

They climbed out of the cab, and a man in a top hat swung open the hotel's huge front door. Oscar peered inside at the glittering lobby. Bright lights twinkled, and piano music filled the air. Oscar lingered outside. He'd never seen such a fancy place, and he was sure he didn't belong in there.

Oscar glanced back at the street, tempted to bolt away to the train station.

And that's when he saw her — a little girl scurrying down the sidewalk. Even in the flickering gaslight, there was no mistaking that dirty yellow cap, those raggedy braids.

"There she is!" Oscar called out.

But Mama and Mr. Morrow were already starting across the lobby, and Oscar's shouts were drowned out by the music and the hum of the chattering crowd. The girl moved quickly across the sidewalk.

And before he even realized what he was doing, Oscar had dashed into the street.

He had to catch that little thief!

## CHAPTER 5



10:15 P.M.

HEADING TOWARD THE SOUTH SIDE

Oscar dodged a speeding horse wagon and leaped over a steaming pile of manure. He hopped up onto the wooden sidewalk and wove his way through the crowd, his eyes glued to the yellow cap bobbing in front of him.

The girl didn't look like much of a criminal, with her stick legs and flapping braids. But wasn't that innocent look part of her act? Papa always said that Earless was a charmer. "He'll

dazzle you with his smile then shoot you dead," Papa would say. Plus, Papa explained, Earless treated the guys in his gang like brothers. "He made sure they ate and drank like kings."

Oscar figured the girl was heading for the gang's hideout. His best bet was to secretly follow her there.

Oscar stayed hidden as he followed her through the busy streets. They crossed behind a tavern and then cut through a snaking alley. They finally came out onto a dark street of small houses and shacks. The girl beelined for a sagging little house set back from the street. Oscar ducked behind a barrel and waited as she used a key to open the front door.

"Bruno," she called out as she went inside. "I'm back!"

Bruno.

*Must be one of the thugs*, Oscar thought. He saw a piece of jagged wood lying on the ground. He grabbed it. It would make a decent weapon, just in case.

He crept up to the house, crouching low so none of the criminals would spot him out the window. He wondered what he should do. Barge in? Demand his suitcases? Suddenly his knees started to shake. Sweat oozed down his neck.

What was he doing? He needed to get out of here!

But then he thought of Papa facing the gun barrel of Earless Max Kildair. No, Oscar thought, he wasn't going to run scared from a bunch of street thugs. He was going to get Papa's badge back.

He curled his fingers around his weapon as he rose up, ready for a fight.

Oscar peered through the window.

He spotted the little thief.

And his mouth dropped open in shock.

*No*, he thought. *It can't be.*

He had imagined her sitting there with Otis Webber and the other boys, rummaging through piles of loot.

He'd gotten it wrong.

There were no thugs, and no sign of his suitcases.

The girl sat in a little wooden chair. On her lap was not a pile of stolen money and jewels but a smiling little boy with a mop of dark curls. Oscar guessed he was maybe three years old.

Their voices floated through the open window.

"Sorry I had to leave you alone again," she said.

"I very brave, Jennie," the boy said, puffing out his chest. His little croaking voice made Oscar think of the baby frogs he used to catch behind his house. "Next time I help."

"No," the girl said. "It's no fun, what I do. And you need to stay here and guard our house!"

The boy puffed out his chest proudly. "I guard."

"And guess what. I have enough money to get us some nice, fresh milk tomorrow."

"And a cookie?" the boy asked hopefully.

"We'll see," she said, taking off her yellow cap. She suddenly looked older than Oscar had first thought, maybe nine or ten. The boy reached up and tenderly smoothed one of the girl's crooked braids.

"I love cookies, Jennie," the boy whispered.

"I know you do, Brunie," Jennie said.

She smiled. But it was a weary kind of smile, tinged with sadness. It reminded Oscar of Mama's smile, how she looked in the months before Mr. Morrow appeared.

Oscar swallowed hard as he stepped away from the window. Those kids were on their own. Oscar felt it in his bones. He remembered what the policeman said: Otis Webber preyed on the most helpless orphans.

Oscar dropped his stupid weapon and headed slowly toward the road. What a dope he was, pretending he was like Papa, chasing a killer outlaw through Chicago.

Instead he'd found two sad little kids.

And now all he could think of was Mama.

How could he have left her like that?

She must be going crazy with worry.

His mind was so jumbled up that he barely noticed when something landed on top of his head. It felt like a leaf, or a big moth. He absent-mindedly brushed it away, then was startled when

a shower of sparks spilled down in front of his face. A few hit his skin, burning his flesh like red-hot needles.

Oscar looked up and saw a sight so strange he was sure his eyes were playing tricks. It looked as if glowing red snowflakes were falling from the sky. They danced in the gusting wind, hundreds of hot, burning embers of different sizes and shapes. Before he knew what was happening, they were all around him, attacking like a swarm of fiery bees. They seared his scalp, burned through the wool of his clothes, scorched his lips. Pain lashed him, and the sickening smell of his burning hair made him gag.

And suddenly, *Whoosh!*

Flames leaped up in front of Oscar's face. The sparks had ignited his clothes.

Oscar was on fire!

## CHAPTER 6



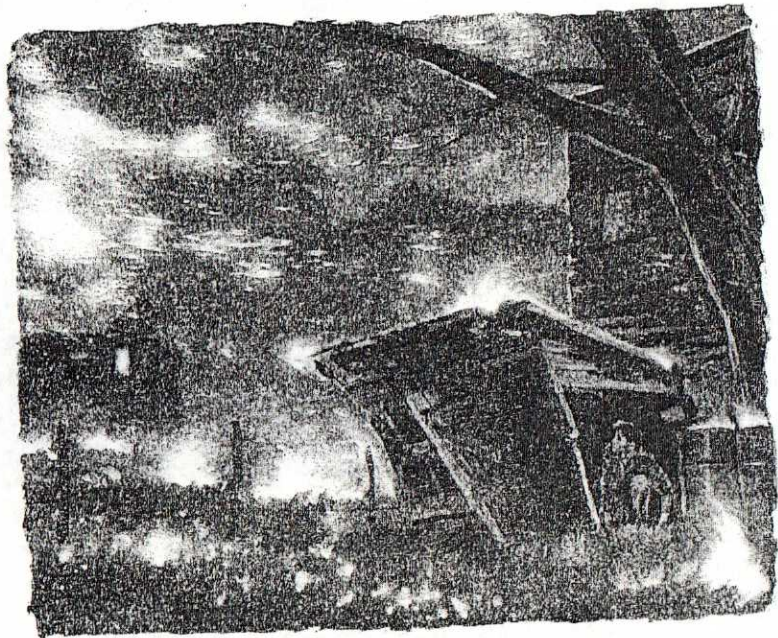
Oscar threw himself to the ground and rolled in the dirt, frantically beating the flames that were crawling up his arms and reaching out to grab his face. He rolled and pounded until finally the burning stopped. He lay there, coughing and spitting out the ashes that coated his tongue. His heart hammered with fear. But he couldn't just lie there. The sparks were still everywhere. He had to find somewhere to hide.

Gritting his teeth in pain, he managed to crawl back to an old chicken coop behind the kids' house. The wood was mostly rotted away, but the

roof was just wide enough to protect Oscar. He sat hugging his knees to his chest, swatting away the sparks that came too close. He breathed deep, trying to slow his hammering heart.

He touched his forehead, gently rubbing his fingertips over the blistered skin. His scalp was badly singed, and there were burns up and down his body.

But he barely felt the throbbing pain. His attention was focused on the sky. That glow Mama had noticed earlier was brighter now. It



looked as though a giant hand had painted the sky bright orange.

The fire had gotten bigger.

Much bigger.

That's where the sparks and embers were coming from. The powerful wind was scattering them like burning dandelion seeds.

The same thing had happened the night of the forest fire near Castle. Sparks and hunks of burning wood and bark had flown for miles, setting off new fires wherever they landed. Mama and Papa and Oscar had almost lost their barn. Some people lost everything — barns, houses, even fields. Ten people were killed. One family survived by diving into their pond and dunking under the water while the flames roared over them.

Oscar took a breath, trying to loosen the choking fear that gripped his throat.

He thought of what Mr. Morrow had said — that Chicago had one of the best fire departments in America.

Maybe that was true, but there was no sign of them here.

And once a fire got too big, not even an army of firefighters could put it out. Oscar had learned for himself during the Castle fire how a fire could grow and grow, how it could become like a ferocious beast that would devour everything in its path. And what a fire was most hungry for was wood — like the thousands of shacks and stores that lined Chicago's streets, the miles of wooden sidewalks, the warehouses filled with coal and oil that would explode at the slightest spark.

Oscar remembered how the forest looked, after the fire. He and Papa had ridden up there to see it for themselves. Oscar would never forget the sight of it. The fire had turned thousands of trees into twisted black stubs. The ground was a sea of ash. There was not a bird, not an insect to be seen. Oscar had tried not to look at the blackened bones that were scattered all around, the skeletons of the creatures that hadn't been able to escape.

He and Papa had both loved that forest. They'd go up there with Mama, who loved telling them

the names of every last tree and flower. Oscar and Papa had both fought back tears as they stood in the burned ruins. But then Papa had pointed to something on the ground — a tiny green shoot pushing up through the ash.

"It will take a long time," Papa had said. "But one day the forest will grow back."

Oscar shivered as he thought of what a huge fire like that could do to a city like Chicago.

Could such an important city burn to the ground?

It didn't seem possible.

But hadn't Oscar learned that anything was possible?

If a blizzard could kill his papa, couldn't a fire destroy an entire city?

Oscar looked up, as though answers might be printed on the orange sky.

But instead, his eyes found the two small and terrified faces peering down at him from the upstairs window of the house.

Jennie and Bruno.

The sight of them, lit up by the glowing sky, jolted him.

Right at that second, the wind blew its dragon breath. More sparks and embers appeared, and out of nowhere, a large plank of flaming wood came soaring through the air. It was like an enormous flaming spear, hurled by an invisible warrior.

It was heading right for the house!

*Boom!*

The wood smashed through the roof of the house, sending a column of flames high into the air.

Oscar opened his mouth, but he was too horrified to even scream.

## CHAPTER 7



Oscar sprinted toward the house, swatting away the burning flakes that swarmed around him. He watched with terror as the fire quickly danced across the roof.

Where were the kids? Why hadn't they come bursting through the door?

"Come on, come on," he whispered, as though he could grab hold of them with his words.

But still they did not appear.

Oscar rushed up the crumbling steps and pounded on the front door.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Come out!"

Nothing. He tried the door, but it was locked tight.

Where were they?

Shouts rang out from the street.

*"Fire! Fire! Fire!"*

Oscar whirled around.

Two other houses were burning like torches. The wind gusted, and flames leaped across the street.

*Boom!*

The house caught fire as if it were made of dried straw.

Any minute this whole street would be a sea of fire. Oscar had to get away!

He had to get back to Mama!

But how could he leave here if those kids were still in the house?

Of course he couldn't. Oscar slammed his shoulder into the door.

*Bam!*

*Bam!*

*Bam!*

On the third try the door frame splintered, and the door burst open. Oscar stumbled in, falling

to his knees. Smoke swirled all around him. He rose to his feet, gasping for breath.

"Hello!" he screamed. "Where are you?"

And that's when he heard them, just above the fire's roar, muffled cries coming from upstairs. Or was it just the wind and the fire fooling his ears?

Was it possible the kids had escaped through another door?

Oscar stumbled to the narrow staircase, peering up into a churning cloud of black smoke.

*Don't be an idiot, he told himself. Don't go up those stairs!*

"Hello!" Oscar called, praying that nobody would answer, that the kids were long gone.

But no.

"Help us! Please!" shouted a terrified voice, the girl's.

There was no choice.

On shaking legs, Oscar started up the stairs. He pulled his shirt up over his mouth and nose. It did nothing to block out the smoke. Each breath burned his throat and lungs. But the worst was the blistering heat. With each step, it grew hotter.



Oscar could practically feel his blood boiling, his skin sizzling, his flesh cooking on his bones.

He wouldn't last long up here. And neither would Jennie and Bruno.

At the top of the stairs was a closed door. Someone pounded on the other side.

"Here!" Jennie shouted. "The door is stuck! Please help us!"

Oscar pushed against the door, but it wouldn't budge.

"Stand back!" he choked.

Oscar kicked the door as hard as he could.

The door crashed open, releasing a wave of heat and even thicker smoke that pushed Oscar back on his heels. He teetered and almost fell down the stairs. But somehow he managed to regain his balance. Jennie came rushing out with Bruno in her arms. They were both coughing and wheezing. Their faces were black with soot and streaked with tears.

Jennie was clutching Bruno with all her might, but her skinny arms were losing their grip.

Oscar reached for Bruno, and to his surprise the kid didn't resist. Oscar pulled Bruno into his

arms, holding him close to his chest. The poor boy's heart was pounding even harder than Oscar's. Jennie stood unmoving, dazed, and coughing. Oscar was afraid she might faint.

Oscar grabbed her arm and pointed her down the stairs, gripping her shoulder in case she slipped. He followed right on her heels.

"Run straight through the front door!" Oscar said to her. "Go as quickly as you can!"

Jennie did what she was told, gaining strength as they reached the bottom.

Oscar put Bruno down at the bottom of the stairs, and Jennie grabbed the little boy's hand. Together they flew out the door. Oscar was just steps behind them.

And then —

*Crash!*

The window shattered.

*KABOOM!*

A giant ball of fire and cinders blasted into the room.

Oscar fell to the floor.

And then there was nothing but flames.