

*Out walking in the frozen swamp one gray day,
I paused and said, "I will turn back from here.
No. I will go on farther -- and we shall see."*

-Robert Frost

Chapter 1

Diana knelt on the grassy bank and dug her fingers deep into the dark, damp soil. Pulling up a handful of dirt, she let it crumble through her fingers. Some rotted, stringy roots and a fat earthworm were left splayed across her fingers. She let the dirt fall, then carefully placed the earthworm back down on the pile and watched as he worked and wormed his way back into the underground world he had come from.

It was autumn, but the weeping willow tree under which Diana sat was still clothed in its summer raiment. Weeping willows are one of the last trees to shed their leaves, the last sentinels to stand their post until the winter shuts down the forest. The brook beneath the bank on which it stood meandered quietly down through the brush and trees to far away places unknown.

That is why Diana was here. She had made up her mind to follow the brook that ran through the woods behind her house to see where it started. As far as she knew, no one knew where it started. None of her friends knew. She had asked her parents and some other grown-ups, but the grown-ups didn't seem to know or care. Grown-ups never did seem to care about such things. They were more interested in grown-up things like money and cars and who was getting married and who was building a new pool. They didn't care at all about brooks in the woods and where they might lead.

But Diana cared. She and her friends often played on the banks of the brook, scooping out places where their dolls could sit, catching water bugs in pails, and floating toy boats. All of them had on various occasions fallen in and went home wet and dirty to be scolded by their mothers. Diana knew the brook intimately, in all of its phases and traits. It was low and stagnant in the summer. It ran fresh and clear in the spring. In the autumn it seemed at its most moderate, trilling along slowly and lazily. In the winter it was ice-bound and cold until after December when it froze over completely. She had seen places where it was wide and deep, up to over her waist if she were to fall in. She knew places where it ran shallow over rocks. She knew places where little side pools would host spring flowers in their short season and other side pools poisoned by clay or some other sulfuric minerals that made the water stink.

What she didn't know was where it came from. She and her friends had tried several times to find out by following it upstream, but the way had been long and crossed many roads, some unfamiliar, and they would grow hot and hungry and tired and eventually turn back. Michael, Patty's older brother, had said that he had once followed it and crossed into a strange woods. He told a story of a giant man with a bow and arrow who had aimed at him. But Michael often told silly stories to scare and tease his sister and her friends, and Diana had become dubious about him. Besides, even if the story of the giant archer was true, Michael had turned back also. Even he didn't know where the brook started.

Diana had decided that she was going to find out. She had waited until the time of year when the brook was moderate and the weather was not so hot. It was a Saturday, late, late in autumn, a clear day that held that particular sharp nip in the air that warned that winter was fast upon the world. She was going to do it; she was going to follow the brook for as far as she

could, and she would find out where it started. She had decided to do it alone. She knew her friends Patty and Judy would give up before they got too far, just as always. Judy didn't really like the brook that much anyway; she was more interested in bike riding and dolls. Patty would certainly have come along, but Diana doubted that she would stick with it. No, she had decided, this was *her* adventure. It was exciting and a little scary. She didn't want to venture *too* far from home. After all, she was only nine years old. Still, there was that certain touch of the romantic that made Diana different from her friends. She had seen part of a television show once that had talked about the source of the Nile and the adventurers who had sought it. Diana knew that the Nile was in Egypt. This wasn't Egypt, it was only New Hampshire, and this wasn't a mighty or famous river that gave birth to civilizations, it was only a country brook. But still, it was *her* Nile, and she would be the one to find its source, even if the grown-ups and the other kids didn't really care that much.

The sun was already high and getting hot. She should have started earlier in the morning, she now thought, but she had watched her cartoons that morning in her pajamas while eating cereal. Now she had one peanut butter and jelly sandwich her mother had made her, wrapped in wax paper in the pink, flowered plastic *Barbie* purse that hung from one shoulder. Around the other shoulder she had water in a round, metal canteen that her older brother had once used in boy scouts. In the pocket of her skirt she had a little penknife with nail file and scissors, a little bit of paper, and the stub of a pencil. And that was all the equipment and supplies the nine-year-old explorer had to rely on in her quest to conquer the Nile.

Getting up from the bank, she walked over and patted the trunk of the willow tree three times, signaling to herself in some hop-scotch way that this was the start of the journey. A friendly breeze chose that moment to stir the drooping branches and the willow waved goodbye. Diana walked down the woodland path that occupied this portion of the brook. The small wood, only about one hundred yards square, stood between two houses in the development, Diana's family's and their neighbors the Casey's. It was bordered on the west by Stagecoach Road, which the brook ran under by means of a culvert. Diana crossed the street and rejoined the brook path in another patch of woods that lay between two other homes. Since it was autumn, most of the trees were partially bare and both houses could clearly be seen. One of her neighbors, Mr. Erskine, was raking leaves in his backyard.

The path that bordered the brook in these two wood patches had been worn deep by Diana and the other children of the neighborhood who would ride their bikes down them as a short cut between the roads of the development. The second path was more fun than the one behind Diana's house. It had low hills so that the children went up and down on their bicycles. Diana would like to have taken her bicycle, but the paths were only in these two sections and there would be many sections ahead with no paths, choked by trees and brush, where no bicycle could pass.

The second path ended where the brook crossed under Robert Road. This was a newer section of the development where the homes had been built closer together. There was no patch of wood between the two houses on this side of the street. Diana stepped quickly and judiciously across the yard since she did not really know the people in this house, and didn't want them to think that she was there to cause mischief. Hugging the bank of the brook, staring down at it so that anyone seeing her would know that she was simply interested in following it and not trespassing, she reached the place where it entered the forest on the border of the development.

Here, there was no path, but the bank of the brook was clear enough since the brush had died back for the winter. Diana marched up to her knees through a section of dead leaves that had never been raked. With each step she made a loud crunching and swishing sound, but underneath it was wet, and soon her sneakers were damp through. She was glad to get out. She wasn't worried about getting into trouble, she had purposely worn her old play sneakers that her mother planned to throw out soon anyway, but it was no fun walking in wet socks. To her right, she saw a pile of wood that had been chopped and stacked between the trunk of a birch and a pole, no doubt to serve as firewood during the winter for the house whose yard she had just crossed.

A black-capped chickadee gave its signature call and bobbed its head as if it were glad of the little girl who now entered its forest. Diana smiled back and waved her hand. The chickadee cocked its head inquisitively and then flitted off to the next tree, and then the next, and then the next, always staying ahead of the little girl, following her in that curious way that small birds do by following in front.

The waters of the brook looked strange here, tumbling over unfamiliar rocks through unfamiliar ways. Diana stooped to watch the water bugs dance and traipse across a calm pocket of water shaded by the bare stalks of cattails. She broke off one of the stalks, held it up to her nose, and smelled its earthy smell. She then placed it in her bag next to her sandwich. She was startled to hear a sudden splash in the water beside her. A muskrat whose home was under the cattails was off on his business, hunting food for the impending winter.

A gentle breeze stirred the wood, and all around the little girl, leaves that shone in reds, oranges, and gold sighed with the tired, satisfied sound of a nature readying itself for its long, cold sleep.

"Not yet," whispered Diana. "It's not time yet. We still have some way to go. I have to follow the brook."

The breeze quickened and the trees seemed to grumble at the delay the little adventurer petitioned, then sighed again and became still. Leaves that had fallen in the breeze floated on the water's surface like curled boats racing back in the direction Diana had come from, the way home. An impatient *fee-bee* came from ahead, and the chickadee hopped on his branch urging haste. The day was moving on.

Diana marched for a long time through the woods until she came out onto another road. She knew this street; it was in Saxonville, the neighboring town. The development where she and her family lived was near the border. Crossing the street, the brook now bordered a field that grew hay in the summer. Now it lay barren, the harvest brought in, and it too awaited the falling snow.

The little girl made better time crossing here where there was no brush or trees, but she preferred the forest. She was still nervous that some grown-up might question where she was going or get angry that she was trespassing. Besides, she felt more welcome in the woods. It was as if the trees and wildlife there favored her enterprise. She suddenly missed having the chickadee for company.

Crossing another street, the brook went by another house and then dove back into the New England forest. Diana skipped for a few paces, then had to step carefully to avoid mudflats and brambles. She heard more scolding from the trees ahead and saw the chickadee. Perhaps it was a different one, but she didn't think so. She clapped her hands and waved again.

There was no path at all here, nor even the semblance of one, and the going started getting tough. In one spot she had to detour out of sight of the brook for several yards to avoid thorn branches. Further on, through some birch trees, she came to two giant rocks, both the size of cars, one balanced incredibly upon the other. Diana stopped and stared, her eyes shining and her heart beating fast with a new excitement.

I've never seen that before, she thought. *This is further than I've ever come. It's further than Judy or Patty have ever come. I bet it's even further than Michael or any of his friends have ever come.* She suddenly remembered Michael's story about the giant archer and looked around nervously. Nothing moved save the wind and the birds in the trees.

Grinning with triumph, Diana walked up and patted the balanced rocks three times. Hopscotch. Opening her canteen, she took a gulp of water and wiped her mouth on her sleeve. Then she hesitated. Maybe she should go back now, maybe this was far enough. A thrill of excitement and fear ran up and down her spine. *This is far from home. Mommy would be mad if she knew.* At that she almost turned back, but the spirit that dominated her soul held fast. *You'll be home before dinner, and it will be all right. And you can tell them. You can tell them all you found it, the place where the brook begins, the source of the Nile.*

Shouldering her canteen, the little adventurer walked up to the rocks again and stepped past them, following the wandering brook as it led deeper into the forest. The trees sighed again in the autumn breeze.

Chapter 2

Mary Clark worked hard to suppress a sigh when she saw Mr. Drexler walk into the office. He strode up to her desk scowling and fidgeting with his hat.

“Good-morning, Mr. Drexler, how are you today?” she asked. Normally Mary Clark had a natural smile that dominated her entire face. The wrinkles of her skin would all rearrange themselves magically, and her eyes would sparkle. Most people referred to her as “genuine.” Today the smile was forced.

“Not well,” replied Alvin Drexler irritably. Mrs. Clark could have mimicked the words and tone in unison if she had been so disposed. It was the answer she always received from Mr. Drexler when he came into the clinic.

“Is Dr. Abrahamson in?” demanded Mr. Drexler, nervously plucking at one gray eyebrow. “He needs to give me something stronger for my nerves. I’m sure it’s affecting my blood pressure. I fear for my heart.”

Mary Clark knew for a fact that Alvin Drexler’s blood pressure was fine. His heart was steady as a rock. He was quite likely to live to a very old age, which would be a hard burden on Dr. Abrahamson and any other physician unfortunate enough to run afoul of him.

“He’s in his office,” she replied, still holding the stiff smile. “I’ll see if he’s available to see you.”

“Tell him it’s urgent!” snapped Mr. Drexler as she walked to the office door.

Entering the doctor’s office and closing the door behind her, Mary Clark closed her eyes and at last let out her sigh of exasperation.

“Mr. Drexler, I presume, from that expression,” smiled Dr. Abrahamson from across his desk.

“I don’t know how you can tolerate that man,” said Mary Clark with a lack of charity that was uncharacteristic for her.

“Poor Alvin has just recently turned sixty. We must have patience with him when he’s ill,” consoled Dr. Abrahamson.

“He’s not ill. He’s healthy as a horse!”

“He is ill, in his own way.”

“He’s younger and healthier than me... or you,” Mrs. Clark’s gentle voice choked slightly on the last words.

Dr. Abrahamson smiled away the comment.

“Why don’t you send Mr. Drexler in so we can see what is ailing him today?”

Back at her desk, Mrs. Clark wrote out Mr. Drexler’s visit in the daily report. Both Saxonville and the neighboring town of Winterport were small, which meant that the tiny clinic on Concord Street did not get much business. *I suppose if it weren’t for the Mr. Drexler’s in the world, we would just sit around and count clouds*, thought Mrs. Clark smiling absently. Finishing the entry, she returned to a letter she had been writing to her sister, Ruth Smerdon who lived over in Birchwood, Maine.

Mary Clark had worked as Dr. Abrahamson’s nurse for the past ten years, ever since her husband had passed away. In those years he had become her closest friend and the most important person in her life, aside from her son, Ernie, who worked as a pharmacist in the Rexall

Drug store downtown. Together they had built a respectable practice for the small New Hampshire community. It made for a good team, her sparkling personality and his gentle patience. Even the Alvin Drexlers of the world couldn't spoil that.

But there were other forces in the world that had greater power. The light in Dr. Abrahamson's pale blue eyes had grown dim even as his cough had progressed. The cancer that had started in his lungs now cast its shadow over both of their lives, as certain and inexorable as the autumn that now cast its shadow over the northern world ushering in nature's twilight.

Mrs. Clark paused in her letter. *I will not cry*, she promised herself with a smile as she did each day. *For his sake, I will not cry... not today*. Looking at the wall, she noted the date on the 1970 calendar, November 28. It was the end of autumn, and in this northern region of the world winter would come fast and relentless.

She heard Dr. Abrahamson's cough through the closed door of the office. Soon now, the winter would come very soon. It was almost upon them.

Gazing out the window she watched the colored leaves fall from the trees, denuding the woods behind the office. Her thoughts spun back upon the many years that seemed to heave and swirl across her vision. Her childhood, her parents, her girlhood, her school years, the older boys going off to the Great War, that had been her spring. Then there was her husband, her son, the trials of the Great Depression, and then another war, her summer. Then her son's wedding, her first grandson, her husband's death, another grandson, and the good doctor who had become her greatest friend, that was her autumn. Suddenly cold, Mary Clark glanced fearfully at the calendar again and tried to swallow back a lump of emotion that had unexpectedly arisen. Was it really November 28? Was the season and the hour truly so late?

Raising blue veined hands to her face, she pressed her fingers against her lips and clamped her eyes shut. When she opened them, she stared once more out the window to the falling leaves. The sun's noontide light slanted through the red and golden forest and warmed the smoky earth. So many leaves had fallen, leaving the tree limbs almost bare where a few short months before had been impenetrable walls of green. The latticed branches now opened far enough to reveal the woodland brook that passed behind their building. Mary Clark could see it now as it ran glinting and glistening over rocks, relentlessly moving forward, sweeping past all their towns, through all their lives leading ultimately out of their world and off to its end, somewhere in the sea, she supposed.

But from what source, she knew not where.