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Chains

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CHAPTER 1



Monday, May 27, 1776

YOUTH IS THE SEED TIME OF GOOD HABITS,
AS WELL IN NATIONS AS IN INDIVIDUALS.
–THOMAS PAINE, *COMMON SENSE*

THE BEST TIME TO TALK TO GHOSTS is just before the sun comes up. That's when they can hear us true, Momma said. That's when ghosts can answer us.

The eastern sky was peach colored, but a handful of lazy stars still blinked in the west. It was almost time.

"May I run ahead, sir?" I asked.

Pastor Weeks sat at the front of his squeaky wagon with Old Ben next to him, the mules' reins loose in his hands. The pine coffin that held Miss Mary Finch–wearing her best dress, with her hair washed clean and combed–bounced in the back when the wagon wheels hit a rut. My sister, Ruth, sat next to the coffin. Ruth was too big to carry, plus the pastor knew about her peculiar manner of being, so it was the wagon for her and the road for me.

Old Ben looked to the east and gave me a little nod. He knew a few things about ghosts, too.

Pastor Weeks turned around to talk to Mr. Robert Finch, who rode his horse a few lengths behind the wagon.

"The child wants to run ahead," Pastor explained to him. "She has kin buried there. Do you give leave for a quick visit?"

Mr. Robert's mouth tightened like a rope pulled taut. He had showed up a few weeks earlier to visit Miss Mary Finch, his aunt and only living relation. He looked around her tidy farm, listened to her ragged, wet cough, and moved in. Miss Mary wasn't even cold on her deathbed when he helped himself to the coins in her strongbox. He hurried along her burying, too, most improper. He didn't care that the neighbors would want to come around with cakes and platters of cold meat, and drink ale to the rememory of Miss Mary Finch of Tew, Rhode Island. He had to get on with things, he said.

I stole a look backward. Mr. Robert Finch was filled up with trouble from his dirty boots to the brim of his scraggly hat.

"Please, sir," I said.

"Go then," he said. "But don't tarry. I've much business today."

I ran as fast as I could.

I hurried past the stone fence that surrounded the white graveyard, to the split-rail fence that marked our ground, and stopped outside the gate to pick a handful of chilly violets, wet with dew. The morning mist twisted and hung low over the field. No ghosts yet, just ash trees and maples lined up in a mournful row.

I entered.

Momma was buried in the back, her feet to the east, her head to the west. Someday I would pay the stone carver for

a proper marker with her name on it: *Dinah, wife of Cuffe, mother of Isabel and Ruth.* For now, there was a wooden cross and a gray rock the size of a dinner plate lying flat on the ground in front of it.

We had buried her the year before, when the first roses bloomed.

"Smallpox is tricky," Miss Mary Finch said to me when Momma died. "There's no telling who it'll take." The pox had left Ruth and me with scars like tiny stars scattered on our skin. It took Momma home to Our Maker.

I looked back at the road. Old Ben had slowed the mules to give me time. I knelt down and set the violets on the grave. "It's here, Momma," I whispered. "The day you promised. But I need your help. Can you please cross back over for just a little bit?"

I stared without blinking at the mist, looking for the curve of her back or the silhouette of her head wrapped in a pretty kerchief. A small flock of robins swooped out of the maple trees.

"I don't have much time," I told the grass-covered grave. "Where do you want us to go? What should we do?"

The mist swirled between the tall grass and the low-hanging branches. Two black butterflies danced through a cloud of bugs and disappeared. Chickadees and barn swallows called overhead.

"Whoa." Old Ben stopped the wagon next to the open hole near the iron fence, then climbed down and walked to where Nehemiah the gravedigger was waiting. The two men reached for the coffin.

"Please, Momma," I whispered urgently. "I need your help." I squinted into the ash grove, where the mist was heaviest.

No ghosts. Nothing.

I'd been making like this for near a year. No matter what I said, or where the sun and the moon and the stars hung, Momma never answered. Maybe she was angry because I'd buried her wrong. I'd heard stories of old country burials with singers and dancers, but I wasn't sure what to do, so we just dug a hole and said a passel of prayers. Maybe Momma's ghost was lost and wandering because I didn't send her home the right way.

The men set Miss Mary's coffin on the ground. Mr. Robert got off his horse and said something I couldn't hear. Ruth stayed in the wagon, her bare feet curled up under her skirt and her thumb in her mouth.

I reached in the pocket under my apron and took out the oatcake. It was in two pieces, with honey smeared between them. The smell made my stomach rumble, but I didn't dare nibble. I picked up the flat rock in front of the cross and set the offering in the hollow under it. Then I put the rock back and sat still, my eyes closed tight to keep the tears inside my head where they belonged.

I could smell the honey that had dripped on my hands, the damp ground under me, and the salt of the ocean. I could hear cows mooing in a far pasture and bees buzzing in a nearby clover patch.

If she would just say my name, just once . . .

"Girl!" Mr. Robert shouted. "You there, girl!"

I sniffed, opened my eyes, and wiped my face on my sleeve. The sun had popped up in the east like a cork and was burning through the morning mist. The ghosts had all gone to ground. I wouldn't see her today, either.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me roughly to my feet. "I told you to move," Mr. Robert snarled at me.

"Apologies, sir," I said, wincing with pain.

He released me with a shove and pointed to the cemetery where they buried white people. "Go pray for her that owned you, girl."