

THE
CHAPEL
CAR BRIDE

JUDITH MILLER



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Judith Miller, *The Chapel Car Bride*
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To Carolyn Poe
who graciously loaned me her research books
and documents that helped to make this story
of the chapel car ministry come alive.



CHAPTER
1

EARLY SPRING, 1913

Hope Irvine clutched a handful of leaflets and picked her way toward the rear of the swaying train. Pushing open the heavy door, she grasped the waist-high railing of the train's rear platform with her free hand. Her lips curved in a bright smile as she leaned forward to toss flyers from the Herald of Hope, the chapel car entrusted to her father's ministry.

But where were the children who usually ran after the chapel car when they pulled into a town? Had she miscalculated the time of their arrival? Were the children still in school? Rather than little girls with pigtails flying in the breeze and young boys waving their caps, the only folks watching the train were a few surly-looking men lolling about outside a tavern near the railroad tracks.

When several of the men hooted and shouted catcalls in her direction, Hope startled, loosened her grip, and toppled backward, landing on her backside with skirts splayed out. Too late, she clapped her right hand to her head. Her ribbon-bedecked

hat that was a perfect match for her red claret suit sailed from the back of the train like a kite on a windy day. Quickly swiping her skirt back in place, she clung to the rear railing and pulled to a sitting position. A rush of anger assailed her as she watched one of the scalawags crush the fashionable hat onto his head, then jump in the air and click his booted heels together. She narrowed her eyes and scowled.

Before she'd regained her footing, her father stooped down beside her, his eyes filled with concern. "You're hurt! I'm so sorry, Hope. From now on I'll toss the flyers."

The train lurched as he helped her to her feet, and both of them grabbed for the railing before they toppled to the platform. He pulled her close to his side.

"I'm fine, Papa. The only thing damaged is my new hat and my dignity."

He tightened his hold around her shoulder. "I've made a mistake bringing you with me. This train isn't a proper home for a young woman. I shouldn't have been so easily convinced."

Her father wasn't stretching the truth when he said he'd been easily convinced. Hope had been caught by surprise when he agreed after only a few hours of arguing her case. No doubt, the loneliness he'd written of in his letters over the past years had influenced his decision, as well. If she didn't allay his concerns, this silly incident might cause him to seek another solution to her living situation before they'd even arrived at their final destination.

"Pshaw." Hope smiled at her father. "What about the wives who have been accompanying their husbands on other chapel cars for many years now? I'm not going to endure any hardships that haven't already been overcome by those fine ladies."

Her father sighed. "Whether you care to admit it or not, there is a vast difference between a married woman accompanying

her husband and a minister's daughter of nineteen years who has never experienced the hardships of life. Besides, you're no more than a wisp of a girl. A strong wind could topple you."

A hairpin fell from her riotous reddish-brown curls and nested in the navy trim that accented her full skirt. She yanked the pin from the decorative cording and thrust it into her curls before flashing a smile at her father. "Nothing you say about those unruly men or the hardships of living in a chapel car will change my mind. I believe the Lord wants me at your side. Those men and their rude comments haven't discouraged me in the least." With a quick swipe, she brushed the soot from her skirt before stepping back inside the chapel car. Though her father wasn't one to end a conversation until he was ready, she hoped her final remark would put an end to this discussion.

Her father followed on her heels as she navigated the narrow aisle that centered the rows of wooden pews in the chapel portion of the railcar. "You can walk away, but we aren't through talking, Hope." He pointed his thumb toward the window. "I shouldn't have given in and let you come with me. If I'd had time to consider the idea thoroughly, I would have insisted you remain in Pittsburgh."

She continued onward until she entered the cramped living quarters at the rear of the car. She squeezed through the slight space between the berths and dining table, sat down, and gestured for her father to take the seat opposite her. "I believe that if you weigh the good against the bad, you'll soon agree that this is where I should be, Papa. Besides, you agreed that you needed someone to help with the children, and while you're a gifted preacher, we both know that the Lord didn't grace you with an abundance of musical talent."

Her father grunted and lowered his lanky body into a chair and met her eyes. "That much is true. And having you along to

play the organ and lead the singing will be a great help. But I've managed without you, thanks to the gramophone and an occasional volunteer in some of the towns. You've already proven your talents are useful to me and the church's ministry, but at what cost?" He shook his head. "I think you should return home. We're going to be in a mining town, where life will be quite different from anything you've ever experienced."

His words had been spoken with such conviction that Hope was left momentarily speechless. Eyes wide, she stared at him and waited to hear him recant the statement. But the only sound in the swaying car was the clacking of the wheels as the train labored up the forested hillside toward the next small town. When she could bear the silence no longer, she reached across the narrow table and clasped her father's rough hand. Not the hand one would expect of a preacher, but Layton Irvine had been a carpenter and builder before he'd accepted his first preaching position many years ago. Since then, his life had been as much about building churches as preaching in them. Each time he'd returned to visit Hope at Aunt Mattie's clapboard cottage in Pittsburgh, he'd repeated the same tale. The life of a traveling missionary wasn't acceptable for a growing young girl. And she'd accepted his explanation—until now. She was no longer a growing young girl, but a full-grown woman.

"What home would you have me go to, Papa? Aunt Mattie is dead, and we've disposed of her belongings. She didn't even own the house where we lived."

She was surprised to see a multitude of gray hairs appear when her father raked his fingers through his mass of wavy dark brown hair. "I know. I know." He waved toward the passing scenery. "But traveling on this chapel car with me isn't the answer. If you would return to Pittsburgh, I'm sure they'd rehire you at the department store. I'll stay long enough to help you

get situated in an affordable boardinghouse. I imagine there are several located within walking distance of the store. If you don't have to ride the trolley to and from work, it will reduce your expenses so you can purchase some new bauble from time to time." He blew out a short breath. "And with your sweet disposition, you'll have no problem making friends with the other boarders."

Hope's stomach churned. Her father was talking as though she'd already agreed to his idea. No doubt his mention of her sweet disposition was an attempt to discourage any argument from her. While she understood his desire to protect her, she was far more likely to encounter difficulties living on her own in Pittsburgh than she would under his watchful eye. Instead of speaking of her desire to help him with his ministry, she decided to recount the perilous situations that sometimes confronted single young women working in the city.

"Papa, Pittsburgh is the last place I want to live. Even though I walked to the trolley stop in full daylight during the summer months, the sun was blocked by the haze caused by the surrounding steel mills. The city is blanketed in darkness both day and night. I'm sure you haven't forgotten the inescapable murky shadows that stretch over the streets in every direction." She'd spoken the truth, but hoped the word picture would convince her father. She didn't want him to feel guilty for leaving her with Aunt Mattie after her mother died eleven years ago. Hope had been only nine years old and he'd wanted her to have a stable life while she finished her schooling. But her education was complete, and Aunt Mattie was dead. Now, more than ever, she wanted to be with family. And he was her only family. Couldn't he see that she needed him?

When he didn't respond, she continued her graphic tale. "In the winter, it was even more frightening. The ice and snow made

for treacherous walking, and more than once I was hounded by beggars. When I didn't toss them a coin, they shouted threats at me." In spite of the warmth inside the car, Hope shivered. It hadn't been necessary to embellish those encounters. Truth be told, fear had caused her to change her route to the trolley stop on several occasions.

"I didn't know. I'm so sorry." He bowed his head and stared at his weathered hands. "I'm still not convinced this is the best life for you, but I suppose I shouldn't let one incident sway me." He leaned back in his chair. "I want your assurance that you'll come and tell me if you encounter any sort of problems with men in the towns where we stop. And remember, even some of the men who work for the railroad can be a rough lot." He hesitated a moment. "I want you to tell me if any of them bother you in any way."

She nodded and smiled. "Thank you, Papa." She glanced through the door toward the rear of the train. "And I do hope you'll allow me to continue tossing tracts from the train until we arrive in Finch."

"We'll see." He turned his attention to the window. "This is Brookfield. We'll be stopping soon. The brakeman told me he was sure some of the railroad workers will want to attend a ten o'clock meeting after they finish their stint tonight. We'll need to be ready for an early meeting with the townsfolk tomorrow morning, as well. Our car will be pushed onto a spur once we arrive in Brookfield."

The distance from Pittsburgh to their final destination in Finch, West Virginia, was less than three hundred miles, but they'd already been traveling for more than a week. And from her father's account, they'd be traveling for at least two more weeks before they reached journey's end. She'd quickly learned their progress was determined by the railroad companies and

their willingness to attach the chapel car to the rear of their trains. Most of the companies along the route from Pittsburgh to their final destination were more than willing—but at their convenience.

Hope sighed. “I didn’t realize it was going to take us so long to get there. I’ll need to do laundry while we’re here.”

Her father’s eyebrows dipped low above his dark eyes. “Remember, we must be thankful for the cooperation of the railroad and make no complaints.”

There was no choice but to accept these stopovers, yet it was difficult to remain thankful when they were pushed onto a spur for days at a time. Granted, such stops gave her father an opportunity to preach and minister to folks in the small towns along the way, but Hope was eager to reach Finch. Besides, being pushed onto the spurs could be painful. At one of their first stops after departing Pittsburgh, Hope had been awakened from a deep sleep when their car was switched during the night. The jarring motion had thrust her body forward and she’d banged her head against the end of her berth. A knot the size of a goose egg had emerged beneath her auburn hair and remained for days. Upon hearing her complain later in the day, one of the trainmen had been quick to tell her that those who traveled for free shouldn’t complain.

After the worker marched off, her father had taken Hope aside and explained that when a chapel car was attached to a train, the railroad provided the service at no cost to the missionaries, and the rail passes that permitted them to ride for free were an act of goodwill offered by the railroad officials. She hadn’t realized that a complaint about layovers or traveling conditions could result in the withdrawal of such charity. Since then she’d attempted to withhold her complaints, but occasionally she still slipped up.

Hope peered out the window as the fringes of the small town came into view. There was no telling exactly how long they'd be here. At extended layovers, her father would put his preaching and carpentering skills to work among the people, though Hope was eager to get to Finch where they would truly begin their work. Before accepting his assignment in Finch, her father had been advised the town was without a preacher and the need was great. He'd agreed to remain as long as the association believed his services were required in the small coal-mining town.

Although some of the chapel cars stopped for only a few days in each town before continuing onward, others remained for extended periods in areas where there was no church. Sometimes the chapel car preachers remained until a permanent parson arrived or until a church was constructed. According to Hope's father, a few of the preachers had remained in the same town for several years. She wasn't certain she wanted to live in Finch for years, but she was eager to be in one place for more than a few days.

"We'll hold services here at seven o'clock. Now, I'm going into town to see if there's a church and permanent preacher." Her father pointed out the window. "Looks like they'll move us onto that spur once the baggage is unloaded."

Hope pushed up from the table. "May I come with you? I can pass out tracts and invite folks to attend tonight's meeting. I didn't get many leaflets thrown from the train, so unless we go and invite folks, we may not have much of a turnout." She gave what she hoped was a convincing smile. "Besides, I'd like to see the town, and school should soon be out. It will give me a good opportunity to invite the children to my class."

She longed to do everything she could to prove her presence would be a help to him and to the chapel car ministry. Thus far, her father had been particularly pleased with her assistance

in the musical portion of the services and with the children, but she also hoped to do her part to encourage attendance at their meetings.

Before Hope joined her father on the chapel car, the small organ that sat in a corner near the pulpit had remained silent, and her father had relied upon a gramophone to assist with the musical portion of the service. After one of their first services together, he said he thought folks came to hear her organ playing even more than to hear his sermon. Hope had been quick to say he was mistaken, yet his compliment had given her great joy. For so long she'd missed having her father near, and his praise had warmed her heart.

Each evening after she played the final strains of the closing hymn, Hope's thoughts shifted from music to the children. Her father enjoyed youngsters, but keeping them quiet in the cramped railcar was difficult, so he'd readily agreed to her proposed classes for the children. His consent had furthered her prospects of remaining with him and given her the opportunity to use the skills she'd acquired while teaching children at the church she and Aunt Mattie had attended each Sunday. Using Aunt Mattie's Bible teaching and the instruction she'd received in Sunday school and church, Hope's lessons with the youngsters had proved a success at their first stops.

She'd been especially thankful for Aunt Mattie's instruction to trust Jesus and find joy in all circumstances. That lesson had served Hope well during the first months after her own mother's death. And because of Aunt Mattie's teachings, Hope had been able to share and encourage several motherless children she'd met since their departure. She'd gone on to tell those children how Aunt Mattie would sit by her side while she read the Bible aloud each evening. Hope encouraged the older ones to read the Bible every day. While they likely didn't have an Aunt Mattie

to sit alongside them, she told the children to think of God sitting at their side and to know He would be pleased with their devotion. Just as her faith had deepened through the years, she wanted the same for all of these children, especially those who had suffered loss and were hurting.

Her father gathered a stack of flyers and divided them in half. He smiled and nodded at one of the mounds. “You take those and I’ll hand out the rest. Looks like we’re going to have good weather for the rest of the day.”

She nodded. “No need to ask about using the train station for my lesson with the children.” On the rare occasions when the weather hadn’t cooperated, they secured permission to meet in the train stations. But the clear skies and billowing clouds overhead indicated perfect weather.

Together, they stepped off the train and headed into town. Her father’s tall frame still made her feel like a little girl when she walked at his side. She reached up and placed her hand in the crook of his arm. As they crossed the train tracks, she glanced about. After seeing those men at the tavern, Hope wasn’t sure what to expect, but she was pleasantly surprised as she and her father walked the main street of town. Though few in number, the buildings that lined the brick street in the main portion of town were reasonably maintained. And, if one could judge from the wares displayed in the windows and crates in front of the Brookfield businesses, the stores were well-stocked.

Hope displayed a bright smile as they handed out tracts and visited with folks. When she spotted a young woman with two small children in tow, Hope asked for directions to the schoolhouse and inquired what time the children would be dismissed for the day. As four o’clock approached, she gained her father’s approval and headed off toward the school located

on the outskirts of town, with his admonition to be careful ringing in her ears.

The woman's directions had proved accurate, and Hope spied the schoolhouse in the distance—a rather small frame building in need of repair and a fresh coat of paint. She'd mention the project to her father. No doubt he'd have it in fine shape before they departed. While the few schools she'd visited since leaving Pittsburgh didn't resemble those she attended as a child, she soon learned that families placed a higher value on physical labor than education. Consequently, schools were constructed where they would gain maximum attendance from the surrounding farms and from the families living and working in the small towns.

The late April sun beat down with unseasonable warmth, and the scent of honeysuckle and lilac filled the air. Hope's shoes sunk into the soft ground as she trudged toward the school with her skirt swishing the tall grass. How she longed for the wide brim of her hat that had gone flying into the hands of those rowdy men earlier in the day. That hat would have blocked the sun from her eyes to perfection. Certain she heard voices in the distance, Hope stopped short and tented one hand above her eyes, then glanced toward a grove of pawpaw trees. There had been no ringing bell to announce the end of the school day, and there were no children in sight.

Her heart pulsed a beat that resounded in her ears. She tamped down her fear and glanced over her shoulder. There was no one in sight. She sighed in relief as she stepped forward. Likely she'd heard nothing more than some birds nesting in the trees. Keeping her attention fixed on the uneven ground, she started as a flash of red fabric flew in front of her and landed near her feet. Her hat!

She gasped and clutched the remaining flyers to her chest.