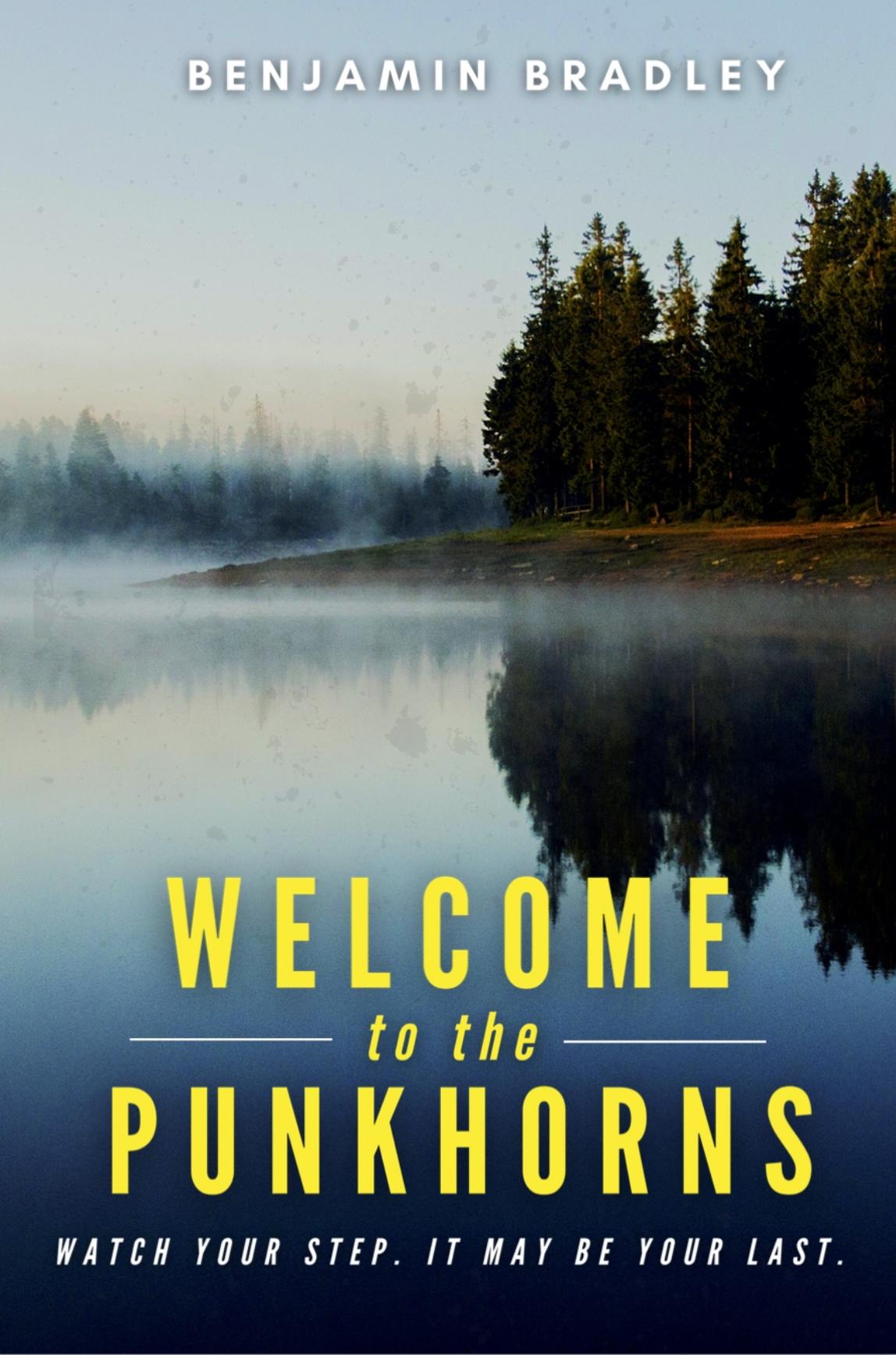


BENJAMIN BRADLEY



WELCOME
— *to the* —
PUNKHORNS

WATCH YOUR STEP. IT MAY BE YOUR LAST.

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**WELCOME
TO THE
PUNKHORNS**

Benjamin Bradley



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For Mom

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

About the Author

“Myths which are believed in tend to become true.”

- George Orwell

Introduction

There's a reason the Punkhorns have been left alone for as long as they have. Surrounded by idyllic beachfront properties and nest-egg cottages, the land should have been lost to the suburbs long ago. If examined closely enough, it's clear that the Punkhorns are actually speckled with the remains of past generations' best attempts at utilizing the thicket of forest for anything except conservation. Faded footprints pepper the soil as the last traces of life on the land. Bones sit beside mossy brick remnants of old foundations as a reminder that everything living will one day die. Eventually, always, something would cause the inhabitants to raise their hands to the sky above and give up. They'd walk out of the woods and away from the land once and for all.

The Punkhorns are littered with pitch pines that reach into the skies but are hard-pressed to live up to the forests that once lived on the same lands. Fishing was once the lifeblood of the surrounding town. Entire forests were cut down to fuel fires which boiled and purified saltwater to freeze enough ice to preserve their catch. The deforested lands allowed space where animals could roam and graze, but not freely; just for the benefit of man.

The forest, however, became more mythologized by legends and tales that flew through the town like the sea breeze from the nearby Atlantic. Soon, the Punkhorns were where shadows slept at night and leapt out at those who dared to disrupt their slumber. The bold visitors who struck out at night claimed that the space is terrifying and dark; much darker than any area neighboring a city should be. No matter how far people ventured in, they would return with a confident and unshakeable faith that the stories they'd heard were, in fact, true.

Stories told over the crackling light of a campfire are often hyperbolic. Children holler and scream in delightful terror with the tale's open-ended conclusions. Teenagers glance at the darkness around them and jump at the slightest imagined movement. The storyteller weaves details that flirt with extremes to get a rise out of their audience and watch as their spines tingle with fear they'd never known was within them.

For a long time, there was an unspoken embargo on telling stories about the Punkhorns if you were inside Brewster, Massachusetts. It held the land safe and sound for the past forty years without so much as a murmur from the haunted hollow that lurked in the distance. With all due respect and reverence, it appears it is

time that ban was lifted, albeit just for a moment.

Welcome to the Punkhorns.

ONE

Monday, August 6th

Urban legends, like a fly on a windshield, cling for dear life with little fanfare or notice. As the drive begins, no hum or buzz draws any attention; it's just there. Waiting its turn. Nearby. Ready. As the wheels continue to roll, it's almost forgotten. It may creep up from time to time and sit in the periphery, just out of sight, but it rarely makes a ripple in the waters. After all, it's just a story. It's just a fly. It's just something that floats around town until it's something more. Until it's in your face, pestering you. Always in view.

With every forward glance, you must ignore the small obstruction right in front of your eyes; you must pretend it doesn't exist, pretend it's not there at all. You can try to wipe it away with the flick of a wrist on a lever, but sometimes that just makes it worse. That's how it spreads. That's how myths and lore creep into everyday conversation. That's how it bleeds. And when something is bleeding in front of you, there's no denying its very existence. There's no closing your eyes and wishing it away. No, it's there and will remain there until addressed. Until it's given the attention it needs to wash it away for good.

Porter Dawes had never given any credence to myths. Especially not those that had little to do with modern-day life in idyllic Cape Cod. No, Porter was much more interested in the ticker at the bottom of the screen on ESPN or the latest keg on tap at the Hog Island Brewery in Dennis. When girl-next-door-yet-drop-dead-on-the-spot-gorgeous Melanie Strong had asked if he'd be willing to meet in the Punkhorns to venture into Seymour Pond, she barely had time to blink before he had accepted the invite.

Porter felt his arms growing tired as he carried the paddleboard above his head. When he'd lifted it into that position, he had glanced towards Melanie to see if she noticed his fully flexed biceps. Moments like this were why Porter worked so hard at the gym. It wasn't for good health or longevity; it was to get a girlfriend. And if he could have his pick of all the women in the world, he'd choose Melanie *freakin'* Strong. She barely shot him a glance. Her gaze was focused on the water with an occasional glance upwards to bask in the sunlight. Instead, she gave him a smile and a big "*Thanks!*" and skipped along in front towards the beach ahead.

Porter willed himself to keep the board up and worked to find the strength to have the board lifted with ease as he rounded the tight corner which led to the pond.

He gave in to his body's cries just before the corner in a position where he thought he'd be blocked from Melanie's view if she'd made it to the shore ahead. As he dropped the board, he heard Melanie's voice from around the corner. "You need help? I can take one end if you can't handle it."

Porter's heart sank. He figured he'd lost any chance he had of impressing his old friend. As he lifted the board back up, he scolded himself for caring so much what others thought. He'd thought that by his late twenties, after college and well into the *real world*, he'd outgrow those tendencies. But they came creeping back from time to time. Especially when Melanie was around. It didn't hurt that she was wriggling out of cutoff jean shorts when he approached.

Porter dropped the board onto the sand, where it clattered against a few stray seashells that had washed ashore. Melanie checked her watch. "You ready? Do you want to swim alongside or share the board?" Porter felt his rubbery arms yearning for a break.

"Let's share the board for now. That work?"

Melanie nodded and pushed the board into the shallow waters, which made up most of the perimeter of Seymour Pond.

The water was warm as Porter stepped into it. He felt the rocky sand beneath his toes. He watched in awe as Melanie, in all of her tanned, athletic glory, pushed out and hopped onto the paddleboard with ease. Porter followed.

Melanie paddled while Porter kicked from behind to propel them along. The clear water rippled behind them with each stroke. There were a few kayakers spread across the pond, and a group swam out by the public beach across the water. Seymour Pond wasn't the largest body of water in Cape Cod by any stretch of the imagination. The pond's fresh, algae-free waters stretched just over one hundred acres between the highway and the forest. In that forest, on the edge of the Punkhorns, she'd found a well-worn little trail that led down to the beach where they'd dropped their shoes and t-shirts.

A woman in a red kayak paddled by and waved at the two of them. Porter followed Melanie's lead and waved back. Porter tried to remember the conversation topics he'd brainstormed on his way to pick up Melanie. He knew that, to some extent, she was using him for the paddleboard his father had bought for his birthday. To another extent, Porter didn't care. He saw this as an opening and, as a romance-minded twenty-six-year-old, the perfect start to something he felt was meant to be.

"Mind if I hop out to swim for a bit?" Melanie handed Porter her paddle, interrupting his daydream. "Go for it," he said with a smile.

Melanie tumbled off the side of the paddleboard, rocking the watercraft so much that Porter had to throw his weight to the far side to prevent it from tipping. She laughed as she bobbed in the warm water and started a furious breaststroke towards the center of the pond. Porter pushed himself to keep up, but she was moving too fast. She looked back, met his eyes, and gave him a *come-on* wave. He tried again to summon the strength to catch up to her. The pristine water flowed in an even wake behind the long board's tail.

He was no more than thirty feet away from her when she turned back to face him. Her body jerked and went underwater. Porter steered towards her, thinking he

could scare her when she resurfaced. After what felt like an eternity, Porter began to worry. He knew she was a strong swimmer, but the way she went under had been all wrong. Unnatural. His heart raced. He dove off the paddleboard into the water. The bottom was far too deep for him to see all the way down. His eyes stung from the briny water. Small fish swam around him without alarm as he frantically swam around looking for her.

When his lungs burned, he shot to the surface, half-expecting to see Melanie sitting on top of his board, laughing at him. He wiped his eyes, blinking to regain his vision. Melanie was nowhere in sight. He screamed her name and listened for a reply. Once more. Then again. Nothing. Panic spread inside him like sunlight at daybreak and soon shifted into pure, unfiltered terror. *Where the hell was Melanie?*

Porter climbed back on the board and paddled as hard as he could towards the public beach. He hoped she'd just swam ashore without him seeing her resurface. As he grew closer, he heard the people on the shore and in the shallows shouting at him. He shook the water out of his ears and tried to make out what they were saying. It sounded like they were yelling for somebody named Grace. He paddled towards the cries in a rush to correct them. "Her name is Melanie!" he shouted, but was drowned out by the chorus of cries from the beach.

"GRACE! GRACE!" the shouts continued as Porter rushed into the beach perimeter. One arm gripped the board, and he paddled with the other.

"GRACE! GRACE!"

"MELANIE! Her name is Melanie!" His voice cracked as he cried out.

Porter shouted to one of the young men standing in the knee-deep water. "What's going on? Have you seen Melanie? Girl in an orange bikini? Brown hair?"

The man shook his head. "A local woman, Grace Lee, went out for her daily swim and went under. Somebody saw her from the beach, but she never resurfaced."

A wave of confusion replaced Porter's fear and soon transformed into pure dread. He dug into the pocket of his swim trunks for his phone, but knew it was sitting in the cupholder of his car. Aluminum beach chairs sat abandoned on the sand like a sudden rapture had swept the beachgoers away. Instead, they all stood, hands over mouths, staring out into the placid water in terror. Porter asked to borrow a cell phone to call the police, but he could hear the approaching sirens as he dialed.

Between each button pressed, he shouted into the ether. "MELANIE! MELANIE STRONG! WHERE ARE YOU?"

He looked around at the shocked crowd of beachgoers, staring out into the pond, looking for signs of life. He felt himself growing sick over letting Melanie swim without keeping a better eye on her, even though he knew she was a strong swimmer. The kayakers that had dotted the horizon approached the beach full of the squawking citizens.

Porter tossed his board onto the beach in frustration. He watched as a few people pushed their kayaks into the pond to try and find Grace Lee. They spread like migrating geese. He shouted to them to look for Melanie Strong too.

"Tan girl. Brown hair. Athletic. Orange bikini. Melanie Strong!" They nodded back. His heart sank further.

“You’re saying another girl drowned out there too?” The man Porter had first spoken to approached him on the beach. The man’s curly hair had shrunk in the water and droplets dripped from each coiled strand.

“She’s a really strong swimmer. I don’t think—I mean, she went under and never came up.” Porter felt his mouth moving faster than his brain. His heart raced with panic.

The man’s bearded face grew pale. “I don’t understand how this could happen.” They watched the red and blue kayaks scamper across the water. Cries for both Grace and Melanie echoed across the beach.

An old woman folded her neon green beach chair and walked to an empty spot on the beach. She stood perfectly still. Porter noticed her and found himself disturbed by her peculiar stance. It was as though nothing was happening around her, like she was alone, the sun soaking her soul. She stared. Stared at Porter. She shook her head and turned away from the crowd, toward the parking lot.

“How could you just leave? Aren’t you going to help?” Porter screamed.

“I’m looking out for myself. You should do the same. You’d get the heck out of here if you knew what was good for you,” she shouted as she stood next to her car. “I’m too old to dance with the devil.”

“You’re saying the devil is to blame for this?” The curly-haired man next to Porter said.

“I’m saying that if the devil lived in Cape Cod, he’d have a waterfront property in the Punkhorns. That place is cursed as could be. Just look at what happened here,” the woman’s voice strained as it shouted over the search party. She climbed into her car and sped out of the gravel lot.

Porter frowned. “Cursed? What the hell did she mean? This has to be some kind of terrible accident.”

The man shook his head and then grabbed his towel and sandals. “Two women drown at the exact same moment? That’s no accident. That’s some supernatural stuff, brother. Some people just buy it more than others.”

Porter looked back at the pond. All he saw between the ripples was the baby-faced reflection of his worried face. “Do you? Is that what you think happened?”

The man sighed and put a hand on Porter’s shoulder. “I’m sure as hell not going to wait around to find out if that’s the case. I hope they find these ladies. Good luck, man.”

“You’re running away, too?” Porter said to the man’s back.

“The police are on their way, right? I’ll leave this to the professionals instead of getting in the way and mucking it up,” the man said while he continued towards the parking lot.

As the man drove away, Porter saw the police and rescue trucks veer into the public lot. *Supernatural stuff, yeah right.* Porter felt like he was in the middle of a terrible dream. It was the only explanation.

He continued to look out into the water, hoping with every fiber in his body that Melanie would just pop up and explain it was all a big joke. As the minutes passed and panic spread across the beach, Porter felt his gaze shift from the waters to the mysterious forest which lined the coast of the pond. *The Punkhorns.*

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Ben grew up in Parsippany, New Jersey. He currently resides in Durham, North Carolina where he consults for nonprofits and international development organizations. He credits his love of books and writing to his mother who taught him at a young age to appreciate and enjoy stories. Mysteries, thrillers and biographies are among the genres he most frequently reads.

When he's not writing, Ben is an avid traveler and hiker who also enjoys juggling while running half-marathons. Ben is an AmeriCorps Alum and StartingBloc Fellow with a passion for improving the world.

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