



## Chapter Two

### Coffin Ship to Bean Town

1850

Once Nellie's toes felt the wide plank in the ship's belly, she stood still waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dark. People she couldn't see well all seemed to talk at once.

"Mum?" No answer. She shivered. Which way had Mum gone? When she could make out the ship's inside, she saw sides that looked like the bony ribs of a long-dead animal. The dim light came through openings high above her head and from lanterns hung from the ceiling. Goose bumps rose on her arms.

From her left, Fannie screamed. "Nellie!"

Nellie turned and screamed, too. "Mum, where are you?"

"Here, Nellie."

Nellie could barely see Mum beckoning. She scrambled toward her mother. The rough plank that crossed the hull scratched Nellie's bare feet. At the sides of the plank were coffin-sized sleeping spaces marked by boards. Did the woman on the wharf mean these spaces, or was this just a place for people to die, far away from home?

Nellie grasped Mum's tattered skirt. "I want to go back."



Illustration taken from *The Illustrated London News*, July 6, 1850. "Scene between decks" of an emigrant ship.

"There's nowhere to go except into the ocean. Don't worry Darlin', we're together. Say a prayer. That's what I do when I'm frightened."

Why would God take their Papa and their home, and then send them to a place like this? Why in the world would she want to pray to a God like that? She stroked Grandmother's rosary in her pocket while they wove between people to move forward, but she didn't pray.

Halfway between the floor and the ceiling were more sleeping spaces. The grownups couldn't stand up in them. People bumped into each other in the walking space in the middle of the deck. It only went as far as their well was from their house, maybe 25 steps. Toward the bow she could make out a door, and hoped it was a water closet. Men filled the sleeping area on one side of the walking space, and women on the other. Some

people had trunks piled in the walking space at the ends of their sleeping spaces. Others hung curtains, but Nellie could see around them. They would have precious little privacy here. She held her breath as long as she could, until she had to breathe or die. The stink made her want to vomit.

They needed to go home. They could stay in the church. At least it didn't stink inside, and they'd live with people they knew. Her eyes started to burn, but she gulped back the tears. She was stronger than that.

Mum came to a top bunk where two women already rested who looked to Nellie to be about Mum's age. Next to them was an empty coffin space. Mum smiled at them. "And may we join you here?"

Nellie didn't much want to sleep right next to strangers, but these women had kind eyes. Maybe.

The one with a missing tooth held out her hands. "C'mere, hand me your little one."

Mum lifted Fannie up. The woman's red hair flopped forward as she caught Fannie and plopped her onto the bunk. Fannie scrambled back toward Mum and Nellie. "No, no, no."

Nellie jumped up beside Fannie and put her arm around her. Her little sister turned and patted Nellie's cheek. Mum turned her back to the bunk, hopped up and settled herself. She held out her hand to the red-headed woman. "And I am Frances Cashman, and these are me daughters, Nellie and Fannie."

When the woman shook Mum's hand, the loose skin under her arm swung back and forth. It reminded Nellie of Grandmother, and she giggled. She and Fannie always

teased her about her “grandma arms.” The woman waved her hand at herself and the other woman, who wore a man’s bowler hat over her own red hair. “Mollie, and me sister, Peg.”

“Nice to meet you both. Girls, say good day.”

Nellie put her hand out as Mum had. “Good day.”

Mum held a blanket out to Nellie. “Roll this out, and then take this other and lay it over the top.” Once they were done, she uncovered the basket and gave Nellie and Fannie another oatmeal cake and cheese.

Nellie put her cheese on top of the cake. “We’ll have the whole basket gone before the day is out.”

Mum’s eyebrows went up. “And that’s what I’m after. I’d rather Grandmother’s food go into our stomachs, than a hooligan’s.”

Mollie laughed. “And you’d be right there.”

They ate and ate, until no cheese, only one oatmeal cake and some crumbs remained in the basket. Her stomach felt as if it might explode. Night had fallen outside, and Nellie and Fannie leaned against Mum’s sides. Lulled to sleep by the rolling ship, Nellie walked the lane with Papa when a whistle blew and roused her.

The blanket didn’t cover her completely, and her feet felt stiff with the cold. When a man across from them yelled, “Keep your mitts off me things!” she reached into her pocket again and took out the rosary to rub its cross. Maybe she wasn’t *that* angry at God. He’d found them a place. Who else could protect them, after all? *Lord Jesus, please show me You’re with us down here. I’m afraid. Grandmother said it’s a long way to America. How can we stand the stinking dark one day, much less many days?* Mum

lifted the blanket and gently placed Fannie under it. Nellie curved herself around Fannie's little body, feeling her warmth.

She would find a way to protect Fannie and herself from mean men like the sheriff or that fat old sailor. She didn't know the way to do that now, but she meant to find out how to stand strong. Mum knew. She would copy Mum.

The next morning, a big man climbed the ladder to go on deck. Nellie heard a sailor yell at him in a rough voice that stopped him. "Get back, Irisher. None may come on deck unless you paid. You didn't pay, and we haven't called any to bring down slop barrels. In the unlikely case you've got something that needs to be cooked, I'd like to see it." The man objected, and the next thing Nellie knew he lay on the plank at the ladder's bottom. His lip bled and he moaned and held his back when he pulled himself up. She had seen that some people had gone into doors on the upper deck. They must have money. When she was big, she was going to have money.

As the days went by, Nellie realized that only the biggest men got to go up the ladder because they fought their way to the top when meals were called. She turned her head when they beat each other, ripped clothes and pulled legs to get there first. She wanted to go up, too, to breathe fresh sea air, stand in the spray at the front of the ship and be washed by the ocean or even climb the mast again. That would not happen. She settled in to spend the whole voyage picking bugs off her sister. When she squashed them between her fingers they made a popping sound. God had better have some good things for them in America, because she didn't care for this ship at all. Paying this price should have a big reward, it seemed to her.

The days held nothing. Nellie found a nail lying on the plank and practiced her letters by carving them in the side of the ship. Sometimes she let Fannie copy her, but they both lost interest after a short time. Mum, who had scheduled daily chores for all of them in Ireland, and been known for the cleanest cottage in Midleton, gave up. “Why clean when there is nothing to clean with and nowhere to put dirt should you find a way to clean?” She dropped a rag she had spit on.

Nellie kissed her on the cheek. “Don’t give up, Mum. We need you to keep going.”

“Aye, I’m fine.” She picked up the rag and gave Nellie’s nose a swipe. Nellie laughed.

When the food came below, all the people fought for a share of the smelly, bug-infested gruel. The water was worse. It stunk like vinegar, or sometimes oil and was no longer clear. A kind man named Dan, who slept on the plank across from their bunk, sometimes brought them food he’d won, but not often. He reminded Nellie of their Uncle Dan. He wasn’t very big. If her belly hadn’t growled and hurt, she wouldn’t have cared whether he brought any food at all.

Eight days after they’d left Ireland a storm raged against the ship. People were thrown around like a rag doll tossed in a toy box. Even the men were thrown from one side to the other. Mum held Fannie and her and they slipped their fingers between boards to try to make a stronger force against the heaving ship. All were seasick, and a person who yelled could only be heard if they were right next to her.

Nellie touched Mum’s arm and screamed. “Are you sure God is here with us?”

Mum stared hard into her eyes and yelled. “Here with us? I am certain, Nellie. Remember when I told you He loves us so much he went through a horrible death for us?” There was a crashing sound and her head nearly hit the plank. She righted herself, laughed and shook her head. Then she continued. “He rose again to prove he is God, and He rides right here on this coffin ship plank in this storm with us. So he does. I think God is close enough, you could feel him if He chose to let you.”

Begorah, if Mum believed that, Nellie did too. She put her hand into the air next to her for just a second, and imagined she could feel the folds of His robe. *I'm glad You are here with us. I don't know why we have to do this, but since You are doing it too, it is not so bad. Please stop this storm. I am scared.*

After three days, He did. She would have liked Him to do it faster, but guessed His time might be different than hers.

Once the storm ended, most nights Peg played a fiddle she'd brought. Those who still had strength, danced. Peg didn't have children, not here or in Ireland. She took on the job of cheering up Fannie, Nellie and every other child who would be cheered. Nellie liked her. Peg called out to them as she sawed out a bouncy melody. “Dance, Nellie. Dance, Fannie.”

Pretty soon even grownups danced and sang, bumping happily into each other, and this in spite of the nasty food and water, not to mention the nasty smell. Nellie had known the Irish happiness since she was a wee lass like Fannie. It didn't surprise her that even this terrible ship couldn't kill that happiness. For herself, Nellie figured that even in the stinking dark, she could either sit and mope or stand up and face it with a laugh. She stood and laughed aloud. Mum had said God was with them, and Grandmother said He

had gone ahead of them. If they were right, then God smelled the nasty smell, felt the painfully hard plank and the embarrassment of the dirt and bugs right along with them. If He could do it, He was strong enough to help them do it. They were not alone.

Not long after the storm, she noticed the little red-haired girl waiting with her mother in the water barrel line. The little girl smiled at Nellie. "Good mornin'. We came up here because our barrel has no more water."

Nellie smiled back. "And how are you this fine day?"

The red-haired girl laughed. "And fine is it? I'd like to know what you think is horrid."

Nellie ignored the girl's comment. She wanted to use their time at the barrel to get better acquainted. "My name is Nellie Cashman."

"I'm Mary Finnegan."

"Where are you from?" Nellie asked.

"Limerick."

"I'm from Middleton, near Queenstown."

"It's nice to make your acquaintance. We're back there in the stern." Mary pointed. She had come to the front of the line and she and her mum filled their cups.

Mary held hers up. "And do you just love the taste of this nectar of the gods?"

Nellie laughed.

Mary's mother nodded at her, and Mary turned to Nellie. "I must be after getting back, then."

Nellie smiled. "I'll see you another day."



Nellie played guessing games with Fannie to keep her busy in the daytime. At night, they continued to sing and dance to pass the time, despite the increasing stench, or maybe to take their minds off it. Mum sat with Peg and Mollie during the dancing. Nellie watched one of the ship's officers approach her one night. She left her dancing to hear what he said.

“Could I have this dance? There could be some extra food in it for you.”

Mum shook her head, and looked away from him. “No thank you.”

The man grabbed Mum's arm. “Aw come on, then. Everyone on this wretched ship needs a little more food and fun.”

Nellie froze. Then Mum reached over and picked up a splintered board. She looked the man straight in the eye. “And I would let go of my arm, if I were you.” Her voice was deadly low. Mollie moved up behind Mum.

The officer let go and walked away. “Irish - too grand for their own good.”

Mum appeared to have no need of any man. “Mum, he was scary. I didn't like him, but would you dance with a nice man?”

“I don't know, Nellie. However, I will not be pushed, not into anything. Neither should you be.”

Maybe Mum pretended Papa danced with her, like Nellie pretended he carried her on his shoulders. Nellie wondered whether she, herself, would ever marry. She certainly would never marry a pushy man like that one.

Mary danced up to their plank. “Come on, Nellie, dance with me.” She pulled Nellie's sleeve. Nellie jumped down and they stomped away at a jig together. Over the music, Mary's older brother yelled, “Willy, you're it,” to Mary's littlest brother.

Mary stopped dancing and ran over to drag on his shirt sleeve. “We’ll play, Paddy.”

Fannie wanted to play, but Mum said no. When Fannie asked Nellie and got the same answer, she glared at Nellie and said, “Well then, I’ll love *you* forever.” She must have heard Grandmother say it back in Ireland, but sure and she had missed the meaning. After that, the children played every evening that the sea allowed them. When they ran out of hiding places among the trunks, they used large people.

Peg taught them the words and melodies to Irish tunes. Mary had a glass-breaking voice, but she sang anyway. Nellie tried to sing “Kathleen Mavourneen” louder than Mary to make up for her friend’s screech. It was a song with lyrics about this very voyage.

Mavourneen, Mavourneen, my sad tears are falling,  
To think that from Erin and thee I must part,  
It may be for years, and it may be forever,  
Then why art thou silent, thou voice of my heart?  
It may be for years, and it may be forever,  
Then why art thou silent, thou voice of my heart?”

After Nellie and Fannie learned it, they had Peg play it whenever she would.

One day, when Nellie wondered if they would live in the coffin ship forever, the sailors hauled an old lady’s canvas-wrapped body up the ladder. Seeing the tragedy made Nellie glad Grandmother hadn’t come. Wooden-faced Irish people climbed the ladder to the outside deck behind the sailors. Mum nudged Fannie and her to follow. Nellie climbed, excited at the thought of clean air to breathe, and filled her lungs as soon as she made the side of the ship. When all were on deck, the sailors covered the old lady’s body with a British flag. A British flag, what a disgrace! Nellie wanted to rip it off her body as the old lady would have, had she not died. The captain muttered her funeral service from

a book. When he finished, the seamen lifted the plank to let her body slide into the sea. Nellie didn't want to come to another funeral. The clean air wasn't worth the lie. The sailors herded the Irish back down into steerage, except the rich ones who stayed in the cabins on this deck. The old lady was the first of several who died each day after that.

About a week later, Mary's mother came to the water barrel alone. Though she leaned far over, she looked disappointed at what she got. A man who saw this yelled toward the opening above their heads, "And could you find your way to bring some more of what you loosely term water down here!"

Nellie went to her. "Where's Mary, then?"

Mary's mother looked away. "She's ill. The typhus."

"I'll be saying a prayer for her."

"Thanks to you."

Nellie looked to Mum, her eyebrows raised. Mum nodded. Nellie slid off the plank to follow Mary's mother. Mary's father and brothers sat around her, their caps in their hands, looking at the deck. Her father squeezed water out of a rag, and replaced one on her forehead with the new one. Mary lay with her eyes closed, so thin, so white, her red hair a dull and tangled flame against her skin, which was blotched with red dots.

"And what has happened to you, Mary?"

Mary's eyes flickered open. "Nellie."

Such a small voice.

"I'm sorry you're sick."

"Me, too."

"Aw, then." Nellie stroked Mary's hair.

Mary's next words came in gasps. "Go now, my friend. Make it to America."

Dear Lord, what could she do to help her friend? "I'd like to stay with you for a while. Maybe I could tell you a story."

Mary relaxed and her eyes drifted shut. "No. It's time for you to go."

Nellie turned away. She made herself put one foot in front of the other and swallowed the lump in her throat. How had their dancing and play turned to this? Wouldn't God let Mary live all of her life? *Are you still here?*

Though she'd prayed they'd make America before Mary lost her chance, one morning Nellie saw the sailors drag Mary's body up the ladder. Her mother followed, supported by her Papa. Nellie stared without speaking, as did others. Some began to climb the ladder behind the sailors, but Nellie shook her head when Mum lifted her eyebrows in question, and they stayed on their plank. The fresh air just wasn't worth it. When they heard the splash of Mary's body hitting the waves, it was followed by her mother's wail. The mourners returned down the ladder. Nellie went to Mary's mother, sharing tears with her. "Live, Nellie. I need you to live." She dragged herself back to the stern looking nearly done in.

Nellie turned back to their space. Even Mum and Fannie looked worn, their hair so filthy it stuck straight up all over their heads, though Mum tried to smooth it down with her hands. Nellie wondered how she looked to them. They all needed to get off this ship. That was sure. Nellie squeezed her sister's shoulders. "We will live past this coffin ship, Fannie. We will do it together."

Fannie said nothing, but Nellie could see that hope still lived in Fannie's eyes. She suspected it was hope that Nellie's strength would see them through. She determined to make it true.

Weeks went by. One day when no food at all came from above deck and the water barrels were empty and not replaced, Mum told them to turn to the wall, their backs to the other passengers. Mollie and Peg sat so that no one else could see they had food. Holding the bag low, she split Grandmother's last oatmeal cake and handed the halves to them. Nellie had forgotten it, and was surprised Mum had thought to save it all this time. She gobbled the cake, even though it felt so hard. It scratched the top of her mouth and tasted like medicine. Fannie lay so frail on their plank that Nellie took her sister's half, moistened it, and spit it into her hand to feed her. Nellie's mouth was so dry it took a while to get the bread wet enough. "Thank you," Fannie said, as the gluey masses disappeared between her cracked lips.

Mum hadn't taken any. Nellie handed her the last piece of her cake. "Please, eat this."

More days passed, and at last, whispers went through the people. "I think there's land. I hear gulls crying."

"We've reached Boston Harbor. The sailors say so."

"And they're right, the rocking is gentler."

Nellie stared as people began to gather their things and climb the ladder into the sunlight.

"Yes! The Boston Light, I can see it!"

"Erin go braugh!"

Mollie and Peg scrambled to collect their things and joined the line to make their way up the ladder.

Mum and Nellie bundled their things, too. Then Mum wrote with a pencil on a scrap of paper, folded it, and wrote again on the other side before they joined the others greeting the daylight. Nellie tapped Mum. "If that's for Grandmother, could I sign my name?"

"And of course you can." Mum handed her the paper and pencil, Nellie signed, and added, "I luv u frevr." Mollie and Peg reached the ladder, and Mum raised her voice above the jubilation to shout to them as they disappeared into the crowd. "Goodbye, thank ye for your kindness."

"May God go ahead of ye wherever ye go," Peg called back as she ascended.

They had survived.

Nellie shouldered her bundle and joined the line behind Mum, who carried Fannie on her hip. Once they reached the ladder, she forced her weak legs to ascend one painful barefoot step at a time. Every few steps she gave Mum's behind a little nudge with her hand to help her climb with Fannie.

Then Nellie's head rose above the deck, and the blessed sun nearly blinded her. *Thank you, Father. I will not forget your protection of us so we could make it all this way. Please tell Mary we made it.*

Nellie shaded her eyes to see sailors fold sails and others prepare to throw the huge ropes to men on the pier. Beyond their pier, sailing ships anchored at dozens of piers and Boston's red and brown brick buildings rose above the hills.

Mum ran over to the sailor who let them stay on deck that first day and handed him their note. She spoke to him a moment, he nodded and slipped the note into his shirt. She touched his arm and smiled, then came back to Nellie and Fannie.

Another inspection station like the one in Queenstown had been erected on the deck of the ship. When the inspector looked at Fannie, he frowned. Nellie smiled at her, and she smiled back. Fannie could not be quarantined. Nellie had seen children quarantined as she waited in the line. Policemen surrounded them as well as their families. Then they loaded them in black boxed-in wagons on the wharf. After the examiner felt Fannie's head, he gestured them on toward the side. Nellie breathed at last and watched Mum place Fannie on her hip again before she scanned the crowd on the pier.

The next instant, Mum slid Fannie down her side and waved both arms high over her head, actually jumping up and down like a girl. "Michael! Lasses, I see Cousin Michael. Get after waving to him. Sure and Begorah, I wrote to him two weeks before we left. He must have met every ship that docked since he got my letter." Nellie had not realized how alone Mum had felt, until right now.

Nellie and Fannie waved and waved as the ship bumped the pier. Michael finally saw them and waved back. "Welcome to Bean Town!" he yelled in a lion's voice, and they actually heard him above all the noise of leaving the ship. Past the crowds Nellie could see the city spreading away to the horizon. The streets were made of stones and there were carriages and wagons everywhere. Then she looked down at her ragged self. Here they were in rich America, then. No food, no money, no shoes, very little clothing,

tired, smelly and weak. She wondered whether Cousin Michael would be able to help them make their way in this Boston.