

# The Haunted Forest

By Frances Little

Danny Boswell knew better than to go into those woods. Killer trees grew there, at least that's what old man Tyler had told him.

But Danny's dog Wink, a young springer spaniel that didn't know any better, took off running straight into the woods – the Haunted Forest as it was known – while chasing a rabbit. Wink usually came running back after a few minutes, but not this time. Danny thought about just leaving Wink behind; after all, darkness was falling and he was alone without a flashlight. But he thought he heard Wink yelp once or twice soon after he'd scampered in. Maybe poor little Wink was hurt. Besides, did he really believe in killer trees? Gosh, he was 11 years old and smart enough not to pay any mind to old man Tyler and his tall tales.

So he ventured in along a narrow trail, probably one made by deer. Few people, if any, went into those woods near Alvin. At least not since Phillip Howell disappeared in there 14 years ago. According to old man Tyler, Phillip had gone in to gather firewood and

never came out. Some kids said they've heard moaning late at night when fog rolls in. They say Phillip walks in there, still looking for a way out. Danny's dad said Phillip piled up a ton of gambling debts and skipped town.

But it wasn't Phillip who you had to look out for. It was the trees, old man Tyler warned.

"Oh, they look harmless enough, but they're watching you," he had told Danny a year ago in late October. "They're clumsy old things, but they watch for people walking beneath their high limbs. That's when they let loose a widow-maker, hoping to smash you. Or sometimes if the wind is strong enough, they'll aim at branch at your head, swing at you as you go by."

Danny thought of all this as he crept deeper into the dark, cold woods. The sun had disappeared now, and he could barely make out the hemlocks, spruce and maple trees. Danny whistled for Wink. "Here boy. Here boy," he called nervously. But Wink did not come.

Danny stopped and listened, hoping to hear a bark, a whimper, anything. The only sound he heard was the whoosh of the wind moving through the leafless tree limbs.

As the moon rose high in the night sky, Danny could see better. He could see the ends of the tree branches, some looking like the slender bony fingers of a skeleton. He called out again for his dog. "Wink! Come on Wink! Let's go home!"

Then Danny felt something touch his shoulder from behind. Startled, he nearly leaped out of his shoes! But it was just the gnarled limb from an oak that had brushed him as it moved in the breeze.

Danny turned to leave. He'd have to go home without Wink. But which way was out? Was it this way or that way? Danny became confused. Suddenly, nothing looked familiar to him as a lump formed in his throat and a knot grew in his stomach. He heard a cracking noise from high above and looked up to see a huge branch hurtling toward him. Danny dove to his left as the big limb crashed to the ground, narrowly missing his head.

Shaken by the close call, his heart beat furiously. Seconds later, he noticed what appeared to be a snake moving through dead leaves toward his right leg. But this was no snake. A long, slender limb thick as a soda can moved toward him like a black serpent.

Danny sprang to his feet and hopped over it. He ran terrified not knowing in which direction he was going. He could swear he heard muffled laughter, evil snickers from every direction.

"H-e-e-e-e-l-p! H-e-e-e-e-l-p!" he screamed as he ran and bounced off crusty tree trunks that left a foul-smelling slime on his hands. He thought he spotted a clearing to his right and dashed toward it. Just as he was about to reach the opening, a huge branch from a giant black ash swooped from above and gathered him up, its slender limbs curling around him like a fist. The branch lifted Danny high into the crown of the black ash as the other trees shrieked in delight. Then he saw a ghastly sight.

Hanging from another high branch of this black ash were Wink and the skeletal remains of deer, bobcats, bears, coyotes and at least one human. Something silver dangled from the wrist bone. Now he and Wink would be the next victims, left there to hang until all that was left were their bones.

Danny jerked and twisted, trying to work himself free. But as he freed an arm, the tree clutched a leg, then his waist. His strength was no match for this tree. He heard the trees laughing, and when the branch would shake him like a rag doll, they'd laugh some more.

Danny began to cry, a response that only brought more howling laughter from the trees. So he stopped and tried to think. He had to think. He realized that being lifted to the crown of the highest tree had its ad-

vantages. He could see for miles in all directions. Maybe someone could see him, too. He knew that tomorrow night was Halloween night; he knew trick-or-treaters would be out walking down the road next to the Haunted Forest. It was a Halloween tradition.

So Danny hung in the tree for the entire night. He shivered in the cold October wind and shouted occasionally toward Wink, who looked up and softly whimpered.

"Don't worry, boy. We'll get down somehow. Then we'll burn these trees until they're nothing but charred stumps."

His words made the tree angry and it shook him furiously until his teeth rattled. Danny said nothing more that night.

As the sun came up, Danny looked around. He could see all the way to Alvin. He could see cars and trucks going down the road. He could see a bright yellow school bus, his school bus. His

mom and dad would be worried sick about him. By now, he was sure, people would be out looking for him. He'd wait until he saw someone walking down the road, then he'd shout at the top of his lungs.

Sadly, nobody appeared on foot anywhere near the Haunted Forest. And the sun began to slowly set, turning day into Halloween night. Danny began to lose hope. Eventually, he'd become just another skeleton hanging in this evil, haunted tree.

Just as Danny began to quietly sob, he noticed a faint light in the distance. Not headlights from a car, but a smaller, dimmer light. He watched as it seemed to come closer. Then he heard what appeared to be laughter from afar and the klippity-klop of horse hoofs on the narrow road. As the object drew closer, he recognized it as a hay wagon filled with Halloween revelers. Excited, he'd wait for it to pass and then he'd let loose a

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