

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

I SURVIVED

THE GREAT MOLASSES
FLOOD, 1919

by LAUREN TARSHIS

 SCHOLASTIC

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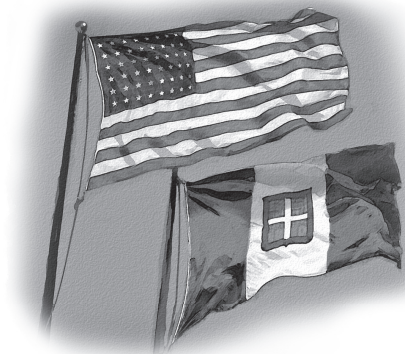
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CHAPTER 1



WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 15, 1919

AROUND 12:30 P.M.

THE NORTH END, BOSTON

Twelve-year-old Carmen Grasso was drowning.

She was caught in one of the deadliest disasters in the history of Boston. A gigantic wave had crashed in to the streets — a swirling, raging monster moving faster than a train. It turned buildings to rubble. It smashed wagons and motorcars and tossed trucks into the harbor.

Twenty-one people would soon be dead. Many more would be fighting for their lives.

This killer wave wasn't made of water. It didn't come from the sea. The monstrous wave was made of a thick brown syrup: molasses. For years, millions of gallons of sticky molasses had been stored in a building-sized metal tank. The hideous tank loomed over Carmen's neighborhood, blotting out the sun.

And in one ear-splitting moment, the molasses tank had exploded apart.

Carmen and her best friend, Tony, had watched in horror as the tank began to shake, as its rounded steel sides bulged in and out. The tank seemed to have come alive, as if it was boiling with fury, ready to destroy.

And then suddenly, thousands of the steel bolts that held the tank together let go.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

They blasted through the air like bullets fired from a machine gun. Seconds later, the metal

tank blew apart completely. Jagged chunks of metal whirled through the air like knife-winged birds.

The molasses hovered in the air like a black, roiling cloud. And then, with a thundering crash, it hit the ground. Instantly, the streets became raging rivers filled with wreckage — chunks of wood and metal and glass, overturned motorcars and wagons.

Horses whinnied in fear.

Screams of terror rang out.

“Run!”

“Get out of the way!”

“Help me!”

Carmen ran for her life, Tony right behind her.

But the wave was moving too fast. Within seconds, the swirl of thick syrup had caught them. The molasses wrapped itself around Carmen’s legs, like millions of powerful snakes dripping with slime. It rose up to her waist, to her chest.

She had to do something!

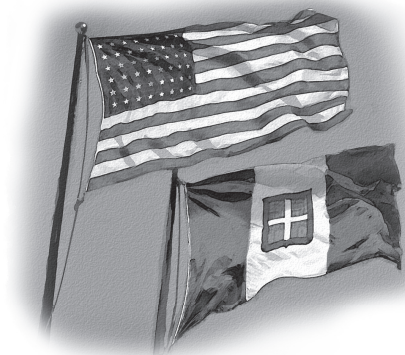
And then she saw it: a broken wagon, floating toward them. She and Tony both managed to climb on . . . until a huge hunk of metal from the tank rammed into the wagon.

Carmen tried to hold on as the wagon nearly flipped. But she slipped off and sank into the swirling flood of ooze.

“Carmen!” Tony screamed.

It was the last sound Carmen heard as the molasses rose up over her head and swallowed her whole.

CHAPTER 2



ALMOST FOUR MONTHS EARLIER

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 1918

AROUND 3:30 P.M.

THE NORTH END, BOSTON

Carmen and her pal Tony were heading back from school, making their way through the noisy streets of their neighborhood, Boston's North End. Horse wagons clattered and squeaked, and motorcars honked. A young newsboy shouted out the front-page headline.

“DEADLY FLU HITS BOSTON!”

Usually Carmen and Tony would be talking and joking as they zigzagged their way through the packs of people that jammed the street. They would maybe stop at Ortelli’s Bakery and see if they could sweet-talk Mrs. Ortelli into giving them a free creamy *cannoli* or crunchy *biscotti*. They always left empty-handed. But they kept trying, because anything was possible, right?

But today Tony was in a rotten mood. He walked glumly, skinny shoulders slumped. Carmen had been trying to cheer him up, but nothing was helping.

“He hates me,” Tony moaned.

“He” was their teacher, Mr. Lawrence.

“No, he doesn’t,” Carmen said, for the hundredth time.

Mr. Lawrence was the nicest teacher they’d ever had. Over the summer, he’d come back from fighting in the Great War. He’d been badly hurt in a bomb attack, and couldn’t go back into

battle. So he came home and took a job as a teacher. He had a bad limp, but he acted like it didn't bother him.

"I'm stupid," Tony continued.

"No, you're not," Carmen said, rolling her eyes. How many times had she told him he just had to study harder — or maybe open a book for once?

That was why Tony flunked the first big math test of the year. Carmen knew it wasn't the F that upset him; he'd had plenty of those over the years. It was Mr. Lawrence's new idea to keep Tony in at recess so they could play some math games together. Carmen knew Mr. Lawrence was trying to help Tony.

Tony thought Mr. Lawrence was trying to torture him.

"That test was impossible!" Tony grumbled now, as they wove around a big pile of horse manure in the street.

"Well . . ." Carmen said.

She'd gotten 100, but she hadn't told Tony that.

She'd carefully folded the test and slipped it into the pages of the book Mr. Lawrence had lent to her, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. The book was about a girl named Dorothy who gets sucked into a tornado and dropped down in a strange land called Oz.

Carmen couldn't wait to show the test to Papa.

He'd pin her perfect test up on the wall with all the others. Then he'd pat her cheek.

"This is why we came here to America," he'd say.

They'd come here four years ago, from a little village in Italy. The village was a beautiful place, where Mama's and Papa's families had lived for hundreds of years.

But in 1908, when Carmen was two, a powerful earthquake struck the south of Italy. Entire cities turned to dust in the quake. Minutes later, gigantic tidal waves roared across the land. More than 100,000 people were killed.

Including Mama, who was swept away when the sea rose up.

Carmen had only one memory of that terrible day — dim and hazy like a dream. She was clinging to Papa's back as the sea churned all around them.

"Hold on!" Papa had cried. "Hold on!"

Papa's voice had risen above the roaring waves, above the screams of the people all around them.

Carmen gripped *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* harder as Tony kicked a rotten apple core into the gutter.

Papa never talked about the earthquake. But growing up in Italy, Carmen had heard the stories from her grandmother, Nonna. And reminders of the disaster were everywhere in their village — the crumbling church, the ruined school, the graveyard where Mama was buried.

Papa had wanted to stay in the village. But as the years crawled by, he realized there was no

future there, especially for Carmen. The school never reopened, and most girls didn't go to school anyway. It was harder and harder for Papa to earn money as a farmer.

And that's why, when Carmen turned eight, she and Papa got onto a big ship and came here to America. They'd begged Nonna to come with them. But she'd refused.

"Someone needs to stay and watch over this place, *tesoro*," she'd told Carmen. That's what she called Carmen. Her treasure.

Carmen hated leaving Nonna. But she'd always been curious about that magical land across the Atlantic Ocean: *l'America*.

Carmen had imagined golden streets, skyscrapers topped with rubies, wide-open spaces where she and Papa would build their new life. Life would be much easier in *l'America*, she was sure.

Carmen smiled to herself now, remembering how shocked she was when she and Papa first arrived here, in the North End. She glanced

around, flashing back to how all of this looked through her eight-year-old eyes.

The sagging buildings. The piles of trash. The dark alleys filled with howling dogs. She and Papa lived in an apartment so small there was barely enough room for the two of them — and the family of rats that refused to leave.

What was Papa thinking? she'd written to Nonna. *We made a big mistake coming here!*



Why would *anyone* want to live in *l’America*?

But Nonna wrote her back, telling her to be patient.

Trees don’t grow overnight, she’d said.

Why was Nonna writing about trees? Carmen had wondered. There were hardly any trees in the North End anyway.

But soon Carmen understood what Nonna meant. It took time to get used to a new place. Like trees, she and Papa slowly grew into their new lives in the North End. She still missed Nonna, of course, more and more, even. And sometimes Carmen had to escape the crashing noises and crushing crowds. She’d find a quiet spot in her favorite park, close her eyes, and pretend she was back in the village.

She’d picture the Italian flag flapping in the town square, with its stripes and shield. Sometimes she could practically smell the sweet Italian breezes, a mix of lemons and flowers and the sea.

But the North End was her home now. She

loved school. There was always something new to see in this bustling city. And most of all, she loved their neighbors — Tony and his big, noisy family. They lived in the apartment right above them. They'd welcomed Carmen and Papa from the start. Most nights the delicious smells of Mrs. Grasso's cooking wafted under their door. And most nights Mrs. Grasso sent one of the kids down to invite her and Papa to join them for heaping plates of pasta or bowls of garlicky soup with *chi chi* beans.

Carmen glanced over at Tony now, smiling to herself. He was more like a brother than a best friend. She hated seeing him so sad!

But then she had an idea that would definitely cheer Tony up.

"Come on," she said, grabbing his arm. "I'll race you to the molasses tank!"