

# CHAPTER 1

CHARLEY—FRIDAY: 12:22 HOURS

I turned my back on my best friend's grave as her black-suited family gathered about it. A cold wind whipped around the eaves of the nearby church. Crows, their feathers as black as the mourners' clothes, sprang from the tops of gravestones, the beat of their wings sounding like gunfire in the bleak December morning.

Suddenly, the fear that my friend might just reach out and wrap her cold, white fingers around my ankle froze my heart. My skin prickled like goose bumps and I thought I was going to vomit. I heard a thump as a loose clump of earth broke free from the grave wall and dropped onto the coffin lid. The sound made me snap to attention as if I'd just been yelled at. Stuffing a bony fist into my mouth, I bit down and stifled the urge to scream. Then I placed one foot in front of the other and staggered away. I leaned against a nearby tree and crumpled.

Grief took me, its soulless fingers squeezing at my heart. The tears that had been standing in the corners of my eyes since Natalie's coffin was carried into the church now spilled down my cheeks in hot streaks. Behind me, I heard the priest's soft voice, only just above a whisper.

"Heavenly Father, we thank you for giving us Natalie to love and care for. Now that Natalie's life among us is over, we give her back to you . . ."

"No!" I sobbed into my hands. "You can't have her back."

Just as I felt my knees buckle, I heard a rustle behind me. My father. He'd followed me away from the grave. Wrapping his arm about my waist, he pulled me toward him.

"Charley—" he began.

"Get off me!" I whispered, pushing him away.

"But, Charley," he said, looking back over his shoulder at the mourners. "This is not the time nor—"

"Please . . . Dad!" My lower lip trembled as I wiped away the silver stream of snot leaking from my nose.

I just wanted to be alone. Why couldn't he get that? He wasn't Natalie. He didn't understand me—not like she had. Natalie had been the only one. And now she was dead, cut to pieces beneath the wheels of a train. I squeezed my eyes shut, wringing terrifying images from my mind. I didn't want to see them. Not now, not ever.

*Stop it!*

"Charley . . . I'm so sorry."

“Leave me alone, *please*.” I lurched away from the tree, glancing back in the direction of the hole. Natalie’s parents were still standing beside it, red eyed and gaunt. I looked once more at my father, and then started off back across the graveyard.

“Charl—” I heard my father start, but he stopped short as if thinking better of it.

Rain began to fall and the wind rushed through the branches of the nearby trees. The sound did little to smother the noise of the grave diggers shoveling earth.

I ran. My auburn hair plastered flat against my cheeks and forehead. Plumes of breath jetted from my mouth and floated upward into the overcast sky. Not knowing—or caring—what direction I was heading in, I raced toward a dark smudge of trees in the distance. As I drew closer, I could see that there was a small building nestling among their trunks.

I sped up, my long black skirt whispering against my legs.

Eventually, I came to rest just beyond the tree line. Gray chinks of light slanted through the branches and glinted off the broken windowpanes of the dilapidated building. There was a rustling sound from nearby.

“Hello?” I called out. “Is anybody there?”

Silence.

Pulling the collar of my coat tight about my throat, I moved closer. The structure looked like some kind of derelict outbuilding. The outside

walls had once been white but were now weather-beaten gray and covered in a mosaic of graffiti and moss. I could just make out a faded British Rail logo beneath the grime and dirt.

The door had been pulled from its top hinge, though it still hung in its frame. I continued toward it, wanting to hide—never to be found again. It was quiet out here, peaceful, apart from the thrumming of the rain bouncing off the leaves above my head. I just wanted to be alone, to grieve.

Then I heard the distant roar of a passing train. I didn't want to hear that sound. It reminded me of what had happened to Natalie. Closing my eyes, I pretended it was the faint rumble of thunder.

I opened the door to the rickety outbuilding and stepped inside. There were holes in the roof. The floor was covered in dead leaves, old tires, and a rain-soaked mattress. I shivered, pulling my coat tighter about me. I suddenly felt lonely. It was a feeling I hadn't felt since Natalie and I had become friends. But now it was back. I squeezed my eyes shut, desperate to stop the flood of tears. When everyone else had taunted me, when those who I thought I could most trust had posted crap about me on Facebook and Twitter, Natalie had been there.

My iPhone vibrated in my pocket, buzzing against my thigh like an angry wasp. I remembered setting it to vibrate as I'd left the house for Natalie's funeral—I couldn't think of *that word*. To say it . . . even merely to hear it in my head would somehow make this all real. And to me it wasn't real. Natalie wasn't dead . . . it was only a bad . . .

*BRRRR! BRRRR! BRRRR!*

The iPhone continued to buzz against my hip.

“Why can’t Dad just leave me alone?” I hissed. He would want to know where I was. He would want to tell me it was time to go home and put all this behind me. I could picture him searching the graveyard for me, a look of despair on his thin face.

*BRRRR! BRRRR! BRRRR!*

“Leave me alone!” I shouted.

I pulled the iPhone from my pocket and looked at the screen flashing blue, then white. On seeing the caller’s name blinking on and off like a heartbeat, I dropped it as if it had stung me.

*NATALIE CALLING!*

My heart began to beat in time with Natalie’s name flashing on and off.

*NATALIE CALLING! NATALIE CALLING! NATALIE CALLING!*

My throat felt dry and I swallowed hard.

*NATALIE CALLING!*

The iPhone screen flashed as it lay among the leaves covering the ground. With a trembling hand, I reached down and picked it up. Was this some sick joke? I remembered the last time I had received a call from Natalie. I knew exactly when we had last spoken. It had been ten days ago, just before she died beneath the train. It had been raining that day, too. She had been on the way to my house. Her cab had failed to arrive, so she was going to walk. Natalie never arrived. She took a short-cut across the tracks and . . .

I hadn't seen the words *NATALIE CALLING* on my phone since she had been found dead.

So how could she be calling me now? Someone must have found her phone. Perhaps a railway worker had discovered it on the tracks and was now calling everyone on her contact list? Perhaps whoever was calling was trying to return the phone to its owner.

I shook my head, my brain feeling as if it were slamming against the sides of my skull.

Trembling, I pressed ANSWER and put the iPhone to my ear.

"Hello?" I said, my voice just a whisper.

Silence.

"Who is this?" I asked, beginning to feel angry. "If you're playing some sick joke . . ."

I could hear short, shallow breaths on the other end of the line.

"Look, whoever this is . . . I'm gonna report you to the—"

"Who are you talking to?" a voice asked.

With a gasp, I looked up to find my father standing in the doorway of the outbuilding.

"No one," I mumbled, hitting the END CALL button and sliding the iPhone back into my coat pocket.

"You sounded upset," he said, wiping away the rain that dripped from his chin.

"Of course I'm upset," I breathed, brushing past him and making my way back toward the church.

“How long is this going to go on?” my father called after me. “Charley, you can’t ignore me forever.”

“Can’t I?” I said under my breath.

With head forward, chin against my chest, and shoulders rounded, I made my way out of the crop of trees and across the grass. I didn’t slow down until I could see the church ahead of me. The graveyard was empty now, apart from the two lone grave diggers in the distance. From the tree line they looked like ghosts, barely visible in the gloom of the dying afternoon light.

I turned away and headed out of the graveyard. Without the slightest idea where to go or what to do next, I just walked. From over my shoulder, I could hear the sound of feet. My father was trotting to catch up.

“Charley, wait a minute. This is stupid. Can’t we just talk?” he called.

I quickened my step.

“Charley, please!” he called again.

Quicker still.

I reached the gates to the graveyard and dashed into the parking lot, my shoes sending up splashes of black rain from the puddles that had formed in the cracked tarmac. From behind, a hand gripped my arm and spun me around.

“Charley!” my father wheezed. “Please, Charley, I know you’re hurting—”

“You don’t know anything!” I said, refusing to look at him.

Gently taking me by the shoulders, he said, "I do know, Charley . . . I know . . ."

"Get off me!" I cried, pulling away from him. "Leave me alone!"

Keeping a grip on my sleeve, my father pulled me closer. I fought him, thrashing my arms about as if drowning.

"Listen to me! Just listen to me!" he pleaded. "You were just a little girl when your mum died . . . but I experienced the same feelings you're having . . ."

"Stop!" was all I could say. I didn't want to hear this now.

"I know what it feels like to lose the person you loved . . . the one person that means everything to you. I can help you through this, Charley . . ."

"You're glad Natalie's dead!" I spat, fresh tears spilling down my cheeks. "You never liked her. You wanted her out of my life from the moment you first met her!" Looking straight into his eyes, I added, "Now you've got just what you always wanted."

Releasing his grip, my father flinched backward, stunned, as if he had been punched. "Is that what you really believe, Charley?" he asked. "Do you really think so little of me?"

"You should keep away from that girl. She is as mad as you if she really believes you have flashes. You have exams to study for! The girl is a know-it-all. I don't like the way she stares at me. I'm your father! Isn't that what you used to say?" I reminded him, choking on my tears. "Why

doesn't that girl Natalie stop poking her nose into other people's business? Why doesn't she just leave you alone?"

I watched my father's face turn ashen. "I only had your best interests at heart, Charley. I never wanted anything bad to happen to the girl . . ."

"Her name is . . . was . . . Natalie." To hear those words from my own mouth sounded odd—like the crunching sound of breaking bones.

"Okay. I never wanted anything bad to happen to Natalie," my father said.

"Well, it did," I sniffed. "And you can't take back all of the nasty things you said about her."

"I know I can't," he said. "I'm sorry, Charley." Again, he stepped toward me, his arms open wide. This time I fell into them.