

### **Chapter Three**

#### **And What Is Freedom, Then?**

**1850 - 1861**

Nellie looked up at grand clouds passing overhead as they escaped that horrid coffin ship. She never turned once to look behind them and breathed in clean air till she felt dizzy. “Sure and this is a happy day,” she said to anyone who might hear. Mum smiled and tugged her hand. She had put Fannie back on her hip. They joined other raggedy Irishmen making their way down the gangplank. Cousin Michael waited, tall and broad-shouldered like Papa, but he had green eyes and very black hair. They made the wharf and he gathered them into his arms. He seemed to reach clear into the sky. Mum hugged him and giggled. “And how glad I am to see a familiar face.” Nellie remembered Michael having a pint with Papa at their cottage.

He picked a bug off Nellie’s dress. “Phew, you lasses are not smelling real sweet. You could use some lime and water, too.”

Nellie picked another bug off her dress and popped it. “And we’re after getting a bath, and that’s for sure.”

Mum picked a bug off her own dress and popped hers, too. “The man who can’t laugh at himself should be given a mirror. I surely don’t want one until I have a soapy bath.”

Michael laughed. “Boston’s Irish section isn’t like the awl sod. We’re packed, often more than a family to a room. One privy for all the families, little sky, or soap, but I’ll make ye a private place to sleep, and sure ye can borrow me soap. Hello, little Fannie.” Michael took Fannie from Mum’s hip and lifted her to his shoulders. Then he reached for Mum’s arm, and she hooked her elbow through his. Fannie frowned down at Nellie, her eyes round.

Nellie winked at her. “And you’re all right. Hang on.”

They joined the crowds headed up cobbled streets near the docks. Children came from doorways, their hands held high to beg the Cashmans for coins as they walked along. “Cousin Michael, who are those children? They look as dirty as I feel.”

“Aw Lassie, the North End is full of them. So many parents died on the way over, and more after they arrived. Cholera, you know. They live alone on the street, and make their way the best they can.”

Nellie remembered thinking it was them against the world in the crowded ship’s hold. Now she realized they still had each other, and were not alone. She didn’t care for this North End, where drunks slept in alleys and garbage filled the streets. But she worried more about Fannie. Could her illness cause her to die from that coffin ship, even now?

Mum was happy for the first time since the day they’d boarded the ship. She babbled away at Michael like a lass. “And how did you know what ship we’d be on?”

“A ship only comes from Queenstown this once a week. It’s been a year since I came over, y’know, plenty of time to get my bearings. I was after getting to me job a little late these

last two weeks since your letter came, not being sure how long you would take and all. It wasn't a difficulty, then."

Nellie, Mum and Michael turned up Batterymarch Street from the docks into the tenements. Boston was so big its streets' names were on signs at corners. They joined others who had begun to sing, "The Parting Glass."

Of all the money e'er I had,  
I spent it in good company.  
And all the harm I've ever done,  
Alas! it was to none but me.  
And all I've done for want of wit  
To mem'ry now I can't recall  
So fill to me the parting glass  
Good night and joy be with you all

Nellie saw Mum glance up at Fannie. Maybe she worried about her more than Nellie did.

Though they had arrived, and this was supposed to be home, it was not. Maybe one day Boston would feel like home, but today the tall buildings and strange faces made Nellie want to cling to Mum's skirts. She'd expected they would have the say over their lives in America, but now she wondered.

At last, Michael pointed to a tall red brick building where women hung from most of the windows talking to each other. Dozens of children played on the front stoop, and they had to walk carefully to keep from stepping on toes, especially Michael. He wore thick leather work boots.

They climbed unpainted stairs to the third floor. She heard babies crying, mothers soothing them, and fathers stomping about. "I've moved my friends out, and we'll be paying the landlord his rent between us four. Are you still among Ireland's best seamstresses, Frances?"

"And might there be ladies wishing it?"

“You have to watch out for the NINA signs. That means “No Irish Need Apply,” and the folks who place them don’t care for our kind much. We’ll see to taking you up Beacon Hill, once you’re clean. The rich, older families live there. They’re fine having Paddy and Bridgit serve them, especially if Bridgit can make Irish lace.”

“Paddy and Bridgit?”

“That’s what they call the Irish, and they don’t mean it kindly.”

Mum nodded and changed the subject. “Is there school for the girls?”

“We’ll see to it, once they’re clean. The nuns have a school at the church.”

Inside their room, Nellie couldn’t see through their one window’s dirty glass. Her first American work would be to clean that window so they could see the city. Then she would get clean and go to school, she would. And so would Fannie.

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On a late spring day two years later, Nellie looked away from Noah Webster’s Elementary Primer and Spelling Book out through the schoolroom window’s wavy glass. She and Fannie were no longer dirty, buggy or sick. They’d had baths in Michael’s big metal tub every Saturday. Mum had made them gingham dresses, and they had filled out from having enough to eat. They even wore button-up shoes and stockings. Nellie didn’t like shoes as much as she had thought she would. She squirmed in her seat, unable to contain her restlessness, wiggling her toes inside her hot shoes. Didn’t anyone realize the sun shone outside?

Fannie sat next to her at their wooden desk. The carvings of years of students told its history in its top. Nellie’s favorite was, “Can’t someone rescue me?” Her bottom was dead from the hard seat and she licked at the ink smudges on her fingers from the quill pen. She daydreamed until Sister Mary Martha, the heavy, habit-clad teacher, rapped her ruler on their

desk. The ruler fell a sliver away from Nellie's knuckles, making Fannie and her jump. "Miss, your parents don't send you here to woolgather!"

Nellie had had enough of those who frightened people. If Sister Anna Clarence were their teacher, that kind-hearted Sister would never frighten anyone. Nellie stood in respect and looked at their teacher. "I am sorry, Sister Mary Martha. I was not woolgathering. I was wishing to be out in the sunshine."

"It is time you open that primer and complete your lessons."

"And I finished, Sister."

"What is the date of the signing of the Declaration of Independence?"

"July 4, 1776."

"And where was it signed?"

"Philadelphia, Pennsylvania."

"Give me the first paragraph."

Nellie looked up at the ceiling. "'When in the Course ....'" she rattled off the entire paragraph. "And I'll be assuring you, Sister, that though I may be Irish first, I am an Irish American, hating the English as much as anyone."

"We should not hate, Miss, and you need more to do." Sister Mary Martha made a regal turn and moved to her desk. Nellie lowered herself into the seat and watched the Sister rummage through her books.

A quick tug at her braid snapped Nellie's head back. She turned to confront her antagonist. Thomas Cunningham sat at the desk behind them. His green eyes sparkled, and he whispered, "And could you be reciting the rest of the Declaration, then?"

Nellie glared at him. "If my braid has ink on it, I'll be after reciting your eulogy!"

Fannie tapped Nellie's shoulder as if she were a chicken pecking feed. "Turn around, Sis..."

Smack, the ruler hit Nellie's knuckles before she had a chance to face forward. She clutched her wounded hand and bent her head trying not to cry out in pain.

"If you insist on daydreaming, Miss Cashman, at least don't involve others. Here, copy the Declaration of Independence, after your whipping." She slapped paper on Nellie's desk. Nellie stood, and at the exact same moment Thomas stood. "Sister, and she didn't speak first. I did."

Nellie sat.

Sister Mary Martha turned on him. "Bend over, Cunningham."

Thomas turned his back to their teacher and bent at the waist. Three loud snaps filled the classroom. Fannie's shoulders trembled with silent sobs. Nellie dared not look at Thomas while Sister Mary Martha marched to her desk on the platform at the front. "You may be seated!" She pointed the ruler at the two of them.

Nellie opened Sister's book and copied the declaration, taking care not to miss a word, but her thoughts were on Thomas. He was an irritation then, but at least he had character. Maybe she would be after trying to get to know him better. She found him interesting.

After lunch, Sister Mary Martha read to the class from a new book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Today she read the part where Uncle Tom met the little girl, Eva. Nellie loved Uncle Tom. She admired the slave's honesty and kindness. The Irish had a difficult time, including herself, Mum and Fannie, coming to America. However, at least they were free. She didn't remember slavery in Ireland at all. Why did America allow people to own others, and people who were owned?

After school, Thomas, Nellie and Fannie walked home together. All of a sudden a flatbed wagon chased by men on horseback clattered right toward them in the street. Nellie shoved Fannie toward the wall of a house, running fast. She turned to see whether Thomas was all right just as the horsemen surrounded the wagon loaded with boxes. The three children pressed themselves against the house.

One man, who had an ugly scar from his mouth to his eye, jumped from his saddle. “Open those boxes!”

The wagon’s stout driver sat like a stone on the seat.

Another man through his leg over his saddle and landed with a tool in his hand. He put the tool under the lid of a wooden box and his muscles bulged under his blue shirt as he pulled up.

Suddenly, the lid burst open and a black man with chains hanging from shackles on his wrists jumped from the box to the wagon to the street and raced past the last mounted horseman faster than Nellie had ever seen anyone run. The scarface pulled a gun from his pants. His voice sounded like thunder. “Stop, or you’re dead!”

The black man ran on, and Nellie heard the click of the man’s gun getting ready to fire.

Fannie screeched. “Stop, please stop. He’s going to shoot you!”

Nellie moved toward the man with the gun. She had no idea what she intended to do, but this couldn’t happen. Thomas grabbed her by the arm just as the gun went off. Nellie whipped around to shield Fannie from seeing it. The black man lay screaming in the street. They had shot him in the arm. One of the men came up behind her. “You children go on home now. This is none of your affair.”

Suddenly, tears fell. She didn't want Thomas to see, but she couldn't help it. She felt him pat her back and nudge her to move away. She pulled Fannie to her, got a grip on her shoulders and turned to hurry down a side alley.

Thomas glanced down at her. "Begorah, that was horrible."

She still shook. "Aye." This did not feel right. Not her weak shaking nor the shooting of the slave.

Fannie cried, too. She barely could get her question out. "And did they shoot that poor black man?"

Nellie sat down on the stoop of a house. "They did."

"Why?"

Thomas was still breathing fast, but he offered them his hands and the three moved off together. "He must have been someone's slave and run away."

Nellie swiped at the tears on her face. "How can the land of the free let things like that happen? I felt as helpless as the poor man, like when we sailed on the coffin ship. I'm tired of feeling helpless."

Thomas bit his lip. "Judging from the book the Sister's been reading, other folks are tired of it, too. I'm guessing it will be stopped, but I don't know how."

As they finished their walk home, Thomas picked up a stick. He used it to roll a rock along a different street than they usually took. His rock rolled into a gutter, but he retrieved it before it went down a grate. "By the way, females are supposed to feel helpless. You need big strong males to protect you, or hadn't you heard?"

Nellie found another stick, and Thomas sent the rock her direction. "You even play with sticks, Nellie. That's not very feminine."



Nellie gave the rock a good whack. “I do not enjoy feeling helpless, Thomas. And I cannot pretend. Besides, who decides what’s feminine? Not you, bucko. Big strong males, my foot. I am a wild horse jumping the fence and off into the sunset.”

“I’m older than you, Miss Lassie, or Miss Filly, whatever you like. I have a baptism paper that says I was born in 1842. So I know about these things.”

The rock hit a man’s pant leg, and he glared at her. “Sorry, Sir.” Nellie retrieved it and sent it toward Fannie. “You’re eleven, then. And I’d be nine, but that doesn’t make you smarter than me.”

“Does, too.”

She handed Fannie the stick, and Fannie tried several times to hit the rock. Nellie shook her finger at Thomas. “I know who I am. I have never wanted to be helpless. I’m after finding adventure, like the sailors on the ship, or Gulliver.”

“That’s too bad. It’s not about to happen for a girl. And besides, what man would want a woman who doesn’t take directions.” He eyed her skirts.

Nellie stopped swishing them. Was Thomas a boy who had decided what a girl was good for? They parted at their corner. She liked his courage, but she and Thomas definitely did not agree about boys and girls.

Nellie and Fannie raced each other to their room. It was unfair to race her. She wouldn’t beat Nellie for many years. But she always wanted to. Nellie might never beat Thomas though, him wearing pants and her fighting these cumbersome skirts.

Mum heard their voices when they came through the front door. She called down the stairs, “Nellie, there should be a bolt of blue gingham down there. Bring it up, please.”

Nellie found the cloth and lugged it up the stairs. Fannie had run up ahead. Nellie heard her telling Mum about the poor black man. By the time Nellie lugged the bolt of material in the open door, Fannie sat on their mattress eating bread with jam. “Ha ha, I won,” she said, the bread escaping her mouth.

“Nellie, what in the world happened on your way home?”

“It was awful, Mum. The horsemen shot that poor black man.”

“Were you in danger, then?”

“I don’t think so. I have to admit I was frightened, though. No one should have a gun. Well, maybe soldiers and policemen, but that’s all. And I never want one, for certain.”

Mum handed Nellie the scissors and another piece of bread. “Thank the good Lord you are home safely. Here, eat your bread, then cut a yard and a half.” Nellie took the scissors. She didn’t want to sew. She wanted to think about what Thomas said. This country was huge and new. There must be more than this working with a needle and thread for her, no matter his opinion.

Mum leaned over pink satin for someone on Beacon Hill and squinted at each tiny stitch. “With the rent paid, everything else we earn can go toward the sewing machine. Once I have one, we can go after saving for another for you.”

“Mum, do you think girls shouldn’t do what boys do?”

Mum looked up at her. “I believe our world says they shouldn’t.”

Nellie plopped down beside her. “Remember when you told that hooligan on the coffin ship to leave you alone? You had a board in your hand. Are you sure men get to tell women what to do? I don’t care for that idea myself.”

“I think the world has decided that men are the biggest, and unless you are very tough, they will tell you what to do. And are you prepared to be that tough, then?”

“I believe I may be.”

Later that night, when Fannie already slept on the mattress and Michael had gone off with his garsuns, Mum and Nellie worked in the light from the kerosene lantern. The light found a copper glow in Mum’s hair. She handed Nellie the edge of a piece of red velvet. “Here Nellie, hold this hem straight for me.”

Nellie ran the soft folded piece between her thumb and finger. “Mum, I’m wondering why God allows one man to own another, if He loves us, and all.”

Mum rhythmically made tiny stitches. “Nellie, m’girl, the world’s evil exists not because God wanted it at all. Bad things began with a choice made long ago. Remember when I told you about Adam and Eve and how they chose to be like God by eating the apple?”

Nellie moved the fabric forward. “God sending them away from the garden just because they ate an apple didn’t seem fair any more than one man owning another.”

“They did the only thing God had asked them not to do. And Satan had lied to them, Nellie. He said they would become like God from eating the apple. All they became was sinners, people who wanted to be God and couldn’t be perfect no matter how hard they tried. Now we are like them. Their choice changed everything.”

“And I’d be knowing about that, for sure. Mum, sometimes I have such a hard time doing what is right or even thinking what is right. I want to, and then I end up doing wrong. Or I’m not even sure what is right, or who decides.”

“Indeed. And though you’d never buy another person, you’d get angry, call somebody a name, and so forth. To God, it’s all missing the mark.”

Nellie shifted her weight, and then looked up into Mum's eyes. "I suppose there's nothing to do about our missing the mark."

"But there is, lass. Sure and begorah God had Jesus and our salvation planned long before Satan fooled Eve." The needle pricked Mum's finger, and she blotted away the blood before it dripped on the fabric. "Nellie, you need to find out about Jesus from that Sister you like so much. What's her name, then?"

"Sister Anna Clarence."

"Yes, talk to her then."

She would talk with Sister Anna Clarence about Jesus. Maybe the Sister could help her make sense of what kind of woman she might become, and what place Jesus might have in it. Nellie felt confused about whether she could determine her own future, live in the way she felt suited for, or whether she would end up having to follow society's rules.

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Eight years passed, the United States elected Abraham Lincoln president, and his election started a war between the northern and southern states over slavery. Nellie didn't like war, but she was glad to see the country doing something about slavery.

She had finished eighth grade and that ended her schooling. Thomas had graduated from high school, and grown tall and handsome. They had become good friends, never mind the word battles they had over education, women's roles, and various other topics that boiled Nellie's blood. He had enlisted in the 19<sup>th</sup> Infantry of the Union Army and they had drilled at the huge park called Boston Common. Now the infantry had moved out, and Nellie and Fannie didn't know where he was.

Sister Anna Clarence and Nellie talked often under the Freedom Tree where the Union troops had gathered in Boston Common. One day as they sat in the shade, the Sister smiled and told her a truth that stuck with her. “True freedom only comes in a relationship with Jesus. He requires nothing but your faith. He gives everything you need, and guides you so that you live life as He would have you.” That meant no one else could tell her how to live life but Jesus. She would have to think about this.

She was seventeen and because Boston’s men were gone, she finally found a job. She convinced the manager of a public building that she could be bigger and tougher than she looked. She operated a lift for him, which gave her time to think about the freedom Jesus offered and read the Bible the Sister had given her.

Mum, whose dark hair was sprinkled with gray now, had bought a shiny black treadle sewing machine. Its speed made it possible for Mum to make money faster, and they had bought a small brownstone house at 328 Federal Street. Nellie loved baths in a tub instead of a bucket and meals in their own kitchen, and windows, lots of windows. Michael came along as their boarder, instead of them being his boarders.

Fannie had started high school, and never let Nellie hear the end of how much more educated she was. Her looks had also sweetened with growth. Her blue eyes were a deep pool when she was happy and looked like ice when anger or sadness overcame her. Her skin was a pearl against her dark hair. She drew attention, just like Thomas had, but Nellie noticed she had eyed Thomas under lowered lashes when she thought no one was looking. Maybe one day her friend might become her brother-in-law, if he came back. She even teased Fannie about it.

The week after Nellie got the lift operator job they had soda bread and clam chowder for dinner one night. Michael talked around his food, as usual. “And I’m after going west to find my

fortune. The paper says men who made killings during the Gold Rush have started a railroad. Sure and they would need hostlers then.” Before the week was out, Michael was headed for San Francisco. Nellie wondered whether God had given her the lift operator job because he’d already known Michael was about to fly, and they would need to replace his rent.

At the public building, she greeted passengers who entered her black wrought iron lift, asked for their floors and talked to them about what life might hold. People came and went, soldiers wearing blue uniforms, delivery boys sporting flat caps, ladies whose hoop skirts swayed back and forth.

One day a tall, silver-haired officer, who looked very much like General Ulysses S. Grant, filled her lift with his huge frame. Nellie thought he might be the general because he looked the spitting image of the picture she’d seen in the Boston Globe. He smelled like horse sweat and leather. In a deep voice, he asked for the top floor. She nodded and pushed the lever up.

“Will you be glad when this war is over, and you can go back to being a woman, young lady?”

“I’ll be glad when the war is over, Sir. But I’m after finding adventure, because I have to, to live. I think I might pass right away if I have to do what women do all my life.” Nellie wondered whether she'd said too much.

The general removed his hat and scratched his white hair. "Perhaps you could continue running the lift after the war."

"No Sir, I don't even want to run a lift forever. There's something more, I know it." She glanced up, and felt relieved when she saw him smile. "You live outside. You would understand

then. I love seeing the sky, watching the seasons change, knowing which animals live in a place.”

As they neared his floor, Nellie lowered the lever. The general stepped from the lift.

“Why don’t you go west, young woman? California needs people like you.”

A flame burst to life in Nellie’s heart. She closed the gate behind him, and lowered the lift. California, where Cousin Michael had gone. Could she escape being a servant girl, or even a lift operator? Might there be adventure, new lands, the chance to control her own destiny?