



The Great Chicago Fire, 1871

By Elizabeth Massie

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Katina can't tell Russell the truth, even as they work side-by-side, until the day love and jealousy drive her to reveal her true self at last. Together they build a dream of new lives and a new city -- until a sudden fire rages through the streets. Now they are racing for their lives as Chicago burns in their wake....

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Elizabeth Massie is a native Virginian who lives in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley. She writes all kinds of fiction: historicals, suspense, mainstream, and even picture books. She has authored several adult novels: *Sineater*, *Welcome Back to the Night*, and *Dark Shadows: Dreams of the Dark* (co-written with Stephen Mark Rainey). Her work for young adults includes *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Power of Persuasion* and the upcoming series *Young Founders*. For middle-grade readers, she has written the *Daughters of Liberty* trilogy. For little guys she co-authored *Jambo, Watoto!* with her sister, Barbara Spilman Lawson.

Besides writing, Elizabeth enjoys reading, camping, and traveling. Favorite movies include *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World* and *Life Is Beautiful*. Her favorite book is *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She is the mother of two wonderful young adults, Erin and Brian. She has performed in local theater, and in her spare time picks ticks off her dog Sandy and watches late-night reruns of *Law and Order*. You can write her at iritgud@cfw.com

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Chapter One: Chief Williams Shares System, Pies, with Boston Fire Department Officials

Visitors from Boston, including fire department officials and city councilmen, arrived in Chicago yesterday afternoon for the purpose of examining the workings of our city's renovated fire alarm system. Boston Fire Department spokesman Leonard Brisco stated their business as gathering information on how they could improve their own systems at home.

"Our method for protecting the citizens of this fair city is the best in the country," Chief Fire Marshall Robert A. Williams told the Bostonians, describing the network which keeps the city informed and abreast of blazes in order to stop them before major damage can occur. "Not even New York can boast of a more proficient system for detecting and halting fires. The Queen of the West leads the way yet again. We have seventeen steam-driven fire engines, two hose elevators, four hook-and-ladder wagons, and twenty-three hose carts. I challenge you to find a more complete array in any American city!"

The entourage visited the Courthouse, where they were treated to a lunch of pork, breads, and rhubarb pie, supplied by Mrs. Williams and a friend, Mrs. Samuel Johnson. The visiting team was then escorted up the narrow steps of the one-hundred-foot-tall cupola, where Chicago watchmen faithfully scan the city twenty-four hours a day from the walkway outside the top of the tower.

"Each neighborhood has an alarm box mounted in a prominent place," Marshall Williams continued as the amazed Bostonians peered cautiously over the edge of the walkway, gazing out at the rooftops of Chicago, "usually on a storefront. These boxes are numbered, according to their location. If a fire is spotted by the neighborhood watch or by a common citizen, he telegraphs the Courthouse, using a number to designate the area of the city in which the fire was discovered. If the watchman in the tower spies smoke or flame, they likewise alert the fire houses in the vicinity of the fire. For added security, we also have the Courthouse bell, which is quite loud, and when it is rung, alerts the citizens of the danger of fire." For added emphasis, Marshall Williams had the watchman on duty ring the bell once, causing the visitors to cover their ears.

One Boston official, Jeffrey Van Osier, pointed out that he'd seen one of the alarm boxes on a stroll earlier, nailed to the outside of a barbershop, and was surprised to find it was locked. Marshall Williams explained simply that this prevented false alarms. "The keys to the boxes are kept by trustworthy citizens who live

nearby."

After returning to the main floor of the Courthouse, Leonard Brisco asked, "Do you believe, then, that fire is no longer a threat to Chicago?"

To which Marshall Williams answered, "Fire will always be a concern. I would be a fool to think otherwise. But with our system of detecting and fighting blazes, I must say that we have never encountered a fire we could not control, and I cannot imagine that we will. The citizens of Chicago are in good hands, and can rest easy."

-- George Rainey, *Chicago Tribune*,
June 2, 1871

The applause from the audience was greater than the size of audience warranted. With only sixteen people and their thirty-two hands, Katina Monroe would have thought the response to the final act of *Men and the Sky* would have barely been enough to stir the dust in the rafters or flicker the lights of the kerosene lanterns. But the men and women who had come to opening night and had dropped their meager donations into the jar by the door were thrilled with the story of two boys who grow up and, with the help of a magical bird, build a kingdom in the clouds. And now, as the four actors took their bows, some members of the audience called out, "Bravo! Bravo!"

Katina bowed deeply from the waist. Next to her, lanky Adam MacPherson, her fellow actor, bowed and whispered, "Author, author! You'll be our century's Shakespeare!"

"Hah!" Katina said softly. "I don't think the Bard and I have much in common, other than a love of words and fantasy. My stories are not poetic, but simple."

"Our audiences understand the simple," said Adam. "The rag collector, the knife grinder. They are the ones clapping, my friend!"

Katina glanced at him as she bent forward again and gave him a grin. Her heart pounded with the excitement of victory. *If moments like this could last forever, she thought, then I could forget the terrible things that have happened to me over the past years.*

After another few moments of bows, the other two actors, Chadwick Tomms and Pip Harrison, stepped to the side of the stage, took the curtains -- worn, paper-thin bed linens -- and tugged them closed along the tight line of hemp rope. The applause began to fade. The actors grabbed each other in rough and cheerful hugs.

"Bravo, indeed!" said Chadwick, at twenty the oldest of the troupe. His sandy hair stood up, matted with sweat. "I can't believe I remembered all those lines."

"Aye," said curly-haired Pip, nineteen, his accent thick with the Scottish countryside from which he had come to Chicago five years earlier. "And I fed ya nearly a third of those lines from behind me hand. Yer brain is a sieve! Look on the floor there and I think that's where most of those forgotten lines ran down to!" Chadwick gave Pip a hearty shove, and they both laughed.

"Give the folks a few moments to clear the place," said Chadwick, shedding the woolen cape and tin crown that were part of his costume, "and we'll close up and go back to my flat. I've some stale gingerbread cake given me by Patterson and some ale to top it off. My mother works at the stockyard till midnight, so we'll

have the place to ourselves for two hours."

"So be it!" said Adam.

"Cake it is!" said Pip.

Katina adjusted the black felt hat on her head and smiled but said nothing. She knew she wouldn't go to Chadwick's flat for talk and cake. It wouldn't be appropriate.

Suddenly two grinning faces appeared through the curtains. Becky Alaimo, a skinny red-haired girl with a mangled ear, and Alice Montague, a chubby girl who would have been pretty had she not been missing four front teeth, giggled and invited the actors to come to their place of employment, the Stick Saloon on Quincy Street.

"Why don't you follow us back to work?" asked Alice, tossing her head so hard the red cap pinned to her straw-colored hair nearly flopped off. Her words hissed because of the missing teeth. "We're due there now. We've music, dancin', and entertainment! We'll even treat you to a free beer, first time."

Katina spoke quickly. "Thank you, but we have other plans, play notes and the like. Don't we, fellows?"

Becky's laugh was more like a bark. "Listen to the child! You's all such babies! Pity. Come on, Alice. They'll stop by when they grow up."

The girls' heads withdrew and their shrill laughter trailed them all the way out the stable door.

Chadwick rubbed at something in his eye. "We may not have play notes," he said. "But I'll be hanged before I'd step inside the Stick. They're as likely to rob you as entertain you. I'd rather take my chances on the streets."

Adam and Pip nodded in agreement.

There was not much to closing up the theater at the end of a show. Katina swept the stage and the wooden floor between the benches, shoving out the clumps of dried mud, while Pip returned the props to the prop box, Chadwick latched the windows, and Adam sat on the floor in what had once been a feed stall and sorted the coins from the donation jar by light of a lantern.

MacPherson Theater was a converted stable, owned by Adam's father, Sanford. Sanford had gone west to seek his fortune with his wife and the youngest seven MacPherson children, and Adam had promised to keep the stable in business. Three months after his family had gone, the stable was still in business, but there was not a horse nor a bit of tack in the place. Adam had cleaned it out, laid a wood floor, built a stage, constructed ten crude benches and sanded them down so a lady would not catch a splinter in her backside, then put the word out that he was going to produce plays. It had been in business now for almost a year.

Katina had met Adam at Anderson's Market on Fourth Avenue, where she ran errands and unloaded wagons. Adam shopped at Anderson's on Wednesdays, and when he had mentioned his new theater, Katina admitted she had written a play called *Fancy and the Captain*, about a silly young woman pining over a haughty sea captain. Adam asked to see it and was so impressed that it became the second production ever held in his theater. Katina quickly composed a second play in her hours after work, *Little Man of the Mountain*, a story of a forgetful gnome. This, too, had been performed on the stable's stage to the admiration of the residents of the destitute neighborhood.

The stable-turned-theater made no money compared to the stable as stable, but Adam loved performing so

much it didn't matter. He earned his bread and butter as a carpenter's helper for a man named Simple Parker, mainly laying down planks for sidewalks in the business district of South Division just a few blocks northeast; Pip was employed at the gasworks on Monroe, and Chadwick manned the ovens at Patterson's bakery.

When the worst of the mud had been chased outside, Katina extinguished all but three lanterns and brought them back to the stall where Adam had been joined by Chadwick and Pip. The three were sitting in a circle, shirts off, wiping their chests.

"Just enough to pay for the kerosene for the next few Saturday nights and for each of us to have a few pennies," Adam told Katina as she sat down.

"Let's put our money together to have a new curtain sewn," said Pip.

"Ah, what this theater needs is a lady's touch," said Chadwick. "None of us can thread a needle. Our costumes are naught but our own clothes, decorated with a stray bit of tin or tassel!"

Adam shook his head. "A lady would only whine and complain that the theater is too shabby, the stage too rough, the kerosene too smoky. No, an all-man troupe is what I have and what I shall continue to have."

Katina crossed her arms. This conversation had come up before. There were always rips in costumes needing mending, or a female character who may have been more accurately played by a girl than a boy in girl's clothing. But Adam said keeping women out of his productions had not hurt William Shakespeare. Adam would never let a woman get involved with his theater. And as far as he knew, he had been true to his word. As far as he knew, there were no females in his theater troupe.

Adam hopped up and dropped the coins into the pocket of his trousers. He shoved one sleeve of his damp shirt into his waistband, then slipped his tattered wool jacket on over bare skin. "I'll concede one thing," he said. "When we've earned a good reputation and the rich have discovered our whereabouts, and when we are earning as much as the Steward Grand Theatre or Crosby's Opera House, then perhaps we shall hire a costume maker. But she would be paid to work and keep her thoughts to herself."

"Here, here!" said Chadwick. "To the time we are as well-respected as the Grand Theatre!"

The actors collected their lanterns and went outside. The June night air was beginning to mist over with an impending shower, and the road was rutted and muddy. Through the open windows of the four-story tenement across Fifth Avenue came the sounds of babies crying, men shouting, women yelling. From north and south along the road came other sounds -- singing, fighting, a fiddle scratching out an unrecognizable tune, doors slamming. It was a usual Saturday night, with usual Saturday night noises.

Adam and Chadwick locked the stable door and then tugged it to make sure it was secured. There were child gangs and dangerous men who prowled the streets in this neighborhood, and one couldn't take chances without a lock. The gangs were out at all hours of the night, knocking folks senseless to steal watches, money, or anything else of interest. Although the people of this neighborhood had little worth stealing, that didn't matter to the thieves. During the day they worked alone in the fashionable business district several blocks over, picking the pockets of the gentlemen and ladies, but at night they would gather together, get drunk and angry, then turn their energies against their own people on their own streets.

"There," said Adam, turning from the locked door. "And now we're off to Chadwick's for refreshment."

"Except for me," said Katina.

They'd heard this before. "What is it with writers?" declared Pip. "Ye's been part of this acting troupe long as the rest of us, yet you've never gone out with us for a bit o' fun. Do ye dislike our company so much?"

"Do we bore you?" asked Chadwick. "Do we stink?"

Katina shook her head. "I'm tuckered is all. I would fall asleep with a mug in my hand and spill ale on Chadwick's mother's fine carpet."

"Fine carpet!" chuckled Chadwick. "Oh, that we have!"

"Come with us, please?" asked Adam.

"I need my sleep," said Katina. "Because tomorrow I shall begin writing yet another play, one even better than *Men and the Sky*."

Adam shook his head and squinted at her. It wasn't just poor light that made him do so. He had poor eyesight and was in great need of spectacles, which he could not afford. "Writers! A peculiar bunch if ever there was one. But remember we'll practice Thursday night. The play went well but there are always improvements that can be made."

Katina nodded. She could feel the first drops of rain plop onto her cap and run down the sides of her face. Her auburn hair, cut as short as Adam's and Chadwick's, was beginning to curl with the damp.

"You want us to walk you home?" asked Pip.

"I'll be fine," said Katina. "Robbers don't like the rain. They'll be finding shelter at a saloon or in the tunnels beneath the buildings of Conley's Patch till the worst is over."

"Suit yourself," said Adam. "Watch out for the road mud, though. I heard that after the rain last week, somebody down on Third Avenue found a brand-new hat lying on the street, only to pick it up and discover there was a man underneath. They asked the man wasn't he glad he'd been found? The man said yes, but the horse he was riding was still holding its breath!"

"Ah!" Katina laughed and swung her lantern, catching Adam in the back with it as the others moved off. "You had me believing for a moment!"

Holding her lantern out before her, Katina walked to the end of Fifth Avenue and turned west on Quincy by Sallee's Butcher Shop, watching her steps. The story of the man and the horse might be farce, but she had lost a shoe in the mud not long ago, and she had to pry it out with the thick, sturdy stick she kept in her back pocket for protection. But there was one consolation: she wore men's clothes, and they didn't require hands to clutch her skirts to keep her hems from dragging on the sorry surface of the street.

"William!" shouted Adam from the corner.

Katina turned around.

"You said earlier that you and the Bard have little in common. But think! You share a first name!"

"That we do," said Katina.

And the three other actors turned away, their lanterns bobbing, scattering shadows across the road and the side of a slowly passing wagon.

William, thought Katina. That's me. Although I am eighteen-year-old Katina Monroe, no one in Chicago knows who I truly am. They all think I am fifteen-year-old William Monroe.

The tenement in which she lived was two blocks up, down a narrow alley people referred to as Rat's Alley. Unlike the fancy mansions along Lake Michigan to the east, or the newer homes across the Chicago River to the north, this district was the bane of the city, run-down and dangerous. Katina hadn't known that when she had come here from Georgia. All she knew was that she needed a place she could afford, a place where she could forget the past eight years of her life.

The rain began to pick up. The steady patter soaked Katina's coat and trousers. She tried to walk faster, but the mud sucked at her shoes and made progress difficult. On both sides of the street, late-night gamblers and drinkers withdrew into their dimly lit shelters to continue their merrymaking. Others hid out in the cavernous, musky tunnels and makeshift rooms beneath buildings which had been raised as part of the city's ongoing renovation, but had not yet been filled in with soil or rock. Inside the Stick Saloon, someone was pounding out "Rain on the Lilacs" on a badly tuned piano.

Gritting her teeth, Katina hurried as best she could. At home, she would light the stove and dry her clothes. She didn't really plan on writing tonight. Her thoughts were fuzzy with fatigue. She just couldn't take a chance on spending extra time with her friends from the theater for fear they might discover her true identity. Although they were the closest friends she had, she didn't trust them completely.

Nobody could be trusted completely. It was a hard fact of life.

She reached the middle of the block and turned north into Rat's Alley. It was a narrow passage, lined with shanties and tall, rickety tenement buildings. Katina's boardinghouse was near the end, just past a pile of blackened beams that had been a garment factory before it burned in November. The residents of the alley had made the scorched hull a dumping ground for rubbish -- rotten food, bones and gristle, splintered wood scraps, old paper, broken bottles. The place stank worse than the Chicago River, but at least on a rainy night the smell was reduced. Katina held her lantern higher, and the light splashed against the buildings on both sides of the street.

A cup of tea will warm my mind and ease my stomach. What I wouldn't give to be able to have some of Chadwick's cake. How I miss good food, a comfortable house, clean clothes, someone to share my home and meals and conversation. How I miss family --

Something hit her from behind, so hard that her lantern flew out of her hand and she fell facedown in the muddy road. Grit and gravel filled her mouth. "Owww!" she cried, instantly rolling over on her back to see what was after her.

Standing over her was a blond boy, no more than eight or nine, wielding a large metal pipe in his hand. He was dressed in knee pants, a coat way too large for him, and a smashed top hat.

"Give me what'cha got," said the child.

Katina had learned to fight here in Chicago, something she had never imagined she would do back in Georgia. In this city, however, it was a skill she had to have. *I should have let Adam walk me home*, she thought, reaching for the stick in her back pocket. *This boy would not have challenged the four of us!*

"I haven't anything," said Katina as she carefully pulled herself to her feet. Her back stung fiercely, but she would worry about that later. She held the stick behind her. She didn't want to strike him, or make him think she would. She knew these children; if they felt threatened they could become even more violent. The stick

was a last resort. "Go on, or I'll call the authorities."

"Authorities!" said the boy. He spit in the road. "Authorities don't care to be here in Rat's Alley. Besides, the men here pay them to stay away! Now, empty your pockets or you'll have the end of this rod again!"

Katina knew getting away was better than a confrontation. She had learned to fight, yes, but she was not very skilled if surprise was not on her side. She slowly began to back up. On the road nearby lay her lantern, the globe cracked but not broken, sending a pool of light across the uneven ground. Several women, huddled beneath shawls, passed by on the other side of the road but didn't look her way.

"Go on," Katina said to the boy. "I've got nothing."

"You do!" said the boy. "I don't want to hit you again, but I will!" He took several steps forward, the pipe shaking in his grasp.

The burned hull of the old furniture factory was close. The boy might be younger, but Katina had longer legs. She could jump through the rubbish piles if lucky, and he would have to crawl over them. She could then kick a pile down on him and escape out the other side.

The boy waved the pipe at her face. "Give me!"

Katina spun about and made for the rubbish.

"Come back!"

She reached the rubbish and tried to stretch her legs enough to hurdle the pile, but her foot slipped in the mud and she crashed into it. Her cheeks were sliced by glass shards, and the palms of her hands were cut by exposed nails. The glass, splintered wood, and rotten food tumbled down around her shoulders. Her foot caught in a tangle of wire. Her protection stick was knocked from her hand and sent skittering away in the rain.

He's going to hit me! she thought, closing her eyes and raising her hands to protect her head. She gritted her teeth and prepared for the blow.

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