

A woman in a long, dark, pleated dress and a pinkish-red blouse stands in profile, looking out over a vast landscape. The scene is set at sunset or sunrise, with a golden glow on the sky and mountains in the distance. A covered wagon pulled by a horse is visible in the lower left. The title 'CHASING THE HORIZON' is written in a large, elegant, serif font across the top. Below the title, the text 'A WESTERN LIGHT \* I' is written in a smaller, simpler font. At the bottom, the author's name 'MARY CONNEALY' is written in a large, serif font, with decorative flourishes above and below it.

# CHASING THE HORIZON

A WESTERN LIGHT \* I

MARY CONNEALY

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CHASING  
THE  
HORIZON



MARY CONNEALY



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To Elle, Isaac, Luke, Katherine,  
Lauren, Adrian, and Quinn

I love you.

# 1



**JULY 1869**

**CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

**E**lizabeth Rutledge crept out of the alley when she heard the creaking of wagon wheels. The man driving the garbage cart, the same route every night, slowed to a near stop as he turned onto the last lane to take the trash and dump it in an ugly pile that would soon be added to by the garbage created by Horecroft Asylum.

“Sir, can you help me?” Beth was dressed in what looked like mere rags, clothing even the servants in her father’s home would disdain to wear.

Her voice was laced with fear, and she put a tone of begging into it. The fear was easy to come by. The thought of what she was doing made her heart pound until she felt it in her ears.

If this failed, she’d almost certainly end up locked away with Mama.

“I’ve dropped a nickel in a crevice between the cobblestones, and I can’t get it out. I need it, sir, to feed my children.”

The garbage man pulled his reeking cart to a stop and jumped down. He rounded the dapple-gray nag and crouched beside Beth. She saw evil in his eyes, even in the nearly pitch-dark of the street, which was lined with crumbling brick buildings.

She'd studied this man and knew far more about him than he'd ever suspect.

He'd help her all right, yet she'd never regain possession of her coin. She felt the weight of the gun in her pocket and hoped the man was just a thief and not something much worse.

While the two of them struggled with a little stick to lift out the coin that Beth had lodged thoroughly in a tight crack, Beth heard a faint rustling coming from behind her.

It was nighttime near a garbage dump. Any rustling sounds were usually made by rats, and this man didn't strike her as very smart.

He didn't see Mama as she climbed out of the back of the wagon and slipped into the night. Beth thought Mama had made a bit more noise than would be expected, but she didn't dare turn to look. That was all it would take for Mama to be discovered, then taken and locked away. Again.

Swallowing hard to make her dry throat work, she saw the garbage man finally dislodge the coin. He held it up with a smirk.

“Oh, thank you—”

His laugh cut her off as he closed his hand around the nickel. “It's mine now.”

“No! Please . . .” She had to make a fuss or the man

might become suspicious. “If you take it, my children won’t have anything to eat. Please!”

He ignored her, clambered onto the wagon seat, and slapped the reins on the swaybacked horse. He laughed as he rolled away.

When his laughter had faded in the distance, Beth whispered, “Mama?”

A shadow shifted in the narrow alley across the street. Beth hurried over.

“Elizabeth.” Eugenia Rutledge flung her arms around Beth. Mama smelled just like the man’s garbage wagon.

Beth only hugged her tighter. The feel of Mama hugging her thickened Beth’s throat with tears. She fought them until Mama burst into tears herself.

Beth clung tightly as she wept. Several minutes passed before she was able to regain her composure.

“Elizabeth, my darling girl—”

“Shh. It’s *Beth* now, Mama. And from this moment on, you’re *Ginny*. My older sister, Ginny Collins.”

Father had never called either of them by a nickname. In truth, they’d never called each other using one. Yet no one would think twice of them if they went by Beth and Ginny, or so Beth sincerely hoped.

Even after three years in an insane asylum, Mama was youthful-looking, her hair still fully brunette with no sign of graying. She was far too thin, though, and Beth had to wonder what the food was like in that house of horrors, Horecroft.

The plan was for them to pass as sisters. Beth prayed for a lack of curiosity among those who encountered them.

“You’ve given us Oscar’s surname? Beth and Ginny

Collins . . . Yes, of course we need new names.” Something fell off Mama’s head. Beth thought it might be a cabbage leaf.

Another shadow emerged, and Beth grabbed for her six-gun.

“I-I brought someone with me,” Mama explained. “She’s a friend. I couldn’t leave her behind. She helped me find my way out of the asylum. I’d have been hard-pressed to make it without her.”

A woman so frail that she looked breakable came to Mama’s side.

Beth was speechless. She’d made plans, detailed plans. For two.

“Let’s go. I’ve held us up too long as it is. There’s no time to waste.” Mama didn’t know the plan, but she did know their situation was urgent.

“I’ll go by Kat,” the delicate blond woman said. She was so small, she looked more child than adult. “I’ll do whatever I need to do to stay out of that horrible place.” Her determination rang out in her voice, even at a whisper.

Beth didn’t have much choice in the matter. Time was limited. She’d plan their next steps on the walk to the wharf. “Let me get my satchel. It has everything I believed I’d need for two women—sisters down on their luck, working their way downriver to Independence, Missouri.” She’d have to find additional clothing for Kat that might fit the woman, who was slender to the point of starvation, and not raise suspicion. “And I’ve got two bonnets that will pull forward to mostly conceal our faces. Kat, you can wear mine.” Beth would think of something before Kat

needed a change of clothing. She had until they reached Independence, where the wagon train should be heading out of town right about now.

Their transportation to the West.

They'd go and find a place beyond Thaddeus Rutledge's reach, and they'd hide for the rest of their lives. She'd told Oscar not to wait for them. She and Mama, and now Kat, would have to catch up sometime later.

And to get there, they'd be working their way westward.



“A cattle boat?” Ginny clutched her throat with a delicate hand as she stared at the low, flat-topped steamboat floating at dock on the Chicago River. “What in the world is a cattle boat?”

The question was foolish because, as Ginny could clearly see, it was a boat that was being, right this minute in the predawn hours, loaded with cattle. A wide gangplank with sturdy railings slanted downward a bit as cattle were driven from shore to boat. The animals followed each other until a man on the boat steered each into stalls along the main deck of the boat.

The lowing of the cattle broke the morning air, along with the splashing of the tide against the shore. Occasionally a cow gave a full-on *moo*, its voice high and indicating fear.

Ginny knew how the poor things felt. She'd lived with gut-twisting fear for three years in that asylum her wretched tyrant of a husband had put her in. She'd lived with fear longer than that because Thaddeus had always terrorized her.

But never had she expected he'd sink so low as to lock her away. Trapped behind walls. Forced to act exactly as she was told in the daytime. Locked into a room shared with two dozen other women at night. Women who were either mad or slowly being driven mad. But she'd found kindred souls in there as well, and she prayed day and night to find a way to escape. And she'd wanted to take all those poor imprisoned women with her.

In the end, escaping had proven so difficult that right this moment, cattle or no cattle, the wonder and relief of walking around free had doused every drop of her deeply felt terror.

Yet there was plenty left to fear. Thaddeus would search for her. Ruthlessly and endlessly he'd search. But to breathe free air. To hug her daughter. To walk by her own choosing rather than being prodded and pushed along like . . .

She watched the marching cattle and knew that what she'd been through had been worse. Much worse.

The cows had no knowledge of freedom. No understanding of any such thing. But Eugenia Wyse Rutledge had known freedom. She'd been stripped of it brutally. And if he had his way, Thaddeus would lock her right up again.

He had the power and the law on his side, while she, an educated, wealthy woman—wealthy in her own right—could only be free by escaping and running. The fury within threatened to truly make her start screaming like a madwoman.

But she'd always fought for decorum and manners, knowing that letting her fury show would only further

prove to anyone watching that the asylum was exactly where she belonged.

She was free. If she wanted to remain free, she had to run.

It would not be easy. The pens, the boat, it all smelled terrible. The boat looked overcrowded and apt to tip. And Ginny was going to live on it for the next few days, along with a few hundred apathetic cows and more than a dozen hungry men.

With her attention frozen on the vessel that would be her home for a while, Ginny wondered at her daughter's steady nerves.

"I've got an idea." Beth stayed well back from the gangplank.

The three of them huddled beside a warehouse with a good view of the boat, but in the hour left before sunrise, hopefully they weren't visible to the busy men. "The trip is four days long, or so the captain told me when he hired me. We have a tiny berth for the two of us. I don't see the captain anywhere, though he's probably in this hectic crowd somewhere. We'll get Kat hidden on the boat, and we can sneak her food. We'll keep her hidden."

"A stowaway?" Ginny said.

Kat nodded firmly. "I can stay hidden."

A long, low *moo* came from the boat.

"They'll soon have the cattle loaded. We ship out at dawn."

Ginny noticed that besides the cattle, men were shoveling coal into the steamboat's tenders.

"We must move now—while it's still somewhat dark." Beth slung an arm around Kat, pulled her close enough

that a casual observer might not recognize it was two women rather than one. Beth headed for the gangplank.

“Remember we’re sisters, Ginny. And Kat is our . . . um, sister-in-law. My brother Michael just died. From a fall. We don’t want any hint of disease. Kat coming along, if she’s discovered, was a last-minute decision after Michael’s death.”

Since Beth was Ginny’s only child, it was a bit of a trick to add a son and daughter-in-law so suddenly.

Kat said, “I miss Michael terribly. I told him not to go out on that roof.”

Beth snickered and kept moving.

Everything smelled terrible. The Chicago River was polluted until the water was like a cesspool. And of course, all around was the smell of cows.

Ginny was no freshly picked daisy herself, nor was Kat. Honestly, they fit right in with the overall stench.

“Mama . . . that is, *Ginny* and I were hired on as cooks.”

“I can’t cook, Beth.” Ginny felt a warning was in order. She might be a terrible cook, but she kept right up with her daughter as they walked the plank.

“I can. I’ve learned so much. I’m ready for whatever lies ahead on the journey.”

Soon they were on the boat, and Beth led them straight over to a steep stairway.

Talking quietly, Beth pointed things out. “We’re walking on the deck right now. This door is the hatch, and the stairs are called the companionway. It leads to our tiny berth. There’s not really room for one, but with a single, narrow bunkbed, they call it a room for two. Now three.

The bottom bunk should be off the floor far enough for Kat to hide beneath it.”

Ginny nodded, knowing how slender Kat was and also how determined.

Beth had the door closed for only a moment when a firm knock sounded.

Without a word, Kat dropped to the floor and vanished under the bunk. Ginny hoped whoever was at the door hadn't seen them come aboard.

Ginny pressed her way past Beth so that Beth could handle the door. Kat shoved her bonnet out from under the bed. Ginny snatched it up and handed it to Beth. Ginny pulled hers down around her face and looked hard at the floor.

Ginny thought she had their story straight, but she didn't want to put it to the test just yet. She resolved to say little or nothing and fastened her eyes on the floor, or deck, whatever it was called.

Beth tied the bonnet on quickly, then cracked the door open a few inches. “What da ya need?”

Ginny recognized the accent. It was the same as the boy's who cleaned and polished the boots at the Rutledge house.

“Food's been loaded into the galley. Come along, both of ya, and we'll go over things.”

Beth followed the man's voice. Ginny hadn't even seen who it was. But Ginny was right behind her daughter, who was posing as her sister. Ginny closed the door behind them and hoped poor little Kat would be all right.

Hooves stomped overhead. The hall was narrow, the smells almost smothering. And they were working in this hulk and would be for days.

All that had been stolen from Ginny hit hard as they walked the narrow corridor toward the boat's kitchen. She tried to focus her thoughts and ignore her temper. It was the same thing she'd been doing for three years in the asylum.

She entered the kitchen, though it was called a galley on a boat. What story had Beth told? Maybe Ginny was supposed to be an old hand at cooking on a boat. Maybe she wasn't supposed to know anything.

The man pointed and talked. Beth nodded, so Ginny did as well. Her anger soon returned, and she was swept up by fury as she thought of what her husband had taken from her and from Beth, and now Beth was making this desperate rescue attempt.

Ginny clamped her mouth shut and looked at the floor so her expression wouldn't show. Ginny knew she should offer to go back. Being locked in an asylum was a monstrous act by her husband, but to save her, Beth was giving up everything.

Ginny couldn't say the words that would give Beth back her life. She just couldn't go back there.

She glanced up, determined to be as much help to her daughter as she could. Fourteen men on the boat, most of them there to handle the cattle. Only two meals a day, but that was meals for the men. Ginny had no idea how often the cattle ate.

Ginny lowered her head and closed her eyes. It was all too much. She missed most of what the skinny man was saying. He sounded grim when he talked of food. Clearly he didn't expect much. Ginny would be little help making meals. She'd never so much as peeled a potato or sliced bread in her life.