

# EMBRACING THE ELEPHANT



a novel by

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*To the resilient, persistent child in all of us*





# CHAPTER 1

*March 25, 1848*

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WHEN THE CITY OF NEW YORK DISAPPEARS behind a curtain of late-season snow I am thrilled. The voyage has begun. The steamer trip from Boston was only a stutter step. Now I am on my way. Soon I will be with Papa.

I am less pleased as the snow turns to sleet and I am driven below decks. It is foul-smelling and crowded there and I know almost no one. Had this been my home in Boston, a blustery day would have been enjoyable with my cousins and me playing games and telling stories and making mischief on the staircase. However, my cousins are still in Boston and the ship's staircase is hidden and probably forbidden and the only children close to my age are the ones with whom I travel and they are not very playful.

Once hailstones pound the decks and the ship tosses and rises and then plummets into gigantic troughs of waves I retreat to my bunk in terror. I expect to be shattered. I want to find the captain and beg him to turn back. The violence of the voyage has turned the stomachs and bowels of my fellow passengers to water and all joy wanes.

Then I think of Papa and I resolve to clutch the sides of my berth until the storm passes and say nothing of my fear to the captain or anyone.

As the storm abates, the wind remains. Today the rain and ice are gone and the decks are dry and I can keep my footing for the first time since we sailed from New York Harbor. I am glad there is this wind for it speeds the ship steadily forward even though it invades every seam and gap in my clothing and makes my body erupt into gooseflesh. I hope this is the kind of wind that can blow ships to the farthest points of the earth like the North Wind which Mama told me about. Papa lives in one of the far points of the earth.

“Good morning, Miss. Fine freezing day isn’t it?”

Mr. Boyle stands before me: Mr. Boyle, the thin and weathered sailor who discovered me on the front-most deck watching as a little steamer towed *The Pelican* into New York Harbor from the channel at Clark’s Wharf. Mr. Boyle, who ordered me to leave that deck because of its danger: snow slick, its railing open to the sea. Mr. Boyle, who grabbed my hand when I gave him no response and, with a snort, led me back to the larger deck, his blunt fingers clenched so tightly that I nearly cried out as I slid across the boards behind him.

“Where are your parents?” he barked once we stepped onto the proper deck. I remained quiet. “Why aren’t they watching you?” I looked down at my shoes, biting at the walls of my cheeks.

He squatted before me and tilted his head to catch my eye. “Ah, I see. I’m a stranger and you’re not allowed to talk to strangers. Is that it?”

I nodded, avoiding his gaze. Of all the advice with which Aunt Margaret peppered me in preparation of this journey the warning against talking with strangers was the most repeated.

“Well this’ll be fun,” he said. “Four.”

I frowned because I could not fathom the significance of the number he had spoken.

"I'm guessing you're ten years old; am I right?" the sailor asked. I shook my head. "Fifteen then?" I was more emphatic in my denial as his guess was well past the mark. "Then you must be twenty. And don't try to tell me you're any older 'cause I won't believe you."

"I am eleven," I said.

He smiled in triumph, showing squared and yellowed teeth. "I told m'self I could make you talk before I'd asked four questions and I've done it in three. But don't you smile about that as it's a small victory. Now I must divine your name and that'll be harder. What's your name?"

The wind answered the sailor's question and I gasped. Of course it could not have been the wind, I knew that. However, since I distinctly heard my name above the noise of the ship, I turned to look for the source only to find the Reverend descending upon us, his wispy hair flaring atop his head in a corn-silk halo.

"Guinevere, what are you doing here?" the Reverend shouted as he neared. "I've been looking everywhere for you. Mrs. Dunsford has given me a terrible scolding for having lost you while still in sight of land. She worried that you might've gone overboard when we left the pier or...or worse." His eyes were fixed on the sailor during this speech as if to accuse *him* for my wandering. "I'm the Reverend Dunsford. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?" He did not sound as if he found it a pleasure and did not offer a greeting hand. Instead he stepped behind me, his thumbs pressing hard against my shoulders.

The sailor stood tall. "Boyle. Eamon Boyle, chief mate of *The*