

*Thirdway* portrays intersecting communities—the inhabitants of a small Virginia town set along the Appalachian Trail and a troupe of hikers on transformational journeys. These groups intertwine in a tale of adventure, family, addiction, relationships, redemption, and self-discovery.

## **Thirdway**

by Mark A. Moore

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# THIRDWAY

MARK A. MOORE



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## **Prologue: Downfall (May 13)**

Mitch Carson sat back satisfied as he closed his laptop, looking out over the Virginia Blue Ridge on a sunny May afternoon. He was at his upstairs desk and just finished another assignment. He occasionally wrote technical pieces, drawing on knowledge gained from decades as a biomedical engineer. He had left a medical implant company five years earlier when the call of the outdoors led him to buy a mountain hotel. Now he was the proprietor of Thirdway Lodge in central Virginia. It had become a busy stop for Appalachian Trail hikers and tourists, and it was a dream come true. Except that dream had included Becca, and she wasn't here.

"Mitch!?" an urgent voice called out from the first floor of the lodge.

The tone jolted Mitch's 60-year-old body out of his chair. "Up here, Adam! What's up?"

"There's a hiker down and she thinks her ankle's broken," replied Adam, who had been temporary help at the lodge since March.

"Where?" Mitch was already descending the stairs.

"Not sure, but she's on the trail south. Adam was at the bottom of the stairs, car keys already in hand. "She slid down a slope and said she can't move,"

"Did she call 911?"

"Yeah, but they're dealing with a pileup on I-81. She was told rescue would be hours, so she called us. It was hard understanding her, but she thinks she's a few miles south of here and had passed a shelter about an hour before she fell. She's in a rocky area with no trees. Then her phone died."

"I think I know where she is," said Mitch, processing the facts and moving past Adam to his desk. He spread out a trail map and pointed. "She's probably on Slaghorn Rocks. That area had a washout in Hurricane Matthew. If she went off trail, the loose shale can make for a long ride down. If she's at the bottom, it's not going to be easy. The emergency kit and air cast are already in the truck. Are there any guests who can help if we need to carry her out? And where's Zeke?"

"Zeke went to Okafor's for supplies. Two hikers just came in. I sent them to Bunkhouse Four. And Mitch, the injured hiker didn't sound good."

I'm not sure if she was scared or what, but she sounded—well, she wasn't making sense."

Mitch grimaced. "Might be shock. Let's go." He pointed in the direction of the bunkhouses and started toward the rough-hewn wooden side door of the lodge. Outside were six small buildings with bunks. "You have trail names for the guests?"

Adam followed Mitch. "Skittles and Fresca. Young and in good shape."

"I hope they'll help. What's the injured hiker's name?"

"Emily. Doesn't sound like a trail name."

A small shiver ran through Mitch as this last byte of information sunk in. Surely it wasn't *that* Emily. He shook his head. "Adam, go ask the hikers and I'll be right there. I'll get some rope."

Adam nodded and watched him veer off. Mitch was still an enigma to Adam. Dr. Mitch Carson used to be in the lab and giving lectures and whatever else he did back in Richmond, undoubtedly with a good salary. But now he ran this lodge, a few hundred yards off the Appalachian Trail—the AT as the hikers and locals called it. They provided lodging, rides, free and mostly useful advice, and occasionally got a hiker out of a jam. It had been a busy May with long-distance backpackers, day hikers, and non-hiking guests in search of solitude and nature. Informality and flexibility were the order of the day. But now there was an emergency to focus on. Adam moved ahead quickly to Bunkhouse Four.

A minute later, Mitch emerged from a supply shed, thirty-foot coil of rope in hand. He was thinking of Becca, needing her more and more. Shelving his melancholy, he called out "Adam!"

"Here." Adam popped out of a wooden structure. Right behind him were two hikers. Mitch surmised that all these two wanted was hot food, a shower, and actual mattress to lie on. Adam motioned to the first hiker beside him. "This is Skittles, he's a northbounder." Mitch shook hands with the tall, bearded, blond, fit-looking man probably in his twenties. He looked and smelled like he needed that shower, long and hot. "And this is Fresca," Adam added, nodding toward the young female hiker. She had a broad grin and red freckles that matched her short, curly hair.

Fresca approached Mitch, fist extended to bump his. "We heard there's a fallen hiker. Let's go get her!" She sat down on a bench in front of the bunkhouse to put her hiking shoes back on.



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Mitch appreciated the attitude and energy of most hikers who passed through. It would certainly make things easier today. The four were soon approaching a brown crew cab truck. Each side had red stenciled letters—THIRDWAY LODGE, JEFFERSON, VA—along with a phone number and web address. Mitch started the truck and turned the wheel, crunching gravel. They were leaving the parking lot when Zeke, his other assistant, approached in an old, dented, rusted green truck. It matched his persona. He leaned out his window as Mitch hailed him.

“Hey, Zeke,” Mitch shouted. “Can you look out for the place while we go on a rescue?”

“Sure thing, boss!” said Zeke, waving them along. “All’s quiet on the Western Front!”

They turned onto a paved road and Mitch looked in his rearview mirror at Fresca and Skittles. “What can you tell me about the hiker?”

Fresca answered. “I think we know who it was who fell, but don’t know her town name. Emily, you said? I don’t know. The chick I’m thinking of goes by Scorpion, but the name Emily does sound familiar.”

“Scorpion?” Mitch interjected, alarmed at the name.

“Yep, Scorpion it is. I remember when she got her trail name in Georgia, Resupply gave it to her. I just don’t know what her real name is. We hiked a lot with her back in Georgia and all the way to Hot Springs, then it got sketchy. Since then we’ve been playing a lot of serious trail tag. We leave a shelter, she’s still there, and later, she hauls it past us, then we pass her while she’s getting water. You know how it is.”

Mitch nodded, but he didn’t really know how it was. He wasn’t much of a hiker and didn’t have the same level of trail knowledge as many lodge and hostel owners. “Sure,” he said. “Tell me more about her. It may come in handy.”

Fresca was looking out the window in wonder at trees whizzing by, then turned ahead toward Mitch. “Scorpion hardly talks to us anymore, but I know she was really anxious to get here tonight and seemed kind of frantic about it. Hate to say it, but seems like the trail’s gotten to her, like she’s gotten more nervous instead of chill, or something. We saw her when she left Melondy Hill Shelter this morning. It’s the first time she’s got out earlier than us in a while. She was hell-bent on getting to Jefferson before

the post office closed. She has some burner phone and was calling them to make sure they were open and that her food drop was there.”

“When did you last see her, and do you know where she might have fallen?” Mitch asked, not even sure they were talking about the same person.

Skittles replied, “I think the last we saw her was at Midvalley Shelter, where we got water. She was sitting in the shelter, rocking. We said hello and it’s like she came out of a trance and got her stuff and set out. I guess that was about noon? We didn’t see her again.”

“So she was ahead of you,” said Adam. “That helps. And we haven’t had any Scorpion or Emily arrive at the lodge. It would make sense to hitch on the county road into Jefferson, get her package, and get back on the trail.”

“That all fits,” said Mitch as they turned onto a small dirt road. “I still think she fell on Slaghorn Rocks.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Fresca. “I remember those. They were tricky and you could take a wrong turn easy.”

The information helped Mitch set their course for the most likely location of Emily, or Scorpion, if they were the same person. Mitch turned onto a gravel road that would end at a small parking lot, a short side trail from the AT.

With a brief drive ahead, Mitch relaxed with a plan in mind. “So. We have a few miles before we get out to look for her. Thanks again and hopefully we can you back to the lodge soon.”

Mitch looked in the rearview mirror and saw Fresca break into a big grin. “Sure, man, our pleasure—it’s a relief to get off our feet and ride for a change. Rad truck, by the way.”

“Thanks. So, Fresca, Adam said that Skittles is a NOBO. Are you, too?” asked Mitch, using the shorthand for northbounder, someone thru-hiking the AT all the way from Georgia to Maine in one hiking season. The SOBOs went southbound and the so-called flip-flops mixed it up but still set out to do the whole trail in a year. And then there were section hikers who tackled specific segments of the trail, maybe for days or weeks.

“Nah,” she answered, “I’m just a mere lowly Sectioner and—”

Skittles interrupted, “Nothing ‘just’ about it, grasshopper. Gotta tell you guys, she is serious and she may *only* be doing a so-called section, but it’s,

like, over a thousand-mile section, from Amicalola Falls, Georgia, to Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. I've hiked with her the whole way, and, I'll tell you what—she stands tall when people talk about how many miles they got that day. And finishing a third of the AT in less than two months is pretty stout.”

Fresca grinned appreciatively at Skittles and Mitch could see the bond. He knew people meet on their hikes, relationships happen, and kinships form in many ways. He didn't know their story but wondered what it would be like for both of them when they got to Harper's Ferry and she left the trail.

“How'd you get your trail names?” asked Adam. Most long-distance hikers on the AT had a trail name, either self-named or usually given by others—and there was always a story.

While they were telling their stories, Mitch thought again of that name, Emily, who was most likely Scorpion. “What does Scorpion look like?” he blurted, interrupting Fresca's trail name story.

“Well,” said Fresca, not skipping a beat, “I'd say she's 'bout five-seven, brown eyes, wicked sleeve of tats on her left arm, kind of a runt body, and seems to keep getting skinnier, like a lot of us. Killer hiking legs. She started with cool long blue hair but chopped it off short. It's kinda brown now. She's maybe mid-twenties. Texas accent, I guess.” She turned to Skittles. “Dude! Remember that time she was in her tent asleep and those Boy Scouts were making all that noise, then she bursts out and...”

Mitch did not hear the rest of the story, since his mind locked on the familiar description and name of this hiker, Emily. As they arrived at a small grass parking lot, disturbing memories of family, scorpions, a dusty farmhouse in Texas, and a longing for Becca to be by his side, especially now, flooded over him.

## Chapter 1: At the Start (Two months earlier, March 19)

Caleb sprang up. “Hello?” Had he said that out loud? He heard rustling and a branch break and felt uneasy on this chilly Georgia March night—or was it morning? The sounds may have been what woke him. Whatever was out there did not sound heavy, so he was relieved. But still, what was it? There was only a thin layer of tent fabric between him and—what? This was one of the many things he had not thought about when he had the wild idea last fall to hike the Appalachian Trail: sleeping outside, with *things*.

Caleb was not prone to pursue wild ideas. But last fall he had been walking in a Knoxville park with his fiancée, Sherry—well, his ex-fiancée now—and they talked with a couple carrying big backpacks. They were in training to “hike the AT” this spring. He didn’t know what the AT was until he asked, though he had heard of the Appalachian Trail. The idea grabbed hold of him, hard. It was the right time in his life to do this: school would be done, he was not yet married or with kids—or so the timing had seemed right at the time. Sherry scoffed at the idea as he got more excited. She grew more resentful as the date approached. It was driving them apart, but he was resolute, in spite of his wariness of the unknown. He approached the trip in the methodical and goal-oriented manner that defined his first twenty-eight years. Now, it was only his second night on the trail and he had misgivings.

And the noise. It was probably a squirrel, raccoon, or maybe even a deer. If it were a bear he would worry, but he knew the black bears around here were not attack animals and were only concerned with getting food. The sound faded and he lay back down and asked himself again, *So what am I doing out here?* He was awake now and it seemed too early and cold to get up, so he had time to think.

It was one thing to think about taking five or six months off from life as he knew it, but it was another to start serious planning. But when he started something, it took on a life of its own. Even getting driven to the trailhead at Amicalola Falls with a full set of gear, toned and trained body, and several days’ supply of food did not mean he had to get out of that car. But watching that driver pull away cast his lot, at least temporarily. He could always pack it in once he got to that first major road crossing after forty miles. He could go home and resume the career he had put on hold. His

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schooling and training were done, and he could join the family practice with his father. The thought was comforting. He liked the known.

But here he was, cold and lonely and a little scared, not knowing what was ahead on the trail. He knew he wanted to see if he could be independent, facing the tough times and embracing the triumphs of a trail hike, but was there another reason for this trek? I'm thinking way too much, Caleb thought. Let's make this simple. You're in Georgia, walking toward Maine, and that's as existential as it gets today.

With that, he roused himself into a sitting position and checked his watch. It was 6 a.m. It was not the middle of the night. He unwound himself from his warm bag and put on clothes at the same time—well, on top of the layers he had slept in. He had heeded the warnings about keeping his food hung in a tree in a bear bag—with one ursine-defying exception. Pulling out his vice, a foil-wrapped power bar, he peeled it open and stuffed half in his mouth. He chomped away as he prepared to leave his warm tent-cocoon.

Caleb unzipped the side of his tent and clambered out on hands and knees, bracing himself against the cold. He saw frost on his nearby backpack and shivered. For the next fifteen minutes he moved steadily, taking down his tent, stowing it and his sleeping bag in a new backpack. He tried to be quiet, since a shelter was only fifty feet away. The three-sided, roofed structure with a wooden platform could probably sleep ten, if they lay side by side. Trail shelters were spaced about every ten or fifteen miles on the trail and were the preferred sleeping spots for many. Most had tent sites nearby, like the one he had used.

He finished packing, except for his bear bag, over in a tree, then slung his pack on and double-checked the tent area. Looking around, he was gratified not to see any trace of himself, except the tamped-down rectangle where his tent had been. He silently made his way in front of the open side of the shelter toward his last duty, getting his food. A plaintive voice stopped him. “Yo, dude, what the fuck? What time is it?”

“Oh, sorry,” Caleb replied softly. “I was trying to be quiet.” He looked into the darkness of the shelter for the source of complaint. A blue-haired woman was peeking out from a bright-orange sleeping bag. He also saw at least eight others facing toward the back of the shelter, seemingly unfazed by the exchange.

“That’s cool, I got in late,” she answered, still lying down on her stomach, propped up on both elbows. “You startled me, that’s all. This trail and shelter thing is new to me. Hold on.” She flipped onto her back and wriggled out of her bag, clothed in camouflage tights and a blue T-shirt. She grabbed a jacket and slipped in her bare arms, one heavily tattooed. She swung her legs out in front of the shelter, slipping into unlaced boots as she stood up. Caleb looked toward the tree that held his bag.

“I gotta pee,” she said. “Might as well get up too.” She started walking in the same direction as Caleb, unlaced boots loose on her feet, their brown lace pigtailed flopping on the ground with each step. “You going that way? Privy’s up the side trail.”

“Yep, but I’m heading out on the trail after I get my bear bag. Hey, I’m Caleb.”

“Cool. Hey, you trying to get to the road tomorrow?”

“Yeah, Neel Gap. I have to resupply. I only brought enough for a few days. I’ve been dreaming about what kind of food the outfitters might have. It’s sad—two nights on the trail and I’m already obsessing.”

They were well away from the shelter now and started talking in normal voices.

“That’s my plan too,” she said. “I might have a food box waiting for me.”

“Nice. I’ve read about people getting shipments from their personal trail angel back home. Your parents?”

She shot him a dark glance. “Nosy much?” After a pause, she added, “Sorry. Sore subject. It’s just a friend—a buddy, I guess.”

“Cool.” Caleb let the subject drop.

She veered left toward the outhouse. “Happy trails!” she called with a wave.

Caleb returned the gesture and turned right to retrieve his food. He admired the ingenious wire and pulley system mounted between two trees that suspended his bag far out of a bear’s reach. He quickly unhooked the wire holding his bag up and let it play out. Once it was in reach, he held the bag while unclasping the carabiner that tethered it to the wire. Taking the bag, he sat on a nearby rock, intent on digging out trail mix and power bars for his front pockets for breakfast and placing the rest of the bag in his backpack. As he was rearranging his gear, he ate some of the trail mix.

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He looked up as Blue Hair from the shelter approached with a wave. “Want some?” he said, offering the open packet of trail mix.

“Hell, yeah.” She took it, poured half the contents into her mouth, and uttered what sounded like *Franks*.

While she was chewing, he pulled out another bag of trail mix for himself. She stretched with her arms raised high, jacket pulled up, revealing a pierced naval and tattooed torso, some sort of geometric design. *Not like Sherry*, Caleb thought. She let out a sustained “mmmmmmm” as she twisted.

“You know,” he said, stuffing the last items into his pack, “I’ve heard that when we dream, all those things we say in the dream are trapped inside of us because, you know, we can’t speak out loud. So, they get captured, like in our muscles. So, when we wake up and stretch and get that good feeling, it ends up coming out in those noises. It’s that dream talk, but now it’s all jumbled up and nonsensical. Like the noise you just made.”

“Holy shit,” she said with a little grin. “That’s pretty trippy there, Caleb. I want some of what you took this morning. And gotta say, I’m damned sure I’ve never heard nonsensical used in conversation.”

He chuckled. “Sorry, you’re my first human of the day. I’m still in adjustment mode.”

Standing, he put a cashew bar and box of raisins in one pocket of his hiking pants and a bag of peanuts in the other. He would continue eating as soon as he hit the trail.

She bent at the waist to touch one toe and then the next, twisting her body and purring nonstop. “Dang, I must have had a bunch of good dreams last night! That feels good. And now I’m ready to get my ass moving too.”

“I hear you,” he said, pack on and poles in hand. “I’m focused on that resupply tomorrow. Funny, but you only supply once at the beginning, but then you keep *resupplying* the rest of the way. I guess scientists search once and then *research* after that. You ever wonder about that?”

“Not once in my life,” she replied, laughing. “But thanks for the second earworm!”

He started moving toward the trail. “Got a trail name yet?”

“Nah,” she said. “Have a good one, Caleb!”

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He hoisted his two poles in a wave. “Happy Trails!” As he turned, he spotted a white strip of paint on a big pine tree, indicating where the northbound trail entered the dark forest.



## Chapter 2: Connections (March 20)

It was cold again the next day, but Caleb knew his quick pace would help him warm up. The trail was fairly smooth, well-marked, and not too steep. He was optimistic about reaching the road crossing and store in time to pick up food and make it to his target campsite before dark. The afternoon before, when it had been raining and cold, he had slipped while climbing a muddy boulder, skinned his leg through his pants, and landed on the side of his pack, smearing it with mud. He had thought then about bagging the whole thing at the road today, hitching to town, crawling into a warm, dry bed, and heading home to Knoxville. He knew other people did just that. Three or four days' hiking and camping, a twisted ankle, bad blisters, exhaustion, a mouse running over their heads in the shelter, waking up to rain or snow, or plain loneliness, and they pack it in. It was one thing planning a long hike, and another to be in the middle of it.

He had heard all the questions from his friends: what about bears, what do you eat, will you carry a gun, how will you know where you are going, and do you have to hunt for food? In fairness, he had some of the same questions months ago. He had learned that the black bears in the East were rarely aggressive but could tear up your tent or pack looking for food. Virtually no one carried a gun, though he had a good pocket knife and a mini-can of mace that was a last-minute addition—he would probably ditch the mace soon. You could get food about every five or six days at a road crossing or by hitching into town.

And for directions, the trail had blazes, little white stripes, generally on trees. And there were guidebooks that gave details about where you were and how far until the next spring or stream or shelter or road, and whether that road had a store or how many miles it was into town. His planning-obsessive side could not imagine life without this guide. It's hard to get lost, but it could happen. A few years earlier, a woman turned on a dirt road in Maine instead of going straight across the road to the trail. She got lost and ended up dying in a remote area. The guiding principle, though, was to keep watch for the blazes.

He was warm now, even though it was in the thirties. Climbing a rocky slope in fine mist, he enjoyed the feel of inhaling cold vapor through his nose. He stepped carefully to avoid yesterday's mishap, barely noticing the

view on the left, a ripple of Georgia hills extending west. The deciduous trees were still bare, but the plentiful pines colored the waves a deep green and added a faint scent to the air.

Intent on his footing, he was unaware of the pair of thirtyish women sitting on a rock to his right. The one with a red bandana covering her head sobbed, with shaking voice, "This...is...hard."

Caleb stopped in front of them. "Good morning!" he said cheerily, trying to counter the anguish.

"Good morning," said the other, composed one, wearing a matching blue bandana. "Is this Blood Mountain?"

"No," said Caleb. "That's maybe ten miles north, or farther."

Red Bandana moaned.

"The gap's just on the other side," said Caleb. "I want to resupply there today. Hey, I like the bandanas."

"Thanks," said Blue Bandana. "We're sisters. Jonna's my name. This is Jenna."

"I'm Caleb." He reached out and fist-bumped each.

Jenna looked up. "Sorry for the pity party here, but this is hard. We had this walk-in-the-woods dream, but dammit, this sucks. I mean in a beautiful way." She looked past Caleb to the open view. The sun was starting to peek through.

Caleb laughed. "I hear you. I took a fall yesterday and if I could have just gone home then, I might have. But today's better."

"We've been out five days," said Jonna. "The reality is we can't do what we planned. This is an ordeal."

"You mean I can't do it," said Jenna, sniffing a cry. "I bet you'd be halfway to Maine by now. Once we get to that road, I'm done. These blisters are killing me and my back hurts from this damned pack. Caleb, thanks for stopping to talk, but we don't want to hold you up."

"I needed the rest," replied Caleb. "But yeah, I think I better get going myself. Do you need anything? Food, water?"

"We're good," said Jonna. "Thanks anyway. I hope you live out your dream on this hike!"

"Thanks."

Both women waved as he turned to continue on the trail.

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Caleb kept a steady pace through the morning, chewing up northbound miles. He thought of the sisters and how his own hike had felt like an ordeal the last few days—and he had not even hiked 2 percent of the almost 2,200-mile trail. Remembering Jonna’s wish for him to live out his dream, he didn’t know what his dream for the hike was, except to go on an adventure and finish the whole thing. He hoped he was going toward something rather than retreating. Thinking of his breakup two months earlier, he vowed not to dwell on that. But he did.

There they were, with comforting plans for the future. She said he was the nicest guy she had ever dated, the wedding was planned—well, overplanned—for later this year. But she had certain expectations, a way things should be with them, what kind of job he should have, how much money he should make, and it was becoming obvious that he did not fit the bill. He could go along, but not be molded. This hike had brought things to a head. It didn’t fit her plan. He was supposed to graduate and start a good job. She could not fathom this hike and felt he was choosing some radical notion over her. As it got closer, she started undermining his plans, mocking him in front of their families, and refusing to talk about it. He felt backed into a corner with two options: He could cave in and set a bad precedent for their married life, or start this hike and have her consider it defiance. At the end, there was no nasty fight. They simply quit making plans to see each other and one day his ring came back, by delivery. He was relieved, but still wondered if he was being selfish. He was the one who messed up her plans, the woman he had loved.

He found he had slowed to a crawl and deliberately moved faster to shift his concentration toward his footing and away from his past. And the way to move forward was to move forward. He could accomplish today’s goals just by putting one foot in front of the other and enjoying the occasional newt or chipmunk skittering across some rocks, a wave of mountains in the distance, or the feel of his muscles tightening and relaxing over and over, propelling his body toward the future.

An hour later, Caleb was still striding along intently and he did not notice the couple sitting on a rock ten feet off the trail. “Hey,” said a guy with short blond hair and brownish face stubble.

“Oh, hey, sorry,” said a startled Caleb. He walked toward them. “I guess I was in the zone.”

“We are too,” said a redheaded woman. “The food zone.” She smiled up at Caleb, shielding her eyes from the sun. “Hey.”

“Hey, I’m Caleb.”

“Cool name,” she said. “How’d you get that one?”

“My parents,” Caleb said, laughing. “I don’t have a trail name yet.”

“Me either—well, neither of us do. I’m Meg. You trying for Neel Gap today?”

“Yeah. I only brought a few days of food to start, trying to be a little light, so I’d better make it before the store closes.”

“I hear you, but I think we have food till tomorrow. Well, maybe,” she said, slapping at the leg of her companion. He looked up, smiling, and reached his hand into a bag of candy.

“Hey,” Meg said with a grin. “Hand me some of those. Dude, you are all about the Skittles. Skittles!” she repeated, pointing at him.

“I know,” he said, holding out the bag. “Here you go. I told you I’d share.”

“No!” she said. “YOU are Skittles.”

“Yep. I don’t know why, but every time someone mentions Skittles, I get hungry.”

She nudged his shoulder and said, “You get hungry anyway. But dude, no. I mean I’m naming you Skittles, your official trail name. Does that meet your approval?”

“Well, I’d be a hypocrite to say no since Skittles always meet my approval, so game on, or should I say, name on?”

Meg and Caleb groaned. Caleb pointed at her. “What about you, Meg? Any attempts at a trail name?”

“Nah,” she said. “One’ll come when it comes. I’m not fretting it.”

“That’s a good attitude.” Caleb replied. “Easygoing, I like it.”

“Funny you say that, man, about her being easygoing,” said the newly-named Skittles. “Our friends say that Meg stands for Ms. Easy Going, M.E.G. Hey, Meg, you should just use that as your trail name.”

“Very clever...Skittles. But I don’t think I can use my real name as my trail name—seems sort of cheaty and double-dipping. And it sounds like bragging if I say I’m easygoing. It would be a lot to live up to. I could never be in a bad mood.”

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“That’s a good point,” said Skittles, placing their lunch trash into a plastic bag, which he slid into an outer meshed pouch on his backpack. He stood and leaned over the pack, tightening straps. “And speaking of double-dipping, I can’t wait until we get farther north and hit some of those all-you-can-eat buffets. I bet some even have ice cream with toppings that include Skittles.”

“Well, you are what you eat,” said Caleb. Meg nodded at him appreciatively, stood up, and stretched.

Skittles put his pack on, then helped Meg with hers, holding it up while she wriggled into the shoulder straps. Caleb felt good. He had reached a trail milestone, witnessing the naming of a hiker.

He also got a better dimension of these two. Skittles was a few inches taller than Caleb, so a little over six feet. Meg was a good half foot shorter with red hair, freckles, and an infectious smile. They both seemed to be in their early or mid-twenties and looked fit enough to physically handle the trail.

Caleb decided to give them some space. “Well,” he said, as they were buckling their packs, “it was good talking to you. I’ll probably see you up ahead. Maybe at the gap for resupply!”

“We’ll be right behind you,” said Meg.

Caleb raised a pole in farewell and Skittles did the same.

“Have a good hike!” Meg called out to Caleb’s back. Another pole rose.

“Dude’s moving on,” Skittles said. “Seems like a nice guy.”

“Yeah, he seemed like it,” answered Meg. “Kinda cute too,” she added playfully.

“Okay,” said Skittles, with a light tap on her shoulder, “It’s Ms. Easygoing, not Ms. Easy.”

Grinning, she poked back at his arm and he laughed. As they started walking, he flung his arm over the back of her pack, as though she had hugely broad shoulders. They could see Caleb ahead. He strode along the narrow, slightly uphill path, working his poles like a cross country skier. He passed a broad oak with a simple white blaze six feet up its trunk. He was on course.

## Chapter 3: Thirdway (March 20)

Far north of the Georgian slope where Caleb was striding away from Meg and Skittles, a 24-year-old man knocked on the partially open front door of the Thirdway Lodge. Adam was dressed in new blue jeans and a green pullover sweater. He tentatively entered, smelling a fireplace. “Hello?” he said. He turned toward the sound of raised voices—a stairway leading upward. He knew one voice belonged to Dr. Mitch Carson, but he didn’t recognize the woman’s voice. Walking in on an argument did not seem like a good way to start a new job. He retreated to his car.

Fifteen minutes later, he returned to the lodge. This time he was greeted by a pleasant older man who arose from his seat behind a large oaken desk.

“Adam! It’s good to see you.” Mitch came from around his desk, hand extended.

“Dr. Carson!” They clasped hands and embraced each other briefly with their free arms.

As they separated, Mitch asked, “How’s your mother?”

“She’s fine, Dr. Carson, and thanks for asking. She said to pass along her regards.”

“Duly noted,” said Mitch. “And it’ll be Mitch, not Dr. Carson. Those days are long gone, just like most of my hair. Turning 60 will do that.”

Adam laughed. “Do you miss TechMed?”

“I still do a little writing on the side for them. It gives me variety and keeps me in touch with the old gang. But I don’t really miss it, except for some of the people, like your mother.”

Adam turned toward the sound of footsteps on the staircase, and saw an attractive, middle-aged woman with short brown hair take the final step.

She approached with a warm smile. “You must be Adam. Mitch said we would have a visitor.”

“Ms. Carson?” Adam walked toward her with extended hand. Yes, the second voice in the argument was hers.

The three now stood in front of the large desk.

“Yes, but it’s Becca to you and pretty much everyone else I come across. My mom always preferred Rebecca and my brother would call me that sometimes, out of spite. I would get back at him by calling him Raymond, which he despised.” She drawled out the last word.

Adam cocked his head at the accent. “I know Mitch is from Richmond and you sound Southern, but not Virginia Southern unless it’s more Appalachian than I’m used to.”

Becca laughed. “Maybe it’s the Texas in me, but that was decades ago. Most people here pick Georgia, if they guess anything. I moved east when I was a teenager and later met Mitch. And here we are thirty years later.” She looked at Mitch.

Mitch fidgeted with a paper on his desk. “Becca, we hope Adam’s going to be with us until fall. He will help with maintenance and fixing up the cabins and manning the place at times.”

“Oh,” she said, with a flash of surprise that was quickly replaced with another warm smile. “That will be wonderful. If the lodge is as successful as last year, you can certainly use the help.”

“Thank you, Becca,” said Adam. His arrival seemed like a surprise to her, but he needed the work and wanted to get off on the right foot. “What do you do here?”

Becca smiled and inclined her head back briefly. “As little as possible.”

“She has her own business,” said Mitch. He looked at Becca with what Adam saw as pride. “She started a community education center in Jefferson and it’s taking off. She even attracts students from Roanoke. And she just got a state grant that supports adult education in small communities.”

Becca smiled and put an appreciative hand on Mitch’s arm.

“Let’s sit,” said Mitch, leading them to a long wooden table. It looked like a big picnic table, with a top of polyurethane-coated yellow pine.

After they were seated, Adam looked at Becca. “If I remember, you were a professor at VCU in Richmond.”

“Good memory, Adam,” Becca replied, warming to this newcomer. “I taught a variety of courses in the School of Education. Now, remind me, how do you know Mitch?”

“My mom worked with Mitch, and I interned one summer.”

“His mother is a marketing director I worked closely with,” said Mitch. “Adam interned in my group one summer and ended up helping to write a paper that got published.”

Adam smiled. “I still remember the title: ‘The effects of circulating chromium ions on the immune system of mice.’ Some of TechMed’s implants have chrome in them and we wanted to make sure they were safe.”

I kept a copy of the paper onboard because the other sailors couldn't believe I was a published author."

"Impressive," said Becca. "Sailors?"

"Yes, ma'am, I was in the Navy for six years, stationed in Norfolk. I got electrical engineering certified. I'd like to get a job in that field, someday."

"Then why?" Becca looked around the lodge.

Mitch put his hand out to interject.

"It's okay, Dr. Carson," said Adam. "Sorry, I mean Mitch." He turned to Becca. "I can thank Mom. She's well connected on LinkedIn and shared my post when I was looking for a job."

"And I," said Mitch, "saw it and remembered how good Adam was with us. I'd been thinking of summer help and, though I knew it wasn't in his field, thought it wouldn't hurt to ask."

"And frankly," followed Adam, "the prospect of some good physical work on dry land was very appealing. And I can pursue a job with my training later."

"So, how did you two," said Adam, looking between Mitch and Becca, "end up out here doing what you're doing?"

"We both like helping people and this seemed like a good way to do it," replied Mitch.

Adam tilted his head. "Forgive the observation, but it seems like you were both helping people a lot, with your research and," he turned to Becca, "you teaching so many people."

"Maybe we were helping them too much, Adam," said Becca. "The whole work-life balance thing. And we had come up here years ago for our tenth anniversary and stayed in one of the cabins. It was a magical week. That always stuck with us and when we got too busy—we would think of 'heading to the hills.'"

Mitch put a hand on Becca's. "We would fantasize about starting a bed and breakfast or something, then when our twenty-fifth anniversary was coming up, I tried to book this place again and saw it was on the market. It all came together pretty fast after that. We were hoping for a slower pace."

"Yes," said Becca, looking at Mitch in a way that Adam could not interpret. "Funny how that worked out."

Adam sensed tension. He looked around. "Where do I sleep?"



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“Bunkhouse Three,” said Mitch. “It will be you and Zeke. It’s the smallest with only two bunks. Zeke put up a wall in the middle so you each really have your own small room with a door. I told you it would be primitive.”

“It’ll be fine. I’ve slept on enough cots and hammocks to appreciate a simple bed and closed door. Who’s Zeke?”

“Another helper,” offered Becca. “He’s been with us a few years. Sort of part-time. He does basic maintenance, cleaning, and runs to town for us. He shuttles hikers around too.”

“I look forward to meeting him. How many bunkhouses are there?”

“Six altogether,” said Mitch. “The other five can hold eight people. Four sets of bunks in each.”

“And two finished cabins out back,” said Becca. “They’re for families or couples who want more privacy. And another two that we want to fix up.”

“Maybe I can do the wiring, if it needs it,” said Adam. “Can I get settled in so I can start?” He wanted to establish a beachhead.

“Sure,” said Mitch, standing up. “Let’s go get your things and I’ll show you your bunk.”

Adam was relieved and got up, starting toward the front door. Mitch looked back at Becca as he followed Adam. She was looking down at her clasped hands.

Ten minutes later, Mitch entered the side door of the lodge. Becca was still seated. He sat across from her.

Becca looked exasperated. “I don’t know, Mitch. I hope the extra hands helps you take a step back, but it seems like it just means there is more work and more hikers and other guests and more commotion and distractions.”

“Distracting for me or for you?” asked Mitch, his expression souring.

“Hello?” came a voice from the front door.

Expecting guests, Mitch popped up and turned to see a teenage girl standing at the front entrance. She was slim, blonde and dressed in black jeans and a bright red sweater. She was carrying a black leather folio. She didn’t look like a typical guest and he thought she might be collecting for a school project or selling ads for the paper.

Mitch approached. “Can I help you?”

“I’m looking for Ms. Carson. I think she’s expecting me.”

Mitch turned a surprised look toward Becca, who had risen at the mention of her name.

“Kathryn?” said Becca.

“Yes ma’am,” said the girl, approaching. “Ms. Carson?”

“Yes, it is,” Becca replied, extending her hand. As they shook, she nodded toward Mitch. “And this is Dr. Carson.”

“Doctor?” asked Kathryn, releasing Becca’s hand and turning to Mitch. “Wow.”

Mitch laughed. “I am not a real doctor, Kathryn. I have a doctorate in biomedical engineering from UVA so don’t ask me about any symptoms you have. And if you do ask me anything, please use my first name. It’s Mitch.” He reached out and was impressed with her firm grip.

“And it’s Becca here,” said Becca. “Mitch, Kathryn and I have a few things to talk about. Mind if we use the long table?”

“Of course not,” said a puzzled Mitch. “Will it bother you if I work at my desk?”

“Not at all,” she replied, leading Kathryn to the table.

Mitch went to work, tapping his pen over Adam’s formal application, then filling out tax forms for a new employee. As he worked, Mitch kept glancing up at Becca and the young woman. There was occasional laughter and he looked up again when he heard benches being moved. Becca and Kathryn stood, leaned over the table and shook hands. Mitch’s curiosity got the better of him. He got up and walked to the table. “Looks like you two struck a deal.”

Kathryn turned toward Mitch with a broad grin. “I got the job! Thank you, Dr. Carson. And Ms. Carson. I mean Mitch, and, and Becca. I can’t wait to tell Mom!” She looked down at her phone.

“Job?” said Mitch, raising an eyebrow at Becca.

Kathryn’s joy left her face.

“Yes,” said Becca firmly. “Kathryn will start part-time at the center next week, then full-time for the summer once school lets out. It was part of the grant funding.”

Mitch recovered and turned to Kathryn. “Good for you.” He raised his hand to high-five her. “Congratulations!”

She returned the gesture, the grin reappearing. “Thank you, sir.”

They all turned as the side door opened and closed. Adam approached the trio.

“Kathryn,” said Becca, “let me introduce you to Adam. He’ll be working at the lodge through the summer. Adam, Kathryn will be working at my center in town, as an instructor’s assistant.”

“Nice to meet you, and congratulations,” said Adam, shaking Kathryn’s waiting hand. “Since I just did a job search, I wonder how you found out about this one.”

Becca stepped forward. “Her mom took one of my classes last fall on mediating disputes. She told me about her daughter, a high school senior, reading all the course material and trying out the methods on her schoolmates and siblings. So, when I knew I needed an intern, she’s the one I thought of.”

Mitch and Adam nodded at Kathryn, impressed.

Kathryn blushed. “Okay, so we’ve established I’m a dork.” She looked around. “This place is so cool!”

“Let me orient you both,” said Mitch, nodding toward Kathryn and Adam. “But first, do either of you want something to drink?” They both shook their heads.

Mitch swept his arm. “We call this whole area the Great Room. It’s our indoor public area for guests. It serves as meeting area, office, supply store, and eating room. It’s about twenty-five by forty feet. On the front wall are the main double doors you came in.” He pointed at the doors, then pivoted to his left along a wall of large windows. “Windows, of course...”

Becca was amused, but not surprised, at Mitch’s methodical description.

“...and then in the front to our left we have the game corner, with couch, coffee table, and chairs. And there’s a small bookcase for games and reading materials. That area’s quite the hiker hangout. Further around, on the far, short wall, is the big fireplace.” It was still smoking from the morning’s fire. “Adam, we’ll want you to keep the bin outside well stocked with wood.” Mitch pivoted toward the far corner. “There we have shelves with minor hiking supplies. Some food, fuel canisters, repair kits, and so on. If hikers need a major resupply, they go to Okafor’s country store in Jefferson. And next, on the back wall, we have a side table and storage. In the summer we have coffee and some light breakfast set up for guests. Next, we have the stairwell which goes up to our living space, and there’s a

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big storage room up there too. On this other short wall, the side door goes out to the bunkhouses and cabins and there's a blue-blaze trail to the AT. And finally, right here, we have my desk for guest registration and mail drop. And I have a little space heater under my desk. Okay, that gives you the three-sixty. Oh, and of course in the center of the room is our pride. We inherited this huge pine table from the previous owners. It can seat about twenty in a pinch. Some summer mornings, it gets filled with hikers having coffee and bagels and planning out their days."

"Wow," said Kathryn. Both she and Adam were nodding in approval.

"Why is it called Thirdway?" asked Kathryn.

"I know this one," said Adam. "When hikers are trying to go the whole distance of the Appalachian Trail north from Georgia to Maine, this is about a third of the way."

Kathryn's blue eyes widened. "They walk it? The whole way? At one time?"

"They try to," said Becca. "It usually takes four to six months."

"I mean," said Kathryn, shaking her head, "I've heard of the trail, the AT and all, but I guess I never thought about how long it is or doing it all at once. Are there any other milestone lodges on the AT, like Halfway?"

"Not that I know of," Mitch said, laughing. "Sometimes this feels like a halfway house, though." At Becca's sharp glance, he quickly added, "I mean, sometimes we have people who just kind of hang out for a while. They don't seem too serious about their hikes."

Kathryn looked at her phone with alarm. "Shoot, I have to get back for class. See you next week, Ms. Becca?"

Becca smiled and nodded. "I look forward to it, Kathryn. Nine a.m. Monday and you know where the center is."

Kathryn was already at the front door. "It was nice meeting all of you! Hey, Ms. Becca, can I use what you said? Instructor's Assistant? It sounds better than Intern."

"That's the title I put in the grant, so definitely use it," replied Becca. "And who knows, one of these days you might be the Assistant Instructor."

Kathryn worked out this puzzle on her face, then brightened. "I get it! That would be cool. It gives me something to work toward. Rats, I really gotta run." She turned and was gone.

The three adults chuckled as she left.

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Adam said, “Becca, I think she’s going to be great. Mitch, I’m going to start stacking wood near the side door like you showed me.” Not waiting for a reply, he turned to leave.

Becca and Mitch stood silent. Finally, Becca said, “My, our situation just changed. Mitch, we’re so caught up in our own worlds we didn’t even tell each other about these new hires. Like I said upstairs, I don’t know if we have time for each other. Something has to change.”

“Becca,” began Mitch. He took her hand and led her to the game corner. They sat beside each other on the couch. “What are we going to do? We have a passion for these second careers of ours, but it seems like they have a life of their own that’s consuming us.”

“I agree,” she replied, pulling her hand from his. “When we came here, I knew this place might be busy at times and I was looking forward to helping. But now with my work, honestly, this place is a distraction.”

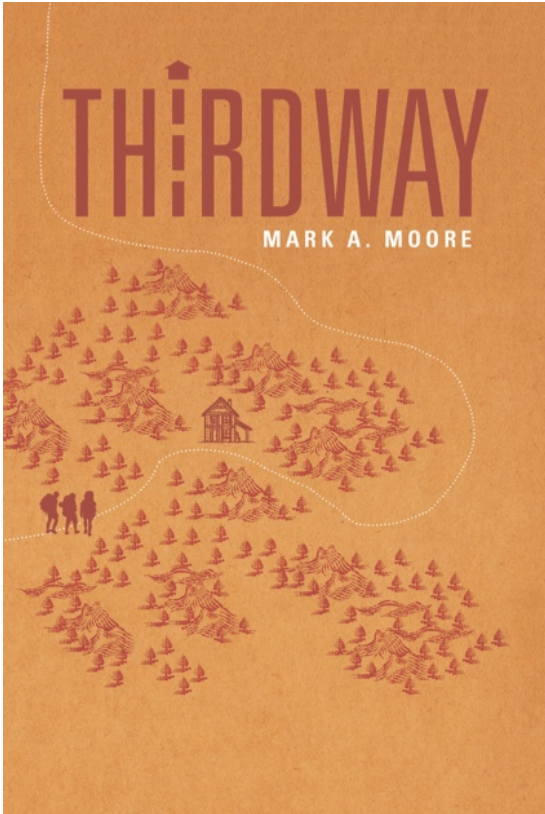
Mitch felt hurt. The lodge was his baby and he was defensive. “Well, what do you suggest, Becca?” he said, flinging her name like a dart.

“Oh, Mitch, we’ve been through all this before. One of the reasons we didn’t have kids was that we liked our peace and quiet too much. It’s too damned hectic and noisy here. It was one thing when we had fewer hikers and they were early to rise and early to bed. Now you have a lot more guests and sometimes—well, it’s like a party at night. I wanted a sanctuary and this is not it.”

Mitch pulled away and squared on her. “Becca, we talked about this before we moved here.” His voice rose. “What did you think it was going to be? One old guest who went to bed at seven? Jesus, Becca, why in the hell did you agree to this if you weren’t going to be supportive? And remember that the slow times in winter were supposed to be ours. But now you’re knee-deep in the center.” Mitch looked down. He was being selfish, but he didn’t care. Raining on her dream might even the score. Although, yes, maybe the decision to get the lodge was unwise.

She retrieved his hand and looked at him until he met her gaze. Her brown eyes glistened. “Mitch, I’ve been thinking a lot and I may need to leave Thirdway. For both our sakes.”

She released his hand, got up, and walked toward the stairs. He could hear her sniffing.



*Thirdway* portrays intersecting communities—the inhabitants of a small Virginia town set along the Appalachian Trail and a troupe of hikers on transformational journeys. These groups intertwine in a tale of adventure, family, addiction, relationships, redemption, and self-discovery.

## **Thirdway**

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