

## Part II Chapter 27 One Fine Day in May, 1841

“Mama, hurry,” Lena was pulling at Bridget, eager to leave for the Cathedral, but Bridget wasn’t feeling well. She was, after all, very pregnant, although she concealed it under all the clothes she wore. She didn’t know if she could survive a long day in a crowded church, standing, then sitting, then standing, then kneeling, then sitting to listen to a sermon by Bishop Hughes, who was known to speak for hours, then watching as lines of children received their First Communion and then again after Communion as they filed up to be confirmed by the Bishop. What she really wanted was to get to the Leary’s, who had invited a number of friends over afterward to celebrate this milestone in Nell’s life. The two families hadn’t seen each other for a while and she was eager to catch up.

“Mama’s coming, Lena.” She corralled Will and made him wear his Sunday clothes, then took the toys from Dan and put his cap and jacket on him before following Lena as she skipped down the stairs and outside onto Canal Street where Tom had hitched the cart to Jackson. It wasn’t too far to walk to the Cathedral, but the children wouldn’t have been able to walk all the way to Greenwich, where the Learys now lived, so Thomas had bought the cart home that weekend.

Bridget’s misgivings were correct. The Cathedral was crowded with families and friends of the more than forty students who had been prepared either in their parochial schools or in Sunday School classes. This was the day they had all been waiting for, and Lena was almost as excited as if she were making her First Communion herself. Sister Rose Marie had already told her that she knew her Catechism well enough and understood the importance of the sacraments as well as the older students. Lena had shown an extraordinary interest in the sacraments, especially since neither Bridget nor Tom were especially devout. They went to Mass, but never went to Communion, except for Easter and Christmas. Yet here was Lena, wishing she were old enough to be dressed in a white dress with a crown of flowers and a veil like the twelve year olds.

“You know why First Communion is on the first Sunday of May? It’s Mary’s Day—May Day. Did you know that?”

“No, I didn’t, Lena. But I remember that in Ireland May Day was the day everyone danced around the maypole. I wish we still had that custom here, but where could they have put up a maypole?”

The Learys had saved seats for them in the Reserved section of the Cathedral. This service was being held in the Cathedral because it was the Bishop’s parish and only the Bishop could administer Confirmation. As the family crowded in with the others. Bridget sank gladly into the pew, allowing Lena to move closer to

the aisle. Bridget put Will and Dan between her and Thomas for safe-keeping. Tom leaned across her to greet Tim in a loud whisper. This was not either of the men's parish church, so they didn't see each other on Sunday and Tom was seldom home otherwise.

As the procession filed in behind the cross-bearing altar boy, Bridget saw that Bishop Dubois was there, followed by Bishop Hughes, followed by several other priests, followed by altar boys, followed by the orderly lines of first communicants. How radiant the girls looked in their white dresses and crowns and veils. She wondered who had made Nell's. She would have offered if she'd had time. When Nell passed by, Lena couldn't suppress an admiring gasp, as she tried to catch the older girls eyes. The boys followed, dressed in white shirts and ties and black suits, ranging from the knee-length Eton suits worn by smaller boys to long pants for the bigger boys. Bridget could imagine that those boys in short pants had begged to be allowed to wear long pants for the first time.



The service began—she stood for the incensing of the congregation, but after that couldn't stand any more. She felt the child in her womb move. She had trouble enough keeping Will from picking on Dan.

After all the readings from the Old and New Testaments, Bishop Hughes began his homily. I hope it's not for three hours, Bridget thought. The Bishop wanted to inform the community, he said, that this was a day the entire diocese could celebrate, not just the families of the communicants. These students had spent several years preparing, either in a parish school or in a Sunday School for this great day. But everyone should have the opportunity for a proper Catholic education, should they not? Had it not been for a few generous religious communities like the Madames of the Sacred Heart, the Sisters of Charity and the Ursulines, who had come to teach the girls, there would be no Catholic education in New York. What about the boys, who had to go to Sunday Schools for their Catholic education because the good sisters' orders forbade them to teach boys? The Jesuits taught only older students, he reminded them. They would need to recruit new Catholic teachers, probably from Ireland, which had already sent so many priests. The priests might take part in the education of the young. But if they had more teachers, could they ask them to teach in the pitiful rooms that they were using now, like the church bell towers at St. Mary's? No. It was a shame that though they paid taxes—a part of which was for education—the City Council hadn't seen fit to grant their petition for some of the tax money to go toward their schools. Well, they would just have to go ahead and build Catholic schools for their own children. He was announcing the beginning of a drive to raise money and open many new schools. "Go", Bishop Hughes told them, "build your own schools; raise arguments in the shape of the best educated and

most moral citizens of the Republic, and the day will come when you will enforce recognition.”

His talk fired up the congregation, who clapped when he had finished. Bridget wondered whether Tom, with his fine education, might be able to teach in such a school. Hadn't he been educated to be a priest himself, although he had long stopped mentioning the fact to anyone, and it now seemed so long ago, but surely he could make a better living in the city as a teacher than working as a laborer, couldn't he???

The Communion service lasted for what seemed an inordinately long time. Several girls looked like they were ready to faint, she thought. She herself would have fainted if she'd continued to stand and sit and kneel with the rest. And after all the first communions and the Mass was finished, and both Will and Daniel were crying, she saw that all the children had lined up again and were filing up to be confirmed--the girls on one side by Bishop Hughes and the boys on the other by Bishop Dubois. Wasn't it a man's world, especially in the Church?

After the Mass was finally over, it was nearly noon, although the Mass had started at 9. Nell was straining to get to the Leary's at last! Bridget wasn't feeling well and wished that they could return home. "Come on, Mama! We'll be late!" Will had revived and was running pulling his father along toward the cart.

The ride up Broadway was slowed by the Sunday traffic, and their cart stopped frequently, so it was nearly one by the time they arrived at the house on Grove Street. Bridget was relieved that the jolting was over, as she was helped down by Tom.

"Let's not stay long, Tom." She wanted only to see Betty and Tim's new place and Tim's new shop. She longed to be back working as a seamstress herself. She hoped her days of fancy embroidery were not over.

As they entered, Tim leaned down and asked Will, "And who are you?"

"I'm a Chieftain!" Will shouted. He still played the game with anyone he could get to play with him. Bridget was glad Tim remembered.

"And I'm five!" Will added as an afterthought.

"Are you indeed?" Then turning to Tom and Bridget, "Nice shop, isn't it? Business is slow—we're still in a depression, and the ready-mades are still snapping at me, but I've got new clients up here, including some bankers. Some folks didn't suffer any loss of wealth, fortunately for their tailors."

Betty was in the kitchen, setting out food—

“Everyone must be hungry, and Nell is famished. It’s her first time fasting from midnight.”

Seeing Bridget looking for somewhere to sit, Betty led her to a bench.

“When are you due, Bridget?” Betty asked.

“Not for a few more weeks, but the service was so long, and then the drive was so slow and not easy on the baby, I’m afraid. . . .”

“Just sit there—I have others to help, and Nell, of course.” Nell, however, was counting on getting a day off to visit with her friends, and Lena was hanging around her, holding her hand, wanting to try on her veil and crown.

“Lena, maybe you could help Mrs. Leary?” Bridget suggested.

Lena looked like a martyr as she dutifully took a dish from Betty and put it on the table, then another, while her mother continued to talk to Betty.

“Tom’s going to have to work on the aqueduct for another year—I don’t know how I’ll go through another year of this. He wasn’t here most of the winter, and I had to do everything myself—shop, take Lena to school, pick her up, look after the children, argue with the shopkeepers—”

“Oh, even if he were here, you’d have to do those things. Tim is right here in the same building with me, and he never helps one bit.” She laughed.

“Yes, but you have only two children. . . . I’ve always wondered that you haven’t had any more. It seems that as soon as I’ve weaned one child, I’m pregnant with another.”

“It depends on how many you want to have. Tim and I agreed that two is enough.”

Bridget didn’t want to pursue the matter any further, but she was surprised that Betty could just turn off her childbearing like that. Most Irish women had a child every other year, the way she did. Didn’t God send them? They were lucky theirs had survived—she knew many died—Lena almost died, didn’t she. They would need them to help out when they were grown. Who would support them when they were old? She felt another kick, but this time accompanied by pain. “Oooh,” she grabbed her side. That was definitely a contraction!

In the other room Tom was telling Tim and the others about the wonderful aqueduct that would some day bring fresh water to all of them.

“It can’t come too soon. Everyone knows that the cholera epidemic came from the bad drinking water.”

“I expect that’s when they started to plan the aqueduct. They’ve got us working year round—right through the winter.”

“Do you have to sleep in a tent in the winter too?” One of them asked.

“We’re used to it— me and my brother, sleeping tight inside a small tent, our body heat keeps us warm under wool blankets. I think it’s healthier there than in the city—The air’s pure, and the dirt roads aren’t filled with garbage and animal manure..”

Betty came in and took Tom aside to tell him that Bridget needed to get upstairs to the bedroom.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just come. You’ll see.”

Tom found Bridget grasping her stomach and trying to stand. “Get me to somewhere private, Tom, away from the children.”

Lena had stopped to gape at what was happening to her mother. “Mama, what’s happening? Are you sick?”

“You just stay here and keep helping the ladies, or better still, take Will and Dan and give them something to eat. Mama will be all right.”

Supported by Betty, she grabbed Tom’s hand—“My water broke, Tom. It’s coming--Ooooh! Now!”

There was barely time for Tom to lift her, with Betty’s help and carry her up the stairs to their bedroom. “Stay with the other guests, Tim. Tom and I can do this.”

In the bedroom, Betty quickly pulled the covers off and covered the bed with towels while she turned to Tom. “You’ll have to help, Tom. No time to find a midwife.”

Tom was in a state of shock. He had helped Dolly deliver Jackson, but he had never seen one of Bridget’s babies born. “Tell me what to do.”

“Run down and gets some of the hot water off the stove and come back with more towels and a basin.”

By the time he was back, he saw that Bridget was lying down. Betty had gotten her out of her clothes and had settled her back so that she had plenty of room and was holding onto her hand.

“Do you remember when Lena was born, Bridget? This won’t be like that. This is going to come easily,” she promised.

“Ooooh!” Bridget groaned again. Betty wiped her forehead. “Push, Bridget!”

“Push!” Tom echoed.

It took a few more pushes before a head appeared—and then the shoulders and then the legs, and out she came—“It’s a girl, Bridget!”

“Oh, thank God,” Bridget said.

But then another pain seized her—something was still inside her. Then another paing, and she automatically found herself pushing again,

“Oh, my God, there’s another one!”

It was true—no sooner had Betty cleaned off the tiny body than another was following it through the door. “My God, you’re right,” Tom cried. “Bridget, keep pushing!”

Before an hour had passed, Bridget had delivered twin girls. Tom ran down the stairs to announce the miracle that he had just seen. “Can you believe it? Twins. Twin girls!”

And in a letter home Tom told his family the story of how they went from having three children to having five on a fine Sunday in May.

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