

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.