

CHAPTER ONE

Charlie Kim never planned on becoming an orphan. Five exhausting days after the policeman had shown up at his house and delivered the news about his parents, he stood before two sealed mahogany caskets, both suspended side-by-side over their burial plots. He subconsciously used his thumb to bend the corner of the pocket-size Moleskine notebook resting in his suit pants before letting the pages snap back like a flipbook animation. He repeated this motion—a nervous tic that he'd picked up a year earlier, during his first week of high school—over and over.

A small sea of people was gathered behind Charlie. Most of their faces would've been unfamiliar to him if he'd even bothered to note their presence. He hadn't. He was too wrapped up in his own thoughts to be mindful of anything existing around him. Whether it was the other attendees, the birds chirping in the distance, or the sweet natural perfume from the freshly trimmed cemetery grass, the rest of the world slipped past his senses unnoticed.

Charlie's lack of awareness wasn't limited to his surroundings. He was even oblivious to the signals that his own body was sending, including the aching in his chest, a side effect of the many hours he'd spent spastically clenching and heaving, and how his bloodshot eyes, unable to lubricate themselves after pouring a bathtub's worth of tears and pushing him to the brink of dehydration, were as sticky as newly paved asphalt. His eyelids twitched, refusing to blink, as he

continued to stare at the caskets.

The caskets had remained closed throughout the wake and funeral mass. During the wake, Charlie had attempted to open his mother's casket. At no point since he was told of their passing had Charlie actually seen his parents' bodies, and part of him held out hope that when he opened the casket it'd be empty.

Charlie had gotten as far as unfastening the first of the many casket locks, and was about to go for the second, when the funeral director stopped him. He let Charlie know that it wasn't a wise idea. Charlie relayed his doubts, but the funeral director assured him that his parents were, in fact, inside each of the caskets. The somber look on the funeral director's face let Charlie know that he was telling the truth. What the funeral director didn't tell Charlie, with either words or expression, was that even if he'd managed to open the caskets, he wouldn't have recognized his parents.

A car accident had claimed the lives of Alan and Mary Kim. Partners in life and business, they'd been driving down the 101 freeway, on their way back to their Atherton home after a meeting in San Francisco, and were less than a mile from their Woodside Road exit when they crashed.

Nothing about the single-car accident made any sense to Charlie. It happened on a stretch of highway that his parents had traveled multiple times daily over the past twenty-plus years. Charlie had even made sure to check the traffic on his cell phone before his parents left, and if anything, there was less congestion than usual. There were no work crews with orange cones and caution signs to disrupt the traffic flow. On top of that, it'd been a beautiful, cloudless day, just like the day of their funeral. There hadn't been even a single drop of rain or anything that might explain why Alan lost control of the vehicle and slammed into the overpass support pillar.

Their SUV was crushed like a recycled can of Coke. Alan and Mary died instantly. The policeman who broke the news to Charlie had made sure to let him know just how quick and painless their deaths had been. It was a misguided attempt—by someone who had clearly never endured a similar grief—to make Charlie feel marginally better. That and much more replayed in Charlie’s mind as his eyes stayed locked on the caskets and his thumb continued to cycle through the notebook pages.

It wasn’t until a hand clamped down on his shoulder that Charlie finally snapped from his trance. He whipped his gaze toward the hand’s owner, his grandfather, and glared.

Kyung-soo Kim looked back at his grandson and nodded sternly. Grandpa Kim was Charlie’s last surviving family member, but to say that they were actually “family” would invoke the loosest application of the word.

Charlie had first sensed the rift between his grandfather and the rest of his family at an early age. But it wasn’t until that night six months prior, when he eavesdropped on his parents discussing whether or not they should encourage the newly widowed Grandpa Kim to move in with the family, that Charlie became aware of the exact history. He overheard how Grandpa Kim had disowned Charlie’s father when he chose to leave Korea for college, and doubled down on his position when Alan married Charlie’s Irish-American mother.

Charlie returned the favor by disowning his grandfather on the spot. He wanted nothing to do with the man who wanted nothing to do with them. Charlie had crossed his fingers that his parents would decide to withhold their invitation, but his parents—frequent travelers of the high road that they were—elected otherwise, and opened their arms and household to the man who had pushed them away.

While Grandpa Kim reluctantly accepted their offer, he did nothing to endear himself to

his gracious hosts, skipping family meals and spending nearly all of his time alone in his room. Charlie met his grandfather's cold shoulder with a frigid one of his own, leading Mary to conclude that Charlie and Grandpa Kim must have shared some sort of genetic stubbornness.

Channeling that stubbornness, Charlie went to yank himself free from his grandfather's grasp, but stopped when he discerned a tear forming in the corner of the old man's crow's-footed eye. It caught him completely off-guard. It was the first breach that he'd ever detected in his grandfather's hardened exterior—a lifetime's worth of fatherly regret condensed into one tiny drop.

Grandpa Kim withdrew his hand from Charlie's shoulder on his own accord. He cleared the drop with his index finger and nodded once more; this time, in the direction of the priest, who was waiting to recite the final blessing.

Charlie nodded back. He let out a long sigh, and then he and Grandpa Kim stepped forward and laid their hands on the caskets.

"Eternal rest grant unto Alan and Mary Kim, O Lord," the priest said, "and let perpetual light shine upon them. May their souls, and the souls of all of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen." The priest gave one last splash of holy water, and then two portly cemetery workers lowered the caskets into the ground.

Once the caskets had reached their final resting spot, the workers offered shovels to Charlie and Grandpa Kim, who accepted the tools. Charlie and Grandpa Kim took turns collecting piles of loose soil and scattering them across Alan's grave. They did the same for Mary's, and then handed the shovels back to the cemetery workers.

Charlie took a couple steps back, returned his hands to his pockets—and his notebook pages—and drifted off into his own thoughts. As he watched the cemetery workers continue to

fill in the plots, he wondered what would happen next. Would his life ever be the same? Could it ever be the same? The questions were complex, but the answers were simple: no way, no how. As far as he was concerned, his parents weren't the only ones in a hole; he might as well have been right in there with them. With each shovelful of soil, Charlie came up with a new way in which his own life was over now that he was, and forever would be, an orphan.

One by one, the attendees began to casually make their way from the gravesite. Only Charlie stayed behind. His feet remained planted, his eyes didn't waver, and his thumb just kept flipping the pages of his notebook.

After a few more flicks, Charlie's thumb abruptly halted. For the first time, he actually felt the pages with his fingers. A thought flashed across his mind. His cheek muscles tugged at the corner of his mouth, some tiny fraction of a smile: He'd discovered his way out.