

## Chapter One

Ulverston, Lancashire, August 1886

“Shh, my darling, don’t you cry.”

The nanny bent over the carriage, as Clara peeped around the corner, from across the road, and saw the woman rock the child until the crying stopped. The sound of the baby had made Clara stop to watch. A baby is what she wanted most in the world with her partner Henry. Clara thought that the woman who lived in that big house had it all. She must be rich. She had servants and a front garden with a gate. Those posh people, with their fine clothes, had no idea how people like her lived. They didn’t know what life was about. Clara looked down at her shabby clothes and bare feet and imagined what the unknown woman was wearing—silk and lace, with shoes and silk stockings, but more than that, she had a baby.

Clara watched the nanny and envied her job. She couldn’t wait to have a child. She wanted a baby now, and decided she wanted that one. As soon as the bairn stopped crying and the nanny disappeared, Clara walked to the carriage, picked up the baby, and wrapped it in the blanket that covered it. She tucked the baby inside her shawl and ran to town end.

No one gave her a second look. They were oblivious to her, as they went on with their own lives. Clara left town end and walked into the fields, hurrying to put a little distance between her and the town. As she walked through the gate of the first field, she heard the piercing scream in the distance. The nanny must have found the empty carriage. The scream carried a long way, but Clara knew she would be gone before anyone could do a thing. She heard the pandemonium, accompanied by whistles and shouts, and Clara ran holding the baby tightly, so it wouldn’t fall. She eventually stopped running and walked instead, as her breath came in short gasps.

No one knew her, so no one would be suspicious of her carrying a baby. She only came to Ulverston to find her auntie to beg some money, but she failed. She was old enough to be a mother, but she and Henry hadn’t produced. Henry told her it was because she was barren. Maybe he was right, but Henry said lots of things that weren’t nice. She wanted a child, and she wanted this one—now. She looked down at the sweet bairn. Clara couldn’t believe it. She had a baby at last, and it had been so easy. She guessed the family would be upset, but they’d soon get over it; meanwhile, she would have a child. She had what she wanted, at last, and that was the main thing.

The grass was lush beneath her feet and the sun warm and bright as she walked through the fields. It felt good to be out in the fresh air and away from the house she shared with Henry. Henry made Clara work hard to earn money for his drinking habit, but she felt sure she could look after a child, too. Maybe he’d soften towards her and not keep bringing men home if she had the child.

She hoped it was a boy, to make things easier, and thought that the baby’s face looked like it could be a boy. She kept to the paths through the fields instead of the road, avoiding the cowpats. She didn’t want to slip with such a precious bundle. She struggled as she passed through a gate, and then climbed over a fence. Then she heard the baby whimper. Clara stopped for a moment and looked again into its face. The eyes stared back at her, and she wondered what was going through the bairn’s mind.

Clara became tired and stopped; she sat down in the cool grass and laid the baby by her side. She hadn’t eaten, as yet, and she needed to rest. Regaining her stamina, she picked up the baby, rocked it in her arms, and began to sing. The baby seemed to appreciate the song because it smiled back at

her. She tickled it under its chin and it felt soft, like velvety skin. Clara wondered what kind of life they would share.

The weight of the child had felt light at first but soon began to feel heavy the longer she walked. She needed another rest. After resting, Clara carried the bairn into a field of cows and watched them warily. A bull looked as if it was going to charge, but then she noticed its udder and ignored it. Placing the bundle on one hip and then the other, she continued to walk until finally she neared Barrow-in-Furness, and home. The child was still quiet and must have liked being held. Maybe the bumping along helped it to sleep. It was a good baby. By the time she reached home, she breathed a sigh of relief.

When Clara reached the house, she looked up at the windows and knew this poor mite would never see anything like the house where it had been born. No posh curtains covered her windows, and the curtains she did have weren't as clean as those in the house where she had stolen the baby. She didn't have a carriage for the child either. Luckily, it wouldn't remember anything of its past life. It would only know love.

Once in the house, Clara pushed things to one side on the table and placed the baby on the old newspaper that covered it. It had to be a boy. Now she would find out for sure. Clara began to take off the baby's clothes. The infant smelled sweet, and the clothes felt smooth and looked of good quality. Maybe she could get a good price for them when they were sold. The child's eyes were open and seemed to look straight into Clara's soul.

"You're beautiful," Clara spoke softly as she took off the nappy. Then she swore in disappointment.

"Bloody hell, you're a girl!" Now what? Clara pondered whether to keep it. Henry might not like a daughter. She looked again into the bairn's eyes, and then came to a decision.

"You will have a different life with me, baby." Clara picked the child up and cuddled her. "And you'll more than likely never wear posh clothes again." Placing the baby back on the table, she folded the clothes, wrapped them up, and put them to one side before Henry came home. "You will learn to love me, but you'll have to work hard for your living like I do. No one will ever know who your real ma is—no one—because I'll be your ma. Oh yes, baby, I'm your ma now."

There were no regrets. As far as Clara was concerned, the mother of the child could afford to have another baby. Why should the rich have everything? Clara was just making sure of her future, that's all; she had to keep her man somehow.

Clara had been with Henry for a while with no sign of a child. Maybe she couldn't have children. Maybe she was barren like he said, but he didn't know that for sure. Maybe he couldn't father a child, but she dare not say that or he would lose his temper, and she knew that would be followed by a good hiding. Suppose she told Henry she snatched the baby. They could demand a ransom for the child's return. She looked into the bairn's face again, and the baby gurgled and smiled at her in return. It could have been wind—she heard they did that—but she was sure that the child was accepting her, and her heart melted.

Clara thought deeply. What should she do? Perhaps she could pretend it was hers. Henry wouldn't know any different. He'd be drunk when he came home; he was always drunk. She'd just say that it came as a surprise and that she didn't know she was with child. After all, if she hid the baby's clothes and blanket, no one would be any the wiser. Henry once said he'd like a son, so maybe he would

spend more time with her if she told him it was a boy. Maybe he would marry her. He didn't need to know he was a she.

Finding out the baby was a girl was a great disappointment. She didn't think Henry would be as keen on a girl, as he had often talked about having a son in the future, not a daughter. He wouldn't know any different. He wouldn't be looking after her, she would. Then she began to make plans. She would pretend she had given birth unexpectedly, and call the baby Nelson after the great admiral. Henry had connections to the sea, with his job and everything, and would like that. What's more, she always liked that name. Henry would never know it wasn't his baby because she would never tell him.

"Mustn't let your daddy Henry see these clothes, or he will know you're not mine, Nelson."

Upstairs, she emptied a drawer, took a thin blanket off the bed, and replaced it with her coat. Lining the drawer with the blanket, she picked up the old dress she wore in bed, and then went downstairs.

Clara tore the dress, and then picked up her scissors and began cutting it into pieces for the baby's nappies. Lifting her skirt, she unpinned the safety pin that held up her bloomers. Wrapping the cloth around the baby's bottom, she pinned it together with the safety pin, leaving the child otherwise naked. She stepped out of her bloomers, which had now dropped to her ankles, and placed them in the boiler to be washed later.

The baby didn't have a lot of hair, but what she had was light brown with a reddish tinge that Clara saw when the sun shone through the window. When Clara noticed a small white patch of hair, she looked closely and wondered what happened. She picked up the hem of her blouse, spat on it, and gently rubbed at the white mark. It didn't come off.

"What have they been spillin' on you darlin'?" Clara placed the child in the drawer.

After bringing in more coal from the yard, Clara began to stoke the fire. She would make it as cosy as she could for when Henry returned. The house never got warm, even in summer, and she needed to bath the baby—as long as Henry wasn't around at the time. She decided to make soup. He would like that, and she could get on his best side, so she busied herself in the kitchen. She placed two spoons on a cleared part of the table, picked up a jug, and went to the nearest pub to fill it with beer for Henry, leaving the baby alone. When she returned, she tidied up the house while the baby whimpered, then sat and waited for Henry to come home from the inn.

The baby began to cry. Clara knew they fed babies milk, but did she have any? She didn't know. Not knowing much about children and babies, she decided to try the baby on her breast. Maybe all women had milk just waiting for a baby to suckle. She undid her blouse, picked up the baby, and awkwardly tried to slip her nipple into the bairn's mouth. The baby refused to accept it at first, but then attempted to suck, stopped, and cried. Clara tried again, gave it up, and fastened herself up again.

Now the child was upset. She didn't cry for milk before, but now she did. Clara decided to give her soup and put some in a bowl. She picked up the baby, rocked her, and then sat her on her knee. Taking a spoonful of the soup, she blew on it before trying to give it to the bairn. Clara laughed when the baby pulled her face, but she managed to persuade her to have a few spoonfuls before she spit it out all over her face. She absolutely refused to have anymore and started crying. Clara rocked her again, and then placed her back in the drawer. While she waited for Henry, she touched the baby,

fascinated. She couldn't believe her luck. A baby at last! She, Clara, had a baby to call her own. She smiled at the thought, and tried to visualise what the baby would look like when she grew.

The smell of soup made Clara feel hungry, and she wished Henry would hurry home. She hadn't eaten for ages. Plus, she couldn't wait to get this over and done with. Then she heard him talking to someone; another customer for her, she supposed. The door opened and he walked in with his "friend." He didn't appear to be in a good mood, and he couldn't walk in a straight line. He was drunk, as usual. Cigarette ash covered the front of his waistcoat. The baby began to cry.

"What's this, then?" Henry asked.

"It's mine . . . ours, Henry."

Henry raised his voice. "Gerr' away."

"He is, Henry, I started having pain after you left, and here he is. Unexpected I know, but he's ours."

Henry turned to the man. "Can you believe that?" The man looked dubious.

"He is ours. I'm telling you the truth, Henry."

"So what happens now?" the disgruntled man asked.

"She's lying. Take no notice of her. It doesn't make any difference at all. She's still able. Aren't you, Clara?"

The man snorted in disgust, turned, and left the house, banging the door behind him.

"Now look what you did. We lost money there."

"I can't help it. The baby is ours, Henry. I know he wasn't expected. It came on me, and in no time it . . . he was born . . . our son."

Henry looked sceptical. "You were all right when I left you this morning."

"I know. That's how quickly he was born . . . *your son.*"

Henry picked up the child and held it high. "My bloody son? You're a big boy, too big if you ask me. How can you know that he's mine anyway? He could be anybody's."

Clara could feel her body tremble. "He is ours, Henry . . . he is *our* son. I should know. A mother knows these things. I was thinking of calling him Nelson. What do you think?"

Henry held Nelson in his arms and sat on his chair. "Let's have a look at the old dingle dangle, then." He began to undo the pin in the nappy.

"Don't do that, Henry, he might pee." Clara got hold of his hand to stop him, but Henry carried on.

Clara closed her eyes and cringed as Henry took off the cloth and shouted out a string of abuses. "What the hell are you telling me, woman? Don't you know the difference between a boy and a girl? You stole it, didn't you? Take the damn child back to its mother, you idiot."

“No, Henry, I didn’t. He’s ours.”

Clara cowered as Henry placed the child back inside the drawer. He turned to Clara and smacked her hard across the face and shouted, “You’re a liar. I’ve had enough. That’s it, girl . . . I’m leaving.”

“Henry, you can’t leave me now. Not now that I have the baby.” The baby began to cry.

“That’s no child of mine . . . or yours. You’re stupid. I’ll find myself a woman who doesn’t tell me lies.”

“But, Henry . . . what can I do now with a child?”

“Take the baby back, and don’t bother me again. You’ve gone too far, woman. Do you think I’m daft or something?” Henry walked out of the house.

## Chapter Two

June 1900

Nellie groped around the rubbish in the midden. It smelled, but she didn't care. It was going dark so no one could see her. She had to find something to eat, not so much for her, even though she was hungry, but for her younger siblings who hadn't eaten all day. A cat joined her, but she shooed it to the opposite end. There was an assortment of rubbish and ashes from a fire, among other things, but they were cold. She remembered the day she looked through rubbish and was burned because someone must have left cinders from a fire. After that, she was more careful.

This rubbish was fresh from someone's kitchen. There was an assortment of peelings and leaves, and her fingers touched a bone. She withdrew it and peered at it closely. There wasn't much meat on it, hardly any at all, but it didn't smell too bad. If it was sucked, maybe the children could find a taste of something. It was better getting it now before the rats took over. Her fingers again rummaged through the scraps, and she picked up potato peelings and a leaf or two of—maybe cabbage. It looked like cabbage in the half light. A stale crust of bread was next. That would do for making soup. Holding up her skirt, she dropped the food into the folds and ran towards home.

Nellie left school when she was eleven years old and never had a proper job. No one would employ her, except to do bits of cleaning and run errands. She had no decent clothes, and besides, she had her siblings to look after. As she ran down the street to her house, Nellie heard people shouting. Hearing her ma scream made Nellie quickly take cover behind the wall of the corner house, where she could watch the commotion without being seen. She saw men at her house that weren't customers of her ma; they were policemen. All the neighbours gathered around watching and adding to the aggravation. The police were dragging her ma out of the house. She was drunk as usual and fighting back even though she was hardly able to stand. Nellie watched with horror as her brother, Albert, and her sister, Beatrice, were also brought out. Beatrice was crying. What could she do? There was nothing she could do but watch with fear.

"She starved them kids. Drinking all day while them bairns were left to fend for themselves. It's a crying shame," said a neighbour.

Another neighbour chimed in. "Yes, and she spent all her time sitting in the pub and left them on their own. Poor Nellie had it all to do. Clara didn't care." Nellie recognised their next-door neighbour as the woman ranting and raving at the police. Then the neighbour shouted and pointed to Nellie's mother. "And you . . . you, Clara, you should be ashamed of yourself."

Nellie stayed hidden, trembling, and watched as the policemen took her family away. She waited until everything quietened. Hurrying to her home, she lifted the latch and went inside. It was dark and eerily quiet except for the rats she heard rustling among the rubbish on the floor. She couldn't stay here—not now, the men might return—but where could she go? Clutching the food in her skirt, she went outside, stopped at the community tap, filled her hands with the fresh water, and took a drink. Where could she go to be safe? As she hurriedly passed the midden, she tossed back the scraps and walked quickly into the street. This wouldn't be the first time she slept outside, and she knew a place where she could lay her head while waiting for things to return to normal. She made her way to the empty house, went around the back, and climbed over the yard gate. She opened the lavatory door, sat inside, and rested her head against the wall. It wasn't the most comfortable place, but at least if it rained, she would stay dry.

The following morning, Nellie went into the yard. Her legs were painfully cramped, so she walked around the yard and stamped her feet before she made her way home again. It was quiet now, and one of their neighbours was cleaning her doorstep when Nellie approached her.

“Excuse me, but have you heard where they’ve taken my family, please?”

“I believe your ma is in prison, and the children were taken away to—I don’t know where, Nellie. Where were you? You should have been here. What will you do now? Where will you go? You’re a bit young to be alone with no job.”

“Don’t worry about me, Mrs, I’ll be all right.”

Nellie walked away; she didn’t want the woman to see her cry. What would she do now? Ma would have to stay in prison. She could do nothing about that, but the children—what *could* she do? She felt helpless! Eventually, she dried her tears and silently promised to find and rescue her siblings as soon as she could. She wouldn’t go to the police. She had managed up to now, and she still could.

Nellie’s mind went back to her family. Her ma said she sold her body for food, but almost all of it went on drink. Most of the food they ate was either provided with the little money Nellie earned, stole, begged for, or rescued from the midden. A string of men came and went, but Nellie didn’t blame her ma. She had a hard time bringing up three kids on her own; she told her that often enough. Nellie knew it wasn’t easy, so she never condemned her ma, but she had no intention of following in her footsteps. There was no one to turn to, so she had to find somewhere to stay on a permanent basis.

The men who visited her ma weren’t very nice—most of them anyway. An odd one would give her a halfpenny, but most of them either attempted to maul her or ignored her. Nellie looked after her brother and sister while her ma was with the men or drinking, which was almost all the time. Nellie fed the children with anything she could find, and they sometimes called *her* Ma. Whether it was accidental or they thought she was, she didn’t know.

Nellie was blamed for Henry leaving, and her ma never forgave her, even though Nellie apologised so many times. In her mind, she could hear her shouting. *It’s your fault your dad left me to bring you up on my own. You should have been a boy, but no, you had to be a girl, didn’t you?* Nellie thanked her lucky stars that she at least knew who her father was; her siblings didn’t know theirs.

“Oh my God, where are you Ma, and where are the kids?” Nellie cried quietly.

Nellie quickened her steps to a run. She must get away, far away, because she didn’t want to be there if men came around looking for her ma, or the police came looking for her.

Nellie didn’t stop running until she reached the railway station. The familiar smell that hung in the air seemed to welcome her. Some didn’t like the station because it frightened children and made them cry, but she loved the excitement of the railway. She sometimes sat and watched trains come in and go out and watched the people who climbed aboard. Some ladies looked posh and wore fancy hats, while their men wore smart suits and had pocket watches. Some were kind enough to give her a penny, but most ignored her. She often wondered how they lived, but now she concentrated on how to slip past the guard and sneak a lift on one of the trains.

Walking behind a mother with her children, Nellie managed to slip onto the train unnoticed. She was excited about being on the train but decided to leave it after travelling for a while. After waiting for

it to stop, she climbed off. She had to get off before someone discovered she wasn't a paid passenger; she didn't want to push her luck.

Nellie left the train station, without being caught, and noticed the Ulverston sign. She looked around. She had to find something to eat and somewhere to rest at night. Her steps took her into the centre of a small town that had four main streets and many smaller ones. It looked old.

Some of the shops were lit with oil lamps, but others had candles that didn't give enough light, so the shops were dark. Those would be easier to steal from, if it was necessary, but first she must weigh things up to see how the land lay. There was an assortment of shops: printer, hardware, grocer, chemist, but it was the toffee shop where Nellie stopped. She wanted to buy some sweets, but she had no money. She crossed the square to walk down the next street and was amused by the sight of a farm worker herding cows down the road. They wouldn't do what he wanted, and one of them made a break for one of the shops where it was quickly shooed away.

It was a busy town, but not too big. Maybe she could stay. Taking a cut down one of the small streets, she came across another square and saw a large store that sold clothes and other things where she stopped to look at the fancy clothes in the window. She wondered who could afford them. After a while, she left the town to explore her options of finding somewhere to sleep. She passed a house, and the smell of something baked drew her close. Two pies sat cooling on the windowsill. Nellie looked around and, seeing no one about, took one of the pies and ran. She didn't know what lay ahead, but she didn't stop running until she reached the canal.

Nellie sat on a patch of grass and got comfortable as she ate the pie. It tasted good. How she envied the people who lived in the house where she had stolen it. *They must eat well*, she thought. She kept the plate in case it came in handy, or until she could return it to where she had stolen the pie.

The canal, a noisy and busy place, was filled with large boats and people working. There were crates and ropes around, and everyone was too busy to notice her. This gave her the opportunity to have a good look around. That was when she discovered an old boat, in need of repair, behind a wall. Nellie sat by the wall and took note of the comings and goings. No one appeared to use this corner, so it would be quiet at night and a good place to sleep. She hoped she wouldn't be disturbed.

She introduced herself to the sailors working around her and the men in the boatyard.

"Hello, I'm Nellie, and I'm very hungry. Have you any food I can eat please, sir?"

"Go home, little girl, and ask your ma."

"I can't, and I'm hungry now."

"How old are you?" one of them asked, but she avoided the question.

Over the next few days, Nellie made friends with some of the sailors. There were many that she avoided, but one of them, Seth, was nice and helpful. He looked tough, and his arms and hands were tattooed, but he was kind, gave her food, and told her where to find a well if she became thirsty.

"If you have any trouble, Nellie, with any of this lot," he said, waving his hand at the boats, "then let me know. I'll sort it out for you."

One day, Nellie became curious. "What do the boats do, Seth?"



“What do they do? They go out to sea, taking things to other ports, and they bring things in.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, Nellie, you know there are things mined here, like iron and copper. Then there’s slate, and even gunpowder. Well, a lot of things go on the train now, but they still use this place too.”

“When they come in, though, Seth, it takes them a long time before they fill up again.”

“When they come in, they bring things like coal and cotton bales, sweetheart, so they have to be unloaded first.”

Nellie sat for a while and thought about it all. Seth was very wise. He had many wrinkles and grey hair that was thinning a little, and Nellie could see his head through it. He also had a big nose, but she wouldn’t tell him. Seth knew everything, or seemed to anyway. His skin was brown, browner than hers, and the colour didn’t wash off because she’d seen him throwing water over his face to keep cool.

“Okay, lass. Do you understand now?”

Nellie didn’t look convinced. “Eeeh, Nellie, you’re hard work,” Seth said. “Anyway, where do you live?”

“I’m not telling you,”

“If it’s a secret, I won’t tell, cross my heart.” Seth crossed his heart with his hand.

“Promise?”

“I promise.” He smiled.

“I’ll show you, but don’t tell.”

Seth followed Nellie to the old boat. “Here, this is where I sleep.”

Seth stopped smiling and a frown wrinkled his brow even more.

“Where is your home, Nellie?”

“I don’t have one.”

“But you need someone to look after you, or do you have a job?”

“I don’t. And if you tell anyone where I stay, then I shall find somewhere else.”

“Okay. What about your parents?”

“I don’t know where my pa is, and my ma is in prison.”

“You poor kid!”

“I’m all right. I don’t want to go to the workhouse. You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

“No, Nellie, it’s our secret, but at least I can make it a little more comfortable for you.”

Seth disappeared, and returned later with a wooden box and gave it to her along with a pallet. He produced a hammer and nails and started to work on a canopy, so she wouldn’t get wet when it rained. The box held a small amount of packing, so Nellie made a bed with that.

Nellie hugged Seth. “Thank you. No one has ever helped me before like that.”

As Seth turned away, Nellie was sure she saw tears in his eyes.

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The nights had been the worst. The first few nights were clear, but the following night it rained. She did get wet, but she was comfortable enough now, more comfortable than she had been on some of the nights when she slept outside.

Tonight Nellie looked up at a sky that was dark enough for her to see the moon and stars. The sky was clear, and she blew a raspberry.

“I don’t care what you do tonight. You can rain if you want, because I’ll still be dry enough, thanks to my friend Seth.”

Once inside the old boat, she lay down. She wrapped herself in a worn cape and a coverlet she stole from someone’s washing line, closed her eyes, and cast her mind back to her siblings. Where had they been taken? Ma will more than likely still be in jail, but where were her sister and brother? Meanwhile, she would look after herself. No one was going to take her away to goodness knows where. She listened to the sounds in the night and eventually fell into a troubled sleep.

Seth left soon after, and Nellie felt sad. She missed him because he was kind and patient enough to listen to what she had to say.

Throughout the day, boats sailed in and out, and there were people around. Her old boat was hidden from view, so that made it private. The front of the boat was overgrown with weeds, so no one bothered to look behind it. Nellie stayed undisturbed, so she began to think of it as her home, and added anything she found that could give her extra protection from the weather. Nellie felt rich. She had her own home, so she knew where she was sleeping at night. When she was at her real home, she slept with her ma, and that was a bit awkward at times. Her ma used the bed for her customers, so Nellie often had to sleep elsewhere—anywhere she could find—so she knew about sleeping rough. She did miss her siblings, though, as life on her own was lonely and gave her nothing to look forward to.

Early one morning, Nellie went for a walk. The sun shone, and the air felt warm. The lanes were quiet—except for the birds singing and twittering, and an occasional rabbit or weasel running across the path—and she hummed “Dixie” until she reached the sea. There were others already there, and some of the children were paddling. The water looked tempting, and although it felt cold at first, she soon began to enjoy herself. As she paddled and jumped over small waves, she felt free, and others soon joined her. They played games, and the time flew by. When the children were called back to

join their family for lunch, Nellie watched them all huddled together, playing in the sand, and she began to miss her own family, especially the children.

Her feeling of loneliness stayed with her until she realised she was hungry. She had nothing to eat at all this morning, and now she could feel the hunger pains. She could feel dabs beneath her feet. Although they buried themselves in the sand, she could feel them wriggle when she stood on them. They were easy to catch, and she soon had a couple to eat. Nellie always kept a box of matches, which she had left at her bed that morning, so she made her way back home, taking the fish with her. The men at the canal quite often had a fire, so she searched for a stick, pierced the fish with it, and roasted the fish over the flames. It smelled delicious and didn't take long to cook. It tasted good, and she felt better. After a rest, she made her way to the well nearby and took a drink of water.

Later, Nellie walked back to the sea again, but this time dipping her body, fully clothed, to clean herself. She waited for the sun to dry her clothes, as she lay in the grass and made daisy chains. The sun became very hot, so she didn't stay in it too long.

## Chapter Three

July 1902

Charles kicked at a stone as he walked down the street. He was leaving home. He had crept down the stairs, grabbed a pie from the kitchen pantry, and pushed it into his pocket. He went out through the kitchen door, so as not to disturb anyone, went around to the front of the house, and then onto the street. No one had seen or heard him. He looked back and took note of the windows to make sure no one was watching. He had gotten away with it. He was free.

Never in his life had he been out at night alone, so it was a new experience. His parents were always telling him what to do and tonight he rebelled. They went too far this time. He didn't ask to be born, so why did they keep going on at him? It wasn't his fault. His temper had taken over as he lay in his bed. Now he was free to do what he wanted. He would go off to sea—that's what he'd do. He was a man at fifteen, so why didn't they treat him as such? He kicked the stone and looked behind him, yet again. He knew if someone had seen him, he would have heard a voice shout, "Stop it, you'll scuff your shoes."

No, they couldn't be watching; they didn't care what happened to him. They only loved Victoria, his wimpy sister, who played with dolls all the time. He was her senior, and she should respect him, but she didn't. Victoria told tales, too, so he couldn't get away with anything. Well, now they could have her, because he didn't want her—or them, anymore.

Charles didn't know where he was going, nor did he care, but he headed for town. After a while, he changed direction and walked toward the canal. The streets were in darkness except for the full moon that helped to light the way. There was no one around, but sometimes the moon cast eerie shadows that frightened him a little, although he would have never admitted it.

Stories about the sailors and the ships that travelled up and down the canal fascinated him. He thought about becoming a sailor. He'd look for a boat to take him on. He wondered if the family had noticed he was gone. *If they did know, they will be glad to see the back of me, but if they didn't know, then they'll worry about me when they realise I'm missing, and wonder where I am. They'll be sorry they treated me like they did.* His mind worked overtime.

He reached the canal and walked down to the towpath. The water appeared calm and looked dark and mysterious. The moon reflected on the water and looked like a mirror image, and he wondered if there were many fish in it. He walked closer to look for ripples and stood a while looking and listening. *Stupid fish! Even they are busy elsewhere—more than likely fast asleep at the bottom. How do fish sleep?* Bored with looking at the water, he decided to carry on walking. When he heard the sound of singing and laughter, he turned back on the path and began to kick out at one stone then another as he walked back.

The people he heard singing sounded drunk but happy. He wished he could get drunk. Maybe he would feel happy then. "Drown one's sorrows" was a saying he once heard. He wished he could because he felt very lonely. There was no one other than his family that he could turn to. What should he do? He saw a girl ahead, and he watched her with interest. *What is she doing here? Had she fallen out with her family too?* He could see her stop and look at something as she walked down to the canal carrying a bundle, and then climb over a wall and vanish out of sight. *What is she doing? Is she going to drown some kittens?*

Nellie had gone into town and stolen a few bits off someone's washing line while they were sleeping. She grabbed a pillowcase she could stuff with packing from the boat and two pair of bloomers. They were a little too big for her, but she'd manage. She only took things that were useful to her, as she had no place to keep things she didn't need. Now she was sleepy and couldn't wait to rest her head.

Charles followed Nellie. He stopped at the wall and looked over. Farther back among the weeds, he saw what looked like a pile of rubbish: some old clothes, a wooden box, and a few other things he didn't recognise. He couldn't see the girl, so he sat on a nearby rock to rest. He thought back to his family and the meals and outings they'd shared.

Hearing someone snoring, Charles noticed a path where the weeds had been trodden, and he moved closer to the pile of rubbish. Pulling aside material that was hung like a curtain, he saw what could be the girl laying on some kind of packing material. He moved closer, so he could see her more clearly. The smell, he guessed, was emulating either from her or the place she was in. *What was she doing here?* he wondered. Closing the curtain, he walked back to the rock and waited. He allowed the tears to fall freely. He needed someone to talk to, but there was no one—no anything. Everyone and everything was asleep except for the drunken sailors, and he didn't fancy joining them. They might get aggressive and tell him to go away. Charles returned to the girl and looked in again.

Nellie awoke to an unfamiliar noise. *What was that? Is there someone about?* She listened, and then opened her eyes to see Charles looking at her. Nellie jumped awake.

"What are you looking at?" Nellie asked, as she slowly sat up. "What do you want?"

Nellie took note of his smart clothes.

"What are you doing here? A . . . are you sleeping here all night?" Charles asked.

"Yeah, so what? What's it got to do with you? This is my place, and these are my things, so bugger off and leave me alone."

Charles quickly thought about it. He heard that the poor sometimes sleep rough. His mamma had told him time and time again what a lucky boy he was for having a comfortable feather bed. Now he knew what she meant.

"You shouldn't swear. I . . . I was just curious, that's all."

"I can swear if I want to, so go and get curious somewhere else, and leave me alone to get some sleep," and then a little mischievously she added, "unless you want to share my bed." She patted the space beside her.

Charles jumped back a little. "I'm sorry if I've disturbed you."

Nellie noticed his cheek glistening in the moonlight. "Have you been crying, Lord whatever?"

"My name isn't Lord, nor is it whatever."

"What is it then?"

"My name is Charles."

“Ooh, bugger me, Charles. Pardon me ignorance. Nobody ever call you Charlie?”

“No, not Charlie . . . but I like that; it sounds friendly. Charlie, *hmm*.” He considered the name. “You can call me that if you wish.”

“What’s the matter, Charlie? Why are you here, and why have you been crying?”

“How do you know I’ve been crying?”

“I can tell.”

Nellie began to feel sorry for Charlie. *How could the rich have problems? It would be interesting to find out.*

“I don’t want to waste your time.”

“I’ve got all night, so come on, tell Nellie all about it.” She crawled out from behind her curtain and sat on the grass, and Charlie sat at her side, but with a little distance between them.

“It’s nothing, really.”

“You don’t want to share it with me. Why? Do you think I’ll laugh?”

“Don’t be silly, of course not.”

“Then why won’t you tell me?”

Charles gave a deep sigh. “I don’t think you’ll be interested, that’s why.”

“Now it’s your turn to be silly. I’m curious, can’t you see?” Nellie laughed. “Come on, tell Nellie please!”

Although Charles was a little doubtful at first, he laughed with her, and then hesitantly told her why he’d been crying. Nellie listened intently.

“So you know what I think?” she said.

“What do you think er, Miss Nellie?”

“I think now that you’ve stayed away for a while you should go home. I wish I had a home to go to like yours. You don’t know how lucky you are”

“Do you think so?”

“What would you do anyway, if you didn’t go home?”

“I thought I’d become a sailor.”

Nellie looked at Charles from head to toe, and then shook her head. “I don’t think you’d like that.”

“Why?”

"You're not the type."

"What type should I be?"

"Sailors are rough and tough, and you're not. You have no idea, have you?"

"No idea about what?"

"Life! Obviously not, or else you wouldn't even think about it."

Charles liked Nellie. Sure she looked and smelled bad, but he liked her. She seemed so wise and intriguing, and appeared to know what's what. He guessed she was older than he. She must be. She looked older and knew so much, but what kind of life had she led that brought her to sleep here?

"What happened to you?" Charles asked.

"Believe me, you don't want to know. Now you go home, Charlie, before you do something silly."

"Why should I?"

"Go before someone comes looking for you."

"I bet they don't even know I'm gone."

"Just go, Charlie." She wrapped her cardigan around her and changed her tone of voice. "What do I need to do to get some sleep around here?"

"Sorry! I didn't realise you were trying to get rid of me."

"Go home, Charlie."

Charlie put his hands in his pocket and felt the pie he'd taken from the kitchen. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm always hungry. What's that to you?"

"Stop acting so tough. I bet you're not really as tough as you want people to believe."

"I'm not acting tough."

"Yes, you are. And all I wanted to know was if you wanted a pie."

"A pie?"

"I'm offering you my pie. That's if you want it."

"Of course I want it."

Charles gave the pie to Nellie. "Don't forget me, will you? I would like to see you again."

"Okay, Lord whatsit. You know where I live."

“Good night, Nellie.”

“Good night, Charlie.”

Charlie thought about Nellie as he made his way home. Did she really want him to go, or did she do it for his benefit? She made a lot of sense. Could he really go out to sea and leave his family? Maybe he was being silly and making a mountain out of a molehill. Maybe his sister wasn't a wimp after all. Maybe they'd missed him at home. There were many maybes. Well, he'd soon find out. One thing he was sure about—he would see Nellie again, hopefully.

The streets were still empty and there were no lights shining from houses. Everyone must still be fast asleep, and Charles hoped he could slip back into the house unnoticed. He didn't feel like an argument.

As he came close to the house, he saw lights on. There was no chance of slipping inside unnoticed. When he let himself in, the family was waiting for him wearing their nightclothes. His mamma wept, while she dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief. His papa grunted, and then left the room, and Victoria smiled.

“I noticed you were gone, and I woke Mamma, but I'm glad you're home, Charles.” She smiled, but he could see there were tears in her eyes. “I don't like to see Mamma cry.”

“What did you tell her for?”

“I was worried you'd run away.”

Charles realised it was his own fault, so he couldn't really place the blame on Victoria's shoulders. He had a lot of explaining to do, and he was severely reprimanded, but he knew he would do it again when he wanted to see Nellie.

Charlie saw a lot of Nellie that summer, and Nellie was changing. She began washing and combing her hair more often. She stole ribbon from Mrs Dyson's shop to tie up her hair. It was easy to steal from old Mrs Dyson as her eyesight wasn't good, and she didn't use enough candles to light the shop. Nellie changed her clothes more often, too. That wasn't as easy, because after a woman caught her stealing from the washing line, she chased after her. Luckily for Nellie, though, the lady was fat and soon out of breath.

Sometimes Charlie would wake Nellie by wafting sweet smelling wild flowers under her nose. They talked, and Nellie learned to laugh more often and enjoy Charlie's visits. He liked her; she was different from the other girls he knew. At least she didn't put a show on and pretend she was something she wasn't. Nellie was Nellie, take her or leave her.

Nellie looked forward to seeing Charlie, but she wouldn't tell him so. He was the first one in her life that took her at face value, and he never looked down his nose at her. He didn't seem to care about her untidiness and accepted her as she was. Summer didn't last long enough, though, and the nights were turning cold.

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Winter was hard and stopped many of Charlie's night visits. If he did go to see Nellie, she wouldn't be there because she had to find shelter where she could. It was so cold that Charles sometimes took Nellie food, and, on an odd occasion, a little brandy when he found some left in the bottle. If he couldn't find her, he would leave things on her "bed." He worried about her. One day he took her a blanket off his bed. When he found her in the shelter, she came outside to join him, and he wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. She thanked him with a kiss on his cheek, which was the first time that had ever happened. He was thrilled and felt the kiss for a while after. She always seemed pleased to see him.

Christmas was hard. Nellie walked into town looking for somewhere to shelter and saw families through their windows sitting by roaring fires. Some had a Christmas tree, and she felt envious.

At the free charity breakfast on Boxing Day, Nellie enjoyed not only the food, but the company too. The free Palladium cinema show was something to look forward to, and everyone always showed their appreciation by stamping their feet. It made Christmas special, but Nellie wished with all her heart she had somewhere to live, especially in winter.

It was a relief when winter was over and she could look forward to warmer weather, and, hopefully, Charlie's visits.