

THE GRAY MAN

The bog was a dreary palette of gray stretching in all directions. Not only was it lifeless, it was colorless in the fallow moonlight. Nick shivered but not from cold.

When he could move again, the thick water slowed his progress through the swamp. The bog seemed to drag at his legs, stealing the strength from them. Like skeletal hands, fallen branches and limbs under the dark water tried to snare his feet.

The twisted branches of the standing trees conjured up grinning faces in Nick's overactive imagination. To keep his fear under control, he kept his head down and repeated his plan to himself. *Keep heading north. Find land. Find Logan. Go home.* The hours and miles passed.

"Over here, Man-born," something whispered. The sound, quiet and distorted, lit up the bog like a match struck in a dark room.

Not ten feet away, sitting on a fallen tree, was a man, an old man by the looks of him. He was gray from beard to boots and nearly invisible against the background of the bog. The man wore a tattered gray cloak and leather breeches and looked as decayed as the tree he sat on. His long, wild beard reminded Nick of straw.

The Straw Man peered into the black, shiny water. He seemed to be staring at something submerged beneath his feet.

There was stillness about him, as though he were incapable of movement.

“Over here, Man-born,” the Straw Man repeated.

Nick, knowing it was too late to hide, fought down his fear and spoke.

“I didn’t see you there,” he stammered, his voice like a scream compared to the Straw Man’s whisper.

“Hard to miss you,” said the Straw Man. The distortion in the man’s voice seemed familiar, not menacing, more like a continuous sigh.

“You’ve got the fresh shine to you, Boy. You are new. Brand new.”

Still staring at the water, the man reached into his cloak. The motion was slow, almost hypnotic. Without searching, he pulled out a thin piece of wood. He raised the wood slowly to his mouth and began picking his teeth.

“Hmm, four minutes,” the Straw Man whispered. “What’s your name, Boy?”

Nick didn’t want to answer that.

“You’re lost aren’t you?”

“What makes you say that?” Nick’s instinct to run grew stronger.

The Straw Man let loose a friendly laugh and, for a split second, the bog warmed a few degrees.

“No one comes here on purpose, Boy.”

“Are you lost?” Nick questioned.

“No. I know my way through these parts.”

“You live here?”

“Yes. I live here.”

“Oh, ok,” Nick said, wondering how anyone could live in this dreadful place.

I can outrun this old man if I have too.

“I am lost.”

“Lost,” the Straw Man repeated. “People have been known to lose hope. And once hope is lost, well...we know what happens then.”

Nick wasn’t sure what to make of that, so he ignored it.

“Which is the way out of here?”

“Which is the way out of here?” The old man repeated the question as if he had asked it himself. “Well, there is more than one way out. You are actually pretty close to one of them, Boy.”

The Straw Man spit into the water.

“Three minutes,” he counted.

“Good. Can you point me in the right direction? According to my compass, I came from the east and have been moving north for hours. But I can’t seem to get anywhere? How far does the bog go?”

“How far does the bog go? Very far and very wide, I would say. But not very far down. Only a few feet in most places. Can get deep in others.”

Nick wondered if the Straw Man was capable of a straight answer.

“Can you tell me the way to go? Should I go back west?”

The Straw Man shrugged his movement slight.

“You could go back west.”

Nick’s face flushed red and his voice sounded strained as he spoke, “How far? You said I was close. Did I miss something? How far west?”

“Not so far now,” the Straw Man answered. “Two minutes.”

“What happens in two minutes?”

“You really shouldn’t worry about time when you are lost. You should worry about finding your way. People have been known to lose hope. And once hope is lost, well...we know what happens then.”

Nick’s frustration peaked. His heart pounded and he had to pant to get words out.

“Look, just tell me the way out of the here. You don’t have to move. I just need to know the direction.” Nick took a step toward the Straw Man.

“One minute.”

“One minute until what!” Nick wheezed, finding it harder to breathe.

“The problem you have, Man-born, is not finding the right direction. It’s finding the right side.”

“Right side? Of the bog?”

“Not of the bog. Of the water.” The Straw Man’s face stretched into a wicked grin.

“Tell...me...the...way...” Nick gasped, his lungs barely finding enough air to talk.

“Thought you would have figured it out by now. You are such a bright, shiny, new boy.”

The Straw Man looked up as Nick staggered closer. The man’s yellow eyes glowed like searchlights penetrating the gloom. Nick tried to scream but there was no air in his lungs. He tried to command his legs to run but they wouldn’t listen. He could only stare in horror at the man.

“This swamp can play tricks on the mind, Boy,” the Straw Man whispered as he turned his terrible gaze back to the water at his feet. Nick followed the man’s stare into the dark water and saw himself.

I’m drowning.

Nick was drowning. The Straw Man’s boots, pressing down on his shoulders, exerted just enough pressure to keep Nick’s head under water. He was weak from lack of oxygen and close to losing consciousness. He tried to free himself from the Straw Man’s boots, but all he accomplished was churning up the thick water. *It’s too late. I’m too weak.*

The burning in his lungs had already lessened. *Maybe it won’t be so bad. It would be easy just to hold off a few more seconds, to give up and drift slowly to the bottom, to become part of the dark water.*

Nick sluggishly peered toward the surface and looked into the Straw Man's eyes. He saw in them equal parts frenzy and glee. Nick had seen that look before. It was the look of the strong bent on punishing the weak, simply because they could. *Had Logan seen these eyes too?*

An emotion, somewhere between love and hope, stirred deep within his body. *If I die, Logan is lost forever.* And with that thought, the decision was made.

Nick pushed himself deeper into the black water using the Straw Man's boots for leverage. When he hit the soft, mucky bottom, he summoned all the strength left in his oxygen-deprived body and thrust upward.

Dark water tugged at Nick as he glided slowly toward the surface. It seemed to take two eternities just to reach the man's boots. With arms as heavy as lead, he grabbed the Straw man's feet and pulled his head out of the water. Swamp air filled his lungs.

Nick clutched the Straw Man's legs and held on. *Can't let him push me under! Just need one breath!*

One breath came and then another. After four breaths, he opened his eyes fully expecting to fight for his life. Instead, Nick found himself alone, clinging to the dead roots of an old, gnarled tree. He looked around frantically for the Straw Man, but the pale moon glow revealed nothing. Nick listened but the only sound he heard was his own frantic panting.

With no destination in mind, Nick pulled himself to his feet and staggered into the bog. He needed to put some distance between himself and this latest terrifying event. By some miracle, his glasses had clung to his face during the ordeal. “This swamp can play tricks on the mind, Boy,” the Straw Man had said.

A half-hour later, Nick found a large, dry log and collapsed. A single thought led him into sleep. It didn’t matter if the encounter had been real or imagined. Either way, the Straw Man was right. *We do know what happens when people lose hope.*