**What Lurks in the Woods**
**By Amelia Mills**

This house had secrets. Charlotte knew it. The windows creaked and rattled in the dry breeze, and the paint was peeling along the sides of the house. It was surrounded by a dark wood, with a worn dirt path running through the forest. The only people who were rumoured to have gone down it had never come back. At night, it was worse. Strange growling echoed from the house all night long, keeping the people in town awake.

And sometimes, when the darkest hours stretched on, a ghostly scream rang through the tall, gloomy trees, with their spindly branches stretching far into the sky.

Charlotte was curious. Nearly a hundred years ago, a girl had gone down the dark wooded path for a dare, wearing a ruffled, laced dress. An hour passed, two. Then, a scream came from the dark. The biggest bit of her they ever found was her thumb, the end mangled as though it had been torn away. The town Charlotte lived in was very small, so people still gossiped about it, when topics for rumors were scarce.

“Charlotte!” her mother was calling her downstairs.
“Coming!” she grabbed her backpack and ran down the stairs and out the door, long black hair whipping out behind her.

While she was waiting for the bus, she checked her planner. There, in large red font, was a book title and author. She stared at the scarlet letters she had most certainly not written in awe.

What Lurks in the Woods
By Allison Turner

The writing seemed to glow upon the page, and Charlotte gasped. The bus pulled up with a loud screeching of brakes and noxious fumes spreading across the street. The bus driver noticed the look on Charlotte’s face and an expression of concern spread across her face.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, gaze gliding across the planner in her hands. Charlotte turned the book towards the bus driver, but the words had vanished without a trace. She got on the bus, worry clouding her mind and her planner clutched in her hands. She decided to check it out before homeroom. It did sound like a good book. When she walked into the library, she was immediately called up to the checkout desk, and a shrill voice echoed through the dusty room.

“Miss Brown!” Charlotte jumped. The librarian was yelling at her, probably for having another overdue book. Charlotte closed her eyes, bracing for a lecture, but the words that came next surprised her.

“I’m so glad to see you’ve put a hold on What Lurks in the Woods! It’s such a great book for young readers!” the librarian said, a wide smile creasing her ancient features. Charlotte was so shocked, she

almost missed the sinister look passing across the librarian's face as she handed Charlotte the forest green book. Stunned, she accepted the book and ran off to her class.

When she came in through the door, late, the whole class stared at her and the book in her arms. Embarrassed, she sat down and tried to listen to what the teacher was saying. However, she found her thoughts always drifting back to the book, buried deep in her backpack. In her head, her book glowed a deep forest green, the golden words upon the cover inviting her to read it. She couldn't stand it any longer. She opened her backpack, pulled out the book against her better judgement, and turned to the first page.

What lurks in the woods doesn't always stay in the woods.

A strange chill crawled up her arms, and she leaned closer to the book to read more.

Long ago, a creature, so horrible I will not name it here, ruled the night. With it's ghostly pale arms clothed in black, and a tread so light, that only when it was right behind you would you sense that it was there. Everyone feared this creature of darkness, and once every year, it would come down into the village, cloaked in shadows, and take one child for its very own.

She stared at the page in silent astonishment, at the words woven into pictures, as a cloaked figure began to take place in her mind. She could see it so clearly, almost as though it was a memory. A hand plucked the book away from her and she looked up to see Mrs. Boyd standing above her, eyebrows raised.

"This is math, dear child, not English, and I expect you to think of it as such. You may have your book back at the end of the day."

The day dragged on, seeming to take even longer than usual, until finally, finally, all her classes were over and she could claim the book again. She went back to Mrs. Boyd's room, desperate to get her book back and read late into the night, but when she arrived, the book was on the desk and Mrs. Boyd was nowhere to be seen. Charlotte got a strange feeling, the same she'd had when reading the very book she was holding in her trembling arms. A chilling shiver down her spine, the feeling that someone, something was watching her. It did nothing but get stronger as she slipped off into the late afternoon, clutching the book in her arms, seemingly unseen.

The front door swung open, as always. The floorboards creaked, as always. The house was deserted, as always. Yet Charlotte had never known anything more unusual. The book she held in her arms gave her a strange feeling, a chilling sense that someone was always watching. When she curled up on her faded blue couch, as always, she opened the book.

It comes every All Hallow's Eve. If you are the one who is dragged off into the woods, you will suffer a fate worse than death itself.

DON'T LET IT READ THIS IT WILL COME FOR YOU

After the last chilling statement, the book's pages faded, and unseen ink disintegrated the evidence. Charlotte stared in horror as the paper crumbled in her very hands, staining them a sickly black. The last sentence had been so… different somehow, the sudden change in profile, the eerie lettering standing out upon the page before vanishing completely from the book. Only then did Charlotte realize she was holding something that was definitely not the book, and promptly dropped it in surprise. A silver compass fell to the floor, clattering and making an awful racket. She stared at it in silent astonishment, wondering how? And why? And what? She had so many questions, but she bent to retrieve the compass anyway. It had carvings around the edges, and the quivering arrow pointed at something off to the west. But the most chilling thing was the carved, elegant silver words on the face of the compass.

What lurks in the woods doesn't always stay in the woods.

She remembered those words. They were the same she'd once read in a dark green book describing the thing that came in the night. In that moment, her resolve hardened. She would find whatever it was this book described.

An hour later, she was more than regretting her decision. The spindly branches of the woods stretched across the fading sky, and the leaves crunched under her sore feet. Charlotte was just about to give in and call it a day, when the glint of a pond shone through the dark trees, the water seemingly inviting her in. When she crept closer, the compass in her hands started vibrating, sending a rush of adrenaline down her spine. She slid cautiously towards the shimmering depths, pushing away brush and leaves, and emerging into a clearing surrounding the glimmering pond. Willow trees extended their drooping branches out over the water, and the long green grass brushed Charlotte's ankles. She walked slowly closer and sat at the edge of the pond, running a finger across the surface of the water. Small ripples spread out in circles from the point her finger made contact. They were so mesmerizing that when a cold, pale hand grabbed her by the shoulder, and when everything went black, all she could think of were those ripples, going out out out from the point where she touched the water.

All she knew was unbearable pain, unseeable darkness, undoubted dread.
She was the pain.
She was the dark.

And somehow, for an undefinable reason, she dreaded it ending, dreaded returning to reality, dreaded seeing the thing again. And after thoughts of the thing crossed her mind, she was awake, the scent of dust and old things filling her nose, a high, rotting ceiling above her. She sat up. The walls were covered in an old, peeling wallpaper, and on the walls hung clearly ancient paintings, each depictions of another world. A forest. A lion. And a decrepit house on the top of a hill, trees surrounding it blowing in the wind, with peeling paint and cracked windows.

A noise sounded from behind Charlotte, a creak of a board, a disturbance of dust. She whipped her head around, heart pounding in her chest, to see a pale girl standing there. She had silky hair tied back in ribbons and a ruffled, laced dress. But the strangest thing about her was not her old attire.
She was so pale, it was as if all the life had been sucked out of her.

Her dress must have once been beautiful, but time had taken away large chunks of fabric, lace and silk torn through to her white skin. Her hair was so snowy, Charlotte would've thought she was an old lady if not for the touch of youth to her face. When she spoke, each word was laced with death, suggesting she had been dead for years, decades even, past.

"Why are you here?"

Her voice was chilling, and it cut to the bone, making Charlotte shudder. She wanted to know why this girl was here, but she was so petrified, she couldn't speak.

"I-I-I don't know." Charlotte stammered, slowly creeping away from the girl. When she hit a window, she knew she was done for, the coolness of the glass seeping through her skin and making her shiver.

The girl just stared at her, gaze cold and calculating. Charlotte used this time to take in more of the girl's appearance. Only then did she realize that her thumb was gone.

Charlotte started connecting the dots inside her head. The missing thumb. The deathly pale complexion. The girl who disappeared 100 years ago. "Whatever you think you've figured out, you're wrong!" she said, though there was a definite note of panic in her voice. "You're WRONG!"

And then she fled, running down the stairs, dress swishing behind her.

The desperation in her voice had been different that time, as if she was afraid someone would find her talking to Charlotte and beat her for it. Maybe that explained the large slashes in her dress. She was about to try and open the window when another voice, oddly familiar this time, rang through the room.

"I took that book from you for a reason, you know."

Charlotte whipped around to see the last person she expected to be there.

Mrs. Boyd was looming over her, deathly white and stern looking.

"Ho-How- How did-" Charlotte stammered, looking at her math teacher in surprise.

"It got me. The thing in the woods. Your book led it to the school. It doesn't like to leave evidence of its crimes."

A creak on the stairs made them both jump.

Nothing.
Except,
There was.

Creeping around silently. In fact, Charlotte only knew that it had gotten her when the world turned black.

The people in the town would say it was a wolf attack, that she had been careless.

But the scream that rang through the dark night couldn't be mistaken for anything else.
It had gotten her.
And now?
She was worse than dead.

What lurked in the woods didn't stay in the woods