

CHAPTER ONE – DIANA

The night and woods grew dark. So dark, Diana could hardly see to find her way. There was no moon. At seven years old, she was petrified. She thought of her warm bed at home, and how safe and secure she always felt nestled under the covers. The night grew darker. She couldn't find her way back to the camp where her parents lay sleeping. No matter which way she turned, there was no light. Suddenly, she heard a noise in the bushes near her. She froze. Her heart was pounding rapidly in her chest and resonating in her ears. She couldn't tell the heart-pounding noise from the noise nearby. Then, out of nowhere, she could see two blazing red eyes coming towards her. Whatever it was appeared enormous and focused on her. A growl came next. Was it a bear? What should she do? What could she do? She panicked and started to scream. Before she could turn and run, a black behemoth was on her and had sunk his jagged fangs into her leg, tearing her like a rag doll. She kicked and screamed to no avail. She seemed doomed. No one was coming to save her. The demon dragged her off into the woods.

Diana jolted herself awake, soaked in sweat from head to toe. After she had been attacked on a camping trip with her parents at the age of seven, she had been prone to nightmares, but she hadn't had one in a while. She lay there trying to calm herself and reasoned that it must have been caused by anxiety over graduation and having to give the valedictorian speech.

Diana Knox was beautiful, intelligent, and not very religious. Religion had never been important to Diana. As a child, she had attended Sunday school at a Protestant church, but by the time she was eleven, her parents weren't pushing her to go anymore, and she didn't much care. Their desire had been to give her a foundation by which she could choose what religion she would practice when she got older. When Diana was seventeen, however, a new set of philosophical questions would come about which would make her reevaluate her religious convictions and bring out a new ecclesiastical awareness in her. She would find herself asking hypothetical questions like: Could the alignment of certain celestial bodies cause a profound and positive physical or spiritual transformation in her, or for that matter, mankind? Could air, water, earth, fire and spirit work together to become forces of nature? Could one's senses become natural superpowers? Could the human spirit be one-with-the-universe? Could a human actually become a God? Diana knew nothing of these, but she was about to get a new education and find out how these questions would play into her own destiny.

Graduation day had arrived. Diana was sitting on the stage waiting for Mr. Taylor, Heartfield Academy's principal, to introduce her as this year's valedictorian. She looked out into the crowd. What if I never saw these students again, she thought? Would anything I say make any difference to anyone? On the other hand, if I could change one life by giving even a tiny bit of insight, encouragement, or advice, it would seem to be my obligation as valedictorian to be as profound and encouraging as possible. Suddenly, she felt a sinking feeling. There was no time left to rewrite her speech which she now felt was woefully inadequate and too cliché. This was it; the end of years of hard work to achieve excellent grades, culminating in a ten-minute speech which had probably been heard dozens of times before by faculty, parents, and maybe even students.

Just then, Mr. Taylor leaned towards the microphone.

"And without further ado, we are proud and pleased to introduce to you this year's valedictorian, Miss Diana Knox."

As Diana rose, the audience's applause reached such a deafening level that it made her feel queasy. Her knees started shaking and she wasn't sure she could get herself to the podium let alone give a speech worthy of such apparent esteem. She hadn't expected to be valedictorian but here she was, only a few points better than the next student, and she was now expected to give a speech to remember. She looked out in the audience to see if she could find her parents. Fortunately, as she scanned the audience, she saw her mother looking intensely at her and remembered what she had told her,

“Remember when you’re giving a presentation, if you become nervous, just view the audience as if they were wearing their underwear. It will calm you immediately.”

Diana had used this technique many times over the years with success. She took a deep breath and looked at her prepared speech. She closed her eyes for a moment, put the speech aside and decided to speak from her heart.

“Hello everyone, I had a prepared speech, but I’d rather just share my feelings with you if I may.” She paused for a moment. “It might surprise you, but I would like you to know I burst into tears this morning. Now you may think it was because we’re no longer going to be together,” A laugh came from the audience. “but, in all honesty I was scared. Yes, scared that I was going to have to stand before you today and say something profound. What can I tell you that you don’t already know, except, graduates, we have reached a threshold. We are about to move from a place of security and prescribed education to the major leagues of true learning, whether we get it via an institutional education, or from what life has to teach us.

What have we learned in the first seventeen or eighteen years of our lives? We have gained a foundation from which to build, for sure. We have learned from history’s experiences. And, hopefully, we have learned how to think. But, just because we have lived roughly one fifth of our lives, have we learned one fifth of what we will ever learn over our lifetime? Some might think they have, or at least they’ve become smarter than their parents.” Another laugh echoed throughout the auditorium. Diana eased a bit. “We may think we’re smart, but we are still infants when it comes to judgment, wisdom and life’s teachings. So, we’re about to embark on a new and exponential journey; a journey where our learning will increase as we gain more understanding; where the meaning of things will become more natural based on experience. Few of us know what lies ahead, or how far this journey will take us. When I think of the future, I often think of Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken”. Which road will I choose? Do I keep an open mind and take the one less traveled, or do I take the one I’ll be more comfortable on? The road where you can see furthest isn’t always the right road to take. Only through curiosity, tenacity, motivation, determination, perseverance and most important, overcoming our own fears and apprehensions will we allow ourselves to be guided. The education we gain from this journey will help us become well-rounded. Through education we gain power. The power to make choices: choices to do good or bad; to influence; to love, hate and forgive. But power also comes from deep within your soul. You must pull deep from within to obtain it. In the end, those choices you make during the coming years will create a way for you to find your true calling, and, perhaps, if you’re lucky, fulfill your dreams. And, we all have dreams, don’t we? Some may call how we end up providence. I’d like to think of it as having a brain to figure things out.” A more thoughtful laugh came from the audience.

Diana waited for the laughter to die down, took another deep breath and continued. “Often the journey won’t be easy. From time to time you may struggle, and definitely there will be mistakes along the way. But only you can decide if *your* journey is worth it and whether or not you made the best use of your life. In the end, whether it’s heaven or hell you find will be up to you. Remember, dreams are only as good as reality makes them. Personally, I hope to expand my horizons by finding and exploring new ideas, and new avenues. I know I won’t always understand where I’m going, or why I should do something, but I must remember to keep an open mind. Perhaps this will lead me to the fulfillment I seek. Now if not profound, I hope these words make you question your motives. So go make your own dreams happen! Good luck, congratulations, and have a great summer. Thank you.”

Diana looked around the room and as the clapping started, the principal once again addressed the audience, thanking Diana for her illuminating and inspiring speech, which he referred to as short, but to the point.

Diana knew that not everyone would get her point. This was an affluent community where most parents had their own expectations as to what their children should do with their lives. Diana, herself, lived in a nice neighborhood in Lincoln, Massachusetts, and had highly educated parents. Her father was

a lawyer and a diplomat, and her mother was a psychiatrist. Their expectations were that Diana would attend an ivy-league school and that she would become successful, perhaps following in one of their footsteps.

Diana's point about overcoming one's fears and apprehensions was more for her own benefit. Few people knew she was really talking about herself and her own fear of animals and of the dark. The attack on her as a child had been a life-altering experience leaving her with emotional and physical scars. During the camping vacation with her parents, a large, strange dog had attacked her on an extremely dark night when she had wandered a bit too far from camp. The dog had bitten her so severely in the leg it put her in the hospital for several weeks. Her father heard her screams and was able to beat the dog off. She hardly spoke for two weeks, except for her nightmare screams, and she wore a brace for two months afterwards. Although she had therapy for months, she never lost her fears, and was left with a strange mark on the back of her leg which looked more like a tattoo than a scar.

During her recuperation period, Diana became an avid reader. Ultimately, this led to her academic proficiency and good grades. She was determined to put the incident behind her and become exceptional in every way. As a result, she became an extraordinary young woman. As she was highly independent, she never sought out friends, but she had a presence where people were automatically drawn to her.

She was only seventeen when she graduated, and was not only valedictorian, but had been voted most likely to succeed, and best looking. With long, shiny black hair that almost glistened in the dark, a creamy, clear rosy complexion, perfect features, a figure which athletic models would envy, and brilliant blue eyes that commanded attention when she looked at you, she had movie star looks with an unearthly quality. Her friends told her she should have joined the theater club. Instead she chose the swim team – a hold-over from rehabilitating her leg. She also played golf, spoke three languages; French, Italian and Spanish, and had a reasonable understanding of Latin. She wanted to travel, but her phobias had kept her from going on any trips without her parents.

Her senior prom, final exams, and graduation had brought her high school years to an end. It also brought an end to a waning relationship she had had with one of the school's varsity football players.

Diana had been hired by a law firm for the summer, but when the economy weakened, the firm decided it couldn't justify any summer help that year. So, they cut Diana's position before she had even started to work. She was now in the unenviable position of having to find a summer job when she knew all the good ones undoubtedly had been taken.

The rest of graduation day was filled with a happy atmosphere of school memories. Student after student stood in cap and gown smiling in front of a camera or cell phone, along with smiling, proud parents. Some students came up to Diana and thanked her for her thoughtful speech. She wished them well and they returned the sentiment. The day was ceremoniously ended with the obligatory hugs, handshakes, goodbyes and good lucks.

Mr. Whitaker, her senior year psych teacher, was one of the last to say goodbye.

"Diana, congratulations! You must be very proud that you'll be going to Dartmouth College."

She liked Mr. Whitaker. He had always been a straight shooter with students. She guessed it went with the territory.

"Yes, but I need to find employment over the summer. My summer job didn't pan out. At this point I'd take just about anything."

He looked at her thoughtfully.

"Look Diana, a friend of mine owns a first class Olympic and therapeutic riding stable where you could help with physically challenged children, and it might even fulfill some of your academic requirements. Also, it might help you get over your fear of animals."

Diana looked at him in disbelief. "How did you know I was afraid of animals, and, if you knew, why would you ever think I would want a job like that?"

Mr. Whitaker thought for a moment.

"I'm a psych teacher, remember? It's my job to figure people out. Plus, it's in your school record." They both gave each other a half smile and he winked at her as if to say "I gotcha, a little."

Diana didn't want to appear ungrateful but was apprehensive. "I don't know. I've never wanted anything to do with animals. I wouldn't know what to do. Horses are a pretty big leap to try to cure my fear. I have a hard enough time with squirrels around the house, let alone trying to deal with a horse. They're so big and unpredictable."

He looked at her with knowing eyes.

"Nevertheless, here's the address and telephone number. It's called Crystal Farms. John Crystal is a friend of mine. I've already told him about you and he said he could use some help this summer and would be happy to show you around. In addition to therapeutic riding, they train Olympic riders, and he's doing a summer camp, so room and board would be included. Not only that, it's in New Hampshire, not all that far from Dartmouth College. So, if you like it, perhaps you can continue with it after school starts."

Diana seemed surprised, not only that Mr. Whitaker had already spoken with someone about a job for her, but how could he have known that she would even need, or want this job? And, if John Crystal was in need of live-in help for the summer, why hadn't he already secured someone, especially someone who had experience with horses? Had Mr. Whitaker somehow coerced Mr. Crystal into taking her as a favor to him?

Diana turned to her parents who at this point had not been involved in the conversation.

"Mom, Dad, what do you think? You know how I feel about animals. What if they have dogs there? I was thinking probably the only thing I could get at this time was assistant waitress at the country club, or some low-level job at the hospital."

Her parents seemed impressed with Mr. Whitaker's offer.

"Well honey" her father started, "you know your mother and I will support you in whatever you decide, but it does appear to be an interesting idea. And you get room and board as well, which would be good since your mother and I will have to be away on business part of the summer. It seems as though Mr. Whitaker has put some thought into this. Who knows? As he said, it might help you. No harm in talking with Mr. Crystal."

Diana shrugged.

"Thank you, Mr. Whitaker. I appreciate the reference and support. I'll certainly think about it."

CHAPTER TWO – JOHN CRYSTAL

A few days went by and although Diana had said all her goodbyes for the summer, she was no closer to finding summer employment. Everything seemed to be taken, or no one needed additional help. Mr. Whitaker's proposal not only seemed to be getting more attractive, but also, it appeared it might just possibly be the only opportunity left.

"What did I do with that card?" She started rummaging through her closet until she found the information. "John Crystal, Crystal Stables. Here goes." She picked up the phone and dialed. "He'll probably hear the fear in my voice over the phone and think no-way am I hiring some ditzy teenager."

Just then she heard a voice at the other end of the phone line say, "Hello, Crystal Stables".

"I'm calling to speak with John Crystal. Mr. Whitaker from Heartfield Academy has referred me."

"This is John Crystal."

"Oh, Mr. Crystal, this is Diana Knox."

"Diana, I've been expecting your call. And, you may call me John."

John's friendly manner over the phone put Diana at ease. But she was still nervous with the thought of having to go to Crystal Stables to be interviewed and be around big animals.

"John, I know Mr. Whitaker referred me to you, but I'm not sure this is such a good idea."

At that moment, he cut her off. "Nonsense, Whitaker told me you need a summer job. He also told me about your fear of animals. Personally, I've always felt the best way to deal with a fear is to meet it head on. I'll tell you what, you come out here and take a look around and if we feel we can help each other, then we'll talk about the job. No harm in just doing that, right? Alan Whitaker says great things about you. I'd like to meet you."

Diana was drawn to the smooth sound of his voice but was still hesitant. "I have to confess to you, horses scare me to death. For that matter, almost all animals do. I don't know how much help I'd be."

He tried a different approach.

"Diana, our horses help people. They're gentle and our riders find great therapeutic pleasure in riding them. You'll see. Besides, I'm looking for more administrative help. If you come, I'll set you up with our most experienced trainer to show you around. He's also one heck of a rider. If he can't make you comfortable around animals, nobody can."

Diana finally agreed to the visit but with great reservations.

"Oh, what the heck, nothing ventured, nothing gained."

The next day, she headed out on the trip to Crystal Stables. It was a beautiful day and she felt happy she had at least overcome her apprehensions well enough to meet with John Crystal. The trip took her about two hours. She hadn't spent a lot of time in that part of New Hampshire, and she was eager to see more of it. As she rode up the highway, she thought how beautiful it was with sweeping vistas and constantly changing scenery. Her parents had given her their used Lexus SUV with built-in GPS as a graduation present, so she felt alive and free to be heading out on her own.

At first sight, Crystal Stables appeared to her as the quintessential New Hampshire farm with white farmhouse and two large red barns beyond. Turning to enter through the gate, she noticed a Latin term imprinted on the wall. It said, "Cor Unum". Further on past the barns, she saw what appeared to be a large, new indoor and outdoor riding facility, and beyond that four, single story dormitory-looking cabins, and several out-buildings. There were two large riding areas, several large fenced-in pastures with horses grazing in them, a good-sized lake, and hay and corn fields which led up to forested hills beyond. What a bucolic setting, she thought.

Diana pulled up to the first barn to park. The sign over the door said OFFICE. When she got out of her car she thought it was a very inviting place. Maybe she had overreacted to her own fears. She heard people and horse sounds coming from behind the barn, probably at the riding arena.

As she approached the door for the barn office, she noticed it abutted stalls for horses. All of a sudden, her fears were back and she hesitated. Just then two dogs came silently trotting her way. They appeared very friendly and were wagging their tails. Diana froze.

"This was a terribly bad idea", she said to herself. She didn't know what to do, and stood there for a moment hoping it would all just go away. Just then she heard a voice calling the dogs.

"Seth! Shadow! Come! The dogs stopped and heeled immediately. "I'm so sorry. You must be Diana. I'm John Crystal. Very happy to meet you." John Crystal was a tall, lean man who appeared to be in his late 50s. He had obviously been very good looking when he was younger, as he still had a full head of hair and had aged well.

"Let me just put the dogs in the office and I'll be right back."

Diana wasn't going anywhere, except perhaps back in her car to head home as quickly as possible. John returned within thirty seconds and apologized again.

"I should have kept the door closed, but it's not normally a problem. Are you OK?"

Diana eased a bit and looked at John who was holding out his hand. It seemed more ready to steady her than to shake her hand. Nonetheless, she mustered up the courage to shake his hand in return and said, "Yes, I'm OK. They just took me by surprise. If Mr. Whitaker told you about my fear of animals, then you'll know that it was a dog that attacked me."

John looked at her with sympathy. He had been around animals all his life and couldn't begin to think of how life would be without them.

"This wasn't the way I had intended for us to start, so perhaps we should go over to the office in the house and talk for a while. Then I'll have my head trainer, Micca, show you around the stables. By then, I hope things will be calmer, and you'll have a better picture of what our work is all about here."

"Thank you, I'd like to hear about the farm and what exactly it is you would expect me to do this summer – that is, if we agree I'm the one for the job."

John gave her an understanding smile as though he felt she must have gone through a terrible experience to be so terrified of animals, and that she must be putting on a brave act now. He tried to put her at ease as they walked towards the house.

"Mr. Whitaker told me you were valedictorian of your class. That's very impressive. He also told me you were pretty. But, he didn't tell me how pretty."

Diana suddenly felt self-conscious.

"Are my looks going to be a problem for you? I'm sure, since places like these tend to be more male-oriented, having a girl around could cause issues."

John felt somewhat embarrassed that he had even brought the subject up. He knew he might be walking on sensitive ground, but sensed from the start that he liked her, and that having this job would probably help her.

"You're 17, is that correct Diana?"

Yes, I'll be 18 in September".

"Well, I would guess anywhere you work, you'd have to deal with guys chasing after you. So, I doubt it would be any more of a problem here. You seem as though you could take care of yourself pretty well."

Diana smiled. "I like to think I have a good head on my shoulders – aside from my fear of animals. You should also know that although I can handle it, I don't like being outside at night, or in dark places alone. It reverts back to when I was attacked in the dark. I wouldn't be expected to be in the barns or out at night working alone would I? It's just that I'd prefer to be with someone."

John tried to put her at ease.

"Frankly, Diana, I don't know of anyone, myself included, who likes to be alone in the dark. I don't see you having to work alone at night. There are usually plenty of people around. And, the bunk houses

are shared, although everyone has his or her own room. But, we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's talk about the job."

They had reached the house and John opened the door for Diana. The house was nicely furnished as though a woman had decorated it, yet no wife was mentioned. The front room had been converted into an office.

"Can I offer you some water or lemonade? John suggested.

"Water would be fine. Thanks"

John left the room and a minute later returned with two waters.

"What I need is someone who can be a general administrative person, and then, perhaps we can wean you into becoming more comfortable with the animals. With the camp starting in a few days, I need administrative help getting the kids situated, scheduling their activities, and handling the office duties while I'm teaching, training or handling general stable issues. We not only teach therapeutic riding here, but we train riders who are serious about showing, all the way up to Olympic quality riding and jumping. Also, we train and board horses. I have a staff of six trainers, three men and three women, four stable hands, and numerous volunteers. It can get very hectic here. Everyone who works here knows that we try to put forth a positive attitude at all times. The riders would sense our negativity immediately, and that would translate into becoming scared. That energy can flow directly into the horse. They are very sensitive creatures. But, going back to the job; part of your duties will be to get information from the horses."

Diana felt her fear coming back.

"What exactly do you mean?"

John laughed a little. "Diana, we aren't your old fashion riding stable anymore. We're in the computer age. Everything is computerized, even the stalls at the horse barns. You wouldn't have to go near the horses themselves other than to walk by their stalls early in the morning before the barns become active. Every morning, just read what the monitor outside each horse's stall says, and enter it into the electronic wand. Then enter that data into the office's main computer. It's all electronic and pretty simple, but I need someone competent and trustworthy to track and record all horse related activities, meaning training, medicines, feed, grooming, exercising, breeding, riding, shoeing, vet visits, and any other visitors. We take our horses very seriously here, along with all our animals. Micca and I are the only ones who are authorized to change any data, and/or any instructions regarding the horses. Don't worry; you wouldn't be able to change anything by mistake. All the monitors are password protected."

Diana felt somewhat more at ease now that she knew she wouldn't be expected to handle the horses.

"I'm pretty good with computers. I'm sure this is something I could handle. But, may I ask, if you knew you were going to need someone for the summer, why haven't you hired anybody before this?"

John looked down at the floor and became quiet.

"I had someone to do the work, but she is no longer available."

Diana felt she had touched a negative chord, so dropped it before John changed his mind about her. They talked a while more about her school and interests until John felt he had learned enough about her. With the help of Mr. Whitaker's reference, he had pretty much made up his mind from the beginning that he wanted her for the job, but he didn't want to appear too eager to hire this teenager with no experience.

"Well, Diana, what about that tour of the stables? Do you think you're ready?"

Diana breathed in and felt a slight adrenalin rush.

"I guess I need to pass the final test, huh? If I can walk through the barn without passing out, I guess I'll be able to handle anything. Just kidding."

Diana felt she wanted this job but knew she'd somehow have to get over her apprehensions.

“Maybe being here will help me as well as the therapeutic riders. Who knows? Maybe someday I’ll even be brave enough to ride.” She rolled her eyes and smiled. They were both laughing as they left the house, which she thought was a good sign.