

PROLOGUE

Summer 2005

Whenever Cora Tozzi drove through these woods, as she did daily, she wondered what was behind the trees she saw from the road. The woods had invited her exploration for years.

Today she would find out. She never expected the parking lot to be empty, though.

She wasn't about to allow the absence of people to scare her off. She closed the car door carefully in reverence of the silence, but the metallic click was as jarring as if she'd slammed it. She glanced nervously around the desolate lot and picnic area to the edges of the forest. The place both fascinated and frightened her. Nothing appeared alarming, but...maybe it *wasn't* safe for a woman to be here alone.

Well, I wanted to come here...here I am. Unpaid bills, food shopping, a hundred other tasks...can wait. I will walk in my forest...don't waste this perfect day! But...it's not what I expected....

Foolish or not, she had decided to come alone, to experience the woods at her own pace, free to savor thoughts, impressions, and observations. Another presence, even Cisco's, would interfere.

But was this a good idea? Was it safe? A small woman, not young, nor as fit as she'd like, she was pretty vulnerable. Maybe she should think about it again...no, surely nothing would happen to her. Good fortune had followed her all her life, as if an unseen presence guarded her, and she had come to count on that. She would be vigilant, though, and she was prepared: she carried a trekking pole with a sharp carbide tip.

Could I actually use it, if I needed to?

A faint trail led into the trees from the picnic area. She tossed off

apprehensions and, heeding her dermatologist's warning to take precautions against more skin cancers, she tugged a floppy hat out of a pocket, pulled it over her graying hair, and stepped onto the path, carefully listening for unusual sounds.

But every sound was unfamiliar, so what would seem unusual? Unseen, a small creature rustled across the forest floor, and she jumped, and then laughed at herself. *Silly old woman*. She heard a car pass on the road nearby, reassuring. She trudged deeper into the trees, and road noise faded.

She mulled over her fears: what was threatening in the woods? As the road noise had just reminded her, she was near civilization, just follow the noise and she wouldn't be lost. But people had been lost, in these very woods or other woods nearby, sometimes their bodies not found until years later, likely due to the density of the underbrush, and the infrequency with which anyone ventured off a path. In fact, she read in the paper just last week about a man who was last seen walking into woods a mile from here two weeks ago, and he had not yet been found.

Foreboding of evil might occur to a woman alone out here. Perhaps some sadistic man lurked in the underbrush, planning to have his way with her, to leave her battered or worse. Women are warned to fear men in lonely places. Maybe some unknown creature lay in wait, like in the movies. The forest primeval—or just evil? Cora didn't believe in alien or supernatural beings...but in the woods alone, anything seemed possible.

She shook it off, laughed again. She'd walked for ten minutes, and nothing she saw, heard, or sensed was ominous. Her confidence returned as the woods deepened, and she became captivated by their beauty.



Every day on her way to and from her job, Cora passed through these woods. Her commute, and her days, were long, beginning at daybreak, or earlier, and ending in twilight, or later. Her daily trip turned out to be a respite of quiet thought in her hectic world. She cherished the drive, especially through the peaceful forest, and the opportunity to reflect on beauty around her she otherwise took no time to see.

She watched the trees, shrubs and groundcovers change with the seasons; the light never illuminated them in quite the same way. The sights delighted her: the fresh greens of spring, the golden arches the trees made

over the road in fall, the crisp new-fallen snow, a brilliant cardinal flashing boldly across the road. She caught glimpses of wildlife: deer, coyotes, raccoons, turkeys—even wolves on the rare occasion, but she had seen them, at least she thought so—possible evidence of wildlife repopulation. She had read that wolves were hunted out of the area over a hundred years ago, but in recent years a rare lone wolf was sighted in Northern Illinois, ranging out of its territory, probably in search of food or a mate. There was plenty of food here, with the overabundance of deer.

The forest's mood could be gloomy, but the woods have many moods, and on other days, sunlight streamed through the treetops—Cora heard it called *God's light*. The sight sometimes brought a lump to her throat and a tear to her eye. Easily moved, which she attributed to her emotional Irish heritage, she was glad she could feel joy this deeply.

A number of roads passed through the forest, but Cora's favorite took her past an old Catholic Church, Saint James at Sag Bridge. The small building sat on a hilltop, surrounded by a cemetery, the cemetery surrounded by dense woods. When Cora attended Mass there, ushers rang the church bells by pulling ropes—one to ring, another to toll, calling parishioners. Cora felt that she stepped into another time and place. Inside, above the altar, a remarkable stained glass window depicted the eye of God.

Stories of ghosts and other mysterious happenings around the churchyard were plentiful, which was not surprising as the encroaching deep and impenetrable woods created an eerie atmosphere.

Cora referred to this rare place as her forest, and considered it a gift.

But that was just what she saw along the road.

She had to know what was in the woods behind the old church.



Now she was here, completely shut off from the outside world. She looked around, and her senses took over.

Shrubs occupied the forest floor. She recognized maples, seedlings and old monsters; some had fallen, some laid broken in tangled masses. There was a magnificent old oak, with majestic branches and massive trunk. A glorious thing, and words from Joyce Kilmer's poem, "Only God can make a tree" came to her mind.

Her skin warmed by a gentle breeze rustling the leaves, she walked easily along the dry level trail, overgrown here and there by thorny brush that caught her clothes. Today the woods emitted a damp, earthy odor, not the wonderfully pungent dry leaf smell of fall. Whispering sounds and birdcalls descended from the canopy, and sharp crackles announced the travels of woodland creatures, squirrels and chipmunks on the ground. Cheerful sounds, the music of the forest.

How different from her yard, with its roar of air conditioners, banging of construction projects, drone of lawnmowers. A small plane hummed overhead, reminding her of childhood, lying on the lawn in summer, dreams and images suggested by clouds.

Suddenly Cora was surrounded by a cloud of gnats and, yes! Mosquitoes! They swarmed around her face, neck and hands, searching, penetrating any open skin, ears, eyes, hair. *No you don't. You're not gonna feast on me!* She broke into a trot, flailing her arms—not easy to do while carrying a trekking pole. Glad no one was there to witness her foolish flight, she left the nuisance behind as the trail came to an end at...*what?—a road?*

Panting, she wished she could shed a few pounds as easily as she was able to when she was younger. She found herself standing on an old asphalt road, neglected and cracked with countless weedy fissures. *A road? In the woods? Paved? Service roads would be gravel...odd. It must have gone somewhere...but where? Saint James? But it has its own roads...*

Curious, no, compelled, Cora followed the road uphill, to find out where it used to go. She labored up and up, curve after curve, pausing now and then to catch her breath and let the burn in her legs ease. She saw only trees. The road seemed endless, a road to *nowhere*. Maybe a scenic overlook was up ahead. But if so, why was the road abandoned? At each bend she expected to see something ahead but saw only another bend.

At last, almost ready to give up, a post, a weathered 4 × 4 next to the road, barely noticed. *Something* was ahead, must be—if there was a post there must be a reason to put it there. As she approached, she felt light-headed...from exertion—or a surreal daze? To the side of the post, which on closer inspection may have been part of an old gate, was a faint trail leading back into the woods, and down that trail she saw butterflies, more butterflies than she had ever seen, an astounding, incredible show!

From an inch to more than six inches, brilliant and varied, some irides-

cent, others royal blue, black, white, yellow, swallowtails. They fluttered over and around the path, so thick Cora couldn't see beyond them as they streamed from the woods. *Do butterflies live in the woods? Don't they like sun, live in gardens?*

Awed, then entranced, Cora walked into the cloud of butterflies. They danced around and ahead of her down the trail, but all was oddly still. There were no birdcalls, no other insects. All was silent except her footsteps, muted on the soft grassy path as she followed the butterflies, as if in a dream.

The path penetrated dense brush, and ended at a clearing; intuitively she knew the clearing was where she was supposed to go. It held the explanation to what just happened and was the reason for the road.

In the center of the clearing was a large stone slab, a cube of about four feet. *Like 2001: A Space Odyssey, in miniature.* The rock appeared to be a monument, and the clearing man-made. Fascinated, she approached the granite monolith and read the words carved on it: CAUTION—DO NOT DIG. BURIED IN THIS AREA IS RADIOACTIVE MATERIAL FROM NUCLEAR RESEARCH CONDUCTED HERE IN 1943–1949.

A memory of something she read, somewhere, sometime: Cora put it together. The old road led to Argonne Laboratory, a large national research facility that was hidden in the woods in these Forest Preserves during the Manhattan Project. It was an ideal location, for then, as now, one could walk for miles in these woods and remain unseen. She pictured Enrico Fermi and Albert Einstein walking this very ground, although she was only guessing.

This, then, was the secret hidden behind the trees that Cora had come looking for. She had no idea anything was left of the Manhattan Project and was surprised the waste was buried near the old site, as the present location of Argonne was across the valley two miles away—in fact, she would have been able to see it, were it not for the trees. She felt the same sense of history and being in another time and place as she had when she visited Saint James, just a short distance from here.

She looked around and realized the butterflies were gone. *What just happened? Were they really here? Did I imagine them?* Wandering in a dream-like state, she explored the clearing. The longer she stayed, the more she imagined she felt something leaching from the ground and detected a

slight sharp odor. *Maybe this stuff isn't harmless...causing some sort of cellular damage!* Her hands tingled, and it was difficult to concentrate, as if in a daze. *Real? My imagination? Shit! I'd better just leave!*



Eating fast food in front of the television that evening, she talked to Cisco about it.

“Don’t you think the butterflies were bizarre? Why would they be there? Why do you think I’m so fascinated by that place? Is it what I found or something else I didn’t find?” she asked.

“Why do you need a reason? Can’t you accept that sometimes it just is?” he replied.

Cora sighed and let it go. That was reason enough for Cisco, but not for her.

Cora returned to the woods a number of times that summer. She never saw butterflies there again. She wondered if it had something to do with the time of year or the time of day, but in her heart she knew there was no logical, natural reason. She knew the real explanation: the mystical butterflies did not return because she no longer needed them to lead her—now she knew the way.

In Cora’s life, the inexplicable was common, just another day.



*Angel of God, my guardian dear
To whom God's love commits me here.
Ever this day be at my side
To light, to guard, to rule and guide.
Amen.*

—Traditional Children's Prayer



*When at night I go to sleep
Fourteen angels watch do keep...*

*Angels hover round me,
Whisp'ring they have found me...*

—Engelbert Humperdinck,
“Evening Prayer” from *Hänsel and Gretel*

Cora

2012

Chapter 1

You know what I think retired means?” Cora said, lugging china and serving pieces up the basement stairs—her fourth trip. She sighed. “I think it means tired all over again. I thought life was supposed to get easier after I quit work, but it seems nothing is changed.”

“Why are you bringing that stuff upstairs?” Cisco was reading the paper at the kitchen table. “Don’t we have stuff up here you can use?”

“Yeah, well, all our good stuff is stored in the basement, and we never use it. We’re going to go to our graves without using it.”

“You’ll have to wash it.”

“Of course I’m going to wash it. Do you think I’m an idiot?”

She filled the sink with hot water and piled in dishes, shaking her head.

“You want some help?” he offered, looking up.

“No, I got it. I’d rather do this myself.”

“You’re your own worst enemy, you know. You don’t need to get involved in so many things.” Cisco turned his eyes back to the paper.

Yet again— how often does he have to remind me?

“I was afraid I’d be bored. I joined things so I *wouldn’t* get bored.” She glanced in his direction. “You think I went too far, huh?”

“You could say that. It’d be an understatement,” he said, without looking up.

“I’m going to get it under control...after I finish a few things...” Cora started stacking washed dishes on a towel on the countertop.

“I’ve heard *that* before. You know it never happens,” he said, eying her over the top of his glasses, closing the paper and adding it to one of several piles on the table.