

“The Bridge”

Never cross the bridge after dark. Growing up in the small settlement on the island of Gray’s Point, Amelia Proctor had heard this rule hundreds of times throughout the course of her one and twenty years. It was a rule that was religiously heeded by each of the island’s villagers. It might as well have been a law of nature on the island. The sun sets in the west, and you never cross the bridge after dark. Yet she now found herself standing at the foot of that exact bridge, lantern in hand, just after midnight with the warning echoing in her ears.

The worn wooden bridge connected the two portions of island that made up Gray’s Point; the village where the settlers lived, and the dense and expansive woods. It was as if God had split the island in half Himself. Peering through the darkness trying to make out the opposite end of the bridge, Amelia wondered now if that was intentional to keep the townsfolk out of the woods. While she knew she was never to cross the bridge after dark, she did not exactly know why. She had always chalked it up to an old superstition dating back to the founding of the island and brushed it off as what she considered to be purely folklore. But now, standing in the dark and preparing to make the intimidating trek across, Amelia wished that the island’s founders had never built the bridge at all.

Despite being separated from the main island, the vast woods were the lifeblood of the community, packed full of invaluable resources for the villagers trying to build a new life off the New England coast. Most of the island’s men made their living cutting down the trees and selling the lumber to new settlers coming to the island to build homes and to use as firewood that would be critical in the coming months. Amelia’s older brother, Grady, was one of these men. Grady spent his days toiling in the woods to provide for their family. Pa wasn’t getting around as well as he once had and had never fully recovered from the loss of Amelia and Grady’s mother two winters before. Their father’s inability to provide left the family’s survival solely in Grady’s hands. Amelia tried to help as much as she could, taking on seamstress work and hosting Bible classes for the village children. However, there were only so many occupations that were deemed acceptable for young women in the village’s eyes.

Amelia took a deep breath and gathered her courage as she stepped onto the bridge, its weather worn planks moaning under her weight. A cold fog had moved in off the sea and was quickly enveloping everything in a dark gray hue that rendered the island she grew up on unrecognizable. It created an atmosphere equal parts beautiful and ominous. The name of the island was fitting to its current conditions, Amelia thought to herself. Though it was only mid-October, the air carried a biting chill that had already numbed the tips of her fingers and nose. Winter was coming early and it would be harsh. The dampness of the fog combined with the fallen leaves plastered to the boards, made the bridge slippery under her feet. Tightly gripping her lantern, and with her other hand firmly on the rough makeshift railing, Amelia began

methodically shuffling across the bridge towards the dark woods that were now barely visible through the fog.

The last time Amelia had seen Grady was around twilight. Life on the island was unforgiving, and Grady had begun picking up odd jobs to help support her and Pa. He was to help patch the roof of Reverend Good's church the next morning but had forgotten his tools in the woods earlier that day. The money Grady would earn would sustain Pa and Amelia through what he knew would be a bitter winter, but he would need his tools to do the job. Amelia's protests against Grady venturing back into the woods so close to dark were to no avail and he promised to return before nightfall. When darkness fell and Grady still hadn't returned, Amelia slipped past Pa, who was fast asleep in the warm glow of the hearth, and set out in search of her brother.

The fog had now become so dense and all-encompassing that Amelia could only see as far as the next step in front of her. The moisture from the fog collected on the hem of her dress as it brushed along the ground, making it heavy and increasingly difficult to walk in. A few unruly curls that had fallen from their place pinned atop her head were soaked and now clung to her face. The freezing air stung her lungs with each breath, and she wrapped her shawl more tightly around her. It was a dreary cream color and had belonged to her mother before the fever took her along with five other villagers two winters ago. Amelia feared the coming winter might similarly doom more victims to the same fate.

She wondered what her mother would say if she could see her now. Ma would have never allowed Grady to leave for the woods so close to dark. She always had a way of stifling his stubborn will and making him see reason. This was a talent that Amelia hadn't yet mastered, and she regretted it deeply now. Amelia's thoughts of her mother were suddenly interrupted by the sound of frantic, yet hushed, whispers in the fog. Followed by the clunk of footsteps. But not just any footsteps, they were strong and steady on the bridge. The sound of sturdy leather soles. Like the soles of men's work boots. Like Grady's boots.

"Grady?" Amelia whimpered, her words swallowed by the fog. "Is that you?"

She hated how afraid she sounded; how afraid she felt. A deep unease settled over her as silence now permeated the heavy air. Even if her brother was standing next to her on the bridge, she wouldn't be able to see him. She tried to convince herself that her mind was playing tricks on her, exacerbated by the poor visibility from the fog. There were no voices and no footsteps, just fear making her unreasonable. Amelia squinted trying to make out what might lie before her, but it was useless. Her lantern was practically worthless in the fog, only adding a glow to the overwhelming grayness. She prayed that at any moment she would see the tall, broad frame of her brother breaking through the fog. They could quickly return home and slip in quietly before Pa even knew either of them had gone and broken the town's most sacred rule. She tried to ignore the nagging sense of doom in her chest that told her this wouldn't be that easy. She

couldn't bring herself to speculate what horrors might have befallen her brother in the woods at this time of night.

The sound of her pounding heart deafening in her ears, Amelia raced blindly towards the direction of the woods. If she didn't go quickly, she feared that her courage might fail her and she would retreat without her brother. She had to find Grady and get home as soon as possible. Though the bridge was only a few hundred feet long in its entirety, it seemed to go on forever as she rushed through the gray expanse. Suddenly, the level platform of the bridge ended, and she tumbled onto the hard, wet ground beneath her, the light of her lantern extinguished in the process. She had reached the woods, but now she was in complete darkness, unable to see even the gray of the fog in the blackness. Amelia struggled back to her feet but was stopped dead in her tracks at the sound of a voice just inches from her ear.

"Never cross the bridge after dark," it sneered, pronouncing each word in a baleful and mocking manner.

Amelia froze at the sensation of breath on her neck, her blood instantly running cold. It took every bit of control she could muster to swallow down the bloodcurdling scream that desperately tried to escape from her throat. She recognized the voice. It belonged to Grady. But she knew it wasn't her brother. It was something far more sinister.