

# MIDNIGHT HOWL

by Clare Hutton



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For James and Fiona,  
who are sometimes wild animals

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# CHAPTER ONE

“You are going to *die*,” my best friend Tasha said. Her brown eyes were wide with horror.

I laughed. “You’re being ridiculous.”

Tasha made a face. “You’ll be lost out there. And I won’t survive here without you.”

We were sitting under a big oak tree on the grounds of our school, eating sandwiches from the café down the street. The sky was blue, the sun was warm, and a gentle breeze lifted strands of curly brown hair from my ponytail. It was a perfect September day.

School had been back in session for two weeks, and it seemed like Tasha and I had spent most of that time having the same conversation. Tomorrow,

I was leaving our hometown of Austin, Texas, for three months.

“You love Austin!” Tasha insisted, tucking her chin-length black hair behind her ear and making a sad face at me. “And seventh grade has already started! We need to be study partners! And plan the Halloween Dance together!” She crumpled up her empty chip bag and looked at me, lips trembling. “Marisol, you *can’t* leave. You won’t be happy in the middle of nowhere.”

Tasha is very, *very* dramatic. One day last year, she called me crying so hard she couldn’t talk. I thought she was sick, or that something had happened to her family. I rushed over to her house on my bike, but it turned out she had just gotten a bad haircut. And it wasn’t even that awful!

Tasha being her dramatic self made me reluctant to show any nerves at all: If I was the levelheaded one, I wasn’t going to admit to any doubts about leaving town. And it’s true I love Austin. It’s the best city in the world—you can walk or bike pretty much everywhere; it’s beautiful; and there are terrific restaurants, funky coffeehouses, great hiking trails, and cool music. But I wasn’t leaving forever—I’d be back in just three months. I ignored the little

tremor of nervousness in my stomach at the thought of leaving home, and took a big bite out of my sandwich.

I thought about how this totally unexpected trip had come about.

When my mom and I found out that everyone in our apartment building had to move out for a couple of months (the building needed a complete rewiring or it might catch fire — yikes!), I assumed we'd just rent another apartment in Austin.

Instead, my mom sat me down and told me she wanted to talk. I knew something big was coming.

“Marisol, I think we should go to Montana and live with Molly while they're fixing the wiring,” she had said in a rush. Molly had been my mother's college roommate a long time ago. I'd never met her, but she and my mom got together for a girls' weekend in New York every couple of years, and she always sent us Christmas cards, so I'd *heard* of her. But still, it wasn't the most obvious solution to our problem.

When my mom explained her idea a little, it made more sense: Molly and her family run a bed-and-breakfast with horses (Yay! I could learn to ride!) in a little town called Wolf Valley near Glacier National

Park. Their busy season is summer, so they have plenty of room during the fall and winter. And Molly had been begging my mom to come out for a long visit for ages. Since my mom edits an online magazine, she can work anywhere, so that part made sense, too.

“This is such an amazing opportunity to experience life somewhere else!” my mom had said excitedly. “When are we going to have a chance to do this again? Pretty soon you’re going to be in high school and won’t be able to switch schools so easily, and then you’ll go off to college. Now is the time!” Then she added casually, “And if we love it, we could even stay the rest of the school year! We’d have to help with the guests in the spring, but they don’t get really busy until summer.”

I had rolled my eyes. “Mom, this might be a great adventure, but I think I’ll be ready to come home after three months of living with strangers.”

My parents got divorced when I was eight, and my dad lives in Miami, so it didn’t make any difference to him where my mom and I were. I spend part of my Christmas and summer vacations with him, so while it would be a longer plane ride to

Miami from Montana than from Austin, it was still a plane ride.

I'm a little less spontaneous than my mom, but spending a few months in Montana *did* sound like it could be awesome. I'd always lived in Austin, aside from visits to Miami and an occasional vacation. In Montana, I could try out a totally different life! How cool was that? So I had swallowed back my nerves and told myself my mom was right. This would be a great opportunity.

But, sitting on the lawn and looking at my best friend's sad face, I knew she wasn't going to be able to even pretend to get excited for me. I also knew that admitting even the smallest case of nerves would totally set Tasha off on another rant, which would only make me more anxious. I swallowed the last bite of my sandwich and reached out to squeeze her arm reassuringly. "Tasha, it's only for a few months. I'll be back before Christmas."

Tasha moaned and flopped down on her back, closing her eyes. "I'm afraid it's the end, Marisol. After three months in the middle of Nowhere, Montana, you'll be dead from boredom. What are you going to *do* out there?"

I flopped down next to her. The warm grass still smelled like summer. “I’m going to be fine. Montana will be great. I can hike and bike and explore outdoors. There’ll be all kinds of animals, and can you imagine the night sky? We’ll be out in the country, and the stars will be amazing without city lights. I’ll be able to see things I’ve never seen before!” Austin’s an outdoorsy city — there’s a great park within walking distance of my building — but it’s not the country. And I happen to love astronomy, so I was super-excited to use the telescope my dad had given me the previous Christmas out in the country.

Tasha made a face. She’s into theater and dance and just barely tolerates the outdoors. Hiking and stargazing clearly didn’t sound all that great to her. “Maybe the school won’t let you go?” she asked hopefully.

“Nope, they’re totally on board,” I said. We go to the alternative public middle school in Austin. They’re very committed to letting everyone pursue his or her own dreams (while meeting state requirements, of course). “They’re treating it like a semester abroad.”

Tasha sighed and looked at me sadly. “I’m going to miss you.”

Of course, I knew that was what she’d really been saying all along. Still, it was nice to hear it. I hugged her. “I’ll miss you, too, Tash,” I said. “But we’ll both be fine. We’ll talk and text and e-mail. Just think of it as if I’m on a long vacation.”

I went to sleep that night with my bags packed, gazing up at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling and trying to think of it just that way: like a vacation. But as I lay in bed listening to the footsteps and laughter of passersby outside my building, I felt a cold shiver of anxiety. Now that I was alone, I had to admit that I *was* a little nervous. I mean, who wouldn’t be? Sure, stepping into the unknown might be an awesome adventure, but it was also *scary*. I drifted off to sleep uneasily, a tense knot in my stomach.

*A minute later, I was outdoors. The air was crisp and clear. I was walking along a wooded mountain path, brushing easily past the branches of wind-twisted*

trees. Dry leaves crunched under my feet. Above me, the sky darkened, but I wasn't worried about getting lost. I knew, in the way you always know things in dreams, that I was in Montana, exploring, and my heart was beating fast with excitement, not fear.

I reached a clearing in the woods and gazed upward. Cygnus, Aquila, and Ursa Major — familiar constellations — shone overhead, seeming so near I almost believed I could reach up and touch them. Just above the tops of the trees a huge, yellow full moon drifted in the sky.

Behind me, leaves rustled. I turned in time to see something disappearing into the undergrowth. Was it a cat?

I took a few steps forward. Yellow eyes gleamed at me from the bushes. A coyote? I crouched to peek beneath the bush. Whatever was in there whined — a thin, lost sound.

The breeze was rising, turning into a wind. On the wind, I heard Tasha's voice again. It was faint but clear, and much more ominous than her joking tone earlier: "You're going to die."

Suddenly, I was very afraid.

I started to run and, as I ran, I could hear something behind me, but I didn't want to look back.

*The path ended abruptly at the edge of a cliff. I wobbled at the brink, catching a dizzying glimpse of rocks and water far below before turning and looking back. I had to see what had been chasing me.*

*There was nothing there. And then I fell.*

I woke up sweaty, my heart pounding. The clock said it was 2:17 in the morning. I thought of texting Tasha — she would be asleep, but just typing out a message might calm me down — or waking up my mom. Instead, I climbed out of bed and padded over to the window.

It was quiet outside. No one was walking by the building now. The streets were mostly empty, but occasionally a car drove past, its tires swooshing on the asphalt. The streetlights were on, and the calm city they illuminated helped me relax. Slowly, my breathing returned to normal.

“Montana’s going to be great,” I said to myself, but I didn’t feel so sure.