

Chapter 1

Cora hadn't planned to write the book. She didn't even know the story existed. It all began when Nick walked in on Cora that morning. A young man, a stranger with dark hair pulled into a ponytail, he startled her with his unforeseen entrance. She had no way of knowing she would come to share his ambitions—ambitions that would lead them all into danger. Nick would probably say it was the Trickster, throwing one of life's surprises at her.

Cora had been standing beside a large library table in the choir loft of the Old Stone Church that now housed the Lemont Area Historical Society, known locally as LAHS. She gazed at stacks of partially sorted books, files, and documents scattered over the table. She had been in a good mood when she woke that morning *and* had a clear head, not always a given for a woman moving into her seventies. She was determined to make serious inroads to clear that table and get every item inventoried and into a permanent home—taking a bite of the elephant, she called it. Then one by one the volunteers that helped her make organization out of chaos called to say they couldn't make it in. That was a difficulty with volunteers in general, but these women were usually dependable, and it was rare that she worked alone. But there she was.

And it was hot! She hated to be hot—it was only early June. *And* this spooky old building was said to be haunted. Some of the members had had “experiences,” but Cora never had. Still...

Staring at piles that never seemed to go down, deserted by her team, alone, hot, ears on alert for strange noises, her positive mood was rapidly deteriorating.

She picked up an item at random from the top of a pile, trying to decide where to begin. A ledger from a polling place, 1945, listing voters. People came to the historical society to look up evidence of ancestors and relatives and to find addresses. But where should she place it? With genealogy materials? Village records? No, it was a county election. She'd assign it to county materials. But then, the county kept its own records... should she keep it at all?

She was startled to hear the clang of the panic bar ring out from below, alerting her that someone was opening the front door on the ground floor. She jumped, dropped the ledger on the table, spun around, and banged her knee on a table leg. *Damn it! My bad knee!* She rubbed it and limped toward the staircase, heart pounding.

It wasn't possible for anyone to *sneak* in; the warped door announced visitors with a sound that reverberated through the sanctuary as the heavy, metal lock released, followed by the squeal of worn hinges that no one ever seemed to get around to oiling. She wasn't expecting anyone this morning, but unexpected visitors weren't entirely unusual.

Cora stood at the top of the staircase and called down, "Hello? Can we help you?" Didn't hurt to imply more people were present.

"Uh...yes...", a bright male voice replied. "I'm looking for Cora Tozzi?"

Cora didn't recognize the voice. She started down cautiously, clutching the railing to support her throbbing knee. She couldn't see anyone below. "I'm sorry, and you are...?"

A man appeared in the doorway at the bottom of the stairs. He was young and handsome, of average height, with a dark complexion and broad shoulders, his shirt tight against muscular arms, his long, black hair gathered neatly at the back of his neck.

"No, *I'm* sorry—for showing up this way." He smiled at her. "When I called, the secretary told me Cora Tozzi worked here Wednesday mornings. I thought I'd just stop in and try to catch her. Is she here?"

Cora closed her eyes for a moment, cursing Maureen for giving out that information. She hated interruptions. *So much to do and so little time.* She opened her eyes and forced a smile as she arrived at the bottom of the stairs, where the man stood in the building's small gathering area.

"I'm Cora." She waited for him tell her what he wanted.

His grin widened. "Cora Tozzi!" he said. "Wow!"

Despite her trepidation, Cora laughed and ran a hand through her thinning white hair. "I have no idea what I've done to deserve that!"

"No—I mean, yes, you have!" he said, thrusting out a hand for her to shake. "We just moved here—I'm a new fellow at Argonne." This man did not match her image of a typical scientist from Argonne, the national research facility about a mile away on the other side of the Des Plaines River Valley.

His hand was warm and smooth, and as Cora shook it she could sense the man's energy.

"I read about that old mystery you solved last year, about Sag Bridge and the murders? I just had to look you up. I'm Nick, by the way—Nick Pokagon."

He seemed friendly, and such obvious enthusiasm made a favorable impression, but Cora turned and called up the stairs to imaginary coworkers. "I'll be downstairs a few minutes." She pointed to the secretary's office.

The Old Stone Church dated from the 1860s and was never meant to house a modern office. The small room doubled as a bride's dressing room when the charming old building was rented for weddings, a necessary source of income for the historical society. A computer and printer took up most of a small desk. The rest of the room held a file cabinet and a pile of assorted items in a corner; a dressing table with a tall mirror for brides on one wall; and a church pew, now piled with boxes and stacks of paper, against another wall for guests. Cora cleared a space on the pew, gestured for the man to be seated, and moved to a chair behind the desk.

The Sag Bridge murders Nick mentioned involved a mystery she had been instrumental in solving the previous fall. The whole story was never revealed to the general public. Secrets only she and a few close friends knew had touched Cora's life personally and left her with a sense of loss that was still painful if she allowed herself to dwell on it. Her visitor could not know that, of course.

She sat tall in her chair, as tall as her diminutive stature allowed, and looked Nick in the eye. "Why did you want to see me?"

He flashed a magnetic grin again, and Cora could not help but be charmed. She struggled to keep her face from revealing the effect the charismatic young man had, but she feared her eyes gave her away. She

found herself wishing she were forty years younger and forty pounds lighter, despite being happily married to Cisco.

Silly old woman, she chastised herself.

“When I found out I received a fellowship, I was excited about coming to Lemont because my ancestors lived here—back around the War of 1812. Now I’ll have a chance to learn more about them.”

“Mostly Indians lived here then,” Cora informed him.

“Yes,” he chuckled. “Like me. I’m Potawatomi. Pokagon Band, from Michigan. But some of us lived here once.”

That explained the dark complexion, the ponytail. *Now, don’t be type-casting!*

“There’s one ancestor in particular. I thought a local historian could show me where she lived...answer some questions. When I read about you and Sag Bridge, I...well, I hoped you’d help me.” He held both palms up in a pleading gesture.

Cora placed an elbow on the desk and rested her chin on her fist. “I don’t have any information about any *particular* Indians, just general information available to anyone. I’m not sure how much help I can be. Documentation from that time is pretty sketchy. There weren’t many settlers—mostly explorers, people passing through. The local Native Americans didn’t leave any written documents, you understand.”

“Actually, there *is* a written document,” he said, eyes twinkling. “That’s why I’m here.” He leaned forward, watching her face as he explained. “My ancestor was educated at a mission and then lived with a voyageur family at an outpost. She left a written memoir. I can show it to you. Maybe we can visit some of the places she lived.”

Cora smiled but tried to hide the sudden thrill tingling inside her.

A document written by an Indian, a Native American woman, no less! During the pre-removal period!

“It’s all different now, of course...if she was around here, the village would have been along the river, and it was moved in the 1890s....” Cora realized she was babbling and trailed off. *What a find, if true!*

“You mean the village was moved, not the river, right?” he chuckled.

“No, the river was moved.”

He opened his eyes wide, and Cora laughed at the expression on his face.

“Yes—to build the Sanitary Canal the engineers moved the river and ran the canal through the original riverbed.” She launched into a favorite topic. “It changed the topography significantly—*islands disappeared, swampy areas developed or filled in, things like that.*”

He grinned again and relaxed against the back of the pew. “See? That’s the kind of stuff I want to know. Even if it’s changed, I want to go there, walk where she lived, get some sense of her surroundings. Can you show me?”

Cora laughed. “Well, not now, certainly. But I could point out where you should go and what you should look for. Don’t you need to be at Argonne during the day?”

He rolled his eyes in the direction of the ceiling. “I have some—flexibility.”

Cora leaned back in her chair, crossed her arms, and grinned. “Well, Mr. Nick Pokagon, it seems we might spend some time together. You’ve certainly got my attention. But nothing’s going to happen this morning—I have things to finish upstairs.”

As they stood up Cora had a sudden impulse. “Are you free for lunch, by any chance?” she asked. “I’m meeting a friend, but you’re welcome to join us. I’m sure you’ll like her. Maybe we can make some plans.”

As she said this, Cora bit her tongue. She had just met this man—she knew nothing about him except what he told her. What was she getting herself into? Was she misled by his charm? He seemed harmless, but the places he wanted to visit were desolate, and she’d be alone with him. Cisco would throw a fit when she told him.

Chapter 2

As Cora locked the front door of the Old Stone Church, she half-hoped Nick would decide not to show up for lunch. Why had she been so hasty? She walked around the building and down an alley where three parking spots were reserved for LAHS. She was irritated to find a dark-blue pickup truck that had seen better days parked near her car. She glanced in the cab, thinking she would give the driver a lecture or at least a dirty look, but didn't see anyone inside.

She backed out and drove to the street, shaking her head and wondering once again why people failed to heed the reserved parking sign for the few spaces at LAHS but obeyed a similar sign for the larger, adjacent area of empty church parking spaces. She was surprised to hear the truck's engine clatter to life and watched in the side mirror as the truck backed into the alley. She had thought it was unoccupied.

The truck stayed behind her. When she turned left off Illinois Street and onto Stephen Street, it darted in front of an oncoming car, forcing the car's driver to brake and sound his horn. She arrived at Smokey Row Pub and parked in the lot behind the building. The truck pulled into the lot, passed her, and stopped a short distance away. When Cora exited her car, the truck raced off. She never got a look at the driver. Perhaps Nick had followed her and then decided to park in a different spot, she thought.

A few minutes later, Nick came striding up Stephen Street where she waited near the entrance to the restaurant. His head turned from side to side as he studied the historic buildings that lined the street, until his attention was caught by the Illinois and Michigan Canal, a short distance from where she stood.

Cora greeted him with a nod and a weak smile. "Do you drive a dark-blue truck?" she asked.

"No, a silver SUV," he said. "Why?"

"Nothing. I mistook the driver for you, I guess," she said. Although she thought the incident somewhat alarming, she pushed it from her mind, assuming she had overreacted.

Seeming not to notice Cora's cool greeting and distraction, Nick waved an arm in the direction of the canal. "So this is what started it all? Chicago and everything around here?"

Cora felt herself succumbing to Nick's boyish enthusiasm once again, and whatever doubts she had quickly dissipated. "Yes. This is the transportation link that connected the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River. It's unlikely Chicago would ever have grown without it." She turned from the canal to the surrounding buildings and Nick followed her gaze. "Some of these buildings have been here 150 years," she added. She caught his eye. "Let's go in."

Cora immediately spotted Frannie, a sixtyish, African-American woman, seated at a table against the far wall. She waved off a waitress who was heading in their direction and pointed Nick toward Frannie's table. Frannie watched as they approached, her eyes narrowing, obviously checking out Cora's companion. Despite her inviting words to Nick, Cora wasn't sure how he and Frannie were going to hit it off, but she had an idea she was about to be entertained.

Cora was amused by Nick's struggle to avoid staring at Frannie's most prominent features: her odd hairstyle—bunches of graying hair poking out at angles—and her chest, which was not merely large but astonishing. She'd seen other people react this way when meeting Frannie, but Frannie never seemed to notice.

"Who's the hunk with you, Cora? More important, is he buying?" Frannie greeted them with her usual bluntness, ignoring Nick's gaze. Cora bit her cheeks to hide a relieved smile; Frannie's remarks told Cora a snap judgment had been made to approve of Nick.

As they seated themselves, Cora nudged Nick. "I should have warned you. Frannie can be outspoken, if not downright outrageous." She winked at Frannie.

Nick leveled a serious look at Frannie and countered, "I can buy. Or we could trade. How are your negotiation skills?"

"Uh, huh—" Frannie shifted her eyes toward Cora, looking baffled. "What's that mean?"

"He's Potawatomi Indian, Frannie. It seems he's also a bit of a joker."

Nick flashed a wide grin at Frannie, leaned back in his chair, and crossed his arms.

"Oh, man, look at that smile! Well, he's a major sexy joker. I can get used to that."

"This is Nick Pokagon, Frannie. He's from Argonne, their new fellow."

"A scientist, huh? A major smart, major hot, joker. This gets better and better."

Nick studied the menu board. He appeared to be enjoying himself.

"I'm going to help him get information on one of his ancestors. She used to live near here. Think you'd want to help?"

"Well, I don't know..." Frannie hesitated. "He brought up about the trading thing—what's *he* got to trade? It's summer now, but I been saving for a fur coat. He can see my negotiation skills for himself if he's got any furs out in his car."

Nick elbowed Cora, jostling the glass of water she was lifting toward her mouth. "I'll have to stay on my toes to top your friend. This is going to be fun."

"I never knew any Native Americans before. I expect you to be all somber and shit, but you're nothing like that," Frannie said, pointing a finger at him.

"Not at all," said Nick, taking a roll from a basket and buttering it. "Nothing unusual about me there. The somber stuff's part of the stereotype. Most Native Americans have a very keen sense of humor. Ever hear of the Trickster?"

Cora and Frannie exchanged blank expressions.

"Who's that?" Frannie asked.

"The Trickster's a spiritual leader, a highly intelligent guy who uses cunning, magic, and tricks to make his point." He took a large bite from his roll and then waved the fingers of both hands in the air. "We believe life gives us surprises, disappointments, reversals, and the Trickster trains

us to prepare for that. Humor is very important. We say we can't pray until we've laughed."

"Bet that training and praying comes in handy at all them casinos," Frannie said.

Cora sputtered, the comment catching her with a mouth full of water. She wiped her chin on a napkin and looked at Nick. He was laughing. "How did you wind up at Argonne, Nick?"

"After I got my doctorate at the University of Michigan, I applied for a postdoctoral fellowship and was fortunate enough to get it. It'll be a real kick-start to my career, and my wife is happy since it's not far from home, Dowagiac, and near our families."

"Married?" Frannie commented, faking a dejected expression. "Huh—just my luck."

The server came to the table and took their drink orders. "Sorry for the wait, but we're a bit backed up," she said, glancing around the crowded room. "Are you folks in a hurry?" Cora told her to take her time.

"You shouldn't have said that," Frannie said when the woman left. "She may not come back."

However, the server reappeared almost immediately, set down a fresh glass of water for Cora and Cokes for Frannie and Nick, but then disappeared without taking their lunch order.

Nick sipped his Coke. "Dawn, my wife, is a research assistant. She's doing some proofreading at home right now, while our baby's so young. Rose's first birthday is next month."

"You're not from a reservation or anything like that?" Frannie asked.

"Well, yes, we live on tribal land."

"In Michigan? I didn't know there was any reservations in Michigan, not Southern Michigan. Dowagiac is just, what, about a hundred miles from here?" Frannie seemed doubtful.

"About two hours, 125 miles, that's right. You've heard of the Four Winds Casino, haven't you? That's ours."

Although Nick didn't seem touchy about ethnic matters, Cora steered the conversation in another direction. "What are you working on at Argonne?"

"Aquatic Invasive Species Transfer."

"What's that in English?" Frannie asked around her straw.

“You’ve heard of Asian carp?”

“Those crazy jumping fish?”

“That’s them. Lemont’s right in the middle of the most likely pathway to spread them into other waterways. If we don’t get a handle on a way to stop them,” he said, pointing out the window at a long bridge spanning the valley, “you’ll be able to look from that bridge in a couple of years and see the Sanitary Canal shimmering with jumping fish.”

“I saw it on *YouTube*—those things jump right in people’s boats. Big, ugly old things. Hurl themselves at people too. Some get hurt.” Frannie knocked her straw to the table. She ignored it and picked up her glass.

Nick nodded. “Yes. It’s important and interesting work until I can find someone to sponsor the project I’m *really* interested in.”

“And that would be...?” Cora inquired.

“Repopulation of predators in urban areas,” Nick said.

Cora threw a meaningful look at Frannie, but Frannie missed it and the words were already out. “Predators? You mean like coyotes and wolves moving back in here? Cora and I know all about wolves, from the Sag Bridge goings-on last year. We can help you there,” she boasted.

Nick raised his eyebrows in surprise. “You two know about wolves? Why’s that? I didn’t see anything about wolves when I read about you.”

Cora wished Frannie hadn’t brought up the subject, and she averted her eyes. “Where’s that server?” she asked, looking around the room. When Nick’s eyes remained on her, she said, “We ran into what we thought was a wolf when we were investigating the Sag Bridge murders.”

“That old wolf still visits Cora, time to time. Tell him, Cora,” Frannie prompted.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Cora said, giving Frannie a light kick under the table. Frannie dropped her eyes, apparently finally noticing Cora’s intent look that clearly said: *Shut up*.

“Just sounds in the night, maybe dreams, who knows. It was all pretty bizarre, so we didn’t mention it when we told people about the murders. But at the time we did a lot of reading about wolf behavior, trying to find out what was going on.”

“What *was* going on?” Nick was clearly interested.

“Please, it’s a complicated story. I’d rather not go into it now—maybe another time. Tell us more about your ancestor.”

“Sure.” He put his elbows on the table. “Her name was Wawetseka. She wrote a memoir in French, the non-native language she knew best. She learned to read and write at a mission and then lived with a French-Indian family when she was young. She was invaluable when white people started moving through the area, sort of like Sacagawea.” He put the remainder of a roll in his mouth and reached for another.

“In her memoir she tells about bringing in the killer of a white man.” He spread his roll thickly with butter.

“Do you know French?” Frannie interrupted.

“Just a little. The Potawatomi are a matriarchal society, you know? Each woman passed the memoir to her oldest daughter, generation after generation. When it got to my mother, I was an only child, so I wound up with it. The stories about Wawetseka always fascinated me, and I had a friend at U of M who spoke French and translated it in exchange for some extra spending money.”

“A trade?” Frannie asked, winking.

“You got me!” Nick said good-naturedly.

“It sounds like quite a story,” Cora said.

“Yes. Wawetseka was an extraordinary woman, more than just an Indian woman with some education and interpreting skills. Her son was accused of killing a white man, and he was to be executed under territorial law. She believed he didn’t do it, and, when no one would look for the real killer, she tracked him down herself and brought him to justice, to free her son. That was not a role Indian women played in those days.”

“When was that? Do you know the year?” Cora asked.

“I do. It was 1817.”

“When I read about that time period, I was surprised how many people passed down the Des Plaines River. White settlers didn’t arrive until about 1830, but people moved up and down the river, and the Indians traded with them. Most people think there were Indians, then traders, then settlers, and that’s it. But tradesmen, merchants, missionaries, military, even bandits, traveled through before the frontier arrived.” Cora leaned forward and moved her hands energetically, a habit she had picked up from her husband, Cisco, who characteristically used wild gestures, jokingly attributed to his Sicilian heritage.