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When The Great Fire Came

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Introduction

London, 1666. The air is thick with anticipation and, unbeknownst to its sleeping inhabitants, the hum of something momentous—something terrible yet transformative—hovers in the darkness above Pudding Lane. In the cobbled streets and crowded taverns, in the echo of church bells and the rattle of merchant carts, the city thrums with life, commerce, and stories both whispered and screamed. But all of that is about to combust, changing London and its people forever.

When the Great Fire Came is a novel set in the heart of this cataclysm. It is a tale woven from ash and hope, shadow and resilience. Through the eyes of ordinary Londoners—shopkeepers, servants, bakers, and beggars—we witness the chaos and courage that rise as fire reduces familiar streets to rubble. Behind the clamour of flames is a story not just of destruction, but of the human spirit: terrified, raw, but unyielding in its quest for survival.

This book is born of a fascination with history's edges—those moments when the world seems at risk of tipping into oblivion, and only through sheer determination do people carve a path forward. The Great Fire of London was one such edge, a crucible that tested and forged anew the fabric of a city. For days, all that was safe, solid, and settled became uncertain. Loyalties shifted, secrets surfaced, and unlikely alliances were struck in the face of a consuming inferno.

To bring this story to life, I have imagined the journeys of men and women of all ranks: from the apprentice racing to save his master's shop, to the mother searching through smoke for her lost child; from city watchmen tasked with an impossible battle to the refugees who would transform grief into resolve. While this novel follows the arc of historical events, it is ultimately a fiction, a tapestry made richer by the threads of invention woven through known facts.

At its heart, When the Great Fire Came is about more than a city on fire. It is about how we endure devastation, the cost of loss, and the sparks of hope that flicker brightest when the night is darkest. As you turn these pages and walk through the burning streets of 1666 London, may you find something of yourself reflected in the smoke and the survival—some ember of courage, some glimmer of what it means to rebuild.

Let us set out together, to witness what is lost, what is saved, and what, from the embers, might yet rise.

CHAPTER ONE: Ashes at Dawn

The air hung still and heavy over Pudding Lane, thick with the scent of a thousand sleeping lives and the faint, sweet perfume of baking bread. Thomas Farriner, Master Baker, was usually the first to stir in his household, roused by the insistent rumble of his stomach and the even more insistent demands of his ovens. But this particular Sunday, September 2nd, 1666, it was not hunger that pulled him from his slumber. It was a faint crackle, a sound like dry leaves skittering across cobblestones, only sharper, closer.

He blinked awake, his eyes adjusting to the pre-dawn gloom filtering through the small, high window of his bedchamber. His wife, the formidable Eleanor, lay beside him, her snores a comforting rhythm he'd grown accustomed to over two decades of marriage. Their two daughters, his pride and joy, slept soundly in the room below. The crackling persisted, growing louder, accompanied now by a subtle shift in the temperature of the room. A strange warmth, unseasonable for the early hours, pressed against his skin.

Thomas pushed himself up, his bones protesting with a familiar groan. He was a man shaped by flour and fire, broad-shouldered and solid, his hands calloused from years of kneading dough and stoking furnaces. He shuffled towards the window, pulling aside the heavy curtain. Below, Pudding Lane was a shadowy canyon, the timber-framed houses leaning drunkenly towards each other as if sharing secrets. But it was not the street that held his attention. It was the yard behind his bakery, where his ovens, still warm from the day's baking, resided.

A tendril of smoke, impossibly black against the paling sky, snaked upwards from the bakehouse. It was thin, at first, almost whimsical, but then it thickened, blossoming into an angry plume. Panic, cold and sharp, pierced through Thomas's sleepy haze. He knew, with a certainty that chilled him to the bone, that this was no ordinary smoke from a damp hearth. This was something else entirely.

"Eleanor!" he croaked, his voice rough with alarm. His wife stirred, grumbling, and pulled the blanket tighter. "Wake up! Something's amiss!"

Eleanor finally blinked open her eyes, squinting at the faint light. "What in the Lord's name, Thomas? It's not even cockcrow."

"The bakehouse," he said, his voice rising in urgency. "It's... I think it's alright."

That got her attention. Eleanor was on her feet in an instant, her nightcap askew, her

usually placid face etched with concern. She was a woman of practical action, and her first instinct was to confirm the unthinkable. She peered over his shoulder. The smoke was undeniable now, a furious black smudge against the burgeoning dawn.

They raced down the narrow, creaking stairs, their bare feet slapping against the worn timber. The smell of burning wood, acrid and unmistakable, grew stronger with every step. Their daughters, Hester and Joanna, aged fifteen and eleven respectively, were already stirring, confused by the sudden commotion.

"Father, what is it?" Hester called, her voice laced with fear.

"Stay in your rooms!" Thomas commanded, though he knew it was a futile request. Curiosity, and the growing heat, would soon draw them out.

They burst into the scullery, which led directly into the bakehouse. The sight that greeted them sent a jolt of pure terror through Thomas. Flames, small and timid at first, were licking greedily at the dry bundles of faggots, the kindling stored for the ovens. A spark, he surmised later, must have jumped from one of the still-warm ovens, catching the highly flammable fuel. The wooden walls of the bakehouse, old and parched, were already beginning to char.

"The water!" Eleanor cried, grabbing a bucket. "Fetch more, Thomas! Quick!"

He lunged for the well pump in the yard, his heart hammering against his ribs. The pump handle was stiff, but he worked it furiously, praying for water, praying for a miracle. Eleanor was already dousing the nearest flames, the water hissing as it met the hungry fire. But it was growing too fast. The heat was intensifying, pushing them back.

"It's no good, Eleanor!" Thomas yelled over the roar of the burgeoning inferno. "It's spreading! The shed, it's catching!"

The small lean-to shed, where they stored sacks of flour and other provisions, was now ablaze, the dry grain catching like gunpowder. Orange light pulsed through the windows, casting dancing shadows across the lane. Neighbors, roused by the smoke and the growing crackle, were starting to appear at their own windows, their faces pale and questioning.

"The girls!" Eleanor shrieked, suddenly remembering. "Hester! Joanna! Get out! Get out now!"

The girls were already scrambling down the stairs, their faces aghast at the scene. Thomas knew, with a sinking certainty, that their home, their livelihood, was lost. This was no mere kitchen fire. This was something altogether more monstrous. The flames

were licking at the wall of their dwelling house now, consuming the ancient timbers with terrifying speed.

“To the street!” Thomas roared, grabbing his wife’s arm. “Leave everything! Just run!”

They stumbled out into Pudding Lane, choking on the thick, black smoke that now billowed from their bakehouse, engulfing the narrow street. Other neighbors were emerging, some carrying meager bundles, others simply standing frozen in disbelief. The roar of the fire was a living thing now, a hungry beast devouring everything in its path. It sounded like a thousand angry beehives, punctuated by the sharp cracks of collapsing wood.

A watchman, his lantern swinging wildly, ran towards them, his face a mask of concern. “What is it, Master Farriner? By the heavens, the smoke!”

“The bakehouse,” Thomas gasped, pointing a trembling finger. “It caught. It’s too large to fight!”

The watchman, a young man named Samuel, peered into the fiery maw of the baker’s yard. His eyes widened in horror. “God help us. This is ill-omened. The wind is against us.”

Indeed, a fresh breeze had picked up from the east, fanning the flames with renewed vigor. The dry, tightly packed houses of Pudding Lane, with their overhanging upper stories and narrow passageways, were a perfect fuel for the rapidly expanding inferno. Sparks, hot and bright, were already showering onto the roofs of adjacent buildings, setting their dry thatch alight with terrifying ease.

Eleanor clutched her daughters close, her face streaked with soot and tears. “Our home, Thomas! Our everything!”

“We’re alive, Eleanor,” he whispered, his voice cracking. “That’s all that matters now. We’re alive.” But even as he spoke the words, a cold dread coiled in his gut. This was more than just their home. This was London. And London, he suddenly realized, was made of wood and pitch and old, dry dreams, all waiting for a spark. And that spark, by cruel fate, had begun in his own bakehouse.

The street was filling with people now, the cries of “Fire!” echoing down the lane, picked up and amplified by panicked voices. The clanging of bells, discordant and frantic, began to sound from nearby churches – St. Margaret, Fish Street Hill, and St. Magnus the Martyr – their urgent peals a desperate alarm. Water buckets were being passed hand to hand, a futile gesture against the growing monster.

Thomas watched, helpless, as the flames engulfed his bakery, then his home, then

began to lick at the adjoining property. He saw the face of Mr. Peabody, the scrivener next door, his eyes wide with disbelief as the eaves of his house began to smoke. The air grew thick with cinders and ash, falling like a grim snow. The heat was immense, forcing them to retreat further down the lane.

From the river, a few barges, alerted by the smoke, were beginning to move, their oarsmen shouting questions that were lost in the roar. But the river was too far, and the narrow lanes leading to it were already becoming choked with fleeing citizens and the first frantic efforts of the city's watchmen.

"We must go further," Thomas urged his family, pulling them away from the immediate heat. "Towards the river, perhaps? Or north, towards Cheap." But even as he suggested it, the routes seemed less and less clear. The fire was growing, not just spreading, but rising, turning the pre-dawn sky a ghastly orange.

Hester, always the braver of his daughters, looked back at their burning home, her face resolute despite the tears. "It's all gone, Father."

"Not all, child," Thomas said, trying to sound more confident than he felt. "We have each other. That is what truly matters." He squeezed Eleanor's hand, a silent promise to protect his family at all costs. But looking at the advancing wall of flame, a terrible thought struck him: what if, in this sprawling, hungry inferno, even that simple promise was impossible to keep? The city was waking to a dawn unlike any it had ever known, a dawn painted in the terrifying hues of fire. And at its heart, the first tendrils of ash from Thomas Farriner's bakehouse drifted towards the sky, the bitter smoke a prelude to a nightmare.

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