

# THE FORSAKEN CHILDREN

by Naomi Finley

## EXCERPT

I crouched behind the gravestone, spying on the grieving family as they lowered the casket into the hole. A shadow swooped overhead, and the cemetery's guardian cawed. I elevated my gaze, and my heart lurched into my throat as the well-fed raven plunged straight at me. I ducked, avoiding its talons. Lifting my head, I scowled at the creature as it landed on the peak of a white marble mausoleum. Squeezing my eyes tight, I tried to regulate the rapid thumping in my chest, only to jump when the church bells struck three o'clock, sending the spirits of the dead scurrying over my flesh.

*Blimey!* Gnawing on my lip, I glanced from the Wolseley car parked on the roadway back to the funeral. The large-bellied priest's voice droned on, harmonizing with the soft weeping of a woman. In the deep shadows of afternoon the gravedigger waited, looking bored. After the deceased's loved ones left he would leave the grave exposed, walk to the alder tree that appeared to have existed since the beginning of time, and settle in to eat a hearty meal before his snores would disturb the peace of the cemetery.

Guilt swirled in my belly at what I planned to do, but I swiftly suppressed it.

Some days back, my six-year-old brother, William, had fallen ill. Mum's toil in the workhouse paid little. We required every coin to keep food in our bellies and shelter over our heads, leaving no extra for medicine.

Hunger knocked a constant reminder on my ribs. Two or three days had passed since I'd eaten. I'd lied to Mum that hunger had overcome me and I'd devoured my fill of the scraps the kitchen wench had tossed into the street on the way back, because there'd been scarcely enough to feed William and Mum. If she had known, she'd have insisted I eat hers, even though stress and malnourishment had hollowed dark circles under her once sparkling blue eyes and her cheeks were sunken. I felt her bones when she hugged me.