

Core Knowledge® Adventures in History™

# THE GILDED AGE

STONE BY STONE



by Colleen Paeff

We are pleased that our materials in the Core Knowledge Curriculum Series™, Core Classics® Series, Voices in History™ Series, Collection of Tales™ Series, and Adventures in History™ Series available on our [website](#), are made available through a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.



Through the license, the user is free:

- To share: to copy, distribute, and transmit the work
- To remix: to adapt the work

Under the following conditions:

- You must attribute the work in the following manner:

This work is based on an original work of the Core Knowledge® Foundation made available through licensing under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. This does not in any way imply that the Core Knowledge Foundation endorses this work.

- You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
- If you alter, transform, or build upon this work, you may distribute the resulting work only under the same or similar license to this one.

With the understanding that for reuse or distribution, you must make clear to others the license terms of this work. The best way to do that is with a link to this web page:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>



# The Gilded Age

Stone by Stone

by

*Colleen Paeff*

Illustrations by *Kailien Singson*

# ADVENTURES IN HISTORY™

ISBN 979-8-88970-625-0

COPYRIGHT © 2026 CORE KNOWLEDGE FOUNDATION

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

PRINTED IN CANADA

CORE KNOWLEDGE FOUNDATION

[www.coreknowledge.org](http://www.coreknowledge.org)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER 1:</b>	
Something Spectacular.....	1
<b>CHAPTER 2:</b>	
A Handful of Crumbs.....	6
<b>CHAPTER 3:</b>	
Give the Girl a Chance.....	12
<b>CHAPTER 4:</b>	
An Essential First Step.....	21
<b>CHAPTER 5:</b>	
Snitch.....	32
<b>CHAPTER 6:</b>	
Through the Gate.....	36
<b>CHAPTER 7:</b>	
Old Times.....	41
<b>CHAPTER 8:</b>	
Mrs. Roebling's Skill.....	46
<b>CHAPTER 9:</b>	
Shards of Light.....	52

<b>CHAPTER 10:</b>	
News from Home.....	61
<b>CHAPTER 11:</b>	
Losing Will.....	65
<b>CHAPTER 12:</b>	
Will Is Gone.....	68
<b>CHAPTER 13:</b>	
A Stubborn Girl.....	72
<b>CHAPTER 14:</b>	
Westward Bound.....	75
<b>CHAPTER 15:</b>	
Discovered.....	82
<b>CHAPTER 16:</b>	
Dysart, at Last.....	87
<b>CHAPTER 17:</b>	
A Proposal.....	95
<b>CHAPTER 18:</b>	
Watch Me Fly.....	98
<b>AFTERWORD.....</b>	101
<b>MEET THE AUTHOR .....</b>	107
<b>MEET THE ILLUSTRATOR .....</b>	109

# 1

## Something Spectacular

Sunday, May 13, 1883

**W**e rarely rode in Da's truck, and we never rode it in the middle of the night. But here we were, under the stars, jostling on the cobblestones like four bags of bones. I could almost imagine we were back in Ireland, racing down the Dingle Peninsula in Grandad's jaunting car. There were no green hills in this part of New York City, though. Instead, shabby tenement buildings and storefronts lined the road to our right, and tall ships swayed in the docks of the East River to our left.

Even at this hour, the longshoremen and truckers were hard at work. By candlelight, they pulled wooden chests from deep inside ships and heaved them onto horse-drawn trucks just like Da's. Sailing ships from all over the world arrived at the docks in our neighborhood carrying crates of tea, coffee, cocoa, exotic spices, and all sorts of other things we couldn't afford to buy—not yet. But I had a plan.

---

**tenement buildings:** buildings that contain multiple apartments, usually crowded and poorly maintained

Even though I worked during the day sewing piecework with Mrs. Kelly, I'd been going to school at night. As soon as I was old enough, I planned to enroll in the Women's Medical College. Sister Flynn said I was in the running for a scholarship. When I became a doctor, me and Da and my brothers would live in our very own home with a garden out back and a stable across the yard for the girls.

"Turn here," Da said.

Peter held the reins just the way Da had before his shoulder went bad, feet planted, eyes straight ahead—except Peter grinned from ear to ear. Even Da wore a hint of a smile tonight, something I hadn't seen for a long while.

I gripped the truck with one hand and steadied my youngest brother, Will, with the other.

"Don't help, Lizzie." Will brushed my hand away. "I don't need it."

At six, and small for his size, Will had the courage and determination of a much older boy.

*Bounce. Bounce. Bounce.* The cart rumbled on.

Da winced and grabbed his sore shoulder. "Pull over here," he said. "Tie the girls up and keep yer voices down."

When we arrived in America, Da had used the money he'd made from selling Grandad's farm to buy two horses, Golly and Gal—the girls—and they were worth every penny. On hot summer nights, I often wished I could sleep in their stable down by the corner grocer, instead of inside the sweltering room we rented from Mrs. Kelly, but Da said it wasn't safe.

"Where are we going, Da?" Will leapt from the cart, and the rest of us followed.

"Once in a blue moon," Da said, "ye get the chance to see something spectacular. Tonight's our chance."

Da led us toward the entrance of the new bridge that would connect Manhattan to Brooklyn. A lone security guard paced in front of a makeshift fence.

"Here we are." Da wrapped his arms around the three of us.

The security guard checked for passersby, then unlocked a gate and pushed it open. "Be quick."

"We're going on the bridge?" Will's mouth hung open.

"Before it's opened?!" Peter practically shouted. Someday, he hoped to build bridges himself.

"The whole world doesn't need to know our plans," Da said, shushing them.

My brothers were already through the gate, but my feet wouldn't budge. "What if we get in trouble?"

"It'll be fine, Lizzie." Da followed the boys. "We'll be in and out. Come along."

I wanted to follow them. But the bridge wouldn't be open to the public for nearly two weeks. What if we got in trouble? What if it was dangerous? What if . . . I stood anchored to the ground, imagining the worst.

"All right then." Da ran back and kissed my cheek. "Wait with the girls."

Following after my brothers, he called back to the guard, "Keep an eye on my Lizzie!"

For a split second, I thought I might find the courage to follow. Instead, I watched my family fade into the darkness.

"You've got to take a risk now and again, girlie," the security guard said, his voice making me jump. "Yer in for a fair dull life if ye won't take a chance."

"We could get in trouble," I snapped and marched back toward Da's truck, feeling smug and stupid all at once. Mam would have gone with them if she were still alive. Mam had an adventurous spirit. That's how we ended up in America. I wished I were more like Mam.

SOMETHING SPECTACULAR

---



# 2

## A Handful of Crumbs

Monday, May 14, 1883

**T**he next morning, the crowded kitchen buzzed with bridge talk. Will said he'd felt like they were flying over the river.

Peter had admired the enormous cables holding up the bridge. "They're huge ropes made of wire!" He opened his arms to demonstrate their size.

Da was most impressed by the two towers stretching from high up in the sky to deep down below the water. "That's a feat that took more than a few men's lives," he said, shaking his head.

The other boarders wanted to know how Da had managed to get a sneak peek before the grand opening, but Da's lips were sealed.

Mrs. Kelly, the landlady, was not at all impressed with the opening plans for the bridge. "It's all well and

---

**boarders:** people who pay to rent rooms in someone's house and usually receive one or more daily meals

**landlady:** a woman who owns property that she rents to others

good for them to plan a parade and a fine party,” she said, gathering nine cups of tea from the table, “but why on the Queen of England’s birthday?” Mrs. Kelly, like many of the Irish, had no love for England’s queen.

“Aye,” one of the new boarders answered. “They should celebrate on a proper American holiday when the working men of our fine country have the day off to join the party.”

“You’re right there,” Da said. “But we’ll have an even better reason to celebrate. The 24th of May is also our dear Lizzie’s birthday.” He hadn’t forgotten! “Thirteen years old—”

“—and she doesn’t look a day over eight,” Peter teased. He was only ten, but he’d taken to gloating ever since he’d grown taller than me. I ignored him and gathered up the empty porridge bowls as the other boarders trickled out the door, past mounds of cut fabric ready to be stitched.

“We need water for washing up,” I announced to my brothers, holding out two metal pails.

But before they could go out back to the pump, Da said, “Wait one minute. I’ve something to say.”

Mrs. Kelly took the buckets and went to fetch the water herself, which was highly unusual. We all looked at Da.

---

pails: buckets

“Listen.” He ducked to avoid the laundry hanging from the ceiling. “I’ve been paying the Murphy brothers to load the truck for me since my shoulder went bad, but the truth is, I can’t afford to pay for help. I don’t earn enough. Even with the money ye three earn, we’re not making ends meet. There just isn’t enough money to go around.”

We all contributed in some way. Peter had his newspaper sales. I had my stitching. Even Will brought in a few pennies by snipping threads.

“Without yer mother’s income . . .” Da’s voice trailed off.

Mam had worked as a midwife before she died. Everyone wanted her—and not just the Irish. There were Russians and Germans and women from all over who asked Mam to deliver their babies. She was that good.

Da stared into our room. Mam had painted Irish wildflowers on the walls when we first arrived, but they were hidden under a thick layer of black soot now.

“I’ve decided to sell the girls,” he said.

His words knocked the air out of my lungs. Even Peter and Will were struck silent. A moment later, we all spoke at once.

---

**midwife:** someone who helps women in childbirth

“I’ll help with the loading.”

“I can drive, Da. I’m nearly tall enough now.”

“I’ll take in extra sewing, Da. Just please, please don’t sell the—”

Da waved one hand. “It’s done.”

He went on to explain the rest of his whole, horrible plan. He was behind in rent. He’d taken a job as a night watchman on a building project north of the city that would last through the fall, only we couldn’t go with him. We were to be separated.

“Mrs. Kelly’s niece knows of a family hiring a chambermaid in Gramercy Park,” Da said. “Lizzie, you’ll interview tomorrow. If you get the job, you’ll live in.”

Peter would live at the Newsboys’ Lodging House.

“Ye’ll be with yer friends.” Da gave Peter an empty smile.

“And I’ll go with Peter, Da?” Will looked suspicious, like he already knew the answer.

“No, son,” Da said. “I’ll not have ye on the streets day and night selling papers at your age. The sisters at the orphan asylum will look after ye.”

---

**night watchman:** someone who guards property at night

**chambermaid:** a maid who takes care of bedrooms as well as other domestic chores

**newsboys:** people who deliver or sell newspapers

"I won't go!" Will took a swing at Da, who took the punch without flinching. "You can't make me!"

"But why can't we stay here?" I asked. "I can look after the boys well enough." I'd been looking after them fine since Mam died.

Normally they would've pointed out that they didn't need looking after. Instead, they waited for Da's answer.

"We have to leave," Da said. "I'll be traveling north tomorrow, and I've already given notice to Mrs. Kelly. She's let our room out to three sisters newly arrived from Ireland."

All at once, my chest felt tight. I couldn't breathe. I needed air. I raced into the dark hallway, up the stairs, and flung open the door to the roof.

I gripped the iron railing that enclosed our flat rooftop and took slow, steady breaths. The bridge towered above me. Why hadn't I gone onto the bridge with Da and the boys last night when I'd had the chance? When was the next time we'd all be together again? Would Peter and Will be safe? What kind of family would we be, cast about the city like a handful of crumbs?

"Lizzie?" Helga appeared behind me. She was the first and best friend I'd made in America.

"I just saw Peter," she said. "He told me what happened. Can I help?"

“Nothing can help.” I rested my head on Helga’s shoulder as hot tears ran down my cheeks.

Helga let me cry myself out, then took me by the shoulders.

“What would your mother say if she were here now?” she asked, touching one finger to the Irish cross I wore on my neck—Mam’s cross.

If Mam were here, none of this would be happening. But then a laugh came through my tears because I knew exactly what she’d say.

“She’d tell me to stop blubbering.”

“That’s right,” Helga said. “And what else?”

I could hear the words in Mam’s voice.

“If your heart is set on moving a mountain,” I said, “start with the smallest stones.”

“Good advice.” Helga smiled.

But where would I start? I needed to get our family back together. That was the mountain, and for that, I’d need money. A job, I suppose, would be the smallest stone.

“Helga,” I said. “Can you help me with some sewing? I want to take in Mam’s Sunday dress so I have something nice to wear for my interview.”

Naturally, she said yes.

# 3

## Give the Girl a Chance

Tuesday, May 15, 1883

I'd never been so far uptown. It was different, quieter. The crowds were smaller; the buildings seemed newer. There was still horse dung in the streets—there was no getting away from that—but several men worked to clear the filth away so the fashionably dressed women wouldn't soil their skirts.

Will walked beside me in silence, arms crossed. He radiated anger, but I knew he was scared. I would be leaving him at the asylum before I went for my job interview, and we were nearly there.

Da had already said his goodbyes. He had done so before we went to sleep and had left before the sun rose. At this very moment, he was heading north to a life without us. Peter had made his way to the lodging house after breakfast, but now I wished I'd asked him to help me deliver Will.

“This is it,” I said as we turned to face a huge brick building. It looked ready to swallow my brother up and spit him out, though I knew he could give the sisters a run for their money.

Will straightened his shoulders and took a step forward, but my feet seemed stuck to the ground. I had a terrible feeling that once he walked through those doors, I might never see him again.

“Wait!” I said, panic rising in my chest. “You’ll come with me for the interview.”

Will let a smile creep across his face.

“You must promise to stay out of sight, though,” I added.

“I will, Lizzie,” he said. “I promise.”

\*\*\*

Forty minutes later, we stood in front of a grand house, across the road from a gated park. There were no carts lining the streets, no neighbors chatting on the stoops—just tall, beautiful homes and the sound of birds chirping in the park.

“Sit on this step,” I instructed. “Do not move. I won’t

---

**stoops:** raised areas, such as porches or stairways, outside the doors to houses

be long.” Will nodded sharply and sat down, and I walked down the narrow stairs to the servants’ entrance on the basement level. I took a deep breath and knocked.

As the door opened, the smell of freshly baked bread wafted past my nose. The scent was so thick, I could taste it.

“Good afternoon,” I said. “I’m here to see Mrs. Whittaker. My name is Lizzie—I mean Elizabeth—O’Brien.”

“Come in and sit down, child. I’m Mrs. Harkness, the cook. Mrs. Whittaker will be with you shortly.” Mrs. Harkness pulled me into the kitchen and plopped me down on a chair. “Don’t look so scared,” she laughed as she busied herself chopping greens. “Mrs. Whittaker only bites the timid ones.”

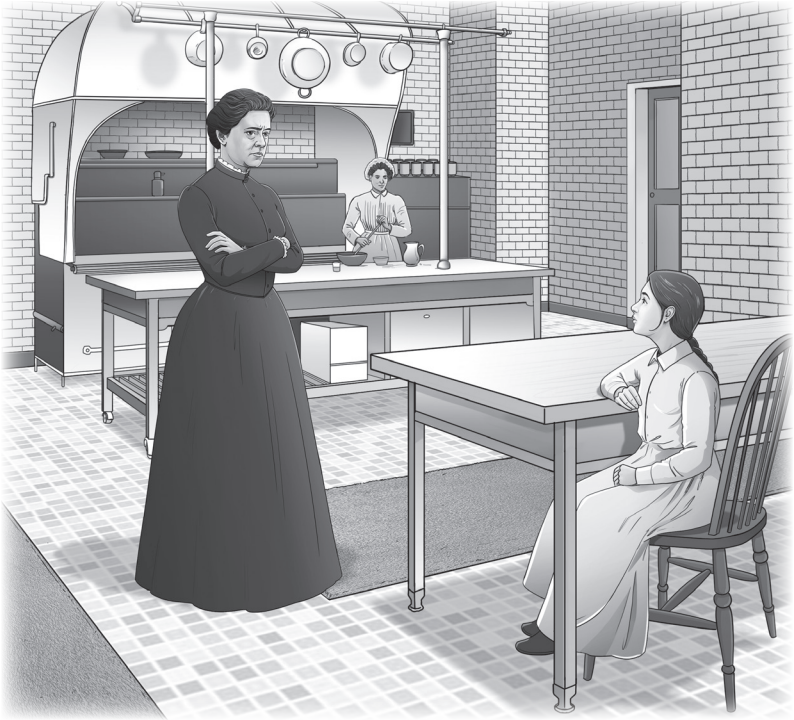
Before I could get a good look at the kitchen, a tall woman with a pointed nose arrived and stood in front of me.

“Elizabeth,” she said in a clipped voice. “I’m Mrs. Whittaker, head maid. What’s your work experience?”

“I, um.” My throat went dry. “I’ve been sewing piecework at home for nearly two years now. I can do needlework. I wash dishes every day, and I help with the laundry and ironing for our building every week.

---

**piecework:** work for which one is paid per number of pieces produced



I can haul water and do basic cooking. I, um . . .” Surely I could do more. “I can read?” I shrugged, unsure if that mattered.

“Do you have any experience in a large household?”

“No, ma’am, but I—”

“We’re looking for someone with experience. I don’t have time to train up a girl with no—”

Mrs. Whittaker was interrupted by a beautiful woman who appeared in the basement doorway as if by magic.

“Look what I found on the street being harassed by Officer Walker, poor thing,” the woman said. Out stepped Will from behind her skirts, and my stomach sank. Will, however, wore a cheeky smile.

“Mrs. Treadwell,” said a shocked Mrs. Whittaker. “I am very sorry, Madam, I’ll remove the vagrant at once.”

“That won’t be necessary, Whittaker.” The woman smiled down at Will. “I believe he’s this young lady’s brother.”

She reached out a hand to greet me. “I’m Mrs. Treadwell, the lady of the house. You must be our new chambermaid. Lizzie, is it?”

“She won’t do, I’m afraid, Madam,” Mrs. Whittaker cut in. “She has no domestic service experience.”

“Surely you can teach her.” Mrs. Treadwell gave Mrs. Whittaker a cheery smile, but her eyes sent a different message. “According to young Will here, there’s nothing his sister can’t do.”

“Perhaps, Madam, but like I said—” Mrs. Whittaker started.

“No ‘buts,’ Whittaker,” Mrs. Treadwell said. “You’ll give the girl a chance. If she hasn’t learned the trade within a fortnight, you may let her go.”

---

**vagrant:** someone who has no steady job and wanders from place to place

“Of course, Mrs. Treadwell,” Mrs. Whittaker said stiffly.

“That’s settled then. Harkness, pack the children a snack to take on their way, won’t you?” Mrs. Treadwell went back the way she had come, leaving Will in her wake like a washed-up urchin.

I turned toward Mrs. Whittaker, afraid to look her in the eye.

“It’s long hours and hard, physical work,” she said. “You will only be allowed Sunday afternoons and every other Thursday evening off.”

“I understand,” I said.

“The pay is three dollars weekly, plus room and board,” she continued. “You are not to speak to the family unless spoken to. A servant’s job is to work so quietly and completely that the family forgets we exist, until they need something—then we are ready to assist them, day or night.”

I nodded.

“We’re looking for someone to start immediately,” she said.

---

**urchin:** a mischievous child, often poorly dressed or spending most of their time in the streets

“I can start immediately,” I said. “I just need to take Will home first—I mean, to the asylum—and then I need to retrieve my belongings from—”

“Enough.” Mrs. Whittaker placed a finger between her eyebrows. “I don’t require your life story. Return by ten o’clock this evening,” she said. “If you’re a moment late, the doors will be locked, and you will have lost your position.” She turned abruptly and left the room.

I closed my eyes and let my head droop. This was not the best start.

“Here, love.” Mrs. Harkness handed me a small basket filled with baked goods and fruit. “Eat the goodies, and bring the basket back with you tonight. Her bark is worse than her bite. You’ll be fine.”

Somehow, I doubted that.

Back on the street, Will spoke through a mouthful of scone. “Sorry, but the lady started asking me questions.”

“It’s fine.” I shook my head. “You’re the only reason I got the job.”

We walked back to the asylum in silence. This time, when we arrived, I forced my feet toward the massive door.

“Lizzie, wait.” Will’s forehead creased. “Please don’t leave me here. I want to go to the lodging house with Peter.”

“It’s not up to me, Will. Besides, it’s only temporary,” I said. “I’ll be saving my wages to bring Da home. We’ll be together again soon.” I tried to hug him, and he pulled away, refusing to meet my gaze.

“It’s not what I want either,” I said, waiting for a sign of forgiveness or, at the very least, understanding from my brother.

When none came, I tapped on the imposing door, half hoping no one would answer.

All too soon, the door opened to reveal a frail-looking woman wearing a nun’s habit. She peered at Will through smudged spectacles.

“You must be William O’Brien,” she said. “Your father completed the necessary paperwork yesterday. Come along.”

As the woman ushered him inside, Will whispered over his shoulder, “You’re not my sister anymore.”

Before I could respond, the door closed in my face.

---

**nun’s habit:** traditional clothing worn by a nun

All at once, my chest tightened. I heaved, trying to fill my lungs with air, but they felt as if they were crushed beneath boulders. I'd had the same feeling when Mam died, but back then Da and Peter and even little Will had been at my side. Now I was alone. We were all alone now.

On the long walk home, I spent a full hour and a half contemplating a future in which Da never returned, Will refused to speak to me, and Peter turned to a life of crime on the streets. By the time I opened the door to our building, my lungs were working, but my thoughts swirled with dread.

Mrs. Kelly had left a bag with my belongings outside the door to our room. A piece of butcher block paper covered in Da's scraggly handwriting poked out of the bag. I smoothed the crumpled paper and began to read.

*My Dearest Lizzie,*

*Ye've had to grow up too fast since yer Mam passed, and for that I am sorry. Peter will be happy enough at the lodging house and I expect ye will find life as a chambermaid bearable enough. I worry after Will, though. Look in on him when ye can. He puts on a tough show, like his Da, but he's ever so tender on the inside. Take good care of him.*

*Your loving father.*

# 4

## An Essential First Step

Wednesday, May 16, 1883

I was certain I'd only just fallen asleep when my bed started to rattle and a chipper voice above my head said, "Rise and shine."

I opened my eyes to find a round face, lit by candlelight, hovering over me. "I'm Becky. Mrs. Whittaker says I'm to instruct you in the daily chores. I've brought up a morning uniform for ye. There's fresh water in the washstand. I'll leave a candle as well. Meet me downstairs in five minutes." Then she was gone.

When I arrived last night, I'd barely looked at my room. Now, in the glow of candlelight, I could make out two iron bed frames separated by a wooden washstand that held a painted bowl and pitcher. A piece of oilcloth protected the wooden floor beneath it. There were four wall hooks on each side of the room, and my new

uniform, a cotton calico dress and white apron, hung on one of them. I'd spread my own clothes across my quilt for extra warmth during the night. It was chilly on the fifth floor.

I gave myself a quick wash, put on my uniform, tied my hair back with a ribbon, and shone my candle under the bed. No chamber pot. Back home we had to go into the back garden to use the privy, but I thought they might have chamber pots here.

I put my shoes on and tiptoed into the hallway. Lo and behold, directly across from the servants' staircase, there was a toilet. An indoor toilet! After experiencing the convenience of indoor plumbing, I then hurried downstairs to the basement.

In the kitchen, Becky handed me a broom and a second item that had a long handle attached to a flat metal container. She lifted a large basket full of what I guessed were cleaning supplies and said, "Follow me."

Leading the way upstairs, she continued, "First one downstairs each morning starts the fire in the range. I've already done it, so I'll give ye instructions another day." She turned to me. "Is it true ye've no domestic service experience at all?"

---

**calico dress:** a dress made of rough cotton cloth, often printed with a small pattern

**range:** cooking stove

“I helped keep the rooms clean at home,” I said defensively.

“And where might home be?” she asked.

“Fourth Ward,” I said. “Near the port.”

“Heavens above, yer in for a shock.” She continued up the stairs. “This is an entirely different world.”

As if on cue, we arrived on the first floor, where the pea green walls of the basement gave way to dark, polished wood and deep red wallpaper. Intricately patterned rugs lay atop shining wood floors. Carved wooden furniture, paintings, potted plants, fine chairs, and sofas upholstered in flowery silk filled the space. On every seat were pillows adorned with fine needlework.

Becky watched me for a moment. “My granny would say it’s a sin that one family should live like kings while another lives like paupers,” she said. “But ye’ll find there’s not much time to contemplate what ye haven’t got when every hour of every day yer cleanin’ what someone else has. Come along, we’ll start in the dining room. Let’s see what ye know and what ye don’t.”

As it turned out, I didn’t know much. For example, I didn’t know that nearly every job required an essential

---

**paupers:** very poor people

first step—the covering of something with a cotton sheet. The sheets went on furniture and on mirrors before you swept, and on the hearth before you emptied last night's ash from the fireplace. I didn't know that curtains could be so heavy. I didn't know that a carpet sweeper—the metal container Becky had handed me earlier—was a contraption and not a person, or that you should always sprinkle damp tea leaves on the carpets before sweeping them, or that fine cloths were sometimes used to wipe the dust from terrifyingly breakable items, like those lining the Treadwells' many fireplace mantels.

At eight o'clock, Becky sent me out back to beat the hearth rugs, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I could beat a rug in my sleep. Other servants were moving about now, including a handsome, blue-eyed boy who looked to be a few years older than me.

I could hear the sounds of clanging dishes and rushing feet and guessed Becky must be serving breakfast in the dining room.

When I saw her again, she had changed from her calico into a black dress and crisp white apron. As I folded up the rugs, she explained that the calico was for morning chores, while the black dress must be worn for serving food and answering the door—two things Mrs.

---

**hearth:** the floor inside or in front of a fireplace

Whittaker had told her I was strictly forbidden from doing.

With the rugs back in place, Mrs. Whittaker led me up the back staircase to the fourth floor, where the children's bedrooms were located. The Treadwells had two girls, aged eight and fourteen.

"While the family is at breakfast, you will clean the bedchambers—all except Mrs. Treadwell's. Miss Walker, you will meet her at breakfast, cares for the mistress's personal needs. I will care for Mr. Treadwell's room until you've been properly trained." Mrs. Whittaker stopped in front of one of the children's rooms. "This is Miss Amanda's bedchamber. I will demonstrate what to do here, and you will tidy Miss Nancy's room on your own."

She handed me a small piece of cardboard with written instructions. "Every item on this list must be completed daily. Do you understand?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

Thankfully, many of the tasks were similar to what Becky had demonstrated earlier: opening the windows and curtains, cleaning the fireplaces, sweeping the carpets and wooden floors, dusting (after covering much of the

room with old sheets, of course). The main difference was the beds. Sheets were stripped, the featherbeds shaken and turned, sheets returned and tucked, pillows fluffed, quilts pulled up and smoothed.

“If lamps or candles need to be cleaned,” Mrs. Whittaker said, “you will deliver them to James for cleaning, then you will return them to the children’s chambers.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said.

“Now, let’s see how you do,” she said, leading the way to Miss Nancy’s room.

I began by pulling back the curtains and opening the windows. As I pulled back the last curtain, something white caught my eye. It was a small corset! I picked it up, unsure where it should go.

“What do you have there?” Mrs. Whittaker asked.

“It’s a corset, ma’am.”

“That girl.” Mrs. Whittaker shook her head. “Hand it to me.”

I continued my work, going slowly so as not to break any of Miss Nancy’s lovely trinkets or china dolls. I could tell Mrs. Whittaker was getting impatient by the

ever-increasing volume of her sighs. Finally, she said, "Servants' breakfast will be served in ten minutes," and left the room.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. *Don't cry*, I said to myself. *Do not cry*. I stood still for the first time all morning, trying to push away my feelings of anger and frustration. I didn't want to be here. I wanted to be with Will and Peter and Da. I would rather be sewing piecework in our dark room at home, among people I knew, than working in this fine, foreign house among strangers.



But then I heard Mam's voice in my head. *If you want to move a mountain, Lizzie . . .* So I kept moving one small stone after another—faster now that no one was watching—so that I wouldn't miss breakfast.

\*\*\*

"Sorry I'm late," I said, rushing into the small servants' dining room.

Six people were seated around the table, with Mrs. Whittaker at its head. Thankfully, they hadn't started eating yet. I took an empty chair beside Becky.

We said our prayers silently. I was glad for that because Mrs. Kelly had told me I was to keep my religion to myself.

"People, well lots of them anyway, don't like the Catholics," she'd said. "And they especially don't like the Irish Catholics."

I knew this because I'd seen newspapers making fun of Irish servant girls. Irish "Biddies," they were called, and the general belief was that they didn't have any sense at all. I hoped to prove this wrong, though I wasn't off to the best start.

After prayers, Mrs. Whittaker told everyone to

introduce themselves to me and state their positions.

I already knew Mrs. Harkness the cook. Becky was the parlor maid, which meant she served meals and kept the public rooms of the house in order.

"I've been chambermaid and parlor maid and everything in between since Ellie left," Becky explained. She didn't look bothered, though. In fact, she seemed unlikely to be bothered by much.

"I'm James," said the boy I'd seen earlier. "I'm yer man-of-all-work."

"Boy-of-all-work, more like," Becky whispered in my ear, loud enough for James to hear.

"I do whatever these fine ladies can't—or won't." He flashed a smile at Becky. "And if you are looking for a boy . . ."

"That's enough from you, James." Mrs. Whittaker frowned.

"What?" he replied, still grinning. "I'm just being friendly."

"Elizabeth doesn't want or need any distractions. Isn't that right, Elizabeth?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

The day had barely started, and I already seemed to be the cause of some concern.

The other two ladies introduced themselves as Miss Walker, Mrs. Treadwell's lady's maid, and Miss Battier, governess to Nancy and Amanda. Miss Battier spoke with a French accent, wore a stylish day dress, and seemed out of place at the servants' table.

Introductions were followed by a reading of an article from the newspaper Mr. Treadwell published, *The Gramercy Gazette*. Apparently, this was a regular morning ritual.

"Tolls Scheduled for New Bridge," Mrs. Whittaker read as the rest of us ate. "The question of allowing foot passengers to cross the bridge for free has been reviewed by the counsel for the bridge trustees and the counsels of Brooklyn and New York. All agree that the trustees must fix tolls for all kinds of passengers. They have recommended a charge of one cent per foot passenger, and the board has agreed. Additional tolls have been arranged as follows: A charge of five cents has been set for one horse and man; ten cents for one horse and vehicle; twenty cents for all two-horse vehicles, with a further

---

**tolls:** fees that must be paid to use something, such as a highway or bridge

**counsel:** lawyer

**trustees:** people who are responsible for managing or maintaining someone else's property

charge of five cents for each additional horse; five cents each for cattle; and two cents each for sheep and hogs.”

“Sorry, James,” Becky said, shaking her head. “It’s not at all fair that hogs like ye should have to pay twice as much as the rest of us. Shall I write a letter of complaint on yer behalf?”

“You can write?” James countered with a smile. “Please continue, Mrs. Whittaker.”

I stifled a laugh, and Mrs. Whittaker shot me a glare.

Clearing her throat, she began again. “A letter from the Central Labor Unions of Brooklyn and New York voiced their opposition to opening the bridge on Queen Victoria’s birthday. Mr. Bush said the laborers had resorted to threats in an attempt to influence the opening date and suggested the letter be ignored. All present agreed. The opening date stands at May 24.”

Mrs. Whittaker looked around the table. “Most of you will have the evening off, as it falls on a free Thursday. Mrs. Treadwell has advised me that your curfew will be extended to eleven o’clock for one night only so that you may enjoy the celebrations. If you arrive at this house one second past curfew,” she looked right at me, “you will sleep in the coal shed.”

---

**curfew:** a time by which someone must return home

# 5

## Snitch

Thursday, May 17, 1883

When Becky shook me awake the next morning, my body ached, and my brain felt full of cotton. I'd slept soundly after a full day's work, but a full day's sleep was what I needed now—and that was not an option.

After breakfast, Becky instructed me to deep dust in the library while she cleaned elsewhere. Working in the light-filled library was certainly preferable to ironing in the stifling hot basement drying room, which was how I had spent much of the previous afternoon.

I set to work. I opened the glass doors of a large bookcase and brushed my feather duster along every book-filled shelf. Then I used a wool cloth to wipe the edges of each book, cleaned the glass, and closed the doors. I made my way around the room in much the same way, brushing and wiping.

On a small table near the sofa, one book was set apart from the rest. I traced my fingers over the deep green cover, letting them linger on the gold letters at the center.

"*Little Women*," I read aloud. "L. M. Alcott." I lifted the book and inspected its spine. *Part Second*, it read. I wanted so badly to look inside, but I didn't want to get into trouble, so I wiped it down and placed it neatly on the table.

"Do you read?" A voice made me jump.

I turned around, expecting to see Mrs. Treadwell. Instead, I saw a girl about my age, wearing a patterned frock with a dark sash tied at her waist. "I've already read the first part. I started part two after breakfast, only I couldn't remember where I'd left it. I'm Amanda," she said, taking the book.

I stood frozen. Mrs. Whittaker had said not to talk to the family, and now I couldn't remember the specifics of the rule.

Miss Amanda looked at me expectantly. "You are?"

"How do you do, Miss," I stammered. "My name's Lizzie."

"Welcome, Lizzie." She held out her hand to shake mine. "It's very nice to meet you."

I wiped my hand on my apron, shook her hand, then curtsied. Was I supposed to curtsy? I wasn't sure. As Miss Amanda turned to leave, a younger girl appeared, blocking her way.

"You snitched to Mother!" said the girl.

"I didn't snitch to anyone." Miss Amanda stepped around the girl and was blocked again. "Nancy! Let me pass," she huffed.

"Well, somebody told her I removed my corset and hid it behind the curtains in my room. The only one who would know that is you!" Her cheeks flushed red, and I felt my stomach fall to the floor.

"I'm ever so sorry, Miss," I interrupted. "I think it was my fault."

They both turned to look at me.

"I found it yesterday when I was cleaning your bedchamber."

"So you snitched to Mother?" she said, narrowing her eyes.

"No! I would never." I felt my face grow hot. "Mrs. Whittaker saw it in my hands. She took it."

"Well, you may as well have given it to Mother," the girl said, looking me up and down.

---

**curtsied:** performed a type of bow by crossing one's legs and bending slightly at the knees

“Yes, Miss.” I curtsied again. “I’m very sorry, Miss.”

“You can make it up to me,” she said with a mischievous smile, and she followed Miss Amanda out of the room. “I’ll think of a way.”

Miss Nancy’s quick switch from outrage to cheer reminded me of Peter. He was all bluster one minute and all smiles, even mischievous ones, the next. Will, on the other hand, could hold a grudge. I wondered what my brothers were doing now.

Peter was probably out selling newspapers. He’d be on a busy street corner, shouting out headlines—some real and some invented to sell more papers. Peter had plenty of friends at the lodging house, and the newsboys looked out for one another. I knew Peter would be all right.

Will was a different story. Every time I thought about him, my throat tightened, and tears threatened to fall. I hated to think of him in a sea of children with no one to comfort him when he missed home.

---

**grudge:** long-lasting anger or resentment

# 6

## Through the Gate

Friday, May 18, 1883

**B**eating carpets was exhausting work, but I enjoyed it for two reasons: First, I was allowed to do it outside, on my own; and second, with every whack of the carpet beater, I took aim at some worry or fear filling my mind.

Family should be together . . . *Whack!*

I didn't belong here . . . *Whack!*

I hated missing school . . . *Whack!*

"Ahem." A small voice caught my attention, and I turned to find Miss Nancy carrying a pair of shoes with wheels secured to their soles. "I know how you can make it up to me." She beamed.

"Goodness, Miss," I said, wiping the sweat from my brow. "What am I to do with those?"

“You’re not supposed to do anything with them.” She rolled her eyes. “I am. I need to practice roller skating, but I’m not allowed in the park alone, and Miss Battier is still doing lessons with Amanda. I’ve finished mine, and it’s not fair I should have to wait on Amanda, so Mother said you’re to take me to the park.”

“I don’t think I can, Miss. I’d need permission from Mrs. Whittaker. I doubt she can spare me.”

“But you have permission from Mother, and she’s Mrs. Whittaker’s boss,” Miss Nancy said simply, though I knew there was nothing simple about it. It was only my third day, and I certainly didn’t want to draw any more attention to myself, but I could see that Miss Nancy was not going to change her mind.

“Yes, Miss,” I said. “Of course.”

I gained Mrs. Whittaker’s reluctant approval by promising to work through my evening break, and she handed me a key to the park gate, saying, “Do not let this become a habit.”

Once we were through the gate, Miss Nancy asked for help swapping her sturdy shoes for the ones on wheels.

“Are you sure they’re safe, Miss?”

“They’re safe enough when you know how to use them.” She stood up and promptly fell down.

“Give me your hand,” she said. “I need to get used to them.”

She held on tight, barely moving her legs as I pulled her around. Gradually, she became more confident and secure in her footing.

“You’re doing very well, Miss,” I said.

“Thank you, Lizzie,” she said. “I’m going to be a better roller skater than Amanda. She’s better than me at most things, but I’m going to be better at skating.” She sat on a bench to rest.



“I believe you will, Miss,” I said. “It’s natural that she’s better at some things, though. She’s older, so she’s had more years to practice.”

Miss Nancy looked at me quizzically. “You’re younger than our other maids,” she said. “Don’t you go to school?”

“Not now, Miss. I had to leave.” I tried to look as if I didn’t care, but there was a catch in my voice that gave me away.

“You miss going to school?” She wrinkled her nose.

“I do, Miss,” I said.

“Mother told me you sew.” Miss Nancy rested her foot on my knee in a gesture so trusting and familiar, it warmed my heart.

“That’s right, Miss,” I said, undoing the straps. “I used to sew piecework at home.”

“Piecework?” she asked.

“I sewed certain parts of a garment together, like collars onto men’s shirts or ruffles onto the bottom of a skirt,” I explained. “But I can sew full garments too. My mam taught me.”

“Piecework sounds a bit dull,” Nancy said, leading the way out of the park.

“The stitching was dull, but I worked with friends,” I said. “We made the best of it.”

We had made the best of it. Seated in Mrs. Kelly’s cramped kitchen, we had stitched until our fingers were blistered. But we’d sung, told stories, and laughed too.

# 7

## Old Times

Sunday, May 20, 1883

I felt all the joy of a hard-earned afternoon off as I walked toward the asylum on a perfect spring day. Surely Will would be happy to see me now that a few days had passed.

A different woman opened the door of the asylum this time.

“Hello, Sister.” I smiled. “I’m here to visit my brother, William O’Brien.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “We’re not allowing visitors today.”

She must have seen the disappointment on my face, because she asked, “How old is he? I’ll see if I can find him for a quick hello.”

“He’s six,” I said, “and his hair’s dark, like mine.”

“I won’t be a moment,” she said.

I leaned against the door and let the sun warm my face. I couldn't wait to tell Will about the news story Mrs. Whittaker had read at breakfast. Apparently, Mr. P. T. Barnum had led Jumbo, his circus elephant, across the bridge the other night! And Jumbo wasn't the only animal. Altogether, twenty-one elephants, seven camels, and ten dromedaries went across.

Mrs. Whittaker called it a publicity stunt, but Mrs. Harkness said Barnum was doing his part to prove the bridge was safe. The fact that the Brooklyn Bridge was eight hundred feet longer than any other bridge of its kind had made a lot of people nervous. They feared it would collapse when its strength was finally put to the test on opening day. I wondered if my old friend Helga had seen the elephants. That would have been quite a sight!

It was a long while before the nun returned, and when she did, Will wasn't with her.

"Are you Lizzie?" she asked.

"I am."

"I'm afraid your brother doesn't wish to see you," she said.

---

**dromedaries:** one-humped camels

**publicity stunt:** something done only to get the attention of the public

“But why?” My eyes brimmed with tears.

“It can take some time to adjust,” she explained. “He’ll come around.”

“Do you know if my other brother has been here?” I asked. “His name is Peter. Has he seen Will?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head, then took a quick look behind her. “Will’s group plays outdoors most weekdays from ten o’clock to eleven o’clock and four o’clock to five o’clock,” she whispered. “You might be able to see him through the back gate if you come while he’s out there.”

“Thank you, Sister,” I said, drifting down the steps like a deflated balloon.

\*\*\*

“Death caused by train wrecker! Read all about it!” Peter shouted from the corner of South Street and Dover. “Destruction in Illinois! Massive loss of life and property!” He waved the paper in front of people walking past. Finally, a man stopped and bought one. Peter pocketed the coin and held up another paper almost in the same breath. “Get your Sunday paper!” he shouted.

When the last paper had been sold, he sauntered over to me. “How’s life in the fancy house?”

---

**sauntered:** walked in a slow, relaxed manner

“Not great,” I said. “But I suppose it could be worse. Have you seen Will?”

“Nah, it’s a long way to go.”

He was right about that. It had taken me over an hour to walk from the asylum to where I stood now.

“I went today,” I told Peter. “He wouldn’t see me.”

Peter laughed. “He’ll get over it. He’s taking it out on you because Da’s not around.”

“Maybe he’d see you,” I suggested, relaying what the nun had said about outdoor playtime.

“All right then,” Peter said. “I’ll try.”

I threw my arms around my brother and kissed his cheek. He made a big play of rubbing it off as we waited in line to buy oysters. But I knew he was happy.

One benefit of live-in domestic work was having my own money. Back at home, Mrs. Kelly would put my pay toward our rent, so I never had any coin in my pocket. Payday at the Treadwells’ occurred weekly. Mrs. Whittaker had paid me too, even though I hadn’t been there a full week yet. I had stashed most of my wages under my mattress, but I’d allowed myself a few coins for meals on my day off.

“I’ll be at Helga’s on Thursday for the bridge opening,” I said. “You, too?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Peter said.

The rest of the day felt like old times. We strolled down to the port, where Peter scampered around with his friends, swinging on the ships’ bowsprits and searching the docks for fruit that had fallen out of crates during transport. I met up with Helga, and the two of us sat in front of our building—her building now—and talked. We just needed Da and Will beside us to make the day perfect.

At the end of the day, I said goodbye to Helga and Peter and walked back to Gramercy Park along Broadway so I could take in the electric lights. People were saying that soon all of New York would be lit up by electric lights—even inside the houses. It was hard to imagine. But as I’d learned in the last week, change would come whether I could imagine it or not.

---

**bowsprits:** large poles that extend from the front of sailing ships

# 8

## Mrs. Roebling's Skill

Wednesday, May 23, 1883

The domestic work was no easier, but my body was getting used to the physical labor, and my mind had finally accepted it must wake before dawn. A week from today, Mrs. Whittaker would decide whether to keep me on or let me go, and I felt she might be leaning toward the latter. I was pondering ways to impress her and had just decided to ask Becky for advice when I nearly collided with Miss Amanda in the hallway outside her room.

"I'm so sorry, Miss," I gasped, clutching two oil lamps in my left arm and a cleaning basket in the right.

"Every time I see you, you're apologizing for something," she said.

"You're right, Miss," I said. "Sorry."

Miss Amanda laughed. Realizing what I'd just said, I laughed too. But we both fell into a guilty silence when Mrs. Whittaker appeared on the stairs.

---

**oil lamps:** devices that produce light by burning oil

"What are you doing with those lamps?" Mrs. Whittaker asked me.

"Taking them to James, Mrs. Whittaker," I said. "The wicks need trimming."

"Give them to me," she said, taking one lamp in each hand. "The last thing we need is broken lamps on the stairs."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "I'm—"

I was about to say "sorry," but Miss Amanda raised her eyebrows at me with a questioning smile.

"I appreciate the help, Mrs. Whittaker," I said instead. "Thank you."

"You are welcome." Mrs. Whittaker looked from me to Miss Amanda and back again. When she finally left, marching down the servants' staircase with lamps in hand, Miss Amanda and I fell into a fit of laughter.

"Give them to me," Miss Amanda spoke in a high, stiff voice. It was almost an exact match for Mrs. Whittaker.

"Oh, Miss," I said, still laughing. "We mustn't make fun of her. I'll lose my job." But the laughter felt too good. It wasn't easy to stop.

Finally, Miss Amanda said, "Oh! Now that you have

---

**wicks:** cords of fiber that draw in fuel, such as wax or oil, at one end and are ignited at the other so that the fuel causes the flame to keep burning

a free hand, I want to give you something. Not give—it's a loan," she said, retrieving a book from inside her closet. I recognized the dark green cover and gold lettering at once.

"Here." She handed it to me. "It's the first part."

"Oh, Miss!" I took the book as if it were a piece of precious china. "Thank you, Miss." I hardly knew what to say.



"You're welcome," she said. "Nancy said you had to leave school, but now at least you can keep up on your reading."

"You are very kind, Miss Amanda," I said, my eyes welling with tears. "Thank you. I'll read it as quickly as I can."

"Take your time," she said with a smile, and closed her bedroom door.

I hurried up to the fifth floor, placed the book under my bed, and raced down to the kitchen for breakfast.

After prayers, I'd expected Mrs. Whittaker would read from the newspaper, but instead she looked at me and said, "Elizabeth will read this morning."

I froze with a slice of ham midway to my mouth, then set it down. Was she testing me?

Mrs. Whittaker handed over the newspaper and pointed to a story.

"Mrs. Roebling's Skill," I began. Goodness, my throat was dry! All eyes were on me. I took a quick sip of tea and continued.

"While so much has been written about the Brooklyn Bridge and those who have had a share either in planning or building it, there remains one whose services have not been publicly acknowledged:

Mrs. Washington Roebling, the wife of the great engineer. 'Since her husband's unfortunate illness, Mrs. Roebling has filled his position as chief of the engineering staff,' says a gentleman of this city well acquainted with the family. 'As soon as Mr. Roebling was stricken with that peculiar fever which has since prostrated him, Mrs. Roebling applied herself to the study of engineering, and she succeeded so well that in a short time she was able to assume the duties of chief engineer.'"

"Isn't that remarkable?" Mrs. Harkness interrupted.

"You won't catch me on a bridge engineered by a lady," James said.

"Then you'd best not eat bread baked by a lady either." Becky took the bread from James's plate and put it back in the basket. "Please read on, Lizzie," she said, ignoring the shock on James's face.

"A few days ago," I continued, trying to suppress a smile, "Mrs. Roebling was the first to drive a team over the bridge. It was most fitting that she should be accorded this honor."

The article finished, and I looked to Mrs. Whittaker for approval. "Well done," she said, snatching the newspaper out of my hands.

---

**prostrated:** caused to lie down or, figuratively, to become weak or powerless

**team:** two or more working animals, such as horses, that pull loads instead of being ridden directly

A wave of relief washed over me as I sat down to finish my breakfast. If that was a test, I thought I had passed.

Conversations started around me, but they faded into the background as my thoughts turned to Will. He'd bubbled with childlike joy the night Da took him and Peter on the bridge. That's the way he should be—filled with joy alongside the people he loved. Not angry and holed up in an orphan asylum with hundreds of other children.

"Elizabeth!" I heard my name and looked up to see the table emptying out. It was Mrs. Whittaker. "I said, you will help with ironing again this afternoon. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said, rising from my seat with my half-eaten breakfast. "Thank you, ma'am." It was going to be a long day.

# 9

## Shards of Light

Thursday, May 24, 1883

**B**oats of all sizes packed the East River, each one decorated with American flags or swaths of patriotic bunting or both. Although I couldn't quite see them, I knew that those lucky enough to have a ticket must be making their way across the bridge now, taking in the beautiful views from above. I kept pushing my way through the crowd until, just as I reached our old building, I heard a shout from above.

"Lizzie!" Helga squealed from the roof. "Come up!"

I climbed the stairs and found Helga on the rooftop in a sea of people. Peter stood to her right, and next to Peter—

"Will!" I said, rushing to his side. I stopped short of throwing my arms around him because I couldn't quite read his face. "What are you doing here?"

---

**swaths:** large amounts or long, broad strips

“Peter broke me out,” he said simply, then smiled.

I froze. “What?” Turning to look at Peter, I asked, “What does he mean?”

Peter just smiled. “Happy birthday,” he said.

“But how . . . ?”

“It was brilliant!” Will’s face became animated. “Peter saw me through the fence during outdoor play and told me to sneak around the side of the building, and as soon as the nuns weren’t looking, I did. Then I climbed a tree, and I jumped onto the fence, and Peter helped me slide down the other side.”

“You know you’ll have to go ba—” I started as the voice of reason, but Peter cut me off.

“We have better things to think about right now,” he said.

“That’s right,” Helga said, handing me a wrapped gift. “Happy birthday!”

I opened the paper to find a beautifully embroidered bookmark that read *If friends were flowers, I’d pick you.*

“I love it, Helga!” I said. “You made this?”

“I did,” she said with a smile.

“Thank you.” I hugged my friend, then placed the bookmark in my pocket. I knew just where I’d put it when I got back to the Treadwells’.

We all peered over the railing, looking down on the crowded scene below. The sidewalks, streets, and docks and the decks of every ship were bursting with people. Some ships even had spectators swarming across their rigging like pirates in search of far-off treasure. It seemed as if the entire city had come out to witness this grand event.

Suddenly, there was a loud *BOOM*, and the sky above the bridge erupted with shards of light. It looked as if stars were raining down from the sky. Bursts of color exploded again and again. Sparks shot out from the tops of the bridge towers. I’d never seen anything like it in my life!

Every explosion lit my brothers’ beaming faces. Perhaps it wasn’t so terrible that Peter had helped Will escape from the asylum tonight. For the joy that had been missing from our lives since Da left was clearly etched in their smiles this evening, and it made my heart sing.

It felt as if the fireworks show would last forever, and

---

**rigging:** ropes and chains used to support masts and sails on a ship



we relished every minute. When the celebrations wound down, we made our way to the street, willing time to slow.

Peter and I kept Will sandwiched between us as we were swept forward with the rest of the crowd. Horse-drawn carriages and coaches raced through the streets, carrying passengers eager to get home, while those of us on the sidewalks trod along slowly, like so many heads of cattle. Just as the crowd started to thin, Will pulled away from us and pressed his back against the grocer's window.

"You can't make me go back," he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"What will you do then?" I asked with a heavy sigh. "Live on the streets?"

"I'll go with Peter," he huffed.

"The lodging house is for working boys," Peter said. "I pay to stay there." It was true, he said, that some boys started selling papers when they were Will's age, but they were bigger boys who could carry lots of papers. They weren't like Will.

"Come along, Will," I said, grabbing his hand.

“We don’t have time for this. I’ll have to sleep in the coal shed if I’m not back by eleven o’clock, and it’s a long walk to the asylum from here.”

I tried to pull Will up the sidewalk, but he fought back with all his might.

“Let me go, Lizzie,” he yelled. “I hate you!” His words hit me like a punch to the gut, and with one mighty yank of his hand, Will broke free.

Suddenly, everything started to happen in slow motion. Will stumbled into the road. A coach came into view. Will tried to dodge the coach’s wheels, but he was a second too late. He fell to the ground, and the coach rolled on. I felt as though I were moving through water as I tried to get to his side.

“Will!” I shook his shoulders. His eyes remained closed, his body slack.

“I’ll get Mrs. Morgenweck,” Peter said frantically, then raced to fetch Helga’s mother.

I cradled Will’s head in my lap, stunned. One of the neighbors appeared and offered their truck to transport Will to the hospital. By the time the truck arrived, Peter had returned with Mrs. Morgenweck and Helga.

“Lizzie,” Mrs. Morgenweck said gently. “You need to let him go so we can get him into the truck.”

Will seemed to float away from me as Peter and the Morgenwecks slid his limp body into the back of the truck, then climbed aboard.

“We’re riding to the hospital with you,” Helga said, offering her hand. “Come on.”

I climbed aboard and held Will in my arms as we rode. He had a bump the size of an egg on his forehead. His knees, elbows, and upper lip were bloodied. He made moaning noises as we careered along the street, which I took to be a good sign. At least he wasn’t dead.

As soon as we arrived at the hospital, I attempted to lift Will into my arms, but Mrs. Morgenweck stopped me.

“Lizzie, you and Peter both have curfews, yes?”

I’d forgotten about the time. “Yes, but we need to get Will—”

“Let me take him,” she said. “Helga will bring news to you both tomorrow. There’s nothing more you can do right now.”

---

**careered:** traveled at top speed, especially in a reckless way

It broke my heart to think of Will waking up on his own, with no family nearby to provide comfort, but Mrs. Morgenweck was right. Peter and I wouldn't be helping anything by arriving home past curfew and ending up without a bed for the night. We whispered our reluctant goodbyes, then watched Mrs. Morgenweck and Helga walk into the hospital carrying our brother.

Peter clenched his jaw as we walked. His lips and chin trembled. I took his hand, but he wrenched it free.

"I should have left him at the asylum," Peter said. "He was fine there."

"This isn't your fault, Peter." I tried to stop him, but he pulled away again. "You couldn't have known this would happen. And I don't think Will would say he was 'fine' at the asylum."

"What if they won't let him back in?" Peter said. "Where will he go?"

"We'll figure it out," I promised. "I'll write to Da."

Peter covered his face with his hands and moaned, "Da's going to be furious."

"He'll understand. Maybe he'll even come back," I offered quietly. "Though I don't know where he'll sleep. . ."

Peter reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of coins.

“Here,” he said. “Keep my wages. If he does come back, between the two of us, we might be able to get him a room for a few nights.”

He gave me a weary smile, and we parted ways.

\*\*\*

I slipped through the basement door moments before our eleven o'clock curfew.

Even though it was late, some of the staff were clustered around the kitchen table, sharing stories about the night's events. That was the last thing I wanted to talk about, so I bid them goodnight and slipped up the back staircase to my room.

With the coins Peter had given me safely stowed beneath my mattress, I changed into my nightgown and slipped into bed.

I reached for Miss Amanda's copy of *Little Women* and smoothed Helga's bookmark between two pages. I tried to read, but my eyes simply would not stay open. Instead, I closed the book and fell into a fitful sleep.

---

**clustered:** gathered in a close group

# 10

## News from Home

Friday, May 25, 1883

The next day, I threw myself into my chores, hoping it might keep my mind off of Will. Mrs. Whittaker must have noticed something was different, because she watched me scrub the floor around the fourth-floor toilet for a few moments, then said, “I don’t think the floor can get any cleaner, Elizabeth. Move on. It’s time for your break in the park with Miss Nancy.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” I said, wiping the sweat from my forehead. I had indeed been spending what were supposed to be my afternoon breaks with Miss Nancy in the park. I would have preferred to nap like the rest of the staff did, but skipping my break was the only way I could appease both Miss Nancy and Mrs. Whittaker at once.

---

**appease:** give in to demands in order to avoid conflict

A few minutes later, I was in the park, watching Miss Nancy skate circles around me. She was much better on her roller skates now and almost never needed a hand.

“Lizzie! Lizzie O’Brien!”

I whipped around at the sound of my name and spotted someone on the other side of the fence. It was Helga!

I ran toward the fence and grabbed her hand through the bars. “How is Will?”

“Mother spoke to a nurse this morning. He’s doing just fine,” Helga said. “The doctor suspects he has a concussion, so they’re keeping him in the hospital to rest for a few days, then he’ll be released.”

I breathed a big sigh, like I’d been holding my breath since yesterday, and then my tears started to fall like rain.

“Oh, Lizzie.” Helga squeezed my hand. “Don’t cry. He’s OK.”

“What’s the matter, Lizzie?”

I started as Miss Nancy suddenly appeared beside us.

I wiped my tears away and turned to face her. “Nothing, Miss.” I tried to smile.

---

**concussion:** injury, especially to the brain, caused by a blow or collision

I must not have been very convincing, because Miss Nancy turned to Helga with fire in her eyes. “What have you done?”

Helga’s eyes widened, and she looked at me.

“She’s just brought me some news, Miss. That’s all.”

“News about what?” Miss Nancy eyed Helga suspiciously.

“My brother, Miss. He was injured last night and had to go to the hospital. Helga promised to bring news.”

I could see a police officer watching us from the far corner of the street.

“You’d better go, Helga,” I said.

Miss Nancy followed my gaze. “Why? She doesn’t need to leave.”

“It’s a private park, Miss, and they don’t like loiterers.” The officer started walking our way as I spoke.

“Helga’s your friend, not a loiterer,” Miss Nancy said. “And she’s not even in the park.”

“It’s different for some people, Miss,” I tried to explain. “We don’t fit in here.”

---

**loiterers:** people who remain in an area for no particular reason

Miss Nancy started to argue, but Helga cut her off.

"I'll come back when there's more news," she said. "I'm off to find Peter."

As I helped Miss Nancy remove her skates, she overflowed with questions: How did I know Helga? Where did she live? Where were my brothers? Why didn't we live together? Didn't we miss each other? I answered each question in turn until, eventually, Becky called me inside.

Miss Nancy and I crossed the street together. Then she ran up the stairway to enter her home through the grand front door, and I hurried down the steps that led to the servants' entrance.

# 11

## Losing Will

Sunday, May 27, 1883

**T**here was no news from Helga on Saturday, and when Sunday finally came, I couldn't get to the hospital fast enough. Peter was waiting outside, pacing. He saw me approach and stormed toward me.

"They won't let me in," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"They don't allow children to visit. I told them he's my brother and that we've no parents around and they still said no." Peter kicked at a crate on the sidewalk.

A sense of panic started to swirl in my stomach. "OK," I said. "Let's think. How can we get inside to see Will?"

Peter came up with some ideas, but they all involved breaking the rules—something I wasn't willing to do.

We decided to ask Mrs. Morgenweck to visit him and report back to us, but no one was home when we knocked on Helga's door. Feeling more than a little discouraged, Peter and I walked around the neighborhood for a time, asking every adult who'd known Da if they'd be willing to visit Will, but not a single one was able—or willing—to help.

Defeated, Peter and I made our way uptown in silence.

Finally, in an effort to lighten the mood, I said, "I sent a letter to Da."

"That's good," Peter said quietly. "Maybe he'll come back." He didn't sound at all optimistic.

"I won't have another day off until next Sunday," I said. "Maybe you can ask Mrs. Morgenweck to visit Will tomorrow?"

"I've got exams tomorrow," Peter said. "For school."

"Oh, right." Of course. He'd been going to night school at the lodging house.

"But I'll ask her to visit him on Tuesday," Peter promised. "Then I'll come to you."

“Thank you, Peter,” I said. “Everything is going to be all right. You’ll see.” We held on to one another for a long time, then went our separate ways.

# 12

## Will Is Gone

Tuesday, May 29, 1883

I had been listening and waiting all day for someone to tell me Peter had arrived. By the time we sat down in the servants' dining room for dinner, I had nearly given up hope. We were halfway through the meal when I heard a familiar voice in the hall call my name. I was out of my seat in seconds, Mrs. Whittaker on my heels.

It was Peter. He stood in the kitchen with a frantic look on his face.

"What's happened?" I asked, not sure I wanted to know the answer.

"What is the meaning of this?" Mrs. Whittaker exclaimed. "You are *not* allowed to receive visitors, Elizabeth."

"I'm no visitor," Peter snapped. "I'm her brother."

"What is it?" I pressed, fearing the worst.

“He’s been placed out,” Peter cried. “They sent him to live with a family out west.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, utterly confused. “That can’t be right.”



By now, the rest of the staff had become curious. Aware that they were listening, Mrs. Whittaker shoed them back to the dining room, saying, “One staff emergency does not mean everyone is free to loiter. Return to your meals at once. Mrs. Harkness,” she called. “Perhaps you can . . .” Unsure of what exactly Mrs. Harkness might do, Mrs. Whittaker waved her hands in my direction, then followed the rest of the staff back to the dining room.

“Why don’t the two of you sit?” Mrs. Harkness said. “I’ll make tea while you discuss the matter at hand.”

“Lizzie,” Peter said, shaking his head, “Will is gone.”

“But how do you know?” I asked.

“Mrs. Morgenweck went to the hospital today. He wasn’t there. A lady from the Children’s Aid Society signed the release papers.”

“But why?”

“Don’t you think I’d tell you if I knew why?” Peter snapped.

“Here you go, loves.” Mrs. Harkness placed three cups of tea on the table, then took a seat. “Is there any chance your brother would lie about his situation?” she asked.

When Peter and I both looked confused, she explained that the society didn’t always look into the backgrounds of the children they placed out. “If Will told them he had no other parent or guardian—”

“They might take him without asking questions,” I realized. I looked at Peter. “Was he angry enough to pretend Da doesn’t exist? That *we* don’t exist?”

“It’s possible. If he thought it would get him out of the asylum . . .” Peter shrugged. “He might.”

We sat in anxious silence until the rest of the staff appeared again. This time, they were carrying their dirty dishes to the sink. It was time for Peter to leave. I sighed deeply as I walked him to the door.

“I’ll ask Mrs. Whittaker if I can take my time off this Thursday morning to visit the Children’s Aid Society,” I said. “They must have a record of where Will’s been placed. Once I explain the mix-up,” I continued, with more confidence than I felt, “they’re sure to bring him home.”

Peter looked uncertain but nodded in agreement, then plodded up the stairs to the street.

“I’ll come find you as soon as I’ve spoken to them,” I promised.

# 13

## A Stubborn Girl

Thursday, May 31, 1883

**M**rs. Whittaker gave me permission to take Thursday morning off, but only because Becky offered to take care of my afternoon chores. Becky had left three younger brothers back in Ireland, so she understood what it was to be separated from the ones you loved.

The society's offices were a twenty-minute walk from the Treadwells', right in the heart of Little Germany. My heart was pounding when I arrived at their door and stepped inside. The woman at the front desk was friendly until I told her about my concerns.

"We're not in the business of kidnapping children, if that's what you're implying," she said.

"Not at all," I responded quickly. "I'm only asking if he may have been taken by mistake. Do you have the names of the children who've been sent west recently?"

“Yes,” she admitted. “But if your brother had adults looking after him, it’s unlikely he would be on the list.”

“It’s complicated,” I said, and reluctantly explained the events of the past couple weeks.

The woman sighed heavily and pursed her lips. “What’s your brother’s name?” she asked.

“William O’Brien.” I said, hands clasped in anticipation.

She opened a large book, and I watched as her finger went down a list of names.

“He went west on Tuesday,” she said, “but the agent in charge hasn’t returned yet. When she does, we will know his location.”

“When will she be back?” I asked, trying to suppress my excitement.

“Do I look like a fortune teller?” the woman snapped. “Sometime next week.”

“Thank you, Miss,” I said, truly grateful. “How long will it take to bring him home?”

“Bring him home?” She closed the book. “That would be highly irregular. We are in the business of placing children, not displacing them.”

“Oh,” I said as all the excitement drained out of me. I didn’t want to cry in front of this woman, but the tears came anyway.

She shifted in her seat. For someone who worked for the Children’s Aid Society, she was clearly uncertain of how to handle an upset child. She cleared her throat. “It is the Children’s Aid Society’s strong belief that it is rarely in the child’s best interest to be removed from their placement,” she said as if reciting from a handbook. After a pause, she added more softly, “If your brother has ended up in a placement, there is likely a good reason for that.”

This did nothing to quell my tears.

Her eyes went to her desk, to the ceiling, to the clock—anywhere but on me. Finally, she said, “Leave your address, and I’ll send word when I know his location.”

“Oh, thank you, Miss,” I said through my tears. “Thank you!”

My head was spinning with one thought as I left the building and turned south to find Peter. We couldn’t wait for help. Peter and I absolutely needed to get our brother back on our own. But how?

---

**quell:** suppress or cause to end

# 14

## Westward Bound

Tuesday, June 5, 1883

When I'd first told Peter of my plan, he'd thought I was joking. But I felt certain that going after Will ourselves was our best and perhaps only option. After all, Da hadn't responded to my letter yet, and there was no way of knowing if the family that had taken Will would be kind to him. He could be suffering at this very moment. And who was to say the family would allow Will to leave, even if he told them he wanted to come home? Most families who took in orphans, or half-orphans like Will, did so because they needed a pair of extra hands, and it was hard to believe they'd give up Will's free labor willingly.

"That's why," I had explained to Peter, "we need to go west—to find him ourselves and bring him home."

"It's a bold plan," Peter had said, nodding his head with approval. "Just tell me one thing. Who are you, and what have you done with my sister?"

\*\*\*

The last twenty-four hours had been full of frantic preparations. Yesterday afternoon, I'd received word that Will was with a family by the name of Redmond in Dysart, Iowa. Peter had already secured a list of upcoming orphan departures through a friend at the lodging house, which was run by the Children's Aid Society. That was how we knew a train full of orphans would be heading west this very afternoon.

I'd given my notice to Mrs. Whittaker, explaining our plan and apologizing for the late notice.

She'd pursed her lips, nodded her head, and offered to give an "honest" reference to any future employers. Then she'd said, not unkindly, "Perhaps your brother is better off outside of the city."

"If he is, I need to see it for myself," was my reply.

Later that afternoon, I had been in the park with Miss Nancy, wondering how to break the news, when she narrowed her eyes at me and said, "Why do you have that look on your face?"

I had thought the news of my departure would make her angry, but instead, Miss Nancy threw her arms around me and squeezed.

“Brave, Lizzie!” she had said. “You’re going on a grand adventure to save your brother!”

Brave was the last thing I felt, but I appreciated her vote of confidence.

Later that night, I had found a velvet coin purse and a leather-bound journal on my bed. Inside the purse were two silver dollars, and on the inside cover of the journal, an inscription read *Wishing you and your brothers a safe return. With love from Amanda and Nancy Treadwell.* I added my own meager savings to the coin purse, admiring the surprising weight of it.

Then, this morning, as I prepared to leave, Mrs. Harkness had handed me a basket full of food.

“You’ll need it for the journey,” she had said with a wistful smile. It took all my willpower to keep from crying as the rest of the staff had huddled around the table, offering warm wishes and goodbyes. Mrs. Whittaker hadn’t even chastised them for “loitering” while they should have been working—not right away, at least.

\*\*\*

---

**meager:** small or low in amount

**wistful:** longing or thoughtful and a little sad

**chastised:** scolded or punished

Now, with Peter by my side, I scanned the crowded train depot.

“There!” I pointed. Thirty children with matching cardboard suitcases were hard to miss. The children walked in two lines, led by a tall, neatly dressed woman. A railroad worker walked behind the group, pushing a cart piled high with boxes. Butterflies rose up in my stomach. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. How had I ever thought we could sneak onto a train, undetected, for a cross-country journey? And what would happen if we were discovered?

As if reading my thoughts, Peter turned to me with a devious smile. “I never thought I’d see the day when Lizzie O’Brien willingly broke the law,” he said.

“It’s for a good cause,” I said, elbowing him in the ribs.

“Even so,” Peter said with a grin. Then, in a high-pitched voice, he cried, “*What if we get in trouble?*”

“You’re not funny,” I said, determined to keep a straight face.

My eyes searched the train depot for the children once more. When I spotted them, still walking in two

---

**devious:** sneaky and clever

lines, I grabbed my brother's hand. For once, he didn't shake it off.

"Let's go get Will," I said.

We followed the children to the end of a platform, where they sat down to wait. Before long, a train pulled into the station, spewing black smoke. The children all stood up like little soldiers.

Peter linked his arm in mine and said, "Now's our chance," as he pulled me into the middle of the group of children. We received puzzled looks from some of the children, but no one seemed overly bothered by our presence. I was grateful the group was large. After all, what were a couple of extra bodies when there were so many already?

We stepped up and into a train car. Then we shuffled down an aisle with wooden benches on either side.

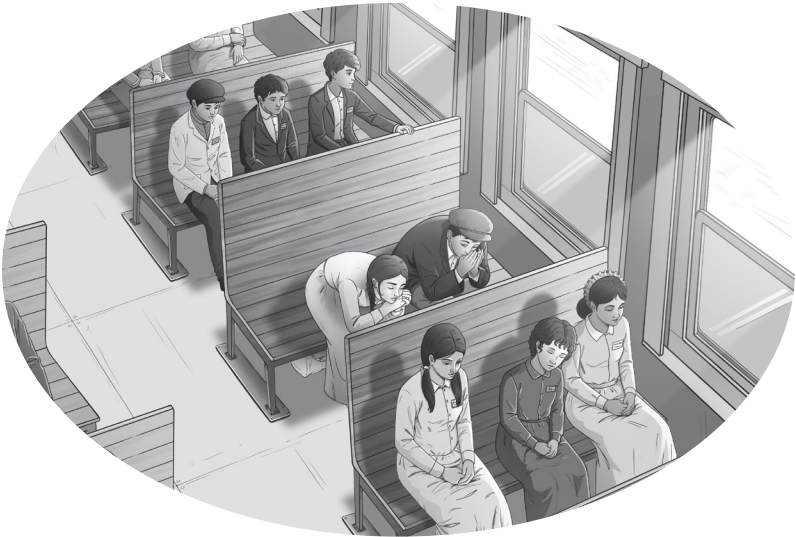
"Sit anywhere you like, children," the woman called. "The entire car is ours. You will find a toilet toward the front of the car."

Peter and I took a seat, keeping our heads down. Two boys in the row across from us eyed Peter suspiciously. When he offered them a nod and a smile, they turned away.

Once everyone was seated, the woman in charge stood at the front of the car and started counting heads. I panicked.

“Duck!” I said, pulling Peter down. “She’s counting.”

As we huddled together, the car began to shake, and the engine roared to life. I peeked over the bench to see that the woman had now taken a seat toward the front of the car. Peter and I sat up as the train sped up. We were going west. I hoped we were doing the right thing.



After some time, a runny-nosed child in the seat in front of us began to cry. I looked at the older girl sitting with her. “Is she all right?” I asked.

But the girl just shook her head and said, “No English.”

I couldn't imagine being sent away to live with strangers who might not speak my own language. The thought made me wonder what terrible stories some of these children could tell. I hoped with all of my heart that they were on their way to happier lives.

All day long, whenever the woman in charge came near, Peter and I huddled together and pretended to be asleep. That way, she couldn't see our faces. When she counted, we hid. When sandwiches were passed down the aisle, we sent them along, sticking to the food Mrs. Harkness had sent.

Peter struck up a friendship with the boys across the aisle, and they told him that the lady in charge was named Miss Stockton. Miss Stockton counted the children often. Somehow, I'd thought blending in would be easy. But I hadn't considered there would be endless counting.

As the hours wore on in the cramped and stuffy train car, my dress became soaked through with sweat. I opened the window, hoping for some relief, and instead was blasted with hot, sooty air. The evening brought cooler temperatures, but finding a comfortable way to sleep on a hard wooden bench wasn't easy. Eventually, Peter lay on the floor, and I curled up on the bench. It took ages to fall asleep.

# 15

## Discovered

Wednesday, June 6, 1883

I was woken by a hard tapping on my foot. I looked up to see Miss Stockton's face illuminated by the pink glow of the rising sun. She woke Peter, too, and motioned for us to follow her toward the front of the train.

"Where are your name tags?" she asked, referring to the strips of fabric all the other children had pinned to their clothing to identify them by name.

"They, um . . ." I started.

"They fell off, ma'am," Peter said. "Just after we left New York."

"Both of them?" She raised an eyebrow. "I should have thirty children in this car, yet twice now, I have counted thirty-two. What are you doing here?"

It seemed the truth was our best hope, so in hushed voices, Peter and I explained what had happened to Will and our plan to retrieve him.

**retrieve:** find and bring back

“I’m sure I know the answer, but did you buy train tickets?” she asked, and we shook our heads. Miss Stockton closed her eyes and sighed. “Return to your seats. I need to think on how to handle this situation.”

For the next few hours, I stared out the window, watching dawn turn to day and worrying about what we would do if Miss Stockton decided not to let us continue our journey. If there were freight cars attached to the train, we might be able to sneak aboard one of those. Otherwise, I wasn’t sure what we’d do.

Before long, we arrived with a loud screech at a one-room train station in a town whose name I didn’t recognize. We were all herded off the train and into a meeting hall across the street from the station, where we were given breakfast by a group of ladies from the town. As we ate, Miss Stockton engaged in an animated conversation with some of the women who had served us food. There was an uncomfortable amount of pointing in our direction as they spoke.

“Peter,” I said quietly, “I think we need to run. We should try to find a freight car.”

“What? No. I’m still eating.” He shook his head. “Let’s wait and see what happens. If she hasn’t kicked us off yet, she might let us stay.”

---

**freight cars:** railroad cars used for carrying goods

Moments later, Miss Stockton called everyone up onto a stage situated at one end of the meeting hall. Unsure what else to do, Peter and I followed along.

“You two stand to the side,” she said when she noticed our presence on the stage.

As we inched our way to the side, I felt equal parts relieved and terrified. But Peter was all smiles.

“She likes us,” he said. “I can tell.”

Peter thought everyone liked him, but I had my doubts.

We watched as Miss Stockton stood next to each child and told the audience about them.

“Susan is six years old and loves to look after little ones. She’s a great help in the kitchen,” she said as Susan’s eyes remained glued to the floor.

A gruff-looking woman stepped onto the stage. She turned Susan around in a circle twice.

“She’s not sickly, is she?” the gruff woman asked. “Open your mouth, girl,” she ordered. My stomach churned as she stuck a dirty thumb into Susan’s mouth and peered down her throat.

Susan chomped down hard.

“Ack!” the woman screamed and yanked her hand back. “Why you little—” She raised a hand, but Miss

Stockton jumped between the two of them before the woman could strike.

Miss Stockton led a tearful Susan toward Peter and me.

“Stay here,” she said to the girl. Then to me, she said, “Keep an eye on her, will you?”

The rest of the afternoon went a little better. There were no more fingers in mouths. There was no more biting. In all, about eight kids left the meeting hall to join new families. It was strange to watch them leave. Some cried, some smiled. Some of the adults were overly kind, while others seemed indifferent. I hoped Will had ended up with the overly kind sort, but it was impossible to know what awaited any of these children.

I’d been formulating a plan as the day went on, so when Miss Stockton approached us again as the hall started to empty out, I launched into it before she could speak.

“This is all the money we have,” I said, handing her my coin purse. “Take it all and put it toward our train fare. For the rest of it, we can work. You need help with the children, right? We can help. We can tell stories and pass out food and soothe worries—anything. We’ll do anything,” I begged. “Please don’t leave us here.”

---

**indifferent:** not interested; neither liking nor disliking  
**formulating:** putting together

Miss Stockton looked very tired as she shook her head and said, "The Children's Aid Society does not abandon children. Even children who are clearly breaking the law."

I couldn't tell if we were hearing good news or bad.

"We also don't place children out if they have families that can care for them," she said. "Given that your brother has no home to return to, I expect he's better off in Iowa, but that will be your father's choice to make."

She reached into my coin purse and took out four silver dollars, leaving a few coins for us to keep. "I will put this toward the cost of your tickets and accept your offer of help. You can start by getting control of the remaining children."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "Thank you, ma'am!"

I glanced out the window to see a group of children running around playing tag on the dirt road in front of the hall. It was clear they were enjoying these few moments of freedom.

Peter and I helped round up the children and got them settled again on the train. Miss Stockton was clearly happy for the help.

# 16

## Dysart, at Last

Friday, June 8, 1883

**I**n all, the train ride lasted three full days. There were other stops and other town halls or churches where the children were paraded in front of strangers who sometimes took them home. Twice, we all got off the train for a few hours to wait for a new connection. When that happened, we were allowed to play tag or hide-and-seek, and for a little while, it felt like we were a bunch of kids doing normal kid things. But eventually, we always got back on the train, each time with fewer and fewer children.

At last, Miss Stockton announced that the next station would be Dysart, Iowa. This time, we wouldn't go into the meeting hall with the few remaining children. Instead, we would set off to find our brother.

The Dysart post office was only one muddy block away from the train depot. Peter waited outside while I went in to get directions from the elderly postmaster. "Follow this here road to the cemetery, turn right, then

take a left at the Catholic church, and walk a couple miles outside of town until you see a farm with a round barn. That'll be the Redmonds' place," he instructed.

A light drizzle started to fall as we walked, and I wished for a second pair of shoes. Mine were already caked with mud, and we hadn't even reached the country road yet. We passed the cemetery on our left, turned right, and saw the Catholic church ahead.

"Hey, I bet we can stay at that church tonight if we can't find a place to sleep," said Peter as we turned left down another road. I didn't respond. In truth, I hadn't thought about where we'd sleep. I had one thought on my mind: Will. My plan ended with finding him.

After nearly an hour's walk, the round barn came into view, and my heart sank. It was like something from a dream. The main house was large with a porch that ran along the front. The red barn stood off to the right, and there were cows grazing in a fenced meadow beside it. On the opposite side of the house, five horses peered at us from a large corral attached to a long stable. It was too perfect. What if Will was truly happy here? Could we really ask him to leave?

"What now?" Peter interrupted my thoughts.

---

**grazing:** feeding on growing grass or other plants

**corral:** a fenced-in area where farm animals are kept

DYSART, AT LAST

---



"I don't know," I said. "We need to know what kind of people they are."

"Right," Peter said. "Follow me and keep your head down."

Hunched low like rabbits, we tiptoed up the front steps and peeked our eyes over a windowsill. Through the window, we peered into an empty room with two overstuffed chairs. On the other side of the room, through another door, I could see a kitchen. We waited impatiently for someone to appear. I was about to suggest we go around back when I heard a man's voice from behind: "Can I help you?"

We whipped around, and there, next to a tall man in overalls, was Will.

"Lizzie! Peter!" he cried as he rushed toward us. The man who had spoken watched in surprise as Will threw his arms around us.

"What are you doing here?" Will cried.

"We came for you," I said, squeezing him tight. Then, so the man couldn't hear, I whispered, "We've come to take you home."

A woman was on the porch now, watching our reunion with apprehension.

“Is Da home?” Will asked with excitement. “Did he get our room back at Mrs. Kelly’s?”

“You must be Lizzie and Peter,” the woman interjected. “We’ve heard a lot about you.” She opened the front door and instructed us to leave our shoes on the porch and come inside.

I looked at Peter, wondering if we should grab Will and run. He shrugged his shoulders and followed Will into the house, so I did the same.

We went through a small parlor and a dining room with a long wooden table and into the kitchen, where we sat in a breakfast nook surrounded by windows that overlooked the vast prairie.

It was clear the Redmonds were shocked by our arrival. Peter and I filled the awkward silence by recounting our journey west while Mrs. Redmond made tea and set some biscuits on the table. When we had finished our story, Mrs. Redmond asked, “Would you like to discuss the reason for your visit?”

I nodded.

“Good,” she said. “First, let us explain why we brought Will to live with us. We don’t have children of our own—”

---

**interjected:** interrupted or inserted a comment

Mr. Redmond interjected. "So when I saw the notice in town saying that a train full of orphans in need of homes would be arriving, well . . ." He looked at his wife.

"It seemed like the right thing to do," she continued, looking at Will with a gentle smile. "We understand now that Will's situation is . . . complicated."

"He wouldn't speak to us for the first day or two," Mr. Redmond said. "When we finally got the whole story out of him, Mrs. Redmond here offered to tell the Children's Aid Society what had happened, but Will refused."

"I don't want to go back to the asylum," he said defiantly, looking from me to Peter and back again.

"But what happened?" I asked. "I don't understand how you ended up on that train, Will."

Will focused on his biscuit as he explained that the boy in the bed next to him at the hospital was scheduled to be placed out. The boy had convinced Will that the only way to avoid the orphan asylum was to get taken in by a family out west. Mrs. Harkness had been right. Will had lied. He'd said we didn't exist.

"He wanted to contact you, though," Mrs. Redmond said. "So you wouldn't worry."

"So we wouldn't worry," I repeated as her meaning dawned on me. My stomach suddenly felt full of rocks.

“You mean you don’t want to come home?”

“If Will wants to stay, and your father agrees, we would like to keep him with us,” Mrs. Redmond said. “Indefinitely.”

“Is that what Will wants?” I asked, the pitch of my voice rising.

“He belongs with us,” Peter said.

“And ideally he would be, son,” Mr. Redmond said. “But with your mother gone and your father far from home . . .”

Anger started to boil up inside of me. How dare these strangers speak about my family like they know us.

Mrs. Redmond must have seen the fire in my eyes, because she stood up abruptly and said, “The three of you have a lot to discuss. Will, why don’t you show Lizzie and Peter around the farm. You can all talk while you explore.”

Will jumped up excitedly. “Wait ’til you see the horses!” The sound of his animated voice interrupted my thoughts as we followed him out through the back door. “Twister has a star on her head just like Golly,” Will continued.

Instead of talking about the big questions, we let

---

**indefinitely:** with no defined ending

Will show us the farm and the animals. I don't believe we'd ever seen him so happy. No one wanted to break the spell.

As for me, I felt a mixture of relief and distress. I was relieved because Will seemed well cared for. I was upset because I didn't want to leave him here—or send him back to an orphan asylum. But what could we do?

The Redmonds extended their kindness to Peter and me. They invited us to stay at the farm for the night. We ate a delicious dinner, then the three of us snuggled up in a big four-poster bed with a feather mattress. As Will drifted off between us, he spoke sleepily into the darkness. "I want to stay here," he said softly. "I want all of us to stay here . . ." Then he was asleep.

Once we were sure that Will was in a deep sleep, Peter and I whispered to each other late into the night. We didn't allow ourselves to sleep until we'd formed a plan.

# 17

## A Proposal

Saturday, June 9, 1883

The next morning, bright and early, I made my way to the front porch to sit and think through our plan. It would require the Redmonds' help and a few ounces of Irish luck, but it felt right. Before long, Mrs. Redmond appeared through the front door, carrying two cups of tea.

"Good morning, Lizzie," she said. "May I join you?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

"It took tremendous courage for you and Peter to come all this way to retrieve Will," she said, taking a seat beside me and offering me one of the teacups.

"Thank you, ma'am," I said, accepting the tea. "We were worried he might have ended up in a home with people who were . . . not like you and Mr. Redmond."

She smiled.

"Peter and I talked last night," I began. "We have an idea."

I told Mrs. Redmond that Peter and I could see Will was happy. We knew taking him back to the asylum wasn't the right choice. "But going back to New York without him doesn't feel right either," I said. "We're family, and come winter, when Da's job is over, he'll be wanting us—all of us—in one place."

"I thought that might be the case," Mrs. Redmond said, nodding her head.

"Here's what we propose," I said. "Instead of keeping Will for good, like you planned, perhaps he could board with you until Da's job is finished?" Mrs. Redmond tilted her head in confusion, but I pressed on. "Peter and I would look for work and find lodging nearby. We would use our wages to help cover his room and board. Then, when Da's job is finished, the three of us would go back to New York to be with him." How we'd pay for that return trip, I wasn't sure, but I was moving one tiny stone at a time. "If we find work close enough," I added, "Peter and I would like to visit Will as often as possible—with your permission, of course."

At first, Mrs. Redmond was silent. She sat quietly, considering my proposal. Finally, she stood up. "Very well," she said. "I'll speak to Mr. Redmond after breakfast. There's a lot to think about." Then she put out a hand for

my teacup. “In the meantime, perhaps you can collect the eggs from the henhouse?”

“I’d be glad to,” I said, knowing that while I felt lighter, a little less burdened, things were still not settled.

# 18

## Watch Me Fly

Monday, July 16, 1883

July in Dysart, Iowa, was hot and sticky, so I'd taken to rising before the sun. It gave me time to feed and water the horses before the flies got too thick. Will would be up soon, collecting eggs from the henhouse. Peter was probably already on his way to the round barn, where he would help Mr. Redmond milk the cows. He was convinced that milking was giving him great big arm muscles, which he never tired of showing off.

The Redmonds had countered our offer with one of their own. As long as the three of us didn't mind sharing a room, and if we were willing to help around the farm, Peter and I could stay at the Redmonds' with Will. We would be expected to go to school when it was in session. We wouldn't be paid for our work, other than room and board, but we'd all be together.

The Redmonds wrote to Da, and it had been settled that he would come to Dysart at the end of December to

---

**countered:** responded with a different suggestion

join us. We didn't know where we'd go once he got here, but we would be together, and that was what mattered.

With the horses cared for, I could take a break and go to my special place. At lightning speed, I climbed the ladder that led up to the loft, where I'd created a private hideaway among the hay bales. Mrs. Redmond had even let me paint some Irish wildflowers on the wall, just like Mam had done back in New York.

I nestled into my spot, reached underneath a folded quilt, and pulled out a cigar box. This was my correspondence case. In it, I kept pencils, paper, and a bundle of letters from Helga and Miss Nancy. I'd been writing to them every week since we decided to stay in Dysart, and they almost always responded with letters of their own.

I'd just smoothed out a fresh piece of paper, with the intention of writing to Miss Nancy, when I heard Will and Peter giggling below me.

"Lizzie!" Peter called. "It's time for breakfast."

"Come on, Lizzie," Will said. "You need to come down."

I peered over the edge of the loft and saw the two of them holding the ladder to the loft.

“Jump, Lizzie!” Will cheered. “We made you a hay pile.”

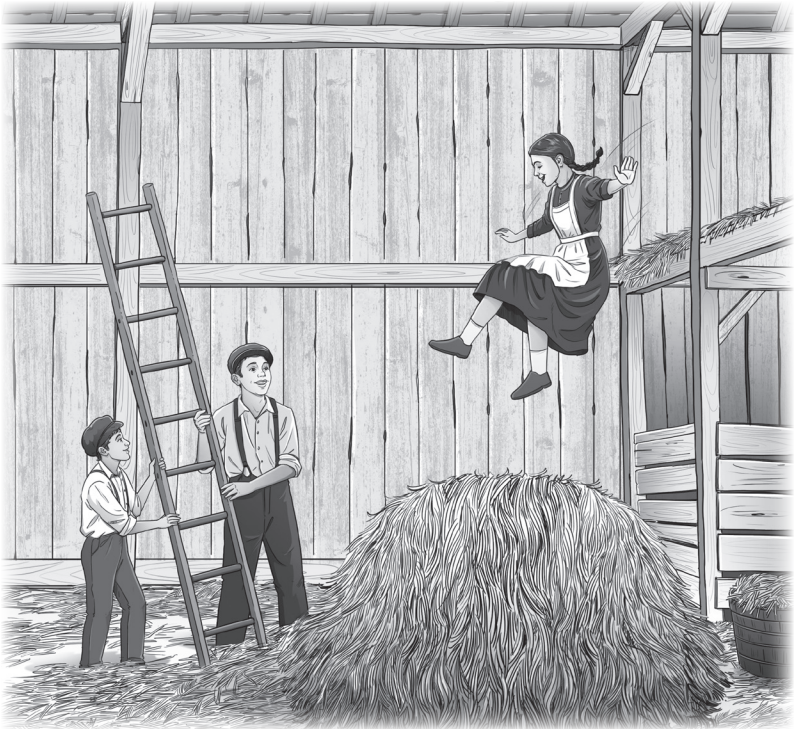
Indeed, there was a huge mound of hay below me.

“She won’t dare.” Peter smiled up at me. “It’s not safe. Right, Lizzie?”

Will turned his big eyes up to me with the most radiant smile.

I took a few steps back. “Watch me!” I said.

And I leapt.



## Afterword

The Gilded Age, the last few decades of the nineteenth century, was a time of immense change in the United States of America. When the Civil War ended in 1865, the United States was a rural country. There were large cities, of course, but most people made their living outside the city as farmers, craftspeople, or skilled laborers. For most Americans, clothing was made at home or by an enterprising neighbor, water was drawn from a pump in the yard, travel was done by foot or with the aid of a horse, and lighting came courtesy of gas or kerosene lamps. But technological advancements like electric lighting and steel manufacturing, coupled with the building of the transcontinental railroad and improved mechanization in factories and mills, soon transformed the American way of life. In one industry after another—knitting socks, sewing clothes, making shoes, and more—the growth of mass production created more goods at a faster pace and for lower prices than ever before. Skilled craftspeople simply couldn't compete with machines.

---

**enterprising:** willing and able to try something new or come up with new ideas

**kerosene:** a thin oil made from petroleum that is used as fuel

**transcontinental railroad:** a railroad that stretches across a continent

**mechanization:** the use of machines to replace human or animal labor

This led millions of people to move from rural areas, where they could no longer make ends meet, to cities, where they hoped to find work. People from other parts of the world were moving to American cities, too. Between 1870 and 1900, twelve million people, mostly from Ireland, Germany, England, and China, immigrated to the United States in search of a better life than the one they left behind.

For some Americans, like the owners of railroads, steel companies, banks, and oil refineries, the Gilded Age brought incredible wealth. The middle class, too, grew in size and prosperity. But for others, like the immigrants who made these industrial changes possible by toiling in factories and at home, the opposite was true. Many of them lived in tremendous poverty, partly due to a lack of jobs and to unscrupulous employers who took advantage of the immigrants' dire need for income.

This huge income gap was on full display in New York City, where the lucky few lived in elaborate mansions along "Millionaires' Mile" as masses of less fortunate people lived in the cramped, unhealthy conditions of tenements on the Lower East Side, just like Lizzie's family does in this story. As with many lower-income families of the time, everyone in Lizzie's family—even

---

**unscrupulous:** not concerned with being honest or doing the right thing

young Will—was expected to work to help make ends meet. It may sound strange today, but modern ideas of childhood as a period of sheltered innocence had only just started taking hold—mostly in more privileged middle- and upper-class families like Amanda and Nancy Treadwell's. For poor families like Lizzie's, sheltered innocence was hard to come by.

Children of Lizzie's class worked in mines and on farms, in cotton mills and factories. They shined shoes and sold newspapers on city streets. They worked as servants in fine homes or assembled flowers, stitched garments, or rolled cigars in their own crowded tenement homes. In the America of the 1890s, at least 18 percent of children aged ten to fifteen had jobs.

For some people of the time, it probably felt like a natural progression for children who had worked on family farms or in family-run businesses to continue working when families moved to the cities. But there are other reasons child labor was so easily accepted (and so difficult to abolish), including the long-held belief among many adults that children should not be idle. Putting a child to work must have seemed like a win-win situation—for everyone but the child. A working child helped support the family by bringing home money and

---

**idle:** not doing anything

helped support industry by supplying cheap labor; in turn, all that work kept the child busy.

But hours were often long, and working conditions were frequently unsafe. A five-year-old girl, for example, might work in a windowless tenement room making fake flowers with her mother for more than twelve hours each day. Another child might work the same amount of time in a mill on dangerous equipment that was likely to crush their hands or cut off their fingers.

While many of these children had families, a growing number of them—especially in New York City—did not. They were orphans or half-orphans (with only one living parent) who struggled to survive on their own. They needed help, and charitable organizations like the Catholic Church and the Children’s Aid Society stepped in to provide it.

In 1825, the state of New York had two orphan asylums. Forty-one years later, it had more than sixty. The rising number of orphans in New York City led Charles Loring Brace, the founder of the Children’s Aid Society, to concoct a plan that would place orphaned city children with rural families out west (hence the term “placing out”), where the children would receive food, shelter, and an education in exchange for helping out on

---

**concoct:** come up with

the family farm or assisting with the family's business. Between 1854 and 1929, the Children's Aid Society rehomed roughly 250,000 children. It was the beginning of our modern foster care system.

While the nation's poor children were struggling to get by, the children of the middle and upper classes led lives that wouldn't be too different from the lives of most children today (minus video games, the Internet, and cars!). Wealthier children would have attended school or studied at home. They may have played with toys, enjoyed sports, or read children's books. In all likelihood, they would not have been expected to work.

As the Gilded Age ended and the Progressive Era took over, laws were enacted to protect children so that employers could no longer take advantage of them for cheap labor. School attendance became mandatory nationwide by 1918 so every child could get an education. And childhood became something the children of today might actually recognize.

This story begins with and takes place during the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge, a symbol of the great accomplishments—and great struggles—of Gilded Age New York. The bridge was an unprecedented feat of

---

**enacted:** made into a law or put into effect

**mandatory:** required

**unprecedented:** unlike anything that was done before

engineering, but its construction was in the hands of the working-class laborers of New York City. Men worked from deep below the surface of the water and up to towering heights, many suffering injuries and even death in the process. On May 24, 1883, after fourteen years of construction, the Brooklyn Bridge opened to become the largest suspension bridge in the world.

## Meet the Author



Award-winning author **Colleen Paeff** was born in Southern California, not too far from Disneyland. The oldest of three children, she liked bike-riding, roller-skating, and putting on theatrical shows (often starring her siblings) for the neighborhood kids. Colleen loved making up stories, but didn't start writing them down until she was in college.

After graduating, she worked a variety of jobs. Her favorites were selling books, teaching preschool, and writing a newspaper column. Eventually, she figured out how to roll books, kids, and writing into a career as a children's book author. Colleen's books include the

Robert F. Sibert Honor Book *The Great Stink: How Joseph Bazalgette Solved London's Poop Pollution Problem, Firefly Song: Lynn Frierson Faust and the Great Smoky Mountain Discovery, and Pufflings Fly Free!: A Rescue Tale from Iceland.*

Colleen has lived in California her whole life, except for a year and a half when she lived in Brooklyn. That was when she became fascinated by the Brooklyn Bridge, which is why she decided to set this story around its opening. Her favorite part of conducting research for this book was reading 19th century newspaper articles and marveling at old photos of the bridge being built.

Colleen is back in California now. She lives with her husband and daughter in Los Angeles. Visit her online at [www.colleenpaeff.com](http://www.colleenpaeff.com).

## Meet the Illustrator



**Kailien Singson.** A born artist, Kailien hails from the northeastern region of India known for its rich natural beauty that serves as a constant inspiration in his work. His passion for art began at a young age with artistic scribbles in notebooks at school and gradually developed into a serious career that led him to pursue a degree in arts. Having explored several techniques in art through his education and professional years in publishing, Kailien specializes in using striking colors and depicting realistic forms in his work. He is equally adept at traditional art styles, taking inspiration from everyday life.



# Credits

## **Cover Illustration by**

Kailien Singson & Ivan Pesic

## **Title Page Illustration by**

Kailien Singson

## **Text Illustrations by**

Courtesy of Colleen Paeff / 107

Courtesy of Kailien Singson /109

Kailien Singson /5, 15, 27, 38, 48, 55, 69, 80, 89, 100

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR:  
ROSIE McCORMICK

MANAGING EDITOR:  
SOPHIE NUNNALLY

DESIGN:  
IVAN PESIC



# Core Knowledge® Adventures in History™

In her little corner of New York City, Lizzie shares a single room in Mrs. Kelly's boarding house with her two younger brothers and their Da. It's not much, but it's home. And most importantly, they have each other. But Gilded Age New York, an uncertain place marked by incredible wealth and terrible poverty, forces Lizzie and her family to go their separate ways. As Lizzie learns how to be a maid in a grand house, she never loses sight of what matters most: bringing the family back together.

These books are suitable for readers aged 8 and up.

ISBN: 979-8-88970-625-0

