

Part II Chapter 39 The Long Hot Summer of 1845

It was early Saturday morning, July 19, and Tom had finally found a carting job, after being turned away by someone who objected to his brogue. This happened more often, now that Irish immigration was picking up. A brogue might result in peremptory dismissal. He had at length found a small job for a family who were being evicted and hired him to move their few furnishings and possessions from a building on Mercer to a boarding house in the heart of Five Points.



“Prejudice and crowds—that’s what this city’s about,” he muttered, dodging carriages and stray animals as he steered Jackson through the traffic on Broadway. Suddenly an explosion rocked the street, then another, then a series, culminating in a huge final explosion that shook the earth. Frightened, Jack reared back, and Tom was just managing to calm him when a runaway frightened horse carriage careened into his cart, overturning it and

spilling its contents onto the roadway right in the path of other wagons and carriages. Many of the items from his cart were badly damaged or carried off by street urchins while he was trying to shift pieces back onto the cart.

The source of the explosion remained invisible, but Tom could see smoke rising above the rooftops. In the streets confusion reigned. It was only later that Tom learned that a huge shipment of saltpeter—used in making gunpowder—had caught fire in a warehouse down on Broad Street. The fire had run through the same district as the fire of 1835 had, in the financial district, and had burned as far as south as Bowling Green. Thirty lives were lost and more than 300 buildings destroyed. The explosion, they said, was heard as far away as Sandy Hook, New Jersey.

“You owe me \$100 for damaging and losing my good furniture,” the owner claimed when Tom arrived at the boarding house on Hester Street with the remains of the load.

Tom was used to owners claiming their goods were worth twice what they were. “Your whole load wasn’t worth \$50,” Tom replied. “What you’ve lost doesn’t amount to \$20.”

If the job had been in a wealthier area of town than Five Points, the man might have threatened to call the police, but police didn’t come to this neighborhood when summoned over petty losses. They came when sent to break up a riot or to arrest a murderer, so Tom knew that the man would have to take what he gave him. “I’ll give you \$10 and waive the fee.”

The day was a total loss. "Prejudice, crowds, explosions, fire, pandemonium, and thievery—New York is no place to live."

When he finally arrived home, Tom found a letter from Michael. Whenever Tom had a very bad day, he returned to his theme that Chicago offered a better life. A letter from Michael would bring good news from Chicago.

"It might be he's met Father Quarters," Bridget suggested slyly.

"Better than that, Bridge." Tom ignored her implication that Mike seldom went to church. "Mike's got himself married!"

"No! I was beginning to think he would be all the other shy Irish men who can't bring themselves to propose and suddenly find that marriage has passed them by altogether." She still remembered how Peggy had given up on him.

"A widow, from his boarding house."

"A widow! I bet she's got money and is going to back him in a saloon."

Tom read on. "You're right!"

"His friend Hagar must have decided against going into business with him," Bridget laughed. "So he found himself a rich widow instead."

"Aren't you always suspicious of Michael's actions?" Tom teased.

"And aren't you always impressed?" she countered.

But Tom secretly took heart that Michael was establishing himself in Chicago, and knew that he would do the same.

As the heat of summer had reached its peak in August, the children were longing to get out of their hot rooms. School would be starting soon, and there would be no further time outdoors, Dan complained. Bridget, with Betty and Peggy, planned a Sunday afternoon picnic outing in City Hall Park. Lena asked if it was her birthday party. Her mother had completely forgotten, so said that yes, it was for her, and she should have a cake.

No one minded that there was nothing for them to do in the park. The girls were satisfied with "Simon Says," "Red Rover," "Mother May I" while the boys preferred to wrestle or play tag. The men ---Mr. Newman had begged off, saying that, in case anything went wrong, someone had to be on call—watched

from the sidelines while the women prepared the food. Tom was telling about that July morning when the explosion had ruined his day. Tim furnished further details: "An immense body of flame... penetrated at least seven buildings, blew in the fronts of the opposite houses on Broad Street, wrenched shutters and doors from buildings at some distance from the immediate scene of the explosion, propelled bricks and other missiles through the air, threw down many individuals who had gone as far as Beaver Street, spread the fire far and wide, so that the whole neighborhood was at once in a blaze, and most unfortunately covered up the [fire company's] hose.... It was only with difficulty that the firemen could obtain any control over the conflagration."



"I heard that the water from the Croton Reservoir provided a steady stream of water, and without it, the fire could have been much worse."

They decided to stroll down to the southeast corner to see the new Croton Fountain, built to celebrate the arrival of water with the aqueduct. Brian, who by then had become a regular in their family gatherings, asked Nell to walk with him to the fountain, where they

quietly paired off.

Betty hadn't seen Bridget since the baby's baptism and wanted to have a word alone, out of earshot of Peggy, who was looking after the two infants—John and her own Robert. "Have you heard anything from Mrs. Daly since 'the tour'?" she whispered.

Puzzled, Bridget said that she hadn't. Betty continued in a whisper, "I'm afraid you're not likely to. Your 'tour' has gotten you in trouble with Mr. Daly."

Bridget stopped what she was doing and turned to face her friend.

"Oh, it wasn't Mrs. Daly complained; he heard about it from one of the other ladies—through her husband. He decided that he didn't want his wife going to places like that, and that his friendship with you might not be appropriate."

"What did I do that was not appropriate?"

"Where you live, for example—they say it's 'questionable.'" She looked at Peggy who was looking in their direction.

“Questionable?” Bridget turned red.

“Race-mixing goes on there.”

“And what is wrong with race-mixing?”

“It’s considered immoral. You know that, Bridget.”

“Not by me! Besides, Peggy and Mr. Newman are married!” Indignant, Bridget was raising her voice.

“Totally immoral. Marriage only makes it worse—.”

“How do you know all this? Tim?”

“Servants hear everything, you know that. There’s more. Questions are being raised about you, when you worked for Mrs. Malloy, before you went to the Dalys—what work did you do?”

“I was married when I arrived here and had to work as a maid, cleaning the rooms and the kitchen. Mrs. Daly and the ladies knew that I witnessed what was going on with the other women there.”

“The very fact that you worked for Mrs. Malloy apparently puts you into an ambiguous category.”

“But they wanted to see these establishments.” Bridget felt defensive again as she had in the carriage that day. “They wanted to see for themselves what women are forced into, and they blame me for it?” She was no longer whispering and Peggy had overheard her last remarks.

“Apparently, you led them then to a place where women were openly soliciting men?” Betty went on. “That’s what Mr. Daly was accusing you of to his wife, based on the testimony he received from one of the women.” Peggy had joined them by then.

“I certainly did not ‘lead’ them there—I even tried to **prevent** them from going there—I had heard about the place. I warned them against it and stayed outside in the carriage while they headed right in, as if they had every right to be there and wouldn’t be turned away.”

“Well, you know they won’t admit that they went willingly, now that they know what kind of place it is and what kind of women go there. According to them, it was your fault. Mrs. Daly is to refuse any further contact with you.”

Peggy looked confused. “But Mrs. Daly means so much to you, Bridget.”

“Poor Mrs. Daly. Her mother will hear about this and be confirmed in her opinion of me,” Bridget sighed. “I’m sure anything she said in my defense was ignored. Her mother will bar the door.”

Bridget couldn’t fully grasp the meaning for herself. She was saddened by the prospect of ending for good her visits to Mrs. Daly, but maybe there was more to it. “I’ve lost my respectability, have I?”

Peggy shook her head. “What is respectability? When I married Mr. Newman, I was considered a loose, immoral woman for that, when in fact, he was making me respectable in my own mind. .People shun me and Mr. Newman now when we go places together, even to church. It doesn’t bother me in the least. I never set much store by respectability.”

“You’re a brave woman, Peggy, but what about our children?” Bridget was concerned that Lena would lose the friendship of the one person her age who challenged her. Peggy didn’t concern herself with such fears. Her two boys were light-skinned like their father and had their mothers reddish hair and green eyes.

Lena mentioned to her daughter that she might not see Will again, but Lena paid no attention. She was sure she would; besides school would soon be starting again, and she was looking forward to her Latin lessons, once she borrowed that Latin book.

On one of the first days in class, Sister asked how many of the girls were then eleven. As Lena had just celebrated her eleventh birthday in the park, her hand shot up. “All whose hands are up are fortunate, for you will join the first Communion class and, if you are worthy, will receive our dear Lord next May.”

Lena was ecstatic. She would definitely be worthy. She became very devout, pleading to go to Mass every day. Her mother told her that wasn’t possible. “How can you think of yourself, Lena? You know you have to help with breakfast, feed the twins, get your brothers ready for school, take them with you and drop them off on your way. Then you’ll be free to go to Mass if they have a children’s Mass.” Lena had now two boys to try to get to school, as Dan had been enrolled in the same public school as Will. The only Catholic school available for boys was still St. Peter’s Free School for Boys down on Barclay Street, too far for Lena to walk and still get to her own school in time. Lena decided that since she couldn’t go to Mass, she could at least start her day by saying the rosary on the way to school. Her brothers would recite along with her.

Will was barely out of bed when Lena would start down the stairs, starting up the rosary: “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” –as a sign to whoever would follow that she was leaving and they had better follow or

be left behind. Will never made it out the door with her but stumbled out a few minutes later, when his mother was feeding the baby. She assumed Will left and would catch up with his sister. She had James playing on the floor in front of her and was keeping an eye on the twins getting into anything they could find to play with. That was how Will managed to have his days to himself.

Although he hadn't satisfied his father in the matter of caring for Jackson, he liked hanging out around the stables, finding other nine to twelve year-old boys like himself, idling away their days fighting and gambling.



Chuck-a-luck was their game. Will wanted to get some money of his own, some pennies to try his luck with. He learned that some of the boys made gambling money by “rat-catching.” A good supply of rats was necessary to fill the popular rat pits, where rats and terriers fought to the death, with merchants betting on the outcome. Will tagged along on a few rat-catching sessions with boys from the stables, and when he caught his first rat and turned it in for five

cents, he showed his money to the others and found himself having to defend himself against them. When grabbing didn't work, they wanted to gamble for it, but somehow, he hung on to it. He realized that he had something others wanted. In truth, though, they had what he wanted, the postures, manners and braggadocio attitudes of street gangs. He bragged about his “gang,” which, when they laughed, he identified as the “Chieftains,” claiming Dan and James as members—though Dan was only seven and not interested in anything Will proposed.

Will found rats in areas nearer home. He saw rats often, scurrying around the garbage that people routinely threw out into the streets for the pigs. He captured some and turned them in for more pennies, but he kept them to himself. He didn't want to fight or gamble for the time, but contented himself with hanging out with the would-be stable hands and watching rat fights, where the bets were in shillings and dollars, not pennies.

Bridget knew nothing of this other life that Will was leading. She assumed he was in school. She had enough to worry about to keep seven children and a husband fed, clothed and happy. Every day brought its extra needs and troubles, and when she had time, she always had the laundry.