SPIRITS AMONG US



SHERRY HOWARD

ADVANCE READING COPY

REYCRAFT BOOKS

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For Review Only

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CHAPTER ONE

Before I lost Momma, a year seemed to last forever. A year was ticking away now, and I needed to connect with Momma before it was over. I bit my lip and prayed for a miracle.

"You okay, Scooter?" Harlan, my best friend since first grade, six years now, broke the silence after a bit.

I handed the flowers to him and he put them on Momma's grave, in the vase that stayed here forever, just like Momma. My heavy wheelchair wouldn't get me near Momma's stone. My chest tightened like my heart was being squeezed, preventing me from answering, but Harlan

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surely understood. He'd been stuck to my side like superglue since the accident nearly a year ago. That could be annoying to me once in a while, but mostly I reckon it was a good thing. My wheelchair didn't stop me from doing much, but when it did, Harlan made things work out okay.

Tombstones surrounded us on all sides. Some tall and fancy, some tiny plaques in the dirt for babies. That might have freaked some kids out—to be inside a fence with only tombstones for company. Not Harlan and me. To us, they were as much a part of life as fog over the hollow, something to study. A sign that you were never really gone—as long as people didn't forget. Our town—this holler—called Chamber's Corner after my first relative to settle here, respected spirits. Our property was known to be blessed with folks who'd passed on but hung around for a good long haunting. It must be hard to leave behind this place and the people who made it seem like a little corner of paradise—most of the time, anyway.

Some of the granite tombstones sparkled like fairy dust had been sprinkled on them. Not Momma's stone though. Her pink headstone had no sparkle, which didn't seem fair, since she had more sparkle than anybody. I forced down the tears that tried to spring up. No sign from Momma today. The birds chirped and her garden blossomed outside the gates. I sat as still as I could. Only the light breeze whistled through the woods. Down in this Appalachian hollow, the beautiful mountains kept us in a hug of quiet with only a sprinkle of light wind allowed in.

If only a bird or butterfly would land on Momma's headstone. She'd give me a sign soon.

Every week when we went to Momma's grave, we waited for her spirit to visit us—our biggest wish. She knew how to make herself known to us—a bird, a butterfly, something that wouldn't let us look away. After all, she'd been an expert ghost hunter herself—not ghosts like the white-sheeted kind, but spirits, the part of us that remains after our bodies give out.

"It's past time," I grumbled. Max, my chocolate lab and the best dog in the known universe, licked my hand. I rubbed the butterfly on my necklace. The last present Momma gave me.

"Be patient. She'll visit us when she can," Harlan said. "A year ain't all that long for crossing over."

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"Ha! Patience! You know if she doesn't make it soon, she might never make it at all. So, do you still feel her here, or is it just me?" Mountain legend had it that if you didn't hear from a spirit that first year, they might get too far away to reach you anymore.

I pulled petals from the black-eyed Susan I'd kept from the bouquet. Harlan's momma had taken off not long after he was born, and he'd loved Momma a lot, so it seemed right that he'd feel her too.

"I do. But I sort of feel her in a lot of places." Harlan fooled around with the flowers until he grinned, stood up, and nodded his head. He had a good eye for making things look special. Guess that's why he was a great photographer.

"Me, too. But mostly here. And in her butterfly garden." By now the petals of the black-eyed Susan from Momma's garden had told me Momma wouldn't visit today. I'd peeled the petals off one by one. She'll visit, she'll visit not. . . . Some days the petals said she'd visit, some days not. No matter what the flowers said, she still hadn't made herself known to us. At least not in a way that we could tell.

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She would someday. I had to believe in that.

The names on the markers showed a roll call of family who'd lived and died on this land we called Chamber's Creek, known as one of the most haunted spots in the United States. Like iron to a magnet, I gravitated to Zebediah's massive headstone, one of the first placed here.

I ran my fingers across the letters of his name, the numbers of his birth date. "How'd this dirt get so messed up in only a week?" Something must've been digging out here, in the grass over his grave. No person would desecrate a grave, would they?

Harlan trimmed the grass with the clippers we always carried to the cemetery. "Hmmm. Maybe critters? Have you seen snakes? I'd like to catch me a snake."

"I finished my research on Zebediah. We should be ready to add to our feature on him, especially how he bought this land." I had spent weeks going over Momma's notes on Zeb, getting ready for our YouTube show on him.

"We added fifty subscribers last week," Harlan said. "We must be doing something right."

Our YouTube channel, *Spirits Among Us*, had passed 10,000 subscribers, and now exploded with new followers after every post. Word was getting around.

Our town was a famous hotspot for ghost hunters, and Momma had been a well-known ghost hunter. We'd used her research on hot spots around the country to start our channel. She had helped us get it going not long before the accident.

Harlan, Max, and I basked in the Kentucky sunshine a few minutes. Sun glinted off the front windows of the abandoned bus outside the cemetery fence—the only windows Dad hadn't accidentally hit when he splatter-painted that and our van. We hadn't played on that old thing in a long time—not since Dad caught us the last time and grounded me for two weeks after I got stuck on it in my wheelchair. The lift on that bus was as stubborn as a Missouri mule; it worked only when it wanted to.

I bowed my head and inhaled the sweet smell of Kentucky bluegrass—enjoying a bit of quiet before Harlan's uncle picked him up. Max snuggled against Harlan, who gave endless belly rubs.

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