

CHAPTER 8



Again, Oscar felt as though he were being attacked by a wild animal, a monster with burning tentacles and boiling breath. It grabbed him, clawed at him, and spun him around.

Smoke gushed into his nose and down his throat, filling his lungs with searing poison. His couldn't open his eyes, but he knew the fire was all around him. He dropped to the ground, crawling blindly, groping for the door.

But he had no idea where he was. It was like being trapped in a flaming maze.

His lungs were ready to explode.

Was this the end? Was he really going to die right here?

And then he heard a voice.

"This way! This way!"

Mama?

"Turn right! Turn right!" the voice shouted, tugging him, guiding him.

Oscar turned.

No, it wasn't Mama's voice.

It was Jennie's.

"Yes! Now straight! Hurry!"

And then he felt a hand on his arm, pulling him up.

Seconds later he was out the door.

He was just steps away from the house when there was a terrifying *whoosh* and an explosion of hot air.

They rushed forward, and Jennie grabbed Bruno from where he had been hiding behind a barrel. They ran across the street and fell to the ground.

Oscar's head throbbed; his entire body felt as if it had been roasted.

He lay back and closed his eyes.

For a long minute, he stayed there, trying to catch his breath.

He might have stayed like that for hours. But only a minute or so passed before he felt someone breathing in his face.

He opened his eyes and saw a huge curly head hovering over him with wide-open eyes.

Bruno.

"Hey! You not dead!" he croaked out happily.

"Hush, Bruno!" Jennie whispered. "That is not a polite thing to say!"

"But he not dead!" Bruno insisted, putting his face even closer to Oscar's, so his slimy little nose touched Oscar's nose. Then he put his gooey mouth to Oscar's ear and whispered, "You not dead."

The kid wasn't going to quit.

Oscar put his hand on Bruno's head.

"I know," he said.

Jennie kneeled down and gently peeled Bruno away from Oscar.

"Let's give him a little room," Jennie said.

Oscar managed to sit up.

He stared ahead at the little house, which was being torn apart by the flames. The wood moaned and sighed as it collapsed into the fire, as if crying out in pain. It was sickening, like watching a rabbit get torn apart by a coyote.

Bruno wriggled closer to Oscar until his small shoulder pressed against Oscar's arm.

"My house," he said, pointing sadly.

Oscar didn't know what to say, so he just put an arm around the boy.

The fire burned so bright that it lit up all their faces.

It was the first time Jennie had the chance to get a good look at Oscar. Now Oscar waited to see the shock in her eyes when she realized who he was.

But there was no flash of recognition. She looked exactly how Oscar felt: scared, dazed, and amazed to be alive.

Their eyes locked together, and Oscar could tell that Jennie didn't recognize the kid she'd tricked at the train station. She saw a different

boy, the boy who'd helped her and Bruno escape from the fire.

And as Oscar looked at Jennie, he didn't see a helpless orphan or a ruthless thief. He saw a brave girl who watched over her brother all by herself, whose voice had led Oscar out of the blazing house in the nick of time.

And then there was Bruno, who grinned at Oscar as though they'd been best friends all their lives.

"I Boono," he said, looking up at Oscar and puffing out his chest.

"I'm Oscar," Oscar said.

"Occar," Bruno said.

"I'm Jennie," Jennie said.

They all sat there a minute, looking at each other. Had he and Jennie really only just laid eyes on each other tonight?

Oscar eased his arm from around Bruno and struggled to his feet, brushing the dust and ashes off his burned clothes.

His body ached, but his mind felt surprisingly clear. He knew exactly what to do.

"We need to get to the Palmer House hotel," he said.

He said the word *we* very clearly.

"My mother is there," Oscar said. "The hotel is fireproof. We'll be safe there."

Oscar picked up Bruno and held out his free hand to Jennie.

She took it, and gripped it tight.

And together they began their journey through Chicago's burning streets.

CHAPTER 9



MONDAY, OCTOBER 9

12:15 A.M.

THE SOUTH SIDE OF CHICAGO,
HEADING NORTH

They left Jennie and Bruno's burning neighborhood behind and headed north. Oscar kept looking over his shoulder at that giant orange glow bleeding through the sky. The main fire was huge now, Oscar could see, and it was spreading fast.

And the wind was carrying sparks all over the

city. Everywhere Oscar looked, he saw new fires burning.

Some fires were very small — a ribbon of flame waving from a tree, a pile of garbage glowing like a campfire.

But there were burning houses everywhere, and in places, the smoke was so thick that they had to gasp for breath.

But Oscar's gasps also came from what was happening all around them: people sobbing and screaming, horses driven crazy by the heat and sparks, stray dogs howling in fear. Even the rats were running for their lives, rushing out from under the wooden sidewalks and getting squashed under the wheels of the wagons and buggies that plowed through the streets.

The crowds got bigger as they moved north. Many people were dragging trunks and suitcases, or struggling with heavy sacks heaved over their shoulders. Two women in nightgowns carried a mattress above their heads. On top was a very old man, curled up under a quilt.

The fires turned the night as bright as day, lighting up the terrified faces all around Oscar — the tearstained cheeks, the mouths open in horror, the wide-open eyes looking up at the sky.

But the worst part was the howling wind, which seemed to be getting stronger by the minute. Each hot gust was filled with dust and smoke, and spit out millions of embers and sparks. One burned a hole clear through the toe of Oscar's boot. Oscar passed a woman just as her skirts erupted into flames. Luckily the man next to her had a canteen of water, and quickly drenched her.

The sparks were terrible for Oscar and Jennie, but they tortured poor Bruno.

"Hot! Hot!" he kept saying, trying to bury his face in Oscar's neck.

Finally Jennie spotted an overturned wheelbarrow with a heap of clothes spilling out. She snatched a lady's hat, its purple velvet smudged with dirt, the wide brim crushed.

"I don't think anyone will miss this," she said.

She put it on Bruno's head, a perfect helmet to protect his curls. She kept her eyes on Oscar,

swatting away embers that came too close to his face or smoldered on his clothes.

Oscar was getting the idea that there wasn't much Jennie couldn't take care of.

They came to a corner where a crowd of people had stopped to watch a grand brick building burn. Oscar and Jennie tried to push their way through, but they were completely hemmed in.

And then, suddenly, the clanging of bells rose above the roar of the fire.

"Fire department!" someone shouted.

People jumped out of the way as two steam pumper wagons came tearing around the corner, each pulled by two sweating horses. A hose wagon followed.

Oscar's heart lifted a bit.

He remembered what Mr. Morrow had told them, that Chicago had the best fire department in the world. And here was their chance to prove it. Maybe they could save at least part of the city.

People in the crowd watched hopefully as about fifteen firefighters hopped off the wagons and got to work, readying the pumper and



uncoiling the heavy canvas hoses. In Castle, there was no fire department or pumper engines. When a fire broke out, people had to rely on themselves and their neighbors. During the big fire, a flurry of sparks had ignited the roof of Oscar's barn. Within minutes, thirty people had rushed to their farm, ready to help. They grabbed every bucket and jug they could find, and formed a bucket brigade.

Mama and two other women had stood at the well, filling the buckets as fast as they could. Everyone else lined up, forming a human chain that led from the well to the barn. Oscar stood on the line, passing sloshing buckets of cold water toward the fire. It was amazing how those heavy buckets flew across the chain of hands, how the splashes of water tamed the flames.

Oscar had kept going even after his arms were numb with pain.

It had taken an hour, but they'd put the fire out. The roof of the barn was burned through, but the rest of the building still stood.

Oscar would never forget how happy he felt when the last of the flames fizzled out, as if he'd helped slay a monster.

He watched now as the firefighters dragged the heavy coils over to the burning buildings, screaming at people in the crowd to stand back as the pumper engines roared and water pulsed into the hoses. Like soldiers in battle, the men aimed their hoses. Cheers rose up from the crowd as thick, powerful sprays of water blasted up at the flames.

Very quickly Oscar realized that the firefighters didn't stand a chance. The fire was too big and too hot. The water hissed as it got close to the flames, and then boiled away into puffs of steam. With every gust of wind, the flames rose higher, twisting and dancing in the sky as though teasing the firefighters.

They'd need an ocean to put out those flames, Oscar reckoned, or a bucket brigade of a thousand people.

"Come on," Jennie said, spotting a break in the crowd.

As they pushed their way through, Oscar turned to take a last look at the firefighters. There was no mistaking the fear on their faces. There was no doubt: Chicago was doomed.

CHAPTER 10



The three of them walked for at least an hour more, inching their way along the packed sidewalks. They were getting closer to the Palmer House, Jennie said. But new fires kept forcing them to find alternate routes.

Now they were caught in a sea of hundreds of bodies. People squeezed them on all sides, and Oscar struggled to stay on his feet.

They were passing by a warehouse when suddenly —

KABOOM!

The smell of oil filled the air, and shards of wood flew all around them.

“Run!” someone screamed.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The explosions rang out like cannon fire.

Like a herd of cattle startled by a clap of thunder, the crowd erupted into a stampede. Oscar, Jennie, and Bruno were caught right in the middle. Elbows jabbed them, boots mashed Oscar’s feet.

He watched as parents were torn away from their children. A woman fell and didn’t get up again.

“Hold on tight, Bruno!” Oscar ordered, locking his arm around the boy as he gripped Jennie’s hand so hard he was sure he would crush it.

If they were separated now, they’d never find each other again.

Luckily the street widened slightly, and they managed to burst out of the crushing crowd.

Jennie led them down a side street, and finally into a wide alley.

“State Street is just a block away from here,”

Jennie said as they caught their breath. "The Palmer House will be right there."

Halfway down the alley, they discovered a water barrel. They all ran toward it, desperate to quench their thirst and to cool their burning skin. Oscar felt like a stalk of wheat, shriveled in the boiling sun.

He hoisted the lid off and held Bruno while the boy slurped up water like a thirsty horse.

When he was finally done, Oscar and Jennie took turns, scooping up handfuls of the cool water and gulping them down. They splashed



the soothing water on their faces and down scorched necks and arms.

Oscar sighed with relief.

"You really know your way around the city," he said to Jennie as he dabbed drops of water onto his burned forehead. "You'd make a good tracker."

"My mother was a baker," Jennie said, with a hint of pride. "Bruno and I used to go with her to deliver her cakes and cookies."

"I love cookies," Bruno whispered to Oscar, as though he was sharing a deep secret.

A picture popped into Oscar's mind. He saw Jennie with her braids straight and glossy, Bruno nibbling on a cookie almost as big as his head. He pictured a lady with Bruno's dark curls and Jennie's big brown eyes, standing in the kitchen in a flowered apron.

"My mama got sick," Bruno said softly. "She in heaven."

Jennie glanced at Oscar and he glimpsed the fresh hurt in her eyes.

"My papa's in heaven, too," Oscar said, swallowing the lump in his throat.

"Our father died right after Bruno was born, in an accident," Jennie said. "Mama died six months ago. I promised her I'd keep an eye on Bruno, no matter what."

Oscar thought of his own promise to Papa: to watch over the farm. That promise had kept him going these past two years. But now it was broken.

Would Papa forgive him? Would Oscar forgive himself?

Jennie put her hand on Bruno's head.

"I couldn't let us go to the orphanage," Jennie said.

Her voice dropped very low when she said *orphanage*, as if it was a curse word no one should ever say.

Oscar understood.

He'd heard horror stories about the orphanage in Minneapolis, the city closest to Castle — that it was more like a jail than a home.

Oscar looked at Jennie and Bruno, suddenly wondering what would happen to them. Their home was gone. They were all alone.

What would they do?

But no, Oscar suddenly remembered. They weren't alone.

He picked up Bruno.

They weren't alone because they had Oscar.

"Hey, Bruno," he said. "I bet up in heaven, my papa and your parents are good friends."

Bruno leaned back so he could look Oscar in the eye.

"Like us!" he exclaimed.

His soot-covered face grinned out from under the fancy lady's hat.

Both Oscar and Jennie laughed, and for that second Oscar forgot about the smoke and the flames.

But their smiles didn't last long.

They'd just started walking through the alley again when they heard loud voices. A group of boys swung into the alley from the street. They were walking toward them.

Jennie froze.

Then Oscar saw who they were: the boys from the train station. And there, right in front, with his rattlesnake eyes glowing through the smoke, was Otis Webber.