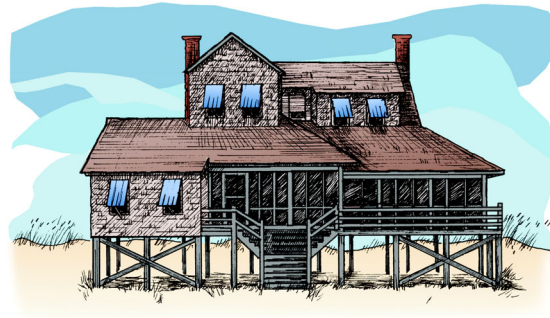


Ghost from the Past: The Mystery of Latham Cottage

By Mary Maden
Illustrated By Vicki Wallace



Chapter One **"It"**

Toby sat in the sand on the beach behind Latham Cottage. A rotten wooden fence and a rusty iron gate were all that separated him from the house. Toby tried not to look up at the cottage. He knew it was silly, but sometimes he could swear that someone or *something* was watching him through the dark windows of the old abandoned house!

Latham Cottage stood on the ocean. Once the grandest house on the beach, the old cottage was now run-down and neglected. Even so, it was easy to see that it had once been a beautiful place. The big house was two stories high. Faded storm shutters framed the windows—now cloudy with years of sea spray and dirt. The windows on the bottom floor had been boarded up, but the ones the second story seemed to stare blankly like aged eyes dulled by cataracts. An ominous dark cloud moved overhead, blocking out the sun. A chill breeze moved in from the ocean. The sea oats blew oddly—almost as if they were shivering. Toby *was* shivering!

Feeling uneasy, he sneaked a quick glance over his shoulder at Latham Cottage. Toby wondered just what was so mysterious about that old place? Toby had never been inside—not that he would even *want* to—but something about that house gave him the willies. It wasn't that Toby really believed

the stories about the cottage being haunted—he was too old to believe in ghosts. Sure, a man had killed himself in that house... and a girl was supposed to have died there, too... but he didn't really believe in that kind of stuff!

Toby's cheeks burned with embarrassment as he thought about what Ali would say if she saw him acting so skittish. Ali was Toby's best friend—really his only friend. Latham Cottage never made Ali uneasy—she loved the old place. The two met there almost every day after school.

Here, on the beach behind the old cottage, they would hang out and talk. Toby could tell Ali anything. Like how his mom had left him when he was six and had never come back. How he never knew his dad. Ali didn't laugh or make fun of him like the other kids did. She seemed to understand how lonely he was and how much it hurt not having a real family. Ali didn't really know her dad, either. He had left when Ali was two, leaving Ali and her mom on their own. Lately, times had been rough. There wasn't enough money, so Ali's mom was selling their house. Ali often said that when she grew up, she would be rich and have a great big house. Maybe that's why Ali loved Latham Cottage so much—it was her dream house.

Often, they would stare up at the once elegant house and wonder what it was like to have lived there years ago. Ali would make up stories about life back then. Even though Latham Cottage made Toby nervous, he was mesmerized by Ali's fanciful tales. Sometimes, Toby could almost see the well-dressed people sipping lemonade on the big porch. Life must have been so easy and carefree back then. Toby sighed. He wished life were like that for him now.

Toby felt a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He wished Ali would hurry up! Not that he was afraid or anything. It wasn't the legends about the house being haunted that made him nervous; it was something else.

Truth was, Latham Cottage had a strange effect on him. It was something he couldn't quite put his finger on. He tried hard not to feel that weird feeling, but it seemed to wrap around him like a big, thick blanket. The feeling took shape. "*It*" was all around him. Something was reaching out to him... calling to him... waiting for him... wanting something from him.

"Hey, Tobe! Snap out of it!" Ali laughed as she grabbed Toby's shoulder. Startled, Toby jumped.

"What's the matter?" Ali teased. "Did you see a ghost?"

Ali's big Lab, Buddy, licked Toby's face.

"Cut it out, Buddy!" Toby laughed, changing the subject. "You're late."

Ali's grin faded. "I know. I was trying to find a home for Buddy. I'd have an easier time if he were a taco-eating Chihuahua!" she wisecracked.

"Don't give up yet," said Toby. "Maybe you won't have to move. Your mom might come up with some money and she won't have to sell your house. Then you can keep Buddy."

"Right! Maybe we'll win the lottery!" Ali replied. "If things weren't bad enough, I heard that they are tearing down Latham Cottage to build a beach parking lot!"

"Our spot will soon be a parking lot!" Toby joked.

"Funny—not!" Ali snapped. "I'll miss the old house. I've always liked it. Sometimes I even imagine I live there with Mom and Buddy and a pesky brother..."

"You don't have a brother," Toby corrected.

"Okay, pesky best friend, then," Ali replied.

"Whatever!" Toby said, secretly pleased. He would even live in Latham Cottage if he had a real family!

Just then, a cat poked its head through the brush next to the gate. Buddy jumped up—ready for action. He let out an excited bark and tore off after the cat.

"Buddy! Come back!" Ali ordered.

The cat ran, with Buddy right on its tail.

"You big mutt! Get back here! I mean it!" screamed Ali.

Buddy ignored Ali, pursuing the cat around the house. Toby and Ali ran after Buddy, turning the corner of the big cottage just in time to see the dog's tail disappear through a crack in a boarded-up window.

"Oh, no! He's in the house!" Ali groaned. "We'll have to go after him."

"We can't," said Toby. "We'll get in trouble."

"We'll be in more trouble if Buddy tears something up," replied Ali. "I'm going in!"

"I don't think that's a good idea,"

Toby argued.

"You don't believe all those old ghost stories, do you?" Ali teased.

"No way!" Toby insisted. "It's just that the place is real old—it could be dangerous. There might be snakes in there."

Ali gave Toby a dirty look. She was deathly afraid of snakes! "It won't work," Ali said. "Besides, this place is in great shape." She pulled at the loose board covering the window. "C'mon!"

"I don't think we should be doing this..." Toby muttered.

His words fell on deaf ears. Ali was gone, and Toby was alone. The weird feeling was back, and "It" was stronger than before! He couldn't move. All he could hear was a faint thump... thump... thump. Toby realized the thumping was his heart beating!

"Toby, are you coming?" Ali yelled impatiently. "I'm starting to think you're chicken!"

"I'm not chicken!" he snapped. "I'm right behind you!"

"I'm not afraid," Toby whispered as he climbed through the window. Not knowing what he would find inside, Toby entered Latham Cottage.

And "It" was waiting!

Next time... Chapter Two:

The Monster Behind the Door

Quality Serials by Mary Maden

© 2002 by Mary Maden.

All rights reserved.

