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shotgun resting on his lap.

"7649 Carronade Lane," Ben said as he double-checked the slip of paper he had written Rex's directions on. "I guess this is it?"

"Can we just go home?" Audrey pleaded.

"But we've come all this way," Ben said, to which Sam added, "And what if *he's* still out there?," which is what they'd all really been thinking.

Ben tossed up the hood of his yellow rain jacket and got out of the station wagon. The man on the porch stood with some difficulty. Ben noticed that he walked with a severe limp running through his right leg and that he used the shotgun barrel-down against the porch as a makeshift cane.

"Evening," Ben said.

"You must be the happy vacationers," the man said. "Welcome to the beach."

"Pete Archer," Ben said, slipping on his alias for the first time out loud.

"Earl Sloane," the man said. "I guess you could say that I'm the caretaker around here."

"Earl," Ben said. "I'm a little confused here. This is 7649 Carronade? I thought this was the Surf's End House?"

"Nah," Earl said. "Surf's End is down at the other end of the block." Earl lifted the shotgun to point into the darkness over Ben's shoulder and Ben instinctively flinched. "Easy there." Earl chuckled. "You passed it on your way up. They must've just given you my address because I have the key."

Rex hadn't said anything about a caretaker, just that the key would be under the mat, but Ben could only shrug it off at this time of night. And really, the place down the block had looked a lot better cared for than this dump. Apparently, Earl didn't like to bring his work home with him.

Earl disappeared into the house and emerged some time later, key in hand. "Holler if you need anything. Hopefully you'll get a good night's sleep. If I do say, you look a little shaky, Pete. Long drive from ...?"

"Spokane," Ben lied. "Yeah, long drive, bad weather, and we saw something ... *strange*." Ben couldn't help but overshare. He'd been holding it together to keep the kids from falling apart, but what he had seen had spooked him to his core.



"Just north of town," Ben continued. "We saw this hitchhiker. Well, I guess I can't say for sure he was a hitchhiker, but it was pouring rain so we slowed down. And his face—"

"Wrapped up in bandages?" Earl interrupted.

Ben nodded. "How'd you know?"

Earl furrowed his brow and sighed as he looked down at the porch. "That would be my son, Billy," he said. "He must've sensed you'd be coming my way. He's always looking for a ride home."

"What happened to him?"

Earl shrugged and tapped his right leg with the shotgun. "Tree got him," he said. "You log enough woods, tree's gonna get you. I took mine in the leg. Poor Billy took his in the brain."

"Jesus," Ben said. "Shouldn't he be in a hospital?"

Earl raised his eyebrow and gave Ben a puzzled look. "I don't think you get me, Pete. Billy's been dead for a

number of years now. It just doesn't stop him from trying to make it home every now and then."

"Wait," Ben said. "Are you telling me he's a *ghost*?"

Earl sighed again and rested heavier on the shotgun. "I'm trying to tell you that he's dead. I don't go putting names to things I don't understand."

"Right," Ben said. He was filled with a sudden motivation to exit this porch, but Earl still had the key. "So? We're done here?"

"Let's see," Earl said, shifting his weight. "Check out time is noon next Friday. Just put your dirty linens and towels in the washer. No need to start it. The phone only makes local calls. And you were told about the murders?"

"Murders?"

"Well, technically the state police call them *disappearances*, but come on. Dogs *disappear* around here all the time. Cats too. Three separate families don't just disappear from the same

house over twenty years without some murder going on. Leaving all their belongings behind? Their cars? People just don't do that."

"I thought you didn't put names on things you don't understand?"

"Exactly," Earl said. "Look, I don't mean to make you uneasy, but I see you've got your kids with you there. It's not too late for you to go back into town and get yourself a motel room."

Ben relaxed as he realized Earl's angle. For some reason, Earl Sloane didn't want them here. All this talk of ghosts and murder — well, that was just a local razzing an out-of-towner. Next the old kook would probably tell him Haystack Rock was built by aliens. Even the guy out on the highway could be in on it. He wasn't sure how, but that seemed more plausible than being attacked by this guy's dead son.

"We'll take our chances," Ben said.

Earl dangled the key out in front of him. "Be my guest, Pete. But don't say I didn't warn you. Oh, and stay out of the basement. That's the owner's private area."

Back in the car, Audrey turned to him. "Well?"

"Let's not bother Mr. Earl Sloane for the rest of the week."

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Like he suspected, the Surf's End House hardly looked like the site of multiple, ghastly murders: white picket fence, sturdy gray shingles on a good one-story skeleton, two bulbous hydrangeas out front — not exactly the kind of set-up to inspire fear and dread. The yard was littered with flotsam — buoys, glass floats, driftwood — as if some tender tsunami had washed it all across the tiny parcel and left it just so.

Inside, the large single room was dressed in knotty pine, with a wood stove in one corner. It was separated from an open kitchen by a matching pine bar. Down a short hallway doorways for three bedrooms and a bath popped open as the kids explored. There was the expected coastal ephemera hanging on the walls: a few prints of seascapes, pithy beach messages done up in needlepoint. Quite a few throw rugs and an assortment of plush furniture softened the spank of the hardwood floors. Built-in cabinets. Even a color TV. In fact, it was all quite tastefully done, except—

"What's that smell?" Audrey asked.