



## P R O L O G U E

The girl was shaken awake. Her mother was leaning over her.

“Kate”—her voice was low and urgent—“listen very closely. I need you to do something for me. I need you to keep your brother and sister safe. Do you understand? I need you to keep Michael and Emma safe.”

“What . . .”

“There isn’t time to explain. Promise me you’ll look after them.”

“But—”

“Oh, Kate, please! Just promise me!”

“I . . . I promise.”

It was Christmas Eve. Snow had been falling all day. As the oldest, Kate had been allowed to stay up later than her brother and sister. That meant that long after the voices of the carolers

had faded away, she'd sat with her parents beside the fire, sipping hot chocolate as they exchanged presents—the children would receive theirs in the morning—and feeling very adult for her four years. Her mother gave her father a small, thick book, very worn and old, that seemed to please him greatly, and he in turn gave her a locket on a gold chain. Inside the locket was a tiny picture of the children—Kate, two-year-old Michael, and baby Emma. Then, finally, it was up to bed, and Kate lay there in the darkness, warm and happy under her blankets, wondering how she would ever fall asleep, and it seemed the very next moment she was being shaken awake.

The door to her room was open and, in the light from the hall, she watched as her mother reached back and unclasped the locket. She bent forward and slid her hands underneath Kate, fastening it around her neck. The girl felt the soft brush of her mother's hair, smelled the gingerbread she'd been cooking that afternoon, and then something wet struck her cheek and she realized her mother was crying.

“Remember your father and I love you very much. And we will all be together again. I promise.”

The girl's heart was hammering in her chest, and she had opened her mouth to ask what was happening when a man appeared in the doorway. The light was behind him, so Kate couldn't see his face, but he was tall and thin and wearing a long overcoat and what looked like a very rumpled hat.

“It's time,” he said.

His voice and that image—the tall man silhouetted in the doorway—would haunt Kate for years, as it was the last time she

saw her mother, the last time her family was together. Then the man said something Kate couldn't hear, and it was as if a heavy curtain was drawn around her mind, obliterating the man in the doorway, the light, her mother, everything.

The woman gathered up the sleeping child, wrapping the blankets around her, and followed the man down the stairs, past the living room where the fire still burned, and out into the cold and darkness.

Had she been awake, the girl would've seen her father standing in the snow beside an old black car, her brother and infant sister swaddled in blankets and asleep in his arms. The tall man opened the back door, and the children's father laid his charges on the seat; then he turned, took Kate from the woman, and laid her beside her brother and sister. The tall man closed the door with a soft thunk.

"You're sure?" the woman said. "You're sure this is the only way?"

The tall man had moved into the glow of a streetlamp and was clearly visible for the first time. To a casual passerby, his appearance would not have inspired much confidence. His overcoat was patched in spots and frayed at the cuffs, he wore an old tweed suit that was missing a button, his white shirt was stained with ink and tobacco, and his tie—this was perhaps the strangest of all—was knotted not once but twice, as if he'd forgotten whether he'd tied it and, rather than glancing down to check, had simply tied it again for good measure. His white hair poked out from beneath his hat, and his eyebrows rose from his forehead like great snowy horns, curling over a pair of bent and patched tortoiseshell

glasses. All in all, he looked like someone who had gotten dressed in the midst of a whirlwind and, thinking he still looked too presentable, had thrown himself down a flight of stairs.

It was when you looked in his eyes that everything changed.

Reflecting no light save their own, they shone brightly in the snow-muffled night, and there was in them a look of such uncommon energy and kindness and understanding that you forgot entirely about the tobacco and ink stains on his shirt and the patches on his glasses and that his tie was knotted twice over. You looked in them and knew that you were in the presence of true wisdom.

“My friends, we have always known this day would come.”

“But what changed?” the children’s father demanded. “There’s been nothing since Cambridge Falls! That was five years ago! Something must’ve happened!”

The old man sighed. “Earlier this evening, I went to see Devon McClay.”

“He’s not . . . he can’t be . . .”

“I’m afraid so. And while it is impossible to know what he told them before he died, we must assume the worst. We must assume he told them about the children.”

For a long moment, no one spoke. The woman had begun crying freely.

“I told Kate we’d all be together again. I lied to her.”

“Darling—”

“He won’t stop till he finds them! They’ll never be safe!”

“You’re right,” the old man said quietly. “He will never stop.”

Whatever “he” they were referring to seemed to require no explanation.

“But there is a way. The one we have always known. The children must be allowed to grow up. To fulfill their destiny—” He stopped himself.

The man and woman turned. At the end of the block, three dark figures, in long black overcoats, stood watching them. The street became very still; even the snowflakes seemed to hover in midair.

“They are here,” the old man said. “They will follow the children. You must disappear. I will find you.”

Before the couple could respond, the old man had opened the door and slid across to the wheel. The three figures were moving forward. The man and woman backed toward the house as the engine woke with a rumbling cough. For a moment, the wheels spun uselessly in the snow; then something caught, and the car skidded away. The figures were running now, passing the man and woman without so much as turning their heads, focused solely on the car that was slipping and sliding down the snowy street.

The white-haired man drove with both hands tight on the wheel. Luckily, it was late, and with the snow and it being Christmas Eve, there was no traffic to slow him down. But as fast as the man drove, the dark figures drew closer. They ran with an eerie, silent grace; every stride covered a dozen yards, the black wings of their overcoats billowing out behind them. Rounding a corner, the car bounced off a parked van, and two of the figures leapt into the air, grabbing on to the town houses that lined the street. The

man glanced in the mirror and saw his pursuers scrambling along the faces of the houses like gargoyles that had broken free.

His eyes showed no surprise, but he pressed the accelerator to the floor.

The car shot across a square, barreling past a midnight crowd emerging from a church. He had driven into the old part of the city, and the car was bumping along cobblestone streets. In the backseat, the children slept on. One of the figures launched itself off the side of a brownstone, landing atop the car with a shuddering crash. A moment later, a pale hand punched down through the roof and began peeling away the metal shell. A second attacker seized the back of the car and dug its heels into the street, tearing grooves through the century-old stones.

“A little further,” the man murmured, “just a little further.”

They entered a park, white with snow and utterly empty, the car skating across the frozen ground. Just ahead, he could see the dark swath of the river. And then everything seemed to happen at once: the old man gunned the engine, the last figure attached itself to the door, the roof was ripped open so the night air poured in; perhaps the only thing that didn't change was the children, who slept through it all, oblivious. Then the car flew off a small rise and was launched out over the river.

It never struck the water. At the last possible moment, it simply vanished, leaving behind three dark shapes that splashed, thrashing, into the river.

A second later and two hundred miles to the north, the car, without a mark on it, pulled up in front of a large gray stone

building. Its arrival had clearly been expected, for a short woman in dark robes came sweeping down the steps to meet it.

Together, she and the old man gathered up the children and carried them inside. They climbed to the top floor, then proceeded down a long corridor decorated with garlands and tinsel. They passed room after room of sleeping children. They turned in at the last doorway. The room was empty save for two beds and a crib.

The nun—the short woman’s name was Sister Agatha—carried the boy and infant girl. She laid the boy in a bed and his young sister in the crib. Neither stirred. The old man placed Kate in the other bed. He drew the quilt up around her chin.

“Poor dears,” Sister Agatha said.

“Yes. And so much depends on them.”

“You believe they’ll be safe here?”

“As safe as they can be. He will hunt for them. That is certain. But the only people alive who know that they are here are you and I.”

“What am I to call them? They’ll need a new surname.”

“How about”—the old man thought for a moment—“P.”

“Just P?”

“Just P.”

“What about the oldest girl? She’ll remember her real name.”

“I will see she doesn’t.”

“Hard to believe it’s really happening, hard to believe . . .” She looked up at her companion. “Will you stay for a while? I lit a fire downstairs, and I still have some of the monks’ ale. It is Christmas, after all.”

“Very tempting. Unfortunately, I must check on the children’s parents.”

Sighing, “Ah me, so it really has begun . . . ,” the woman passed into the hall.

The old man followed her to the door, then paused to look back at the sleeping children. He raised his hand as if in blessing, murmured, “Till we meet again,” and walked out.

The three children slept on, unaware of the new world that awaited them when they awoke.

CHAPTER ONE  
Mrs. Lovestock's Hat



The hat in question was owned by Mrs. Constance Lovestock. Mrs. Lovestock was a woman of some years, even greater means, and no children. She was not a woman who did things by half measures. Take her position on swans. She thought them the most beautiful, graceful creatures in the world.

“So graceful,” she said, “so elegant.”

When one approached her large and sumptuous house on the outskirts of Baltimore, one saw shrubbery cut to look like swans. Statues of swans taking flight. Fountains where a mother swan spat water at baby swans. A birdbath in the shape of a swan where lesser birds could have the honor of bathing. And, of course, actual swans gliding across the ponds that encircled the house, and sometimes waddling, not as gracefully as one might have hoped, past ground-floor windows.

“I do nothing,” Mrs. Lovestock was proud of saying, “by half measure.”

And so it was one night near the beginning of December, while sitting before the fire with her husband, Mr. Lovestock—who took a vacation by himself every summer supposedly to collect beetles, but actually to hunt swans at a private reserve in Florida, blasting them at near-point-blank range with a mad grin on his face—so it was that Mrs. Lovestock sat up on the swan-shaped couch where she had been knitting and announced, “Gerald, I am going to adopt some children.”

Mr. Lovestock took the pipe from his mouth and made a thoughtful sound. He had heard clearly enough what she said. Not “a child.” Rather “some children.” But long years had taught him the futility of direct confrontation with his wife. He decided it wisest to give up some ground with a combination of ignorance and flattery.

“Why, my dear, that is a fabulous idea. You’d make a wonderful mother. Yes, let’s do adopt a child.”

Mrs. Lovestock tutted sharply. “Don’t toy with me, Gerald. I have no intention of adopting just one child. It’d hardly be worth the effort. I think I shall begin with three.” Then she stood, indicating the discussion was over, and strode out of the room.

Mr. Lovestock sighed, replacing the pipe in the corner of his mouth and wondering if there was a place he could go in the summer to hunt children.

Probably not, he thought, and went back to his paper.

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“This is your last chance.”

Kate sat across the desk from Miss Crumley. They were in her office in the north tower of the Edgar Allan Poe Home for Hopeless and Incurable Orphans. The building had been an armory in centuries past, and in the winter, the wind blew through the walls, rattling the windows and freezing the water in the toilets. Miss Crumley’s office was the only room that was heated. Kate hoped whatever she had to say would take a long time.

“I’m not joking, young lady.” Miss Crumley was a short, lumpish woman with a mound of purplish hair, and as she spoke, she unwrapped a piece of candy from a bowl on her desk. The candy was off-limits to children. On their arrival at the Home, as Miss Crumley was explaining the list of dos and don’ts (mostly don’ts), Michael had helped himself to a peppermint. He’d had to take cold showers for a week afterward. “She hadn’t said not to eat them,” he complained. “How was I supposed to know?”

Miss Crumley popped the candy in her mouth. “After this, I’m done. Finished. If you and your brother and sister don’t make yourselves as agreeable as possible so that this lady adopts you, well . . .” She sucked hard on her candy, searching for a suitably terrifying threat. “. . . Well, I just won’t be responsible for what happens.”

“Who is she?” Kate asked.

“Who is she?!” Miss Crumley repeated, her eyes widening in disbelief.

“I mean, what’s she like?”

“Who is she? What’s she like?” Miss Crumley sucked

violently, her outrage rising. “This woman—” She stopped. Kate waited. But no words came. Instead, Miss Crumley’s face turned bright red. She made a gagging sound.

For the briefest of seconds—well, perhaps more like three seconds—Kate considered watching Miss Crumley choke. Then she jumped up, ran around, and pounded her on the back.

A gooey greenish lump flew out of Miss Crumley’s mouth and landed on the desk. She turned to Kate, breathing hard, her face still red. Kate knew better than to expect a thank-you.

“She is”—Miss Crumley gasped—“a woman interested in adopting three children. Preferably a family. That is all you need know! Who is she! The nerve! Go find your brother and sister. Have them washed and in their best clothes. The lady will be here in an hour. And if either one of them does anything, so help me . . .” She picked up the candy and popped it back in her mouth. “. . . Well, I just won’t be responsible.”

As Kate descended the narrow spiral stairs from Miss Crumley’s office, the air grew colder, and she drew her thin sweater more tightly around herself. Adults seeing Kate for the first time always took note of what a remarkably pretty girl she was, with her dark blond hair and large hazel eyes. But if they looked closer, they saw the furrow of concentration that had taken up residence on her brow, the way her fingernails were bitten to the quick, the weary tension in her limbs, and rather than saying, “Oh, what a pretty girl,” they would cluck and murmur, “The poor thing.” For to look at Kate, pretty as she was, was to see someone who lived in constant anticipation of life’s next blow.

Leaving the side door of the orphanage, Kate saw a group of children gathered around a skeletal tree at the edge of the yard. A small girl with thin legs and short, chestnut-colored hair was throwing rocks at a boy in the branches, yelling at him to come down and fight.

Kate pushed through the crowd of laughing, jeering children as Emma picked up another stone.

“What’re you doing?”

Emma turned. There were red circles on her cheeks, and her dark eyes were bright.

“He ripped my book! I was just sitting there reading and he grabbed my book and ripped it! I swear, I didn’t do anything! And now he won’t even come down and fight!”

“It’s not true,” cried the boy in the tree. “She’s crazy!”

“Shut up!” Emma yelled, and threw the rock. The boy ducked behind the tree as it bounced off the trunk.

Emma was small for eleven. All knees and elbows. But every child in the orphanage respected and feared her temper. When cornered or aroused, she would fight like a devil. Kicking and scratching and biting. Kate sometimes wondered whether her sister would have been as fierce if they’d never been separated from their parents. Emma was the only one who had no memory of their mother and father. Even Michael had hazy recollections of being cared for and loved. As far as Emma was concerned, this was the only life she had ever known, and it had one rule: When you stopped fighting, you were finished. Unfortunately, there were always a few older boys who went out of their way to rile her, relishing the way Emma worked herself into a fury. Their favorite

target, not surprisingly, was the children's single-letter surname. Since Kate was the oldest, at fourteen, it was usually her job to calm her sister down.

"We have to find Michael," Kate said. "There's a woman coming to see us."

A hush fell over the children. There had not been a prospective parent at the Edgar Allan Poe Home for Hopeless and Incurable Orphans in months.

"I don't care," Emma said. "I'm not going."

"She'd have to be a loon to want you," called the boy in the tree.

Emma seized a rock and winged it. The boy wasn't quick enough, and it caught him on the elbow.

"Oww!"

"Emma"—Kate took her sister's arm—"Miss Crumley says this is our last chance."

Emma pulled herself free. She stooped and picked up another rock. But it was clear the fight had gone out of her, and Kate waited quietly as Emma tossed the rock from hand to hand, then threw it weakly against the tree.

"Fine."

"Do you know where Michael is?"

Emma nodded. Kate took her hand, and the children parted so they could pass.

The girls found Michael in the woods above the orphanage, exploring a cave he'd discovered the week before. He was pretending it was the mouth of an old dwarf tunnel. All his life, Michael

had been obsessed with stories of magical creatures. Wizards who battled dragons. Knights who fought off maiden-hungry goblins. Clever farmhands outwitting trolls. He read everything he could get his hands on. But he was particularly fond of stories about dwarves.

“They have a long and noble history. And they’re very industrious. Not always combing their hair and mooning about with mirrors the way elves do. Dwarves work.”

Michael had a very low opinion of elves.

The source of this passion was a book titled *The Dwarf Omnibus*, written by one G. G. Greenleaf. Waking up that first morning of their new lives, parentless, in a strange room, Kate had discovered the book tucked into Michael’s blankets. She’d immediately recognized it as their mother’s Christmas present to their father. Over the years, Michael had read the book dozens of times. It was, Kate knew, his way of staying connected to a father he barely remembered. So she tried, and tried to convince Emma, to be understanding when Michael would launch into one of his impromptu lectures. But it wasn’t always easy.

The air in the cave was damp and mossy, but the ceiling was high enough that Kate and Emma could walk upright. Michael was a dozen feet from the entrance, kneeling beside a flashlight. He was just this side of scrawny, and he had the same chestnut hair and dark eyes as his younger sister, though his were hidden behind a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles. People often mistook them for twins, which irritated Michael no end. “I’m a year older,” Michael would say. “I think it’s pretty obvious.”

There was a flash, then a whirring, and Michael’s battered

Polaroid camera spat out a picture. He had found the camera in a junk store in downtown Baltimore a few weeks earlier, along with a dozen packs of film that the owner had more or less given him, and ever since, he had been using it for his exploring game, constantly reminding Kate and Emma how important it was to document your discoveries.

“Here.” Michael showed his sisters a rock he’d just photographed. “What do you think that is?”

Emma groaned. “A rock.”

“What is it?” Kate asked, willing to go along.

“An old dwarf ax head,” Michael said. “There’s water damage, obviously. These are hardly ideal conditions for preservation.”

“That’s funny,” Emma said. “ ’Cause it looks just like a rock.”

“All right, enough,” Kate said, for she could see Michael was about to get upset. She told him about the woman coming to see them.

“You go,” he said. “I’ve got work here.”

Most orphans longed to be adopted. They dreamed of a rich, kind couple whisking them away to a life of comfort and love. Kate and her brother and sister did not. For that matter, they refused to be referred to as orphans.

“Our parents are alive,” Kate would say, or Emma would say, or Michael. “And one day they’re coming back for us.”

Of course, they had nothing to support this belief. They had been left at St. Mary’s Orphanage on the banks of the Charles River in Boston one snowy Christmas Eve ten years earlier, and since that time they had not heard the faintest whisper from their

parents or any other relation. They couldn't even say what the P of their last name stood for. But still, they continued to believe, deep in their hearts, that their parents would one day reappear. This was due entirely to the fact that Kate had never stopped reminding Michael and Emma of their mother's promise, on that last night, that they would all be together again as a family. It made the thought of being claimed by some stranger totally unacceptable. Unfortunately, this time, there were other considerations.

"Miss Crumley says this is our last chance."

Michael sighed and let the rock fall from his hand. Then he picked up his flashlight and followed his sisters out of the cave.

In the past ten years, the children had been in no fewer than twelve different orphanages. Their shortest stay had been two weeks. Their longest by far had been at their first home, St. Mary's. Nearly three years. But then St. Mary's had burned down—along with the Mother Superior, a kind woman named Sister Agatha, who took a special interest in the children but who had a bad habit of smoking in bed. Leaving St. Mary's was the start of a journey that took them from orphanage to orphanage to orphanage. Just as the children would get settled in one place, they would have to move again. Finally, they stopped expecting to stay anywhere more than a few months, stopped trying to make friends. They learned to count only on each other.

The reason behind all this moving about was that the children were, in adoption-speak, "difficult to place." To adopt one, a family had to adopt all three. But a family willing to adopt three

children in a single stroke was a rare thing, and the Miss Crumleys of the world were not long on patience.

Kate understood that if this lady didn't take them, Miss Crumley would cite it as proof that she had tried her best but the children were hopeless, and they'd be shuffled off to the next orphanage. Her hope was that if she and her brother and sister were well behaved, then even if the interview was a failure, Miss Crumley would think twice about sending them away. Not that the children had any great love for their present home. The water was brown. The beds hard. The food made your stomach ache if you ate too much, but if you ate too little, your stomach ached anyway. No, the problem was that as the years had gone by, each new orphanage had been worse than the last. In fact, when they'd arrived at the Edgar Allan Poe Home for Hopeless and Incurable Orphans six months earlier, Kate had thought, This is it, we've reached the bottom. But now she wondered, What if there's someplace even worse?

She didn't want to find out.

Half an hour later, washed and dressed in their best clothes (which was not saying a great deal), the children knocked at the door of Miss Crumley's office.

"Come in."

Kate led Emma by the hand. Michael followed close behind. She had counseled them, "Just smile and don't say a lot. Who knows? Maybe she'll be great. Then we can just stay with her till Mom and Dad come back."

But when Kate saw the large woman wrapped in a coat composed entirely of white feathers, holding a purse in the shape of a swan and wearing a hat from which a swan's head curved upward like a question mark, she knew it was hopeless.

"I suppose these are the foundlings," Mrs. Lovestock said, stepping forward to loom over the children. "Their last name is P, you say?"

"Yes, Mrs. Lovestock," Miss Crumley giggled. She only came up to the giant woman's waist. "They're three of our best. Oh, I do love them so. But painful as it would be to part with them, I could force myself to. Knowing they'd be going to such a wonderful home."

"Hmp." Mrs. Lovestock bent to inspect them, causing the swan's head to dip forward with an air of curiosity.

Kate glanced over and saw Emma and Michael staring wide-eyed at the bird.

"I should warn you now," Mrs. Lovestock said, "I don't go in for any childish higgledy-piggledy. I won't have running, shouting, yelling, loud laughter, dirty hands or feet, rude comments about the bank. . . ." Each time she ticked off something she wouldn't tolerate, the swan's head nodded as if in agreement. ". . . I also don't care for excessive talking, rubbing of the hands, or full pockets. I despise children with full pockets."

"Oh, these children have never had a thing in their pockets, I can assure you, Mrs. Lovestock," said Miss Crumley. "Not a thing."

"In addition, I expect—"

“What’s that on your head?” Emma interrupted.

“Excuse me?” The woman looked startled.

“That thing on your head. What’s that supposed to be?”

“Emma . . . ,” Kate warned.

“I know what it is,” Michael said.

“Do not.”

“Do too.”

“So what is it?” Emma demanded.

Mrs. Lovestock turned on the quivering orphanage director.

“Miss Crumley, what in the world is going on here?”

“Nothing, Mrs. Lovestock, nothing at all. I assure you—”

“It’s a snake,” Michael said.

Mrs. Lovestock looked as if someone had slapped her.

“That’s not a snake,” Emma said.

“It is too.” Michael was studying the woman’s hat. “It’s a cobra.”

“But it’s all white.”

“She probably painted it.” He addressed Mrs. Lovestock. “Is that what you did? Did you paint it?”

“Michael! Emma!” Kate hissed. “Be quiet!”

“I was just asking if she painted—”

“Shhh!”

For what felt like a very long time, there was just the whisper of the radiator and the sound of Miss Crumley nervously clasping and unclasping her hands.

“Never in my life . . . ,” Mrs. Lovestock finally began.

“My dear Mrs. Lovestock,” Miss Crumley twitched.

Kate knew she had to say something. If they were to have any hope of not being sent away, she needed to smooth things over. But then the woman said the thing.

“I understand one can expect only so much from orphans—”

“We’re not orphans,” Kate interrupted.

“Excuse me?”

“Orphans are kids whose parents are dead,” Michael said. “Ours aren’t.”

“They’re coming back for us,” Emma added.

“Pay them no mind, Mrs. Lovestock. Pay them no mind. It’s just idle orphan chatter.” Miss Crumley held up the bowl of sweets. “Candy?”

Mrs. Lovestock ignored her.

“It’s true,” Emma insisted. “They’re coming back. Honest.”

“Listen to me.” Mrs. Lovestock leaned forward. “I am an understanding woman. You may ask anyone. But one thing I will not tolerate is fantasy. This is an orphanage. You are orphans. If your parents had wanted you, they would not have left you on the street like last week’s garbage without so much as a civilized name! P indeed! You should be thankful someone such as myself is willing to excuse your atrocious lack of manners—and your complete ignorance of the most beautiful waterfowl in the world—and take you into my home. Now, what do you have to say for yourselves?”

Kate saw Miss Crumley glaring at her around the woman’s waist. She knew if she didn’t apologize to the Swan Lady, Miss Crumley would almost certainly send them somewhere that

would make the Edgar Allan Poe Home for Hopeless and Incurable Orphans look like a fancy vacation resort. But what was the alternative? Going to live with this woman who insisted that their parents had thrown them away like trash and had no intention of ever returning? She squeezed her sister's hand.

“You know,” she said, “it does look like a snake.”