



The surf, the wind, and the rain were at war, battering against the old building so forcefully Greg wondered if its crumbling walls could stand against them. When the bawling thunder blasted the boarded-up window again Greg jumped back, stumbling into Cyril and tromping on his foot.

“Ow!” Cyril shoved Greg, jabbing his flashlight spastically at the wall in front of them. The light scanned over drooping sections of blue striped wallpaper and what looked like two red letters, “Fr.” Streaks of something dark sprayed over the stripes. Was that pizza sauce? Or something else?

Hadi laughed at his two bumbling friends. “It’s just the wind, guys. Suck it up.”

Another gust hit the building, and the walls shuddered, drowning out Hadi’s voice. The rain pounding on the metal

roof ratcheted up, but inside the building, close by, something metallic clinked loud enough to be heard over the wind and rain.

“What was that?” Cyril whirled and swung his flashlight in a wild arc. At barely thirteen, Cyril was a year younger than Greg and Hadi, though still in their fledgling freshman class. He was short and skinny with boyish features and limp brown hair, and he had the misfortune of sounding like a cartoon mouse. It didn’t win him many friends.

“Let’s go check out the old pizzeria,” Cyril mimicked Greg’s suggestion. “Yeah, this was a great idea.”

It was a crisp autumn night, and the seaside town was dark, robbed of power by the latest storm’s assault. Greg and his friends had planned a Saturday night of gaming and junk food, but as soon as the power went out, Hadi’s parents tried to recruit them for a board game—the family’s tradition during power outages. Hadi had convinced his parents to let the boys bike the short distance to Greg’s house, where they could play one of Greg’s new tabletop strategy games instead. But once there, Greg enlisted them to go to the pizzeria. For days he’d known he had to do this. It was like he was drawn to this place.

Or maybe he had it all wrong. This could be a wild goose chase.

Greg shined his flashlight around the corridor. They’d just explored the kitchen of the abandoned restaurant and had been shocked to find it was still stocked with pots, pans,

and dishes. Who closed a pizzeria and left all that stuff behind?

After they left the kitchen, they found themselves next to a large stage at one end of what had once been the main eating area of the derelict pizzeria. A heavy black curtain at the back of the stage was drawn closed. None of the boys had volunteered to see what was behind the curtain . . . and none of them had mentioned seeing the curtain move when they passed the stage.

Hadi laughed again. “Better than hanging with the fam . . . hey, what’s that?”

“What’s what?” Cyril aimed his light in the direction of Hadi’s gaze.

Greg turned his flashlight that way, too, toward the far corner of the large, table-filled room they stood in. The glowing beam landed on a row of hulking shapes lined up along a murky glass counter. Bright eyes reflected the light back at them from across the room.

“Cool,” Hadi said, kicking aside a broken table leg as he made his way toward the counter.

*Maybe*, Greg thought, frowning at the eyes. One pair seemed to be staring right at him. Despite the confidence he’d felt before, he was beginning to wonder what exactly he was doing here.

Hadi approached the counter first. “This is dope!” He reached for something and sneezed when dust billowed up from the stand.

Before they left his house Greg had suggested they all take handkerchiefs to cover their noses and mouths, but he couldn't find any. He expected to find the empty restaurant filled with dust, mold, mildew, and who knew what else. Surprisingly, given the wet coastal climate, the only decay they'd seen was dust; but there was a lot of dust.

Greg stepped around an overturned metal chair and passed Cyril, who had his back pressed to a dirty, paint-peeled pillar in the middle of the dining area. Other than one broken table and two upside-down chairs, the area looked like it just needed a heavy cleaning before it could be fit for diners. Which, again, was strange. Greg had known *something* would be here, but he didn't expect the building to still hold dishes and furniture and . . . what else?

Greg looked at what Hadi held, and he sucked in his breath. Was this what he'd come for? Was this why the old place was calling to him?

"What is it?" Cyril asked, not moving any closer to the counter.

"I think it's a cat." Hadi turned the lumpy, roughly furred object he held. "Or maybe a ferret?" He poked at whatever it was. "Might be an animatronic?" He put it down and shined his light over the other shapes along the counter. "Yeah, awesome. They're prizes. See?" Hadi scanned his light over the stiff figures.

That explained the cavelike cubbyholes that lined the broad hallway Greg and his friends had come through to get

to the dining area. The little enclosures must have been for arcade cabinets and game booths.

“I can’t believe these are still here,” Hadi said.

“Yeah.” Greg frowned, studying what looked like a stiffened sea otter and a tangled octopus. Why were they still here?

The old pizzeria had stood, boarded up and bombarded by coastal storms and sea air, for who knew how long. The structure was clearly abandoned, and it looked not just old but ancient, on the verge of collapse. The graying, weathered siding was so faded you could barely tell what it was; the name of the pizzeria was long gone. So why did it look so good on the inside? Well, not *good*, exactly. But from where Greg stood, the building looked sturdy enough to stand another hundred years.

Greg and his parents had moved to the small town when he was in first grade, so he knew the place well. But he didn’t really understand it. For example, he’d always thought it was strange that a boarded-up pizzeria had been left untouched in what was supposed to be a vacation spot. But then again, this wasn’t exactly a swanky resort town. Greg’s mom called it a “hodge podge.” Big, fancy homes could be found across the street from tiny, ugly beach cabins draped in dirty fishing floats and surrounded by piles of old lumber or crumpled lawn furniture. The house across from Greg’s had a huge boxy sedan, like from the seventies, up on blocks in the front yard. Still, Greg wondered why a pizza place couldn’t

be turned into something useful instead of being left a gnarled old ghost-building that practically screamed, “break in,” to local kids.

But weirdly, it didn't look like anyone had broken in before Greg and Cyril and Hadi did. Greg had figured they'd find footprints, trash, graffiti—evidence that other “explorers” had been here before them. But . . . nothing. It was like the place was abandoned, dipped in formaldehyde, and preserved until Greg suddenly felt like he was supposed to come here.

“I bet these are still here because they're the really good prizes,” Hadi said.

“No one ever wins the good prizes,” Cyril piped up. He had edged a little closer to the counter, but he was still several feet away.

“There aren't any clowns, Cyril.” Greg had to assure Cyril there wouldn't be any clowns in the abandoned restaurant in order to convince Cyril to come along. Not that Greg knew one way or the other.

“What's that one?” Cyril pointed at a large-headed figure with a big nose. It sat under a sign that read, TOP PRIZE.

Greg picked it up before Hadi could. It was heavy, and its fur felt matted and coarse. He was oddly drawn to the animal, whatever it was. He studied the pointed ears, sloped forehead, long snout, and piercing yellow eyes. Then he noticed the blue collar around the animal's neck. Something gleaming dangled from the collar. A dog tag? He lifted it.