

HOME TO *A* MANA

A
SHINING LIGHT

JUDITH MILLER



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To *Mary Greb-Hall*
for her many years
of friendship
and unfailing assistance.



 CHAPTER 1 

Early March 1890
Baltimore, Maryland
Andrea Neumann Wilson

Unable to grasp the totality of Mr. Brighton's message, I gripped the brass doorknob and attempted to steady myself against the splintered doorjamb. Concern shone in the eyes of the owner of Brighton Shipping Lines, a well-dressed gentleman who looked out of place in this brick tenement with its leaking roof, cracked dormer windows, and wooden cornices that begged repair. My mind told me I should invite him inside, but the words would not come. Instead, my lips tightened into a thin line, and a lump the size of a hedge apple lodged in my throat.

"I hope you're not going to faint on me, Mrs. Wilson." Mr. Brighton nodded toward the interior of the small apartment. "You should sit down."

Still holding my arm, he propelled me toward one of the rickety

wooden chairs not far from the entrance. Of course nothing was far from the doorway of the one-room tenement that had become our Baltimore home. Lukas, my seven-year-old son who had been napping on a narrow bed lodged against the wall, rolled over and rubbed his eyes. His gaze settled on Mr. Brighton.

“Who is that, Mama?” The moment he asked, he cast a glance about the room. “Is Papa home?” A hint of fear edged his childish voice.

Pity clouded Mr. Brighton’s eyes. He leaned close and kept his voice low. “Do you want me to tell the boy?”

“No. I’ll speak with him after you’ve gone.” I crooked my finger to motion Lukas to my side. His bare feet slapped on the wooden floorboards as he crossed the room. “Put on your shoes and go downstairs to Mrs. Adler’s rooms. She told me she would have a piece of bread and butter for you when you got up from your nap.”

His lips curved in a smile that tugged at my heart. Instead of growing too large for his clothes, his shirt and trousers hung loose on his frame. He was too thin. So was I. So were most of the people who lived in these run-down tenement buildings.

Unlike me in my youth, when I’d never felt the sting of abuse or felt the pinch of hunger, Lukas had experienced the opposite. He’d lived with his father’s wrath and gone to bed hungry far too often. While I had experienced the wonders of nature on our Iowa farm, Lukas had been deprived of a carefree childhood. Instead of running through fields and meadows, he lived in an aging tenement building where I did my best to keep him safe. Too soon, fear and worry had caused my son to seem far older than his seven years.

“I’ll come back and share it with you,” he offered.

I shook my head. “No. You eat every bite yourself. And stay with Mrs. Adler until I come and fetch you. Understand?”

He shoved his right foot into one of the worn brown shoes, then pulled the end of his sock forward and tucked it over a small hole in the toe of his sock before donning the other shoe. Looking up at me, he grinned. “Now my toe won’t poke out.”

I tucked a wisp of hair behind my ear. “I’ll darn that for you when you come back home. Be sure you remind me before bedtime.”

“I will, Mama,” he called as he flew out the door. His shoes clacked a familiar beat on the narrow wooden steps that provided the only means of passage from our third-floor room.

Our building was situated in a row of tenements near the foul and ruinous sweatshops where many of our neighbors worked for meager wages and hoped for a better life. Others, like me, were wives of sailors who depended upon the earnings their husbands might—or might not—bring home after returning from sea. The area was plagued with poverty and crime, but right now I didn’t need to worry about Lukas going outdoors without me. The expectation of an extra piece of bread provided ample assurance that he’d go directly to Louise Adler’s apartment. And Louise wouldn’t permit him out of her sight without me.

Mr. Brighton remained standing near the doorway, and though he gave no indication, I knew he wanted to be on his way. “I wish I came bearing better news, Mrs. Wilson, but . . .” His voice evaporated like a morning fog drenched with sunlight.

“You truly believe my husband is . . . dead?” My voice trembled, not so much from fear or sorrow, but from utter disbelief. “If the men didn’t recover his body, how can you be certain?”

He drew a step closer and touched my shoulder. “There isn’t a person on the crew who believes your husband is alive, Mrs. Wilson. Had there been any hope, I would have waited before coming to call on you. I realize it’s difficult to comprehend, but

when there's a storm at sea—well, I don't want to go into the details. Suffice it to say that your husband was not seen after the storm. The ship's records reveal your husband boarded the ship in Martinique for the return to Baltimore. However, John Calvert, one of the sailors who is said to be a friend of your husband, reported he saw him wash over. In addition, the crew assures me they searched every nook and cranny of the ship, and he wasn't found after the storm."

"So you believe he was washed overboard during a storm and there's no hope his body will be recovered?" My mind reeled as I attempted to digest the news. Could I truly believe Fred would never again enter this room in a drunken stupor and crawl into bed beside me at night? That he would never again shout profanities and strike me? That he would never again hurt Lukas with his odious words and deeds?

"I'm afraid so." He reached into his pocket and withdrew an envelope. "I know this doesn't in any way make up for the loss you've suffered, but we at Brighton Shipping hope this contribution will assist you and your son. Your husband's final pay is included, as well." When I didn't immediately extend my hand to accept the envelope, he leaned around me and placed it on the dilapidated table. "Will you stay here in Baltimore? I'd be willing to help you find some sort of work."

The man appeared befuddled and uncertain what more to offer, yet it was likely he'd been required to perform this unpleasant duty on previous occasions. After all, sailors frequently were lost at sea, and many were injured or died in accidents on the wharves, as well.

Perhaps it was my lack of tearful emotion that baffled him. "I'm not yet sure what I will do, Mr. Brighton, but I doubt I'll remain in Baltimore."

He cleared his throat. "Well, should you change your mind

and desire my help locating work, you need only send word to my office, and I'll do what I can." With a final glance around the room, he took a backward step. "If there's nothing else I can do, I suppose I should get back to my office." When I rested my hand on the table for support and began to rise, he waved me back to my chair. "No need to get up, Mrs. Wilson. You relax and gain your strength."

I wanted to explain that it wasn't the news of Fred's death that had caused my weakness. Truth be told, the news caused more relief than pain, but I would never utter those words aloud—at least not to this stranger. Touching the envelope he'd placed on the table, I realized I hadn't acknowledged his gift. "Thank you, Mr. Brighton. I appreciate your kindness. I am sure your gift will be of great help to us."

"I wish you well, Mrs. Wilson." He gave a brief nod before he hurried out the door and down the steps. He appeared eager to leave now that he had performed his official duty, and I didn't blame him. No one wanted to remain in this section of Fells Point unless he had nowhere else to go.

Through the open window, I heard the children in the street below begging for money, but when Mr. Brighton ignored them, their beseeching pleas soon turned to angry invectives. If he didn't give in to their demands or make a quick escape, they would soon hurl stones at him. Prepared to shout at the children, I stepped to the window, but Mr. Brighton had already disappeared from sight. He'd obviously chosen to quicken his step.

Returning to the table, I picked up the envelope and lifted the flap. Carefully, I counted the sum. Mr. Brighton had spoken the truth. It wasn't much. Still, any amount was better than nothing. Along with the cash, Mr. Brighton had included an accounting of Fred's wages. I scanned the carefully penned

figures. The numbers revealed Fred had drawn against his wages before departing on his latest voyage, a practice that had become all too common of late.

True to form, Fred hadn't provided me with any money before he sailed. Instead, he'd expected me to make do with whatever I could earn taking in piecework from one of the sweatshops. Resentment swelled in my chest. I shouldn't have anticipated anything different. Fred's selfish behavior, his gambling, abuse, and drinking had increased throughout our years in Baltimore. Why would he have given any thought to Lukas or me before he'd departed this time?

My husband was dead. On some level, I should be experiencing grief. Yet how did one grieve the loss of a man who'd taken pleasure in causing pain to his wife and child?

The loud clatter of wagon wheels rumbling on the cobblestone street below drifted through the open window and jolted me back to the present. After tucking the money into my pocket, I descended the rickety steps to Louise's rooms while trying to formulate the proper way to tell Lukas the news. I couldn't be certain how he would react. The child feared his father, and rightfully so. There had been no escaping Fred's wrath when he'd been drinking. Yet, on the rare occasions he had remained sober, Fred would take Lukas to the wharf and tell him stories about the ships and his adventures at sea. No doubt the child would miss those infrequent yet exciting escapades.

After a few taps on the door, I heard the sound of footfalls and the door opened. A cheery smile spread across Louise's face and she waved me inside. Looping her arm in mine, she stepped toward the table. "You're just in time for a cup of tea and a slice of bread and butter." The aroma of the fresh-baked bread filled my nostrils, and I moved steadily toward the scent.

Lukas wiped crumbs from his mouth. “It’s really good, Mama. This is my second piece.”

I opened my mouth to scold him for taking a second slice, but Louise shook her head. “I insisted. He needs some meat on his bones, Andrea.” The older woman lifted a crusty slice from the end of the loaf, smeared it with butter, and handed it to me. “You need fattening, too. Sit down while I pour you some tea.” She lifted a kettle from the small stove that was used for both heating and cooking in the small apartment.

“Thank you, Louise. You’re good to share with us.” I was ashamed to take food from our neighbor, for I knew her means didn’t exceed my own by much, but my growling stomach won out. I bit into the crusty bread and savored the yeasty flavor.

“Lukas said a man in fancy clothes came to your room. Did Fred go off and leave the rent unpaid?”

I shook my head and gestured to the other side of the room. “Why don’t we sit over there, where we’ll have a little more space.” I patted Lukas on the shoulder. “You stay here at the table so you don’t get crumbs on Mrs. Adler’s floor.”

“Yes, Mama,” he said before taking another bite of the treat.

Louise carried the teacups to a small table in the living area, and we sat down on the couch. With the piece of bread resting atop a napkin on my lap, I leaned a little closer. “I don’t want Lukas to hear just yet, but Mr. Brighton came to tell me that Fred died at sea.”

Louise clapped her palm to her lips and let out a small yelp. Instantly, Lukas twisted around and looked in our direction. “Did you burn your mouth with the tea, Mrs. Adler?”

The older woman shook her head. “I’m fine, Lukas. You go on and eat your bread.” Louise grasped my arm in a tight hold. “Did they recover his body?” The moment after she’d uttered the question,

she dropped her gaze. "I'm sorry, Andrea. That was a thoughtless question, but I know sometimes they don't find the men."

I explained as much as I'd been told. "Mr. Brighton gave me what little was left of Fred's wages, along with a sum they pay to widows. If I'm careful, I think it will be enough for food and train fare to get us back to Iowa."

Mrs. Adler arched her brows. "You've already made a decision to return home?"

"What else can I do, Louise? I can't provide a proper home for Lukas in Baltimore. Besides, it was Fred who wanted to come here, not me."

"I know. If the mister and me had a farm to go to, I'd be wanting to leave here, too. I'd rather have the smell of clover blowing through my open window than the odor of dead fish that greets me every morning." Louise took a sip of her tea and then settled the cup atop a chipped saucer. "What are you gonna tell the boy?"

I momentarily closed my eyes. "That his father was lost at sea."

The older woman nodded. "I'm sure your father will be a much better example for Lukas and will give you all the help you're gonna need." Louise shook her head. "I never wished Fred any harm, but he was a mean sort." She shivered and rubbed her arms, as if to erase the remembrance of Fred and his cruel behavior.

"I'm sure my father will be pleased to have someone cook and clean for him again, and I know he'll enjoy having Lukas around. He always wanted a boy. Now he'll be able to teach Lukas all the things he'd hoped to teach me if I'd been a son." A note of melancholy overcame me as I recalled my father's lamenting the fact that my mother had never borne him a son to take over the farm. From that day forward, I'd felt somewhat less important in his life. Maybe returning with a grandson would make up for the fact that I was a girl.

“How can I help you? Tell me what needs to be done and I’ll get busy.” Instead of keeping her voice low, Louise had spoken in her usual boisterous tone.

Lukas jumped to his feet and hurried to my side. “What do you need help with, Mama?” He lifted his arms and attempted to flex his small muscles. “I can help.”

Louise grimaced. “Sorry.” She touched her fingers to her lips. “Me and my big mouth.”

“You’re fine, Louise. Don’t worry.” I took hold of Lukas’s hand. “Let’s go upstairs. I have something important to tell you.”



Preparing for our departure didn’t take as long as I’d anticipated. Probably because most of my belongings had remained in the trunks they’d been packed in when we moved to Baltimore. There had never been enough shelves or cupboards to hold all of my clothing or the household goods I’d brought with me. In this small room that we called home, there was little space for more than the three of us. To try to arrange china or knickknacks in the room would have proved disastrous, especially once Lukas had begun walking. Besides, Fred had discouraged unpacking much of anything, promising he’d find a larger place in a better part of town before long. That empty promise he’d made before Lukas was born.

With a sigh, I lowered the lid of the trunk and locked the hasp. “I’m thankful for your help, Mr. Adler.”

Louise’s husband glanced at me and shook his head. “I been telling you to call me Bob ever since you moved into this place.”

I forced my lips into an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry, Bob. It doesn’t come naturally to me, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t appreciated all your kindness through the years.”

He grinned. “Wish I could have done more for you and the boy. I’m sorry about Fred, but the Lord knows best. I probably shouldn’t say this, but you may be better off without him. He sure had a mean streak running through him when he was into the drink.”

With a grunt, Mr. Adler heaved the last of my trunks from the room and headed down the stairs to a waiting wagon that would transport my son and me to the train station. I grasped Lukas by the hand and glanced around the room one final time.

A rush of unexpected emotion gripped me. Not the feeling of anticipation I’d experienced years ago when leaving the farm with Fred, but one of sorrow for the wasted years that could have been filled with happiness and joy. Sadly, my only delight had been the arrival of our son. But like me, Lukas had been unable to please Fred, so even the joy of our son had been tempered by Fred’s anger and discontent.

Lukas tugged on my hand. “Come on, Mama. The wagon will leave without us.”

His childish voice tugged at my heart, and I squeezed his hand. “The driver will wait, but you’re right. We must hurry or we’ll miss the train.”

Louise stood near the wagon and pulled me into a tight embrace before leaning down to kiss Lukas on the forehead. She motioned to her husband, who was holding a basket in one hand. “I’ve packed some food for the journey. Don’t argue with me—it’s the least we can do for you.”

Lukas danced from foot to foot. “Is there bread and jam?”

The older woman tousled his light brown hair. “Now, what kind of friend would I be if I didn’t pack you some bread and jam? You be a good boy and help your mama. You’ve got a long way to travel, so you’ll need to behave.”

“I will.” He bobbed his head. “I’m going to a farm and see lots of animals and meet my grandpa.”

Mr. Adler hoisted the boy into the wagon and then assisted me. “Take good care and don’t eat all that bread and jam before the train pulls out of the station, Lukas.”

“I won’t, Mr. Adler.” The boy grinned and waved as the wagon pulled away from the ramshackle tenement houses.

If my son harbored any grief or sadness, he was keeping it well concealed. I hadn’t expected him to grieve the loss of his father, for Fred had never shown the boy any love. Nothing we had done ever pleased him, and though I believed his rants were no more than an excuse to justify his departure for the bars along the wharf, Fred had always blamed everything, from our poverty-stricken existence to his drunken stupors, on everyone but himself.

“Cost ya extra to have me take the trunks into the station, missus. Up to you.” Brows arched, the driver looked at me for further direction.

“I’ll need you to take them inside.”

He helped me down from the wagon but held out his hand for payment before unloading the trunks. I carefully counted out the money and waited to follow him inside, for I didn’t trust him any more than he trusted me, and I could ill afford to lose my few worldly possessions.

Lukas’s excitement mounted as we walked into the busy train station. “Stay by my side,” I instructed while I purchased our tickets.

The man behind the counter pointed the driver to the platform. “You can place her trunks and baggage out there on that loading area to the left of the doors.” Turning his attention back to me, he handed me our tickets. “That’s your train waiting out there. You and the boy can go ahead and get on board.”

“You’re certain they’ll load my belongings?”

His smile was forced. “We do this every day, ma’am. Your luggage will be with you when you arrive in Iowa.” He signaled for the next person in line to step forward.



Marengo, Iowa

Every bone in my body ached when the conductor stepped down the aisle and called out, “Marengo! Next stop, Marengo.” The train ride had been long and tiresome, and I would be thankful when the final leg of our trip would come to an end.

I roused Lukas. “Time to wake up. We’re pulling into the train station.”

Lukas rubbed his eyes. “We have to get on another train?”

I smiled and shook my head. “No more trains, but we’ll need to take a wagon ride to the farm.”

The answer pleased the boy, and he sat up to peer out the window. “Do you think Grandpa will like me?”

“He will love you very much. You just wait and see. He’ll show you how to milk the cows and feed the chickens. You’ll learn all sorts of new things. There will be trees to climb and fish in the pond waiting for you to catch.”

He bounced on the hard seat. “And you can cook them for our supper.”

“Indeed I will, but first we need to take that wagon ride.” Still hissing and belching, the train lurched to a stop. I escorted Lukas off the train, took him by the hand, and led him inside the station.

A paunchy old gentleman stood behind the ticket window. “How can I help ya, ma’am?”

I explained my need for a wagon, and he pointed to a lanky

man leaning against a railing outside the station. “That fellow out there is who you need to speak with.”

After a quick thank-you, I crossed the short distance to the door and stepped outside. While keeping an arm around Lukas’s shoulder, I made arrangements with the driver, and although I had hoped I might see someone I knew, I immediately realized the improbability of such an idea. I’d never known many folks in Marengo. My parents had purchased most of their supplies at the general store in High Amana. If a trip to Marengo was necessary, my father or one of the hired hands had made the journey.

Once the driver loaded our belongings, he helped Lukas and me into the wagon. Then he circled around the horses and gave each one a gentle pat on the rump.

We hadn’t gone far when he looked at me. “You said you wanted to go to the Neumann farm. That right?”

I nodded.

“Guess you best give me directions on how to get there.”

His statement caught me by surprise. It seemed a man offering wagon services at the train station should know his way around these parts. When I questioned him, he shrugged his broad shoulders and grinned. “Man’s gotta make a living, and Clint—he’s the ticket agent you met back there—he told me there’s always folks needin’ a ride somewhere. So far, it’s worked out pretty good.”

I arched a brow. “But what if one of your passengers didn’t know how to direct you? Then what would you do?”

He chuckled and rubbed his jaw. “Then I guess I’d go back to the train station and ask Clint, but so far I haven’t had to do that. Jest my good luck that most folks know how to get where they wanna go. And I’m beginning to learn my way around.” He slapped the reins and the horses picked up their pace. “So does this farm we’re going to belong to you and your husband?”

“No, it belongs to my father.”

“I see. Well, to tell ya the truth, when I first saw ya, I thought maybe you was one of them Amana folks, what with your dark clothes and all. I went over to one of them villages looking for work when I first came to town, but they wasn’t hiring. Told me to come back during harvest in late summer and they might have work for me. All the women was dressed in dark colors.”

Lukas pointed to a herd of cows grazing in a distant pasture. “Are those some of my grandpa’s cows?”

“No. We have a ways to go before we’ll get to Grandpa’s farm. Why don’t you rest your head on my shoulder and try to sleep.”

“There’s too much to see, Mama. I don’t want to sleep.”

As I looked out over the rolling hills and vast farmlands that spread around us like a patchwork quilt, I tried to imagine seeing this countryside for the first time. Little wonder Lukas found the unfolding scene fascinating. For all of his young life, his view had been restricted to tenement housing and an occasional walk to the wharf, where he’d wave good-bye to his father when his vessel would set sail. A while later, weariness won out and he finally nestled against me and fell asleep.

Leaning forward, I squinted and pointed in the distance. “Turn to the left at the fork in the road. It won’t be much farther once we turn.”

A mixture of excitement and dread knotted in my stomach. My parents had been opposed to Fred’s decision to leave Iowa, and my father had tried his best to convince him we should remain on the farm. He’d likely be quick to point out the folly of Fred’s choice. There hadn’t been many letters back and forth, but I hoped my appearance with Lukas would heal any scars in our damaged relationship.

We’d traveled for less than an hour when I straightened my

shoulders and peered to the left. “There! That’s the farm up ahead.” I leaned forward to gain a better view. Confusion took hold and I raised my hand to block the sun from my eyes. Why couldn’t I see the house? Had we taken a wrong turn? Surely I hadn’t been gone so long that I’d forgotten my way home.

As the wagon drew near, I let out a gasp and clutched a hand to my chest. In the distance, my gaze settled on what had once been my family’s home. Now only ashes and a sandstone foundation remained.