

# **Fire in the Belly**

A novel by  
Peter A. Wright

## **The Pick - Chapter One**

It's not how fast you run—it's how you outwit your victim. You have to pick the right one. He'll be distracted; looking at a tourist guide, craning his neck at skyscrapers, arguing with his wife or any of a thousand things. His attention is compromised. I do the mark a favor. I give him something to focus on.

My legs carried me easily through the thick, evening theatre crowd that I dodged like pylons on an obstacle course. My breath plumed from my mouth like a racehorse's in the chilly late-November air. I darted across Dearborn on my way north. A car horn sounded. Brakes squealed. I slapped my hands on a red minivan's hood before the front bumper could touch my thigh.

The mark hollering after me had been my starter's pistol. I took off beneath the blue sparks from the 'L' train that flashed against the Goodman Theatre. The tracks supported the creaking train on its way along the elevated rails over Lake Street. I was heading a block west, to the Clark and Lake L station where I had four levels to lose the sucker running after me.

When your only chance of survival on your own terms is dictated by a tourist's generosity or their foolhardy arrogance, you find ways to manipulate Chicago's streets to your advantage. You can find the right corner and shake a cup filled with change and hope one in ten people drop their spare coins into it or you can create your own opportunities.

The baton in my hand was a wallet fat with vacation cash. I shoved every bill into my jeans pocket that didn't have a hole. There were credit cards galore but I folded the leather halves back together and tossed it over my shoulder. I couldn't pay Phil back with a credit card; drug dealers only took cash.

You can find yourself on the streets any of a million ways but no matter how you got here there's only one way out: survive in a dwelling with a roof over your head that isn't stained from exhaust fumes. That's a big hurdle to leap and one that many find to be an icy slope where the mirrored surfaces far outnumber the solid ledges. There is hope. You won't stay homeless forever. There are too many elements in this city to survive.

"Somebody stop him..."

The bastard was still chasing me! I wanted to explain to the fool that tourists don't chase pickpockets. That I was a Varsity Track star my junior year of high school and could run his ass so far out on the west side he'd be dead before he made it back to his hotel. I knew this city; he couldn't find Water Tower on a map. What was he doing in the Loop anyway? Stupid fuck, I wanted to yell back to him, this is the business district. Nobody cares about nobody here. You should be shopping on Michigan Avenue or drinking on Rush Street.

The trick then is staying away from the streets' grease. It's harder than it looks. I did it once but got sucked back outside within six months. It doesn't matter how many books you read or how hard you work a job. The grease knows your name and pelts you with promises of freedom, zero responsibilities and unlimited drugs, provided you can find the scratch to maintain a decent habit.

I turned the corner onto Lake, the last leg. The smell of burgers cooking almost made me nauseous. I promised myself I'd eat something before I went to Phil's. I hadn't eaten since yesterday's soup kitchen debacle. Having the runs with a nearby toilet was one thing; having them when there isn't a public bathroom anywhere close to where you sleep is a completely different situation.

Life isn't too bad once you learn that restaurants throw away a lot of good food and there's always a concrete wall to sleep behind. You'll avoid the soup kitchens no matter how great they smell because the food tastes like old gym shoes. You'll only brave the shelters that smell like shitty underwear when you want to shower so you can blend into pedestrian traffic long enough to find the right mark.

The entrance to the L station was on the far side of the Thompson Center. Its sloped, glass façade that faced Randolph Street was on the other side. That seemed to echo my life to this point. Where the people enjoyed the beautiful architecture, I got the ass end. I never finished high school even though it was free. My foster parents and I parted ways when I was seventeen. My coach was so pissed at losing his star sprinter he threatened to break my nose. In the end, the coach forgot about me, my foster parents were absolved of their responsibility and I was on the streets with my kid brother in tow.

You have to respect the elements, though. If you don't, you could freeze to death in January or fall through the ice and drown in the Chicago River because no one ever taught you how to swim.

One element that's not listed in any nature book is actually the subject of a legend that you'll learn when you're getting the down-low about which shelters are safe and where in the city you don't go. You'll be told to stay away from the dude in the fancy car. I learned it on a bench in Grant Park and told Paul about it on Lower Wacker. The dude said little but what he did say melted your balls. His driver could beat the shit out of you like you were a child in a boxing match. When you met the guy, and you will meet him sooner or later, you were fucked.

A police siren whoop-whooped behind me. I immediately slowed to a hurried pace like I was jogging to catch the next train not running from a crime scene. I kept one eye on the glass doors just before the big Self-Park sign suspended above the sidewalk and the other on the squad car. The L was out of the question if the cops were in on the gig. They could shut the place down

and spend all day searching for me. I knew the city but I wasn't going down any subway tunnel to get away from a cop, no way.

Cops and burglary have never been a good combination for me. I've been stopped when I hadn't done anything but think about stealing a purse because, as the cop always says, I look guilty.

I slowed even more to a quick walk when the squad car rushed past me and slammed on its brakes right across from the L station's doors. One cop waddled into the station, the other got out of the car and stood on the sidewalk facing me. I tried to look like I was just hurrying for a train. His eyes followed me when I scooted past him and pulled money out of my pocket to get one of those stupid fare cards. I checked behind me. I had to get downstairs if that guy was still chasing me. I had dropped his wallet. Would he still be after me? He had a job. He could replace the money. My job was stealing. I was the modern-day Robin Hood but I was also the only beneficiary.

I rarely look over my shoulder; I stare life direct in the eye. If it's got a surprise for me, I trust my instincts to know it's coming. Paul, my kid brother, says I'm too mean, street-tough and obnoxious but I've been on and off Chicago streets since I was a kid and know 'em better than the Artful Dodger knew London. I'd bounced through enough foster homes to think anyone had my back. Yeah, Paul did to some extent but he couldn't get past the past.

I pushed my way through the glass doors and turned to my right to punch one of the machine's buttons to add value to a piece of magnetized cardboard and wondered why people paid to ride the train. You can hop the turnstile if no one's looking. Usually they aren't.

The machine finally spit my card out. I stepped toward the chrome turnstile bars. The fat cop burst into sight up from the depths, charged around the escalators and headed toward me. His red, sweaty face looked pissed and he was panting. I moved out of his way when he chose my lane to squeeze out of the station. He glared at me like he knew I had done something wrong. I held up my fare card so he could see it. He grunted and knocked me out of the way. I slipped my card into the turnstile slot. The machine gave me a green light and shot my card back out. I zipped down the

short hall then turned left to the broken escalator. I saw both cops get into their squad car through the sidewalk-level window as I beat my feet down the unmoving, metal stairs. I felt the rumble of the approaching train on my way down to the lowest level. I hoped it would already be stopped in the station when I got down there. I knew the train would stay on its tracks but I couldn't get over my fear of heavy machinery coming toward me at any speed. Car, buses, trucks were no big deal. Trains or anything bigger terrified me. Sometimes stupid decisions can haunt you long after you escaped without a scratch. I was thankful when the train's bright, white headlights shot past me as I stepped onto the concrete platform. My breathing was normal when the O'Hare Airport-bound Blue Line whined to a stop and the doors opened. I hadn't even broken a sweat from such a short run, only four blocks—barely a half-mile. I was just glad my regular running kept me in somewhat decent shape. I didn't know the Chicago lakefront because I'd slept there so many times but because I ran the pathways year-round. It wasn't a choice. Believe me, if it was I'd have stopped a long time ago. I run because I have to. Because if I didn't the stupid thoughts in my head will never shut up.

I stepped aboard a heated L car. My cocky smile grinned back at me from the windows while I walked to an empty seat. I had beaten the odds again. The doors closed and I swung onto a cloth-covered plastic seat. Ahead of me, by the other set of doors and on the seats that faced the aisle, a little girl, maybe eight years old, was crying with her father trying to console her. I thought of the picture in the mark's wallet, a different little girl, and how she was smiling so proud for the camera. I wondered if she was crying now too because some asshole kid had stolen their vacation money.

This was why I hated feelings, emotions, whatever; all they did was make you feel bad about yourself. They never let you stay happy for any length of time.

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