



FOREST HORROR ANTHOLOGY

ROOTS GROW DEEP

MICHELLE ROXANNE BREDESON

ROOTS GROW DEEP
Forest Horror Anthology

Michelle Roxanne Bredeson

Also by
Michelle Roxanne Bredeson

Legacy – Bloodline Book 1
Legends – Bloodline Book 2
Sleep to Dream

Copyright © 2019 Michelle Roxanne Bredeson

This book is a work of fiction.

The characters, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to any actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Cover Design & Photography —
Michelle Roxanne Bredeson
Published by Little Dog Press • Edinburg, ND
www.michellebredeson.com
books@michellebredeson.com

ISBN: 978-1-948809-06-1

First Ebook Edition
Printed in the United States of America

Stories

1. Look Inside

2. Forest for the Trees

3. Never Leave a Job Half Done

4. We, Canopy

5. Driftwood

6. Lone September Night

7. Thousand Oaks

1. Look Inside

When it comes to moonlight
When it comes to midnight
Eyes are watching
Eyes in your foresight
Bumps in the forest
Bumps in the night
Pull up the blankets
Cover your eyes

When it comes to stories
Fables told as a child
When it comes to monsters
Your closet's open wide
Leave on the light
Blink your eyes
The stories are true
Take off your disguise

When you walk through the trees
When you bump in the night
When you make the voices
That whisper your plight
When you stomp through the closet
Open your eyes
The monsters are real
Just look inside

2. Forest for the Trees

Into the woods I go now.

To grieve, to say goodbye. To escape for all kinds of reasons. To escape from myself.

We're all hiding from something, faces buried in tricky places. We're all hiding from someone, even if it's just that twin in the mirror.

In my youth I dreamed of perfection, of an ordered world flowing with riches and control. And now I long to be back in those daydreams, back in that ignorance, back before cynicism took me as its virginal captive.

Oh, that order! Oh, that lovely white perfection!

I step into brilliant green grass weighted sideways with rain. I step off the trail, off my agenda, away from any path that brings sense or approval. I wander in and on, not looking back, not leaving a trace.

Under my feet, stable earth. Under my mind, a breakthrough to tomorrow.

Oaks steadfast and strong. Birches pointed and smiling and waiting for a challenge. Pines friendly with scented hellos.

My boot sticks in the grass, my heel suctioned back. Underbrush grabbing at my ankle, waking me up. Earth loud and savage, shaking me to life.

Live! the forest begs. For it lives.

Breathe! the forest begs. For it breathes.

Triumph! the forest begs. For it triumphs.

Stare in its face and overcome.

It is not a suggestion, but a command. The trees, the grass, the brush, the creatures stowed in beauty—they champion me on. They creak and squeak and sway in chorus. They harmonize compassion. They bring sad bones to life.

Branches sway in startling wind and it catches me also. I catch my breath and organize the horror in my mind. Real life, blooming and bleeding. Real life, skinned raw.

But in this bizarre buzzing song, this fairy tale delight, organic perspective shines through. Paced understanding, diligent reprieve.

It is not spoken but given, leeches apathy. Gifted to me. In feeling not voice, deep echoing calm. Agendas forgotten. Never alone.

Fingers stretch to meet limb, and it shudders over me.

I must go on. I must face the tomorrow that once blinded and consumed me. I must settle into contentment of my space-time in this world.

But never alone. Not anymore. That is the gift the forest gives me. Brave face, limb to palm, magnificent certainty of absolute bond.

3. Never Leave a Job Half Done

First published in 2012.

There were bloodstains on the carpet, and that was a problem for Kate. If Mother had just kept her goddamn mouth shut none of this would have happened. But mother had never been good about keeping her mouth shut.

Kate sipped a cup of coffee as she stared down at the contrast of sticky, red goo on white carpet. As irony would have it, she'd just had the carpet in the entire place professionally cleaned less than three days before. Go figure.

Mother had always been a real bitch about making trouble like this. Like how she'd shown up at all of Kate's parent-teacher conferences blitzed out of her mind. Or when she'd slept with Kate's first real boyfriend.

Shit like that, well, it just got to a person after a while.

Kate wondered if she could have the same company clean the carpets again without raising suspicion. Surely she could come up with some explanation for the bloodstains. She'd given a generous tip last time; perhaps they wouldn't say anything at all.

Kate took another drink, contemplated making a second pot. It had been a long night and sleep wouldn't be a possibility until this mess was gone.

Maybe it would be simpler to rip out the carpet. Would the blood have soaked all the way through by now? It had spilled such a short time ago.

Kate glanced at the clock. She should've been at work an hour ago. But no, Mother had to go and cost her a sick day. Mother had always been a real bitch about making trouble like this.

Would a tile floor be better once the carpet was out? It sure

as hell would be easier to clean. Not that Kate planned on this happening again, but, well, a person could never be too sure.

“Kate?”

She finished the last of her coffee and glanced over her shoulder. “Hmm?”

Mother flashed her checkered smile. “The body’s all taken care of. I buried it in the woods, behind Grandpa’s old cabin. Deep.”

“Good.”

“Now what?”

Kate grimaced at the bloody mess once more. “Now we have to do something about this carpet.”

4. We, Canopy

We see. We, Canopy.

We live, we breathe. We watch with clarity. We, Canopy.

We, in the silent of nowhere. We, in the solitude of alone.
We, Canopy.

We feel determined footsteps through our footbeds. They are new, the steward. The caretaker of our land.

They are new to us, and we to them.

With sunrise comes the steward again. Anxious wanderings become worn paths. Each step, connection. Each morning, love.

They, intelligent great ape lost in their mind. We, centuries old forest of birch, oak, and pine. They, newborn on this earth, fresh and lovely. We, aged and worn and undetected. We, Canopy, static but not forgotten.

They leak tears the first few times, emotions running down pinkened cheeks. Emotions soaking frail flesh. We are clothed in our own withstanding armor, We, Canopy.

They reach for leafless branches and we linger back, love shared among fragile souls. We feel their hurt. We cry their tears. We, Canopy.

They are bent but not broken, jaded but not cut in half. They keep coming back, day after day, feeling it all but still going on in the still of We.

We, Canopy.

Day after day, step after step, in us and through us and on our behalf. Day after day, storming among the thick of it. Day after day, cheering on toward a lighter side.

We have watched many, We, Canopy. We have watched and expected and shaken our heads. We have given the benefit of the doubt, we have given our flesh. We have given all of ourselves, but never have we gotten back. Never have we known anything

so wonderful until they.

They, broken and spectacular. They, strong and resolved.

They, an empathetic mark on our heart.

They, in love with We. We, Canopy. They, smitten and scarred. They, alive and unyielding. They, ready to act on hurt and hate.

But We cannot let them do that. We, Canopy.

We whisper on this morning's walk. We whisper deepest support and secrets. We speak next of what must be done.

What they must do.

And we wait. We, Canopy.

And there they are, in hazy delight. Dow-eyed and gorgeous. They and their dark scar, their thief in the night.

They, stunning and adored. And you...

We invite you in. Open up, wide and ready, bated breath. We tempt and taunt and bat our lashes.

We kiss and tell. We, Canopy.

We want what we want and we will take it. We will have it. We will indulge but not apologize. We will rule.

We, Canopy.

We hold back at first. We tiptoe and sweettalk and whisper in ears. We kiss necks and caress lower backs.

And then, just when you feel you are free of us, just when you feel you are safe, we'll come for your heart. We'll cut it right out. We'll tear you right down.

We'll hear you scream and continue right on. We'll love every second of it. And when we're good and done with you we'll eat you right up and let the earth swallow you whole.

We'll suffocate you the way you suffocated them. We'll take away your breath and pretend it's what you wanted all along.

Now we lure you deep in our dark, We, Canopy. We hypnotize and touch and tease. And in the same breath, you are gone. You are nothing. All that's left is them and We.

We, Canopy.

5. Driftwood

First published in 2009.

Joan had been excited for her one-year wedding anniversary, excited to go on Jason's sailing trip, excited to brave the water just the two of them—until the boat sprang a fatal leak in the middle of their third night.

Thinking back now, Joan couldn't remember what had caused it, or how the boat had disappeared under the surface so fast. All she knew for certain was that both Jason and the boat were long gone. A miraculous four-foot chunk of driftwood was now her only salvation.

Joan squinted, scanning calm waves. There was nothing in the sky, and only dark water below. No food, no drinking water, no sign of life for miles.

Joan was nothing more than God's sick joke, alone with her piece of driftwood.

She tried to remember how long a human could survive without food and water as she clung to the lonely log. Three days without food? A week without water? She searched for recollections of all those survival shows Jason had forced her to watch, but she couldn't remember anything for sure.

She told herself to stop crying, that her body couldn't afford the tears, but that just made her start all over again. Where had Jason gone? How could he have abandoned her so easily?

She fingered the diamond ring on her left hand, would've traded it for any sign of life. Despite her prayers, her tears, her pleadings with God, she remained alone, drifting.

Joan blinked and realized the day had escaped her. A sliver

of silver moon hung in the sky, just low enough to leave small specs of light dancing on the water. She couldn't see much, but enough to know she was still alone.

She whispered a thankful prayer that she hadn't lost her piece of driftwood.

If it was dark now, several hours must have passed. Her mother would be expecting a call over the radio. When it didn't come, she'd send help.

At least that's what Joan wanted to believe.

She tried to kick away the deep ache in her legs, but it continued up her torso and through her arms. It was more than pain, more than thirst, and there was no appeasing it.

She rested her cheek on the log, closed her eyes for just a moment. "You've kept me safe so far, haven't you?"

Yes, something whispered back.

Joan lifted her eyes to the water but was instead captivated by her own left hand. It had been resting on her driftwood since she'd found it, and the skin looked as if it had somehow changed color. The top of her hand, her thumb and fingers had all shifted in tones of browns and deep greens to resemble the log.

She tried to raise her hand to examine it, but her arm wouldn't budge from its place on the log. Joan ignored the panic in her chest as she planted her right hand around her left wrist and pulled. Her hand didn't come free as she'd hoped, but instead the exertion forced the log and her body under the water.

Joan struggled for the surface, but it seemed hopeless with her left hand stuck to the driftwood. She tried to grip onto it with her right hand, but it was too slippery. Her lungs were out of air, her entire body throbbed in pain, and nothing was working.

Joan closed her eyes, and simply gave up.

And that's when she floated to the surface. She gasped as air sailed down her windpipe, reviving her with life. She took in several greedy mouthfuls as she stared down at her left hand. The dappled color had spread up to her wrist and over her forearm.

“What the hell...?”

Not only was her entire arm changing, but her once diamond wedding band had also transformed. As if she was becoming part of the driftwood.

Joan shrieked, but there was no one to hear her. This wasn't happening—couldn't be possible.

She was hallucinating. This was all just a dream; she'd see that once the sun was in the sky again. She'd wake up and everything would be okay.

Joan rested her cheek on the driftwood, looked over the monstrosity her insanity had created, and closed her eyes.

Joan was greeted by bright white light digging into her retinas. But the sun wasn't enough to blind her from her petrified left hand. Her vision, her reality, waved through her mind as she stared over wooden fingers.

I can't... move them. Her brain sent signals to her hand, but they stopped at her shoulder. There was no feeling, no sensation whatsoever.

Joan tried to lift her head, but it was stuck, too. “What the hell is going on?” she yelped as she gripped her right hand onto the driftwood. If she was going to die, it wouldn't be like this.

Joan braced her body, scissor-kicked at the water, and pushed at the log with all her might.

An ear-splitting crack erupted as pain exploded throughout the right side of Joan's face. She didn't realize what had happened until vomit found its way up her throat and onto the piece of her mangled face that remained attached to the driftwood.

She spewed out a mouthful of bile, but couldn't take her eyes off the missing piece of her face. It was splintered, half covered in blood and flesh. Joan resisted the urge to vomit again as she brought her right hand up to her cheek.

Her face felt like a mess of wood and tissue. She forced her

fingers to probe the extent of the damage, and that's when she realized her right eye was missing. Part of the socket remained, a soft C-curve above her nose, but the rest was gone. Now a part of the driftwood.

She gagged, her gaze fixed on the driftwood. Reality bent further as the log seemed to absorb the bite of her face it had just taken. She watched with intent as her cheek and eye slowly disappeared into the smooth surface and became a part of the very thing that had kept her alive all this time.

She tried to swallow, but blood poured over what remained of her lips. She wanted to cuss, but there wasn't enough of her mouth left to form the words.

Joan's vision swam black. She refused to wake up to this again. *Jason, I love you*, she thought as she plunged her head underwater and let darkness come one final time.

The lone piece of driftwood floated among gentle waves, content and freshly fed. It could surely live off this meal until the next came along. And another *would* come along—the water always made sure of that.

6. Lone September Night

First published in 2009.

It was the bloodcurdling scream that woke me from a deep sleep early the morning before my seventeenth birthday. My best friend Janie, her twin brother Wes, and I had stayed up much too late the night before telling ghost stories around their backyard fire pit. We'd be starting our senior year of high school in just two days, but considering I'd fallen in love with Wes over the course of the sweltering North Dakota summer, school was the last thing on my mind.

Especially once I heard that first scream.

"Haley, wake up!" Janie ordered as she used her foot to jab at my leg. "Did you hear that?"

"What?" I moaned into my pillow.

"Duh, the loud scream."

"It's probably just Wes watching another movie."

"He fell asleep on the couch before we came upstairs, remember?"

"So? He probably woke up—"

Another scream, louder, closer, broke through the air. Janie clutched onto my arm, digging her nails in my skin. Now I was awake. I sat up and met her gaze in the dark room.

"What was that?" I whispered.

"I don't know," she whispered back. "My parents are gone, so it's just the three of us out here."

And no one else for miles, I remembered. I'd always loved the solitude of Janie's farmhouse, but not tonight. "It has to be Wes—playing a trick or something."

"I don't think so," she assured me. "He wouldn't do anything to scare you."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," I said as my eyes adjusted to the dark. "Remember last year on my birthday when he put

that wild raccoon in my car? It's definitely Wes."

"The screams didn't even sound like him," Janie said. "Besides..."

"Besides what?" I asked as I forced myself from the bed. I grabbed a hoodie from the floor and slipped it over my pajamas. "I'm going downstairs to scare the crap out of him. Care to join me?"

A third scream found its way to my ears, shrill and high-pitched. It definitely didn't sound like a guy.

"That wasn't Wes," Janie confirmed as she jumped from the bed. "I told you he wouldn't scare you—not when he likes you so much."

"What did you say?" I asked, wondering if I'd heard her right.

She grabbed my arm again. "Nothing, I wasn't supposed to say anything. So if it's not Wes, who is it?"

I looked to her bedroom door. "I don't know, I... Do you think Wes is okay? He's downstairs alone."

An alarming thud sounded right outside the door. I let out the first shriek, and Janie mimicked my cry. We both jumped as the door flew open.

"Are you okay?" Wes asked as he flipped on the light.

I let out my breath as I looked him over. He was bearing a shotgun, and must have forgotten his shirt downstairs.

"If that was you, I'm going to kill you!" Janie cried as she rushed up to slap his shoulder.

"That wasn't me," he said, his gaze flitting to me. "You all right, Haley?"

"You *swear* it wasn't you?" I drilled him.

"I thought *you two* were playing a trick on *me*," he countered. "You know, payback for the raccoon, and the firecrackers in your locker that one time, and—"

"If it wasn't us, and it wasn't *you*, someone has to be outside," Janie said.

"Is it a twin thing that brought us to the same conclusion?"

Wes teased, nodding toward the shotgun in his hand. “Stay here. I’ll go check it out.”

“No,” I protested, reaching for his arm. It wasn’t something I usually did, wasn’t a gesture I generally made, but here I was now, fingers wrapping around his wrist. “I mean, you shouldn’t go alone. What if someone’s out there?”

Wes looked me in the eye, and that was enough to drive my fingers away. “Haley, someone probably *is* out there. And if they are, they might need our help. I’ll be right back.”

“*No*,” Janie said this time. “That’s what they always say in the movies right before they’re killed by the escaped mental patient or vampire or whatever.”

Wes rolled his eyes. “Tell you what—if I find Dracula out there, I’ll make sure to get his autograph. I’ll be right back, promise.”

I grabbed Janie’s hand and dragged her out into the hall right after her brother.

“So you’re coming with me then?” he asked.

I flashed a crooked smile. “If Dracula’s out there, I don’t want to miss him.”

He let out a laugh as he led the way downstairs. “We’re most likely to find Kyle out there. Best friend my ass. He was supposed to go camping with his cousin tonight, but he might’ve made a detour since he knows Mom and Dad are out of town.”

“You think Kyle’s playing a prank on us?” Janie asked as we hit the first floor.

“I think someone is,” Wes told her. “We’re in the middle of nowhere. Nothing ever happens in the middle of nowhere.”

I hoped he was right as we crept toward the front door. I watched as Wes reached for the knob, but I grabbed his hand before he had the chance to open it.

“Haley?” he whispered, his gaze groping over mine.

“Just... be careful,” I said, and let go.

He opened the door. “Stay inside,” he advised as he stepped onto the large front porch. I wanted to follow anyway, but Janie

kept me beside her just inside the doorframe.

Wes made a circle around the yard and returned frowning. “Hello!” he called out, his voice echoing through quiet night. There was only silence in return. “Kyle? Is that you...? Look, I told you Haley won’t go out with you, so if you’re trying to get her attention—”

A scream erupted through the night again, and Wes had the gun cocked in half a second. He cursed, his back rigid as he made another sweep of the yard. I peered out from behind him, but only noted the empty gravel road and blackness of pine trees surrounding the farmyard.

“Back in the house, now,” Wes insisted.

“No,” Janie told him. “We’re staying with you—”

“Damn it, Janie, just do what I’m asking,” he snapped. “Go into Dad’s office and get your and Mom’s handguns from the safe. There should be loaded clips in there, too. *Now!*”

She nodded and pulled me back through the living room, dining room, and into her father’s office. I watched as her fingers found the combination on the gun safe lock. She pulled out two handguns and gave one to me. All those summers of target practice flooded back into confident fingers.

Wes was still on the porch when we returned, frozen.

“Is a gun really necessary?” Janie asked.

“I hope to hell not, but someone is out there and I’m pretty certain it’s not Kyle. He wouldn’t take too well to a loaded gun aimed his way.”

“Then what should we do?” I asked.

“For now, wait,” he spoke without looking back. “I think the screams are coming from the east, but with the wind I can’t be sure. You okay with that gun in your hand, Haley?”

“You know it,” I answered.

“It’ll be just like target practice,” he told me. “Remember all those Coke cans you obliterated? It’ll be just like that—”

There was another shriek, closer this time. From the east, like Wes had said. We all turned that direction, straining to see

through the dark.

“Maybe we should go out there?” Janie suggested. “Coyotes usually keep their distance, but that doesn’t mean anything. What if someone was out for a walk? What if they got hurt and need our help?”

“No one we know would be out walking at three o’clock in the morning,” Wes answered. “Besides, anyone around here would know this is our farm. They’d be calling out Dad’s name or something.”

“What if it isn’t someone from around here?” I asked. “What if it’s someone passing through?”

“On a minimum maintenance gravel road in the middle of the night? I doubt it. Besides, a car hasn’t gone by all night.”

“Okay, so if it’s nothing obvious then what is it, Wes?” I begged. “Because you’re right—this is pretty much the gold standard for the middle of nowhere. Someone’s out there and they could be hurt. We shouldn’t be pointing guns at them. I should call my dad—”

“We don’t need a doctor,” Wes interrupted.

“Well, we should call *someone*.”

“Like who?” Janie asked. “The Sherriff?”

“We’re not calling Sherriff Johnson out here for no reason,” Wes said.

“No reason?” I asked. “You’re the one pointing a gun at nothing! I’m calling him.”

“Wait,” Wes sighed, lowering the shotgun. “You’re right, okay? But what if it’s nothing?”

“It’s something,” Janie said. “Someone was screaming. We need to call someone. I’ll call Dad—”

“You’re not calling Dad,” Wes growled. “It’s their nineteenth anniversary, Janie.”

“Then we should call Haley’s dad.”

Wes looked to me. “Do you really think we should call him?”

“Yes, I do,” I said. “Someone could be hurt.”

“Fine,” he conceded. “I’ll stay here if you two want to go.”

“Okay,” I said, and led the way into the kitchen. Janie set her gun on the counter and poured herself a glass of water. I kept my gun in one hand as I picked up the cordless phone.

“There’s no dial tone,” I said, turning to Janie.

“No dial tone?” she asked. “You sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“Here, use this,” she said as she picked up Wes’s cell from the counter. She thumbed in his code and handed over the device.

I took it from her and punched in my home number, realizing it was saved in his contacts.

“Well?” Janie asked.

“It’s not ringing.”

“What do you mean, it’s not ringing?”

I put the phone up to her ear. “It’s not ringing.”

“Maybe you did it wrong,” she said, and hung it up before she typed in the number again.

I rolled my eyes. “I know how to use a phone, Janie.”

“Yeah, but it’s not yours so you never... It’s not ringing.”

“Yeah, like I said. My cell’s in my purse in the living room. I’ll get it.” I stepped through the house, Janie at my heels, and dug out my phone. “Of course.”

“Of course what?”

“Dead battery, and I left my charger at home.”

“My cell’s upstairs.”

“What’s taking so long?” Wes called from the porch.

“Phones aren’t working!” Janie called back.

“What?” he asked as he joined us in the living room. “What do you mean they’re not working?”

“The landline’s dead, and your phone’s broken or something—it won’t even ring.”

“And mine has a dead battery,” I said as I threw it on the coffee table.

“I used my phone just a few hours ago,” Wes said, heading

for the kitchen. Janie and I followed and watched as he picked up the cell and brought it to his ear. “If this is some kind of joke, I’m so over it.”

“We’re not trying to trick you,” I told him. “Our phones won’t work and someone or something’s outside.”

“Have we tried all the phones?” Wes asked.

“We haven’t tried Janie’s. It’s upstairs.”

“On your charger?” he wondered, not waiting for an answer as he rushed out of the room.

“Yes,” Janie called after him. She looked to me, and added, “You can tell me if you two are behind this.”

“We’re not in on anything,” I told her. “At this point, I wish we were.”

“Your phone’s dead, too!” Wes called from the staircase. He returned wearing a sweatshirt, the shotgun still in his hand. He handed the phone to his sister. “It’s clearly been charging, but it won’t turn on. Screw this, we’re heading into town. We’ll call the Sherriff from your house, Haley.”

“Sure,” I said as he headed for the garage door. The lights went out just as he reached for its handle.

Janie yelped, clawing for my arm.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Wes said. “The power going out doesn’t mean anything. Let’s just get in the truck. I think there’s a flash-light around here somewhere.” On his last word, a filmy beam of light filled the room. “You’re going to be okay. I’m not going to let anything happen to you.” He caught my gaze and emphasized, “Either of you.” He opened the door to the garage, walked inside. “Can you see to get in the truck?”

“Yeah, I think so,” I told him as he opened the passenger door. “Shouldn’t the interior light have come on?”

“Yes,” he sighed as he climbed inside the cab. I craned my neck and watched as he slid the key into the ignition. “Shit.”

“It’s not starting?” Janie asked.

“It’s not doing anything,” he confirmed.

“Is the battery dead?” I asked.

“Maybe. Let’s try my car.” He reached out and took my hand in his, and I jumped. “Sorry—just thought this would be best if we’re heading outside. I don’t want to lose track of either of you.”

“Sure,” I said, squeezing his fingers as I laced my free arm through Janie’s. I took in my breath as we spilled out the door. “It sure is dark without the yard light.”

“You’ve got that right,” he said as we reached the car he shared with Janie. He turned off the flashlight as he slid into the driver’s seat, put the key in the ignition.

“Well?” I asked, glancing around the dark yard. The sliver of moon and clouded sky offered little insight as to what may be looming in the trees. “Wes?”

He let out a string of curses. “I wish I knew what the hell was going on.”

“It’s not starting?” Janie asked.

Wes climbed out of the car and slammed the door. “Shit!”

“Hey,” I said as I took his hand again. He seemed to calm as I ran my thumb across his fingers. “We’re going to be okay. Doesn’t your dad have a CB radio in the shop?”

He let out a metered sigh. “Yeah, he does. I’ll check it out.”

“You will,” I agreed. “And we’re coming with you.”

He turned on the flashlight and waved it across the farmyard as we hurried to the shop. There was no movement, no sound. As far as I could tell, we were as good as alone.

The shop door creaked as Wes swung it open. Janie jumped beside me. I clung to them both as we stepped inside the crowded shop.

“Where’s the CB?” I questioned, making sure I kept my voice cool.

“In the back corner here,” Wes said as we crept along.

“The CB should work, right?” Janie asked. “I mean, if anything should work the CB should work.”

“Hope so,” Wes said as we reached a long oak table. He let go of my hand and gave me the flashlight, then propped his gun

against the wall beside him. I searched his gaze as I held the light over the table. He was trying not to show it, but I knew he was just as terrified as I was.

“Well?” Janie asked as Wes fiddled with the CB.

“Give me a second, okay?”

“Hey, Janie,” I said as I wrapped my arm around her shoulders. “Did you tell Wes about your date with Seth last Friday night?”

“You went out with Seth Jackson?” Wes snickered.

I grinned, thankful I’d managed to lighten the mood.

“It was just one date,” Janie told him.

“Liar,” I quipped.

“You do realize he’s going off to college tomorrow,” Wes said. “You’re not going to see him again until Thanksgiving, if that.”

“Nice, relationship advice from the master,” she said as he kept working on the radio. “When was the last time you had a date exactly? Oh, that’s right—prom.”

“It’s not for lack of options,” he assured her. His fingers moved over the same buttons again and again, but the damned thing just wouldn’t come to life. He looked to Janie, then me. “Nothing. I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to do.”

“We haven’t heard anything in what, a few minutes?” Janie said. “Maybe whoever’s out there is okay now—maybe they don’t need us.”

We jumped in unison as a scream rattled the air.

“I think we should go back into the house,” I told them. “At least we have cover there.”

“And my gun, which I left on the counter,” Janie said.

“Good plan,” Wes said. “We should stay close.”

My heart raced as I readied myself to face open night again.

“The good news is it will be dawn in just a couple hours,” Wes said as he reached the shop door. He took in a deep breath before walking back into vacant night. I had to force oxygen into my lungs as I followed his lead. “And then it’s just one more day

until your birthday, Haley.”

“Yeah, my birthday,” I said, my gaze flitting every which way as we walked. There was nothing but the black void of trees and absolute haunting silence.

“Are we all still going to the movies?” Wes questioned. “I mean, is that still the plan?”

“Yep,” I mumbled.

“You don’t have a date or something instead, do you? Haley?”

“Oh, I,” I said, my gaze landing on him for a moment before I turned back to the trees. “No, just you. I mean, I’m just hanging out with Janie and you.”

“We should go to your house after,” Wes said, keeping calm though his posture told otherwise. “We could play Monopoly, or I could beat you at Tetris again.”

“You’ve never beat me at Tetris,” I reminded him as we reached the door.

He grinned as he turned the knob, but: “It’s locked. The house is *never* locked.” He grabbed a key hiding under the doormat and shoved it into the lock, but it refused to open. “Shit, it’s not working.”

“What do you mean, it’s not working?” Janie whined. She stepped in front of her brother and twisted the handle again and again, but it wouldn’t budge. Finally, she stomped down her foot and growled out her confusion.

“Hey,” I said. “This isn’t the only door. We’ll try another and we’ll be inside in no time.”

“Let’s try the back,” Wes suggested.

I scanned the yard as we walked. I didn’t see anything; not one single solitary movement. I clenched my teeth, waiting for the next scream. It was just a matter of time before it happened again. Right?

Wes tried the door, but I figured it was locked before he had a chance to confirm. Even so, he struggled with it until the key broke off in the lock. Janie started crying then. Small whimpers

at first which soon turned into dramatic sobs.

“Well,” I said, calculating our options. “Where else can we go?”

Wide-eyed, Wes shook his head. “The doors won’t open.”

“I know,” I replied.

“The phones aren’t working.”

“I know.”

“The cars won’t start.”

“Wes, I know,” I said as I rested my hand on his arm. “But I need you right now, okay? Where else can we go?”

He sucked in his breath as I comforted Janie. “I don’t know if it’d be safe.”

I let out a laugh. “Like we’re safe right now?”

He nodded. “There’s a small loft in the shop. If we go up there, we’d be trapped, but at least we’d know if someone were after us.”

“Then we’ll go there. Do you have any more ammunition?”

“My dad has some stashed in the shop.”

“Is there anything else in there? Blankets or anything...? Wesley!”

“Yes, I’m sorry—yes.”

“Show me,” I urged.

“Do you really think that’s our best option?”

“I think it’s our only option,” I told him. “You’re right, the sun will be up in just a couple hours. We can hold out until then.”

“We don’t even know what’s happening, Haley.”

I looked once again to Janie, who was still crying. “Agreed, but we can’t keep running around like this all night. We have to get somewhere stable.”

He wiped his brow with the back of his hand. “Okay, let’s try the shop again. Maybe we’ll have better luck there.”

“Let’s go,” I said, and led the way this time. Adrenaline replaced horror with each step. I knew that even if Janie and Wes weren’t strong enough to make it through the night, I had to be. Wes was right, none of us knew what was happening, but we

could still find a way to survive it.

“Wes, the flashlight,” I said as I reached the door to the shop. It was still open, and hopefully as quiet as we’d left it.

He stepped in front of me and scanned the light over the small space. I noted the riding lawn mower this time, and the ’72 Mustang that Wes’s dad had been restoring for the past three years. Nothing seemed out of place, but that didn’t mean anything.

“Come on,” Wes said as he rushed across the room to a large tool chest. He pulled out two boxes of shotgun shells before stepping over to a ladder. “I’ll go first.”

“No, I should go,” I said.

“No way. What if someone’s up there?”

“What if they are?” I countered, safely stowing my gun before I grabbed the ladder.

“Wait!” Wes cried in a hushed whisper.

“What?” I asked.

“Take the flashlight,” he said as he handed it to me.

“Thanks,” I said, and secured it in my left hand before I grabbed onto the ladder once more.

“Wait!” Wes called again.

“What?” I snapped.

“Haley, I...”

“What, Wes? I’m kind of in the middle of something here.”

“I want to take you to the movies on your birthday.”

“We’re already going to the movies on my birthday,” I reminded him as I began to climb the ladder.

“No, I know. I mean, I want to take you to the movies just the two of us.”

I paused, my heart now racing for much different reasons. “Like just me and you and not your sister?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay,” I said, and continued up the ladder. I hesitated as I reached the top, sure I was going to find some kind of monster. I summoned all the courage I had and raised the flashlight to scan

the small loft. Empty. “Janie, come up!” I called as I crawled onto the wooden floor. I peered over the edge and stared down at my best friend. “It’s safe, promise.”

“You’ll be fine,” Wes encouraged her.

She nodded, and started up the ladder.

I shone the flashlight down on her, but my gaze soon fixed on Wes. He’d walked away from the ladder, and I couldn’t make out what he was doing. “Wes?”

“Blankets, remember?” he said, stepping back to the ladder just as Janie reached the top.

I grabbed onto her arms and hoisted her up next to me. She fell into a heap and clutched onto my arm. I peered down from the loft, giving Wes as much light as I could.

My stomach was in knots as I watched him struggle to get up the ladder with an armful of blankets and the shotgun. “Hey, you doing okay?”

“I’m fine,” he muttered.

“This was a really great idea, Wes. You always were too smart for your own good.”

“You’re just saying that so I won’t drop anything—”

Another bloodcurdling scream rang through the air, echoed off thin shop walls. Wes lost his grip on the ladder and fell to the floor in a loud thud, managing to keep hold of the gun. He scrambled to his feet and started up the ladder again.

“Wes, if you’re not up here in five seconds, I’m going to kick your ass!” I growled. I grabbed the gun from his hands as soon as I could reach it, then the blankets. I set them down next to Janie as Wes joined us.

I threw my arms around his neck and held him in a tight hug. His arms circled around me as he buried his face in my hair. “Are you okay?” I asked, refusing to let go of him just yet.

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

I squeezed onto him for a few moments more before pulling away. “Did it sound closer this time?”

“Yeah,” Wes confirmed as I turned to Janie.

I shook out one of the blankets and draped it around her shoulders. She'd stopped crying now, exhaustion painting her face. She wrapped herself up and leaned back against the wall, closing her eyes.

Wes leaned over the ladder and swept the flashlight across the shop floor. "Nothing."

"Good."

"Honestly, the screams aren't what's freaking me out. The house being locked—"

"I know, Wes."

He took in his breath as he sat up next to me. "And the phones and the cars..."

"The important thing is we're all okay."

"I know, but... What is it, Haley? I mean, seriously, what could it be?"

I reached for his hand and held it in mine. "I don't know."

"Something's out there."

"You're right, but I don't know what we should do about it."

Wes let go of my hand and reached across me to grab the shotgun. He checked to make sure the safety was on before he set it down next to him. He settled in right beside me, his shoulder touching mine.

"Janie?" Wes asked, looking to his sister. "You okay?"

She gave a slight nod, her eyes still closed.

I ran my hand along her shoulder before resting it on top of her arm. "We're going to be all right. Your brother's taking good care of us."

Wes smirked. "Haley, I'm not..."

"You're not what?" I asked.

"We're stuck in the shop loft in the middle of the night. I have absolutely no idea what to do next. I mean, I should have handled this better."

"Handled it better how?" I asked. "Wes, you've done everything right."

"We shouldn't have left the house."

“We didn’t know what would happen when we did.”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry I let you down.”

“You didn’t let anyone down, Wes... Should we turn off the flashlight? We should save the battery.”

“Good call,” he said, and extinguished the light.

I blinked a few times as my eyes adjusted to the dark. Pitch black soon faded into blotchy coal.

“Can you see anything?” Wes asked as he inched closer.

“Not really. You?”

“No,” he said as he brushed his fingertips over the top of my hand. “I don’t hear anything. Do you?”

“No, nothing.”

“If the screams are so far away, what do you think happened to the phones and the cars? Who do you think locked the doors to the house?”

A shiver raced up my spine as I speculated, “Maybe it’s better we don’t know.”

“Maybe,” he said as he wrapped his fingers around mine.

I moved my hand until it was firm in his. “Wes, I’m freaked out.”

“Me, too.”

I rested my head on his shoulder, scanning the dark shop. Just because we couldn’t hear a scream didn’t mean we were alone. “Are you ready to go back to school?”

He let out a laugh. “Am I ready to go back to school? Yeah, I don’t know. I made a lot of money working construction this summer. I’d honestly rather do that.”

“I guess,” I sighed.

“Do you know what you’re getting for your birthday?”

“No, what’d you get me?”

He squeezed my hand, and I saw a smile on his face. “That’s a surprise, Haley. You’ll just have to wait.”

I managed a grin as I looked to the shop floor. There was still no movement, no sound. Whoever had been screwing with us before seemed content to leave us alone for now.

“Janie?” I asked. She didn’t answer, and I didn’t push it.

“I’m really proud of you, Haley,” Wes said. “For how well you’re keeping it together.”

“I have to make sure Janie’s okay—and you. I have to make sure you’re okay, too.”

“Well, for now I’m okay, but the sun hasn’t come up yet.”

“I think whoever’s out there isn’t hurt,” I determined. “The screams would have been more consistent, don’t you think? They’re too far apart, too sporadic.”

“Maybe you’re right. So what do you think it is then? Who would do this?”

“No one we know—no one from town.”

“I still can’t figure out why the house is locked. I mean, the cars and the phones... That’s weird, yes, but the house just... The house just baffles me.”

“Then let’s not think about it,” I said. “Let’s think about anything except that.”

“Okay, here’s a question. Why didn’t you tell me Janie’s dating Seth?”

“Because I didn’t know it was my responsibility to keep you updated on her love life.”

“It’s not, I guess, but you’re my friend, too. It wouldn’t hurt to keep me informed about what’s going on with you two.”

“I’ll try to remember that.”

“Like did you date anyone this summer?”

“What?” I asked, heat filling my cheeks.

“You and Grady hung out a few times.”

“You think I’d go out with Grady? I guess you don’t really know me.”

“So you don’t have a boyfriend or anything then?”

“No,” I confirmed. “I don’t have a boyfriend. I’m sure you’d know if I did. News travels pretty fast around here.”

“I suppose it does.”

“What should we do when the sun comes up?” I asked. “Or have you thought about it?”

“Walk to the Henderson farm and hope their phones are working?”

“What time do you think it is?”

“Four maybe?”

“This is the longest night of my life.”

“I know what you mean.”

“No offense, but I wish Janie would’ve stayed at my house tonight,” I told him.

“Yeah, I kind of wish I’d stayed there, too,” he agreed.

“What movie do you want to see?” I asked, meeting his eyes through the dark.

“It’s your birthday. Shouldn’t you pick?”

“You’ll go see whatever I pick? No matter what it is?”

“Yep.”

I smiled. “You must really like me then.”

“Yep.”

It hit me what I’d said, what he’d said, and my gaze fell back to the shop floor. It was still quiet, and for some reason that scared me. I couldn’t help but to wonder what was going on outside in the farmyard and woods beyond that we weren’t privy to.

“Haley?”

“Yeah?”

“You okay? I mean, you’re quiet.”

“There’s just a lot to think about tonight.”

“I guess there is. Look, about your birthday.”

“What about it?” I asked.

“If you don’t want to do something with me—I mean *just* me—I understand.”

I looked over his features, which I’d come to think were so beautiful in the past few months. He wasn’t just my best friend’s brother, he was my other best friend. He was the person I wanted to go to every movie with, no matter what it was, just the two of us.

“Haley?”

I took in a deep breath as I decided to kiss him. What did

I have to lose? I brought my lips to his and changed things between us forever.

Wes kissed me back, and I pulled away.

“I’m... Are you alright?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

We sat in silence for a moment. I wasn’t quite sure what to do next. This was what I’d wanted, but I was also overwhelmed. Plus, what would Janie think?

“Haley, look I—” Wes started, and another random scream flooded the air.

Wes and I jumped together, though Janie was still. Maybe the shock had drained her.

“I’m scared,” I admitted in a hushed whisper.

“I think that’s all this is—someone trying to scare us,” Wes replied.

“It’s working.”

Wes wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “The sun should be up soon. We’re almost through the night.”

“Can we keep talking? About anything? I’ll feel better if we keep talking.”

“Sure,” Wes said, and indulged me with his plans for the coming year and how he thought he’d work construction again next summer. I held onto him as I listened, waiting for the next scream.

But the night was good to us after that, and the sun came up without any further disturbances. We waited until full daylight before we woke Janie. Wes crept down from the loft first, shotgun in hand, and made sure all was clear before we joined him.

Sun blazed in the sky as we walked outside. Wes tried his car and the engine turned over right away. Whatever had troubled us in the night seemed now long gone.

We piled in the car and sped away from the farm without so much as a word. Wes drove straight to the Sheriff’s station, and though our story seemed farfetched, an investigation was

launched. But even after a thorough search throughout the property, nothing was ever found.

Janie didn't sleep at her house again for over a month, and it took Wes almost as long. He still sleeps with a loaded shotgun under the bed, and I can't blame him. Every so often I ask him what he thinks that night was, what really went on out there, but he never has an answer.

I still don't have any answers either, but I am certain of one thing—I hope I never again encounter the faceless monsters that haunted us that lone September night.

7. Thousand Oaks

I walked into the woods and asked the trees what to write. In response, the forest whispered its name, Thousand Oaks.

Sometimes the only way out is through.

She circles around us again, the one we've seen before. The one we're getting to know.

We call to her in recognition, but she isn't attuned to hear us yet. It takes time, learning the language of our roots. It takes study, understanding what we whisper back.

Atmosphere is a lost cause, but we give it freely. The stage is set and she falls in line again over deer-carved trails.

We hear her tears of mourning. We cry back ourselves. She does not yet hear us, but it is coming. She will awaken to us and there will be no going back.

She curses human heartache. She shakes her fist at apathy.

It's wind that makes us grow. Not just her; not just us. Malevolent unseen force, pushing outside barriers and inner limits. Resilience unlocked in formulaic pressure.

Push. Push back.

Song of the trees.

Wind in the willows when she next stops to listen.

She opens her eyes and circles back round us again. Another pass. Another smiling hello.

We beg her back. Footsteps in groove again, nowhere to wander now but down this same path.

We don't want to let her go. We don't want to turn her over to dark fate night.

We hold in our breath.

Soft whisper, flourishing rest.

Whole person, new again. Gorgeous and rebirthed. Fresh

trail through the woods. Organic start.

But here is the same track again. Record starting over.
Notches of time well-worn and swollen with circumstance.

The illusion of control is a bright cherry morning.

Weathered paths or new beginnings. Perspective. Chaos.

Sometimes the only way out is through. How is irrelevant.
Find the path and cycle round, blind.



Michelle Roxanne Bredeson
is a
Writer + Graphic Designer.

She resides in
The Middle of Nowhere,
North Dakota.

For more information,
please visit
www.michellebredeson.com