

# The Promise

Stephen Paul Sayers

Glen Taylor rested at the dune's edge, the churning wind buffeting the beach grass with a comforting swish. The swells picked up energy as the distant storm approached Cape Cod, still miles offshore. Dark clouds streaked toward the sea as if skewered, their contents spilling out in sheets, and the air pressed against him with an unmistakable weight. Except for the seagulls floating motionless on the breeze, the beach lay empty on a late autumn afternoon.

Glen hadn't been back here in... had it been five years now? But, Falmouth hadn't changed much. The buildings lining Main Street had received a fresh coat of paint or updated signage, but they afforded nothing more than a superficial makeover to the quaint past they clung to. In his mind, he held Sarah's hand as they strolled through town, stopping to grab donuts and *The Boston Globe* on their walk back from the harbor, the smell of newsprint and warm pastries forever linked to her memory. He clutched the small blue urn with a chalice's reverence, turning it in his hands.

A swirling wind gust whipped Glen's hair from left to right and back again, the salt air inhalation triggering an olfactory memory that spanned no image, only a sense of youth and invulnerability.

Funny how death shatters such pretenses.

Glen fought to purge the memory, but it powered through his mind's crumbling defenses like a bulldozer. Nothing that morning had been out of the ordinary—aside from Sarah's death. They'd scurried about the house, orbiting each other in their morning rituals to get to work on time. Sharing a hurried breakfast over the granite countertop, they'd checked devices, shoved computers into shoulder bags, straightened skirts and ties, and filled travel mugs with industrial strength Joe.

He'd wrapped a sweater around her shoulders as she'd dashed out the front door ahead of him. She was behind the wheel and pulling out as he'd locked the front door. He hadn't said goodbye, he hadn't told her he loved her.

He'd make up for it later, he promised himself.

He didn't remember much afterward, disjointed images and recollection fragments. His morning lecture in Gaston Hall, two police officers, doorframe silhouettes. Traffic accident. University Medical Center ICU. Crisp white, buffed floors, medical staff padding back and forth. ER doctor, eyes cast downward. Bits and pieces of

phrases. "Nothing we could do...." "...injuries too extensive," "...she didn't suffer."

He'd held her hand in the hospital room beside the morgue, after they'd cleaned her up, caressing her lacerated arm beneath a sheet as white as her skin. He touched his head to her forehead one last time.

That's when he'd said goodbye, told her he loved her.

Glen's gaze swept across the wide expanse of beach where he and Sarah had each visited as children, fixing on the B and B across the street where they'd honeymooned as adults. They'd held each other in the second floor guest bedroom as a late-afternoon breeze swirled through the open window, cooling their flushed skin. Sarah had whispered a wretched request, her smile fading as her head sunk into the pillow.

"If I die before you—"

"Don't say that," Glen had interrupted, "no one's dying on my watch, Mrs. Taylor."

She grinned at her new last name. "Seriously, I need you to listen to me. If I die before you, I want my ashes spread in the sea, across the street."

The waves' gentle roar rose from outside the window, a crescendo filling his ears. "Trust me, I'll be dead and buried long before you."

"Tell me you'll bring me here, back home. Tell me you'll set me free." She lifted a hand to his cheek, the way she would sometimes, sending a surge of heat through his core, as if a balmy breeze had blown through him.

Glen clutched her hand and kissed her fingers. "I promise."

Unscrewing the smooth urn's cap, Glen's feet sank in the shifting sand as he slogged to the shoreline, the wind whipping open his windbreaker. "I love you, Sarah. Forgive me for taking so long."

Glen waded into the foamy surf, bone numbing water sloshing over his Nike's and trouser cuffs. He reached into the urn, Sarah's ashes caressing his skin. He screwed the lid back onto the chalice. / *can't do this, I'm not ready.*

As he turned to step back onto the beach, a small voice floated above the ocean's steady rumble.

"Hey, mister! You're gonna ruin your sneaks."

Glen eyed the boy hiking up the beach toward him. He couldn't have been more than ten years old. Perched on the rock jetty behind him, a little girl hurled shells into the surf. He hadn't noticed them earlier.

"I think I already did."

The boy chuckled and pointed to Glen's feet. "Still keep those things on when you go swimming?"

"Nah, I haven't done that since I was about your—"

His words tangled in his throat as he locked eyes with the boy, pausing as if to process a riddle. He inspected the boy's familiar features, a scattering of freckles across an upturned nose, blue-green irises marbling outward from dark pupils, a brown hint at the far edges. Beneath the boy's left eye, he spied the tiny star-shaped scar. Glen pressed a hand to his own face, rubbing an identical blemish.

"How'd you get that?" Glen's shaky finger pointed toward the boy's eye.

The boy stepped closer. "The same way you did."

Glen backpedaled, the crashing waves' roar suddenly muffled, muted, as if walled off from the shore. "Who are you?"

"I'll give you three guesses...and the first two don't count," the boy snickered, tossing a hand over his mouth.

Glen's legs faltered, depositing him into the sand. The cold sea flooded his pants as he jammed his eyes shut. *He's not really here. When I open my eyes, he'll be gone.* Glen garnered the courage to peel an eyelid, discovering the boy seated in the wet sand beside him.

Pressing his hands to his head, he rubbed his temples in slow circles. "How can you be here? Are you a...?"

"Ghost?" The boy shrugged. "Kinda."

"But, I'm not dead. And if I'm not dead, you can't be a—"

"Ghosts don't have to be dead, silly," the boy interrupted, shaking his head. "I bet you see Sarah inside every bookstore and seafood shack on the waterfront." The boy stood and rested his hand on Glen's shoulder. "Those are ghosts, the things in our head that leave traces. Like me...when we were young."

"So, are you in my head, or...?"

"Part of me is up there," he pointed to Glen's forehead, "and part of me is right beside you." Sensing Glen's puzzlement, he added, "It's sorta complicated."

Glen gazed at the boy as if in a trance, cradling the urn in his lap. "I used to love this beach when I was your age."

The boy snaked an arm around Glen's shoulder. "Sarah did, too. She used to come here, just like we did." The boy pointed down the shoreline. "You see those rocks over there? You walked past her one day and she showed you hermit crabs she caught. Don't you

remember? That was the day you met."

Glen closed his eyes, trying to resurrect a memory he'd never reclaim. He shook his head.

The boy waved to the girl on the jetty. She dropped the shells and made her way up the beach. "Maybe she remembers. You could ask her."

Glen stood as the girl approached, his heart fluttering against his chest like a bird against a window. "Who...is she?"

The boy leaned over and whispered. "She's a real ghost."

Glen studied her face, the resemblance to the tattered photographs unmistakable—the child playing on the lifeguard's chair, stuffing french fries in her mouth on the picnic table outside the fish market, perched against the harbor's dock pilings waving to the boats rumbling past. Tears rimmed his eyes as the living image stood before him, a ten-year-old with the childlike face of a woman he wouldn't meet for another decade.

The boy reached over and rubbed her shoulder. "Hey Sarah, I want you to meet Mr. Taylor."

She brushed the sand from her hand and held it out to him. "Nice to meet you, mister, but you're all wet." She turned to the boy. "Did he go swimming with his pants and sneakers on?"

Glen gazed into Sarah's eyes. They registered no recognition, no hint of a connection. "Do you remember me?" Glen asked.

The girl placed her hands on her hips. "Hmmm...no."

The boy pulled on Glen's sleeve and whispered. "You won't meet for another ten years, that's why she doesn't recognize you."

Glen kept his eyes locked on Sarah's. "Do you remember showing me your hermit crabs?"

The girl scrunched her face as she inspected him. "You mean my pet crabs? I showed them to him." She pointed at the younger version of himself.

Glen pulled the boy aside. "Why is she a...child? She died much older."

"Well, this is where she spent her childhood. That's who she is as a ghost."

"But we spent time here, together." Glen dug his fingernails into his palms. "Why wouldn't she choose to be older, how she was when I knew her? Why would she choose—?"

"Gosh, you don't know much about ghosts," the boy interrupted, shaking his head. "Ghosts don't get to choose who they are when they're dead, just like you don't get to choose who you are when you're alive."

Sarah lowered herself to the sand and hugged herself, goosebumps riddling her bare skin.

"Are you okay?" Glen knelt beside her.

"I want to go home, it's so cold here."

Glen shed his windbreaker and wrapped it around Sarah's shoulders, the sleeves swallowing her arms and hands, the ends snapping in the wind. "Is that better?"

She nodded as she snaked her hands through the jacket's arm maze until they popped through into the chill air.

"You can help her get home, you know." the boy whispered to Glen. "Give her a new beginning."

The little girl stood, her eyes darting back and forth between Glen and the boy. "You mean, I can go home now?"

"You've been so patient, Sarah." The boy rubbed her hand, his eyes communicating an unspoken devotion. Glen recognized the look as if he'd stared into a mirror.

"She's been waiting all this time?"

The boy nodded. "But I've been keeping her company. There are worse places to be stuck, believe me."

"And she hasn't...moved on? Somewhere."

"Even the dead are bound by promises made by the living." He hoisted the urn from the sand and handed it to Glen. "Come on."

*Tell me you'll bring me here, back home. Tell me you'll set me free.* Sarah's words echoed in his head.

They waded into the numbing surf, Glen reaching into the urn and pouring its contents into the roiling swell. The incoming waves crushed Sarah's ashes into the sand, the receding undertow pulling the rest out to sea.

As they stepped from the frigid waves, Sarah made her way to them.

"Nice to meet you, mister, but I gotta go." She shook off his windbreaker and tossed it to him. She extended her tiny hand.

Glen folded her palm in his, turning toward the boy. "Can't I go with her?"

The boy shook his head. "It's not your time. But, I can go...if it's okay with you."

Glen swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. "You'll take care of her?"

"Until you come." The boy grinned.

"Goodbye, mister." Sarah reached a hand to his cheek, warmth spreading across his face and through his core. He squeezed his

eyes shut as their life's memories flooded him in a sensory barrage, peppering him like confetti shot from a cannon, rushing past in a blur. Glen struggled to slow the images down, savor each one.

When he pried his eyes open, she'd made her way along the water's edge, the boy beside her, traipsing through the surf with his sneakers on. They held hands as if they belonged together, their shapes shimmering like a mirage with each step, the rocks and sea visible through their now fading forms. The boy must have said something funny because she turned to him with a giggle as they disappeared from view.

Glen lowered his gaze as the swirling beach grass fell silent, the storm upon him now. Just before the skies opened, a gust of wind tumbled in off the sea. He leaned his head back, the warm air burst caressing his face and traveling to his core, as if someone had reached out a hand and touched him.

## About the Author

Stephen Paul Sayers is a writer of horror and supernatural thriller fiction. He holds a PhD from the University of Massachusetts and is a professor at the University of Missouri. He is a member of the Missouri Writer's Guild and active in local writing groups and conferences. Stephen divides his time between Columbia, Missouri and Cape Cod, Massachusetts writing and teaching.