

*Beeline is a story of mystery, romance, suspense, backpacking, co-dependencies, family dynamics, insecurities, and triumph set along the Appalachian Trail and at the fictional Thirdway Lodge in Virginia. Enjoy the journey.*

## **Beeline**

By Mark A. Moore

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# BEE LINE

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## —Prologue—

*Mama . . . just killed a man. Put a gun against his—*

*No, no, no. That's what that guy sings. The guy Dad said was just not right.* “That boy ain’t right,” he’d say with a smirk when he heard the song on the radio.

I looked down at the blood oozing out of the torso, through the wildly colored shirt. Not a gun against his head, but . . . Now, my arms were bent and I looked at the knife I still held in both hands pointed at the ceiling. It reminded me of a prayer emoji. I looked again at the man on the floor. “That boy ain’t right,” I muttered and winced. “Oh, mama, what have I done?”

My knees weakened and things went gray.

\* \* \*

The next morning, I awoke to a knock on my bedroom door and looked through bleary eyes at the grinning face.

“Dude, you gonna sleep all day?”

I shook my head and noticed how tightly my hands were clenched. *Had that happened last night, or was I just clenching a dream knife?*

I slowly got up and shuffled into the living room. “Where’s the rug?”

He shrugged. “Collateral damage.”

I sniffed and the air stung my nose. “What’s that smell?”

He sniffed deeply like his face was buried in a gangster funeral-worthy floral arrangement. “Freedom.”

I looked around again. He followed my gaze. “Don’t worry, he’s gone.”

“Gone?”

“Don’t worry about it. He won’t bother us.”

My voice rose. “Don’t worry? What—”

“Shut up!” His harshness gave me an adrenaline jolt and the shadow over last night lightened a shade. Then he gave a calming gesture of absolution. The shadow deepened again, helping me to forget. *But forget what?* “Don’t think about it.”

I shook my head in resignation. “He’s gone?”

“‘Gone, boy, gone.’ In the past.”

*The past. Where had it gone wrong? And what was that saying about what happens when we don't remember the past?*

"Dude, you need some coffee," he said, offering me a mug.

I chugged. *Destined to repeal it. Or something.* I onboarded more coffee. *Repeat it, that's it.* I looked down and didn't recognize the T-shirt I was wearing. It wouldn't have been my choice, anyway, not being a Stones fan.

"Not yours," he stated the obvious.

I looked around for my own shirt. "Where's—"

"Gone too. You're clean. Literally. We're clean. He was an asshole and if you hadn't, well, taken care of things, he'd be the one sitting there with Jagger's tongue sticking out at me."

I shook my head and stood, walking to the window, to the sunlight.

From behind me, he said, "Dude, you need a hike!"

***I whipped around, incredulous. "I need a hike?" I pointed at the floor where the rug had been. "Isn't that where all this started?"***

---

## Where All This Started

“You know this can’t continue, Rudy.” Olivia stood in front of him, hands on her hips. Rudy looked so much smaller when he folded into that tiny school desk.

He looked up at her. “Is it our age difference?”

She slapped her forehead in exasperation. “This,” she swept her arm around the classroom, “is inappropriate and you know it. What would your parents say? What would the school board say?”

Rudy grimaced. “You’re right.” He half-smiled, no doubt trying to look cute. “You *are* the mature one after all.”

She humphed. That smile of his. That’s where all of this had started, and it had led to a situation that could get her fired. She changed the topic. “So, what are you doing this summer?”

He unwound himself from the desk made for a child and stood to his full 5’10”. “I dunno. You talked about a hike on the Appalachian Trail. Want company?” He took a step toward her.

She backed up. “For freak’s sake, dude, I told you I’m going on the AT alone. We can’t get caught.” He nodded and advanced one more step. She backed up against her desk. A plastic cup and its contents clattered to the floor. He quickly bent and grabbed the cup rolling in a semi-circle at his feet. She bent, too, and scooped up the pens, a ruler, and scissors all in one hand. She held them in front of her, as though to ward off his charms. She grinned.

He looked at the point of the scissors. “Be careful with those.” He stepped forward so that the point pressed firmly against his stomach. He leaned forward, his head close to hers. Olivia Hernandez stood paralyzed as her hand felt the pressure on the scissors and Rudy’s lips brushed her neck.

She stumbled back and laid the scissors down on the desk. “I repeat, I don’t want to get into trouble.”

“Maybe if Ivan were out of the picture.”

“You know it’s more complicated than that.”

He held up his hands in surrender. “You’re right, Libby. Maybe in a different situation, we could...”

*Maybe we could,* thought Olivia.

A light rat-a-tat on the closed classroom door caused them to snap their heads in that direction. Olivia slid her hands down to straighten her shirt and pants, then opened the door.

“Well, hello there, Kolo,” she said with a forced smile, “You’re here early.”

The girl took a tentative step forward. “Uh, I’m here for Principal Grissom. Ms. Wilkinson told me to look for him.” She still looked at Olivia, although Principal Rudy Grissom was standing right there. “There’s a parent to see him,” she glanced at Rudy, “in his office.”

“Well, Principal Grissom,” said Olivia, “duty calls. I’ll finish up those assessments this afternoon.”

Rudy nodded at Olivia, then down at the second grader. “Thank you, Kolo. Please tell Ms. Wilkinson I’ll be right there.”

Kolo nodded, turned, and closed the door partway. They heard her clomping down the hall.

Olivia stared at Rudy. “We have to do something about Ivan.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “I have a plan, Libby. He may just end up in the wrong place at the right time.”

“Be careful, Rudy. He caught us and might even have pictures.”

“He’s the one that needs to be careful.” He nodded toward the door. “Gotta go.”

“Parents on the last week of school? They may want a head start on vacation.”

“Or complain about grades or beg us to keep their kids a few more weeks.”

Olivia smiled weakly. “You have to go, and I need this job.”

Rudy nodded and sighed. “Maybe just see you in the fall? From a distance...” He turned to go.

Olivia’s heart lurched. They knew it had to be this way, and she wasn’t sure he was *the one* after all, but did he have to give up so easily? “Bye, sweetie.”

He turned back and saw her hopeful smile. “Can I know your rough plans, Libby?” he asked. “You know, to make sure I avoid you on the trail. Or...”

She rushed to her desk, tore off a piece of colored construction paper, grabbed a crayon, and hastily wrote a message with the wrong hand—her vain attempt at anonymity. She distractedly shoved it into an empty sandwich bag and thrust it at him. He took it and said, “Looks like a ransom note.” After

school, Rudy Grissom got in his truck under a light rain. The old Chevy started in disagreement, coughing at him. He pulled the plastic bag from his front pocket, looked at the note, and smiled: *Start in Damascus on the AT around Memorial Day and end by the Fourth of July near Roanoke at the Thirdway Lodge.*

At the Thirdway Lodge in central Virginia several weeks earlier, Emily handed five dollars to a tall, handsome hiker. “Your change, Yellowstone.”

“Thanks, Scorpion,” he said, eyes on Emily but nodding at the signs over her shoulder: TRAIL LINGO SPOKEN HERE and SCORPION - ASSISTANT BUSINESS MANAGER. “Trail lingo?”

Emily laughed. “Turns out I’m the only one here with a trail name, and the only one that’s hiked any distance on the AT, but this place is Appalachian Trail through and through.”

Yellowstone peered around the lodge from under the brim of his cowboy hat. “Hiker box, supply shelves with fuel canisters and ramen noodles, free coffee, hook scale to weigh backpacks, table with games and comfy chairs, picture of Earl Shaffer on the wall, pole corral on the front porch, yep, you got your finger on the pulse all right.” He pointed to another sign behind her that read FRIENDS OF BILL W, ASK PROPRIETOR ABOUT MEETING. “Don’t think I’ve been to a lodge with an AA meeting before.”

Emily laughed again. “That’s my doing too. People with trail names can’t be the only ones with anonymity around here! I got inspired by a similar sign that I saw in Maine.”

He squinted at her. “Thru-hiker?”

Emily grimaced and pointed to her 2,000-miler certificate from the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, given to those hikers who traversed most, if not all, of the 2,200-mile trail. It was tacked on a corkboard next to numerous photos of former hiking guests. “Almost. Two years ago, I did the whole thing except about ten miles. Slipped my mind.”

Yellowstone’s jaw dropped. “How’d that happen?”

“I hiked north from Georgia before wiping about ten miles south of here, at Slaghorn Rocks. Then, after I recovered, I flipped up to Maine and hiked south back here to my family’s lodge, and damned if I didn’t forget that little section from the lodge south to Slaghorn Rocks.”

Yellowstone put his thumb about a quarter inch away from his index finger like he was holding a pen. “You were this close?”

“Yep. I’ve closed that gap since, but it was the next year.”

“Hell, that’s a thru-hiker in my book.”

Emily shrugged just as her cell phone rang. Yellowstone turned with a wave, heading toward his bunk and the shower he'd no doubt been looking forward to for a week. Emily snatched up her phone. "Hey, Laine Porter!"

"Scorpion!"

"Whaddup, Intrepid?"

"Woohoo, trail names already!" said Laine. "Yeah, let's get this hike started. I almost signed my term paper Intrepid Laine today."

"Geez, Laine, I'm normally the one with impulse control issues." She glanced at the doorway recently occupied by Yellowstone and started pacing toward the game corner.

"Speaking of impulse control, Scorpion, did you get your last little *situation* straightened out?"

"I sure did. Roanoke man's not going to mess with me again." Emily turned from the game corner as two hikers entered the front door. "Laine, guests just walked in and I've got to go. We'll talk soon, but you know our trip isn't for a month yet."

"Memorial Day Weekend, I know, I know."

Emily held up a just-a-minute finger to the two hikers. "Look, Laine—"

"Is Nick still going with us?"

"No!" snapped Emily. The two hikers jumped. She held her finger back up and whispered to Laine. "Yes, he'll be there, but he'll be hiking with Dr. Cory Parsons."

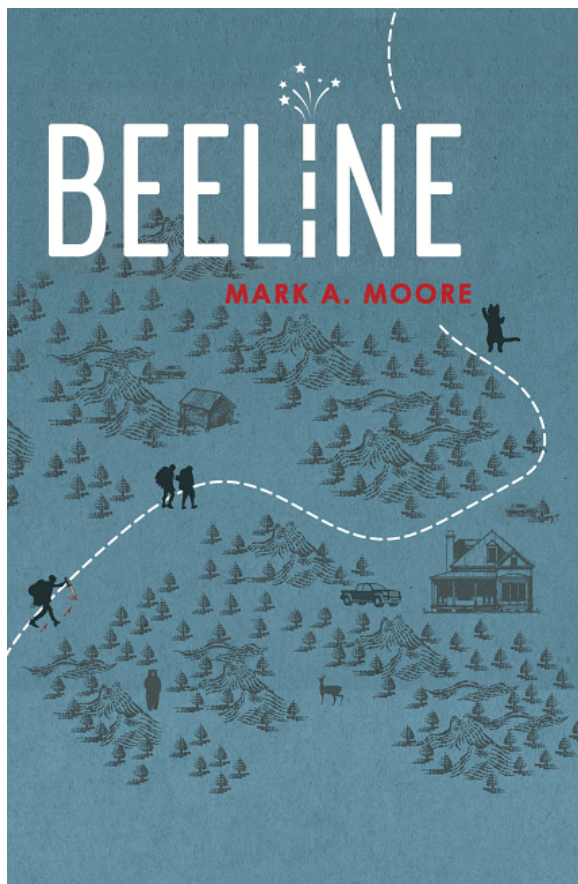
"I hate her," whispered Laine.

"She's all right," said Emily, with a sigh. "As long as he's happy . . . And really, what chance do I have against a flipping doctor? I'm just Ms. GED, at your service."

"You're smart as hell, Emily. And, anyway, she'd better not mess with Nick or you, or I'll open a can of Intrepid whoop ass on her."

Emily laughed, "Love you, Laine." She clicked off the phone and turned to the hikers. "Sorry about that. Bunks and a shower? Shuttle into Jefferson for dinner and resupply?" They grinned and held out cash.

As she was signing them in, she thought to herself, yep, they're together—Nick and Cory.



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