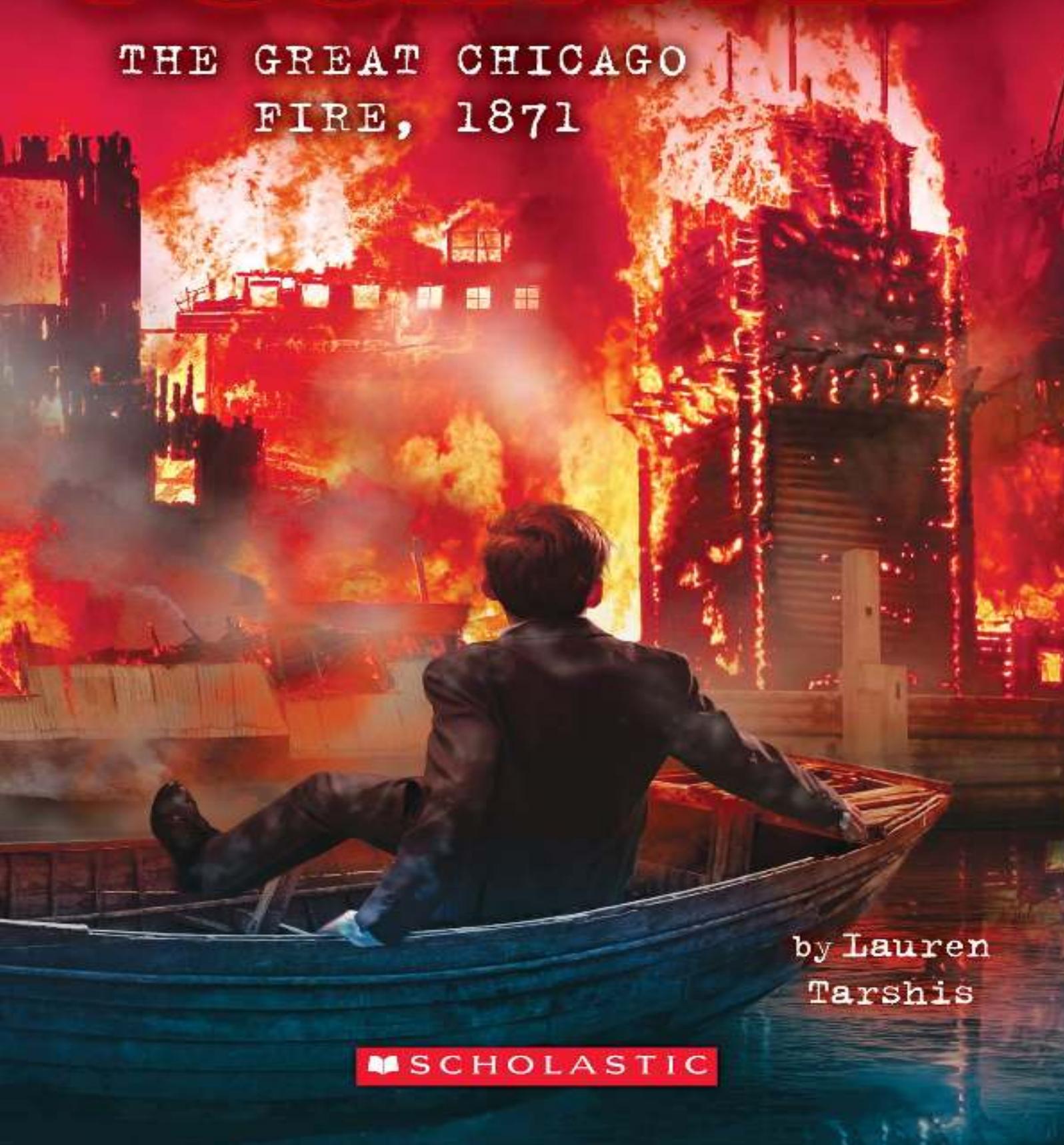


THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING SERIES

I SURVIVED

THE GREAT CHICAGO
FIRE, 1871



by Lauren
Tarshis

 SCHOLASTIC

I SURVIVED

THE GREAT CHICAGO
FIRE, 1871



by **Lauren Tarshis**
illustrated by **Scott Dawson**

Scholastic Inc.

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For Stefanie Dreyfuss, my friend

CHAPTER 1



SUNDAY, OCTOBER 8, 1871

11:30 P.M.

CHICAGO

The fire started inside a barn.

It was tiny at first, a glowing dot, some wisps of white smoke.

But then flames reached up.

They grabbed hold of a pile of hay.

Crackle!

Pop!

And then,

Boom!

Towers of flame shot up, higher, higher, punching through the roof, reaching for the sky.

Voices screamed out.

“Fire! Fire! Fire!”

Alarm bells clanged. Firefighters readied their horses and raced their pumpers through the streets.

But it was too late.

The flames blasted a shower of fiery sparks into the windy sky. Like a swarm of flaming wasps, they flew through the air, starting fires wherever they landed. Shops and homes erupted in flames. Warehouses exploded. Mansions burned.

Crowds of panicked people fled their houses and rushed through the streets and along the wooden sidewalks. They screamed and pushed and knocked one another down, desperate to get away from the choking smoke and broiling flames.

But there was no escape.

The winds blew harder. Flames shot hundreds of feet in the air, spreading across miles and miles. And in the middle of it all was eleven-year-old Oscar Starling.

Oscar had never felt so terrified, not even two years ago, when a killer blizzard hit his family's Minnesota farm.

He was trapped inside a burning house, fighting for his life. He'd made it down the stairs, desperate to escape. And then,

Crash!

A ball of fire and cinders crashed through the window, and the house exploded in flames. And suddenly, Oscar was in the fire's ferocious grip. The flames clawed at him, seared him, threw him to the ground. Smoke gushed up his nose and into his mouth. But the worst was the blistering heat, the feeling of being roasted alive.

Was this the end?

Oscar had never wanted to come to this city.

And now he was sure he was going to die here.

CHAPTER 2



THREE HOURS EARLIER
A TRAIN TO CHICAGO

Don't puke.

That's what Oscar had been telling himself for the past nine hours as the train chugged and swayed and jerked its way toward Chicago. They'd crossed four hundred miles of wide open prairie. For hours, Oscar had been staring out the window. There had been nothing to see but shoulder-high grass and a few scrawny buffalo that seemed to wave good-bye to Oscar with their swishing tails.

Now that they were getting closer to the city, Oscar couldn't bear to look. He slouched down in his seat and glued his eyes to his dusty boots.

"Are you feeling all right, Oscar?" Mr. Morrow said.

"I'm fine, sir," Oscar lied.

"Such a long trip," Mama said, her freckled face shining with excitement. "I feel like we're heading up to the moon!"

Mama and Mr. Morrow both laughed, but nothing seemed funny to Oscar. So much had happened these past few weeks. He was in a state of shock. Mama had married Mr. Morrow. They had sold the Minnesota farm where Oscar had lived his entire life. And now they were moving to a strange city that might as well be the moon.

No wonder Oscar felt sick.

Of course the real nightmare had happened two years ago, when Papa died.

He was killed in a vicious blizzard, a wall of ice and snow and wind that slammed into their prairie town with no warning. Papa had been trying to get home. His wagon crashed into a tree in the

blinding snow.

Even now, Oscar couldn't believe that Papa was gone.

Papa was the toughest man Oscar knew. He'd been a sheriff in Dakota Territory. He'd survived gunfight with one of the most brutal outlaws in the West. He'd carved a farm out of forty acres of wild prairie.

Papa was Oscar's hero.

Those first weeks after Papa died, Oscar was sure his sadness would rip him apart. But he couldn't just lie in bed sobbing. With Papa gone, it was Oscar's job to help Mama with the farm. He made a whispered promise to Papa — to watch over the farm, to work as hard as he could to keep it going.

He worked before dawn and after school. He worked so hard he'd fall into bed every night, too exhausted to think.

Mama wanted Oscar to see his friends.

"Maybe tomorrow," Oscar always answered.

"Then come sit with me awhile," Mama would say. "Let's play cards."

He and Mama and Papa used to play fierce games of hearts. When Papa lost, he'd pretend to fly into a rage, pounding the table while Mama and Oscar doubled over laughing.

But Oscar had no time for cards. All he wanted to do was work.

The seasons passed in a blur of sweat and dirt and aching muscles.

And Oscar would have just kept on going. But then, six months ago, Mr. Charlie Morrow appeared at their door.

Mr. Morrow was an artist for a big Chicago newspaper. He'd come to Castle for his latest project which was to paint scenes of life in a booming little prairie town. Mama was honored when Mr. Morrow stopped by and asked if he could paint their farm.

Each morning for a month, Mr. Morrow would show up just after the sun rose, waving at Mama and Oscar with his paint-stained fingers. "Hello!" he'd sing out.

He was a big man, with jet-black hair and a beard to match. Mama said he reminded her of a giant from a fairy tale. "But the nice kind," she explained.

Oscar liked Mr. Morrow well enough. He made Mama smile, that was for sure.

Most nights after Mr. Morrow packed up his paints, he'd join them for supper. Afterward he and Mama would sit out on the porch and look over the day's paintings.

"Oscar, join us," Mr. Morrow would boom.

But why did Oscar need to look at paintings of his farm? He lived there!

So he'd make excuses and then fall asleep to the sound of Mr. Morrow and Mama's soft laughter drifting upstairs. After Mr. Morrow went back to Chicago, Mama seemed to get a letter from him every single day.

So maybe Oscar shouldn't have been shocked when, two months ago, Mama sat Oscar down under the apple tree with some big news.



“He’s asked me to marry him,” she said.

At first Oscar laughed.

Mr. Morrow? He was nothing like Papa! He was an artist. An artist! Was that even a job?

But then Oscar noticed how Mama’s eyes were twinkling.

“Oscar,” she said. “I want to say yes.”

Oscar stopped laughing.

“He’s a wonderful man,” she said. “And what a life we’ll have with him in Chicago.”

At first Oscar just sat there like he’d been smacked in the head with a shovel.

Leave the farm? Move to Chicago?

What about his promise to Papa?

Oscar begged Mama. He pleaded with her. He tried to make her understand that they needed to stay in Castle.

“Papa wouldn’t want us to leave here!” he exclaimed.

But then Mama looked at Oscar with her hopeful eyes.

“Oscar,” she said quietly, putting her hand up to Oscar’s cheek. Her fingers were like Oscar’s, covered with calluses and scars from all the scrubbing and weeding and washing that filled her days.

“All Papa ever wanted was for us to be happy.”

And Oscar could see that she had made up her mind.

Oscar could have run away, or refused to get on the train.

But he didn't have the guts.

So now here he was, miserable, chugging along with his stomach turning inside out.

The train whistle shrieked.

Woooooo! Woooooo!

“Chicago!” the conductor shouted out. “Ten minutes!”

Oscar's stomach flipped.

Don't puke!

His stomach didn't listen.

He managed to slam open the window just in time to splatter his lunch across the tracks.

Welcome to Chicago.

CHAPTER 3



Oscar stared out the window in shock as the train pulled into the city.

Chicago was called the Queen of the West.

But what an ugly queen!

All along the tracks were factories and warehouses. The sky was smudged dirty brown from coal fires and dark clouds burping out of smokestacks.

Soon enough, they were off the train and standing in the enormous station hall. Every other person smiled and waved at Mr. Morrow.

“Charlie!” a man boomed.

“Welcome back, Mr. Morrow,” said a porter lugging a heavy suitcase.

“Mr. Morrow, I loved your latest pictures!” a pretty woman gushed.

“Good to be back!” Mr. Morrow beamed.

People swarmed around the station — more people than Oscar had seen in all of his life. Everyone was rushing around as if they were late for church.

And suddenly, Oscar noticed the rotten stench that filled the air. He had never smelled anything as disgusting. It was like someone had tossed a hundred skunks into a hot outhouse and left them there for a month.

Oscar could see from Mama’s crinkled-up nose that she noticed it, too.

“The slaughterhouses,” Mr. Morrow said, reading their sickened expressions. “They butcher more hogs in Chicago than anywhere in the world.”

Mr. Morrow went to the baggage room and returned with their three suitcases. Oscar’s was the smallest. Inside was all that was left from his life on the farm: his few clothes and his prized possession — Papa’s sheriff’s badge, a five-pointed silver star.

“Is there somewhere I can freshen up?” Mama asked, smoothing one of the golden curls that had popped out of her bun.

“I’ll show you,” Mr. Morrow said, taking Mama’s arm. “Oscar, can you keep an eye on the bags?”

Oscar nodded.

But as they disappeared into the crowd, Oscar’s heart thumped.

He felt so out of place here, and strangely all alone. A bunch of rough-looking boys lurked around. One of them stared at Oscar. He had bright red hair and strange yellow-tinged eyes that reminded Oscar of a rattlesnake’s. Oscar was relieved when they drifted away.

He took a deep breath and looked around, thinking about Papa’s one visit to Chicago. Papa was just twenty years old at the time. His parents had both died, and Papa had decided to leave his hometown near Boston and head west.

“I was looking for my fortune,” Papa always said.

He landed in a no-name town in Dakota Territory. The town was desperate for a sheriff, and Papa needed a job. For months the place was quiet — until the night a gang of outlaws rode in.

Their leader was Earless Max Kildair.

“Actually, Earless did have one ear,” Papa had explained to Oscar. “He lost the left one blowing up a safe during a bank robbery.”

Papa heard that Earless Kildair was a killer. And sure enough, by morning the town’s bank had been robbed, and one of Papa’s friends was sprawled out dead in the street. Earless and his gang were long gone.

Papa went after the gangster, chasing him all the way to Chicago. He finally found him in a stinking tavern near the river. Papa pulled out his gun, ready to arrest him. But Earless was too quick. He jumped behind the bar and started shooting.

Pow!

A bullet whizzed just past Papa’s head.

Pow!

Papa fired back but missed.

Earless lunged forward with a final shot.

Pow!

The bullet hit Papa in the chest. It should have torn a hole right through Papa’s heart. But it ricocheted off his badge instead, leaving a big dent smack-dab in the center.

Earless escaped in the commotion.

After that, Papa decided he was done chasing outlaws. He heard about free farmland up for grabs in Minnesota. He’d never farmed, but figured he’d give it a try. He ended up in a little town called Castle, where the first person he met was a freckle-faced schoolteacher with the prettiest blue eyes Papa had ever seen.

Mama.

Within the month, they were married. By the next year they had their farm — and Oscar.

“So I found my fortune,” Papa liked to say, kissing Mama on the cheek.

As for Earless, he was still on the loose. Papa heard he was in Chicago, lying low, but still up to
no good.

Oscar's thoughts of Papa were cut short by a whispering voice.

"Can you help me?"

He looked down at a skinny little girl with a yellow cap over two raggedy braids. She stared up at
him with big brown eyes.

"I've lost my parents."

She looked so helpless!

"We'll find them," Oscar said, standing a little taller.

"I think they went this way," she said, leading him by the arm out of the main waiting room.

But then suddenly she let go of his sleeve.

"Sorry," she said.

And then *poof*, she disappeared into the crowd.

An uneasy feeling grabbed hold of Oscar.

Something wasn't right.

He spun around and rushed back to the suitcases.

They were gone.



CHAPTER 4



THIRTY MINUTES LATER

9:00 P.M.

ILLINOIS CENTRAL TRAIN DEPOT

“Those street kids are vicious,” the policeman said. He looked down at Oscar. “Son, you’re lucky you didn’t get stabbed.”

Mama, Mr. Morrow, and Oscar stood with the policeman on the spot where their suitcases had been. The cop, Officer Brennan, was an old buddy of Mr. Morrow’s. He explained that Oscar had been tricked. That little girl wasn’t really lost. She was a crook, part of a band of thieves.

“She distracted you so the others could steal the suitcases,” Officer Brennan said. “Happens here every day.”

Officer Brennan and three other cops had already scoured the station, but there was no sign of the girl or the bags or those rough boys Oscar had seen. Oscar told the policeman about them, too, including the redheaded boy with the strange eyes.

“Otis Webber,” the cop said, his friendly eyes narrowing. “He’s only fourteen years old, but he’s got the heart of a killer. We hear he works for an older guy. They take helpless orphans and turn them into ruthless criminals.”

Oscar shuddered.

“Will you find our suitcases?” Mama said.

“Doubtful, ma’am,” he said, giving them all an apologetic smile before he left.

Mr. Morrow put his arm around Oscar’s shoulders. “I should have warned you,” he said. “In a b

city like this, there are some bad characters.”

“What’s done is done,” Mama said, shaking the worry from her face. “We can all get new clothes. What matters is that here we are, together.”

Mr. Morrow beamed at Mama.

Oscar ducked out from under Mr. Morrow’s arm.

Oscar didn’t care about his clothes. All he cared about was Papa’s badge, which was gone forever.

* * *

It was past 10:00 P.M. when they finally got out of the station and into a cab, a beat-up buggy pulled by a dusty horse. The cabdriver flashed a smile filled with black teeth when he saw Mr. Morrow.

“Charlie!” he cried. “Welcome back!”

Was there anyone in Chicago who didn’t know Mr. Morrow?

“Hello, Joseph!” Mr. Morrow said, patting the man on the shoulder. “Take us to the Palmer House, please.”

Joseph let out a sharp whistle. “Fancy!”

“We’ll have supper there,” Mr. Morrow told Mama and Oscar. “Then we’ll head home. Oscar, I think you’re going to like the house. My father built it. It’s a little far away from things, north of our new park. The best room is my studio. You can look out the windows and see all of Chicago.”

Oscar managed a nod and bit his tongue.

Mr. Morrow’s house would never be home. Home was Papa’s farm, where the air didn’t smell like dead hogs, where the only thieves were the rabbits that stole carrots from the garden.

The horse clattered away from the train tracks and warehouses and onto a wide avenue of grand buildings. Oscar tried not to act like he was impressed, but the buildings were taller than any tree he’d ever climbed.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Mr. Morrow said, smiling proudly. “When I was born, this city was just a little town on a marsh. Today, Chicago is one of the most important cities in the world.”

“It’s beautiful,” Mama said.

But suddenly Mama’s expression darkened.

“Does the sky look odd to you?” she asked, her brow wrinkling with worry.

Oscar saw it, too, a pale orange glow in the sky.

“Must be a fire,” Joseph said matter-of-factly. “We’re having fires practically every night now. Hasn’t rained here in months. The city is bone-dry.”

The word *fire* sent a flash of fear across Mama’s face, and it jolted Oscar, too. Three years ago, a massive forest fire had erupted in the woods north of Castle. It burned thousands of acres of pine and birch trees, and then raced across the prairie toward Castle. Dozens of buildings were burned, including Oscar’s barn. The entire town could have been lost. But just as flames were lapping at the edges of Main Street, a big rainstorm blew in and doused the fire.

“Don’t worry,” Mr. Morrow said, giving Mama a reassuring pat. “Chicago has one of the best fi

departments in the country. We have close to two hundred firemen and a fleet of the best new steam pumpers. That fire will be out before we finish supper.”

The cab lurched to a stop, and Joseph turned around. “And here we are, folks. Palmer House hotel. Finest in the city.”

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 absentmindedly 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 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!

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