

HIDDEN TRAILS

by
LEIF J. ERICKSON

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Baskı ve Cilt
Fom Baskı Teknolojileri
Şerifali Mah. Şehit Sokak No: 16/1 Ümraniye/İstanbul
Tel: (0216) 337 37 96
Matbaa Sertifika No: 31613

Chapter 1

I stood on the edge of wonder. What lies ahead in the mythical dreams of the forest? Who might we find as we explore her secrets? Stories tell us of witches and warlocks, fairies and imps, trolls and unicorns, or maybe just of ourselves. The fog surrounds us; the symphony of nature envelops our ears. We find what our hearts truly desire. We hear, but we don't listen. We fear what the lyrics might say. The trees are skyscrapers; the grass, asphalt; and the rustling of leaves is the sound of their rush hour.

What do we find walking her paths and admiring her beauty? We find in ourselves the basic need to connect—to our environment, our surroundings, and to those whom we love. People who run from you cannot handle the fear of losing connections. They live in the moment, ultimately alone no matter how many people they surround themselves with. Those who choose to embrace, to connect, find a friend in the forest and in their lives. They are never truly alone.

The spring air was warm with the promise of a new season bringing forth warmth and beauty. All the plants on the state college campus were vibrantly green and blossoming. Animals returned from hibernation and explored the new season in the evening hours. The students, like animals shedding their winter fur, shed their coats and hurried around campus in tank tops and shorts.

In a rowdy bar and grill near campus, three senior guys sat on an outdoor patio, enjoying burgers and a pitcher of beer. The guys ate quickly, as if they were on a mission to devour the beef and fries before anyone else could. They kept their eyes open, waiting for someone to join them. At a glance, it would be hard to tell the guys apart. They were all muscular, frat boys with gelled, spiky hair, fake tans, and wearing cargo shorts with polo shirts.

They didn't put their burgers down until two stunning women walked up to them and sat down. One, Heidi, was very petite, black, and wore her short black hair in a ponytail. Her jean shorts and university t-shirt

fit her well. The other woman, Roxy, was tall and thin, with silky, shiny, brown hair that cascaded down her back. Roxy was tan and fashionable, preferring designer labels and matching her makeup to her accessories. Before they could say anything to the guys, a waitress rushed up to the table.

“Roxy, Heidi,” the waitress said in a bubbly voice. “What can I get ya?”

“Another pitcher of beer,” the only guy with glasses said. “And glasses for both.”

“Only one glass,” Roxy said. “I’ll have a Gray Goose martini.”

“Sounds good,” the waitress said walking away.

“No beer tonight?” the glasses guy asked.

“Please Mike,” Roxy scoffed. “I never drink beer.”

“Can’t blame me for trying,” Mike said. “I thought Todd here was going to drink that pitcher by himself.”

“It’s hot out,” Todd said with a mouth full of burger. “Have to stay hydrated.”

“Gross,” Heidi said. “Steve, where’s Greg? I thought you two were going to be working on that project earlier.”

“He needed to stay at the library for something. Where’s the rest of your crew?”

“Jennifer and Leah are on their way,” Heidi smiled. “They were in the labs. Savannah was at the gym.”

As Heidi finished speaking, two more women walked up to the table and sat down. Leah, tall and muscular, but a little thick, wore her red hair cropped short. Jennifer, a hauntingly beautiful blonde bombshell, was shorter than Leah, but had a powerful presence with piercing blue eyes. Jennifer kissed Mike before sitting down.

“Love you babe,” Mike said.

“Love you too,” Jennifer said.

“You guys eat?” Mike asked.

“We did earlier,” Jennifer said. “We’ve been in the lab.”

“You wore that to the lab?” Todd asked, referring to her black business ensemble.

“I put a lab coat over it,” Jennifer said. “I had an interview earlier.”

“How’d it go?” Mike asked.

“The same as all the others,” Jennifer said. “Long, lots of hard questions. My God, the job market is competitive right now. I can barely get my foot in the door. Just getting an interview is like pulling teeth.”

“I know the feeling,” Todd said. “I’ve interviewed at ten different companies since January and I haven’t gotten any callbacks.”

“I’ve took the offer I got,” Mike said, “but it’s a jerk-off job. I took it so I would at least have some money coming in while I looked for something better.”

“And so we can pay for some of the wedding,” Jennifer said with a smile.

“Your dad was pushy about that,” Mike said. “He said I needed something. The wedding’s a month away so I took it.”

“He’s proud of you,” Jennifer said kissing Mike. “I am too.”

“Thank you,” Mike said. “Heidi, what about you?”

“I’m going to work as a secretary for my older brothers,” Heidi said. “Two of them started a business together.”

“I thought you guys didn’t get along,” Steve said.

“I don’t,” Heidi said. “But there are bills to pay.”

“How’s that gonna work?” Mike asked. “I remember some of the stories you told about growing up with them, you sure you can work with them?”

“Their secretary just had twins and wants to take a three year leave,” Heidi said. “I’m there to get some experience and show that I can handle a job. It’s only three years with them...but it will be a long three years. The market should be better when I’m done there.”

“I barely got into grad school,” Roxy said. “There’s so many people applying right now; it’s very competitive.”

“Please, they took one look at your dad’s checkbook and rolled out the red carpet for you,” Todd said. “I’ve always wondered why you went to a state school. You’ve got straight A’s and a multi-millionaire father. Why?”

“To be close to my dad,” Roxy said. “Ever since mom left, he depends on me.”

“Like what?” Todd asked.

“I buy his clothes,” Roxy said. “Give him advice on what he should wear for big business meetings, making sure he’s eating right, stuff like that.”

“Whatever,” Todd said. “Steve, I know you’re in the same boat as me.”

“Right,” Steve said. “No idea what I’m going to do in a couple weeks when we graduate from this place.”

“It’s a beautiful Thursday,” Mike said. “Perfect weather, perfect friends, let’s just enjoy it. This could be the last time we are all here.”

Mike’s words sunk in around the table. This was the last couple of weeks of college. Soon, they would be kicked out of the comforts of

school and have to make their way in the real world. The waitress dropped off their drinks and took Leah and Jennifer's orders.

"I'm going full time at the state park," Leah said. "Maintaining trails and cleaning up after tourists. Why did I go to four years of school for this?"

"How's the pay?" Jennifer asked.

"Horrible," Leah said. "And what really sucks, I haven't had any time this year to hit the gym. I'm always working on school stuff. A business degree with an economics minor and I'm cleaning toilets. I feel horrible. I've gained weight, something like twenty pounds this year, lost a lot of my muscle mass and strength, and I have a useless degree."

"You'll have time for the gym though," Todd said.

"Only because I got a part-time job at one," Leah said. "It doesn't pay very well, but I get a free membership. I need to work two jobs just to make it. I wish I didn't have to grow up."

"I think we all wish that," Heidi said. "School is so much easier than the real world."

Mike was about to say something when Savannah approached. Savannah stood slightly over six feet tall with a very powerful, muscular body. She carried herself proudly, both dominant and authoritative. Everyone found her intimidating. Her curly blonde locks dropped past her broad shoulders complementing her blue eyes and fine features. She wore red running shorts, a white tank top, and sneakers; she looked like she'd just stepped out of the shower.

"What'd I miss?" Savannah asked as she poured herself a beer.

"That none of us are ready for the next couple of weeks," Jennifer said.

"I'm not too worried about it," Savannah said.

“You’ve got stuff lined up though, little miss accountant,” Todd said.

“Don’t call me that, Toddy” Savannah said. “It is what it is, I guess. The pay is good, but I have to wear business attire.”

“There’s nothing wrong with dressing up,” Roxy said sipping her martini. “You really should dress up more often, Savannah. You always look like you are going to the gym.”

“That’s because she’s always going to the gym,” Todd laughed. “I mean, look at those arms. How much can you bench?”

“It’s not going to be that bad,” Savannah said ignoring Todd. “I just wish I could have a little more time here.”

“We all wish that Savannah,” Jennifer said. “None of us are ready to leave.”

“I just wish that it could be like this more,” Savannah said. “We’re going to lose touch with each other.”

“There is something called the Internet,” Mike said. “And we won’t be very far away.”

Savannah was about to say something when Greg, a college frat boy who’d let himself go, excitedly rushed up to the group, panting and out of breath.

“You guys will never guess what I discovered,” he said.

“Your feet?” Todd joked.

“A woman?” Savannah asked with a sly grin.

“No, you guys,” Greg said. “I found it. I found what we’ve been looking for!”

“What’s that?” Jennifer asked.

“The hidden trail,” Greg said. The group fell silent.

“The hidden trails,” Savannah broke the silence cautiously. “You’re talking about the legend at Foothill State Forest? You mean the hidden trail somewhere in the woods that the rangers covered up and no one is allowed to walk anymore?”

“That’s right,” Greg said. “I found it. We need to hike it. You know how cool it would be? We need to get out there.”

“We don’t have time, Greg,” Mike said. “We’ve got finals.”

“Oh come on! Let’s have one more big event before we cap off college,” Greg said. “We’ve talked all semester about doing something and we’ve talked the last four years about hiking the hidden trails.”

“We’ve been in that forest hundreds of times,” Savannah said. “I started running the trails when I was thirteen; I’ve never seen any hidden trails there. They don’t exist.”

“But they do,” Greg said taking a map from his backpack. “Look at this.”

Greg set the map on the table. The map was of the state forest as it was 1890. There was a network of trails and logging camps. Greg took out a modern forest map and set it next to the old map. Greg pointed out where a trail on the older map and where it would be on the current one.

“This trail goes into the foothills,” Greg said. “It stops at the base of the mountain. We should hike up there.”

“I have so much work to do,” Heidi said. “There’s no way. I barely have time to be here right now.”

“We need a bachelor party. The guys could go out and make sure it’s safe. Then, after the wedding, we could all go out there. The first adventure of our new adult lives,” Greg said.

“Being an adult is nothing to celebrate,” Leah said.

“Agreed,” everyone chimed in.

“We should do something though,” Savannah said. “You look at our partying and playing it would be a damn shame for us to go out with a whimper. We need to shake it up.”

“But we have so much work,” Jennifer said.

“Then we’ll go and see what there is out there,” Mike said. “We’ll leave tomorrow after class and come back on Sunday. After the wedding, we’ll all go out there. You girls can party it up here tomorrow night.”

“I don’t know,” Jennifer said. “We have so much wedding planning yet to do, Mike.”

“Once school is done your sisters will help,” Mike said. “I think we should do this.”

“What the hell,” Steve said. “I’m in.”

“Why not?” Todd said.

“It’s settled,” Mike said. “Tomorrow after class the guys are hitting the hidden trails.”

Chapter 2

It was a beautiful spring day and almost all the students were out and about, Frisbees and baseballs were sailing through the air. Runners took in that first good outdoor run, and even the students who were studying sat outside on the grass enjoying the air.

Almost all the students were outside, except for one group of girls who'd had a bit too much fun the night before. Inside Jennifer's apartment on the west edge of the campus, Jennifer and the girls were trying to sleep off their wild night. It had started at an upscale restaurant with \$20 martinis, but the evening ended at a house party with keg beer.

Heidi was the first one to move, but that was only to rush to the bathroom. As she stumbled through the messy apartment, she tried to avoid stepping on anyone—most of the girls wound up crashing on the floor or in chairs. Heidi felt the room spin and tried to remember how their night had gotten so out of control. Heidi made it to the bathroom just in time. Jennifer woke up slightly confused as she stretched and tried not to wake Leah, who shared the sofa with her. She walked to the bathroom door.

"You okay?" Jennifer asked.

"Lovely," Heidi mumbled back before vomiting again.

"Need someone to hold your hair?" Jennifer asked.

"No," Heidi grunted.

Jennifer braced herself against the wall before shuffling to the counter where her cellphone was sitting. Jennifer called Mike's phone. She wasn't sure if he would have his phone on, or if he would be in location where there was reception, but she wanted to try. The phone rang several times before it went to voicemail.

“Hey honey, just wanted to check in and see what was going on. How’s the trail? Give me a call when you get this. The girls and I will be studying today so call anytime. Love you.”

Jennifer hung up and looked over toward her friends. They hadn’t partied this hard since their freshman year in college. Savannah, laying on the floor without a blanket or pillow, stretched and opened her eyes.

“What time is it?” Savannah managed to ask.

“About ten,” Jennifer said fiddling with her phone.

“That was a hell of a party,” Savannah said. “I don’t think I’ve ever drank that much. Nothing weird happened last night, did it? I don’t remember much.”

“Not that I remember,” Jennifer said. “The booze just flowed.”

Savannah was about to say something when Heidi stumbled out of the bathroom. She looked horrible, hair a mess, puffy bags under her eyes, flushed, and holding her stomach. She dragged herself over to a chair and fell into it.

“I’m never doing that again,” Heidi said.

“Wasn’t that bad,” Leah said, cracking her eyes open. “You want to keep it down?”

“I think a few more hours would be good,” Jennifer said slumping into an open chair.

Jennifer settled in and soon all the girls were fast asleep.

The sun had just set, but the campus was still a beehive of activity. The evening saw students out in full force enjoying weather—except for Jennifer and her friends. They were all back in Jennifer’s apartment, worried that no one had heard from the boys.

Leah and Savannah sat at the table playing cards; Heidi was occupied with her phone; Roxy watched television as Jennifer paced around the room playing agitatedly on her phone as her thoughts were consumed with Mike. Jennifer had left six voicemails and a ton of text messages, but there was still no word from Mike or any of the other guys.

“Something went wrong,” Jennifer said. “They should have answered us by now.”

“Calm down,” Leah said looking up from her card game and taking a drink from a flask. “I’m sure they’re deep in the foothills right now. There’s no reception up there.”

“One of them should have walked out and called us,” Jennifer said. “They should have gotten into contact with us. They were supposed to be home last night.”

“The trails are probably longer than they thought,” Savannah said. “I’m sure that’s what happened to them. Try not to worry.”

Jennifer was about to speak when her phone rang. She looked at the number and her face was flushed with excitement. The caller ID indicated that the call was coming from the Foothill State Park.

“It’s from the park. I’ll put it on speaker,” Jennifer said as she answered the phone. The other women stopped what they were doing and gathered around. “Hello?”

“Jennifer? This is Ranger Lacey Mark,” Lacey said through the phone. “How are you doing this evening?”

“A little nervous,” Jennifer said, fear edging into her voice. “I’ve been waiting to hear from Mike and his friends. They were at the park this weekend.”

“That’s what I needed to talk to you about,” Lacey said. “This weekend there was a retreat for teenaged girls at one of the campsites. A couple of them went missing so we went searching for them.”

“What does this have to do with Mike and his friends?”

“While we were searching for the girls, we came across Mike’s campsite. It was empty and it didn’t look like it had been used that day. This was Saturday afternoon.”

“Okay?” Jennifer asked.

“I just got back from the site,” Lacey said. “All their gear is still there, but they haven’t been back. Nothing’s been moved from where it was on Saturday.”

“What are you trying to say?” Jennifer asked.

“I’m sorry, Jennifer,” Lacey said. “They’re missing. Have heard from them?”

“No,” Jennifer said. “I’ve left calls and messages, but they haven’t responded. What do you think happened?”

“I don’t know,” Lacey said. “Did they say anything to you before they left? Were they going to try the rapids or go climbing? Anything dangerous?”

“No,” Jennifer said. “It was going to be just hiking and camping. They would have alerted you if they were going to try something like that.”

“Here’s what we do next, I’ve noted that they are missing and if there’s been no contact by tomorrow evening, then I will alert the police and file missing person reports. That’s our standard procedure. I’m sorry I can’t do more now, but we have to wait twenty-four hours. We’ll search the area tomorrow and ask everyone if they’ve seen them. I’m sure they’re safe. They’ve probably just gotten lost or stuck. Try not to worry.”

“I won’t,” Jennifer said. “I know they wouldn’t have gone somewhere dangerous without telling someone—maybe you’re right and they are lost. Thanks for letting me know, Lacey. Have a good evening.”

“You too, Jennifer,” Lacey said with a hint of confusion in her voice.

“Goodbye,” Jennifer said as she ended the call.

The apartment was silent for a moment. Everyone except Leah was frozen. Leah pulled a half full bottle of cheap vodka out of her bag and poured a good amount into her flask, put the bottle away, and took a large swig of her drink.

“You okay, Jennifer? You seem rather calm about all this.”

“I’m not,” Jennifer said. “We have a big problem.”

“They’re lost,” Roxy said.

“They’re not lost,” Jennifer said. “Well, they might be, but more than that, they aren’t where they are supposed to be. If they’re found on the hidden trail, they might get in trouble. Plus, the rangers and police won’t be looking on those trails.”

“Then we just wait for them,” Heidi said. “They will either call or return soon.”

“No,” Jennifer said. “They would have called by now.”

“I know what you’re thinking, Jennifer,” Savannah said. “We have classes. It’s the end of the semester, our futures are on the line here. We graduate in two weeks.”

“And the guys need to be there to graduate with us,” Jennifer said.

“Wait,” Roxy asked, “what are we talking about here?”

“We’re going to the park tomorrow,” Jennifer said.

“But we have class, tests to study for, and final papers to write,” Heidi said.

“And the guys have all those things to do too. If they are lost, we need to go out there and find them. They would do the same thing for us.”

“No, they wouldn’t,” Savannah said. “Mike would for you, but Steve and Todd wouldn’t be sober long enough to care. Greg might, but he would never be able to agree on a plan.”

“Girls,” Jennifer said, “this is my fiancée. We are getting married in a month. I have to have a groom for there to be wedding.”

“She’s right,” Leah said. “We have to do this. They’ve saved us before. Remember spring break last year—”

“You don’t need to remind us. We were all drunk and shit happened.” Savannah sighed, “I hate to say it, but I agree with you. We need to be well supplied and ready for anything.”

“Supplied?” Roxy said.

“GPS units, copies of the map Greg found, and food and water to start. We’ll be doing a lot of hiking and it’s been unusually warm. They’re talking temperatures in the upper eighties and possibly ninety tomorrow so we need to dress and pack light. We need to move fast.”

“Pack light?” Heidi asked. “How the hell long do you think we’re going to be out there?”

“We’re bringing tents,” Savannah said. “I’m sure we’ll have to spend the night.”

“I can’t miss that much class,” Roxy said. “Not this late in the year.”

“I’m going,” Jennifer said. “Savannah, I gather that you’re coming with, who else?”

“I will,” Heidi said. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“Why the hell not?” Leah said taking another drink.

“I don’t know,” Roxy said.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to go, Roxy,” Jennifer said. “I know that you aren’t the biggest fan of the forest or hiking.”

“I don’t want to disappoint you guys,” Roxy said. “I’ll go, but I have to be back by Wednesday night.”

“We’ll take two cars,” Jennifer said. “Roxy, you can leave Wednesday, but if we haven’t found them by then I’m staying until we do.” There was a silence in the room for a moment.

“What about the other thing Lacey said?” Savannah asked.

“What?” Jennifer said.

“Missing teenage girls?” Savannah said. “You don’t think they found the guys?”

“They would never,” Jennifer said. “Not with teenagers.”

“Guys out camping, drinking a little,” Savannah said. “Couple girls show up, fake names and ages given, Mike wouldn’t, but the others might.”

“Speaking from experience there, Savannah?” Heidi asked with a sly grin.

“Hell yeah,” Savannah said. “I was fourteen.”

“Fourteen!” Roxy exclaimed.

“We didn’t go all the way,” Savannah said. “I was at a volleyball workshop at a summer camp. I didn’t want to be there. It was really lame and I was far and away the best player there.”

“But you’ve always played soccer,” Heidi said. “Why were you at a volleyball camp?”

“Parents,” Savannah said shrugging. “They wanted a volleyball star. Well, technically they wanted all boys who were football and wrestling stars, but I was supposed to play volleyball, not soccer, because I’m a girl. The point is that I snuck out with a couple other girls. We met up with some college guys at a campsite, got some booze, whatever.”