

Lost in the Woods

Chapter 1

Where Are We?

Dad sighed and pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket. He studied it for a moment, then frowned and stuffed it in his right pocket again. He had that strange worried look on his face I hardly ever saw, and it scared me. It made me feel like the world was going to end tomorrow. It made memories flash through my mind, bad ones. Dad glanced at the plants and weeds in front of him, then at the trees bending over us. He didn't need to tell me—we were lost. The usual sparkle in his eyes had disappeared. The jolly grin on his face was gone. His eyes were now dull, his mouth turned upside-down. Uh-oh. Dad barely ever became like this, still and quiet and thinking. He only did it if something really terrible was happening. I stood behind my father, anxious. Dad took out the paper again and scanned it with his blue eyes. He muttered to himself and looked even closer at the paper. It was a map, I found out. I buried my face in my hands. Oh, no. Please. We couldn't be. We couldn't be lost. It was impossible.

Dad folded the map carefully and tucked it inside his pocket. His eyes were wide with fear, his mouth hanging open in a sort of silent scream. I shut my eyes tightly. I hated that ugly look. I simply hated it. There was no more to it. It made me feel hopeless and sad, full of grief. It drained all the happiness out of me, every single drop, and made me feel terrible, as if I'd just woken up from a nightmare. I opened my eyes slowly. Dad was staring at me, his bright blue eyes glassy and thoughtful, as if behind them he was thinking of something. And I knew exactly what he was thinking:

We're lost.

I didn't want to believe it, but I had to. I knew it was perfectly, utterly, terribly true, and I couldn't change the fact that it was. This morning, we'd packed a couple of large bags full of water and sandwiches and set off for a long hike in the woods nearby our little, broken-down cottage. We'd planned to follow the trail that twisted and winded straight through the middle of the woods, where most of the wildlife lived. And we had. But halfway through the trail, we'd spotted a deer and her fawn, and, excitedly, we'd quickly yet quietly hurried after the two amazing creatures, Dad snapping away with his camera like mad. The deer began to gallop swiftly, too fast for us to keep up with, until they'd disappeared behind a huge, messy clump of overgrown weeds and wild rosebushes. After gazing admiringly for quite a while at the direction the deer had leaped away to, Dad had suddenly cried, as if I knew, “Where are we?”

I'd jumped about three feet into the air, so startled and surprised I'd dropped the bottle of water I'd been holding, and asked, "What do you mean? I thought we were following the trail." I glanced down at my feet, expecting to see a yellow gravel path I was standing on, but there was no trail. "Dad," I whispered shakily, as worry flooded through my body. "Do you mean to say—do you mean to say we're *lost*?" My whole face had turned pale and white, and my worn-out sneakers were soaked, because the water bottle I'd dropped had spilled water all over them. A jolt of terror shot through my body as I waited for the answer to my question.

"Yes, Emily," Dad breathed. "Yes, we're lost."

And here we were, stuck and lost in the middle of a huge, unknown, unfamiliar jungle, Dad staring blankly at a useless map, and me gazing worriedly at his shivering back. A harmless brown bear and her cub sneaked behind me, but I didn't notice. I was too scared—scared that we were lost in the woods, scared that we'd never find our way out, scared that there wasn't enough food and water to last us until we got out of here, scared that I'd die of panic and worry, scared that a giant tarantula would attack me, scared that—there was just so many reasons I was scared!

Finally Dad turned around slowly and marched over to me. "The best I can reckon is that we're somewhere around here," he muttered thoughtfully to me, jabbing his stubby index finger at a spot quite close to the trail. I felt relieved. We could easily find our way back to the trail. But what if his calculation was wrong? What if we *weren't* where he thought we were? What would happen if we walked for days and couldn't find our way out of the woods? Then what? Noticing the look of uncertainty on my face, Dad smiled in what he seemed to hope was a reassuring way. "I'm pretty sure we're there, honey," he said, trying to sound happy and relieved. But I knew him too well. He had that worried tone in his voice.

"Daddy," I whispered. "I'm scared."

He nodded sadly. The only time I ever called him "Daddy" was when I was really worried, but right now I was feeling more than just plain old *worried*. I was starting to panic. I nervously twisted the bottom of my ragged, tattered T-shirt. "I'm scared, too, honey," Dad whispered softly. "But that doesn't mean we should stand here like this. We should be strong and brave. We should be upbeat, optimistic, dear. And I can assure you, we *will* find our way out of here."

I sniffled. "You sure?"

"Positive," he laughed.

Chapter 2

Lost in the Woods . . . Alone

“Daddy, I'm tired,” I complained loudly. We had begun trudging through the woods thirty minutes ago, and my legs already were starting to ache. The sun was setting, and the sky was a pinkish-orange color. I shivered—the air was getting chill. Pink clouds loomed across the sky, fat lazy blobs. My legs were cut and bleeding, and there were just about ten million blisters on each of my feet. My curly blonde hair was tangled and messy, like those silly rosebushes that had scratched my bare legs. The sleeve of my T-shirt had gotten caught in the curved end of a branch, and I'd struggled for what seemed like hours until I'd tugged hard, so hard that the sleeve of my T-shirt had ripped clean off. Somehow the seat of my pants had been torn off, probably by a branch like my shirt had, showing my white Fruit of the Loom underpants. I was a total mess.

Dad whirled around and glared at me. “Too bad,” he snapped. “Now get your bottom moving.” He was cranky and tired, and the rosebushes that had scratched him did *not* improve his terrible mood. He was a mess, too. Even though the night air was chill, all that walking had caused him to start sweating like crazy. After a few minutes, he'd ripped off his shirt in anger and thrown it onto the ground. I, also, was as hot as popping grease, but I wasn't sweating quite as much as him. His orange hair was tangled with dried brown leaves, thorns, twigs, and dead bugs. His tough jeans were fine, since nothing could rip them, unlike my soft pants. His face was smudged with dirt and tree sap. He didn't look much better than I did, really.

We trudded along slowly. Monkeys swung from tree to tree above us, screeching curiously, as if to say, “What are these strange creatures doing in my home?” Bluebirds chirped a merry song. “*Cheep, cheep, cheep!*” Deer gracefully galloped in front of us and disappeared behind berry bushes. The whole forest was full of loud, noisy life. Normally, Dad would have stopped and stared at them excitedly, but both of our minds were on getting out of here, not animals. And anyway, we'd be looking at them for the rest of our lives if we couldn't find our way out of here. Who in the world cared about these silly animals *now*? Not me, that's for sure.

Suddenly, I heard one of the monkeys give a loud, startling screech. Dad and I both stopped to gaze at the animal who'd made that noise. A fierce-looking, strong, tough monkey dangled from the thin branch of a willow tree, screeching nonstop. “*EEEEEEE!*” it wailed. “*EEEEEEE! EEEEEEEE!*” It glared angrily at us.

Dad and I froze. The monkey swung to another tree's branch, edged its way over to the trunk, and scrambled down, screeching incessantly. Leaves rustled under its feet as it cautiously approached us. Its eyes were narrowed and glaring. You could practically see the fire dancing in them. Its nose flared angrily. Its mouth was wide open, showing all its sharp, yellow fangs. It made an awful, terrifying hissing sound as it crept toward us. "Dad," I breathed. "Are you aware that—"

"Yes," he interrupted softly. "Yes. Yes, I am."

"What do we do?" I whispered urgently. The monkey was edging closer and closer to us with every cautious, angry step.

"Stay still," Dad replied sharply. "Don't move."

The monkey came closer, growling with bared fangs.

"Uh, Dad?" I whispered uncertainly.

"Yes, Emily?" he asked quietly.

"It's—it's getting closer."

"Yes, it is, dear."

"Don't you think we should—you know?"

"What, honey?"

"Like run?"

"That's a great idea."

We both started to sprint away from the monkey. It let out a thunderous screech and chased after us, hissing and growling. My sneakers fell off and my bare feet pounded on the soggy dirt ground. The bottoms of my feet were red and sore, but I hurried on, beside Dad. I couldn't—I simply *couldn't*—let that monstrous monkey harm, maim, or kill me. My face was flushed and desperate. I glanced behind my shoulder at the monkey, still dashing furiously. Its eyes glowed angrily. It chased after us, those beady black eyes staring at me. It screeched again, and put on an amazing burst of speed. "Dad!" I cried, trying to warn him. "Dad, the monkey's getting faster!"

Dad tripped and fell, landing face down in a puddle of mud. "Dad!" I wailed. The monkey leaped over to him, grabbed the left leg of his tough jeans, and gave a good, hard yank. Dad's pants slipped off his legs. "AAARRRRRRGGGGG!" Dad jumped to his feet and tore ahead of me and the monkey, dashing along in his striped red-and-white underwear. "Dad, wait!" I cried. My backpack fell off my shoulders as I raced after him. "Daddy, wait! Daddy! *Daddy!*" Suddenly, I heard a screech behind me. I whirled around to see the monkey tearing open the backpack dumping out all its contents.

Uh-oh, I thought. This is not good. I watched in horror as the monkey dug through the pile of stuff, fished out a small plastic container crammed with sandwiches, and started fumbling with the container. He yanked at the blue plastic top, found that he could not open it, and began chewing the box with his sharp yellow teeth. He managed to make a tiny dent. Obviously satisfied with his work, he continued gnawing on the container. "Hey!" I shrieked angrily at the monkey. He glanced up carelessly at me and chewed on. "Give me back my container!" He glanced up again and glared at me. I stepped back into the eerie shadows of the wild oak trees. Even though I was angry with the monkey, that didn't stop me from being hopelessly terrified of it. I'd heard stories of monkeys seriously injuring people. I didn't want to end up like them. The monkey scowled at me and continued chewing the box. "Hey!" I screamed at him. That was all the food that we'd brought along. If the monkey ate it, Dad and I would probably starve to death. If I fought for the food, I'd probably get seriously injured. What was I going to do? Take a risk, fight the monkey, and try not to get my race ripped up, or should I just let the monkey take the food?

I didn't have much trouble deciding what to do. I was going to try and steal our food back from that monkey. It wasn't like I wasn't prepared. I had a pocketknife, and I was reasonably strong and tall for a eleven-year-old girl. I wasn't really a good fighter like some of the other kids at my school were, but I had my faithful old pocketknife, and that was enough. It wasn't as if it were going to be really difficult to scare away or maybe even kill a harmless little monkey, right? I slowly took my pocketknife out of my tight jean pocket and aimed it threateningly at the monkey.

"Okay, kid," I breathed softly. The monkey glanced carelessly up at me. The angry expression on his face meant quite plainly, "Will you stop chatting to me? Geez!" I scowled at him, stamped my foot in annoyance, and slowly, carefully began to edge closer to him, my pocketknife pointed at his chest. "Drop the container," I whispered menacingly, as I slowly walked closer to him. The monkey gave a little squeal of terror and the box slipped out of his hand. I dashed over to him as quick as my long legs would go and snatched up the container. "Got it!" I cried triumphantly. The monkey screeched, leaped into the air, did a fancy somersault, and as he was coming down skillfully plucked the container clean out of my hands! "Hey!" I roared angrily at him. I grabbed onto the container and yanked, hard. The monkey wrapped his arms tightly around the box and squealed, terrified. I tried to pry his hairy little fingers away from the box, but he wouldn't let go.

“That's it!” I screamed at him, so loud my throat hurt and I nearly popped my own eardrums. “I give up!” I let go of the box, tripped backward, and fell right in a puddle of thick, disgusting, oozing brown mud. “Ugh!” I cried as I furiously leaped to my feet. The monkey was scurrying away back to his safe willow tree, clutching the box of sandwiches to his chest and screeching. I aimed my pocketknife at him and threw it accurately. It missed his ear by an inch and clattered the ground. The thieving old rascal squealed and scrambled up his great big willow tree. One hand wrapped around my container, he climbed all the way to the highest branch of the tall, towering tree and perched himself comfortably there. He continued gnawing on his container like nothing had ever happened. When he'd made a big enough hole, he wiggled his tiny hand inside and pulled out a sandwich. He popped it into his mouth whole, chewed for a long time, and gobbled up the rest like a fat, greedy pig.

I glared at him for a moment before stomping over to my pocketknife, snatching it up, and hurrying over to my backpack, which had a giant hole in it from where the dumb monkey had torn it open. My whole body was caked in wet mud. I staggered along, looking like a muddy zombie. I tried to wipe my eyes with my mud-covered hand but only succeeded in smearing the brown ooze all over my face. I tripped on a rock, stumbled, but caught my balance before I fell. Slowly, wearily, I trudged along. The whole time I was walking, my mind was on that monkey. My eyes burned with anger at the thought of that little thief. That creature had stolen my only container of food. Now, thanks to the monkey, I was going to starve to death out here in the woods and nobody would know. Centuries later my bleached white bones would be found scattered around the muddy ground.

I'd been so mad with the monkey that I completely forgot about Dad. I whirled around, expecting him to be stumbling along behind me, breathing furiously, but he wasn't there. “Oh, yeah,” I muttered thoughtfully, smacking my forehead with my palm, “Dad ran off in his underwear.” My eyes suddenly widened in horror. “Wait a minute. *Dad ran off in his underwear!* My god, I should be looking for him, not thinking about that monkey!” I began wildly searching for my father. I peeked behind thick, towering green pines and glanced behind small, shriveled-up oaks, but I didn't see Dad. I screamed endlessly, “Dad! DAD! DAD!” But no strong, deep voice replied. I tore around the woods, searching helplessly for Dad, but I could not find him. At last I gave up and slumped under a shady tree. I had to face it. I was lost in the woods.

Alone.

Chapter 3

Finding Dad

I wasn't sure how long I sat under the tree. I didn't care. I was full of helplessness and worry. My heavy eyelids were half-closed and I gazed sadly at the ground through my long, curly eyelashes. Terrible thoughts swam around inside my head like frantic fish splashing around in the ocean. *You're going to starve. The monkey stole your food, remember? You're going to starve,* a little voice chanted endlessly inside my head. "I am not!" I shouted aloud angrily, but somewhere lurking in a dark corner in the back of my mind, I knew that I was. *And Dad's gone. What are you going to do without Dad, huh?* I could almost feel the menacing voice grin smugly. I miserably dragged my feet back and forth across the dirt ground and whispered, "I don't know." My voice cracked. Tears pushed against my heavy eyelids, but I forced them not to squeeze out of the corner of my eye. Dad was everything. After Mom had died, he'd become a mother *and* father to me, like he was two different people, yet only one. I *needed* Dad. He took care of me. He comforted me when I wasn't feeling too happy, assured me everything was alright when I felt scared, and cooked delicious meals for me every day, just like Mom would have done if she were still alive. He took Mom's place as a mother and still kept his as a father. Without Dad, I don't even want to think about what would become of me.

"This," I breathed, so softly I could barely hear my own voice. "This is what would become of me." With a dull *THONK*, I rested my head against the tree and closed my eyes. I sniffled and wiped my nose with the back of my wrist. *No, don't cry,* I pleaded myself silently. *Please don't cry, please, please. Eleven-year-old girls aren't supposed to cry.* But the more I begged myself not to cry, the more I wanted to burst into tears.

Which I did.

No, no, no! I thought desperately. *I'm crying!* Sobs escaped my lips and echoed through the woods, a hollow, mournful sound. Tears flowed down my cheeks like small, rapid streams. Some trickled quickly down my cheek, made a sharp curve, and crawled into my mouth. Tears don't taste very good, a lot like salty sea water, so I advise you not to taste them. Unfortunately, I must have swallowed more than a bucketful of tears, and they left a salty, rather unpleasant taste in my mouth. I spat out a mouthful of tears onto the ground. Luckily, I'm one of those kids who don't cry very long, but, unluckily, I'm one of those kids who shed an unusually large amount of tears, so I stopped crying pretty quickly, but by the time I had, there was a huge puddle of tears at my feet.

You're not in middle school! You're in kindergarten! A cold, taunting voice sneered a few cruel words in my mind. My lower lip trembled and quivered. Fortunately, I managed to seal my lips just before a high-pitched sob slipped past. I buried my face in my dirty, sweaty hands and allowed a few salty tears, but refused a sob. If I felt a sob brewing in my throat, I swallowed it down with difficulty.

Night fell quickly. Before I knew it stars were twinkling and shining in the sky. They were like tiny pieces of glitter spotting that blank, empty stretch of black, velvety sky, lighting up the world below it with an ominous, eerie glow. The moon hung on an invisible piece of thread, dangling low and guarding the earth. It reminded me of Mom's beautiful pearl necklace, the one that she'd given to me before she'd died. I would have started crying, because it's painful to think about Mom, if I weren't already asleep.

“Oh-h-h.”

I groaned sleepily as my eyelids fluttered opened and I blinked furiously. I kind of half-hoped that yesterday had all been a dream and that I'd find myself in my comfortable, cozy bedroom at home, but of course I wasn't. I miserably tucked a wisp of curly blonde hair behind my ear and mumbled, “I can't believe I'm still stuck in this stinking place.” I heaved a long, unenthusiastic sigh, stumbled sadly to my feet, and glared at my surroundings grumpily. I angrily kicked a dirty pebble with the toe of my sneaker and watched it as it skipped across the ground and splashed into a puddle of gooey, wet mud. Disgusted, I stared at it as it sank into the brown ooze. “Ugh. Well, that surely didn't improve my appetite!” I cried as I clapped a dirty hand to my mouth.

Wait a minute.

What was *that*?

I thought I'd heard a rustling sound not too far away, the crackling of dry leaves under heavy leather boots. My eyes widened in excitement and hope as I realized the sound was strangely familiar. “Dad,” I whispered softly. My sapphire-blue eyes twinkled. My heart pounded furiously, throwing itself against my ribcage. For a moment I was as still as a rock, my mouth hanging open, not bothering to close it quickly, the toe of my worn-out sneaker in a mud puddle, stiff with happiness. “Dad,” I breathed again, louder this time. “Dad! *Dad!*” I tore crazily towards the rustling sounds. “Dad!”

I don't think I've ever sprinted so fast in my life before, not even when I

was racing Jimmy Williams, the fastest kid in the whole school, not even when I was running from that black widow spider I found underneath my bed at home, not even when I was rushing to save Leo, my best friend, from drowning at the beach. Never, *ever* have I run so fast in my life before. In fact, my long legs surprised me. I never knew that I had such an ability. But then again, there are lots of abilities hidden in a single person that they have yet to find out about, and running is one of them.

I pumped my arms hard and sprinted faster than *ever* towards the rustling sound, screaming, “Dad! Dad!” I burst into a little clearing and there he was tall, buff, and handsome. I dashed at him at full speed, jumped up, and threw my arms around him. He stumbled backwards. “Dad!” I shouted happily, dropping to the ground. “I thought . . . you'd—” I froze and stared up at his face. His *unfamiliar* face. “Whoa. Wait a minute. Dad doesn't have a beard.” I stepped backwards. This man, the one that I thought was Dad, had a huge, tangled mane of beard growing wildly all over his face. But Dad didn't *have* a beard. He'd shaved this morning. Mouth open in horror, I stared at the man. He stared back at me. “Dad doesn't have green eyes,” I gasped. “He has *blue* eyes, like me!” I could just make out sparkling, emerald-green eyes glinting behind long, messy bangs on the man's face. “Whoa. Whoa. Dad doesn't—he doesn't *have* a green hat, or a plastic rain-jacket, or black pants. Last time I saw him, he didn't have on any clothes at all!” I shouted. “Hang on! You're not *Dad!* You're—you're a hobo!” I whirled around and started to sprint away, but the stranger grabbed the hood of my jacket. The helpless scream that sprang into my throat failed to pass my dry, cracked lips. He seized my shoulders with crushing strength and spun me around to face him. The moment I saw his smile, I relaxed.

“Hey,” whispered the man soothingly. His voice was deep and dripping with kindness. His green eyes gazed into mine. “Hey, it's okay.” He tugged his thick fingers through my tangled golden hair and stroked my flushed cheeks. He loosened his tight grip on my shoulders. “Who are you, kiddo? What are you doing here—alone? Where's your mother?” I could only stare in wonder and curiosity at the man. The words stuck in my throat. “What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?” He laughed playfully. I managed a weak smile.

“I'm lost,” I whispered softly.

“Oh?” the man inquired.

I laced my fingers together, yanked them apart, and shoved my clenched fists into my pockets. “It's . . . actually a long story,” I admitted apologetically.

“Do you want to tell it to me?” questioned the man hopefully. “I mean, I

really don't mind a long story, or anything. But if you don't want to tell me, you don't have to, of course. It wouldn't be nice to force some personal information out of someone, right? But if you want to tell me . . .” He threw a pleading, sideways glance at me, smiled pleasantly, and raised his eyebrows curiously.

I blurted out the whole story to the complete stranger, ranting on and on about the clever little monkey which had stolen our food and how much I wanted Dad to find me and especially about my beloved mother who had died of a serious blood cancer that couldn't be cured, leaving Dad and I stranded in a suddenly lonely and lifeless cottage that had once held Mom's gushing, everlasting happiness which was now . . . gone.

The moment the word “mother” escaped my lips, I burst into tears. The next thing I knew, the man had wrapped his warm arms around me and was tenderly fingering my hair. “There, there,” he whispered gently. “Wipe away your tears, now.” He handed me a crumpled white tissue which he pulled from the pocket of his pants.

I took the tissue from him with a trembling hand and deftly swiped it across my face. I clutched it tightly in my fist as I wailed, “But I've already lost Mom! Now—now I've lost *Dad*, too!”

“You haven't lost him,” the man assured me. “He's still obviously in the woods somewhere. All we need to do is find him.”

“We?” I asked shakily. “You mean you're going to help me?”

“Sure. Isn't that what Park Rangers are for?” grinned the man.

“You're—you're a Park Ranger?” I questioned.

“Of course I am,” the man replied. “I'm James Seeker the Park Ranger. What's your name?”

“Emily. Emily Cameron,” I answered. “So are we going to find Dad now?”

“Okay, let's—”

James the Park Ranger was interrupted by a rustle of leaves. A bush nearby swayed slightly, and a tall, burly man burst into the clearing. I whirled around, my eyes wide and frightened. James stepped protectively in front of me, his face pale with surprise.

“State your name and—” James began sternly, but was again cut off, this time by me.

“Dad!” I shrieked joyously. I ran out from behind James and threw my arms around my lost father's waist.

“Emily!” gasped Dad. “Oh, I thought I'd lost you forever. I looked and looked and . . .”

He stopped abruptly and tilted his head up to face James. “Emily, who is this here?” he demanded furiously. “Was he trying to *harm* you?”

“No, Dad, he wasn't, he's a Park—”

“So you're Emily's father, eh?” snarled James. “Let me give you a tip. Next time, don't run off when you see a monkey and leave your daughter stranded, alone, in the middle of the woods!”

Dad's face turned a dark shade of red, like it always did when he was angry and embarrassed at the same time. “Now, just what are you talking about? I did not—”

“What an irresponsible father you are!” shouted James rudely.

“The monkey ripped my pants off! I thought Emily was following me when I ran away!” Dad protested.

“James, Dad, please—” I begged.

“Don't just *think* Emily was following you! Make sure she really *is*!” James growled.

“I'll *make sure* you keep away from my daughter!” Dad snapped back.

“I can't believe how Emily can stand you! What a pain you are!” James barked through gritted teeth.

“You want to see pain?” Dad demanded, stepping forward.

“Bring it on!” James bellowed.

“Stop it!” I hollered. “Dad, James is a *Park Ranger*! He comforted me when I came to him for help. As for you, James, the monkey was probably going to kill Dad! He had a perfectly good reason to run away.”

Both men glared at each other, but their expressions had definitely softened. “Still—” James began heatedly.

“Quiet! Apologize, both of you!” I commanded, feeling rather like a teacher than a child.

“Sorry,” Dad muttered.

“It's alright. Sorry,” James said softly. He held out his big hand, and Dad gingerly shook it.

“James, would you be kind enough to show us the way out of the woods, please?” I asked pleasantly.

“Right this way,” James instructed. He strode over to a small opening in the giant wall of trees surrounding the clearing. “Here's the trail.”

“Thank you,” Dad said. I hugged James, and together Dad and I stepped out onto the trail. I glanced back over my shoulder and waved to James one last time, smiling my biggest.

James grinned back in that goofy way of his. Then he turned on his heel and pushed his way through the trees, the woods swallowing his whole body.

I sighed, and followed the trail with Dad until we burst into the bright sunlight. I blinked, not used to the sudden light. We stood at the edge of the woods for a moment, not wanting to leave it behind, then broke off into a brisk trot, heading towards the tiny cottage in the distance.

Home, I thought.

Home at last.