

Where's My Body?

A Nate & Mattie Mystery

By Steve Schatz

Recommended for ages 9 and up

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Acknowledgements

For Paul, always for Paul

The town in this book is loosely (very loosely), based on Becket, Massachusetts, nestled at the base of the Berkshire Highlands.

Some of the names and events are loosely based on actual historical events, but the dates and many facts have been changed to fit the story... which is FICTION. The only person based on a real person is the town's particularly wonderful librarian, Zina Jayne. Liz, Matt and Tom provided a spark - thanks. Everything else is a product of the author's imagination.

Thanks to Lauren for liking it and for the title.

1. Her Flesh Peeled Back From Her Scream

Nate pushed through the front door, dropped his jacket and backpack, flicked his brown hair out of his eyes and headed into the kitchen. Another lousy day at school done. Now to get through the afternoon. He grabbed some grapes, a juice and a handful of chips, then headed up to his room.

“Honey, is that you?” His mother came in from the living room.

“Who else would it be?” he asked, not stopping.

“Did you have a good day at school?”

Nate rolled his eyes and started up the stairs.

“Nate. Stop. I have to tell you something.”

Nate stopped, but didn't turn around. He knew he wasn't going to like this.

“What?”

“I got some good news today. I got the job.”

He turned around and stared at her. “What job?”

“The one in the doctor's office in Pittsfield. I start next week. We'll finally have some more money. I can get you those new shoes you wanted.”

Nate came down the stairs slowly and put his snacks on the counter, fuming. His mother smiled and brushed his hair back out of his eyes.

“You mean like a permanent job?”

She nodded. “As long as I want it. Of course, that means that I won’t be here for lunch, but I won’t have to leave until after you go to school and I’ll be back just a little while after you get home. It’s almost perfect.”

“What’s perfect about it? You said we’d only be in this crappy place for a little while.”

“Now Nate. I didn’t say that. I said we’d be here as long as we needed. I thought that would only be a little while, but your father...”

“What about Dad? You’re the one who left and dragged me along. I LIKED it in Boston. I had friends in Boston.”

“Honey, I know you did and I know you want to get back to your friends, but if you’d try to make new friends here...”

“I don’t want new friends. I want my old friends. I don’t like the people here. I don’t like this house. I don’t like this town. There’s nothing to do here. Nowhere to go. Everybody’s boring, stupid or both.” Nate was getting madder and madder.

His mother’s face grew stony. She was not going to listen to him. “I’m sorry Nathaniel. I can’t help it. I’ve tried to work things out with your father and I’m still trying, but he’s not trying very hard. When you’re older you’ll understand, but for now, this is where I have to be and if this is where I am, this is where you have to be, too, because your father is too busy to...”

“Stop it! Stop blaming Dad. You made this happen. I hate it here and I hate you!” He pushed past her and slammed out the back door, charging up the hill behind their house. It was steep, nearly straight up. No way would Mom try to follow him. He had always liked running and was good at it. In the last couple of years, he had grown a lot. Mom said he was all legs and no fat. He didn’t care about being skinny, it made running all the easier. One foot pounding after the other, faster and faster, even up the steep hill. Everything else dropped away.

At the top, Nate stopped at the circle of trees and looked around, panting. No one was in sight. Good. Slipping through the branches, he sank down on the thick padding of leaves and leaned against his favorite golden birch with a sigh. He could stay here all afternoon and no one would bother him.

Inside the circle, he didn’t have to think about Mom and Dad fighting every time they talked on the phone. He could forget about school, where nobody talked to him, which was fine ‘cause, he didn’t want to be at their lame little school. He could think about his real friends, back in Boston, not the stupid country kids out here. He could stop thinking about being stuck in this little hick town in the middle of nowhere in a falling down dump of an old house. Up on the top of the ridge, inside this circle of trees, he didn’t have to talk to anyone or think about anything. Now that the snow had melted, he came up here almost every day.

He had stopped panting and was watching a black, shiny beetle climb over a stack of leaves, considering if he could find a stick to make it climb over, when without a sound, the branches across the circle pulled apart and a girl popped through.

Nate couldn't speak he was so surprised. No one ever came up here. He hadn't heard footsteps and the leaves were thick and dry with plenty of twigs, so he should have. The girl looked like she was his age, maybe even as old as 12. He'd never seen her at school or around town, which was weird. There weren't that many kids around, so he should have run into her somewhere. Even stranger, she was totally soaking wet and dripping, like she was standing under a waterfall. Water kept streaming down her face and dripping from her pig tails, but she didn't seem to care. She didn't even try to brush the water out of her eyes. The girl didn't say a word, just sat down and leaned against a tree across from Nate, water pouring off her, like she was carrying around her own personal shower. She didn't seem surprised he was there. She sat back comfortably, looked around, and then stared at him like he was a slightly interesting rock or bug.

Nate finally found his voice. "Who... who ARE you?" he asked.

The girl leapt up like she had been stung and screamed...then disappeared. Gone! She didn't run away. She disappeared! Not like poof and a trail of smoke or spinning leaves. No, it was much worse. First, her mouth stretched into a scream. Then, her flesh peeled back from that scream, like something was yanking the skin off a piece of chicken. As fast as the oozing meat under her skin was exposed, it instantly dried and crumbled, revealing bone. Then the bone crumbled with a gross, cracking, snapping sound. One second, she was standing there. The next, she was gone. It happened so fast, Nate would have missed it if he hadn't been staring, but he had been. He really wished he hadn't seen it or that he could forget it, but that picture ran through his head in slow motion again and again and again. His mouth flew open and

his own scream ripped out of his throat. He pushed up and back with both hands, trying to get away.

Bad move. He straightened up so fast, his head smacked into the trunk of the huge golden birch he was leaning against with a massive crack. His scream of terror turned into a yelp of pain and, just as quickly as he had pushed back, he fell forward, crashing face down into the leaves, Stunned from what he had seen and the major blow to his head, Nate lay there for a minute, trying to make sense out of it all. Through his fog, one thought made it through. Get away!

He could figure it all out later, but now, getting home was most important. He started to push himself up, when a big drop of water hit him on the head. That thing was standing over him! Dripping on him. Was she going to drown him or rip him apart?

A giggle broke the quiet. “You might as well get on up. I ain’t gonna eat you or nothin’. You jest surprised me is all.”

Nate looked toward the voice. She was standing like he had first seen her, dripping all over him and grinning. He had to admit that she didn’t look very scary.

She cocked her head and squinted at him with one eye. “You kin see me? Right?”

Nate stayed low and backed away. She might not look scary at this instant, but this thing had just melted in a very unpleasant way right in front of his eyes.

“Wha.. what are you?”

The girl shook her head. “Boys ain’t gotten any smarter over the years. They was dumb in my time and they’re still dumber than most rocks. What do I look like?”

“It’s not what you look like. It’s what you just did.”

She shrugged. “You scared me is all.”

“Me!! I scared you?!!”

She grinned. “I guess I scared you right on back. Sorry. It’s one of the drawbacks.”

“Drawbacks?”

“Of bein a ghost. Most folks can’t see me, so I forgit that it can be a bit disquietin’ when I shatter.”

“Shatter?”

She nodded. “Yup. See, we ain’t really all that all together. I mean, this body’s not bound up so tight, so when I lose focus – like when I git scared, well... you saw what happened.”

Nate stood up and backed up, trying to put as much distance between him and the girl as he could.

“Wait a minute. You mean you’re really a...”

“Ghost,” she finished. “You hard o hearin AND not so bright? I jest told you I was.” She looked a bit proud and nodded down the hill. “I drowned right down there in Yokum Brook in the big flood of ‘22. Been hangin’ round these parts ever since.”

“But... but... there’s no such things as ghosts. Everybody knows that.”

She shook her head. “I don’t give a cup of warm spit what everybody knows. I’m here, ain’t I?”

Nate started backing toward the opening out of the circle of trees. If he could get away, right at the bottom of the hill was home. Just a few more steps. “This is way too weird. I’ve got to get out of here.”

The girl, with a pitying smile bowed and gestured toward the opening, stepping back so he could see she wasn’t planning on chasing him. “I ain’t stoppin you.”

“You mean you aren’t going to eat my brain or something?”

She stared at him, then started to giggle. Pretty soon, she was laughing so hard she fell down.

“What are you laughing at?”

She looked up with a big grin on her face. “I’m jest trying to figure how to find such a teensy tiny thing as your brain rattling around in your head. It shore wouldn’t be worth the trouble.”

“Hey!”

She sat up and shot him an angry glare. “Hey what? You’re the one talkin about me eatin brains. I don’t eat nothing and if I did, I’d go for something more interesting than the brain of some stupid boy.”

Nate didn’t know whether to be scared or insulted. This was not making any sense.

Suddenly, the girl stopped laughing and held up her hand to keep him quiet. She was listening closely. Nate didn’t hear anything, but she obviously did. She scrambled to her feet, a look of fear on her face.

“You gotta go now.”

“I already said that.”

“I mean right now. Hurry. Git back down to your house and don’t look back. Hurry. He don’t know you kin see me yet.”

“Who?”

She didn’t answer, just turned him toward the trees. Where her hands touched his jacket, Nate felt an icy chill shoot through. She pushed him.

“Go on now. Run. I’ll see you again, soon enough.”

“What are you afraid of?”

Her voice changed. It was low, sounding like gravel screeching across glass, but squeezed down into a whisper. Nate felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, it was that scary. “Stop yappin. Shut up and move! He’s almost here.”

Then, she pushed him hard. Nate popped through the trees and the force of her push sent him nearly rolling down the hill. He had to pump his legs fast to keep from falling and couldn’t stop all the way down until he was at his back door.

He pulled open the door and, as he stepped into the porch, he heard a high scream, like an animal being torn apart, rising to the sky, then sliced off.

Nate felt a shudder pass through his body. He’d heard coyotes before and a few times had heard some creatures fighting, but that scream squeezed at his stomach and his heart. It was the most horrible sound he’d ever heard.

2. She Rips Half Her Face Off

The next day, after school, Nate took his usual shortcut through the woods to avoid the rest of the kids, but he steered clear of the circle of trees. He wasn't sure what had happened yesterday. Maybe he fell asleep and had a weird dream. Maybe someone was messing with him.

“Whatever,” he thought. “Don't know. Don't care. I'll keep away from the circle of trees for a few days. Then, I'll check it out again.”

Nothing strange happened on the way up the hill or along the ridge, so he stopped worrying. “Must be a trick,” he said. Hearing himself say it out loud made him feel even more sure. “If I can figure out how she faked pulling her skin off, I'll have the perfect Halloween costume. I'll walk in looking normal, then reach up and...” He grinned at the thought. “Bet someone will barf if I get it right.”

He was thinking that a mixture of some of his mom's face goop with some food color to make it look like skin and some flour mixed in, to make it thicker as he walked. He had stopped thinking about the girl and was on automatic – almost home, when...

“Boo,” came a quiet voice right in front of him.

Nate looked up and shouted in surprise. Leaning against a tree, grinning and dripping, was the girl from yesterday. Nate looked around wildly for a direction to run. Maybe if he could get into his house.

She shook her head and poked him in the chest. “Don’t try it. I coulda beat you when I was alive and I run lots faster now,” she said.

Nate held up his fingers like a cross. “Get away from me. I don’t want to be a vampire or anything.”

She shook her head, amused. “Goodie fer you. What is all this hee haw about vampires? Yesterday it was zombies. Tomorrow you’re gonna think I’m a space alien. Why you need to keep inventing new things to git afeared of? Seems like a plain, old fashioned ghost should do the trick good enough.”

“Whatever you are, go away.”

“Why? You got chores or a friend comin’ over? From what I seen, you spend most of your time alone.”

“Have you been spying on me?”

“Naw. I jest have a lot of time and I notice things...unlike you, I might add. What I notice about you is that since you moved here last fall, I ain’t seen a single friend come a callin’. When you’re on the playground, you don’t mess around with the other kids. You set and read or jest walk around. When you’re on your own, you mostly go poking around in the woods by your own self.” She cocked her head to one side and looked him up and down. “What’s amatter with you? Why ain’t you got any friends?”

“I’ve got friends, they’re back in Boston, where I live.”

“Seems to me that you live here.”

“No I don’t. My mom made me come here, but we aren’t staying.”

The girl nodded as if the conversation no longer held any interest to her and it was time to get busy. “Well, no matter. You got time on your hands and I need some help. You’re the first kid in a lotta years who kin see me and my time’s running out, so I got something for you to do.”

“No thanks. I don’t know you and from what I’ve seen, I don’t want to. I’ve got better things to do.” He started to turn away, to walk around her and get inside the house. She quickly stepped in front of him, grabbed his shoulders, which turned icy in her grip and shot him a dangerous look.

“You hear me ask if you wanted to? I TOLD you I got a project for you and that’s that. So, pay attention. We kin do this nice, but I don’t rightly care if I gotta get mean. I got a deadline and once it’s over, so am I. You’re the only one who kin help me and I ain’t givin up without a fight. I got a whole lotta ways to convince you and I don’t think your gonna like em. You think shattering was scary? Take a gander at this.” She reached up, grabbed one of her dripping pig tails and yanked. With a wet, sucking sound, a gooey mess of hair, skin and meat pulled free. The faded pink ribbon at the end of the braided hair looked so normal, topping the hunk of oozing flesh that she held out and shook in Nate’s face. He couldn’t take his eyes off her ear, still stuck on what should have been her face, hanging upside down, jiggling as she wiggled it at him.

“Hey, Boy.” Nate looked up at her. The part of her face still attached grinned at him, bone peeking through left-over skin and assorted yuck and she winked. “I got

plenty more ways. How'd you like to wake up n see me lookin' down at you like this?"

Nate backed away, trying not to hurl.

She swung the mess up and stuck it back onto her head and pointed at him. "Now, I'm gonna say it agin. I got something for you to do. And you ARE gonna help me. So, let's get to it."

In spite of himself, Nate was curious. "What could you want? It's not like I can avenge your death or something. I can't do any magical rites to bring you back to life."

She rolled her eyes. "Nothing so big and spooky. If that was what I needed and you was the only one to help, I might as well quit afer I begin. I jest need you to help me find somethin."

"What do you need to find? You're dead. You don't have any problems. What could you possibly need, except maybe a towel?"

She shook her head. "There's more about being dead that you don't know than you do. It ain't so easy. Plenty of things are finished when you die, but a lot keep on goin'...particularly things you wish would end."

"Like what?"

She looked grim. "Pain – at least some kinds of it. Pain from being sick – that's gone, but there's plenty of other things that can hurt, and hurt more than anything you felt when you was livin."

“What else?”

She blinked her eyes. She might have been crying. He couldn't tell because of the dripping water, but she looked really sad. “Loneliness. That don't go away.” She shook her head to chase away the thought and looked mad. “All this talk ain't gettin nothing done. We got things to do and a deadline. Are you in or do I have to do some more convincing?” She reached up and grabbed her other pigtail.

Nate waved his hands frantically to stop her. “Okay. Okay! I'll give it a try, but you have to promise to stop with the pulling off your skin and doing other gooey, slimy stuff.”

She held out her hand to shake his. He hesitated, then shook it. A cold chill shot from her hand into his.

“So, what are we looking for?” he asked.

She winked. “My body...and I'm almost out of time.”

3. Visit to the Graveyard

“Your WHAT?!” Nate yelled.

“My body. I wasn’t born a ghost, dummy. I used to have a body.”

“Well, what did you do with it? How can you lose your own body? Maybe it’s in the cemetery. Go a quarter mile down that way and look up the hill,” said Nate. “You can’t miss it. It’s the place with all the tombstones.”

“I’m dead, not stupid,” she replied. “The cemetery is where I want to be. It’s safer and there are more of my kinda folks. I might like to go on to other places, but I can’t do that if I don’t start in a cemetery.”

“Well, why don’t you go there?”

“I would if I could. Come on. I’ll show you.” She headed out to the road toward the cemetery. Nate watched her go, thinking that this might be a good time to make a run for it. She turned and her eyes started glowing red. “Don’t even think about it. I’m tired of messing around and you know I kin make you regret it. Come on!” Then, she turned and continued toward the road. Nate sighed and followed.

“Say,” he called after her. “Do you have a name?”

“Course I got a name. What kinda question is that?”

“Well, want to tell me what it is? Or should I call you Drippy Mae?”

She didn't even slow. "Mattie. You kin call me Mattie. Try callin me Drippy and see how many parts of you end up twisted in ways you never thought they could bend."

She walked fast and Nate had to nearly jog to keep up. "Aren't you worried about someone seeing you? You kind of stand out. I mean, people don't usually walk down the road sopping wet."

She shook her head. "Most folks don't see me. I kin go nearly anywhere I want, long as I stay around town." She stopped and looked at him. "Sometimes I wish folks could see me. Hard to make friends when people look right through you." She turned and continued down the road. "You're the first in a while. That's why I'm almost out of time."

They had come to the cemetery. It was up a short, steep driveway. Mattie didn't slow down a bit. If anything, she sped up while Nate huffed behind her. "Can't we go a little slower? What's your hurry? You afraid you're not going to still be dead when we get there?"

Mattie didn't slow or turn. "Got to hurry. Once the Major sees I'm here agin, the squawking starts."

"The Major?"

Mattie didn't answer as she barreled through the cemetery gates.

Nate had been to the cemetery a couple of times. It was small. Some gravestones dated back to mid-1800. He liked wandering between the stones, picking out the names and wondering about the lives of the people who buried there. It was always

empty, too, so he never had to worry about people trying to make friends because he and his mom were the new folks in town. Unfortunately, the cemetery was full of people today – really packed. Nate had only seen so many people in Becket on Town Fair day. There were clusters of people all over the place, most of them dressed up like they were going to church or something. Maybe there was a funeral going on.

“Mattie, don’t,” he called out. “Let’s come back when there’s nobody here. I can’t talk to you with all these folks around. They’ll think I’m nuts.”

“Don’t worry,” she said, heading toward a group of ladies who looked like they were discussing the plantings near the front gates. Nate figured they were the local garden club. He sighed. They were exactly the type he avoided – nosey and sure to try every way they could to find out about his mom and why she was back in her aunt’s big, falling down house after so many years away.

One of the ladies looked up from the flowers and smiled at Mattie. She was short and round, with eyes that sparkled, surrounded by laughter lines. “Hello, dear. It’s been a while since you came to visit.” The lady looked past Mattie at Nate and gave a little squeak of pleasure and surprise. “Why, is that Nathaniel? All grown up?”

Nate, still puffing from the fast walk and the hill looked suspiciously at the lady. “You know me?”

She smiled and nodded. “I most certainly do. Of course, it’s been a few years... you were only 5 and I couldn’t see so well.”

“That was the last time I was here. My Mom brought me with her ‘cause her Aunt May was dying. I don’t remember going anywhere. We just stayed in the house and we left a couple of days later because...”

She nodded. “Because I died.”

Nate’s mouth dropped and he took a step back, looking around wildly. “You mean that you.”

She nodded and smiled brightly. “Of course, dear. Who else do you think you’d see in a cemetery?” She gestured toward the others. “We’re all ghosts.”

Nate suddenly felt a pounding in his ears and the world started spinning. His eyes rolled back and he slumped to the ground.

4. Mattie Loses Her Head... And Her Arm

Nate slowly opened his eyes. Clustered around him, a bunch of concerned old ladies all dressed in old timey black clothes, made tisk tisk and clucking noises.

“What happened?”

“Thank goodness, he’s awake.” said one with a severe face, hair pulled back into a bun and a black dress. She looked like a school teacher who would rap your knuckles with a ruler if she caught you talking in class. Turning to Aunt May, she scolded, “You never think, May. The poor boy didn’t realize...”

“Well, I’m sorry, I’m sure,” sniffed Aunt May. “I thought that since he was here with Mattie, it was obvious that we were all...”

“No harm done,” interrupted another, with rather wild, grey hair. “Young people are like rubber balls. They bounce right back.”

Nate sat up quickly, remembering who or what they were. Looking at them he felt a bit embarrassed that he had gotten so scared. This bunch didn’t look like they could do much worse than bore him or make him eat cookies that tasted like cardboard.

“I’m okay. It was just...”

“Never you mind, Child,” said the bun lady. “A bit of a shock, I’m sure. We’ve seen you here before, but this is the first time you saw us. That’s because Mattie

brought you.” She turned to Mattie. “Now, explain yourself, young lady and be quick about it. The Major is sure to be around soon.”

Mattie said, “Nate don’t believe in ghosts... at least he didn’t.” She giggled a bit. “He asked me why I wasn’t in the cemetery, so I thought I’d show him, else he wouldn’ta believed that either.”

“I’d let you in, dear. You know that,” said Aunt May. “I feel so bad for you out there. Better you should have some company and protection.”

“We all would,” snapped the stern lady. “However, you know it is not up to us. Cemetery protocol is most clear on who decides and it is simply not a voting matter. The GIC makes the decision and his decision is final.”

“What’s the GIC?” asked Nate.

“The Ghost in Charge,” replied the lady with the wild hair. “The one who had the most people come to their funeral is the GIC of the cemetery and makes all the judgments when an exception or judgment must be made.”

“Unfortunately,” said Aunt May, “the Major is very strict and traditional. Plus he doesn’t get on with Mattie. We’ve tried to get him to change his mind, but we have been unable to...”

“Burns my biscuits,” interrupted the stern lady. “I believe in propriety and tradition as much as he does. More in fact. And unlike him, I never used strong drink when I was alive.”

“Celia, you were the minister’s wife, for pity’s sake,” said the wild haired woman. “Of course you had to behave. It would have caused no end of talk. Too bad, ‘though. Might have done you some good to lift your skirts a bit.”

“Gladys Crenshaw, you be quiet. I am quite aware of your opinion and I have told you mine. I might have been proper, but I was not stuffy. I did not mind your wild ways and never allowed gossip about your exploits in my presence, as well I might have. You certainly did things to gossip about. However, you were always kind and never pushed your ways on others and at the very least, you did not die a drunkard’s death, walking on a train track, too intoxicated to hear a train.”

“I HEARD THAT TRAIN, BUT I WAS PUSHED!” came a thundering shout from across the cemetery. Swiftly walking toward them, a tall, gangly man waved his arms, so angry it looked like fire was going to shoot out of his eyes.

Nate thought he looked a bit like Abe Lincoln, except for two things. First, he had a mean, furious look on his face. Second, there were deep grooves running across his body, one below his arms and the other just under his knees. He looked like he had been...

“Run over by a train,” whispered Mattie. “Don’t say nothing about the wheel tracks or he’ll show you what he looked like right after the train hit him and dragged him for a mile. This is how they purtied him up for the funeral. Trust me. You don’t wanna see what he looked like afor. It even makes ME sick.”

The man had arrived and was so mad, actual sparks and flames were shooting out his eyes, ears and mouth. He grabbed Mattie by the arm, jerking her back and forth and shouting. “I told you to stay out of here, you miserable ragamuffin. You have no place in this graveyard young lady. I have made my ruling and that is final.”

Nate could tell he was hurting Mattie, but before he could say anything, Aunt May laid a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Now, Major. She’s only a girl and she’s been through a lot. You know most of us think we should let her in.”

Not letting go of Mattie’s arm, the man turned his fury toward Aunt May. “That is not for you or anyone else to say. I am the GIC and I make the decision. Tradition is what keeps a graveyard orderly. I could overlook one black mark, but this miscreant has two black marks and that I will not stand for. Besides, look what she’s doing! She continues to encourage mutiny in the cemetery. And now she has gone completely out of bounds. She has brought a Breathie here.”

He looked at Nate, unhinged his jaw so his mouth opened past his chest and bellowed at him. “Get OUT!! You don’t belong here!” Inside his gaping mouth, Nate saw roaring flames and huge, writhing snakes that reached out toward him, hissing. Nate began to back away, not wanting to leave Mattie, but keeping his distance from the man and the snakes. The Major turned back to the ladies. “I will not have my authority questioned. The only way she can come in is with a body and that’s final. And until then,” he turned his fury back to Mattie, “***STAY OUT!!!!***”

With that, he gave a huge yank on her arm. With a disgusting, sucking, cracking sound, the Major tore Mattie's arm out of its socket. Mattie turned and ran and the Major followed, trying to smack her with her own arm. At the graveyard gates, the Major stopped. He continued to shake the arm like a club, but he would not take a step outside the graveyard. It was clear that Mattie knew he wouldn't go any further, because she turned around and began to make fun of him, walking crazy like she was drunk and shouting at him.

"Big ol' Major still scared of the outside? Too many people who ain't heard of you and won't listen to your bellowin? Heck, they can't even see you – lucky for them. Trains can't see you neither – same as when you was alive. Lots n lots o trains.

Nate finally caught up to Mattie. He panted, "How did you get down here so fast? You were up there, then you were down here. I just saw a blur."

Mattie laughed. "I told you I was faster now. One of the pluses. I ain't got so much weight to haul around, so I can run like the dickens." She looked back up at the Major. "But now I got a bit more work to do."

Mattie stuck her tongue out at the Major and shouted. "Train's a comin. Choo Choo Choo you up! Best try to stumble off the track."

The Major shook the arm at her so hard it looked like it was going to break apart and began to shout a stream of curses while clouds of black smoke poured from his mouth. Nate grabbed Mattie to pull her away, but she wouldn't budge and continued to shout at the Major. "You couldn't hit a barn with that arm. You couldn't hit the

ground with your foot. You're too drunk, even after all these years. You couldn't even hit a train – it had to hit you. Chooo Chooo Chooo! Time to catch your train. Oh wait, you already done that. Maybe next time you'll remember... works better iff'n you wait til it stops."

The Major was spurting flames and snakes and screaming at her. Mattie kept jumping around at the edge of the cemetery, making fun of him until he got so mad, he hurled her arm toward her head. Mattie quickly ducked her head to the side, reached up and grabbed the arm with a laugh. "Ha! Tricked you agin, train track. Gotta watch that temper, it'll be the death o you one day."

She pushed her arm back into place with a wince of pain and a juicy, slurping sound, then turned and headed down the road, back toward Nate's house. Nate followed behind while the Major screamed, "I'll *NEVER* let you in. Your pa can have you. Let him teach you some manners."

Continuing down the road, Mattie shook her head. "He's like the sun comin up in the morning. Always kin make him so mad he throws whatever he just ripped offa me."

"Doesn't it hurt?" asked Nate.

"Course it hurts. But it's not the same as if he ripped your arm off. Like I said, we aren't so all together."

Nate thought about that for a minute. "Could he? Could a ghost rip my arm off?"

Mattie shrugged. “It’s possible, but ain’t easy. Usually we can’t even be seen by Breathies – that’s what we call you livin folks – without a lot of focus and some luck. Touching is a heap harder. Actually, yanking your arm off would take a pile of thinkin. Most couldn’t do it. I’m purty sure the Major don’t have that kinda control.” A troubled look crossed her face. “Course some ghosts got enough meanness and jest plain hate to hurt most anyone they want. Them’s the ones to watch out fer.”

Nate gulped. “I’ll remember that.” He decided not to ask any more about those kinds of ghosts. Mattie looked upset, so he figured it would be best to change the subject. “Okay, you need your body or else the Major won’t let you into the cemetery. Where is it?”

They were turning to cross the bridge over Yokum Brook near Nate’s house. Mattie turned to him with a disgusted look. “If I KNEW where my body was, I wouldn’t have to ask you to help me find it, now would I?”

“How can you not know where your body is? It’s not like a pair of gloves or something. You must have had it when you died. That’s where it should be.”

Suddenly, Mattie looked past Nate and gasped. “Pa!”

In the middle of the bridge a huge lumpy pile of a man stood, glaring at them. Thick, powerful arms crossed over his chest. A dangerous, evil smile played across his lips and his sneaky, cold eyes studied Nate, like a butcher examining a lamb, deciding on the easiest way to slice him apart. Just like Mattie, water was pouring off him like he had just climbed out of the brook below. Nate felt a chill run through

him. He would have preferred to spend an entire week with the Major than another minute with this creature. Mattie stepped in front of Nate, shielding him from her pa's gaze.

“So, you got yourself another little friend, Mattie,” he said. “You still tryin to out fox me? Ha! It'll never happen. I'll take care of him jest like I took care of the others and then you're mine...Jest like you've always been.”

Mattie spoke quietly to Nate, “When he starts in on me, get across and don't look back. You won't like what you see. I'll be okay. Jest get home and don't come out tonight.”

She didn't wait for his reply, but hurled herself at the man, screaming, “I ain't yourn. Never was. Never will be.”

It was like Mattie could fly. She leapt the length of the bridge while she was screaming and crashed into the ghoul, scratching at his eyes. They both tumbled over the side and into the creek. Nate ran across the bridge toward his house. At the far bank, he turned and looked down into the water. The man had recovered from the fall and was slapping Mattie again and again. She kept scratching at his face and eyes, leaving deep gashes, where the skin fell off his face. She turned for a moment and looked at Nate, her eyes desperate, pointing toward his house. Then, as he watched in horror, the man grabbed her head and twisted. With a sound Nate felt in his stomach, Mattie's head turned and then ripped off her neck.

Nate felt his breakfast trying to burst out his mouth. Clapping his hands over his mouth to keep from hurling, he turned and fled into his room with Mattie's screams ringing in his ears. He couldn't stop asking over and over, "How can she keep on screaming after he pulled off her head?"

5. How Mattie Died

Nate wouldn't come out of his room for dinner. He wanted to ask someone what they thought and what to do, but who? No one would believe him, much less know what to do. He didn't trust anyone out here in Hicksville or even know anyone very well. If he called one of his friends back in Boston, they'd think he was making it up or had gone nuts. So, he sat in his room, staring out the window, wondering what was out roaming in the woods if he was next on its list.

He tried to sleep. No way. Every little creak or snap, and he'd jump up, sure Mattie's pa was at the window. The old house was always creaking. To make things worse, a storm was blowing in, so all the trees started creaking and cracking. That helped lots. Finally, he gave up and just sat at his desk, staring out the window and waited for dawn.

By morning, he could hardly keep his eyes open, but the light from the morning sun made him feel a little safer. For once, he was glad to go to school. School, with its solid walls, bright lights, even all the rules, made Nate feel safe. Ghosts couldn't show up, dripping and swinging axes, in the middle of Ms. Robbin's math class. If they tried, she'd glare at them until they stopped, then make them sit in the corner and stay after school to work word problems.

As he headed home, he had almost convinced himself that he had imagined everything that had happened. There couldn't be a cemetery full of ghosts that talked to him, much less a girl who drowned over 80 years ago that needed his help finding

her body. There certainly couldn't be an evil ghost who grinned while planning to do horrible things to him. That happened in movies, not in little towns a couple of hours away from Boston in the 21st century. However, just to be safe, he decided it would be a good idea to walk down the road and steer clear of the woods completely.

The road was fine. There were plenty of kids around. Everything was ok, until he came to the bridge across Yokum Brook. Just across the bridge was his house. He could see it. Still he couldn't help thinking about the last time he was there, when Mattie's pa was standing right there, waiting.

Nate stopped at the edge of the bridge. He looked around. Across the street, the library doors were open and a couple of kids were going in to get help with their homework. The sky was deep blue, with a few clouds. The sun was bright and a little breeze rustled the leaves.

He shook his head. "Chicken," he said with a laugh and started across. Of course, he made it across with no problem. He was laughing some more at himself and thinking about what he might be able to scrounge in the kitchen, when Mattie stepped out from behind a tree.

"Come on, we gotta go see someone."

"Aaaggg!" screamed Nate, completely surprised. He looked around for a way to escape.

Mattie shook her head. “You better start payin’ more attention, Boy. Pa ain’t one to be trifled with.”

“Go away,” yelled Nate. “You’re dead. Ever since I met you I’ve been scared or grossed out or both. Now I’m being hunted by some ghost that rips you apart and wants to do the same to me. Everything was fine before you showed up. No one bothered me. This is why I stay by myself. Other people just cause problems.”

Mattie’s eyes blazed with anger. “You are so dumb,” she yelled back at him. “You can’t lump everyone together and throw away the whole kit ‘n caboodle. Some people cause problems, sure. Others help you when you’re in trouble, or help pass the time, chew the fat, watch out fer you. Folks like that are called friends...not that you’d know about friends.” She was so angry, she was shaking. She poked him in the chest. “Friends is the light in the darkness. Friends is food for your heart. I need friends and I’m dead and you need em even more. You needed em afore you met me and jest cause Pa’s causin problems that don’t change a tick. Now, you may not think I’m your friend, but I’m ‘bout the only friend you got right now and you’re in trouble. More trouble than you know.”

She held up her hand before Nate could say anything. “I know it’s partially my fault. He’s my Pa and I gotta take responsibility for that, but you got to shoulder some of the load, ’cause you kin see me and that means there’s something special about you. Fault don’t matter. Reason why don’t matter. I ain’t gonna leave you to face Pa by your own self. I’m gonna help you, ‘cause that’s what friends do.”

Nate looked at her, stunned at how mad she was. “I don’t get it. You need a friend? I’m always confused when you start to talk.”

“That’s cause you’re so dumb. I don’t need a friend. I’ve got friends. I need some help. You, on the other hand, need a friend in the worst way. You’re fixin’ to take a long walk down a lonesome road. If you don’t change up fast, you’re gonna be one of those folks who is always by their own selves, even when you’re in a room full up to the rafters. Folks help each other. That’s what we do. You’re so wrapped up in your own little world that you can’t or won’t see past your nose.”

“It’s not my fault. I didn’t want to come here. I didn’t want to...”

“Wanna, wanna, wanna!” she yelled. “You didn’t wanna anything! You still don’t wanna. So what!?! You think I wanted to die...or get stuck walking around drippin’ like a bucket...waitin’ around to see what Pa does next? Let me tell you something. I didn’t choose any of it! Sometimes things jest happen.”

“What do you mean?”

Mattie sighed. “I guess it’s time I tell you a few things. ‘bout why I’m here and about why Pa...”

“Is he here?” Nate looked around, scared.

“Naw. Not right now, but he’s always prowlin ‘round. Some folks are like that.”

“What’s he got against you? I thought fathers were supposed to watch out for their kids.”

Mattie cocked her head and looked at Nate with sad eyes. “You know that ain’t always the way things are.” She sighed, “Pa wasn’t always so bad. He weren’t good. Some folks is born mean, but mostly he’d leave me alone. Ma could get him to behave. He minded her, but then, Ma died. It was the influenza.”

“Flu? She died of flu? Nobody dies of flu.”

Mattie shook her head. “Not so much anymore, but when I was alive, lots of people did. Ma had been ailing for a few years. She’d never got back to her old self after my sister was born and...”

“Wait a minute. You have a sister? Is she a ghost, too?”

“No, Teghan’s still kickin’.”

“Alive! She must be about a million years old.”

Mattie stuck out her tongue. “I kin tell math ain’t your best subject. She ain’t no spring chicken, but she’s still purty spry. She’s a bit the other side of 90.”

“It sounds like you’ve seen her. You know where she is?”

Mattie crossed her arms. “Every one thing I tell you, you ask for a whole ‘nother tale. Now I got the time, but it’s gonna git dark soon and Pa’s gonna come lookin’

and if I was you, I'd wanna know what to do 'bout that. So, you wanna keep askin me to tell stories or you wanna hear bout Pa?"

Nate said, "If it explains why he wants to kill you and me, I want to know everything you can tell me."

"He can't kill me. Leastwise not agin. He already did it once. Or did you forgit I'm dead?"

"He killed you! Why?"

"If you'd let me git a word in edgewise, I'd tell you." Nate started to object and Mattie held up her hand to stop him. Then, she reached down and picked up a pebble and held it out. "Here's what you're gonna do. Put this pebble in your mouth and hold it there 'til I tell you it's okay. That way, I'll kin tell you one whole story and I won't have to shove this pebble up your nose or pop my eyeball out to make you shut up."

"You wouldn't pop out your eyeball..." Nate started to say.

Mattie rolled her eyes and started digging in her eye socket with her finger. Nate quickly grabbed her hand. "Okay!!! STOP!!!"

Mattie held out the pebble again and glared, her finger stroking her face next to her eye. Nate sighed, took the pebble and popped it into his mouth. Mattie nodded.

“Okay. Good. Now, Ma died and no one could control Pa. He started hittin’ me regular and getting’ drunk every night. I didn’t like it, but there weren’t a lot I could do about it. You seen him. He was way bigger than me. ‘sides, I took it, because I didn’t want him to start on Teghan. She was still just a youngun, ‘bout 3 and a half. When he was drunk, it weren’t so bad. He’d just crash into things and fall asleep. But when he woke up, he woke up mean.

Then Pa ran out of money. I heard him talking to Mr. Waltrup in the next town. He was makin’ a deal to hire me out as a servant. He’d take all my wages so’s he could always have money for whiskey. Now, I didn’t mind none ‘bout getting’ hired away. Putting distance tween Pa and me was fine. The work didn’t bother me neither. I was already doin’ all the work round the house. Only problem was Teghan. I weren’t gonna leave her behind fer Pa to start in on.”

“Whaa oo ue?” asked Nate, trying to talk around the pebble. Mattie glared at him and started poking at her eye again. He waved his hands wildly, begging her to stop and mimicked locking his lips and throwing away the key. Mattie nodded and continued.

“That winter was bitter cold, with more snow than I’d ever seen. The spring was late a comin’. I didn’t think we’d ever get out of that house, but finally, it started warming a bit and the first big storm that was rain, not snow came. Pa had got a bottle of whiskey for signin’ the deal with Mr. Waltrup and he sat up late searchin’ for the bottom of that bottle. I waited ‘til Pa passed out. Then I got Tehgan all bundled up and we snuck out and made a run fer it.

We was heading up here, because Ma had a sister in Becket and she always told me if things got real bad, I should aim fer her sister. Tehgan and me hoofed it fer 3 days and kept movin' most nights to stay warm. We kept oft the roads as much as we could, afeared Pa would be after us, but there was still piles of snow and we weren't big.

All three days, it never stopped raining, but that last day was the worst. It was like a river pourin out of the sky. All day we slogged through it. We was cold and wet to our bones. Tehgan had been soldiering on as best as she could, but she was so little and we was so cold, wet and tired. She kept sniffing, but I made her stick with it. Tried to make it a game. Said we could stop fer a piece if we could march up to 300 steps. Sometimes, I'd carry her. We did everything I could think of to git some space tween us n Pa.

'bout midnight that last night, it was raining so hard and we was so tired, we jest had to stop and git out of the cold and wet, at least fer a spell. I thought we mighta made it to Becket. I weren't sure, but I could see a factory over one part of the brook, a mill near a little bridge, a church near the bend in the road and a fancy road house, jest like Ma had talked about. I figured not many places had all them things in one spot, so I was hopin'.

It didn't make no difference. We had to git out of the rain, warm our bones and rest a piece. I saw an old shed cross the bridge. Looked like a storehouse for the mill. I figured it had to be dry to keep the grain from spoilin' and there shouldn't be nobody in it. So that's where we headed.

That bridge was shakin' and moanin' like a live thing 'cause of all the water poundin' at it. The brook below was like the ocean pouring down a drain pipe. All the snow meltin', plus three days of rain were tryin' to git down that brook to the river and the water was climbin' up the banks and fixin' to flood. Whole trees was bouncing along in the current.

The bridge creaked and swayed as we went across, so's I thought it was gonna bust apart, but we made it across and got to the shed. A door was loose enough fer us to squeeze in. It was so nice and dry and there was soft burlap bags to lay on. Didn't take long and we fell asleep."

Nate started to say something, but Mattie glared at him. "That ain't the end of the story. Let me tell it like she happened. You got questions after, you kin ask."

Nate nodded and Mattie continued. "A couple of hours later, I woke up just as the door busted apart. Pa was standing there like the devil his self, rain pourin' off him, heftin' a huge ax in his hand. He was cussing so hard, he was spitting. Said he was gonna teach me a lesson fer running and then he'd start larnin' Tehgan the same thing. I jumped at him and he slapped me so hard I slammed back against the wall, my ears a ringin' and my head all woozy so's I couldn't hardly stand. He started after me, raisin' the ax to finish the job. Tehgan jumped up, grabbed his leg and bit him. Bit him a good one, like a rat terrier. He howled and raised up his boot to kick her head in. He woulda killed her. I felt a shovel on the wall near where I fell. I grabbed it and brought it down, BANG, on his head."

Mattie was breathing hard, remembering the fight.

He was bleeding and he swayed a bit, but didn't go down. He turned toward me and I yelled, 'You're too fat and stupid to ever catch me you stupid, stupid, drunk old demon!' and headed out the door, into the rain, running as fast as my tired legs could carry me. I knew he'd chase me. He hated bein' called stupid more'n jest bout anything. I wanted him to, so he'd leave Tehgan be. I looked back and he was running full speed after me, screamin' that he was going chop my lying tongue right out my mouth and waving that ax over his head, death in his eyes. I ran toward the bridge, jest aimin' to git him as far from Tehgan as I could. I was running fer my life, but he was gaining and I knowed he was gonna catch me. So, in the middle of the bridge, I stopped and turned.

Funny. I knowed it was my last minutes ter be alive and time slowed way down so's I could take in near everthing all around. I could see it was getting light, so's it musta been near dawn. I could feel the rain poundin' onto my head. Standin' on the bridge, with Pa bearin' down on me, even though it was near my last breath, I looked down and seen the brook was almost dry and I member thinkin' how strange that was, since it had been so high and wild jest a few hours afore and it was still rainin', so that brook shoulda been fuller, not dry.

All that time, I saw Pa gitting closer n closer. He got right on up to me at the middle of that bridge. He had his big ol ax held up high, drippin' water and death. I had the shovel. I was 11 and small. He was... well, you saw him."

Nate shuddered, thinking of Mattie standing up against that powerful man.

“He took a swing and I ducked under it, but I heard it swing close. I whacked him on the knee with the shovel. It didn’t even slow him down, jest made him madder. He backed me up against the railing of the bridge. He had the head of that ax up under my chin and was just pushing me back and back and back.” Mattie was stretching her head back, like she could still feel the ax at her chin. “He growled real low and mean, ‘I was gonna get money from you workin, gal, but nobody on this earth lays a hand on me and lives. So, I guess I’m got to put that sister of yorn to work and there’s nothing you kin do about cause you’re gonna be all chopped up.’”

Mattie took a breath. It was hard to tell the story, but she wanted Nate to know. “Then, he jammed his knee into my gut to hold me tight and he lifted up that ax to chop me. The bridge was slippery from all the rain and he was a bit teetery – standing on one foot, but he didn’t need much strength, just enough to lift that ax and bring it down and that was gonna be it for me. I figured my only chance was to wait ‘til the very last tick and try to twist away, but he had me awful tight.”

Nate’s eyes were huge. He could see Mattie trapped there, just waiting for the ax to fall.

Mattie continued. “But afore he could do the deed, I heard this huge roar like the earth was splittin’ in two, so loud it thundered out over the sheets of rain. It was getting a little light, so I could see up the brook a piece and what I saw took my

breath away. A wall of water, taller than all the buildings around and most of the trees was crashing down right at us!

I guess all those logs in the water had blocked up the brook for a while and that's why the water had stopped. All that water had built and built up and then had busted loose and was comin' straight fer us. As I watched, the water crashed into the factory just up the way and the buildings folded and fell in like they was made of paper. Faster than I could think, that wall of water was on us. Pa heard the sound and half turned and I saw a timber from the factory catch him full in the chest and heave him up.

I figured I was saved. All I had to do was hold on somehow and I would be able to swim to the surface. But at the very last, Pa reached out his hand and latched holda me and we was both swept away."

Mattie stopped and looked down at the brook, calmly bubbling over rocks with a cheerful sound as the sun sparkled off the rippling current. She blinked her eyes.

"I don't remember much after that. I was gasping fer air, tumbling ever which way, trying to dodge the tree trunks and boulders that was churning all around. I recall lookin' up and seein' the broken bridge above me, but I was looking at it through what seemed like a mile o' water. Then, everything was black.

Later, I don't know how long, it coulda been days or weeks or years, I woke up back here. Things looked different. The bridge was built up agin, but the factory was gone. I walked around getting to know the place. But if I tried to go more 'n about a

mile up the road, I'd snap right back here, like I was hooked to a slingshot." Mattie looked around, at the hills, at the bridge, at Nate, then down at the ground and sighed. "That's how it's been ever since."

Nate spit out the rock he had kept in his mouth. He reached out a hand and touched her shoulder. Even though it made his hand go numb with cold, he rubbed her shoulder.

"I'm... I'm sorry," he said. "I'll hang out with you, if that will help. I mean, you're right. It's not like I have any friends. And from what Mom says, I'm not going back to Boston any time soon, so we could..."

Mattie shook her head, like she was trying to clear her mind, sending water flying. "Thanks, Nate, but I ain't got much time left. We got work to do and if you don't figure out a way to fix things, I won't be around." She headed toward the woods behind the house. "But first we got to git you some protection so's you kin stay in one piece, breathin' and useful, while you're tryin' to help. Come on."

Without looking back, she headed up the hill behind the house. Nate hurried after her.

6. Misty, the Crazy Cat Lady

Mattie took off up the hill. Nate was a fast climber, but Mattie was faster. She was almost gliding above the ground. She went so fast Nate's lungs were burning trying to keep up. He wanted to slow down, but there was no way he was going to be left alone in the woods with Mattie's pa hanging around. So, instead of asking the questions filling his mind, he concentrated on keeping up.

He was surprised when she swung away from the circle of trees. That's where he figured they were headed. Instead, she continued over the ridge and down the other side. Going downhill, he was able to catch his breath.

"Where are we going?" he panted.

"It's time you met another friend of mine," she replied.

"Another ghost? Come on! Don't do that to me again. Every time I meet one of your friends, they do something that makes me want to hurl or run."

"Don't worry, yellow belly. You should be able to handle Misty. She's alive as you and a sweet lil ol lady to boot. I'm purty sure even you won't go all twitchy when you see her. 'sides, she's the only other breathie I know who can see me."

They were approaching a big, run-down house. Nate realized it was just down the road around a curve from his house. He was surprised how close the place really was

when they went straight up one side of the hill and down the other. On the road, it seemed pretty far away.

He had never seen the place up close, since it sat way back at the end of a long, dirt driveway. Like Nate's house, it was old and shabby, but this house was different. At Nate's, the disrepair was because his mom didn't have any extra time or money. This place looked like the owner wanted it to be exactly the way it was. All around the yard were strange collections of all kinds of things. It wasn't like someone toss out a bunch of garbage. Everything seemed carefully arranged.

Under one tree, over a hundred bottles of all different colors and shapes were set to look like flowers. A bunch more dangled from the branches, making a musical clinking as they tapped together in the breeze. In front of the house, a pyramid of stones sprouted dozens of long thin poles that were covered with shiny metal decorations. The poles kept slowly bouncing and banging like a weird piano while the metal pieces caught the sun and shot beams of light all around. There were piles of stones and branches and mirrors laid out all over the ground, forming pictures and symbols.

The house itself needed a paint job, but on all the sides and around the windows and doors, there were symbols and patterns painted in greens, blues and browns, with paintings and carvings glued or nailed into the patterns. The whole place was run down and totally messy, but it looked kind of cool, too. Everywhere that Nate looked, there were cats. Cats at the windows. Cats on the porch. Cats sprawled in the garden among the early spring flowers.

Nate hung back. He didn't know much about the town, but even he had heard of Misty, the crazy cat lady who lived here. Everyone said she lived there by herself, was the oldest person around and had been crazy since she was a little girl. Every morning, rain or shine, she walked to the store, always wearing a coat that was either bright yellow or bright green, a long, striped muffler and a scarf covered with flowers. At the store, she would buy a package of cookies, a bottle of milk and the newspaper, smile sweetly at everyone in the store and walk back home. It was only a quarter of a mile, but she did it every day, even when it was snowing or storming.

Nate didn't want to be in the same house with the crazy lady and he certainly didn't want to just walk up to the door and try to explain he was following his invisible friend. Who knows what she would do - probably start throwing cats at him.

However, Mattie walked up to the front porch and started hollering, "Misty. Misty! Come on out. I got someone fer you to meet."

The door opened slowly and out stepped a tiny, old lady. Up close, Nate could see her blue eyes sparkling behind little, round glasses. She leaned on a cane that was decorated all over with symbols like the ones on the walls. She beamed at Mattie. "Hello, sweetie. It's been a while since you've come to visit." She peered around, anxiously. "He's not after you again, is he?"

Mattie shook her head. "Naw. Not today, but he's been around. That's why I want you to meet Nate."

Misty turned toward Nate, looking him up and down. “Why, I declare. He’s a Breathie, isn’t he?”

Mattie nodded.

Misty’s mouth split into a wide smile. “That’s fine. That’s just fine. It’s been a long time. Maybe he can help before...”

“That’s what I’m a hopin’,” said Mattie. “But yesterday Pa seen him, too. So’s I’m afraid...”

Misty nodded. “I understand.” Turning to Nate she said, “Well, don’t just stand there, Youngun. Come on in and let’s get you fixed up. You’re lucky. I had an idea someone might be coming by and I made molasses, ginger cookies. They’re still hot.”

With that, she turned and went inside, leaving Nate to hurry after her. He realized that Mattie was still outside, so he held the door. She smiled. “That’s right nice of you, but doors don’t cause me no never mind. Go ahead and close it. I’ll show you.” Nate let the door close and a moment later, Mattie’s head poked through the solid wood. She looked up at him and grinned. “See. Doors ain’t so much a problem.”

Looking at her head and shoulders sticking through the heavy door, Nate shook his head. “You are definitely the weirdest friend I’ve ever had,” he said. Then, he noticed a necklace with a small heart hanging around her neck. Poking her head through the door had made it swing free. He reached for it. “What’s this?”

She pulled back, her head disappearing back through the door, like a chipmunk popping back into its hidey hole. After a second, she stepped through the door and into the room, standing straight, tucking the necklace back under her dress. “Ain’t fer handlin’,” she said. “I don’t like anyone else a touchin’ it. Got it from Ma. It’s all I got left of her. There’s even a little picture of her inside, but with the water and all, you can’t hardly see it. Still, I recall it fine. I was wearin’ it when I died. Always wore it.”

Misty came back into the room with a plate of cookies. She set them on a small table, brushed a cat off a chair and sat in it. “Sit down, Boy,” she said, pointing at a chair nearby. “Just push Sammy off, but watch out. He tends to scratch a little.”

Nate saw that Sammy was a big, fluffy, orange cat, with a pushed-up nose, who was gazing at him with calculating eyes, obviously planning how to cause the most damage if Nate came near or dared try to disturb him. Nate took a step toward the chair and Sammy hissed. Misty glanced over and barely flicked her fingers at the cat. “Go on, Sammy.” The cat immediately leapt off the chair and huffed away, smacking Nate’s leg with its tail. Nate sat down and looked around.

The room was filled with old, comfortable furniture. Everything had different colors, patterns and styles, but instead of a jumbled mess, it felt friendly – a place you’d want to sit back and relax.

The walls were covered with pictures. There were photos, paintings and drawings. Some were in frames, others just taped or pinned up. Around all the

pictures, in every empty space, around every window and door and even in places on the floor and ceiling, were symbols and letters from an alphabet Nate couldn't recognize.

“For protection,” said Misty, breaking into his thoughts. “When I was younger, I learned a lot from the librarian, Mrs. Snow and from some of her friends. Other things I learned from books and travelers. The rest, I learned by trial and error.”

“Here comes the crazy,” thought Nate. What did she need protection from in this little town? Was she afraid of killer mice? Was it aliens or something stranger?

Misty laughed and turned to Mattie. “I think your friend is trying to figure out how to get out of here alive. I've seen that look before. He's afraid I'm going to eat him.”

“Yup,” said Mattie with a grin. “He's lookin at you like he knows you're cracked, but ain't decided if you got the *'tra la la, look, it's a fairy'* crazies or the *'you got the devil in you so I gotta lop off your head'* crazies.”

She looked at Nate. “It ain't for her protection. It's fer me. This is the only place I can be sure Pa can't git me. He can't cross into this house and even if he got in, the signs would drive him out like he was a fire. He's tried plenty o' times, but he can't do it. That's why you're here. Misty is the only person who kin make something to protect you from Pa.”

Nate looked back and forth between the old, strange lady and his young friend, the ghost. They were staring at him, measuring him, like he was supposed to say something important.

“What’s his problem? He shouldn’t be picking on kids, particularly not his own kid or someone trying to help her,” said Nate.

They both relaxed. Misty looked at Mattie. “He believes you and he’s not going to run. He’ll help. It’s time you told him the whole story.”

Mattie looked like a scared little girl about to face the dentist. Nate had never seen her look close to scared. “Would you tell it?” she asked meekly.

Misty pointed to the couch. “I will if you sit down. You start pacing and I won’t be able to concentrate, plus you’ll scare the cats. You sit down and relax a bit.” Mattie nodded, went to the couch and sat.

Misty turned to Nate. “Have a cookie. They’re still warm.”

Nate picked one up and took a bite. His eyes almost closed, the cookie was so good. It filled his whole head with a warm, sweet taste. Then a little spark of ginger at the end woke up his mouth for another bite. It was the best cookie he had ever eaten. Misty smiled and pushed the plate toward him so he could have some more. Then she began.

7. Black Marks Mean Body or Badlands

“The first thing you have to understand is that cemeteries have rules, just like any other city. When there is a special case or two different rules can be applied to a situation, the GIC makes a decision and that decision is final.” She peered at him. “Do you know what the GIC is?”

Nate nodded. “Ghost in Charge.”

Mattie laughed. “Him and the Major danced a bit.”

Misty made a face and nodded. “Too bad he’s such an unpleasant fellow. He always was. The Major likes to play the big shot and there’s not much chance he’ll ever be demoted. He owned half the town when he died and the town is much smaller now. There’s not much chance that anyone will have a bigger funeral, so they have to follow his rules.”

Nate asked, “What rules? What does this have to do with Mattie?”

Misty replied, “Most people, when they die, go into the closest cemetery. However, there are some exceptions. If they killed someone or caused someone to die on purpose, most cemeteries won’t let the ghost in, so they are stuck, with no place to go. They can’t get a transfer, because they aren’t in a cemetery.

Sometimes, they wander, like Mattie. Most of the mean ones get sent to the Badlands.”

“Where’s that?” asked Nate. “What’s it like?”

Misty shook her head. “I haven’t seen it, but I’m sure it isn’t pleasant. Most of the ghosts there are killers and they like to keep on hurting each other – even after death. Any ghost sent there will do anything, and I mean anything, to keep from going back.”

Mattie spoke up. “That’s where Pa got sent, but he offered to trade em fer a chance to git out ever once n a while. He traded me fer that treat.”

“What!?” said Nate. “How can he use you?”

Misty said, “The only thing a ghost can trade are other ghosts. They trade their freedom for the freedom of someone else. If they can deliver a ghost who is on the edge...someone who might have to go in or could stay out, then the bad ghost can get an exit pass.”

“But Mattie isn’t on the edge, is she?” asked Nate.

Misty nodded. “She is. Mattie was partially the cause of her pa’s death. She hit him and he wouldn’t have been on that bridge if he wasn’t chasing her.”

“But that’s not...”

Misty held up her hand. “I know it’s not fair, but the rules have been handed down since there were first graveyards. I’m just explaining, so you understand.”

“That’s one of the black marks the Major was talking about,” said Mattie.

“He said there were two. What’s the other?” asked Nate.

“The other important rule,” continued Misty, “is that a person, or what’s left of them, must be buried in the cemetery in order to be let in. If someone dies nearby, but aren’t actually buried in the cemetery, they can’t get in. Again, that applies to Mattie. Her body was swept away and we’ve never been able to find it. Sometimes, if there is no body, but someone puts up a tombstone, that’s good enough. However, no one knew that Mattie was here. She was running away and no one came looking. No body. No tombstone. That’s the second black mark.”

Mattie looked mad. “The Major would near hafta let me in on either one. He could even wink n let me in with both. He’s a stubborn cuss and don’t like me. He couldn’t squawk if I hadn’ta been the reason Pa was on that bridge, but I’m glad I was. I’d do it again in two shakes.” She looked at Nate. “That’s why we got to find my body. I been looking fer nigh onta 88 years and my time is runnin' out. If’n I don’t find it by the 19th of April...”

“What happens?” asked Nate.

Misty said softly. “Remember that I said some people make a deal – a trade?” Nate nodded.

“Well, Mattie’s pa made a deal that he would deliver her in return for him getting out every once in a while, to cause trouble and watch her. He’s too mean to get out entirely. However, he’s her pa and she had a hand in his death, so he can claim her if

she doesn't get into the cemetery by the 88th anniversary of their death. Those are the rules. It may not be fair, but those are the rules."

"Why 88?" asked Nate.

"Eight is the ancient symbol for eternity. Two eights – one for each of them. He can't get out himself, but he can make sure she is trapped right there with him. She'll be trapped with all those killers and evil things...and her pa. Forever."

"April 19 is in just 10 days!" cried Nate, jumping up. "We've got to find your body right now."

"Don't ya think I know it?" replied Mattie. "The head scratcher is, I got no idea where to look."

"What do you mean? You said you went in at the bridge. You said you looked up and saw the remains of the bridge. It's obvious that your body is somewhere under the bridge."

Mattie shook her head. "No such luck. We've been a lookin' ever which way since Misty was littler than you. Never found nothing."

Misty nodded. "Once, when I was 7, I was up on the hill behind this house, picking wintergreen, and I saw a girl walking toward me. She was dripping wet, like she had just poured a bucket of water over her head."

Nate looked back and forth between the two. “You’ve known each other that long?”

Misty smiled. “We used to play all the time. I told my friends and my parents about her.” She laughed. “That’s when they started calling me crazy. I guess I grew into it.”

Mattie smiled. “We spent years and years digging in the banks of that brook, tryin’ to find a little scrap o me to bury. I’d go under the water, peerin’ this way and that, aimin’ to see where I was that last time, but I never seen the same view agin.”

Misty shook her head. “I would climb up to the bell tower of the old school and look as far as I could to see any other place the brook might have taken her body. Any place that looked promising, we’d go there and hunt around. Still nothing.” She smiled sadly. “No one could figure out why I spent so much time digging in the banks of the stream. I guess it was lucky they thought I was a little off. They just figured it was part of my crazy and let me do what I wanted.”

“Wait a minute,” said Nate. “What bell tower? There’s no bell tower in town.”

Misty smiled. “There certainly is. The building is the art center now. The tower on the front is a bell tower.”

“Really? I’ve never heard it ring. I wonder if the bell is still up there.”

“I’m certain it is. I’d know if they took it down. It used to be the alarm bell for the town. There’s a special door on the side of the tower. You have to look carefully to

see it, but you can open it and the rope for the bell is there. Anyone who saw a fire or anything else important could ring the bell and the whole town would come to hear the news. They don't use it any more, now that we have phones and TV."

Mattie grinned. "I remember you used to sneak out and ring it Halloween night."

Misty nodded and laughed, her face showing the tricky little girl she was those many years ago. "And never got caught. Chief Bill started taking down the rope on Halloween to stop me."

Mattie laughed. "But you'd be skinny up inside the tower and ring it anyway."

Misty smiled. "Remember the year Izzie and his friends climbed up early and hid so they could scare me?"

Mattie hooted. "Do I ever! You nearly fell out of that tower! Course when they chased you down and went back up to ring the bell, I waited 'til they was near up top and started ringing it my own self. They almost messed their britches!"

"They never bothered me after that."

"So, hold on," said Nate. "If you've been looking for all this time and haven't been able to find it, what makes you think I can help? It sounds like your body just washed away."

Mattie shook her head. "Can't be. It's tucked up somewhere here about. Got to be, 'cause I'm stuck here. Remember? I told you if'n I go more 'n about a mile from

this spot, I pop back like a rubber band. I got to be somewhere nearby. I'm just hidden. You've gotta figure it out a way to find me.”

8. Trying to Keep Nate Alive

“First things first,” said Misty, grabbing her cane and pushing herself out of the chair. “We need to make you some protection, so you stay safe while you search. Mattie’s pa is a powerful ghost. He can do more than just scare you. He can reach through the worlds and touch you.”

“So can Mattie.”

“No. Mattie can only touch you because you let her, because you and she have a connection. I’m not sure what it is, but that is unusual. Mattie is only partially in this world. Haven’t you noticed? Even though she’s dripping, nothing in the house gets wet.”

Nate had nearly stopped paying attention to the constant stream of water that flowed down Mattie and he hadn’t noticed that she wasn’t soaking everything she touched.

“Mattie’s pa has plenty of rage and plenty of focus. He’s driven off everyone who has tried to help her in the past...except me. Over the years, I learned how to send him away, at least for a while and how to protect myself. I’m too old to search for her body any more, but I can make some protection for you.”

She headed into the next room, leaning on her cane. “Come on,” she called back over her shoulder. “Have you ever seen a garden inside a house?”

Nate followed her into a bright, sunny room that had been completely enclosed with glass and filled with plants, so the room seemed like a lush garden. Birds flittered near the ceiling and a small waterfall fell into a fountain. Misty turned and smiled.

“This is my special room. I don’t have many Springs left in this body, so I like to have a bit of Spring all year ‘round.

Nate pointed to a bright yellow canary splashing in the fountain. “What about the cats?”

Misty waved away the question. “Oh, psha. I talk to each cat when they come here and explain that in this house, there will always be plenty of food and lots to play with, but that does NOT include birds. Never had a problem.”

She led the way to a large, rough table that stretched along one wall. “You sit right here and let me cogitate.”

Nate sat down and Misty peered at him from every angle, muttering to herself. After several minutes she nodded, put a stone bowl on the table in front of him and began gathering things and dropping them into the bowl. There were powders that she took from jars stacked on shelves against the wall. She added cuttings, both leaves and flowers, from different plants growing around the room. Some things Nate couldn’t even guess what they were came from a large cabinet of drawers that was so tall Misty had to climb up on a stool to reach into one.

Finally, she was satisfied. She took a heavy, worn, metal rod about the size of a big cigar and used it to crush and mix everything together, singing quietly to herself. She added something that looked like thick oil or shampoo to the mixture. The contents began to smoke a bit and a sweet smell filled the air. From a small, red, wooden box with strange writing all over it, she took a small, tan stone that had a hole in the middle and put it in the bowl, stirring gently and singing. She looked at Nate.

“This is high desert sandstone, full of the power of the sun. It is very absorbent, so the mixture will soak into it. However, you must be careful. Don’t wear it in the bath or when you go swimming, because it will melt. The desert doesn’t get much water.”

Nate nodded that he understood. The smoke was making him a little dizzy. Misty took a braided red cord from the box and pulled the stone from the bowl. Nate gasped. The stone now sparkled with reds and greens and seemed to glow like it had a light inside it. Misty strung the stone on the cord. She dipped her finger into the bowl, scooping up some of the mixture and rubbed it on Nate’s forehead. It felt hot and there was a tingling in his head and a buzzing in his ears. Misty tied the ends of the cord together and slipped it over his head. Where the stone lay against his chest, a warm tingling spread out all over his body.

Misty clapped her hands three times and said, “It is done!” Then she sank down into a chair. Fanning herself with a handkerchief, she smiled a little weakly at Mattie and Nate. “I’m going to have to ask you to excuse me now. I’m not as young as I once was and I’m all tuckered out. I need to take a little nap.”

Nate stood. He didn't really know what to say. Misty made shooing motions with her hands. "Go on, young man. You'll be fine. You have a friend to help."

Nate nodded and turned to go. Mattie held back a minute, looking at Misty. Misty smiled a weary smile. She said softly, "If anyone can, he can, sweetie. All we can do now is hope."

9. How to Find a Body

“What now?” asked Nate, as they headed away from Misty’s house.

“It’s up to you,” replied Mattie. “You kin see me and there’s got to be a reason fer it. You got something special that’s gonna crack this riddle. I kin feel it.”

“I don’t know anything about finding bodies,” protested Nate.

“You mightn’t got the answer, but I betcha you got some way a lookin’ at it that’ll do ‘er. Think Nate. We got ourselves a mystery. How would YOU figure it?”

Nate considered. “The first step is to decide what the important questions are. I guess there are really two big questions. One is, where is your body? You looked up and saw a bridge. Maybe it wasn’t that bridge. Maybe we need to take another look at the other bridges nearby.”

“Naw. How you gonna do that? You ain’t got time fer walking up all over tarnation.”

“Don’t have to. I think I have a way.” He held up his hand, stopping her question. He was on a roll. “The second question is how we find your body, even if we know the spot. I figure the reason you haven’t been able to find it so far is because it’s buried too deep. During the flood, a ton of stuff could have ended up on top of you. We’ve got to find a way to locate what’s left of you under a pile of dirt and rocks. I don’t know how to do that, but I know where to find answers to both questions - the

library. They have books, maps and they have the internet. I'm sure we can get some ideas there. Plus, that's where we can see pictures of every bridge around here. There's a good chance we'll be able to see pictures of the bridges even from underneath. Some people from a place called wild and scenic rivers came to talk at school. They are charting the entire river and documenting it. They keep the entire collection of pictures on a computer at the library." He stopped and looked at her. "Can you go into the library? I mean, you don't have any problems with it, do you?"

Mattie shook her head. "I got no problem with it, but..."

"But what?" asked Nate.

Mattie grinned. "You best remember to keep your yap shut. You start jawin' with me and they'll lock you up fer a loon. Remember, no one else kin see me."

Nate nodded. "I'll try." Looking up at the sky, he added, "Let's hurry. It looks like a big storm is blowing in and if we don't hurry, we're gonna get soaked."

Mattie laughed. "Don't make me no never mind." She gestured at the streams of water flowing down her face. "I'm always a drippin, but YOU probably think you're so sweet, you'll melt like cotton candy."

Nate grinned and headed toward the library. "Fat chance. Let's get started. This is going to take a while and you don't have much time."



During the next several days, Nate spent as much time as he could in the library. He had been right. The collection of pictures of the river included photographs of bridges. Unfortunately, they were organized along the length of the river. He couldn't just look up bridges. That meant he had to use satellite view of maps on the web and find where on the river there was a bridge. Then he could go to that section of the river and go through all the pictures to find pictures of the bridge. Once they found those pictures, they could see the bridge from every different angle, so Mattie could compare the picture to her memory. It was hard work, particularly because Mattie kept talking to Nate and he had to remember not to talk back, since no one else could see her. It was frustrating too, because none of the bridges looked right to her. Hour after hour they looked and time was running out.

Nate also searched for different ways to find bodies under lots of dirt. He got help from Zina, the librarian, who suggested several sites, showed him how to do advanced internet searches to find other sites and even located some books that helped. She would always answer his questions and try to help, but didn't ask him why he was looking. Nate was glad of that. He didn't want to try to explain why he was trying to learn how to find a body. In spite of all the information he found, he wasn't getting any closer to a solution. All the methods he checked out were expensive and involved equipment like radar or chemical analysis, which would cost too much and take too long.

Day after day, from after school until the library closed, they looked. It was discouraging. Mattie tried not to show it, but she was getting more and more worried. The weather didn't help their mood either. A constant, heavy, soaking rain had settled in over the small town and everything was turning to mud. The brook kept rising and it was threatening to flood. Trees along the bank were falling in and being carried downstream.

"Four days left," said Mattie. "You got to be missin' something." Nate was sitting in the computer room, reading a web site that told how dogs were able to sniff bodies. It was gross, but interesting.

"I can't get one of these dogs," he whispered, looking around to make sure no one was paying attention. "Besides, I don't even know if they could find you after all this time. There might not be enough of you to smell"

"I wish I could say the same 'bout you," grinned Mattie.

"Nate?" Nate looked up and saw Zina standing in the doorway. She smiled. "May I talk with you?"

Nate nodded and she sat down. "First, I want you to know that an important part of the rules for this library is that we do not ask questions about what patrons are reading. It's a matter of privacy." She looked closely at Nate. "Do you understand?"

Nate nodded. "I wondered why you answered my questions, but never asked what I was doing."

“That’s the reason why.” Zina looked a little uncomfortable. “But I also want you to know that I am here to help if you need something and that any help I give you stays between us. I’ve noticed that you seem to be looking for something and it looks like you are not finding it. I don’t want to intrude, but is there something I can help with?”

Nate sighed, not sure what to do. Mattie, standing beside Zina, studying her, turned to Nate. “Ask her. Don’t say we’re lookin’ fer a body, but ask her about finding something from back then. I got a feelin’.”

Nate nodded and said, “Well, I’ve been interested in the flood in 1922.”

Zina nodded. “We have a lot of information about that in the archives, much more than is in books or on the computer.”

“Archives? What’s that?”

“In small towns like Becket, people often don’t write whole books about what happens. Even the newspapers often don’t cover it. We still don’t have our own newspaper. So, the way we know history is from letters, stories, pictures and other things from people who were living here back then. We have a lot of things upstairs. Many of the papers are too fragile to be out on the shelves, but we have them to look through, if you are careful.”

Nate began to feel hopeful. The archives sounded interesting. He wanted to study them, but he knew he needed to stay focused on his immediate problem. He thought

about how to phrase his question without coming right out and saying that he was looking for a body. “I’ve been trying to find things from the flood, things that might have been washed away, like from the mill that was near my house.”

Zina thought a bit. “I’m not sure if you could. Anything small would have been covered with dirt during the flood. Then, every year, with the spring thaws, more dirt would be deposited. I guess that things from the flood might be down a foot or more now.”

“I thought maybe I could dig in the stream or on the banks, if I knew there was something there and if I could find a place that didn’t have many rocks.”

Zina smiled. “We have more rocks than sand around here. You’d have to know exactly where to dig or it would be slow going.” She thought for a minute, then leaned forward and typed in a search on the computer. Clicking on a page, she said, “Maybe this is the answer.”

Nate looked at the screen and felt a chill of excitement. She had opened a page that explained how to use a metal detector to discover objects that were over 2 feet deep.

“If you got lucky, and you had a good metal detector, you might be able to find something, if it had some metal on it,” suggested Zina.

Nate nodded quickly, a smile splitting his face for the first time in days. “I think I saw one of these in our basement. I bet this will work. Thanks!”

Zina stood up and smiled. “My pleasure. Good luck with your hunt.” Nate scanned the article, then stood and headed toward the door.

“Wait a minute,” said Mattie. “That’s as much use as a match in a hurricane. I ain’t made of metal, case you ain’t noticed.”

They had stepped out into the rain, heading towards Nate’s house. He stopped and turned, tapping her on her chest, feeling the locket under the thin dress. “You aren’t, but your locket sure is. I think it’s silver and the article says there’s a special setting for silver, so we won’t get any false readings on nails or other stuff.” He was excited and wanted to find the metal detector. He could picture it in a corner of the basement next to a big pile of other stuff Aunt May had left.

He hurried across the street. On the bridge, he looked over the side and stopped. The water had slowed to a trickle, even though the rain was pouring as hard as ever. “That’s funny,” he said. “Look at the brook. Where’s all the water?”

“That ain’t even a little bit funny,” said Mattie, with dread in her voice. “I seen that afore. Something’s blockin’ the water.” She shot Nate a scared look. “That’s the way it looked the night I died.”

As she spoke, a siren blared from down Main Street. Nate turned and saw the fire truck screaming down the road, siren blaring and lights flashing. As he watched, both the town’s police cars and then 2 state troopers sped by. Standing in the pouring rain, he knew there was trouble. Big trouble. The road crew’s big earth movers, used for

repairing damage from winter storms rolled by while he watched. Something really dangerous was happening.

“We better get home. They’re heading upstream to unblock the brook,” said Nate. Turning, he gasped. There, standing in the middle of the bridge, holding an ax, an evil grin stretching his face, was Mattie’s pa.

“Hello Breathie,” he said. “I think you been playing with my daughter a bit too much. It’s time you and I had some fun.” He raised the ax. “At least it’ll be fun fer me. Sorry to say, you might not like it so much.”

Mattie charged by Nate and hit her pa in the stomach with her shoulder. With a grunt, he brought the ax down, trying to chop her, but she was too close, so only the handle hit her. The power of the blow cracked into her head with a sound like a melon busting open. Mattie staggered back, moaning in pain. The huge man turned back toward Nate and raised the ax again.

Mattie, holding her head together with both hands cried, “Nate! The stone! Use the stone.”

Nate reached around his neck and felt the cord. He pulled it over his head and held out the stone like a shield...a teeny, tiny shield against a huge, ax swinging demon. He winced and turned his head away, waiting for the blow. Instead, he heard a roar of disbelief and rage. He opened his eyes and looked. The stone was shooting out beams of light that were hitting the ghost all over. Everywhere a point of light hit, he started burning. The ghost was swearing and yelling, trying to bat them away,

like he was being attacked by a swarm of bees. He dropped his ax, which disappeared, and dove into the brook, vanishing before he touched the little trickle of water that barely covered the rocks.

Gasping, Nate turned to Mattie, who was lying on the bridge, her head bashed in. She was awful to look at, but he held her hand, patting it.

“What can I do?” he asked.

She moaned a bit, trying to hold her head together. “Nothing. Nothing now. I’ll be okay. It looks bad and it burns like the dickens, but I kin patch myself up. You go on home and git that contraption. Tomorrow we’ll see if it does the trick.”

Nate stood. “Are you sure? Can’t I do anything?”

Mattie grimaced and shook her battered head. “Ain’t nothin’ you got powers over. This un is on me. Go on, home.” Nate nodded and turned toward home.

“Hey Nate,” she called.

“Yea?”

“Dry that stone off. It’s real wet out here and it’s gonna start to melt.” Nate nodded. “And thanks. You might be learnin’ how to be a friend after all.”

10. Risking the Flood

The next afternoon, the rain was still coming down hard. Nate was down on the banks of the brook under the bridge sweeping the metal detector back and forth. Mattie had to keep watch for policemen and highway workers. The police chief had come by earlier and warned everyone to stay clear of the brook. Someone's deck had fallen in and was wedged, blocking the brook just across from the cemetery. As more and more trees and debris got stuck behind the initial plug, the water was backing up along the brook and getting higher every minute. The highway crew had been working all night, but they couldn't get it unplugged. Everyone was worried that when it finally broke, a flash flood would rip through town.

"Stop watching me," he called up to Mattie. "If anyone comes around either bend and sees me, I'll be in so much trouble, there's no chance we'll be able to look any more."

"I kin watch both," she called back. "Ghosts got better hearing and faster seeing, so stop cluckin' like a brood hen and keep a lookin'."

"Having the stream blocked is actually working for us. If the water was flowing, there would be no way to get so far into the stream. With all the rain, the brook would be way too high." He stopped and looked up at her. "You're sure you'll know if the dam breaks? Really sure?"

“You Nervous Nellie! I tol’ you. Your Aunt May is watching n she’ll let me know. She don’t want nothin’ happenin’ to you. The dam is right across from the cemetery, so she’s got a straight shot. Once she knows, I’ll know.”

“Ghost telephone?” asked Nate.

“You gotta trust me. We kin call out to each other when we wanna. Ain’t no time to prove it now, but I’ll know.”

Nate shrugged. “Okay. I guess you don’t want me dead either. I’ve got to find you first.”

“I wouldn’t wish death on you nowadays, nohow, but if you don’t get a wiggle on, I’m gonna come up with something to light a fire under you and I’m guessin’ you won’t be happy when you see it. Hmmm... what ain’t I used on you yet?”

Nate quickly started sweeping back and forth with the detector again. “Never mind!” he called. “I’m looking. I’m looking!”

After several more minutes, he sighed and looked up at her again. “Mattie, I’ve gone over both banks from right before the bridge to a few feet after. You said you looked up and saw the remains of a bridge, so that’s as far as it can be. This has got to be the bridge you saw. We couldn’t find another one that looked right.” He set down the device and looked at Mattie, sad and hopeless. “I’m out of ideas. I don’t know what to try next.”

“Perhaps, young man, you should be more careful in your research,” came a voice from the bank behind them. Turning, Nate saw the proper lady from the cemetery.

“How did you sneak up on us?” he began, then realized who, or what, he was talking to. “Oh, sorry. I forgot.”

She smiled and nodded. “We have not been properly introduced, but you may call me Mrs. Snow.”

Nate could tell that she was someone who could be very nice if you were polite and very mean if you weren't, so he bobbed his head. “Hello, ma'am. I'm Nate Carlyle. It is nice to meet you.”

She nodded, as if his manners had passed her test. “I know who you are, Nathaniel. Your Aunt May never tires with talking about you. She thinks very highly of your abilities.”

“Really? I was just a kid when she died. I never did much when I was here visiting.”

Mrs. Snow gave a quick shake of her head. “Your Aunt has an excellent eye. She saw potential in you. Potential is ability that has not yet shown itself. You are showing some of that potential now. However, you did not take the time to carefully listen during your research. Research is a matter of carefully looking, listening and smelling.”

“Smelling?”

She smiled a tight, little smile. “That is what I call it. I was the librarian here for twenty-three years and I spent many hours following leads on subjects of interest to myself or others. The path to knowledge is almost never a straight road. You must listen and sniff at every new turn and learn to trust your instincts. I have been watching you as you were investigating. You missed an important clue.”

“Really? What? Where?”

“Think back, young man. Think over the last few days. What lead did you not follow that you thought you should?”

Nate tried to remember all the articles and searches and web sites and books he had looked at. They all started to blur together in his head.

“Breathe deeply and think back. Something will grab you,” she said.

Suddenly, Nate opened his eyes. “The archives,” he said, a huge smile splitting his face. “I remember when Zina said there were archives with old articles and writings. I wanted to look at them, but then we found out about the metal detector.”

Mrs. Snow nodded. “There are also pictures in the archives. Many pictures, including pictures of bridges and damage caused by the flood.”

Nate’s smile shattered. “That’s no good now. We can’t get into the library, even if there is a new clue. Today is Friday and it’s not open. If I wait until tomorrow, I may not find what we need before they break the dam and the brook fills up again and...”

“Shushhh!”

If Nate had wondered whether or not Mrs. Snow had really been a librarian, that settled it. He had heard a lot of *Shushhes* in his time and her's was a professional one for sure. He realized that one of the things he liked about Zina was that he had never heard her *Shushhh* anyone.

Mrs. Snow continued. “Another thing a librarian can do, if the patron is working hard and being respectful, is to help with finding information.” Mrs. Snow’s eyes were twinkling a bit, although she tried to keep a strict face. “Besides, I don’t need to look anything up. I was alive during the flood, so it’s easy for me to tell you.”

“Tell him what?” asked Mattie, who was also a little intimidated by Mrs. Snow.

“You are looking under the wrong bridge,” she answered.

“But we looked at the pictures of all the other bridges,” protested Nate. “Mattie didn’t recognize any of them.”

“That was your mistake. You see, Mattie came here at night. After she died, she was confused for quite some time. She never realized that there was another bridge, not far from here, at the end of Main Street. ***That*** bridge was destroyed in the flood and was never replaced. It spanned the river just after the brook empties into the river. That was the bridge she saw when she looked up.”

In the darkening day, Mattie and Nate looked down the brook. They could just make out the end of the brook, about a quarter of a mile away, where, they were now

sure, they would find Mattie's body. So close, after all this time. They turned toward Mrs. Snow to thank her, but she was gone.

"Let's go now," said Nate. "I might be able to get a few sweeps in before it's totally dark."

Mattie shook her head. "No way. I got a powerful want to go now, too. It's too blame dark. I kin see, but you'll slip n fall or worse, n then we're cooked. Better you git some shut eye and I'll wake you up real early. We'll find me tomorrow morning right after dawn. I feel it in my bones." She thought a minute, then grinned. "That's kind of a joke – I kin feel in my bones that we're a gonna find my bones."

Nate rolled his eyes, then asked, "You can come get me? I thought there was something about my house that kept you out. You've never been inside before."

"It ain't that I can't. It jest gives me the willies, cause it's right aside that old shed where... you know... where I..."

Nate nodded. "I understand." He turned to go. "Okay. Wake me when it's light, but be quiet. I don't want to try to explain to Mom why I'm getting up at dawn on a Saturday."

Mattie nodded and turned.

"Mattie?" Nate looked down, thinking, then looked up at her. "What do you do at night? Is it cold or scary?"

Mattie smiled and shook her head. “Cold don’t matter. Dark don’t neither. Mostly, I walk in the woods. Sometimes I go see Misty. It ain’t a bother, ‘cept when Pa’s around. I’m used to it.”

Nate nodded. “Maybe sometime, after this is done, you can come spend the night.”

Mattie grinned. “Depends on how messy your room is. First, let’s get me found. Tonight, I’m gonna go poke around down to the end of the brook and see if I can figure where to start tomorrow.”

Nate nodded. “See ya.”

11. Into the Howling Storm

“Nate!”

A big drop of water hit him in the face. His eyes flew open. “Wha..?!” Mattie bent over Nate, face full of worry.

“Git up! There’s a pile o’ trouble.”

Nate rubbed his eyes and looked around, confused. He was not a leap out of bed and dash into action kind of guy. He peered at her as another splash of water hit his face. “That you, Mattie?”

Despite her worry, Mattie grinned. “Got other gals who come a callin’ in the middle of the night and drip water all over you?”

Nate looked at the clock. It was 4:30. He began to get mad. “What are you doing here? It can’t be light yet. You said you were coming at dawn.”

“It’s ‘bout an hour afor dawn, but you gotta get up now. Misty’s in trouble. You gotta go help her.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I was over talkin’ with her and she tripped over one of them dad blamed cats. She fell and I can’t pick her up. Shake a tail feather! She’s hurt. Maybe bad.”

Nate started to get up. “I should call the police or the ambulance.”

“You can’t. Hear the storm? Nothing’s workin’.”

The wind had picked up and the rain was coming down in buckets. Lightning flashed and a huge roll of thunder shook the glass in the windows. Nate reached to turn on his lamp, but nothing happened.

“Lights gone out all over town,” said Mattie. “I’m figurin’ the phones are broke too Welcome to how it was when I was alive.”

“Cell phone might work,” said Nate. “Mom won’t let me have one yet, but hers’ is downstairs. Maybe I should wake her.”

Mattie shook her head. “You ain’t thinkin’ right. What you gonna tell her? Your ghost friend came callin’ to say Misty needs help?”

“I guess you’re right.” Nate got up and went downstairs, feeling his way. In the kitchen, he found the flashlight they kept near the door and found his mom’s phone. “No signal,” he said, looking at the phone. “Must have knocked out the power to the tower.”

“You gotta get over there!” urged Mattie. “She needs help now and setting here jawing ain’t doin’ her no good.”

“Okay. Okay.” Nate grabbed his coat and slipped outside. Immediately, he was soaked to the skin. It was like trying to walk through a very windy swimming pool. “Arrrggg,” he said in his best pirate voice. “In all me years I’ve never seen such a storm. Shiver me timbers and everything else. It’s cold!”

He turned with a grin to Mattie to see if she appreciated his pirate impression. A sudden flash of lightening lit up the hill, making it day for an instant. He caught a

glimpse of Mattie's face. She wasn't grinning back. Instead, her face was frozen with fear.

"It's jest like that night. When Pa and me..."

A chill passed through Nate that had nothing to do with river of water washing over him, pouring down his face and body. The chill passed, but the water continued to run down his face. He tried to brush it away. No luck.

"How can you stand it?" he asked, trying to break the spell the past had over Mattie. "It's only been a few minutes and all this water is driving me nuts. You've had water in your eyes for years and years."

Mattie, shaking off her fear and looking at Nate had to smile at her dripping friend. "You get used to it," she said. "Like skeeters or black flies. After a piece, they's jest part of the everything else. There's an up side, too. The rain may keep down your natural stink fer a day or two. Folks'll be mighty grateful. Now, stop whining and git a move on, but watch yourself. The ground is mostly mud and if you slip, you'll slide all the way to the bottom...less'n you're lucky enough to hit a rock."

Nate nodded and grimly followed her up the steep hill. He had to focus completely on each step. Step up. Carefully place his foot. Struggle against the ground that wanted to melt underneath his foot and drop him backwards. Put the weight on that foot, digging in with his toes through each shoe that was so full of water, it was like walking with a bucket on his foot. Push up against the wind and rain.

Then do it again. And again. And again. One false step and it would be a rolling plunge down the steep hill. No mistakes. No rest. One shoe that felt full of cement. Then the other.

Wave upon wave of rain lashed by the wind beat at him. Bursts of lightening ignited the sky, then plunged the world back into blackness as the arc ended. Thunder smashed so loud it shook him and echoed in his ears. And still he climbed, urged on by Mattie.

Finally, they crested the ridge and headed down to Misty's house. "Hurry!" screamed Mattie.

Nate threw open the door and hurried inside, water pouring off him, soaking the rug and everything he passed. Misty was lying on her side in the front room. Nate had heard that you weren't supposed to move a hurt person, because they might have broken bones. He knelt beside the small woman, trying to see if she was breathing. The water continued to drip off him and splashed on her face. She blinked, then opened her eyes!

"Misty?" Nate asked. "Can you tell how badly you're hurt?"

Misty slowly rolled onto her back and wiggled around a bit, testing her body. She gave a weary smile and rasped, "I believe I'm shaken, but not broken. Some water and one of the little white pills near the sink will help. Mattie, you know which ones I need?"

"I'll show him," said Mattie. "Come on."

Nate followed Mattie back to the kitchen. He found a glass, filled it with water and took a pill from the bottle Mattie pointed out. He hurried back. Misty had still not moved.

“Can you help me sit up?” she asked.

Nate slipped a hand behind her shoulders and lifted her up into a sitting position, surprised how light she was. She was like a ghost herself. She took the pill and put it under her tongue and followed it with a sip of water. She breathed deeply for a couple of minutes. Then, she smiled at Nate.

“Thank you, Nate. I’m feeling better. Perhaps you could hook your arms under mine from behind and slowly lift. That way, I can stand up.”

Nate tried and soon Misty was on her feet. She took a short step to her chair and sat down, holding out her hand again for the glass of water. She finished the water and placed it on the table beside the chair and attempted another weak smile.

“I’m all right, Mattie. You can stop pacing now.”

Mattie had been nervously prowling all around the room while Nate had been helping Misty.

“Thank you both.”

“What happened?” asked Nate. “Do you need to go to a doctor? The phones are out, but my mom could drive you.”

Misty shook her head. “I thought I was going to step on Sammy. He darted under my foot, so I tried to shift. Unfortunately, I ended up falling. That was too

much of a surprise for me and my heart....” She smiled and shook her head. “My bones are fine, but my heart doesn’t like to beat so fast.”

Nate looked concerned. “Then you should go to the hospital.”

Misty shook her head again. “It’s not my time. Soon, but not yet. If I go to the hospital, they will just keep me in a bright, uncomfortable room and watch me. They can’t do anything about it. I’m old. There’s no cure for that.” She looked up at Nate. “You look like you’ve been taking a bath with your clothes on. Do you want to borrow a towel?”

Nate shook his head. “I don’t guess so. I’ve got to get back home before Mom realizes I’m gone and I’ll get just as wet on the way back.”

Misty nodded. “Then you go on. I’ll be fine. I just need to rest a bit.” She looked at Mattie. “Girl, take him by the road. I know it’s longer, but that ridge is too slippery on a night like this.”

Mattie nodded. “That’s what I was a planning.”

Misty leaned back in the chair, her eyes beginning to close. Nate and Mattie went to the door. Stopping a moment to prepare for the drenching, Nate took one last look at Misty, opened the door and went out. Immediately, the rain and wind began to pound him. Shouting above the noise of the storm he called, “Let’s get back to my house. By the time I dry off, it will be starting to get light, so we can start looking where Mrs. Snow told us.”

Mattie nodded and led the way.

Back in her house, Misty was slipping into a healing nap. Suddenly, her eyes sprang open. “Oh no! Wet like a bath! That stone won’t last through this much drenching. It will melt!”

She tried to call them back, but realized her voice would never be heard above the roar of the storm. Sighing she gathered what little strength she had and reached for her cane.

12. Mattie's Pa Aims His Ax

Mattie and Nate headed toward the road. Sheets of rain tore at them and rivers of water ran down the drive, making it a slippery mudslide. As they made it to the road, Mattie stiffened. A huge rumbling came from up the brook. "It's the dam," she shouted over the howling wind. "Aunt May and the others are telling me to git back there double quick."

They looked down into the brook and could see that the trickle that had been running there had increased. "That's still not much water. It must be holding," shouted Nate.

Mattie shook her head. "Ain't fer long. I gotta take a gander. You git back to your house and grab that metal finder thing. We got to start lookin' now or we ain't never gonna have a chance. When that dam cuts loose, it'll carve up the banks and dump a boat load of rock. We won't find my body in a year o Sundays."

She pushed him toward his house and she turned the other way, up the road toward the cemetery and the dam. "Hurry! Grab it and meet me down at the end of Main Street. I gotta know it ain't going to bust while you're a lookin'."

Nate nodded, tucked his head down and tried to run toward his house. He had to fight the wind with every step. Water was running down his pants and filling his shoes again. The constant roar of rain and the wind tore at him from every direction. Finally, he made it to the bridge. Hurrying across, he took a quick look over the side,

to see if the dam had burst. The flow of water was increasing, but still nothing like the flood waiting to crash through, ripping trees, houses and boys from the banks.

A flash of lightening lit up the scene and in that moment, a tremendous crash came from up the road. Even above the sound of the storm, he could feel the rumble. A torrent of water surged down the brook bed, toward the bridge. Nate gulped. That was it. The dam had broken and they had failed.

“It’s just the top of the dam, Nathaniel. There’s still time.”

Nate looked up. Aunt May was standing on the bridge, smiling at him. “Hurry dear. We’re all keeping a close watch. The crews just knocked a hole in the top of the dam. They are hoping it will be able to relieve some of the pressure, but I don’t think it will work. If you’re lucky, it will buy you enough time to find Mattie. So, hurry. It’s starting to get light.”

Nate nodded and slipped into his house. Thankfully, his mom was still asleep. He grabbed the metal detector and headed out again. Coming up to the bridge, he saw a shadowy figure standing at the far end and smiled. “It’s nice of Aunt May to wait,” he thought, hurrying across the bridge as another crash of lightening lit up the sky.

Nate skidded to a stop, eyes wide, gazing up into the horrible evil grin of Mattie’s pa. His powerful arms swung out from behind his back, showing Nate the giant, gleaming ax he gripped in his hand. “Nowhere to run, Breathie.” He growled, low and menacing. “Nowhere to hide.” He took a step forward and raised the ax. “You’re all wet and miserable, but I like the rain.”

He took another step forward. He was almost close enough to swing. Nate sneaked a quick look behind himself – back off the bridge...back to nice, safe home. Mattie's pa shook his head. "Na uh. Don't try it. If you run, you know I'll catch you. Then I'll make it hurt even more."

Another glance around and it was clear he was right. The bridge was too high to jump over the edge. There was no way Nate could get passed Maddie's pa without getting chopped.

Then, he had an idea. Nate squared his shoulders, looking at the gloating ghost. "I don't have time for this, you creep." He reached for the cord around his neck. "I wonder what will happen if I whack you with this stone? Think you'll burn? Maybe you'll blow up. That would be fun to see." Pulling the cord quickly over his head, he swung it at the ghost, grinning at the punishment he was going to inflict on the man.

In horror, Nate saw that all that dangled from the cord was a small fleck of stone. Even that quickly melted in the pouring rain. He was attacking a ghost holding an ax with a small, red cord. The ghost grinned even wider.

"Ooopss. Look like that one done gone and melted. Got any more rocks, Breathie? Or are you planning to stop me with a little piece of rope?" He swung the ax over his head. "Bet my ax don't melt, even when it's soaked with your blood."

Suddenly, from up the road, a siren howled. They both turned to look. Almost immediately, an earth-shaking crash roared from the dam. Again, lightning lit up the sky, and Mate saw a towering wall of water pounding toward them! The deep

banks gave direction, but the flood leapt higher, ripping at trees and boulders on both sides. Logs crashed through the swirling wall of liquid death.

Nate froze. He thought this bridge was new enough so it wouldn't collapse when the huge wave smashed into it. If he held on, he might not drown. If he went into that deafening flood, he was dead for sure. Of course, it didn't matter if he held on or got swept away if Mattie's pa and his monster ax got him first.

A scream of pure rage blasted over the storm's din. Mattie's pa raised his ax and was taking aim. "I can't be any more dead than I is right now, you little cuss, but I'm gonna make sure you don't get through this alive!"

Nate could not move. Backing up would put him in the middle of the bridge. Going over the side would be sure death. Getting closer to the demon would just make him a better target. Nate was out of ideas. As he stared, the thick muscles in the ghost's arms tightened, preparing to bring the terrible weapon down. Nate held his breath and ducked his head, somehow trying to make himself disappear.

Suddenly, a bright, burning hole appeared in the middle of the Mattie's pa's chest. It quickly grew, like a lit match stuck into the middle of a piece of paper. The face, twisted with rage, turned to a look of shock, surprise and then pain, as the hole burned and spread larger and larger.

With a roar, the man turned and Nate saw, behind him, holding her cane like a sword, the tiny figure of Misty, eyes blazing. She had speared Maddie's pa with her cane and was about to do it again. "Get back you horror!" Get out of here. You've caused enough pain. Get out of here or I'll...."

The ghost was hurt, but far from destroyed. With a scream, he lunged at her, swinging the ax. Nate was certain he would have chopped her in half if the cane had not already caused so much damage. The ax and the man were shimmering, fading a bit in the dawn's light. Even so, as the ax passed through the old lady, Nate could tell she was hurt. With a cry, her cane flew up and she fell back toward the road.

Still burning, the man advanced on the tiny form. Nate hurled himself at the giant's back. He could not let him hurt Misty. He leapt, but as his feet left the bridge, the water was upon them. He slammed into the broad, muscled back and, at the same time, with the force of a train, the wall of water smashed into them both, sweeping them over the bridge and into the churning flood.

13. Into the Rushing Waters

Nate didn't feel the fall from the bridge. It was one continuous plunge through a liquid hurricane. Instead of punching Mattie's pa, he gripped tightly, holding on to the only solid thing in this wild water world but, under his fingers, the ghost was melting, turning back into spirit.

Soon Nate was crashing through the churning water alone. All around, huge logs tumbled and spun. If even one hit him, he'd be squashed. The churning, murky, water spun him over and over. He couldn't tell which way was up anymore. Lost in a pounding liquid world, he had no sense of direction, no path for escape. Everything was boiling, violent motion and his lungs were screaming. If he didn't get air soon, he'd be dead.

He thought he could hear a bell ringing somewhere nearby – like a church bell or an old-time school bell, but that was impossible. No sound could get through the roaring, churning flood. No time to think about it. He had to get air. He couldn't tell which way was up, so he aimed toward the sound of the bell, figuring whatever it was, it had to be coming from the surface. He couldn't hold his breath any longer. He was going to suck in a huge mouthful of whatever was there – water or air. He couldn't help it. He couldn't stop himself.

Suddenly, his head broke free of the water. Air! There was air. He gulped a huge lungful, but before he could get in another, the water pulled him back down. Tumbling and spinning.

He grabbed madly at passing logs, but they flew by too fast to hold. Fear wrapped around him. His world was only rocks, water, dirt and logs. He needed air again and he needed it now. He had to grab something that wasn't moving. Then, maybe he could pull himself to the bank and drag up the bank and out of this horror. But how? Rocks loomed out to crush him. If he ran into a tree, he was going so fast it would jam right through him. His options were get speared, be crushed or drown. All bad choices. All the while he was hurtling down the wave of water toward the mouth of the brook where it emptied into the river. If he got to the deeper water of the river, there was no chance. He would certainly drown.

No right move. No way out. Doing nothing meant dying. The current was spinning him around so much, he couldn't tell which way was up, but he could feel the current and he knew the current had to be going down toward the river. The only way to get to the bank was to force his way across the pounding current. He kept trying, but the current was so strong, he couldn't fight it.

A last desperate gamble occurred to him. "Maybe, if I stop trying to fight to the surface and blow out all my air, I'll sink. At the bottom, I can grab the huge boulders. Maybe, if I can hold my breath long enough, I can pull myself to the bank."

He blew his breath out, watching the last air in his body bubble up. He began to sink, dodging a giant log and a piece of someone's fence. He felt a boulder and grabbed at it with all his strength. It worked! The current was actually not as wild down here. He was able to pull himself across and then reached out with another huge rock. Maybe...just maybe.

He lost his grip and went tumbling down stream again, but quickly slammed into a mass of logs. He was able to hold onto them and pull himself closer and closer to the bank. His head broke through the surface and again he gasped a lungful of air. An instant later, a powerful surge of water ripped him away from the logs and on down toward the end of the brook. The battle was taking its toll. He hardly had any strength left and he needed air. He needed a rest. He needed something to grab hold of.

It was too much. He couldn't do it. He wasn't going to make it. He was going to run out of air, out of strength and die in a flood – just like Mattie. Not exactly like Mattie, he realized. His mom would come looking for him. Even if he was swept away, she'd put up a stone and he would be allowed in to the cemetery. Not like Mattie.

He felt a wave of sadness for his new friend. He had never realized how alone she really was. The only one who knew her from when she was alive was her pa and he was the cause of her troubles. Nate realized that now he had failed her, too...failed his only real friend. There was no way he was going to find her body. Even if he lived somehow, the flood would either wash away her bones forever or bury them so deep no one could ever know where they lay.

Any will to live left him then. He was so tired of the fight, the fear, the pounding water. Might as well breathe in a lung full of it, let it in and let everything go away. No more pain or worry or loneliness or anger or....

“Nate!” He heard Mattie’s voice, but couldn’t tell where she was. He couldn’t see her. Must be imagining it. “Nate! You dumb boy. Stop your snivelin’. Reach out! Reach out your hand!”

“What!?” he tried to say, but his mouth filled with water and he started to cough.

“NOW! You only got one shot. DO IT or else... and I **PROMISE** you won’t like the or else!”

Nate knew better than to cross her. Without thinking, he reached out toward her voice. Amazingly, he felt something hard, like a branch or pipe. He grabbed it and pulled. It stayed firmly braced. As he kept pulling, his face broke the surface of the water.

Air! Wonderful, lovely air! Gasping, he tried to shake the water out of his eyes. He was almost next to the bank! The bank was too steep for him to climb up and he felt his remaining strength draining away, but he wedged himself behind the branch. With any luck, nothing would hit him there and, as long as he didn’t let go, he wouldn’t slip away. He was safe!

Wrapping his arms around a rock that held the branch in place, so exhausted he could hardly breathe, he let the darkness rise up and he fell asleep.



“Here! Over here!!”

Nate heard a shout from above him. He squinted up toward the voice. The rain had stopped and the day was bright. On the bank stood a fireman in a yellow slicker who shouted down at him.

“Kid, can you hear me? Are you okay?”

The water was still high, but had dropped a bit. It wasn’t tearing at him anymore. Nate called back weakly. “Yea, but I can’t get up the bank. It’s too steep.”

“Hold on.” The man looked back up the bank and called out to someone out of sight. “It’s a kid. He’s alive. Hurry up with that rope!”

Nate heard the engine of a large truck and other people shouting. Another person came up to the bank and tossed a rope down. It dangled close to Nate. Nate started to reach for it.

“No!” shouted both of them. The first man said, “Just hold on, kid. I’ll come down and get you. All you need to do is hold tight. Can you do that?”

Nate nodded and soon that man had shimmied down the bank, the rope fastened to a harness on his belt. Quickly, he was next to Nate, wrapping the rope around him.

“You’re going to be fine, son,” the man said. “Now, just let go and we’ll pull you up.”

Nate nodded and tried to let go of the branch, but he couldn’t. His hands and arms were frozen, wrapped around it. He was nearly crying, he was so tired and frustrated. “I... I... can’t,” he said.

The man spoke calmly. “It’s okay, son. Your muscles are just cramped from the cold water is all. They knew that holding on was the only thing keeping you alive, so they don’t want to let go. The water level is going down. We’ll just take a little more time and let you relax. It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

Nate felt the strong arms wrapped around him and all the terror of his battle with Mattie’s pa and the flood and his struggle to get to the bank and how sure he was that he would die washed over him. It was too much and he began to pass out.

At that moment, the water level dropped some more and the end of branch lifted out of the water. Nate felt the man stiffen and heard him gasp. The man called up toward the top of the bank, “Bill, get Tony on the radio and call the cops. There’s a skeleton down here. That’s what he was holding on to.”

Nate smiled, because he knew. He knew. He had found Mattie. Then everything went black.

14. In the Hospital

Nate opened his eyes slowly, looking around. The room was all white. In an armchair near the bed, his mom was sleeping. He was incredibly thirsty. There was a table that stuck out over the bed. On it was a glass with ice and water. It looked sooo good. He reached for it, but his muscles weren't working too well and he missed. The glass tipped and spilled all over his mom. She leapt up with a surprised shout, then saw Nate was awake and scooped him into a huge hug.

“Oh Nate. I've been so worried!”

It had been a long time since he had let her hug him, but, after all that had happened, it felt good. He hugged her back. After a couple of minutes, she straightened up.

“Where's Dad?”

She tried not to show it, but he saw the anger in her eyes. “He said he had a big presentation, that he would call you afterwards.”

Nate nodded slowly. He suddenly understood what had been going on during the past year. “That's why we came here, isn't it? He doesn't really want...”

She didn't answer at first. Then, she nodded, blinking back tears. “I'm sorry, Nate. I thought it was better for us to come here, that things would be better, if we didn't have to face...” She gestured at the lack of his dad.

Nate said quietly, “We’re not going back, are we?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

Nate nodded again and looked at her. He realized something. “It’s okay, Mom. I think Becket is going to work out for us.”

His mom smiled and reached out and stroked his hair. “I was so worried. I was afraid I’d lost you. I didn’t know where you...” She couldn’t go on.

Nate asked, “How did they find me?”

His mom smiled, brushing away her tears. “It was amazing. The police and all the workers were at the dam, but Misty walked through the storm to the art center across from the library.”

“The bell!” said Nate. “She rang the bell!”

His mom’s widened. “How did you....? I didn’t even know there was a bell. Most people didn’t, but the police chief remembered it from when he was young. He sent someone down to see what was going on. There she was, holding onto that rope and pulling it with all her might.”

Nate laughed. “She’s great! Even after she...” He realized he couldn’t explain about Mattie’s pa chopping her. Who would believe him? He said, “er... Even in all that rain, she told them where to find me.”

His mom nodded. “Yes. She said you fell in and she was certain you would be at the end of the brook. The firemen went down there and you were right where she said.”

“And what about Mat... what about the skeleton?”

His mom looked at him closely. “How did you know about that?”

“I heard something before I passed out. Did you find it all? Did she get buried?”

“How did you know it was a girl?”

Nate shrugged. “I dunno. I just kinda thought....”

“It was. They actually don’t know who it was, but she must have been swept away in the 1922 flood, the same as happened to you. She just wasn’t so lucky.”

“Did they bury her?”

“Not yet. They’re going to bury her at the same time as...” His mom paused.

“At the same time as who?”

Nate’s mom sighed. “As Misty. Nate, Misty didn’t make it. She... well, once she told the fireman... they say it was a massive heart attack. There was nothing anyone could do.”

Nate was stunned. “She’s dead?!”

His mom nodded. “The funeral is this afternoon. The whole town is coming. Actually, a lot more people than that. You see, the news picked up the story – the flood, you falling in, her saving your life. People from all over the country are coming. The governor is coming. It will be the biggest thing the town has ever seen.”

Nate shook his head, trying to make sense of it. “I have to go to the funeral.”

“No honey. You’re not ready to get out of the hospital yet. You’ve been unconscious for 2 days. The doctors say you are doing well, but it will be another couple of days before you can come home.”

“No. I want to go! I need to go.” Nate pushed the covers back and sat up. Dizziness swirled, his head pounded and he fell back.

His mom brushed his hair back from his forehead. “I know you want to go, sweetie, but you just can’t. When you get out, you can go up there and say goodbye.”

“What about her cats? Is someone watching them?”

“Everyone in town is pitching in. They’ve been feeding her cats. They’ve been coming by our house, too. We’re really part of the town now. Why, just about everyone at school has called or come by. You’re going to have a busy schedule once you’re home, getting together with all your new friends...” She paused, looking at him. “...if you’ll let them be your friends. Nate, the people in this town and the kids in the school really want us to be part of Becket.”

Nate looked up at his mom and thought about it. He nodded. “I think you’re right. I’m okay with staying here.”

Suddenly very sleepy, he laid his head back. “Mom, I think I need to take a nap now.”

She smiled and leaned over and kissed his cheek. “That’s good. You get some rest.”

He opened his eyes. “Will you be here when I wake up?”

“Oh, honey. I’ll always be here. If you don’t see me, just call and I’ll come running.”

Nate nodded and let his eyes close again.

15. Back to the Graveyard

A few days later, Nate walked up to the cemetery. No other living person was there, but the ghosts all saw him coming and gathered around, clapping and cheering.

Aunt May gave him a big hug. “You did a very good thing, sweetie. I hoped you could. You did better than I had even dreamed possible.”

Even Mrs. Snow managed to smile. “Excellent work, Nathaniel. Now that you’ll be staying, I expect you to investigate the archives.”

Nate nodded. “I promise.”

He looked around and saw Misty’s grave. Blinking back tears, he walked over to it and looked down at the simple stone. “You gave your life for me. I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Oh psha! Dry those tears, young man,” came a voice from up the hill.

Nate looked up and saw, skipping down toward him, a very happy Misty and, holding her hand, skipping right beside her, was Mattie. A huge smile split his face as they skipped to a stop in front of him.

Misty said, “I haven’t felt this good in years! I liked being alive, but dead, lordy, all the aches are gone!”

Nate looked at Mattie and she grinned back at him. “Not too shabby work, for a boy,” she said. “Jest in the nick of time.”

“I heard you calling me.”

She nodded. “When the dam broke, it tore off all the everything that was a coverin' me up. I could feel where my bones was and I could see em like they was shining searchlights right at me. I knew if you could git near enough, you could catch a hold and we'd both be found.”

Nate grinned. “Good work. So, the Major had to let you in?”

Aunt May hooted. “The Major had no say in the matter.”

Nate was confused. “What do you mean? He's the Ghost in Charge. That's what you all said.”

Mrs. Snow shook her head. “You weren't paying attention. He WAS the GIC, but that position is based on how many attendees came to the funeral. Misty attracted at least 3 times as many people, so...”

Nate turned a delighted face toward Misty. “You're the GIC?”

Misty smiled and nodded. “Actually, since it was a double funeral, we share the duty. We thought it was best.”

Looking at Mattie, Nate grinned. “So you went from outcast to co-GIC. How's the Major taking it?”

“He's madder than a rooster in an empty hen house,” laughed Mattie. “I figure he'll stop havin' conniptions in a year or two. He ain't so bad, jest stuffy.”

“Besides, even he can’t complain that much, when it means the family is reunited.” said Misty.

“Family?” asked Nate.

Mattie nodded. “Yup.” She squeezed Misty’s hand. “That’s why she could see me, even when she was little. Misty’s my sister.”

Nate shook his head, thinking back to Mattie’s story. “Wait a minute. You said your sister’s name was Teghan, didn’t you?”

“Yup. After I died, she stayed in the shed. Always did have the sense to stay in out o’ the rain. Next day, she went out a wanderin’, lookin’ fer me an some grub. The folks at the next farm found her and took her in. Twern’t so odd back then. Lots o’ folks took in strays.” Mattie smiled at Misty. “Specially purty little gals. Problem was, Tehgan couldn’t say her own name. Remember, she tweren’t even 4 and she called herself T – you know, short for Teghan.”

Nate understood. “So, they called her, Miss T, right?” They both laughed.

“Exactly,” said Misty.

“Did you know?” Nate asked Misty.

Misty shook her head. “No. My ma and pa never told me the story.”

Mattie added, “I never said nothing. Pa weren’t sure and I didn’t want him to take aim at her. Also, if she’d a knowd it, she mighta tried some fool thing and got herself hurt.”

Aunt May walked up. “The funny part is that they were actually aiming toward my house. My mother was the one they were trying to find. She was their mother’s sister.”

Nate stared at May. “But if you are my aunt...”

Aunt May laughed. “Officially, I’m your great aunt. My big sister was your grandma. So, you and Mattie are related. That’s why you could see her.”

Nate leaned against Misty’s gravestone. “This is so strange.”

Mattie nodded. “It’s a heap fer a boy to take in all at once, seein as how your brains ain’t so big and all.”

Nate shot Mattie a dirty look. “After all I did. You almost got me killed.”

Mattie grinned. “Aw, a piece o’ cake. I knowed you had the stuff to get ‘er done. You’re the only one who didn’t think so.”

Misty patted his arm. “You’ll have plenty of time to get used to it. Now that you have a home with real roots.”

“How did you know we decided to stay?”

Misty laughed. “We have lots of time to find things out, plus parts of life that seem very confusing when you are alive make more sense from our perspective.” Her eyes twinkled. “Besides, you have lots more to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“For one thing, you have a house full of cats to take care of.”

“Your house? How can we do that? Mom can’t even afford to fix the house Aunt May gave us and...”

Misty shook her head. “Don’t worry about that, young man. Even before this happened, I knew you were the one. My lawyer will be contacting your mother soon. I changed my will. You are inheriting my house and my estate.”

Nate shook his head. “I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but judging from the condition of the house, I don’t think that will even pay the taxes.”

Misty gently smacked his shoulder. “Now don’t you judge a book by its cover. I happen to like the way that house looks. It is that way because I chose to keep it like that, not because I didn’t have the money. Back in the day, my parents owned most of the land around here and sold it at a very good price. You’ll find that you and your mother are now actually very wealthy.”

Nate was so stunned his mouth dropped open and stayed that way.

“Tryin’ to catch flies?” asked Mattie. “Or did your brain just blow a gasket?” She turned to Misty. “I think you mighta broke him.”

“Oh hush,” said Misty. “It’s a lot to think about.”

Nate nodded.

Aunt May gave him a little hug. “It’s been a long day. Maybe you should go home now dear. Get some rest and come back tomorrow. We have plenty of time to talk.”

Misty smiled. “That’s right. All the time in the world.”

Nate, still in a daze, nodded. He picked up his pack and turned to go. Suddenly he stopped, remembering. Turning to Mattie he asked, “Where are you... where did they put your...”

She smiled and held out her hand. He took it and she led him up toward the edge of the cemetery. Since no one knew who she was, there was just a small post with a number. Nate looked down at the freshly turned earth, then looked around. Across the road, he could see the brook, once again back to a gentle, babbling flow. Nearby was a small stand of golden birch trees, their bark still shining from the recent rains. “It’s a nice spot,” he said. Mattie nodded.

“Thanks Nate. It took some doin’, but once you got the hang of it, you done right by me. I’m proud to call you my friend.”

Nate nodded, not knowing what to say. He opened his pack and pulled out a piece of wood. “I made something for you. The board is from the bank near where they found you. I didn’t know your last name, but I thought...” He showed it to her.

On it, Nate had carved,

Mattie
Good Sister - Good Friend

Mattie smiled. “That’s mighty nice, Nate.”

Nate nodded, knelt down and pushed the wood into the dirt at the head of the grave. “I’ll get a better one made. Heck, I guess I can afford to have a real stone one, now.”

Mattie shook her head. “No need. Stones ain’t fer us. They’re fer Breathies who can’t see us.”

Nate stood and looked at her again. “I never had a friend like you.”

Mattie grinned. “I’m willing to bet on that one. Dunno if that’s so much of a compliment.”

Nate grinned back, “Well, you know what I mean.”

Mattie punched him in the shoulder. “Git out of here, boy. You need some rest.”

Nate nodded and turned. He headed down the hill. At the gate, he turned. “See you tomorrow?”

She grinned, “Not if I smell you first... and that won’t be hard.”

Nate waved and turned, heading back to his house and the adventures ahead.

T H E E N D