

HANNAH
1912 - 1934

Chapter 1

Before Hannah met Wade she thought that being with God was her destiny. That's just the way it was. There was God or there was man...nothing in between but disgrace, a future dimmed by lack of purpose.

"I'm promised to no one, Papa."

Hannah looked at the tip of her shoe, avoiding her Papa's eyes. The time for truth was nearing as the harsh, gray Dublin sky gave way to rain, an adumbration of things to come. Hannah felt a shiver right through to her bones.

John Reilly laughed, pretending that it didn't matter, wouldn't ever matter. "You're too independent, girl," he said, wrapping his arms around her. "Men don't like that."

Hannah knew that if a girl wasn't promised, she went to the convent. That's where God wanted a woman if no man had asked for her hand.

"You'll make me proud, daughter," John Reilly said, kissing the top of her head.

Hannah nodded. Acceptance now was all she had.

The shutter hit the open window, as torrents of rain-water obscured the view of Dublin's hills. They watched as the sky lit up the deep gray landscape, blurred further by her tears.

"Of course," she uttered, breaking the silence. "It's His will."

She was twenty years old when she entered St. Michael's, too old for hope.

They were told to sit on the hard wooden pew and pray. Rosaries slipped through their fingers like lace. Glass angels smiled, blessing their hopes; all the good deeds of tomorrow sat in their hearts, promises to the Lord, their worship as deep as the ocean floor.

Hannah would adjust. A whisper of prayers pushed through her breath, a plea for forgiveness, for wanting more than the blood of Christ on her lips.

Their heads rose when they heard the footsteps, eyes landing on the altar, soft in trust. They stiffened each in turn as she approached, her black gown trailing the floor, her habit as white as the soap that cleansed her skin.

“The five of you will be going off to America.” Mother Mary Angelica looked at them pensively. “Better off in America, I’d say.”

Hannah bolted upright. Her mouth fell open as the prayer book came to her breast. *Better not show joy*, she thought, feeling Bridget Regan’s elbow hit her waist. Hannah turned to find Bridget’s smile and let her expression crinkle up, before quickly returning her eyes to the blessed Mother and the pensive acceptance of God’s will.

Hannah’s expectations had been bleak. A consistent cluster of women and endless hours of prayer was what she had expected the rest of her life to look like. No more barefoot romps through the emerald valleys or bashful glimpses of boys with unruly curls, and certainly no trips across the ocean to a far away place would ever touch her future.

“I’ll let you have Patrick Sullivan if I can go in your place. I want to go to America.” Her sister Anne whined when Hannah gave her the news.

Hannah laughed. “That’s generous of you.” She grinned. “But if Jesus had wanted *you* he would have come knocking.”

She’d had a dream that night. Jesus had appeared to her, his eyes so black it was startling. Then he winked. He looked right at her and *winked*.

She woke up laughing and said to her sister, “Do you know Jesus winks, Anne? A sure sign he approves of my journey.”

And Anne had nodded and taken her hand.

“Oh yes, a sure sign. Oh, yes, of that I am certain.”

Not that it was easy for Hannah to leave her homeland and trust that life in an American convent would be any better than in an Irish one. She was afraid, surely petrified, at first. America was so far away. *But*, she thought, *it is surely God himself calling my name, surely God himself sending me across the Ocean.*

The girls never strayed far from the dock in Liverpool, they stood anxiously in a line, staring over the sea; breathless and eager, they watched until the *Campania* approached; the ship that would be taking them all the way to their new home. Hannah clutched Bridget’s hand so tightly she cried out. Their hearts pounded in unison as the dot in the distance grew bigger.

“Blessed Jesus,” Bridget Regan screamed as the mighty *Campania*’s anchors were tossed. “That ship is the size of a small country.”

Euphoria took hold of Hannah like it was heaven and all its angels appearing in her midst. Fate was unfolding before her very eyes. She’d soon be a nun, an American one at

that. She grabbed Bridget's hand again and squeezed tight. "Blessed be to God," she whispered. "It's His will."

"What do you think America will look like?" Hannah asked Bridget, as Liverpool faded from sight.

"The ground between the Rectory and the chapel is about all we'll see of America," Bridget answered.

"Maybe we'll travel to poor schools and distant towns to help the poor." Hannah's eyes were wide with hope.

Bridget put her hands on her hips. "You best not be fooling yourself, Hannah Reilly."

From out of her mouth came Hannah's tongue, her eyes closed and her face squinted into lines.

"Have you no faith, Bridget?" she asked with a giggle. "We'll run away, grab an American train. We'll be vagabonds." Hannah laughed so hard she fell to the ship's floor.

Bridget Regan made the sign of the cross.

"I think you stole the wine from the ship's chapel," Molly Flynn said, with a finger pointed in her face.

There were many young girls arriving through Ellis Island in 1912, most sent off to convents throughout New England. Hannah was promised to the Convent of Saint Anthony in Concord, Massachusetts along with Bridget and Molly. The other two girls were put into a separate carriage and sent to a small parish in Lowell.

“I think I’m going to like Concord,” Hannah said, through half closed eyes as the carriage approached St. Anthony’s.

Bridget laughed. “You’re so tired, Hannah Reilly, you don’t know what your eyes are resting on.”

Hannah had come through Ellis Island exhausted, so tired from lack of sleep on the crossing, and then there had been the tedious process of going through immigration, it had left her weary, so many questions, so much waiting. Hannah slept all through the trip from New York to Concord and didn’t see a thing of America.

Mother Superior sent them right off to sleep, after brief introductions and a tour of the rectory.

“She’s nice,” Molly Flynn whispered. “Though she reminds me of a Jersey cow.”

“Best be watching your mouth, Molly Flynn,” Bridget said. “I hear they punish nuns in America; they make them drink salted water.”

“Better that than American tea,” said Hannah, as the others laughed.

They were ambiguously dissatisfied. The church of Saint Anthony looked just like St. Michael’s Parish in Dublin. “We might as well be looking out on the Wicklow Mountains,” they told each other with a disappointed sigh. Even Jesus looked the same, thin and long on the cross, benevolently silent. The Virgin was blonde and the apostles all bearded and dark. It was the same everywhere.

The morning brought no light and breakfast was meager.

“Is there no butter for the toast?” Hannah whispered to Bridget.

“Be grateful.” Bridget smiled. “For the toast.”

They would never have expected it. Father John came in with the bells, gloating over something or other. Whatever it was, he was pleased to tell them. He walked to the front of the small dining hall and waited for silence.

“I am sure you are going to be very surprised,” he said, his smile showing no teeth.

“I don’t think he has any teeth,” Molly giggled softly, nudging Hannah in the ribs.

“Shish,” whispered Bridget from behind.

Father John held up an envelope. “The oldest Catholic Church in America is in Boston,” he said, still grinning through tight lips. “You’ve been offered a tour, my good women.”

Hannah let out a sigh as Molly reached for her hand.

“We’re going to Boston?” Bridget cried out.

The priest nodded. “Courtesy of the Boston Archdiocese.”

Hannah wanted to fall to her knees. She’d be seeing a bit of America after all, before settling behind the walls of St. Anthony’s for the rest of her blessed days. The good Lord needed to be thanked.

Father John read from a piece of white paper. “You must spend some time at our beautiful church. We await your visit with much anticipation.”

Hannah could barely keep her feet from leaving the ground. She was as excited about traveling to the big city of Boston as she had been about boarding the boat in Liverpool. Reaching for her rosary, she smiled, her eyes traveling up to the Lord’s. When she knew she wouldn’t be noticed, she winked, knowing in her heart, the Lord was winking back.