

JOHN STEPHENS



The poster features three young characters in the center: a girl on the left, a boy with glasses in the middle holding an open book, and a girl on the right. They are set against a dramatic background of a large volcano under a blue sky with a dragon flying in the upper right. The scene is filled with magical light effects and floating particles. The title 'THE FIRE CHRONICLE' is prominently displayed in a large, ornate, gold-colored serif font, with 'THE' in a smaller font above 'FIRE'. The background also includes faint silhouettes of figures in the distance and a red, web-like pattern at the bottom.

THE FIRE CHRONICLE

How far would you go to save your family?

THE BOOKS OF BEGINNING



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About the Book

It's been six months since Kate, Michael and Emma confronted the Dire Magnus, but the trail to their long-lost family remains cold. Then Michael and Emma find the man who was the last person to see them. He knows about a secret map of a distant, mysterious land - maybe this is the clue that will lead them to their parents ...

Meanwhile, Kate's connection to the Book of Time grows ever stronger, and when a dangerous trick traps her in the past, she must find new friends to help her return home.

Once more the children must embark on a daring and perilous quest to find the second Book of Beginning and harness its power. But will it be enough to save them all?

THE FIRE CHRONICLE

THE BOOKS OF BEGINNING
JOHN STEPHENS

RHCP DIGITAL

For Arianne



Prologue



THE BOY WAS small, and new to the orphanage, which meant he had the worst bed in the dormitory, the most uneven, the saggiest, the strangest-smelling; it was little more than a cot, jammed into an alcove at the back of the room. And when the scream came—a scream unlike any the boy had ever heard, the way it seemed to reach into his chest and crush his heart—he was the last of the frightened, shrieking children out the door.

At the bottom of the stairs, the mob of children encountered a dense fog and turned right, stampeding down the hall. The boy was about to follow when two figures emerged from the mist, close on the heels of the children. They were black-garbed, with burning yellow eyes, and held long, jagged swords and stank of rot.

The boy waited till they passed, then fled in the other direction.

He ran blindly, with fear thick in his throat, knowing only that he had to get away, to hide. Then, somehow, he was in the director's office, and there were voices in the hall. He dove beneath a desk, tucking his legs up close.

The door of the office banged open; a light snapped on. A pair of green slippers backed into view, and he heard the orphanage director, a dull bully of a man, begging:

"Please—please, don't hurt me—"

A second man spoke, his voice strangely cold and lilting. "Now, why would I do a thing like that? It's three children I came for."

"So take them! Take three! Take ten! Just don't hurt me!"

The other man stepped closer, the floor groaning under his weight.

"Well, that is generous. Only it's three very special children I'm after. A brother and two sisters. They go by the lovely names of Kate, Michael, and Emma."

"But they're not . . . they're not here anymore. We sent them away! More than a year ago—"

There was a strangled gurgle, and the boy watched as the slippered feet rose, thrashing, into the air. The other man's voice was calm, without a hint of strain.

"And where did you send them? Where do I find them?"

The boy pressed his hands to his ears, but he could still hear the choking, still hear the man's lilting, murderous voice. "Where are the children . . .?"

CHAPTER ONE

The Letter in the Tree



KATE FINISHED WRITING the letter, sealed it in an envelope, then walked over and dropped it into the hollow of an old tree.

He'll come, she told herself.

She'd written to him about her dream, the one that had yanked her out of sleep every night that week. Again and again, she'd lain there in the dark, covered in cold sweat and waiting for her heart to slow, relieved that Emma, lying beside her, hadn't woken, relieved that it had only been a dream.

Except it wasn't a dream; she knew that.

He'll come, Kate repeated. When he reads it, he'll come.

The day was hot and humid, and Kate wore a lightweight summer dress and a pair of patched leather sandals. Her hair was pulled back and cinched with a rubber band, though a few loose strands stuck to her face and neck. She was fifteen and taller than she'd been a year ago. In other respects, her appearance hadn't changed. With her dark blond hair and hazel eyes, she still struck all who saw her as a remarkably pretty girl. But a person did not have to look closely to see the furrow of worry that was etched into her brow, or the tension that lived in her arms and

shoulders, or the way her fingernails were bitten to the quick.

In that respect, truly, nothing had changed.

Kate had not moved from beside the tree, but stood there, absently fingering the gold locket that hung from her neck.

More than ten years earlier, Kate and her younger brother and sister had been sent away from their parents. They had grown up in a series of orphanages, a few that were nice and clean, run by kind men and women, but most of them not so nice, and the adults who ran them not so kind. The children had not been told why their parents had sent them away, or when they were coming back. But that their parents would eventually return, that they would all once more be a family, the children had never doubted.

It had been Kate's duty to look after her brother and sister. She had made that promise the night her mother had come into her room that Christmas Eve so long ago. She could picture it still: her mother leaning over her, fastening the golden locket around her small neck, as Kate promised that she would protect Michael and Emma and keep them safe.

And year after year, in orphanage after orphanage, even when they had faced dangers and enemies they could never have imagined, Kate had been true to her word.

But if Dr. Pym didn't come, how would she protect them now?

But he will come, she told herself. He hasn't abandoned us.

If that's so, said a voice in her head, why did he send you here?

And, unable to help herself, Kate turned and looked down the hill. There, visible through the trees, were the crumbling brick walls and turrets of the Edgar Allan Poe Home for Hopeless and Incurable Orphans.

In her defense, it was only when Kate was frustrated or tired that she questioned Dr. Pym's decision to send her and Michael and Emma back to Baltimore. She knew he hadn't really abandoned them. But the fact remained: of all the orphanages the children had lived in over the years—one of which had been next to a sewage treatment plant; another had made groaning noises and seemed to be always catching on fire—the Edgar Allan Poe Home for Hopeless and Incurable Orphans was the worst. The rooms were freezing in the winter, boiling in the summer; the water was brown and chunky; the floors squished and oozed; the ceilings leaked; it was home to warring gangs of feral cats. . . .

And as if that weren't enough, there was Miss Crumley, the lumpy-bodied, Kate-and-her-brother-and-sister-hating orphanage director. Miss Crumley had thought she'd gotten rid of the children for good last Christmas, and she had been less than pleased to have them turn up on her doorstep a week later, bearing a note from Dr. Pym saying that the orphanage at Cambridge Falls had been closed due to "an infestation of turtles," and would Miss Crumley mind watching the children till the problem was resolved.

Of course Miss Crumley had minded. But when she'd attempted to call Dr. Pym to inform him that under no circumstances could she accept the children and that she was returning them on the next train, she'd found that all the information Dr. Pym had previously given her (phone number for the orphanage, address and directions, testimonials from happy, well-fed children) had disappeared from her files. Nor did the phone company have any record of a number. In fact, no matter how much she dug, Miss Crumley was unable to find any evidence that the town of Cambridge Falls actually existed. In the end, she'd been forced to give in. But she let the children know that they were unwelcome, and she took every opportunity to corner

them in the hallways or the cafeteria, firing questions while poking them with her pudgy finger.

"Where exactly is this Cambridge Falls?"—*poke*—"Why can't I find it on any maps?"—*poke*—"Who is this Dr. Pym fellow?"—*poke, poke*—"Is he even a real doctor?"—*poke, poke, poke*—"What happened up there? I know something fishy's going on! Answer me!"—*poke, poke, poke, pinch, twist*.

Frustrated at having had her hair pulled for the third time in one week, Emma had suggested that they tell Miss Crumley the truth: that Dr. Stanislaus Pym was a wizard, that the reason Miss Crumley couldn't find Cambridge Falls on a map was that it was part of the magical world and therefore hidden from normal (or in her case, subnormal) humans, that as far as what had happened there, the three of them had discovered an old book bound in green leather that had carried them back through time, that they'd met dwarves and monsters, fought an evil witch, saved an entire town, and that pretty much any way you looked at it, they were heroes. Even Michael.

"Thanks," Michael had said sarcastically.

"You're welcome."

"Anyway, we can't say that. She'll think we're crazy."

"So what?" Emma had replied. "I'd rather be in a loony bin than this place."

But in the end, Kate had made them stick to their story. Cambridge Falls was an ordinary sort of place, Dr. Pym was an ordinary sort of man, and nothing the least bit out of the ordinary had happened. "We have to trust Dr. Pym."

After all, Kate thought, what other choice did they have?

Faint strains of music were drifting up the hill, reminding Kate that today was the day of Miss Crumley's party, and she looked down through the trees to the large yellow tent that had been erected on the orphanage lawn. For the past two weeks, every child in the orphanage had been working nonstop, weeding, mulching, cleaning

windows, trimming hedges, hauling trash, collecting the carcasses of animals that had crawled into the orphanage to die, all for the sake of a party to which they were not even invited.

“And don’t let me catch you peering out the windows at my guests!” Miss Crumley had warned the assembled children at breakfast. “Mr. Hartwell Weeks has no desire to see your grubby little faces pressed against the glass.”

Mr. Hartwell Weeks was the president of the Maryland Historical Society, in whose honor the party was being given. The society ran a weekly bus tour of “historically significant buildings” in the Baltimore area, and as the Home had been an armory in some long-ago war, Miss Crumley was determined to see it added to the list. She could then—Miss Crumley had this on good authority—charge groups of hapless tourists ten dollars a head for the privilege of stomping through the orphanage grounds.

“And if any of you mess this up”—she’d taken particular care to glare at Kate and her brother and sister as she said this—“well, I’m always getting calls from people who need children for dangerous scientific experiments, the sort of thing they don’t want to waste a good dog on; I could easily volunteer a few names!”

The guests were now beginning to arrive, and Kate watched as men in blue blazers and white pants, women in creams and pastels, appeared around the side of the orphanage and hurried toward the shade of the tent. In truth, she was only half watching. Once again, she was thinking of her dream. She could hear the screams, see the yellow-eyed creatures stalking through the fog, hear the man’s voice saying her and her brother’s and sister’s names. Had the events in her dream already happened, or were they about to? How much time did she and her siblings have?

She trusted Dr. Pym; she really did. But she was scared.

“Well, she’s done it again!”

Kate turned to see her brother, Michael, huffing up the slope. He was red-faced and sweating, and his glasses had slipped down to the end of his nose. A tattered canvas bag was slung across his chest, the pouch resting on his hip.

Kate forced a smile.

"Done what again?"

"Gotten in trouble," Michael said with put-on exasperation. "Miss Crumley caught her trying to steal ice cream meant for the party. I thought she was going to have a heart attack. Miss Crumley, I mean, not Emma."

"Okay."

"That's it? You're not angry?" Michael adjusted his glasses and frowned. "Kate, you know Dr. Pym sent us here to hide. How can we keep a low profile if Emma's always getting into trouble?"

Kate sighed. She had heard all this before.

"She needs to learn to act more responsibly," Michael continued. "To use her head. I can't imagine I was so careless at her age."

He said this as if he were referring to some distant era in the past.

"Fine," Kate said. "I'll talk to her."

Michael nodded his approval. "I was hoping you'd say that. I've got the perfect quote. Maybe you can slip it in. Just a moment. . . ." He reached into his bag, and Kate knew without looking that he was taking out *The Dwarf Omnibus*. Just as she clung to her locket, Michael treasured the small leather-bound book. The night they'd been taken from their parents, their father had tucked it into his son's blankets, and, over the years, Michael had read and reread the *Omnibus* dozens of times. Kate knew it was his way of staying close to a father he scarcely remembered. It had also had the effect of giving him a deep appreciation of all things dwarfish. This had come in handy in Cambridge Falls when they had helped a dwarfish king claim his throne. For that service, Michael had been given a silver badge by King

Robbie McLaur, and named Royal Guardian of All Dwarfish Traditions and History. More than once, Kate and Emma had come upon him, silver badge pinned to his chest, staring at himself in the mirror and striking somewhat ridiculous poses. Kate had warned Emma not to tease him.

"Honestly," Emma had said, "it would be too easy."

"Now, where was it. . . ." The *Omnibus* was the size and shape of a church hymnal, its black leather cover worn and scarred. Michael flipped through pages. "Oh, here's a story about two elf princes who started a war over which one had the shiniest hair. So typical. If I was an elf, I think I'd die from embarrassment."

Michael had a very low opinion of elves.

"Here we go! It's a quote from King Killin Killick—that's his real name, K-I-L-L-I-N, not a nickname because he did a lot of killing, though he did that too. So he says, 'A great leader lives not in his heart, but in his head.'" Michael snapped the book shut and smiled. "Head, not heart. That's the key. That's what she needs to learn. Yes, sir."

His argument made, Michael settled his glasses once more upon his nose and waited for his sister to respond.

Michael was nearly a year older than Emma. Nearly, but not quite, which meant that for a few weeks every year, the two of them were technically the same age. And every year, it drove Michael a little crazy. Being the middle child, he clung to his sliver of superiority. It didn't help matters that he and Emma were frequently mistaken for twins. They had the same chestnut hair, the same dark eyes; they were both small and scrawny-limbed. Kate knew that Michael lived in fear of Emma getting a growth spurt before he did. Indeed, for a while, she'd noticed Michael trying to hold himself as straight and rigid as possible, as if hoping to give at least the appearance of greater height. But Emma had kept asking if he had to go to the bathroom, and finally he'd stopped.

In five days, he would be thirteen. Kate knew he couldn't wait. For that matter, neither could she.

"Thanks. I'll remember that."

He nodded, satisfied. "So what were you writing to Dr. Pym? I saw you put the letter in the tree."

This was how they communicated with the wizard. Letters placed in the hollow of the tree would reach him immediately. Or so the children had been given to believe. As they had not heard from the wizard since arriving in Baltimore, Kate sometimes wondered if all the notes she'd dropped in the tree were sitting there, unread.

Kate shrugged. "Just asking how much longer we'll be here."

"It's been almost eight months."

"I know."

"Seven months and twenty-three days, to be precise."

Seven months and twenty-three days, Kate thought. And suddenly she remembered waking up on Christmas morning, having just returned to the present, and being told that Dr. Pym and Gabriel had left in the night, that Cambridge Falls was no longer safe, that the three of them were being sent back to Baltimore.

On some level, Kate hadn't been surprised. The night before, alone on the witch's boat, she had learned enough to know that their adventure was far from over. She'd tried to explain the situation to Michael and Emma, gathering them in the mansion library, and reminding them how the *Atlas*, the emerald-green book that let them move through time, was only one of three legendary Books called the Books of Beginning.

"It turns out there's a prophecy. Three children are supposed to find the Books and bring them together. Everyone thinks we're the children. They'll be looking for us."

"Who will?" Emma had demanded, still upset that Gabriel, her friend, had left without telling her. "The stupid

witch is dead! Her stupid boat went over the waterfall!"

That was when Kate had told them about the Countess escaping from the boat at the last moment, how she'd lain in wait for fifteen years and had attacked Kate when they'd returned to the present, how Kate had used the *Atlas* to take the witch deep into the past and abandon her.

"So I was right," Emma had said. "She's dead. Or as good as."

"Yes. But it's not her we have to worry about."

And Kate had told them about the Countess's master, the Dire Magnus. She'd described the violin that had heralded his arrival, how he'd taken over the Countess's body, how even Dr. Pym had seemed in awe of his power. The Dire Magnus needed them, she'd explained, for only through the three of them could he find the Books.

Snow had been falling past the library windows, the world outside silent and white. Kate had had to force herself to go on.

"There's one more thing. For the past ten years, all this time we've been going from orphanage to orphanage, the Dire Magnus has been holding Mom and Dad prisoner. It's up to us to free them. But for that, we'll need the Books."

The next day, the children had packed up their few possessions, Kate stuffing the *Atlas* deep inside her bag, and returned to Baltimore.

Now, standing there on the hillside, with the late-summer air warm and heavy against her skin, Kate thought of the *Atlas*. By the end of their adventure in Cambridge Falls, she had learned to command its magic at will. She knew she could make it carry her and Michael and Emma through time and space.

If Dr. Pym doesn't come, she told herself, I can still save them.

"Hey, I almost forgot. Did you hear what happened at St. Anselm's?"

Kate whipped her head around. "What?"

"I heard some kids talking. Some sort of gang or something broke in last night. They're saying Mr. Swattley—remember him?—they're saying he was murdered. Hey—what's wrong?"

Kate was trembling. St. Anselm's was the orphanage the three of them had lived at before first coming to Baltimore. It was also the orphanage from her dream.

"Michael . . ." She tried to keep her voice steady. ". . . I can depend on you, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"If I weren't here, I could depend on you to look after Emma. To be patient with her. To be a leader."

"Kate—"

"Just promise me. Please."

There was a long pause, then he said, "Of course."

And she opened her mouth to tell him about her dream, about all her dreams, not just the one she'd been having that week, but she saw that Michael was looking past her, away through the trees. She followed his gaze.

All summer long, it had scarcely rained, day after cloudless day. But there, massed along the horizon, was a range of thick black clouds. They were moving; they rolled toward the children, growing larger and darker with each passing second. It seemed to Kate that a great dark curtain was being drawn across the sky.

She said, "We need to find Emma."

CHAPTER TWO

The Storm



MICHAEL AND KATE came sprinting down out of the trees and onto the asphalt of the orphanage playground. To their left, beneath the yellow tent and a clear blue sky, Miss Crumley's party continued undisturbed. To the children's right, the black clouds were closing in fast.

Michael stopped.

"What're you doing?" Kate demanded. "We have to—"

"Emma! She's locked in Miss Crumley's office! For stealing the ice cream! We need the keys!"

Kate stared at him, her mind working feverishly. Their enemies had found them. She had no doubt about that. Only the *Atlas* could save them now. But it was hidden—

"Can you get them? If I get the *Atlas*, can you get the keys?"

Michael seemed frozen, his assurance of moments before now gone.

"Michael!"

"Y-yes," he stammered. "I can get them!"

"Then meet me at her office! Hurry!"

And Kate turned and ran for the orphanage.

When she crashed through the doors, Kate saw children clustered at the windows, oohing in amazement as the

clouds rolled toward them. She didn't bother telling them to get back. Once she and her brother and sister were gone, the other children would be safe. Kate raced along the hall to the basement stairs, leaping down the steps three at a time. On returning to the Edgar Allan Poe Home for Hopeless and Incurable Orphans, the first thing Kate had done was to wrap the *Atlas* in two heavy-duty plastic bags and, with Michael and Emma standing lookout, sneak down to the basement. Using a spoon from the cafeteria, she had pried out three loose bricks from the wall behind the furnace and placed the *Atlas* inside.

The basement was empty, and Kate retrieved the scarred spoon from under the furnace and began to pry free the bricks. At first, Kate had come down regularly, in the middle of the night, to check that the *Atlas* hadn't been disturbed. But she had not visited the basement in months. The truth was, no matter where she was, Kate could feel the presence of the *Atlas*. She was bound to the book; it was a part of her now. And as she dropped the last brick onto the floor and drew out the heavy, plastic-wrapped package, her hands trembled with excitement.

. . .

There were perhaps forty men and women gathered beneath the tent, the sun shining through the yellow canvas giving them a distinctly malarial hue. The men wore blue blazers with gold buttons and had identical red turtles sewn onto their breast pockets. The women favored long, shapeless sundresses and broad-brimmed hats, all of which were in various states of floral explosion. There was a table set with plates of gelatinous yellow cake and bowls of liquefied ice cream. Another table offered pitchers of iced tea and lemonade. A string quartet, sweating through their tuxedos, played languidly in the corner.

Michael immediately spotted Miss Crumley through the crowd. The orphanage director was wearing a dress the color of egg yolk and talking to a woman with the longest, thinnest neck Michael had ever seen—her head looked as if it were balanced atop a noodle—and a short, doughy sort of man. He had doughy hands, doughy cheeks; even the rolls of skin at the back of his neck had a white puffiness, as if he were only wanting another half hour in the oven and he would be cooked and ready to serve. The man was talking loudly and waving his fork, and from the way Miss Crumley hung on his every word, Michael guessed that this must be Mr. Hartwell Weeks, president of the historical society, in the doughy flesh.

“Reenactments!” he announced, twirling his fork. “Reenactments, my dear Miss Crummy—”

“Crumley,” the orphanage head corrected.

“—that’s how you sell history to the masses! You want to join the bus tour, you need a high-class reenactment!”

“Yes, quite,” cooed the noodle-necked woman as her head swayed this way and that.

“Re-*what*?” Miss Crumley leaned in. “I don’t understand.”

Michael came up behind the group, nervously gripping and regripping the strap of his bag. How was he supposed to get her to give him the keys to her office? Should he say there’d been a fire? Or a flood? He had to think of something fast.

“Reenactments! Pick a historical event and act it out! Put on a bit of a show! Now, your place here”—the man flicked his fork in the direction of the orphanage, accidentally tossing a bit of cake onto the hat of a nearby woman—“why is it historically significant? Hmm? What’s it got going?”

“Well, it was built in 1845—”

“Boring! I’m asleep already!”

“Then it served as an armory during the Civil War—”

"Better, better. Keep going, Crummy! This is the stuff!"

"And it was attacked by Confederate forces!"

"Ha! Jackpot!"

"Oh yes!" Michael could see Miss Crumley warming to her subject, a mustache of sweat glistening on her upper lip. "And can you believe it, those beasts shot cannonballs at the north tower! That's where I keep my office! Why, just imagine if I had been there!"

She did not explain how this might have been possible.

Michael felt a cool breeze brush the back of his neck. The storm was coming. By now Kate would have the *Atlas*. He was running out of time. . . .

"Perfect!" Mr. Hartwell Weeks squatted down, his doughy palms held out before him. "I see it now! The battle for the orphanage! The heartless rebel forces! The roar of cannon fire! *Boom! Boom!* Dead orphans litter the ground like confetti! You stage it, Crummy—"

"Crumley, please. And it wasn't an orphanage then—"

"Don't let details ruin a good show! You stage the battle and we'll put you on the tour! I've got the Confederate uniforms. I can get you a deal on the cannons. You'd only have to provide the dead orphans!"

"Yes, quite," clucked Noodle Neck.

"Not real dead orphans, of course. We're not savages."

"Miss Crumley," Michael said.

The orphanage director didn't hear him. Her mind was lost amid visions of mock carnage and the busloads of dollars that would soon be arriving at her door.

"Mr. Weeks"—she rubbed her hands together greedily—"doesn't ten dollars a visitor seem a bit cheap? Isn't twelve more appropriate—"

"Twelve? Ha!" The doughy man prodded her stomach with his fork, forcing out a giggle. "You're a hungry one, aren't you? All right then—"

"*Miss Crumley!*"

Conversation around them stopped. Michael saw Miss Crumley stiffen. The spaghetti-necked woman peered down at him, the curve of her neck forming an upside-down U.

"Crummy," drawled Mr. Hartwell Weeks, "I think you've got a dead-orphan volunteer."

Miss Crumley turned slowly about. Her smile had remained frozen, but her eyes betrayed the fury that was coursing through her. She said, in an only moderately strangled voice, "Yes, my dear?"

"I need the keys to your office," Michael said, nervously adjusting his glasses. "Something . . . very bad is about to happen."

In the end, that was the best he could think of.

"Did you hear?" Mr. Weeks bellowed to the party. "Something very bad! Like what, boy? You think Johnny Reb is going to attack again? By gum, I wish he would! I'd show those rebel dogs a thing or two! Ha! Like that!" He jabbed his fork at an ancient man who was supporting himself on a pair of canes, shouting, "Go back to Dixie!" as the old man tried to hobble away.

Miss Crumley brought her face down to Michael's, lowering her voice so that only he could hear.

"Listen to me, you little fiend, you turn around right this instant and go back inside. You hear me?"

"No, you don't understand—"

"I said turn around!" She was hissing, showering Michael with spittle. "Unless you want the same treatment as your hoodlum of a sister—"

Suddenly, a woman's hat blew off her head and cartwheeled across the lawn. Then a pile of napkins, stacked neatly on a table, blew away, first one by one, then in twos and threes, and, finally, in a great fluttering mass, like a flock of birds taking flight.

"I say, Crummy"—Mr. Hartwell Weeks was pointing with one doughy finger—"those are some nasty-looking clouds."

And the entire party turned to look just as the tide of black clouds blotted out the sun. It was as if night had fallen in an instant. There was a collective gasp, and Michael's heart sank as he saw the clouds swelling higher and higher, like the gathering of some great dark wave. Then he smelled the tang of ozone and looked to see a gray wall of rain sweeping toward them from across the playground, swallowing up everything in its path, and Mr. Hartwell Weeks, scourge of the Confederate army, shrieked, "Run for your lives!" and the party exploded into chaos. Rain pummeled the tent. Michael was knocked to the ground, and, as he struggled to rise, he could hear the orphanage director screaming, "It's just a shower! It will blow over! I have gelato!" But the guests were running across a swampy lawn already littered with dozens of trampled sun hats, and no one paid her any mind.

Michael had just gotten to his feet when he was seized by the arm and wrenched around.

"This is all your fault!" Miss Crumley's hair was a sodden wreck. Lines of green mascara streamed down her cheeks. Her guests were gone. Even the musicians had run away, clutching their instruments. "I don't know how, but I know this is your fault!"

It occurred to Michael that for once the woman was absolutely correct. But before either could say another word, a gust of wind whipped across the lawn, and the tent, which had broken free of its anchors, rose into the air like a giant yellow sail. In a panic, Miss Crumley released Michael and grabbed at one of the loose ropes. She was lifted off her feet and carried along, with a hard bounce here and there, till she finally let go and dropped, face-first, into a puddle.

Michael immediately ran to her side.

"Help me up!" the woman commanded. She was covered in mud, she'd lost both shoes, and her dress was ripped. "Help me up, you villain!"

"I'm sorry about this," Michael said. "Honestly." And he reached into her pocket and pulled out her keys.

Miss Crumley's cries of "Thief!" followed him to the door of the orphanage.

Inside, it was pandemonium. Children ran about in the darkness, shrieking with delight at the wildness of the weather.

"Michael!" Kate appeared out of the crowd, breathless, her eyes wide with alarm; she was holding the *Atlas* tight against her chest, not caring who saw it.

"Did you get—"

"Yes!"

And it was then, as Michael held up the ring of keys, that they heard the first scream. It came from outside, still some distance away; but it cut through the rain and the wind and froze every child in the hall. Michael looked at his sister; they both knew what had made the sound: a *morum cadi*—a Screecher—one of the reeking, half-alive monsters they had fought in Cambridge Falls. And now, as the cry tore through the orphanage, Michael felt the familiar suffocating panic.

It's really happening, he thought. They've found us.

The scream died away. The children in the hall came back to life; but the fear was on them, and they clung to one another and cried. Kate snatched the keys from Michael's hand and took off running down the hall, shouting for him to follow.

Miss Crumley's office was in the north tower, atop a steep corkscrew of stairs. Michael and Kate raced upward in darkness. Soon, they could hear Emma above them, hammering at the office door, crying, "Let me out! Let me out! Someone help!"

"Emma!" Kate shouted. "It's us! We're here!"

She found the keyhole by touch, and a moment later, the door was open and Emma, the youngest of the family, their little sister, was in her arms.

"You're okay?" Kate asked. "You're not hurt?"

"I'm fine! But did you hear the scream?"

"I know." And Kate stepped into the office, motioning for Michael to follow her and shut the door.

Miss Crumley's office was a small, round room with four windows spread out evenly from the door. There was a desk, two chairs, a steel filing cabinet, and, propped against the wall, a chipped wooden wardrobe.

"Kate!"

Emma was at one of the windows; Michael and Kate rushed over as lightning shuddered across the sky. Far below them, three figures had emerged from the woods and were moving across the asphalt yard toward the orphanage. The children recognized the Screechers' jerky gait. All three of the creatures held naked swords.

Kate quickly told them her plan. She would have the *Atlas* take them to Cambridge Falls. If they left, the other children at the orphanage would be safe.

"Hurry," Kate said. "Take—"

Just then the window shattered, and a half-decayed gray-green hand reached in and seized Kate by the arm. Emma screamed and grabbed Kate's other arm, the one that was holding the *Atlas*. Through the broken window, Michael could see the black shape of the Screecher as it clung to the wall of the tower.

"Michael!" Emma shouted. "Help me!"

Michael jumped forward, hugged Kate around the waist, and began pulling her away from the window. Gusts of rain blew into the office. For a moment, Michael thought they were gaining ground; then he looked and saw that the creature was still gripping Kate's arm and had actually begun to crawl into the room.

"Stop!" Kate said. "You're just pulling it in! Let me go!"

"What?" Michael's face was still buried in her side. "No! You—"

"Let go! I know what I'm doing! Now! Do it!"

There was such command in her voice that Michael and Emma both released her. The Screecher had half its body inside the room, its fingers digging into the flesh of Kate's forearm. A deep hiss gurgled from its throat. Michael saw his sister work several fingers between the pages of the *Atlas*, and he realized what she was going to do.

Kate looked at Michael and their eyes met.

"Remember," she said, "whatever happens, take care of Emma."

"But—"

"Remember your promise."

And then she and the creature both vanished.

"Kate!" Emma cried. "Where'd she go?"

"She . . . she took it into the past," Michael gasped. "Like she did with the Countess. She took it into the past to get rid of it."

His heart was hammering in his chest. He placed a hand on the desk to steady himself.

"So why didn't she come back?" Emma's face was wet, whether from rain, or tears, or both, Michael didn't know. "She should've come back right away!"

Emma was right. If the *Atlas* had worked as it should have, and Kate had left the Screecher in the past, then she should've returned to the exact moment she'd left. So where was she?

The cry of a Screecher echoed up the tower, and they heard boots pounding on the stairs, growing closer and louder. The children backed away from the door.

Michael heard Emma shout his name.

What was he supposed to do? What could he do?

Then the door flew open, revealing the dark, ragged form of a Screecher, and at that same moment, a pair of hands seized the children from behind.

CHAPTER THREE

The Devil of Castel del Monte



“AND HERE WE are.”

They stepped out into a narrow alley. Crumbling stone walls bounded them on either side and ran down to an empty square. Behind them, the alley ended in a high stone wall, in the middle of which was the wooden door they’d come through. Raising his eyes above the wall, Michael could see a grove of olive trees climbing up the hill. The sky was a perfect deep blue, and the air was hot and dry and silent. Michael glanced at his sister; Emma was taking in their new surroundings and appeared unhurt. That, at least, was something.

Michael turned to the man beside them.

He was tall and thin, with unruly white hair, a rather shabby tweed suit, and a dark green tie that looked as if it had recently escaped a fire. The stem of an old pipe poked from the pocket of his jacket, and he wore a pair of bent and patched tortoiseshell glasses. He was exactly as Michael remembered.

Straightening his own glasses, Michael coughed and put out his hand.

“Thank you, sir. You saved our lives.”

Dr. Stanislaus Pym took the boy’s hand and shook it.

“Of course,” said the wizard. “You’re most welcome.”

As the Screecher had crashed through the door of Miss Crumley’s office, Michael had felt a hand on his shoulder and had whipped his head around, thinking that another of the *morum cadi* had snuck up behind them and the end had come. But the hand on his shoulder, like the hand on Emma’s shoulder, had not belonged to a Screecher. To his complete surprise, Michael had seen the wizard, Stanislaus Pym, leaning toward them out of the wardrobe, and before Michael could utter a word, he and his sister had been yanked inside and the door had slammed shut. Michael had found himself in darkness, crushed between the side of the wardrobe and the wizard’s elbow. His nostrils had been filled with the smell of Dr. Pym’s tobacco and the moist, cabbagey odor of Miss Crumley’s shoes. Out in the office, the Screecher was heard tossing aside chairs as it leapt toward them; then Dr. Pym had murmured, “One more turn,” there had been a sharp click, and just as Michael had been certain that a sword was going to come splintering through the wardrobe wall, Dr. Pym had pushed open the door and both the Screecher and Miss Crumley’s office had vanished, replaced by stone walls and blue sky and silence.

“Would you two stop shaking hands?!” Emma shouted. “What’s wrong with you?”

Michael released the wizard’s hand. “I was just being polite.”

“Dr. Pym!” Emma’s voice was high and desperate. “You have to go back! You have to find Kate! She—”

“Used the *Atlas*. I know. Tell me exactly what happened.”

As quickly as they could, Michael and Emma told him about the storm, about being trapped in the tower, how the Screecher had grabbed Kate, how Kate and the creature had both disappeared. . . .

“She must’ve tried to take it into the past,” Michael said, and he told the wizard—who, due to his abrupt departure from Cambridge Falls eight months earlier, was still in the

dark regarding certain events—how the Countess had reappeared on Christmas Eve and how Kate had discovered that she could use the *Atlas* without a photograph, how she had taken the witch deep into the past and abandoned her.

“I’m sure she did the same thing with the Screecher,” Michael said. “Only she didn’t come back.”

“So you gotta find her!” Emma cried. “Hurry!”

“Yes, of course,” said the wizard. “Now, if you go straight ahead, on the other side of the square is a café. Wait for me there.”

“But, Dr. Pym,” Michael had to ask, “where are we?”

“Italy,” came the answer.

And with that, the wizard turned and stepped toward the wooden door through which they had come. Michael was confused. Where was Miss Crumley’s wardrobe? How were they suddenly in Italy? Where was Dr. Pym going? Then he saw the wizard take an ornate gold key from his pocket, slide it into the lock, step across to the other side of the wall, and shut the door behind him. There was the same distinct *click* as before. Curious, Michael walked over, listened for a moment, then opened the door.

A goat stared back at him.

“He’ll find her.” Emma hadn’t moved, but she was hugging herself as if she might fall apart at any moment. “Dr. Pym will find her.”

Michael said nothing.

Together, they walked silently down the alley. When they got to the square, Michael saw they were on the side of a hill and that the town was of no size whatsoever. A church loomed on their left. A white dog loped past. Across the square stood the café. It had a red awning and two empty tables out front.

A curtain of colored beads hung over the door, and the children passed through them into a well-lit, tile-floored room, with rough rock walls like the inside of a cave. The café was half filled with older men and women, and there