

mattie shyclass

and the 8 Magic Stones

Shoba Sreenivasan



CHAPTER 1

the magic spyglass



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Strange and magical things sometimes happen on days that are completely, absolutely, and firmly ordinary. For Mattie, who was eleven and whose tastes ran to hot chocolate with two (or three) fat marshmallows floating on top—maybe a Twinkie on the side—magic wasn’t even a remote possibility. Not in 1968. Not in Hackensack, New Jersey. However, this gray, cold October day would end very differently than it had begun. But Mattie didn’t know that then. She was just an ordinary, everyday, maybe even humdrum type of girl. Mattie pushed her frizzy red hair back and yawned. She was still in bed and heard the rain fall outside furiously as it hit her bedroom window. Mattie snuggled down further into her blankets. The radiator was hissing softly in the corner, and her room was nice and toasty.

From downstairs she could hear the news coming from the radio, the CBS morning news that her mother liked to listen to as she started her day. “Mattie! Get up or you’ll be late for school.”

Mattie went to Fairmount Grammar School in Hackensack, New Jersey. This is where she lived (in Hackensack), so of course it made total sense that she went to Fairmount. She was in the fifth grade—a very difficult year if one really thought about it. This was when grammar got *really* complicated, and there were all sorts of rules and regulations about how to spell, how to make sentences. More than once Mattie’s teacher, Mrs. Elmwood, had reprimanded her for saying “It don’t” instead of “It doesn’t.” Why was “It don’t” wrong, anyway? It sounded perfectly right to Mattie. She would have to ask Mr. Biddle about this one after school today.

Mr. Biddle was *very* smart and *very* old. He worked at Sears with her mother, but he was in the furniture department while her mom worked in ladies’ hats and accessories. Only the hats part wasn’t doing too well. Ladies didn’t wear hats like they used to, like Lucy did on TV in *I Love Lucy*, where she and Ethel were always pining for this or that hat and driving Ricky and Fred crazy. And there was even one time when Lucy put a bowl of fruit on her head to make it seem like a fancy hat since Ricky was too cheap to buy her one and to make Ricky see that she really needed a new hat. At least that’s what Mattie remembered about the episode. Anyways, her mother was always worrying about “her position” and if they didn’t sell more hats she could lose her job. It was all the fault of those “hippies,” her mother said. Those girls wore such dirty clothes with all those patches, strange beads, and such—and wearing pants all the time! Modern times! Mattie’s mother kept sighing and saying that who knew 1968 would be such a bad year for hats. Personally, Mattie hated hats. They made her head itch. But she didn’t say this to her mom. She wasn’t that dumb.

“Mattie!” she heard her mother call out again. “You’d better be out of that bed and ready to go in ten minutes!”

Mattie jumped up. She grabbed some clothes and ran to the bathroom down the hall. She quickly brushed her teeth and then put on her skirt and blouse. She tried to squish into the tights that were kind of small. They had a big hole in the middle and, boy, did that hole get bigger and bigger the more she tried to squish in. Mattie gave up. She’d just have to wear knee socks. She hunted around the laundry basket in the bathroom and pulled out one brown and one black sock. Close enough. Plus they weren’t too dirty. Mattie herself took her baths at night and not in the morning as her mother always said, “Your slow-as-molasses ways don’t allow for morning bathing.” But that was okay. Who wanted to get up an hour early to take a bath anyway? Mattie started to go downstairs. She stopped. Darn! Today was Show and Tell, and she had totally forgotten.

“Mattie O’Reilly!” Her mother’s voice sounded pretty stern. Mattie heard her mom starting to come up the stairs.

“I’ll be right down mom!” she called out. The footsteps stopped and her mother said, “Your breakfast is stone cold now. Hurry up.”

Mattie went to the end of the hallway. There was a rope there that she pulled, and a ladder came down from the ceiling. This led to the attic, and she didn’t often like to go up there on account of all the scurrying noises she heard. Mice. Or maybe worse. But this was an emergency. Mattie grabbed the small chain to the bulb and pulled it. A weak light from the lone light bulb gave the attic an even spookier feel—a yellow dimness that lit up the cobwebs all around. Mattie went to a big trunk. This had belonged to her dad, who was dead. Or deceased. That’s the word her mother liked to use. Mattie’s dad had died just before she was born. From the pictures of him he looked pretty old to her, sort of chubby, with frizzy graying red hair, a bushy red mustache, black-framed glasses,

and a stoop to his shoulders, as he squinted into the sun. That was from one of his archaeology trips.

There were whole bunches of pictures of her dad—the same chubby face but younger—that lined the walls going down the stairs. She had slid down the banister right past those pictures a million times when her mom wasn't home because she wasn't really allowed to do that. ("Very unladylike, Mattie," her mom had said when she had caught her once.) Her mother said her dad was a distinguished professor of archaeology when they had met. Mattie's mom had been in her senior year of college at Columbia University where he taught, and her mom loved to tell this story. "And it was love at first sight. He was so dashing." Her dad married "late" (and this was supposed to be a nice way to say he was old), but as her mother emphasized, "Love comes at the most unexpected times, Mattie. Remember that." Why Mattie needed to know that, she couldn't figure out, but she'd always nod when her mother said it. Mattie's dad was the love of her mom's life, and she was always kind of sad when she talked about him, and this made Mattie sad too. Too bad her dad had died like that while her mom was in Hackensack in this very house waiting for him to come back from the dig. Way off in Egypt or someplace like that; she could never remember. Her mother would always correct her, kind of irritated, like, "It was *Nineveh*, Mattie. It was Nineveh in the Kingdom of Iraq where your father was on a very important quest when he perished."

Mattie was digging through the trunk. She'd done it before. It was just a bunch of junk as far as she could tell. Old clothes, lots of paper, books. Boring. Mattie shut the trunk. She was bent over, as the attic was cramped and she couldn't stand up straight. The trunk wouldn't shut right, and she knew if the mice got in there and ate up her dad's stuff her mother would have a conniption.

Darn stupid thing. Mattie opened it up again. Oh, that was the problem. There was some sort of metal thing stuck by the hinge. Mattie pulled it out. She'd never seen this before. It was about six inches long, brass, heavy, like a miniature telescope. Mattie held it in her hand. It was heavy and cold. It looked like it had three gold bands on the wide end with some kind of writing on it, but she couldn't tell for sure in the attic light.

"Mattie!" she heard her mother call out.

Mattie dropped the telescope into her skirt pocket. She quickly slammed the trunk and rushed out of the attic. She pulled the ceiling door shut and ran down the stairs. Mattie's mother was at the bottom when she came down giving her that *look*. Her mother was very tall and thin. She had blonde hair that she wore back in a bun, but she'd look a lot prettier if she put it down like she had when she was in college (this was Mattie's own opinion).

Her mom was in a hurry and was already in her coat and by the door. She jingled her car keys in one hand impatiently. "Margaret Ann O'Reilly! Lollygagging again!" Mattie's mom looked at the crumpled figure of her daughter who thumped down the stairs and sighed. She gave Mattie a kiss on the forehead. "I've got to run. I don't want to be late for work. Don't forget your galoshes. Your lunch is on the kitchen table, Mattie," her mom said as she went hurrying out to the car. "Don't forget to lock the front door. And come right to Sears after school."

"Yes, Mom," Mattie said from the front door. It had stopped raining, which was good as the windshield wipers on the car never worked so good. She saw her mom back up that old car of theirs, a 1950 Mercury. It had been her dad's and now it didn't run too good, Mattie thought. But money was tight and there was none for a new car. For the second time that morning, Mattie thought about her dad. It would have been a lot easier if he were still around. Plus

Mattie always felt kind of left out when the other kids talked about their dads. Oh, well.

Five minutes later Mattie was out the door. She made sure she locked it and checked it twice (she had forgotten once and, boy, did her mother have a fit). She almost forgot her lunch and realized this when she rounded the corner and had to race back home for it. Mattie went through the whole ritual of making sure the door was locked and then dashed out again. She rounded the corner again, and it began to sprinkle and then it really started to rain again. *Drat!* Mattie thought as she started to run toward school. No umbrella. That was back home, but she had no time to go back again.

Since she was so late, she'd missed walking to school with her friends Eddie and Geeta. Mattie's wool coat was now well on its way to being soaked and starting to have an odor—that wet dog kind of smell. She had a chubby face and what her mother said was a very cute button nose (her best feature), but now all of that didn't really matter much as her straggly wet hair was going this way and that. Mattie's feet were now really, really wet and making a squishy sound in her shoes since she had forgotten to put on her galoshes. She was surprised to find herself right in front of the school, and the bell was just ringing. Sometimes it seemed as if she was in one spot and all of sudden she was in another one. That happened a lot, and her mother said it was because Mattie was one of the great "wool gatherers of all time." This made absolutely no sense to Mattie, but it was supposed to mean she daydreamed a lot. What did wool have to do with that anyway? Mattie ran toward the big heavy wooden door to the school. When she got there, she got bumped by a big boy pushing his way in, one of the sixth graders who thought they were better than everyone else in the school. A whole bunch of other kids rushed in behind Mattie.

Mattie scooted behind her desk and slipped past old Mrs. Elmwood's eagle eyes. The teacher had her back turned away from the class and was facing the chalkboard. She liked to write what she called "aspirations," something the class was supposed to think about the whole day long. Supposedly this is what one of the "Founding Fathers of our Great Nation" (this is how Mrs. Elmwood talked) Ben Franklin did, and now everyone in Mrs. Elmwood's class had to do it also. *Ben Franklin probably went to Fairmount,* Mattie thought. *That's how old this school is!* He probably had sat right in Mattie's creaky old desk that was way too small for fifth graders. Mattie had to kind of squish in sideways just to get behind the crickety old desk, the kind with the chair attached to it.

Nobody in the class was looking at the silly old board as Mrs. Elmwood kept scrib, scrib, scribbling away. The popular girls were asking each other about their clothes (all the popular girls were also very pretty; Mattie guessed that's how it was the whole world 'round). The boys in the back, especially that big fat kid, were making a ruckus as usual. A whole bunch of other kids were squirming around.

Eddie Petersen was pulling out a bunch of small plastic green army men from his pocket and putting them on his desk as usual. Eddie had a face splat full of freckles and yellowish blond hair that stuck up in a cowlick in the back. He lived right across the street from Mattie, and they were friends. Eddie's dad was out in Vietnam in the war. He was in the Army, and Eddie didn't like it if you left it like that. "He's special forces," Eddie would always add. Eddie missed his dad a lot, Mattie could tell. Eddie also talked like he was in the Army. You couldn't go out and just play; they were always out on "operations" with a "mission." Eddie's favorite thing to do was to sneak around "camouflaging" himself and spying on people. He called this his "reconnaissance missions." He found

out that old Mrs. Marshall liked to drink an afternoon sherry while she was cooking Mr. Marshall's dinner; that Miss Smith, the librarian, often ate peanut butter sandwiches behind her desk; and that the janitor Willie snored while he was sleeping on the job. Eddie kept all of this "intelligence" in a spiral "log book." He was very organized and would wake up at 0600 hours in the morning. You'd better not want the normal time when you asked Eddie; all you ever got was military time.

Mattie noticed that Geeta was sitting in the front row. Geeta was Indian (from India), had brown skin, two long black pigtails on either side of her head, and large glasses. She had an accent on account of just having moved to Hackensack from India last year. Geeta usually wore a plaid skirt and a white shirt that looked just like a uniform. Today she was kind of dressed up, Mattie thought, probably 'cuz of Show and Tell. She was wearing a turtleneck and a paisley light-purple dress and mustard-yellow tights. Geeta was sitting straight up and at attention, her eyes behind really thick glasses looking curiously at the blackboard, and seemed to Mattie just what you'd think an owl would look like if it turned into a girl. Geeta was Mattie's friend too. Mattie called her "The Brain." Geeta lived right next door to Eddie and helped them both out with homework. Geeta's dad was a scientist, and her mom stayed at home and always seemed to be cooking something.

Geeta was very serious all the time and liked to read. Plus she got very goofy talking about the people in the books, like they were her friends. But Mattie's mom just loved that, and she and Geeta would talk and talk about books. "Mattie," her mom had said to her more times than she could count, "why can't you get involved in the romance of history, like Geeta? Look, we're reading all about the Russian Empire, Rasputin, the Bolsheviks!"

Geeta would chime in, "Mattie, see how sad this is? It's the story of the Tsar Nicholas, the Princess Anastasia, and also Rasputin, the mad monk who cures the prince of the bleeding disease!"

"The Romanovs! The confidant of the tsarina!" Mattie's mom would join in. It's a much better story than what I see you watching on television, Mattie. And it's history. You need to learn this. Go ahead, Geeta. Read out loud to us."

Oh, how Mattie's mom and Geeta loved to read out loud. Mattie was kind of forced to sit around and listen and sometimes miss really good TV shows too! Mattie's mom would say, "Mattie, I don't understand why you can't develop an interest in Jane Austen, like Geeta."

Mattie didn't even know who this Jane Austen was and never saw her play with Geeta. When she mentioned that to her mom, her mom just sighed. "Jane Austen is long dead, and an English writer. Honestly I don't know what that Mrs. Elmwood teaches you."

In that long, loopy schoolteacher handwriting that every teacher seemed to be born with, Mrs. Elmwood had written, "It is easier to fight for one's principles than to live up to them. (Alfred Adler)" She turned around and looked pleased with herself. She clapped the dusty chalk from her hands. *Clap. Clap.* "Class," Mrs. Elmwood screeched out. *Clap.* "Class!" This meant they were supposed to be quiet. She allowed you two screeches of "Class!" and three claps. After that Mrs. Elmwood had made it real clear that if they weren't quiet then *everyone* stayed after school. This had already happened twice.

"Let's stand for the Pledge of Allegiance," she said, and everyone faced the flag. "Hand to your heart." Mrs. Elmwood said and then began the Pledge. "I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands."

Mrs. Elmwood went on, “One Nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all.” Mattie had to admit she liked the Pledge. It sort of made you understand that you were part of a big country and what it stood for. Plus she really liked the “liberty and justice for all” part.

Mrs. Elmwood handed Geeta the song sheets. “Pass this back, dear.” Mrs. Elmwood *loved* to sing. She had the kind of singing voice Mattie’s mom would have called “unsuitable” for the choir (her mom sang in the church choir at Our Lady of Mercy in Paramus). Mrs. Elmwood called out to Alice, who not only “looked like a dear little angel, she sang like one too!” (This was Mrs. Elmwood gushing when Alice was chosen to lead the school in the National Anthem for Special Auditorium when the big-shot school superintendent was coming for a visit in two weeks.)

Alice smiled sweetly at Mrs. Elmwood and held the song sheet just so. She was wearing one of the endless “cute outfits” of hers (this is what the popular girls always said to one another, “Oh, Alice. That is such a *cute* outfit!” No one ever said anything like this to Mattie, but then she wasn’t a pretty, popular girl.) Alice had on a ribbed maroon sweater with a rounded white collar peeking out; a blue, brown, and maroon plaid skirt that *exactly* matched the maroon in the sweater; maroon socks; and Mary Jane shoes. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail held by a maroon ribbon. Mattie wondered how anyone had all that time in the morning to match like that. Mattie took a look at her own socks—one brown one black, and it turned out one knee-high and the other an anklet. She had missed that in the morning. Oh, well. Mrs. Elmwood nodded for Alice to begin. Her voice started the song “God Bless America.” Mattie and the others sort of followed along, and Mrs. Elmwood began to get into it in a big way when they got to

“Stand beside her and guide her” and steamrolled right over Alice. She just couldn’t help herself.

Mrs. Elmwood had the class sit down. Mattie felt her wet socks and scrunched up her toes in her shoes, and they made squishy sounds.

“Show and Tell, class,” Mrs. Elmwood said.

Eddie showed his father’s medals from the military. The one he especially liked was his dad’s parachutist Jump Wings. Eddie then got up on a chair and jumped down; this was supposed to show him jumping out of an airplane like his dad had shown him. Next came one of the boys in the back who had his father’s football jersey from when he had played on the Hackensack High School team. Geeta came up and had some folded material with her. She opened it up and said it was a sari, which is what Indian women wore (and Mattie knew this already as she saw Geeta’s mom in one almost everyday). The sari had lots of glitter on it, and this was a fancy party one from what Geeta said. Mrs. Elmwood then had her wrap it around her, and it looked kind of goofy. Mattie really hated Show and Tell.

Alice then went up and showed a doll from the “eighteenth century.” It looked like a baby in a lace outfit. Mrs. Elmwood *loved* it. Mattie fidgeted at her desk. She still had the metal thing in her hands. Maybe it was a small scope, kind of like you’d see pirates use. She put it to one eye and looked at Alice. Mattie gasped. Alice’s blonde hair suddenly turned gray, and she looked like a really old, ugly lady. Not like Alice at all. Mattie dropped the thing into her lap and looked at Alice. No, she hadn’t changed. She was still pretty, popular Alice. Mattie put the telescope back to her eye. Alice was ugly and snarling at her. Mattie swallowed hard. One of those weebie-jeebie feelings went over her, and she felt

goose bumps on her arms. This was weird. When she had glanced down at the telescope, the thing looked like it had eyes staring at her—eyes that were trying to tell her something. Mattie quickly put the telescope back in her skirt pocket. It felt strangely warm, like something alive maybe.

From his desk two rows behind and to the left, Eddie had his eyes trained on Mattie. Nothing missed his keen observation. Mattie had a telescope in her hands. A miniature telescope, Eddie concluded. A very old one. It did not match the ones he had seen his father show him from the military. It didn't look like binoculars. It wasn't big like the telescopes pirates used. Very odd. He had seen Mattie gasp and drop the thing, pick it up, and look scared. This was something that needed further investigation. He pulled out his three-by-five log book and documented the event.

Date: 10 October 1968

Time: 0945 hours

Location: Classroom, Fairmount Grammar School.

Entry: *Mattie brings miniature old telescope to Show and Tell. Looks scared. No further intel.*

Plan: *Further investigation needed. Interrogate subject Mattie at recess after kickball.*

Mattie's hands were clammy, and she just knew Mrs. Elmwood would call her up next. And she did. Mattie came up and sort of stood there.

"Well, Mattie, what do you have for us?" Mrs. Elmwood asked.

Mattie went to pull the telescope from her skirt pocket, but when her hand went to it, she froze. She couldn't lift it out of her pocket. It seemed stuck, like magnetized right to her skirt pocket. She heard a loud command from deep in her pocket, *No!* it said.

Like that telescope was talking to Mattie! Geeta looked at her encouragingly. "Um...um," Mattie sputtered. Her mouth got real dry. She tried to make some sounds. She searched for words but couldn't find any.

"I...I...forgot," Mattie said finally.

Mrs. Elmwood looked at her disapprovingly. "Well, Mattie, this is most displeasing. You can't come to class unprepared like this. Sit down, and next time do your homework." Mattie heard Alice and the other pretty girls snickering as she went to her seat.

Eddie looked over at Mattie—very, *very* curious. He scribbled in his book, "Subject hides mini-scope. Interrogate."

The recess bell rang. All the kids had made a mad beeline to get out to the playground. Outside it was sprinkling and the playground was wet. Eddie went over to the "rally point" where his buddies were playing kickball. Eddie loved kickball. He'd get around to the interrogation later. Subject Mattie wasn't going anywhere. Eddie jumped into one team and started running around. He was fast and a good kicker.

Four girls were playing double-dutch jump rope. Other girls stood in line to jump in. Mattie stood to one side watching. She hadn't been able to concentrate since she had looked at Alice through the telescope, and she kept thinking of those eyes in the telescope, staring at her, and that voice that said, "No!" She had this funny feeling in her chest, like right before you knew something weird was going to happen, and it had stayed there all morning. A funny, wormy feeling. Suddenly Mattie felt a tap on her shoulder. She jumped what seemed like ten feet but was really just an inch.

"Mattie!" Geeta said. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing," Mattie said, but her heart felt like it was going to leap right out of her chest.

“Oh.” Geeta gave her a penetrating stare, her large brown eyes magnified behind her thick glasses. “You are acting very strangely,” she concluded.

The kickball game was still going on, but Eddie took one last kick and left. It was time for the interrogation. That was more important than kickball. He walked toward Mattie and Geeta, who were standing by the jump rope game. Eddie very casually said hello to both girls and looked at Mattie. “Where’d you get that old telescope? It looked cool.” Her mom would call Eddie a nosy-parker, and that’s just what he was too.

“What...what telescope?” she stuttered. Her mouth started to feel like sandpaper, and she felt her hands go clammy.

Eddie nodded sagely. *Subject is lying. Use confrontation tactics.* “We know all about it. Let me look at it.”

No, she thought. Creepy Eddie. That voice came to her again. *He wants to take me away from you! Watch out.* Eddie wanted to steal the telescope! It was *hers*. Mattie felt startled by her thoughts. Eddie was her friend. But somehow she didn’t want anyone else to touch *her* telescope.

Mattie said, “It’s broken. You can’t see anything out of it.” Her face flushed, and she looked nervous.

This is more intel, Eddie thought. Mattie was lying. Eddie just nodded.

The recess bell rang, and Mattie felt a twinge of guilt. It was just an old telescope. Why couldn’t she show it to Eddie or Geeta? Somehow she couldn’t. She couldn’t let anyone else touch it. And that feeling was strong. She felt enveloped by possessiveness. *That’s right,* said the voice from the telescope. *I’m yours. Only yours.* Instinctively her hand patted the side of her coat over her skirt pocket. It was still there.

“I’ve got to go. I’m milk monitor,” Mattie said and then ran toward the lunchroom. Geeta and Eddie looked at each other.

Eddie observed, “Mattie is up to something.”

Geeta said, “Yes, she is, but I cannot figure out what.”

Mattie suddenly felt very alone. She had already eaten her lunch—a peanut butter sandwich with grape jelly, a Hostess chocolate cupcake, and milk—and was quietly sitting behind the desk where the milk was sold. Mattie was on milk patrol for the lunch period, and this meant she sat there and took seven cents from each kid for a carton of milk and got her own milk for free.

The Fairmount Grammar School cafeteria was also the gym, so on the side several kids were playing basketball. Eddie was one of them. Geeta was working with the teacher on practicing the Gettysburg Address for the Special School Auditorium on account of how it was like some anniversary of when “Mr. Lincoln gave his momentous speech. Right there where the battle had raged so fiercely.” (This was Mrs. Elmwood when she had told the class all about it.) Mrs. Elmwood had chosen Geeta to represent the school for when the big-shot superintendent and all the other big shots from the school board were coming—the same one where “that angel Alice” was also singing. If anyone could memorize the Gettysburg Address it was Geeta.

After lunch Mattie kept looking out the window. The day was gray and wet. Something about the whole day seemed off, like when something is off center. She kept her hand on the mini-telescope. It felt warm to her, and it was comforting to know it was right there in her skirt pocket.