

# Chapter One

It called to me—that path in the woods. The path that always looked so inviting with sunlight dappling through the leafy green layers of brush and trees. I would wander along it for hours it seemed, enjoying the delicate wild flowers and the tall grasses that proudly waved in the light breezes—loving the quick turn of a fawn when it spotted me and the relentless chattering of the nervous squirrels in the trees.

It was so peaceful, so beautiful, so undisturbed.

It was as if the path had been that way for centuries and was just waiting for the right person and the right time to reveal its mysteries.

When I walked the path, I felt alive, excited, and expectant. I always felt something wonderful was going to be waiting for me when I reached the verdant meadow where the path emptied. But then, when I would get to the end, nothing would happen except the certain feeling that something important had transpired here. Strangely, I felt like the meadow was in a state of waiting, but waiting for what—or whom? Was it waiting for me?

I was always melancholy when I left the meadow to return to my ordinary and mundane little cottage. Mine was a life bereft of excitement, intrigue or danger—or anything else for that matter. I had such a boring life and the path knew it. I don't know how it knew it, but I knew that it did.

I walked the path in the fall when the trees slipped into their autumn robes of beautiful dark oranges, vivid yellows and crinkly browns. I walked it in winter when the snow fell to cover my footsteps and barren tree limbs tried to catch my long brown hair in their claw-like appendages. And I walked it in the spring when those same trees were in labor, bringing forth their budded children, and the decaying morass of yesteryear's undergrowth allowed new green shoots to struggle forth into the warming sunlight.

But never did I feel the pull of the path more strongly than in the middle of the dappled summer when it shaded me from the fierce spray of the sun's hot rays. It was cool to walk into the shade, such a relief to feel the breezes lifting my hair off my sweaty neck. It was easy then, to feel myself in a more exciting time and place.

Frowning, I stood at the path's head, in back of my cottage, and gazed along its meandering tail, mesmerized by its nagging pull. Frustrated, I shouted, "What do you want from me?" Goosebumps prickled my skin when a gust of air blew back across my face, lifting my hair and seeming to mock me in return.

Finally, I sighed and turned to walk across the yard, my collie, Chocolate, leading the way. Her fantail waved back and forth like a race flag in front of me, causing me to smile briefly.

Lately, the dreams, some of which included the path and meadow, had returned, stronger than ever. They had drifted into nothing while I was attending my mother during her illness, but now they refused to let me rest peacefully some nights.

Mother had been gone since spring, and autumn was now casting its long evening shadows across the great oak and maple trees, preparing for winter. There was a cold chill in the air, and I wasn't looking forward to being alone in the cottage by myself in the lonely days ahead. I needed to do something, but what?

Dejected, I let myself into the cottage that Mom and I had shared here in rural Kansas and looked carefully around. It was a small house with two bedrooms, a bathroom and a kitchen. The floor was hardwood, marked from years of use. Braided throw rugs adorned the most heavily worn areas on the floor, their cheerful rag coloring spicing up the place a bit. We had a small television, a worn leather sofa and two plain brown stuffed chairs that were comfortable to sit in and read. And we had books, lots and lots of books. My mother loved to read all sorts of books, especially history books, hence my love of history as well. It wasn't much, but it was home and I loved it. I ran my fingers lovingly along the spines of the books as I went past the shelf where they were stored, headed to the kitchen.

I was feeling particularly maudlin today, for some reason, my restless spirit unleashed as I pondered the meaning of my placid and uneventful life. I had my doubts as to whether anyone would even miss me if I were gone. How could they? After all, Mom had done her best to keep us secreted from the rest of the world, and no one ever visited the cottage except the postman or the Prichards.

The postman brought the small stipend that my mother and I lived on and which had finally run out. I was very frugal with the insurance policy which had paid for her burial expenses and supported me thus far, but that was almost gone, too. I figured I'd have to try to find a job in town somewhere but I had never worked. And the Prichards owned the cottage we lived in, so that was the extent of our visitors' list, for the most part.

I had put off applying for acceptance in a two-year business college because it was so far to drive to get to the Overland Park area. I had taken this fall semester as a last reprieve to figure out what to do with my life, I knew I couldn't stay here forever. Eventually, I would have to move—but I didn't want to.

Mom had home schooled me and I'd never even had a date or a boyfriend in my nineteen years of life. After she'd finished my high school education—which she'd extended for another year—my world had consisted of her and her illness. I think she extended it because she didn't want me to leave home either. Now, at almost twenty years old, all I'd seen of the world was the small town of Wakanda, Kansas, the cottage I lived in—and the path.

Sighing once again, I put down a bowl of food for Chocolate and rubbed my fingers across the top of her silky head. Old man Prichard had given her to me as a puppy, six years ago, and she was my one faithful friend in the world. Then I grabbed a can of Pepsi from the old model fridge that hummed incessantly in the quiet of the room and finally made my way into my mother's bedroom. It felt different this evening—and somehow, I knew it was different as I sat on the edge of the bed, my body feeling tense and expectant.

I ran my palm across the patchwork quilt, my fingertips finding the rougher edges of the patch from my old worn out jeans. Mom loved to make quilts, and I swear she saved every scrap of material from everything we had every worn in our entire lifetime.

With a sigh, I lay back on the bed and closed my eyes, inhaling the lingering scent of lavender. Mom's favorite.

Last night, my dream had been intensely vivid and I easily pictured his rugged face in my mind. I did not know who he was, but his brown eyes were staring at me from beneath arched black brows. His face was deeply tanned, his expression a mixture of anger, worry and fear. He was a handsome man with a strong square jaw, small crinkly lines leading away from his eyes and a determined air. When he reached for me, the fingers on his hands were long and powerful with well-shaped nails, and I knew something was about to happen. Something that excited me and set my heart galloping like wild a horse across a meadow, yet still made me afraid. It was at this point

that I always woke up. I'd yet to know what was going to happen if he fulfilled the intent written in those beautifully expressive eyes.

The dream had invaded my sleep countless times before, but never as strongly as last night. Last night, he was standing at the head of the path, beckoning me with his forefinger, calling my name in a strong masculine voice. Then like a zoom lens on a camera, I saw him up close with that same expression he always wore—the one that excited and frightened me at the same time. Somehow, the man and the path were connected and I needed to find out what—or who, if that was the case—was calling me.

Restless, I stood and stepped in front of my mother's dresser. My face in the old mirror looked back at me, the resemblance to my mother unmistakable. I was nothing special yet I had a mysterious look about my gray eyes which was kind of intriguing. I had that look that said I was waiting for something momentous to happen to me and, as yet, I didn't know what it was going to be. Other than that, I was just ordinary. My nose was short and turned up, like an urchin still growing.

I didn't like my nose very much.

I reached up, flattened it with my thumb, and then pinched it between my fingers but it retained its same hated shape.

My skin was good, one of my best features, really. Smooth, with a texture of rich cream fresh from the cow's udder and the pale pink of wild roses in my cheeks. The same pink as the rambling roses that clambered and bloomed haphazardly all over the fence behind the cottage in the summertime. My burnished brown hair fell below my shoulders with body and fullness yet not the wiry look of full curls. I would get a few tendrils along my forehead if the day was humid but it didn't turn into a bush as my mother's did in the muggy heat. She had hated her hair as I hated my nose.

I turned sideways to study my figure. Not bad—full breasts, but not too full. They were shaped nicely in the red tank top I was wearing. My arms were slender and bare. I smoothed my hands along my backside, following the nice curve. It looked normal so I guessed it was okay. At least it wasn't too big, not like Doris Davis's. Her backside looked twice the size of her shoulders, and I felt sorry for her. She obviously hated that and I wondered if all women had something they hated about the way they looked.

I might have been better friends with Doris, if Mother had let me, but she always discouraged friendships. Doris attended the same small Lutheran church we sometimes attended, when Mother felt like going.

Other than that, we pretty much stayed to ourselves in Wakanda, Kansas and everyone else left us alone.

At one time, I thought I would get out and see something of the world once I was through with the high school home classes, but then Mother had taken ill. That had put an end to that idea, not that she had wanted me to go, anyway. I swear, she wanted me to be a hermit just like she was and I really didn't understand it. She always said there was something else in store for me but she remained frustratingly mysterious as to what it might be. I had wondered if it was connected to the path and the pull I felt, but she never said.

Now, I was totally alone—and, today, the pull of the path seemed fiercely insidious. A thought suddenly occurred to me and I spoke aloud, "Mom, did you feel a connection to the path too? Is that why you have stayed so close to it all this time?"

Of course, there was no answer, and to be truthful, I'd probably have peed my pants if there were.

Sighing forlornly, I turned away from the mirror and stared at my mother's closet. I hadn't cleaned that out yet; I had been putting it off like a coward.

But today was the day I'd finally decided to do it, although I'd been procrastinating all day. Suddenly, the urge for answers was stronger than the fear of clearing away the last of my mother. Maybe I was just being a silly girl with an overactive imagination—maybe there was nothing in the closet but clothes and a chest full of trinkets.

But I was sure there was more.

Bracing my shoulders back, I strode with determination to the closet door and flung it open. The smell of the lavender sachets she had kept hanging inside drifted out to assail my nostrils.

What I was interested in was the old chest at the back of the closet. It had always been locked but I now had the key on a chain around my neck. It had been in my mother's jewelry box for years, until she gave it to me right before she died. She told me about the chest and that I was not to open it until I felt ready. I wasn't exactly sure what that meant, but something had kept me from opening the chest until now. Every time I had tried, my throat would constrict as if I couldn't breathe and the sense of impending change would be overwhelming.

For months now, I hadn't been ready for anything to change—now, today, I was.

I pulled the chest out into the middle of the braided oval rug, another example of my mother's homemaking skills that I never acquired. I sat on the floor, hugged my knees and just stared at it while I fingered the key on the chain around my neck.

What was in there? Would it change my life?

The excitement was building in my chest again but my throat didn't feel constricted this time. I felt exhilarated. I was sure there were answers to my questions in that trunk, and I was more than ready for them.

I craved them.

Finally, I got up on my knees, slipped the key into the lock and quickly turned it. It felt a little rusty but it clicked and there was no hesitation as my trembling fingers grabbed the clasp and flung it open. I don't know if I was expecting a ghost or something to come roaring out or what, but I was sharply disappointed when nothing happened. I felt somewhat deflated.

Shaking off my gloomy feelings, I looked into the chest, appreciating the pleasant aroma of cedar. There was a book lying on top of some old yellowed clothing. It looked like a diary. My mother had kept a diary?

I took it out and opened the cover, the old paper feeling thin and slightly crinkly under my fingertips. The date jumped out at me right away—October 29, 1870. Confused, I flipped carefully to the last entry, but it was dated a few days before my mother had died, April 2, 1987. That couldn't possibly be right! I slammed the diary closed, my heart hammering so hard my body was shaking. Somehow, the diary, my mother and the path were connected; I could feel it strongly. I refused to think about the fact that there was a hundred year gap in the hand written pages.

With shaking hands, I stuck the thin leather diary down the front of my jeans for later, determined to get to the bottom of the chest. I picked up an article of clothing instead. It was a dress, a long dress, and I had to stand up to unfold it completely. It looked really old-fashioned. It was made of soft white cotton with small yellow daisies on it and cinched at the waist then pleated into a full skirt. I had never seen anything like it except in pictures in history books.

I laid it on the bed and picked up two more articles of clothing. They looked like an old-fashioned chemise and a pair of pantaloons, knee length. Both had yellow ribbons adorning them in the same color as the daisies on the dress.

I felt strongly that I had seen these garments before. Forcing myself to go on, I laid them aside and took the next garment out of the trunk. It was a child's dress, a white silky material, now yellowed, of course, with a yellow sash around the waist. As I fingered the soft material, I noticed that there were matching gloves and hats for both dresses.

Suddenly, the images came, flashing in and out of my mind as I gasped for breath. There was a small child holding my mother's hand, a man who looked worried and angry, and a young boy. The path was there, entwined within the images and my mother was young, as young as I was today, it seemed. Then another male face, the one of my dreams appeared, saying something unintelligible to me, his face also worried and angry—just as he appeared in my dreams. They all swirled together and then they were gone as fast as they came and I found myself lying on the floor, clasping the small dress to my chest.

I threw it down as if it had been a snake and scrambled up to run for the door. I had to be out in the hot sunshine, out where things were normal and everything looked the same as it had all my life. Out where I could inhale the fresh air and breathe again.

At once, I felt the comfort of Chocolate's wet doggy nose sticking into the palm of my hand. She looked up at me with big brown doe eyes and whined, her tail wagging back and forth, as if to say I'm here for you. I thanked God for my canine friend as I sank down to bury my face in her soft collie coat and put my trembling arms around her neck. She whimpered and tried to comfort me with face licks until I finally emitted a hollow chuckle and sat back on the concrete stoop.

"It's all right, girl," I crooned, relenting with a scratch behind the ears. Chocolate made everything seem so normal that I almost felt foolish, and yet, it had all been so real. What did it all mean? Why would my mother have those old clothes and why would her diary have a page dated a hundred years ago? I shivered at the implications and I wished she were here to explain because what I was thinking was just crazy and impossible. Certifiable even.

The sound of the old yellow Nash choking and sputtering up the driveway brought me out of my reverie and I stood up to greet Mr. Prichard. He looked older than dirt to me but he was such a nice man. He owned the cottage and property, and he and his wife, Ethyl, would occasionally come to visit. More so, since my mother had passed. He was a kindly old man but lately he'd seemed bothered and upset about something. Ethyl wasn't with him today so he stood by the driver's door, worrying his fishing cap in his hands as he waited for me to approach him.

"Hi there, Mr. Prichard," I chirped, trying to sound as normal as possible. "What brings you out here today?"

His craggy features had more wrinkles than you could count but his vivid blue eyes peeked at me from beneath snow white, bushy brows. "Got some bad news, Destiny," he replied, his voice laced with regret.

My heart beat faster. "What might that be, sir?"

"I sold the farm and Ethyl and I are moving into town."

A sense of impending doom started to close in on me. I was stunned. "But—what about me?" I finally croaked. "Do the new owners know I live here and are they okay with that?"

"The new owner is Phil Sangorini," he replied.

I watched him swallow hard.

"I'm sorry. I know you and your mother didn't like him very well, but I had to sell, I didn't have any choice. I'm too old to work the farm anymore and I can't afford to stay here. He offered me more than I was asking and I couldn't turn it down."

I was stunned once again—and frightened. Phil Sangorini might as well have been a synonym for *snake in the grass*! The man made me feel dirty when he ogled me. The day he had come out to look the farm over, he had seemed to find reasons to brush up against me, to touch me. His touch had made my skin crawl, and I'd been repulsed by the hot desire in his eyes when his gaze traveled up and down my body. I may have never had a boyfriend but gut instinct told me the man wanted me in a totally inappropriate way. In short, I didn't trust him at all—and now he was going to be my landlord? I felt sick. I wanted to scream and curse a blue streak but I managed to spare poor Mr. Prichard.

"Is there anything I can do to help so you don't have to sell?" I asked desperately. "I can work, take care of the horses, whatever you need, I can at least try."

He shook his head regretfully. "You're not a ranch hand, Destiny; it needs someone who knows farming and agriculture. Besides, you have your whole life ahead of you—your own future to look to."

"When is he taking over?" I whispered because my mouth had become too dry to speak the words any louder.

"He's taking possession at the end of the month."

The end of the month! Today was October 30, All Hallows' Eve. What a sick prank! "You...you mean tomorrow?" I stuttered.

"Oh no, no...the end of November," he assured me.

I heaved a sigh of relief, however, that still only left me a month because I already knew that if Phil Sangorini was going to own my cottage, I wasn't going to stay. My heart sank so low, I didn't think it could go any lower.

Poor Mr. Prichard looked thoroughly uncomfortable, his fingers still aimlessly fiddling with the hat in his hands. "Destiny, Ethyl and I want you to come to town with us. We bought a small house but it has an extra bedroom."

The words were blurted out, and I felt like an out of depth swimmer who had just been handed a life preserver. Even still, the idea of moving into town was very foreign. My heart was here—linked with the path. My destiny was here, I was sure of it.

When I didn't answer, he went on. "You think about it, Destiny. You know we loved your mother, and I know you don't have any place to go. I never knew where she came from, just appeared here one day in an old dress, holding your hand. You were in an old dress, too, and I thought it was strange to be dressed as if you were in some kind of civil war reenactment or something. I made inquiries but no one knew who she was, and she either didn't remember or didn't want to say, so we never pried. We had plenty of room and this extra cottage here at the back of the ranch so we just let her stay. Did she ever tell you anything?" he asked curiously.

There was a rather odd look about his curiosity but I shook my head. "Not much, just that my father was dead and he didn't have any family, either. That's all I know. I've always wondered, though."

I knew now that the dresses in the trunk had belonged to my mother and me. I had suspected it, but Mr. Prichard had just verified it.

My voice held a trace of wistfulness that Mr. Prichard didn't fail to notice. "Well, don't let it worry you none. You're like a granddaughter to us and we'd be proud to have you live with us, if you're willing."

I mustered up a wobbly smile for him. After all, he was being very sweet and offering me an escape from Sangorini. "I surely appreciate all your kindness and I'll think about it. I'm not finished going through all of Mom's things, but if I can find any clue as to where I came from, I'll

probably pursue that. If not, you may have a boarder, but I'll get a job in town and pay my own way."

"That wouldn't be necessary," he replied gruffly reaching out and patting my shoulder. "We'd be happy to have you. I know you'll eventually find your own way into the world, maybe get an education or get married. Until then, you have a home with us."

"Thank you, sir." My voice felt thick but I fought back tears. I refused to cry.

He cleared his throat. "You know, Destiny, I've always felt you and your mother were like family, somehow. I know back in our line we had contact with some Hancocks. In fact, my great grandfather, Frank Prichard, had dealings with a Hancock over this property. Just seemed right, somehow, for your mother and you to stay here."

I nodded gratefully. "Whatever your reasons, sir, you've been wonderful to both of us, and I thank you again for your kind offer."

My eyes were misty as he got into the old car and backed down the lane, the backfire of the old engine leaving an oil smell in the air. With a wave of his heavily veined hand, he took off when he reached the end, headed back towards the ranch house.

I watched him until he was out of sight, standing there brooding on the news he had left me with until the fury of Chocolate's barking interrupted me. With a heavy sigh, I turned and followed the sound. She was behind the house, making a terrible racket. It was probably a fat groundhog, an opossum she had cornered, or maybe a raccoon. The fields and forests were alive with wildlife, including the white tailed deer. No telling what she was fussing over.

Rounding the corner of the house, I stopped and stared in amazement at the sight of the cow just emerging from the path. It was the prettiest little Jersey milk cow I had ever seen. Mr. Prichard didn't have a milk cow, though; he ran black Hereford shire cattle.

As I cautiously approached the animal, I could hear the sound of a bell tinkling on the breeze, and it didn't take long to see that she had an old-fashioned pewter bell around her neck. Chocolate had stopped barking and was sniffing. The cow, deciding Chocolate was no longer a threat, dropped her head and started munching on the sweet, tall grass, ignoring the dog's now friendly overtures. I ran my hand over her velvety, honey colored hide and admired the pink nose and soft brown-like eyes. They were huge as they gazed placidly back at me while she chewed her cud. Strangest of all was the braided rope around her neck and trailing on the ground. I picked it up to see the edges were frayed, as if she had been tied up and then worn the rope through to get loose.

"Well, girl, what am I going to do with you?" I scratched my head and debated whether to call Mr. Prichard or just let the cow wander back to where she came from. I decided to let the matter rest until tomorrow since the sun was beginning to wane. If the cow was still there by morning, I'd do something—if not, it would be one less headache to deal with. After all, maybe it was someone's idea of a Halloween prank. Which would be strange in itself, for we had never had any trick-or-treaters that I could remember. We were too far out of town.

I turned back to the house. Much to my chagrin, the cow started to follow me. I hurried in the back door and closed it, not willing to share my little house with a cow, no matter how friendly.

Dismissing the cow from my mind, I turned my attention to fixing a sandwich to eat, mulling over the bad news of my impending eviction, and the puzzle that was my mother's diary. I was trying to make sense of the diary's opening page when the mournful mooing began. The hair on my nape stood at attention and I nearly choked on my Pepsi at the horribly creepy sound.

Chocolate stood up and started whining, her padded feet carrying her to the back door. She sniffed along the edge, and I knew the cow must be standing right outside. I shivered, my heart

racing, my vivid imagination conjuring up images of a mad cow with red eyes trying to take over my mind. "Calm down, it's just a cow," I muttered to myself, following Chocolate to the door. Knowing what the sound was didn't keep it from being spooky!

Taking a deep breath, I leaned my ear against the door and listened. Common sense told me it wasn't a ghost cow, but what did it want? I'd been raised around cows but never had much to do with them. I did know that cows didn't go in houses. Barns maybe, but there was no barn here; she'd have to go up to Mr. Prichard's barn to get inside for the night.

Gathering my wavering courage, I opened the door. The cow was standing there staring placidly at me, without cursed red eyes. I sagged in relief.

"Shoo—go away," I ordered firmly, flapping the diary at her. She just stared, her liquid brown eyes begging me for entrance—or something. It was then it occurred to me that milk cows are supposed to be milked. Not that I'd ever milked one, I just knew they got milked—usually in the evening.

I looked suspiciously down at her smooth udders and teats. Oh yeah, they looked full to bursting. I'd read that if they didn't get milked, cows could get a fever or, at the very least, they would be in pain.

I frowned at her. "I hope you don't expect me to milk you," I said. I was rewarded with another mournful moo. Apparently, she disagreed with me, so now what was I supposed to do?

I closed the door and ran to the living room to take out the encyclopedia. Lucky for me there was a brief description of milking a cow, along with a picture of how to sit when you're doing it. I slammed the book shut and took the wooden step stool my mother had left in the kitchen to reach the shelves and a plastic bucket from the walk in pantry. Armed with these items I marched out the back door to the still mooing cow.

"Okay, Bessie, let's see if we can relieve some of the pressure," I muttered to her and myself. I sat the stool down at her side, figuring she would be desperate enough to stand still—I hoped. If not, we were going to have a problem.

Facing Bessie's backside, I laid my cheek and shoulder against her velvety ribs. Then I reached under her and grabbed a hold of two of the teats and pulled once, twice, and then several times over. Naturally, nothing happened.

I swore loudly, cursing being one of my talents, if you can call colorful language a talent. Since there was only me, Chocolate, and the cow, I could now vent freely. "Bloody stupid excuse for a milk machine," I shouted to the sky, lifting one hand to swipe the sweat off my forehead. I tried again and again, my language getting rougher with each failure. It was amazing the curse words you could find in the encyclopedia and learn from Doris Davis. And I loved words—I could make simple words sound like a curse.

I was so involved in my attempts to milk the cow that I didn't even see him until his strong familiar voice rang out.

"That's no language for a young lady. Where on earth did you hear such things?"

My fingers froze on the abused teats as the stern voice echoed in my ears. I knew before my head snapped up that it belonged to the man in my dreams, the one with the angry brown eyes. It was *not* comforting to look up and realize I was right.

I stood up so quickly that the stool went backwards and the cow moved nervously to the side. "Who the bloody hell are you and where in blinking blue blazes did you come from?"

I demanded the knowledge in a nervous yet superior sounding voice laced with anger. My body trembled with the impact of his unbelievable stare. My heart was racing as my mind tried to process how this man could step from my dreams and into reality. I stared incredulously as I drank



in the sight of him dressed like an old west rancher. He even carried a rifle and had a gun belt around his waist with a pistol in it.

My insides shook as I surveyed the corded muscles of his bronzed neck and the immense expanse of shoulders beneath the white shirt and suede leather vest. His long legs were powerful in the snug tan pants and leather boots, but it was his face that I was drawn back to. He looked to be about twenty-five or thirty, if I had to hazard a guess. The bones of his rugged face were well honed, his eyes the color of the dark brown eddy of a river swollen out of control with dangerous undercurrents. I saw the flash of strong white teeth encased in the square jaw line when next he spoke.

"The question would be who are you and what are you doing to my cow?" He clenched his big hand impatiently around his chin with the five o'clock shadow and frowned. "And why are you dressed like a man? Women don't wear pants; it's unbecoming to their station. Neither do they show off their bare arms with sleeveless blouses."

Now I was definitely astounded and confused. Not to mention suspicious, skeptical and infuriated at the possible meaning of this word.

"Station?" I purred in delicate disbelief, letting it roll off my tongue in distaste.

An equally disbelieving eyebrow shot up. He spoke a little slower, as if I was daft. "Place—your place."

It was my turn to raise my eyebrow. "*My place* is wherever I choose it to be," I replied loftily, my pulse racing.

"Then it looks like your education has been lacking. You need to be taught better," he replied, his low voice smooth as silk. It slithered across my nerve endings, making all the hairs on my body leap up to greet him.