

... REFINED BY LOVE ...

The Artisan's Wife



JUDITH MILLER



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Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

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In memory of
Sharon Asmus,
precious friend, sister in Christ, amazing editor.
You are deeply missed.

*Thou also, son of man, take thee a tile,
and lay it before thee, and pourtray upon
it the city, even Jerusalem.*

Ezekiel 4:1

Chapter 1

Grafton, West Virginia
May 1876

A lump the size of a lemon lodged in Ainslee McKay's throat. Hands shaking, her thoughts whirled while she forced herself to once again read the brief note from her sister. How could Adaira do this? Sisters didn't run off without a word of warning. Especially not a twin sister. And certainly not with a man who was practically a stranger. There was no way to make sense of Adaira's impulsive decision.

Ainslee raced down the stairs with the note clutched tightly in her fist, giving no thought to her inappropriate attire. Inside the dining room, she skidded to an abrupt halt.

Grandmother Woodfield's brows arched high. "Did you forget that we fashion our hair and dress for breakfast, my dear?"

Although she wasn't a blood relative, the older woman had been like a grandmother to Ainslee and her sisters when they had arrived from Ireland. Even before Ainslee's brother Ewan and Laura Woodfield had married, she'd asked that the girls address her as Grandmother Woodfield. And they'd been delighted to accommodate her request.

Ainslee's sun-kissed light brown locks spilled from the loose ribbon that had held her flowing tresses in check during the night. After tracing her fingers through her hair, she clutched her dressing gown tightly around her neck with her free hand. "I apologize, Grandmother, but once all of you read this, I think you'll understand why I didn't take time to dress." Flapping the piece of stationery, she turned toward Ewan and his wife, Laura, who sat near his side at the dining table. "Did you receive a note from Adaira, as well?"

Ewan shook his head. "Why would she write to us when we live under the same roof?"

"That's just it. We no longer live under the same roof." Ainslee's voice cracked with emotion. "Read this." She handed the missive to her brother and watched his nonchalant expression change to one of utter disbelief.

"I canna believe Adaira would do such a thing. She can be a bit flighty, but she's not a thoughtless girl." Ewan's words were tinged with Irish brogue as he returned his attention to the note. "And yet . . ." He handed the piece of cream-colored stationery to Laura.

Ewan's wife visibly paled. "Surely we must have missed some clue along the way. Did you realize she was serious about Chester Mulvane, Ainslee? Had she spoken to you about him?"

Before Ainslee could reply, Grandmother Woodfield edged forward and tapped her index finger on the table. "Is anyone going to tell *me* what has happened?"

Ewan gulped the remains of his coffee and returned the cup to its saucer with a startling clank. "Adaira has eloped with Chester Mulvane."

The room fell silent; time stood still.

Grandmother Woodfield was the first to recover. "Eloped? With Chester Mulvane? Isn't he the young fellow from Pitts-

burgh who was here for dinner last week? Adaira barely knows him, and she's only twenty years of age. I can't believe she'd do anything so rash. Let me see what she wrote."

Ewan passed the note to his mother-in-law. "Aye, you're right about Chester. He was here for dinner last week—and a few other times, as well. He's a nephew of Joseph Horne and works for his uncle. I'm not sure what title they've given him, but he does a good deal of buying for the store. He's placed several large orders for china, and when he was last here, he purchased some of our most expensive specialty pieces for their store. While I value the company's business, I'm not pleased by this turn of events."

"Nor am I." Grandmother Woodfield read the scribbled note and returned it to Ewan. "In addition to shopping at Mr. Horne's department store on several occasions, I've attended a few social functions where he and his wife were present, but I don't recall meeting the Mulvanes. And I don't recall any of you telling me Chester was related to the Hornes."

Laura motioned for Catherine to refill her coffee cup. "I didn't think Chester's family history was pertinent, Mother. None of us thought he was anything more than an occasional visitor to Grafton."

"Yet he'd called on Adaira, so he likely considered himself a suitor, don't you think?"

Laura stirred a dollop of cream into her coffee. "Perhaps, but none of that really matters at this juncture. What matters is that we locate Adaira and discover whether she and Chester have truly married."

The older woman sighed. "I'm not sure if it's better to hope that they've exchanged vows or trust they came to their good senses before finding a preacher who would marry them. Either way, there's bound to be no end of gossip once word gets out."

“At the moment, gossip is the last thing that’s on my mind.” Ewan pushed his plate aside and turned toward Ainslee. “When did you last see your sister?”

“Late yesterday afternoon. She said she was going to dinner with Chester and then they were going to hear some speaker at the Emporium. She told me it would be late before she returned home.” Ainslee frowned at her brother. “I mentioned this at dinner last night. Sometimes I wonder if anyone listens to me.”

Ewan pushed away from the mahogany dining table and massaged his forehead. “I do listen, Ainslee, but sometimes I forget what I’ve been told. I now recall that you said she’d be returning home late.” He looked at a loss for what to do next. “Did you look in her room before you came downstairs?”

“No. I’ll go up and check now, if you’d like.” She thought the note provided enough evidence of her sister’s departure. The idea of checking her room seemed a waste of time, but she wouldn’t argue. She shot an exasperated look in her brother’s direction. “I don’t think she’s hiding under the bedcovers.”

Ewan sighed. “Nor do I, but I do wonder if she took her belongings. I know you’d both been packing for your upcoming departure to Weston, though I’m not sure how she could have removed those heavy trunks from the house without someone noticing. If they’re not in her room, it’s a sure sign she’s not planning to return anytime soon.”

Ainslee nodded toward the maid who was removing Ewan’s plate from the table. “Adaira knows Catherine goes into town for the weekly shopping on Monday afternoons. Chester could have come to the house then and loaded them into a wagon or even hired someone to come to the house and transport her belongings.”

Tessa, Ewan and Laura’s six-year-old daughter, jumped up from her chair. “I’ll go upstairs and look for you, Daddy.” With-

out waiting for his approval, the towheaded girl ran from the room and disappeared up the stairs.

Ewan folded his hands together and turned toward Laura. "I'm not sure what to do. Should I board a train for Pittsburgh and try to bring her home?"

Ainslee gave her brother an enthusiastic nod. "Yes. Adaira simply must come home or we'll lose the tile works. I can't go to Weston on my own."

"Let's take this one step at a time." Ewan's lips tightened into a thin line. "First we must decide what to do about Adaira. Then we'll discuss the new business in Weston."

Before another opinion could be offered, Tessa's footsteps clattered in the hallway. "Her trunks are gone."

Ainslee dropped onto one of the silk-upholstered dining chairs as the child's words seeped into her bones. She and Adaira were scheduled to leave for Weston on Friday and begin work at the tile works on Monday morning, yet her sister never said anything about a plan to elope with Chester Mulvane. Truth be told, Adaira had barely spoken Chester's name. Granted, she'd mentioned that Ewan had given the young man permission to call on her when he was in town, but there had been no indication that Chester was anything more than a handsome young man who could act as her escort to an occasional party or dinner. In Ainslee's opinion, he'd been no more than a passing fancy to Adaira, no different than several other young men who had occasionally called on her sister.

How could she have been so blind? Ainslee picked up the engraved piece of stationery and traced her fingers across the imprint of her sister's name. The personalized notepaper had been a gift from Grandmother Woodfield last Christmas. Ainslee's name had been inscribed in bold block print, while Adaira's had been printed in a delicate flowing script—to match their

talents and personalities. At least that's what Grandmother had said when they'd opened their gifts.

Ainslee had agreed with the assessment. Though given to bouts of anxiety, she'd always been the reliable, no-nonsense twin, who excelled in practical studies—whereas Adaira was the carefree, animated member of the twosome who had been gifted with as much creative talent as their older sister, Rose.

Swooping up the note, she crumpled the paper and shoved it into the pocket of her dressing gown. “Any idea how we can locate Adaira and bring her home?” Ainslee glanced around the table, hoping someone would offer a practical solution.

Grandmother Woodfield touched her linen napkin to her lips. The older woman appeared as unruffled as a peaceful spring day. “I don't see what good it will do to rush off to Pittsburgh. While it seems logical they would go there, they may avoid the city since they likely believe it's the first place we would look for them. There's really no telling where they might be.”

She leaned back in her chair and met Ewan's steady gaze. “I believe we should send a telegram to his family. Better yet, send a telegram to Mr. Horne at his store and inquire about his nephew's whereabouts. I wouldn't mention the possible elopement. Though I'd like to believe the telegraph operator can be trusted, there's no way of knowing for certain. Best we keep this to ourselves until we know exactly what's taken place.”

Ainslee leaned forward. “Tell Mr. Horne ye'r coming to fetch Adaira and bring her home.” A bit of Ainslee's own Irish brogue slipped through in her emotional state.

Grandmother Woodfield shook her head. “If they are married, we can hardly force her return to Grafton. Right now, I think you should continue with your plans to depart for Weston without your sister. Don't you agree?”

Ainslee gaped at the older woman. “Na, I don't agree. Not in

the least.” Her stomach roiled at the idea. She had never gone anywhere without Adaira. Did the family truly expect her to continue as though nothing were amiss? She clenched her jaw. “I won’t go—not without Adaira.”

Ewan sighed. “I don’t think there is any other choice, Ainslee. You and your sister pursued this venture and argued the soundness of the idea. While I know it’s uncommon for a woman to be in charge of a business, I recall a strong argument you waged when you and Adaira first came to me with the idea. You assured me you were up to the task of taking charge. You both pointed out that Rose had been given great responsibility at the pottery works and you wanted to receive the same opportunity.”

Ainslee frowned. This wasn’t going well. Ewan was dismissing her arguments at every turn. “But that was when I thought Adaira would be with me.”

Her brother leaned back in his chair. “The contract is signed, and we can’t walk away from the tile works. Beyond the moral obligation to abide by the terms of my agreement, a default on the contract would lead to financial disaster for all of us—not to mention the workers at the tile works, who are depending upon us for their jobs. They have families to support, and we agreed to maintain their employment.”

Grandmother Woodfield nodded her agreement. “While Adaira possesses artistic talent, it was your intelligence and ability to keep a sharp eye on the costs and operation of the tile works that sealed our decision to purchase it. We were clear that without your agreement to oversee the day-to-day financial matters, we would not invest in the company.”

She leaned back in her chair. “We can locate another artist to replace Adaira, but we know what occurs when an untrustworthy person takes charge of a business. We can’t take such

a risk with this venture. We must insist you fulfill your obligation, my dear.”

“That’s all well and good, but I agreed to go to Weston because it was Adaira’s dream.” Ainslee swallowed hard. This wasn’t fair. She needed to convince them they were wrong. How could any of them even think they should place this burden on her shoulders? “You must remember that I didn’t want to leave Grafton. I was happy with my teaching position, but Adaira convinced me by saying she would suffocate if she couldn’t put her creative talent to use and become independent. She said we needed to spread our wings.”

“And you shall. In fact, I believe you’re going to soar like an eagle.” Grandmother gave a firm nod.

“But I have no desire to soar. I’m the twin who’s content just flapping her wings. It’s Adaira who wanted to fly.”

Ainslee hunched forward and wrapped her arms around her waist. If only she could follow her sister’s lead and simply disappear.