

## Part II Chapter 35 Easter Sunday 1844

“A letter from Michael!”

“It’s about time.” It was Holy Saturday. Michael had been gone for almost a year and this was the first they had heard from him since they saw him waving to them from the steamboat heading up the Hudson and then toward the West.

When the letter came, everyone had to sit around the table and listen quietly, without interrupting. “Otherwise, Papa will stop,” Lena added, looking warningly at William. William had pestered his parents to write Uncle Mike, and paid no heed to their replies that they certainly would if they had the slightest idea where to address the letter, and that “Michael O’Shaughnessy, Chicago” probably wasn’t enough.

‘DEAR TOM AND BRIDGE. . .’

“When did Michael learn to write?” Bridget wondered aloud.

“Mama!”

*“HELLO FROM CHICAGO. FOUR DAYS THRU CANALS AND LOCKS INTO THE WILDERNESS. LOTS OF LABOR WORK HERE*

*MICHAEL O’SHAUGHNESSY.”*

“Is that all?” Lena peered around her brother to see the letter herself.

“That’s what Uncle Mike wrote. Someone else added more.” Tom skimmed it and summed it up “Uncle Mike had a long trip of more than four days, and along the way he fell in with a German family who were also moving west from New York, hoping to improve their lot. He and they are now boarding together. He has worked odd labor jobs, canals, construction, to get a feel for the place. He has his eye on a saloon—“

“He always wanted a saloon of his own,” Bridget commented.

“The trip out from New York took us almost four days—through locks and canals. I had no idea America is so large--vast, ” Tom continued.

“You’ll have to come see it for yourselves. Wilderness with farms dotted along the way. Tell Will I’m sorry, but we never saw an Indian.”

“On our steamer I fell in with the Hagers, a German family with two children, a girl about 12 and a boy about 10. He’s got a stake too, wants to be a merchant. We’re boarding at the same place now, on Canal Street.”

“Is he living right on a canal?” Bridget wondered.

“I’m learning my letters in a home school here, from a young lady. ”

“Ooh!” Lena gasped at the idea of a girl teaching a grown man to read.

“Chicago is a frontier at present—no paved streets or sewers, just lots of work to be done all at once. Any man can find work here. Day labor on construction crews, canal digging, dock work, carting. Railroads are coming here soon. Grains come through here the canals and get loaded on ships bound for the east.

“Anyone willing can find work--nobody says you can’t work here. I hope you’ll come some day and see for yourselves. Right now’s a little rough for women and children.”

“Is there an address?” Bridget reached for the envelope and read, “Harrison and Canal.”

“President Harrison was the last president,” Lena reminded them.

The family was fascinated by the thought of Uncle Mike starting life over way out west in the wilderness, on an important street named after a president and alongside a canal.

“Where can we find out more about Chicago? Can we go see him?” Will voiced what everyone was thinking. Uncle Michael had planted an idea in their imaginations of a mysterious wild place where things were bustling and energies were exploding and workers were needed, and even girls could teach.

“You heard what he said, Will,” his mother answered. “It’s too rough there now for children like you. Maybe when you’re older.”

Tom’s spirits lifted at the thought of going to a place where workers were welcomed, where being an Irish Catholic didn’t mean you could only do the most menial work. The seed was planted in Tom’s mind that yes maybe someday they would **all go to Chicago** to see what a city sprouting in the wilderness alongside a great lake looked like.

Easter Sunday. Lena dressed the new outfit her mother had made for her and helped her mother put new dresses on the twins. Tom supervised Will and Dan in dressing. After Mass, they were all going as usual, to celebrate the feast day at the Leary’s. Brian was to go as well. Since he had danced with Nell at

Michael's farewell party, he had taken a fancy to her and never missed an opportunity to visit, accompanying the family on their visit on Christmas.

Tom had brought Michael's letter to read to Tim and acquaint him with the family's new interest in Chicago. When they heard that Michael was learning to read and planned to open his own saloon, everyone was in admiration. "Knowing New York saloons can give him an advantage over those frontier folks," Tom bragged.

Bridget rolled her eyes. "He'll probably be swindled by those frontier folks, for all he knows about business."

"He made his stake, didn't he?" Tom still looked up to his brother.

Hearing that Michael was now learning to read in a family school, Nell spoke. "As I am now sixteen, and have finished school, "

"With high marks," her father added.

"I am hoping to become a teacher, even if I have to start my own school."

Her mother explained that they knew of someone who started a family school and taught pupils in her own house.

"I could teach them upstairs in the parlor!"

Betty laughed and told her that no one would want to study with a sixteen year old, but Brian said that he admired Michael for learning to read as an adult. Perhaps some other adults might want to learn English. He was ashamed that he could not read, and was still trying to master English, and a family school room would suit him fine. He thought Miss Nell could only improve him.

"What a fine idea!" Bridget encouraged them.

Nell was thrilled to have found a willing pupil and, eager to prove herself, showed them the reader and a slate she would use. She led them into the parlor, moved a small table to make a desk, arranged a few chairs in a circle and set her slate and book on the table. Brian sat in a chair before the "desk" and Nell told him to write his name on the slate. Brian obediently wrote "B-R-I-A-N O-H-A-R-E."

"Be thankful you don't have a long name like O'Shaughnessy," Tom laughed.

"Very good, Mr. O'Hare, I see you know your letters," Nell continued, imitating her teachers at St. Mary's. "Are you able to read words that are not your own name?"

She wrote "I can read and write," on the slate, but Brian could only spell out the letters. She read it for him, made him repeat after her as she pointed out the words, then wrote "learn to" read it and had him read it, then had him read the whole sentence. When he read "I can learn to read and write," everyone cheered and Nell said, "Yes, you can."

Bridget wasn't the only one who wondered if Brian's sudden interest in learning to read and write might not be his humble way of courting Nell.

The men went off together to smoke and talk, leaving the teacher alone with her pupil. Bridget put the twins in the bedroom for a nap, then helped Betty prepare dinner. Lena asked whether she and Cathy could go for a walk around the square. "Yes, it's such a lovely spring day. Take Will and Dan with you."

Lena sighed and glared at Will. "You'd better behave!"

Lena knew that meant that she and Cathy would have to find something interesting to do. Walking around Sheridan Square didn't sound exciting, so they continued walking and were soon several blocks away in Washington Square. They saw some girls skipping rope and asked to join them. Lena told Will to sit on a nearby bench where she could keep an eye on him.



The girls lost themselves playing, losing track of time and forgetting about the boys. The girls were sisters who lived around the square and before their mother was calling them to come in.

When Lena looked for Will and Dan she couldn't see them. The girls walked from one end of the square to the other, calling their names.

They had just seated themselves on the bench and were resigned to waiting for him to show up, when they recognized the Daly's nurse walking by, pushing the carriage, so they ran over to have a look at Baby Charles.

"There you are, young lady," Nurse scolded her. "Shame on you for leaving your brothers alone in the park while you go off to play. I saw you there skipping rope with your girl friends, ignoring your charges."

Lena was shocked to hear herself scolded. No one scolded her. "Do you know where they are? They've run off."

“If it hadn’t been for Master Will who rescued them. . .”

“Rescued them? What happened to them?”

“Master Will saw them being chased and intervened. They were being chased by some bad boys who’d picked a fight with them.”

Lena thought it might have been the other way around, but didn’t want to annoy Nurse any further. “Will you please take us to them, so that we can go home? Mother will be worried.”

“You can get them yourselves. You’ll find them with the Cook over at the Daly’s.” Nurse had no intention to taking them there herself. It was her private time to enjoy being outside the nursery.

Lena and Cathy ran to the Daly’s house and down the stairs to the servant’s entrance, where they were admitted by Cook herself, who smiled at the sight of them. “Why here are the young ladies themselves. I’ve been looking after your brothers for you, Miss Lena. Don’t you worry. They’re being well cared for.”

Indeed they are, Lena thought, as she saw Will and Dan sitting at the big kitchen table, with a plate of cookies and glass of milk before them.

Upon seeing his sister, Will immediately looked relieved. “Oh, Lena, there were these bullies who were beating us up. We were running for our lives. Will Daly saw us from his window and ran out to save us as we were running from them.”

Will Daly himself was there to back up their story. “They’re a bad lot.” Lena looked at her brother as if to say, “I know what really happened and I’m going to tell Mother when we get back home,” but she only said, “Oh, thank you, Will, and thank you, Cook. Now we had better leave. Mama’s going to be worried.”

“Maybe Miss Lena would like to come to your tenth birthday party next Sunday, Master Will?” Cook suggested.

Will cocked his head at the thought, wondering if his mother would mind if he invited someone without asking her. “Oh, yes, come! We’ve invited lots and lots of people.”

Will walked them up the street to the end of the Square, then stood waving as they walked away, calling after her. “Don’t forget to ask your mother to bring you to my party, Lena!”

After Brian’s lesson was finished and Nell was helping her mother, Brian joined the men sitting talking in Tim’s shop. Tom was telling about Dolly’s death and

how it had nearly ruined Easter for him, but thank heavens they had come over to the Leary's. He had managed to put it out of his mind for now.

"It's the end of an era for me. Michael's gone and now Dolly's gone. And Brian will be gone too. He'll need a horse himself if he's going to be a carter. Maybe you could buy a horse, Brian?"

Brian looked surprised. "I hadn't thought of that. How did you buy a horse yourself, Tom?" Tom retold the whole story of how he and Michael had gone to the auction and found Dolly, looking like a run-down nag, and how he'd bought her for only \$25. He loved to tell how his care had restored her.

"And you still owe me \$5 you borrowed from me," Bridget called as she was passing by.

"Don't I give you every cent I earn?" He had no idea how much money they had. He had no interest in counting money. Bridget was good at that.

"Too bad Michael isn't here. He knows people who can tell whether a horse is good, just by looking at it closely. He saw that Dolly was a good horse; she had just been worked nearly to death. All she needed was someone who'd care for her proper."

"I don't have the price of a horse—not even \$25. I don't know that I want to be a carter at all. Aren't I good with horses myself, like the man you were telling about? Couldn't I find some work with horses?" He told them again about how he'd been a stable boy at Coole after he was sold at the hiring fair and how he'd learned everything during those seven years.

Tim had a suggestion, "Why not work in the city stables? There are all those horses that pull and omnibuses. Wouldn't they always be needing farriers, someone who could tend horses?"

"It's probably not a job that grown men are looking for, now is it?" Tom asked.

"No, and it's not that high-paying a job. But it could lead to something, if Brian's good."

That was all the encouragement Brian needed. Maybe he could make something of himself as a farrier.

Tim himself had decided to branch out and was telling them that beside his custom business, he was working on contracts from a big ready-to-wear, acting as cutter and then farming out the sewing to a group of seamstresses. "Maybe Bridget would be interested in doing some sewing at home?"

"You'll have to ask her yourself."

When Lena came home at last, she had forgotten about telling on Will in her eagerness to ask her mother if she could go to Will's birthday party. Under Bridget's probing the whole story of how Lena had found Will and Dan being entertained in the Daly's kitchen came out. She forgot to mention Nurse's scolding, only saying that they had run into Nurse who had told them where the boys were to be found.

Bridget didn't know whether an invitation authorized by Cook meant an invitation from Mrs. Daly, but she decided to allow it. It would offer her a chance for a visit with Mrs. Daly, whom she hadn't seen since her visit after James's christening many months ago. She would like to see Will, Molly and Charlie and hoped for a visit with Mrs. Daly herself, although with so many guests, there would hardly be time.

Lena could hardly believe her luck. She had been invited to birthday parties but usually had to decline to come home and help Mama, especially if it was on a Sunday. Sundays were special in the O'Shaughnessy family. "Sundays are the only day that we can enjoy having your father at home all day, Lena."

The next Sunday finally came and Tom dropped Bridget, Lena and baby James off at the Dalys, then took the boys and the twins off for a drive. Circling around Washington Square Park they headed over Christopher Street to the Christopher Street Ferry on the Hudson, where they sat and watched passengers disembarking and new passengers boarding.

"Can we ride the ferry, Papa?"

"Maybe another time, Will. What would we do with Jack and the cart if we went off and left them?"

"But we left them when we went to the Learys last Sunday."

"But we were not gone far or long."

Mrs. Daly had been told by Will that he had invited Lena and her mother, so she welcomed her seamstress's daughter with the same graciousness that she welcomed the other guests. Lena felt perfectly dressed for the birthday party in her new Easter outfit. She saw the other girls in party frocks with frills and ruffles, but Lena felt that her simple dress became her.

Bridget remained in the kitchen with Cook, hoping that Mrs. Daly might ask her to come up to the parlor for some refreshments along with the other parents, although she wondered how Mrs. Daly would introduce her to the others. She

had always introduced her as “my seamstress.” Bridget would have preferred to have a private chat with Mrs. Daly herself.

Lena had no notion of being a seamstress’s daughter. She and Will had known each other as long as she remembered, and she had never felt unequal to him. He introduced her as his old friend Lena and did not mention the word “seamstress.” Lena found out that the other guests were mostly children of friends of the Dalys. The girls seemed barely to know Will, or were extremely polite, or perhaps just shy. He seemed more at ease with the boys, some of whom were classmates from his school. No one from her school was there, and she realized that they must all be Protestants. She had never been with all Protestant children,

The children’s playroom was the center of activity. Children admired Will’s trains and rocking horse, Mollie’s doll’s house and dolls. A Noah’s Ark all in wood, with a house, boat, and pairs of tiny animals charmed them. They played games like pin the tail on the donkey, and blindman’s bluff and hide and seek. When they were tired from playing, they were asked to be seated, and suddenly a magician, calling himself Mario the Magnificent, appeared from behind a curtain and proceeded to perform magic and card tricks. .



While the children were watching the magician, Bridget received a message delivered by the maid that she was to meet Mrs. Daly in the nursery. Mrs. Daly had found to steal away for a glimpse of her baby, which the demands on her forced her to limit. Bridget found her hovering over the crib of Baby Charles. She looked at her own Baby James in the sling over her shoulder. He was always with her, perched him on her hip or laid upon whatever surface was free while she attended to something else, not worrying about him. She knew that Baby Charles was not treated with such nonchalance; he was always watched by Nurse, whether in the bassinett which Mrs. Daly’s mother had ordered from London for Molly, or in his pram or in Nurse’s arms. She knew, however, that Mrs. Daly envied her.

Mrs. Daly greeted Bridget warmly and asked her to sit down and ordered the maid to bring tea for Bridget. “I have to go back when the show’s over to serve tea to the children.” She looked tenderly at James, who was dressed in his only good dress. He was almost a year now and Bridget put him on the floor, so that she could let him show Mrs. Daly that he could stand up by himself, when assisted. “I don’t know how you do it, Bridget. How many children do you have now?”

“Six.” Bridget thought she heard “Tsk, tsk” coming from the corner where Nurse’s chair was.

“Yet you manage so well. Lena looks lovely in that dress—you made it I’m sure. I would have you make Molly’s clothes, but Mother orders them for her. ‘You named her for me, dear; the least I can do is buy her pretty dresses.’”

“You’re fortunate to have her hovering over you. I wish my mum could see my children. Imagine; they’re named after grandparents who’ve never seen them.”

“Bridget, I’m glad you came. I have something I must talk to you about, if only briefly.” She took her aside and lowered her voice so that Nurse couldn’t hear. “You remember when you were here and met the Female Moral Reform Society? I believe I gave you a pamphlet?” Bridget barely remembered that Mrs. Daly had indeed given her some information, the whereabouts of she had lost track. “Well, you will not believe it, but my husband told me that two aldermen proposed licensing and regulating brothels! After all our work to raise awareness of the dangers to the public from these places and our efforts to get the city to label running a house of prostitution a misdemeanor and fine them \$500, the city leaders are talking about licensing them! My husband seemed amused. He said it would lighten his case load. He likes to needle me about my “lady reformer friends. He may laugh, but we have had some influence already in turning public opinion against establishments that foster immorality, and have raised the public’s interest by sending articles to the newspapers. A petition has been forwarded to Albany calling for laws to punish adulterers, seducers, and theater proprietors who allow prostitutes to frequent their establishments. It asks for punishments of one year in prison for convicted adulterers, three years in the penitentiary for convicted seducers, and \$100 fine for each offense by theater owners.

Bridget knew nothing of this. The last time she had heard this topic mentioned was

“What could I do?”

“I was thinking that you might appeal to some of the women in your parish, or to the minister or bishop. Certainly the churches should do their share. Could you inform your minister at least, Bridget. Maybe he knows someone on the city council or in Albany?”

Bridget could not imagine the priests having time to worry about what was happening in Albany—they were so busy trying to get the schools built and opened that Bishop Hughes had finally managed to find funding for. “I’ll ask, Mrs. Daly. It is certainly a good cause.” What else could she say? Brothels were a fixture of life in Five Points. She remembered Mrs. Malloy and thought of Peggy’s brief career working for her. Mrs. Malloy’s girls were thought well of in Five Points. They earned a better living than seamstresses, but she could hardly tell Mrs. Daly that.

