

# Waves of Mercy



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For Lyla Rose  
with love



“Grandchildren are the crown of the aged.”

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PROVERBS 17:6 RSV

For I am convinced that neither death nor life,  
neither angels nor demons,  
neither the present nor the future,  
nor any powers,  
neither height nor depth,  
nor anything else in all creation,  
will be able to separate us from the love of God  
that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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ROMANS 8:38–39 NIV



# CHAPTER 1

*Anna*

**LAKE MICHIGAN  
1897**

I am living my nightmare. A violent storm has overtaken our steamship, and as we mount high on the crest of a wave one moment, then plunge sickeningly into a watery trough the next, I am certain we are about to sink. Everything is happening just as it does in my nightmare—the one that has haunted my sleep for as long as I can remember.

Mother and I huddle inside the passenger deck as the wind hurls rain and waves against the windows. Thunder rumbles and booms like barrels full of cannonballs rolling downhill. I close my eyes as daggers of lightning slash the dark horizon. Above the roaring wind I can barely hear my own whimpers or Mother’s voice as she tries to soothe me.

“Shh . . . Don’t cry, Anna.”

I’m a grown woman of twenty-three, but she tries to calm my fears the same way she did when I was a child and would awaken

at night, screaming in terror from the nightmare, shivering as if the icy water had swallowed me alive.

But I am not dreaming. We are aboard a ship called the *City of Holland*, fighting to cross Lake Michigan in a terrible storm. The boilers pound and throb beneath my feet like an urgent heartbeat, mimicking my own heart. I'm dizzy from the wild pitching and swaying as the ship rolls on the lake like a toy. I never should have agreed to travel by steamship, but in my haste to leave Chicago I chose what seemed to be the quickest and most direct mode of travel. A tragic mistake. How could I have forgotten the nightmare that tormented my childhood? I'm going to die and I don't want to.

"Shh . . . Don't cry, Anna," Mother soothes. "I'm right here."

But my father is back home in Chicago, and that's how this real nightmare differs from the dream I've had all these years. That's how I know that Mother and I will both die. In my dream, Mama and I abandon our sinking ship with the other passengers and climb into a crowded lifeboat. Suddenly a towering wave slams into us, capsizing the lifeboat and plunging us into the frigid water. The shock of it sucks the breath from my lungs. My skin tingles and burns as if on fire. We sink beneath the water, clinging to each other, pulled down by Mama's heavy skirts and petticoats. I can't see, can't breathe. She kicks and struggles to reach the surface again, and when we finally do, people are screaming and shouting for help all around us. The vastness of the lake muffles the sound. I see Father frantically treading water a few feet away from us, dressed in his dark suit and waistcoat. Mama thrusts me toward him, begging, "*Please! Save my daughter! Save her, please!*" I don't want to let go of Mama, but Father pulls me into his strong arms and keeps my head above the lashing waves. When I look back, Mama has disappeared. The only thing visible above the swirling water is her hand as if she is waving good-bye. Father lunges to grasp it, but he's too late. Mama is gone, devoured by the churning black sea.

I always cry out as I awaken from the dream, but I can't awaken from this nightmare. I clutch my mother so tightly she gasps. "Anna, let go a little. I can't breathe!"

“Father isn’t here to save us this time. We’re going to sink, and I don’t want to die!”

“We aren’t going to sink, darling.”

I’m not convinced. I recall the very last service I attended at the Chicago Avenue church, and the sermon topic now seems prophetic. The minister described a sudden storm like this one on the Sea of Galilee, making the scene as vivid as my nightmare. Jesus was asleep in a boat and His friends awakened Him, fearing they were about to sink. Jesus shouted, “Peace, be still!” and immediately the wind and waves died down. They were saved. “*Jesus can calm the storms in your life, too,*” the minister had said. Then he’d asked, “*Have you made Jesus your Savior? Is He beside you when you sail life’s stormy seas? If you died tomorrow, would you go to heaven?*” I wanted to rise from my pew at his invitation and walk down the aisle with the others, but I was afraid. Now, because of that sermon, I’m aboard this ship in a violent storm. William had forbidden me to go back to that church, and when he found out I had defied him, he ended our engagement. I left Chicago to give my broken heart a chance to heal, sailing with my mother to a lakeside resort on the other side of Lake Michigan. It seems we will never reach it.

Another clap of thunder booms, and it sounds more distant now. “Everything is going to be all right, Anna,” Mother says. I wonder if she’s speaking of the voyage or my shattered heart. Perhaps both. “Open your eyes and see.” She untangles our arms, and I lift my head from where I’ve buried it against her pin-tucked shirtwaist. “See, darling? The storm is blowing past us. The sky is lighter over there. It shouldn’t be much longer now, and we’ll be there.” But the shoreline still isn’t visible, and the storm-tossed lake continues to seethe, promising a rough ride to the Hotel Ottawa on the Michigan shore.

“This is so much like my nightmare, Mother. Remember? Remember how I used to wake up at night, screaming? I haven’t dreamt that I was drowning for a long, long time, but this storm is bringing it all back. That dream used to feel so real!”

“You’re going through a difficult time right now. It’s only natural to be upset.”

I loved William and I thought he loved me, but he broke my heart when he ended our engagement. I press my fist against my heart and feel it beating like a wounded bird’s. “It still hurts,” I say.

“I know, darling . . . I know.”

But my mother doesn’t know the real reason why William no longer wants to marry me. It has to do with religion in general—and the church on the corner of Chicago Avenue and LaSalle Street in particular. “*I told you I didn’t want to hear any more about that place, Anna,*” he had shouted. I had never heard William raise his voice before. “*I told you to stop going there. It’s making you crazy. I forbade you to go back there, but you defied me!*”

William believes, as my parents do, that churches are places to be married and buried, places that Chicago’s fine families attend at Christmas and Easter and other special occasions. William says that flagrant displays of emotion such as those seen at Mr. Moody’s evangelistic rallies and in his Chicago Avenue church are for the ignorant, immigrant masses, not refined people like us. Yet something drew me back there, even after William forbade me to go. The church seemed wonderfully familiar to me, and the minister’s words touched a deep, empty part of my soul, the part that feels like the photographs I’ve seen of Chicago after the Great Fire with nothing but blackened sections of tottering walls and lifeless, rubble-strewn streets that stretch for miles and miles. When I tried to tell William how I felt and why I had gone back, he ended our engagement. “*I can’t have my wife, the mother of my children, falling for such nonsense.*” I wonder if he will mourn for me when he learns that this ship has sunk and I’ve drowned.

The steamship continues to rock and pitch. The view out the windows is blurred by rain and fogged by our breath on the inside. I can still feel us climbing to the tops of the waves, then sliding down the other side again. If Jesus was aboard with me, could He truly shout, “Peace, be still!” and calm the seas? William doesn’t believe in miracles.



When Father learned that my engagement had ended, he was shocked. He had arranged my courtship with William in the first place, and he feared I would be ruined by gossip when the other members of our social circle heard the news. “I’ll talk to William,” he’d promised. “I’ll see what I can do to smooth the waters.” Do I want William to take me back? I think I do. I think I still love him.

Hours seem to pass until I hear one of the other passengers say, “I see harbor lights!” Mother pulls her lace-trimmed handkerchief from her sleeve and wipes the foggy window, but I don’t see anything. And even if we are near the harbor, our ship could still run aground on a sandbar. That’s what happens in my nightmare. That’s why Mama and I have to abandon the ship in my dream and board the lifeboat.

“We could still run aground on a sandbar.”

I don’t realize I’ve spoken aloud until Mother places her gloved fingers over my lips and says, “Hush, Anna.”

“That’s the harbor,” the same passenger says. “I recognize the Holland lighthouse.” A few people stand up to look, and they nearly fall over on the unsteady deck. It seems to take years to reach the shore as the ship battles against the surf. When I finally see the channel entrance leading from Lake Michigan into the smaller lake, the opening seems impossibly narrow. How can the captain avoid the stone piers on either side with the waves crashing over them? Somehow he does. We navigate the channel and enter Black Lake, which is no less calm than Lake Michigan. I see the lights of the resort glowing in the darkness, the dark shape of the sand dune looming behind it, illuminated by distant flashes of lightning. More lights twinkle from a row of cottages and from the other hotels on the opposite shore of the narrow inland lake.

At last I hear men shouting outside on the slippery deck as they maneuver the ship into place beside the Hotel Ottawa’s dock. Porters bearing umbrellas run to assist passengers as we disembark. I stand up, eager to get off this ship, yet not at all certain that my trembling legs will carry me. The deckhands have to grip my waist

to get me off safely as the ship bobs up and down in the choppy water. I'm horrified to have a stranger manhandle me so intimately.

"There you go, miss," the man says as my feet touch the ground. My knees buckle, and he grabs me again as I nearly fall. "Whoa! You all right, miss?"

"I'm fine." I push away his hands. Mother and I squeeze beneath a single umbrella. The ground moves beneath my feet as I wobble up the wooden walkway to the main door. I sink into the first chair I find inside the hotel lobby and wait while Mother attends to our room keys. It will be very strange to be without our lady's maid during our stay. Mother wanted to bring Sophia along, but I insisted that I wanted to be completely alone. We will be wearing casual clothing while we're here, freed from our corsets and obligations, so there's no need to have our dresses laid out or our hair elaborately pinned. I have no idea what I'll do with myself all day or how long it will take for my heart to mend.

"The porter will show us to our rooms," Mother says when she returns with him and our room keys. "Dinner will still be served for another hour."

"I feel too ill to eat," I tell her. "I simply want to change out of my traveling clothes and lie down."

Our adjoining rooms are in the original hotel building, not the expanded annex. They're small but lovely, and mine has a view of Black Lake and the *City of Holland* still moored outside at the dock. It didn't sink in the storm; Mother and I didn't drown in Lake Michigan. But as I watch the bobbing ship and the dancing whitecaps in the distance, I silently vow to travel by train back to Chicago when it's time to leave. I'll never board another ship as long as I live.