

At HOME in TRINITY • 3

THE
MIDWIFE'S DILEMMA

DELIA PARR



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Delia Parr, *The Midwife's Dilemma*
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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-7642-1735-7

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2015956728

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Cover design by Dan Thornberg, Design Source Creative Services

Author is represented by Linda Kruger

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*Dedicated to my children and their spouses
and most especially my seven grandchildren,
Caden, Ana, Camryn, Sofia, Crew, Jack, and Luke.*

You are all my everything.

Acknowledgments

As the AT HOME IN TRINITY trilogy comes to an end, there are many people I need to recognize and thank. Within my family, my sister Carol Beth, RN, has been by my side as cheerleader and editor from beginning to end. My children—Matt, Brett, and Liz—have inspired me and blessed me with seven precious grandchildren.

I am so very grateful to my three editors: Jennifer Enderlin (St. Martin's Press) and Sarah and David Long (Bethany House) who shared their vision and expertise with me so generously and so wisely. My agent, Linda Kruger, is a sister-in-faith who never let me doubt myself or give up when the going got tough. The team at Bethany House is unbelievably talented and committed to their authors. Bless you all!

And finally, with great humility, I thank my Creator and my God for the talent He has given to me and pray I have used it to bring all honor and glory to Him.



1

JUNE 1831

Barely after first light, duty called for midwife Martha Cade once again.

This time, however, she had left her birthing stool at home, along with her bag of simples filled with remedies to ease the suffering of the women and children who depended on her. She was not riding her faithful mount, Grace, either. Instead, she was afoot and making her way ever so slowly through the woods at the north end of town, carrying a covered basket.

She paused for just a moment to lift the lid on the woven basket and take a quick peek inside. Her tiny yellow warbler named Bird chirped the moment their eyes met. “We’re almost at the clearing above the falls, where there’s no one to notice us,” she said, then quickly dropped the lid back into place before resuming their journey. Somehow she had never given the poor creature a proper name, but she was still determined to

hold true to the promise she had made last fall to set Bird free once his broken wing had healed properly.

She just did not want anyone in Trinity to watch her.

With trees swaying gently on either side of her, she resumed a slow pace on the worn dirt path to keep from jostling the tiny bird overmuch. After a harsh winter, some of the trees were still wearing buds on their branches and struggling to catch up to summer, while stands of evergreens proudly displayed an ever-constant curtain of deep green. Spring violets were just blooming, adding a hint of color to a forest floor of pine needles and decaying leaves. Even the birds had arrived later than usual, giving Martha even more time to prepare Bird to return to where he belonged.

Her thoughts were as muddled as the forest that surrounded her, and she lifted the basket with both hands and clutched it against her chest as she walked. Life without Bird would certainly be less stressful, considering he escaped from his cage in her room at will, but she had grown attached to the mischievous little creature. He was good company, lifted her spirits with melodious song, and listened to her pour out her troubles to him when she had no one else, other than God.

Once the path ended in rocky, hard-packed earth at the base of a steep incline, she stopped and blinked back tears. Until two weeks ago, this is where she would have dismounted and tethered Grace. But the horse that had carried Martha so faithfully to those who needed her, regardless of the weather or the miles they had to travel, was gone now, claimed by an illness so suddenly that Martha hadn't had the opportunity to say good-bye.

Her chest tightened, and she closed her eyes as she took slow, measured breaths. Once fiercely independent, Martha now had to depend on fathers-to-be and husbands to fetch her to and from their homes to deliver a new babe or tend to their sick wives

and children. She also had to walk everywhere in and around Trinity instead of riding, an added bonus to her constitution on days like today. After delivering Belinda French of a fine, healthy son just after midnight, Martha had arrived home at dawn. She'd headed right out with Bird because she feared if she stopped to rest, she might not get up until tomorrow.

She had no desire to waste any of the energy she did have on self-pity and again offered a silent prayer thanking God for the blessing that Grace had been. She also asked Him to consider blessing her with a new mount, particularly since she had no funds at her disposal to purchase one.

After taking a deep breath, she grabbed hold of the basket with one hand and lifted her skirts with the other. She was more than a bit winded by the time she climbed up the incline and stepped into the sun-drenched clearing just beyond the woods that provided a backdrop to Crying Falls and the town that lay below.

The clearing above the falls was ideal because it was so isolated and well away from townspeople's spying eyes—not an easy task in a town as small as Trinity. She'd claimed this place as her own oasis, a place where she could escape the confines of home and duty to help Bird gain enough strength to be able to fly away and survive on his own. The serenity of nature she found here also made it easier to open her heart and pray.

Soon she was surrounded by the pungent aroma of pine and the gentle scent of new flowers. Noting the comforting sound of the water rushing over rocks to cascade below, she set the basket down. Once she had Bird perched on her shoulder, she stepped just far enough into the clearing to get a good view of the town below. Unbidden tears blurred her vision.

She was tired to the bone, but she was heartsick and lonely, too. Distressed by a growing estrangement with her daughter,

Victoria, she also missed Fern and Ivy Lynn, sisters who had temporarily closed the confectionery where Martha now made her home with her daughter. With Thomas Dillon acting as their escort, the sisters had traveled east last January to settle a matter critical to maintaining the reputation they had earned as lifelong spinsters who were generous and loving to a fault.

Her heart skipped a beat just thinking about Thomas, but almost immediately it began to pound with worry for all of them. They were four months overdue in returning, and she had not heard from any of them since February.

Anxious to pray, she closed her eyes and steepled her hands together. She poured out her troubles before asking God to help her. "Please help me to use the gifts you have given me wisely and to answer my calling as a midwife without complaining about all the work I've been asked to do lately. Help me with Victoria, and watch over my friends and bring them all safely home to Trinity. Amen."

When Bird chirped, as if offering his own amen, Martha opened her eyes and chuckled. "I'm rather certain the good Lord heard your prayers, too," she teased, and then she walked directly to the copse of trees where Bird had first taken wing again just a few days ago after a long convalescence. "Ready?"

When she offered the bird her hand, he hopped onto her finger, where he sat for a few moments before he flew to the very same branch of the very same sapling they had been using for the past few weeks. He puffed out his chest and ruffled his feathers a bit before taking flight again, landing in a neighboring tree.

"Look at how far you fly!" she cried, even though he had not traveled more than a few feet. After several more efforts, which still kept him well within her reach, Bird returned to the very same branch where he had started and looked down at

her. She smiled and waved her hand, silently encouraging him to continue to practice his flying, but he ignored her.

Concerned that he was apparently exhausted by the little flying he had done, she sighed and held out her hand to him. When Bird held very still, neither hopping onto her finger nor flying off, she smiled. “Having you fly off and live on your own again might seem terribly natural to both of us, but maybe you’re not quite strong enough to be on your own quite yet. We can try again in a few days,” she crooned.

He hopped right onto her finger, and she did not have to coax him back into the basket.

Both disappointed and relieved that Bird would be going back home to the confectionery with her, at least for a few more days, she checked the position of the sun. “Most folks will be out and about by the time we get back,” she cautioned. “I’ll let you know when it’s time to be quiet again. Until then, I wouldn’t mind a bit of a melody.”

Bird, however, held silent and still, which only reaffirmed her suspicion that he had tuckered himself out and was not quite ready to leave her yet. She had only taken a few steps when a familiar flash of light from the top of one of the trees below made her blood simmer. Powered by indignation, she charged forward, holding the basket against her as she tore down the incline and through the patch of rocks. She managed to reach the base of a very tall tree just as Will dropped to the ground, but she was clearly out of breath, and Bird was squawking a protest.

Grinning, the boy flapped his arms. “Look at how far you fly!” he mimicked. “You sure are one silly lady.”

She snatched the spyglass from his hand and scowled at the now nine-year-old boy her friend Samuel had adopted some months back. “And you’re a terribly rude young man. Haven’t

I warned you about spying on folks with this thing? And why aren't you in school?"

The rascal tried but failed to grab the spyglass back. "I weren't spyin'. I was practicin' using the spyglass, and you just popped right into my view. Besides, you ain't *folks*. You're . . . you're almost family."

Though her heartstrings tugged in response, she knew him well enough to see his flattery as nothing more than an attempt to distract her from being annoyed with him in hopes of escaping punishment. She slid the spyglass into her pocket, pleased that only a hint of the handle stuck out so he could not easily grab it back. "And what about school?" she asked, barely able to keep a smile at bay.

He grinned again. "Last day is tomorrow, but school don't start this early." He squinted at the sky overhead. "I'd say that it's nearin' seven thirty."

She reached into the other pocket in her gown to check the watch her grandmother had carried when responding to her duties as the very first midwife in Trinity, and Martha nodded when she saw that it was fifteen minutes before eight. "You're getting better. You're only off by a quarter hour. Does Samuel know you're out and about, snooping in the woods?"

"He's the one who sent me," Will insisted and brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes. "He said you'd probably be out with that dumb bird today and might need a bit of company walkin' back home if it finally flew away for good."

"So you *were* spying on me," she argued and pursed her lips. How Samuel knew what she had been up to was still a mystery, but she was moved by his concern for her. Completely blind and just as obstinate and independent, the retired seaman still argued that he could find his way through the woods surrounding the isolated cabin where he lived with Will, although she

doubted he would ever be able to venture very far beyond that on his own.

Now that his old seafaring friend Fancy had joined the oddest and most reclusive household in the area as a caretaker and cook, however, she had the distinct feeling Samuel might be getting some help in venturing out.

Will studied her for a moment before he held out his hand. “I can walk you home. You look really sad. I think that’s ’cause that bird of yours can’t fly off, but Mr. Samuel says you’re still missin’ that dumb, ugly old horse of yours. I don’t know why you’d be missin’ it so much that you’d end up cryin’, but Samuel says girls are like that.”

“Like what?” she asked as she shifted the basket to the crook of her arm before grasping hold of his hand.

“Weepy and silly. But mostly, he says they’re so unpredictable a man can’t be sure of anything a girl might say or do.”

She chuckled. The hero worship in the boy’s eyes and the tone of his voice was unmistakable. And quite remarkable, considering Will had been a New York City orphan who had been lured west as one of Reverend Hampton’s academy boys. The alleged minister had even fooled Martha before revealing himself as a fraud and the leader of a group of orphans he had trained at the so-called academy to steal for him from the folks in and around Trinity last year.

“Girls aren’t nearly as hard to understand as Samuel suggests, if you take the time to really talk to them,” she suggested. “What does Fancy have to say on the matter?” she prompted.

A voice coming from somewhere straight ahead replied, “I told the boy that girls are a complete and total mystery, but they’re right sweet to look at.”

Grinning, Fancy stepped into view from behind a tree and into a patch of sunlight. Gaudy jewels that studded the length

of each of his ears sparkled in a rainbow of colors, and she noted that one of the jeweled earrings was missing since she had seen him last. Somewhere past sixty years of age, he was a good twenty years older than Martha, and his heavily lined face testified to the many sun-drenched years he had spent at sea.

He was a mere slip of a man, with the top of his head scarcely reaching Martha's shoulder, and since she was not an overly tall woman, Fancy could only be about five feet tall. She was also not quite as plump as she had been before Fern and Ivy had closed the confectionery and left, but she clearly outweighed Fancy, and her hair was still mostly brown, instead of completely gray like the few wisps remaining on his head.

He held up his hand as they approached. "Before you start yakkin', I wasn't spying on you. Samuel sent me to keep an eye on young William here," he offered. He noted the spyglass barely sticking out of her pocket and cocked his head.

Martha shrugged. "I'm keeping the spyglass for a spell."

Will groaned and dropped hold of her hand. "You're keepin' it? For how long?"

"Until you prove to me that you've done well in school this term and you can promise that you won't spy on me or any of the townspeople again. You're only to use that spyglass when you're out hunting with Mr. Fancy. Understood?"

He groaned again.

"Sounds fair to me," Fancy cautioned. "I don't think Samuel will argue with Widow Cade, either." When Will grumbled something under his breath, he cocked his ear. "What's that you said?"

"I-I said, 'Yes, ma'am. Er-er . . . yes, sir. It's fair enough.'"

"Good," Martha said, then stifled a yawn. "I don't have to rush back home. Let's head back to the cabin together, shall we? I've a mind to pay Samuel a quick visit and remind him

how important it is for him to have someone with him when he ventures outside.”

Fancy walked along beside them. “Maybe you should come for a visit later.”

“Why? Is Samuel not feeling well?”

“He’s out practicin’ himself. Close to the lake,” Will blurted as he tugged on her arm.

Fancy scowled.

Martha halted mid-stride. “He’s out in the woods? By himself? Why in heaven’s name did you let him—”

Fancy interrupted her with a rather loud snort. “You know he can’t stay cooped up in that cabin forever, ’specially now that warm weather’s finally here.” He gestured for Martha to continue walking. “He’s gettin’ real good at followin’ the trail we set up for him so he can get to the lake by hisself to do some fishin’. If he don’t come back, I know right where to look for him.”

Martha held her own counsel as they skirted a puddle of mud. Although Fancy seemed convinced that he was perfectly capable of watching over Samuel, she asked God to watch over him, too.

When they were back on a dry part of the path again, Fancy gave her a smile. “Would you want to come for supper tonight? I’ve been hankerin’ to cook up some squirrel stew, assumin’ this young man will help me catch and skin a few after school today.”

“I’d really love to come, but I haven’t seen my own bed since the night before last. I’m afraid once I do, I just might sleep straight through till morning, which is why I came straight here with Bird,” she admitted.

“Come if you can. There’ll be plenty,” Fancy said as they reached the fork in the path where they would part ways.

“I’ll try,” she promised and started alone down the path that

led through the woods to the cemetery on the eastern side of town. "Time to be quiet now," she cautioned, but Bird had not uttered a peep for a good long while and was probably asleep.

By the time she crossed through the cemetery, she was too tired and too hungry to pay any attention to the progress the builder was making on the new brick church. The last she had noticed, he had still been working on the foundation.

The thought of the cot waiting for her in her room in the newly renovated confectionery spurred her onward. She was also tempted by thoughts of the basket of food she had brought back with her from the groaning party, a feast she had shared with all the women who had stayed with Belinda during her labor and helped Martha during the birthing.

An even better thought prompted her to take the food and eat it in bed, lest she fall asleep at the table eating it. She paused for a moment to catch her breath and checked her watch again. It was nearly nine o'clock. At this hour, Victoria was probably still at Aunt Hilda's, where she usually slept whenever Martha was called away overnight while the Lynn sisters were gone.

Until they returned, Victoria's daily routine would not change whether Martha was home or not. She helped Aunt Hilda and her husband with their chores in the morning. After dinner, she spent her afternoons working a bit for Dr. McMillan in his office before spending a few hours writing her poems and stories in his study. In late afternoon, she would check on Aunt Hilda again.

All of which meant Victoria would not be there to witness Martha's utterly silly plan to have breakfast in bed and sleep away the day.

But Martha found she could not face eating a thing or finding a wink of rest until she took care of a difficult task she had been deliberately avoiding for the past two weeks.