

# THE SPOTTED DOG LAST SEEN



JESSICA SCOTT KERRIN

leaving  
nodded  
clapped  
genuinely  
haunting  
attack  
slipping  
twinkly

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FOR the little boy who lost his little brother



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## *Prologue*

THIS IS A LARGE cemetery for such a small town. And old. You told us once that some of the gravestones date back hundreds of years. But I didn't make a habit of hanging out in cemeteries when you were doing the telling. Believe me, I'd rather have been anywhere else.

Did you know I arrived alone that first day? Pascal Bender and Merrilee Takahashi were supposed to meet me at one o'clock by the iron gate. There I stood. It was three minutes past one. And then it started to rain.

The first raindrops plopped against the grave markers, which teetered this way and that over the lumpy ground. I was sure that even a ghost could knock down some of them, just by floating past at sunset.

Sorry. I know how you felt about ghosts.

And vampires. And zombies.

I could see that there were different types of stones — brown, white, bluish gray — but I didn't know which was which.

And all those carved symbols on the stones? Well, the angels were easy to spot. Their wings were a dead giveaway. But I didn't know what the other symbols meant, like the ones with clasping hands or a baby

lamb. And all those skulls and crossbones? I was sure that meant the cemetery was full of dead pirates!

When Pascal and Merrilee didn't show up, I thought I must be waiting in the wrong section. I was standing in the oldest part of the cemetery, where the stones were covered in lichen and eroded words. Maybe we were supposed to start in the newer section and work our way backwards through time.

But I didn't know where the newer part of the cemetery might be. I certainly didn't know who would be buried there.

You.

One

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## Reading Weathered Marble

WIND HOWLED through the trees that surrounded me. Boughs overhead moaned. The roots beneath my feet wrapped tightly around the buried coffins to hold the trees to the ground.

And all the while, I stood at the cemetery gate trying my best to ignore the posted warning signs:

*Beware of Falling Gravestones*

*Enter at Your Own Risk*

*Closed at Sunset*

*No Dogs Allowed*

Just who did the gate think it was fooling? Sure, it looked secure enough, but when it was locked at night, the gate would be useless at keeping anything inside that wanted to get out.

And I wasn't worried about the living.

Then I heard a shrill four-fingered whistle across the street from the cemetery.

“Derek!” the whistler hollered from the front steps of the old stone library that had once been a church. “We’re in here!”

I grabbed my knapsack and bolted from the cemetery gate, cold heebie-jeebies charging down my spine. But when I got to the crosswalk, I stopped in my tracks.

I looked left, right, left, and then left, right, left again before taking a careful step off the curb. The extra checking was a safety habit that I couldn’t seem to shake, not even when fleeing a spooky graveyard in the cold rain. After crossing the street, I scrambled up the granite steps to the library with relief.

I’d never been to this library before. Even though it was no longer a church, its stained-glass windows had been saved. Each one was filled with scenes of people in robes and sandals — the men with beards, the women’s heads covered by hoods, many of them weeping or looking up to the sky with their hands clasped, some on their knees, heads bowed, beams of light shining down.

“You must be Derek. I’m Loyola Louden.”

Loyola was basketball-player tall compared to my own husky self. If you asked me what my favorite subject at school was, I would not say, “Gym.” But I was guessing that Loyola sure would. She effortlessly held a large stack of books with one hand as she shook my

hand with her other gigantic one. At least she didn't squeeze hard. I really hated that.

"Do you supervise cemetery duty?" I asked.

"No. I'm a university student," Loyola said. "I work here part-time."

"I'm supposed to report for cemetery duty by the gate," I explained.

"The Twillingate Cemetery Brigade gives lessons here whenever it's raining."

"*Lessons?*" I repeated with alarm. I thought cemetery duty was supposed to be dead easy, like picking up litter or planting flowers around that ugly towering gate or straightening gravestones that looked like they were about to topple over.

She ignored my unease and led me inside, past stacks and stacks of books, to the research area where Pascal and Merrilee sat waiting.

"Hey," I said to them without much enthusiasm.

Merrilee answered by pushing her glasses higher on her nose. Pascal gave me a tight nod. They looked about as glum as I felt about our new school assignment.

Queensview Elementary has been getting grade-six students to do community service work during the last three months of the school year for as long as anyone can remember. Usually, everyone gets to pick from a list of places that need volunteers. Soup kitchens. Homeless shelters. Seniors' residences. That kind of thing.

I thought the seniors would be okay. I'd sit around

playing cards with them and whatnot. Talk about whatever war was going on. How hard could that be?

But I was sick at home the day we made our selections. Not really sick, I just had an eye infection. Pink eye is what they call it. Supposed to be highly spreadable. By the time I got back to school, all that was left was cemetery duty.

“Do you want me to call your teacher?” my mom had blurted as soon she found out. “See if someone will switch with you?”

“No one’s dying to go to the cemetery,” I had said, which is pretty funny, now that I think about it. “And anyway, I’ll be fine.”

She had turned away, but not before I saw her frown.

“I’ll be fine,” I had repeated, trying to convince myself more than her.

I slid into the empty seat beside Pascal. I was not used to seeing him out of school uniform, or Merrilee for that matter, although I spotted her familiar red plastic jacket with the bunnies-and-carrots print draped over her chair. I hoped they would notice my t-shirt. It read, *Change is good. You go first.*

I like to collect sayings I’ve heard and print the best ones on t-shirts. Lately, I had been giving them away as gifts. My dad got, *I’m fine*, with a bloodstain printed beneath the words. He likes to wear it in his workshop in the garage or when he goes to the hardware store.

I thought that if I were to make a t-shirt for Pascal,

it might read, *There are three kinds of people: those who are good at math and those who aren't*. Pascal had an answer for everything, even if he had to take a wild stab in the dark.

But I wasn't so sure about Merrilee. I didn't know her as well as Pascal, although I remembered that she was quite the archaeologist when she was little. She had a peculiar habit of burying things in the school's sandbox, then later digging them up. Maybe her t-shirt would read, *X marks the spot*.

The cemetery work crew we were assigned to arrived in full force — all three of them.

“Students, I'd like you to meet the Twillingate Cemetery Brigade. This is Mr. Creelman, Mr. Preeble and Mr. Wooster,” Loyola announced.

Each one glowered more fiercely than the next. All three stood dripping in their raincoats. Loyola eyed the stack of books that Merrilee had been leafing through and quietly moved them to another table for protection.

Creelman broke away from the trio. His thick white eyebrows reminded me of a portrait of my grandfather that I'd done back in grade one. I had been really inventive by gluing on cotton balls for his eyebrows.

“No sense cleaning grave markers today,” he announced, digging out a thick wad of wrinkled yellowed notes from inside his raincoat pocket. “Instead, you'll have your first lesson on how to read weathered stones.”

Creelman paused. Was he expecting us to clap? All he got was the sound of rain slamming against the cheerless stained glass above our heads.

“Let’s see how much you know,” Creelman said, plowing along even without applause. “What are most of our nineteenth-century stones made out of?”

“Nineteenth century,” Pascal repeated. “You mean the really old ones?”

“Not old! Weathered!” Creelman barked, pounding the table for effect.

I startled. Merrilee flinched.

“Concrete?” Pascal guessed undaunted.

As I said, he had an answer for everything, but even I knew that he was way, way off.

Creelman stared him down, probably trying to figure out if Pascal was joking or not. His cotton-ball eyebrows collided into one straight line.

“Anybody else?” he growled, turning to Merrilee and me.

We quickly shook our heads, me unable to look away from those comical brows.

“Marble,” he pronounced. And then he repeated himself as if we were idiots. “Mar-ble.”

We shifted in our hard wooden seats.

“Does marble last forever?” he asked, eyebrows now arched.

It felt like a trick question. Merrilee and I didn’t bite, but Pascal quickly weighed in.

“Yes, it does. For sure. Look at the ancient Greek statues.”

Creelman snorted.

“Ancient Greek statues aren’t forever!” he declared, pounding the table again. “That’s why there aren’t many left and they end up inside museums for protection!”

He had a point. It even silenced Pascal for a moment.

“And do you know why marble doesn’t last?” Creelman continued, laying another trap.

I looked around for help. Preeble and Wooster were standing off to the side appearing smug, as if they knew the answers but weren’t about to share. Loyola was gone. I spotted her back at the front desk helping a day-care group check out picture books.

“Sulfur dioxide,” Creelman declared, but he didn’t pound the table. Instead, he stood with his arms crossed, giving us plenty of time for this fact to sink in.

I wondered if my mom should make the call about cemetery duty after all.

“And where does sulfur dioxide come from?” Creelman demanded.

He was relentless!

Desperately, I looked over to Loyola who had finished checking out the books. I caught her eye, but then she quickly busied herself by sharpening pencils. She was not coming back any time soon. Traitor!

“The periodic table?” Pascal guessed.

*The periodic table?* I was tempted to inch my chair

closer to Merrilee so that Pascal had plenty of room to dig his own grave. Good grief!

“Burning coal power!” Creelman replied, his eyes widening.

Even though we knew it was coming, all three of us jumped when he pounded the table yet again.

“Sulfur dioxide is the enemy of gravestones,” Creelman continued, as if he were talking about some new plague or a campfire ghost story. “It steals letters and makes our grave markers unreadable.”

Pollution. Got it. I sneaked a peek at the wall clock. This was going to be a very long afternoon. I almost wished I was back in the cemetery, despite the rain.

Almost.

“Part of your job will be to read and record our gravestones so that the information doesn’t disappear,” he leaned in, “*forever*.”

As if rehearsed, Preeble pulled a small mirror from the pocket of his raincoat, handed it to Creelman, then took a precise step back beside Wooster. Creelman moved beneath the nearest stained-glass window and held the mirror in front of the engraved plaque mounted in the shadow of the windowsill.

“If there’s plenty of light, like in this library, you can use a mirror. You hold it over the gravestone like this,” explained Creelman, flashing the mirror across the plaque, “and redirect the light at an angle so that the carved words are highlighted in shadows. See?”

The words etched on the plaque really popped out. It read, *Restored by the Twillingate Cemetery Brigade.*

Despite the table pounding, I was a little impressed.

“But sometimes there’s not much light,” Creelman said, his eyebrows casting a shadow, his face clouding over.

That was Wooster’s cue to pull out a paintbrush from his pocket and hand it to Creelman, then return to his spot beside Preeble.

“What you do is take a brush and some plain water.” Creelman demonstrated by brushing the air. “When you wet the surface, you move the dirt into the carved letters and lighten the surrounding surface at the same time. Then it’s easier to read.”

Makes sense, I thought. It was simple to follow now that the table pounding had stopped.

Creelman began to lay out his yellowed sheets of paper in front of us.

“Even with all that, you’ll still need to become an expert at deciphering engraved characters that have partially disappeared. Have a look.”

The three of us leaned in. Creelman’s papers contained charts of what carved numbers looked like after they had weathered for one hundred years and then two hundred years.

“I need someone to demonstrate,” Creelman said. He slowly scanned the three of us, and his eyes landed on me.

“Okay,” I croaked, having very little choice.

He handed me a nubby pencil.

“Write the numbers 1 through 9 on this piece of paper,” he instructed.

I did.

“Now look. See how all your strokes are even?”

Everyone inspected my numbers. I have to admit that I do write neatly. My notebook where I record my collection of t-shirt sayings is a thing of beauty.

“But it isn’t so with numbers hand-carved in marble. They are carved by uneven chisel strokes. Take the number 4. The carver has to lean in hard to make one long downward stroke, and then finish the rest of the number with short light taps. Over time, those little strokes fade away, leaving only the deep downward stroke, until finally you can’t tell a 1 from a 4.”

“How do we figure out which is which?” Pascal asked.

“Good question!” Creelman replied, not scowling for the first time that afternoon. “Your only clue is the spacing. Look here. The downward strokes in the year 1811 are spaced more evenly than the year 1814.”

Even Merrilee nodded in interest.

“The numbers 2, 3 and 5 are in the next group. Over time, only the deep curve on the right side of all three numbers remains — here at the top of the 2, here at the bottom of the 5 and here, twice for the number 3.”

By now, I’d completely forgotten about the cemetery. As we studied Creelman’s charts, I began to feel as if we

were training to become detectives for hidden codes.

“Next are the numbers 6, 9 and 0. They also have deep curves on both sides that remain over time. The number 6 will have a long curve on the left and a short curve on the right. Nine is just the opposite. And see here? Zero will have two long curves.”

Look at that, I thought, taking in the lesson.

“Last are the numbers 7 and 8. When carvers engrave an 8, they have to cut a deep diagonal line in the middle that is the last to fade away. But unlike the number 8, the number 7 has a long deep diagonal cut that runs all the way to the bottom.”

Then, just when I was not expecting it, Creelman pounded the table and declared, “Sevens never die!”

From the safety of her desk, Loyola Louden looked our way with a startle.

The lights flickered overhead.

“Now, we’re going to leave you to study these charts. When we get back, there’ll be a quiz. We can’t have you making any errors when you’re recording our grave-stones.”

With that, Creelman, Preeble and Wooster marched past the book stacks and out the front door, leaving behind the yellowed sheets, a mirror and three puddles on the marble floor.

Rain smashed against the stained glass. The only things missing were a mighty flash of lightning, a full-on power failure and sinister violin music.

“What was *that* about?” Merrilee demanded. She shoved the yellowed papers away and reached over to grab one of the books from the pile that Loyola had moved to the next table.

“You’re not going to study?” I asked.

Although I was not the best student at school, I did study, especially when I knew there’d be a quiz. And I still kind of liked it when my mom posted my better efforts on the fridge door. I think she had even saved the portrait of my grandfather. She said it was a keeper.

Merrilee gave me a withering look.

But that didn’t bother me nearly as much as the table pounding that was sure to come if I failed the quiz, so I got to work. Pascal studied the sheets, too. Then we took turns writing out eroded dates and seeing if the other could guess the correct numbers.

Eventually, Loyola returned to our table to chat. She noisily scraped a chair across the marble floor and sat down.

“So, what do you think of the donation?” she asked Merrilee.

“Looks pretty good,” Merrilee said, leafing through a book. “I’d like to sign it out.”

I stopped quizzing Pascal. “What donation?” I asked.

“The book Merrilee has arrived by mail this morning. There’s no return address, no way to find out who the donor is.”

I leaned over to read the cover of Merrilee's book. *The Purloined Parrot*.

"What does *purloined* mean?" I asked.

"Stolen," Merrilee said.

I shrugged. The book still sounded pretty girly.

"How's it going here?" Loyola asked brightly, despite the surrounding gloom.

"Okay," I said, tidying up Creelman's papers of eroded numbers. "But what's with all the table pounding and whatnot?"

"Mr. Creelman's dead serious about the cemetery," Loyola said, grinning at her choice of words. "He's a founding member of the Twillingate Cemetery Brigade."

"Are they ever coming back?" Pascal asked, leaning into the central aisle for a better view of the front door.

"Oh, sure," Loyola replied. "Mr. Preeble and Mr. Wooster are probably finishing up at the cafe down the street by now, and Mr. Creelman is likely pacing the shop's back alley, trying not to smoke."

"He smokes?" I repeated.

"Poor guy," Loyola said. "He told me that he wants to quit for good just once before he dies."

There was a commotion at the door, and we craned our necks to watch the arrival of the Brigade. They made a beeline for our table while Loyola returned to the front desk, pushing a squeaky trolley of books along the way.

“Ready for your quiz?” Creelman demanded, his two cronies on standby.

“You’re dripping,” Merrilee said kindly. “Let me get you some paper towels.”

She got up from the table with the slightest grin.

She didn’t fool me. I knew exactly what she was doing. She was getting out of the quiz, that’s what she was doing, and she was going to take her sweet time finding those paper towels.

From his pocket, Creelman dug out a stack of cue cards wrapped in a thick elastic band, each with an eroded date on it. And that’s how it went — him holding up a card and us calling out the year. Merrilee took forever to return, and sure enough, by then, we were done.

Creelman scooped up his yellowed papers from the table.

“See you next Wednesday. Thirteen hundred hours sharp.”

“Thirteen hundred hours? I thought we were only volunteering on Wednesdays for the next three months,” Pascal said. “Just until we graduate.”

Creelman shot him a sober look before leading the Brigade away without a word.

I lingered until they were gone, and then I explained military time to Pascal. We packed up our knapsacks to go.

Outside, it poured. I stood on the steps to zip my

coat while Pascal took off in the direction of his home. Merrilee remained behind to sign out her book. I looked across the street at the cemetery, glad to have avoided my duties in there, at least for now.

Lightning flashed.

Thunder clapped.

Darkness descended.

I half-expected to hear an evil laugh coming from the other side of the looming iron gate.

“Well,” I half-joked to myself out loud. “This certainly has all the makings of a horror movie.”

## Two

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# Gravestone Carvings

I PUSHED DARK thoughts about cemetery duty away until the next Wednesday. I hoped it would be raining hard again so that we could have another lesson in the safety of the library. Instead, I woke up to a blue-sky day.

Instant dread.

“How’d you sleep?” my mom chirped, her standard question at breakfast.

But I could hear an edge in her voice. She knew it was Wednesday, too.

“Good,” I lied.

She looked at me just a little too long.

I didn’t feel like telling her that I had had a nightmare last night. The same one I had had for months and months when I was little, always waking up screaming in a cold sweat.

The one with the orange rubber ball.

I had not had *that* nightmare in years. I had almost forgotten about it. Perhaps this was just a random glitch, and things would go back to normal. Yes, that was it.

I dug into my cereal, even though I didn't feel like eating. The flakes somehow tasted like wrinkled yellowed paper.

Back upstairs, I took deep breaths. Then I got dressed and put on my t-shirt that read, *If the sky's the limit, why are there footprints on the moon?*

Pascal and Merrilee were waiting inside the iron gate when I arrived that afternoon. It was warm, but Merrilee still had on her red plastic bunnies-and-carrots jacket.

"Where's the Brigade?" I asked.

"At the library," Pascal said.

"So we're back in the library?" I asked. I practically whooped as I took an eager step in that direction.

"No. They told us to wait here."

I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Oh."

I reluctantly rejoined the group.

"Why'd you sign up for cemetery duty?" Pascal asked. "You don't seem the type."

"I didn't," I said. "I had pink eye. The cemetery was all that was left."

Pascal nodded sympathetically.

"Dentist appointment," he said, pointing to himself and shrugging.

“What about you, Merrilee?” I asked. “Were you sick, too?”

“No,” she said matter-of-factly. “This was my first choice.”

First choice! We looked at her as if she might turn into a werewolf or a vampire at that exact moment. She fiddled with the drawstrings of her hood, in no hurry to give us further explanation. We kept staring.

Dead silence.

Finally, she muttered, “I like to be outside.”

So do werewolves and vampires, I thought warily. Especially in cemeteries.

“Here they come,” Pascal warned, looking past my shoulder.

I turned. Creelman, Preeble and Wooster were making their way along the sidewalk at a surprisingly brisk pace. They had just crossed the street from the library. Loyola Loudon stood on the steps to wave them off, then disappeared back inside.

“Uh-oh,” Pascal said. “Looks like we’re in for another lesson.”

Each member of the Brigade was carrying a small stack of books. Pascal and I groaned.

Creelman greeted us, eyeing my t-shirt, but choosing to ignore it.

“Good afternoon,” he said, almost like a challenge.

I wondered if Preeble and Wooster ever spoke.

We mumbled some polite words in reply.

“So, which headstones are we tackling today?” Pascal asked, boldly ignoring the books.

He stood with his hands on his hips while surveying the vast selection of skulls and crossbones before him.

“Tackling?” Creelman snapped. “That’s not how it works. You need to know about what you’re tackling first before you learn how to tackle it. Today’s lesson is symbolism.”

Pascal dropped his hands to his sides and tilted his head with a confused look.

“Sym-bol-ism,” Creelman repeated syllable by syllable, as if dealing with preschoolers.

He thrust his stack of books at me. Preeble and Wooster handed theirs over to Pascal and Merrilee.

“We want you to make your way around this part of the cemetery, from the gate to that first hedgerow. Study all the carvings, and if you don’t know what a symbol means, look it up.”

“A symbol,” Pascal said pensively. “Is that the same as a simile?”

“A what now?” Creelman asked, sticking out his lower jaw.

“He’s confusing his terms,” Merrilee said. She turned to Pascal. “A *symbol* is a thing that stands for something else. A *simile* is a figure of speech comparing two completely different things.”

“What’s the difference?” Pascal asked.

I jumped in, having included a few similes in my

collection of t-shirt sayings.

“A tree in a graveyard is a simile if I say that the tree stood alone like a pirate on trial for looting. But a skull and crossbones is a symbol for pirates because it means danger.”

I looked at Creelman, pretty pleased with myself.

“You think a skull and crossbones is a symbol for pirates? Not here, it isn’t,” he barked. He pointed to my stack of books and jabbed three times at the cover of the top one. “Look. It. Up. We’ll be back in an hour. There will be a quiz.”

It sounded like a threat.

Creelman turned on his heel and marched away, with Preeble and Wooster following in tight formation. I thought I heard him grumble something about pirates.

I checked out my stack of books. They had deadly boring titles, such as *Grave Matters*, *Final Destination* and *Eternal Landscapes*. Each was filled with grainy black-and-white photographs of grave markers, a sea of gray when I flipped through the pages in fast motion.

I couldn’t believe it. The school’s sign-up sheet for cemetery duty had promised that “volunteers would be in for a charming and delightful romp through the ages.”

Hilarious.

I looked around. Merrilee was already wandering among the teetering stones, having abandoned her pile

of books on top of a gravestone that had fallen face-first to the ground. Pascal had moved to a nearby marker, flashing sunlight across the carved numbers with a mirror that he had pocketed.

“Is it working?” I asked, remembering last week’s lesson.

“Yes! Look!” he exclaimed.

The numbers magically popped out from the shadows.

I was about to call Merrilee in my excitement, but by then she was too far away, floating from stone to stone like a butterfly in a meadow.

“I’m going to start over there,” I announced to Pascal, feeling the need to report in to someone. I pointed to a particularly old section with plenty of lichen on stones that stood bunched together in small family groupings, all facing the same direction.

Pascal barely glanced at me as he moved to another stone with his mirror, leaving his pile of books beside Merrilee’s.

I headed out on my own. Really, I had no choice. There was that threatened quiz, after all. But I was actually glad to look up symbols. It would keep my mind off things. I just had to make sure that I didn’t wander too far away from the cemetery gate, in case I needed a quick escape route.

First things first. What were all those skulls and crossbones about? I flipped through my books until I

found a photograph of one that looked almost the same as the one carved in stone right in front of me. It turned out that skulls and crossbones were meant as reminders that everyone dies and had nothing to do with pirates.

As I picked my way among the stones, the not-pirate symbols were everywhere. Then I discovered carvings of tipped-over hourglasses. That meant time had stopped for the person buried below. Several stones away, I spotted a winged hourglass. That meant time on earth was fleeting.

Then I came upon a carved butterfly. I had done a science report on butterflies a few months ago and learned all about cocoons and metamorphosis. So I thought a butterfly would symbolize rebirth. I was wrong again. According to one of Creelman's books, it meant a life cut short.

"Come and look at this one," I called to Merrilee, who had drifted into my zone.

She sidled over and inspected the carving by running her fingers over its wings. Then she said in a deadpan voice, "I think I've come across a secret code."

"Where?" I asked, peering closely at the butterfly.

"Not in the cemetery," she said, shaking her head. "In the mystery novel I signed out from the library last week. *The Purloined Parrot*. The one Loyola told us was anonymously donated."

"Well, sure," I said, stepping back from the gravestone. "Mystery books often have secret codes. And

smoking guns and suspicious butlers and red herrings.”

Where was she going with this?

“No, you don’t get it,” Merrilee said, rooting around in her knapsack. She pulled out the library’s copy of *The Purloined Parrot*. She handed it to me. “Look on the dedication page.”

I flipped to the page at the beginning of the book.

“To my darling Arlene,” I read out loud.

And then I noticed a list of words handwritten in pencil in the margin. The writing was cramped but tidy, and whenever the letter *a* occurred, it was written with a hood, as if it was typed, rather than how we were taught to print it, like a ball and stick. The words in the list were out of the ordinary but unconnected as far as I could tell: helicopter, flashlight, tripod, radiator, basket, orchid.

“Just looks like an unusual list of words, right?” Merrilee said.

I nodded.

“At first, I thought so, too. But then I noticed that each of these words first appeared in the same order in the novel. And then I remembered a book I had signed out a few months ago about writing secret codes. I did a project on it. One of the simplest types of codes is the classic book code.

“The classic book code,” I repeated, trying to follow along.

“What you do is write down a secret message, then

grab a book and find the first appearance of each of the words in the message in that book. Then you write down the word that is right before each of the words in your message. String those new words together in the same order to make the code. That's what this list of unusual words is. A code."

"Wait," I said. "You're saying that you found each of the words on this list inside the book, and then you wrote down the words that followed each of the words you found? Is that it?"

"Yes," she said. "And you know what? Those new words put together gave me *The Case of the Waylaid Water Gun*."

"The case of the waylaid water gun? Sounds like the title of another mystery book," I said.

"You're right," Merrilee said. "Turns out it is."

Except I wasn't following. The name of another mystery novel? So what! It was probably just some weird coincidence, like how all the grave markers that surrounded us were facing the same way.

Merrilee stopped nodding and scowled at my lack of enthusiasm.

"You still don't get it," she said with annoyance. She dug around in her knapsack and pulled out another book, which she handed to me.

"*The Case of the Waylaid Water Gun*," I said, reading the cover.

"Look at the dedication page," she said impatiently.

This time, I didn't read the dedication out loud. Instead, I immediately spotted another list in pencil. It was written in the same penmanship with the same letter *a*.

"So, you're going to have to read this book, too, just to get to the next message?" I asked, handing the novel back.

"Exactly!"

"Where's this going?" I asked. "All it sounds like is just a bunch of reading from one book to the next, like some kind of secret mystery book club."

"It's more than just books. I can feel it. I *genuinely* can," Merrilee said, pushing her glasses higher on her nose with a jab.

This from a girl who liked to spend outdoor time in cemeteries. Any minute now I expected her to admit that she had special powers and saw dead people or something equally disturbing.

I stood waiting.

"Still. Who's behind the codes?" I asked after a minute had passed without her admitting to anything.

Merrilee shrugged.

"Loyola said the book was donated anonymously, remember?" she said.

She tucked the book under her arm and returned her attention to the butterfly on the headstone I had spotted.

There was another long and awkward silence.

“Butterflies give me the creeps,” she said at last.

I guessed we were done talking about secret codes. At least for now.

“Butterflies give you the creeps?” I repeated. “I thought girls loved butterflies, right after unicorns, ballerinas and mermaids.”

“Not me,” she said. “I find them creepy.”

There we were, standing in an old cemetery, surrounded by ghosts galore, talking about secret codes written in anonymously donated mystery books, but it was *butterflies* that gave Merrilee the creeps. Good grief!

“What’s so creepy about them?” I asked.

“They don’t know who they are,” she said. “One day they’re a caterpillar with a million legs. The next day they’re fluttering their wings.”

“That’s what makes them special,” I argued.

“No, that’s what makes them creepy,” Merrilee insisted.

She took off her glasses, breathed on each lens, then rubbed them clean with a tissue from her pocket.

“Well, creepy or not, according to Creelman’s book, a butterfly is a symbol for a short life.”

“I rest my case,” Merrilee said, putting her glasses back on. “Butterflies are creepy and sad.”

I could tell that I wasn’t going to win this pointless argument any time soon. Instead, I surveyed the cemetery, looking for Pascal. I spotted him in the far dis-

tance, a flash of brilliant light catching my eye. Obviously, he was still playing with his mirror.

“What section are you going to study next?” I asked Merrilee.

“Don’t worry about me,” she said, turning away.

She took off her jacket, laid it on the soggy ground, then plopped down and rested her back against the headstone with the carved butterfly. She opened *The Case of the Waylaid Water Gun* to where she had inserted a well-worn playing card — the Queen of Spades, with a hand-drawn pair of glasses — and began to read.

“How are you going to get out of the quiz this time?” I asked point blank.

I did nothing to hide my bitterness.

“You’ll see,” she said dismissively, licking her index finger to flip a page. She didn’t bother to look up.

“I’m going to head back,” I reported, but Merrilee was already lost in her book, dead set on solving the next secret code.

I decided to make my way closer to the iron gate where Pascal was still flashing his mirror. I took an inventory of the symbols along the way to test myself. Weeping willow. Skull and crossbones. Crown. Dove. Urn. Skull and crossbones. Trumpet. Angel. Skull and crossbones. Grapevine. Candle. Wreath. Shell.

Then I came across a carved stone lamb. I froze. I had seen a lamb before, I was sure of it. But I couldn’t think of where. Suddenly, the ground wobbled, and I

had to grab a nearby grave marker to steady myself. I tried to call out, but I had no voice. The colors drained around me, and everything turned to black and white. Even the birds stopped singing. What was happening?

I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I screamed.

“Whoa,” Pascal said. “Jumpy or what?”

Instead of feeling relief, I filled with rage. “Don’t ever sneak up on me like that again!”

Even as I shouted, I knew I was overreacting. I turned away and bent over to take some deep breaths. Merrilee popped up from her hiding spot in the distance to see what was the matter.

“Sorry,” Pascal said. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“I’m not scared,” I barked back, probably sounding terrified. “I just don’t like being sneaked up on, that’s all.”

I glanced at Pascal. He stood holding his stack of books, his knapsack at his feet. I was dead certain he could hear my heart pounding from where he stood, and I thought he was going to make fun of me. I braced for it.

“Want to quiz each other on symbols before the Brigade gets back?”

I paused. There wasn’t a trace of meanness in his voice. He really did want to work on our assignment. Maybe he couldn’t hear my pounding heart after all.

“Sure,” I said, grateful that the colors in the cemetery

had returned and that Merrilee had sat back down.

We found a nearby bench and laid the books on symbolism between us. Pascal started by opening up one of his and pointing to a picture of a headstone, while I told him what I thought the symbol meant. We went back and forth like that until Pascal grew bored and completely changed the subject.

“They’ve picked the locker for the time capsule,” he announced, as he stretched his arms.

“Really?” I said.

The time-capsule program has been going on at Queensview Elementary for even longer than community service duty. Every seven years, someone in grade six gets picked to turn his or her locker into a time capsule at the end of the school year.

“Whose locker?” I asked.

“Marcus Papadopoulos’s.”

Marcus was in my science class, and he recently got top marks for the ant farm project he had made out of old plastic jewel cases, aluminum foil and duct tape. Not a single ant escaped, much to our disappointment.

“Wonder what he’ll leave in his locker,” I mused.

“If it were me,” Pascal said, “I’d leave my collection of Phentex slippers.”

“What kind of slippers?”

“Phentex. It’s a type of yarn that never ever wears out, believe me. Stronger than tombstone marble, that’s for sure. My grandmother knits me a pair for my birth-

day every year. I must have a hundred pairs by now.” Pascal closed his book. “What would you leave?”

I took a minute to answer. It was a tough question. We had been told that time capsules usually contain items such as school supplies, photographs, journals and books. Sometimes clothing is left in them. Or seeds. Or small gadgets. I would want to put in things that said a lot about me, but that I wouldn’t miss. The thing about the school’s time-capsule program is that you don’t get the items back. The locker gets locked and a plaque is placed on it. Then it stays sealed, only to be reopened fifty years later.

“I might put in a collection of t-shirts with my favorite sayings,” I said, pointing to the one I was wearing about footprints on the moon.

Pascal was eyeing my t-shirt when something else caught his attention behind me.

“Here they come,” he warned under his breath.

I looked. The Brigade had marched their way past the iron gate and were headed straight to our section. We stood.

“Merrilee!” Pascal called.

Merrilee got up, saw what was happening and gathered her belongings.

“Quiz time,” Creelman announced. “Put the books away.”

“Actually,” Merrilee replied, having just joined the group, “Loyola asked me to remind you that we’ll need

to return the books early today. A genealogy tour group is dropping by the library this afternoon to have a look at them. That's why I stacked mine ready to go near the gate."

I gave Merrilee a suspicious look. She had failed to mention any of this to me when we talked about her mystery novel with the handwritten secret code or her inexplicable dislike of butterflies.

"That's right, the tour," Creelman said, his eyebrows crowding together. "I forgot it was scheduled for today."

"I could return everyone's books right now if you like," Merrilee offered helpfully.

Did she just give me a wink?

"Good idea," Creelman said. "In the meantime, we'll quiz the rest of the group."

The rest of the group? I looked at Pascal, and Pascal looked at me.

Merrilee collected our books and practically skipped away, whistling a cheerful tune.

"Follow me," Creelman ordered, and we did.

Reluctantly.

He worked his way from gravestone to gravestone, pointing to various carvings with his cane.

"What does this mean?" he demanded periodically.

"Liberty."

"Cycle of life."

"Eternal sleep."

"Passage of time."

“End of the family line.”

“Triumph over death.”

“Fallen soldier.”

“Dawn of life.”

“Victory.”

“Hope.”

Hope was my favorite — a winged angel kneeling beside a ship’s anchor.

And I had to admit that between the two of us, Pascal and I had become pretty good with symbols.

But Creelman was not the type to hand out gold stars. He barely nodded with each right answer before immediately striding to the next gravestone, determined to trip us up. Finally, Wooster warned Creelman about the time by pointing to his pocket watch. It was getting late.

“Fine,” Creelman said, glaring at us as if it was our fault.

We made our way back to the iron gate.

“See you boys next week,” Creelman said grudgingly.

The Brigade marched one way down the street. Pascal vamoosed in the opposite direction.

I lingered at the gate for a few minutes, expecting to see Merrilee pop out of the library any minute, now that the coast was clear.

Instead, a busload of seniors pulled up to the curb, blocking my view. I watched as they climbed off the bus, while Loyola charged down the library steps to

greet them. I could hear her laughter even from where I stood.

I turned back to look at the rows of markers. From this distance, all the symbols we had carefully memorized had disappeared. The gravestones now looked the same, an endless gray sea, patiently marking time. It was only up close that the stones could whisper their stories to anyone who'd listen.

And then I remembered the grave marker that had given me such a shock — the one with the carved lamb. I scanned the cemetery to see if I could spot its location, but that marker remained hidden among the silent stony crowd.

What was it about the lamb? What did it mean? Where had I seen it before? My stomach lurched. There could only be one place — the cemetery at Ferndale.

Ferndale was the nearby town where we had lived when I was little. It was where the accident with the orange rubber ball had happened, the accident that had been giving me nightmares ever since then, the accident that had ended just like all the stories ended at Twillingate Cemetery.

My mouth went dry.