

Chapter 1

MARCH 2015

PEOPLE who knew Valerie Pawlik might have said she was a loner, but she had never felt as lonely as she did now.

Seated in an armchair, leather or perhaps a high-quality synthetic she supposed, she ran her fingers over the soft surface. If she remembered correctly, it was bright turquoise or maybe soft orange or gray, the Lemont Public Library's color scheme. Sunlight from a nearby window warmed her. Surrounding sounds seemed loud to her now: a page being flipped, a scratching pencil, a clearing throat. Someone walked nearby, probably looking over the selections on the fiction shelves behind her. An overweight adult woman, she speculated, from the heavy breathing and spaced footsteps. The woman had probably stared at Corky when she passed by, not expecting to see a dog here. Valerie placed a hand on the sleek fur and then rested her arm in her lap.

Alone and lonely were not the same thing: she knew that now!

She couldn't go home—it was Sally's home really—before she thought through what Father McGrath had proposed. She had to make a decision. Better to be alone in a public place than in that stifling atmosphere. So she had the Dial-a-Ride driver take her to the library, despite the fact he would not be available later. She patted the pocket that contained her cell phone. After she made her decision, she'd call a cab.

She had the basics down now: how to dress, feed herself, and move confidently with her guide dog or a cane. Father McGrath was helping her prepare for the rest of her life. She couldn't leach off Sally and Grace forever, didn't want to, even if she had felt welcome there. She was too

independent—well, her personality was independent, even if her situation wasn't. But above all she had to consider Molly.

Father McGrath suggested she get help from Cora of all people! Cora, who had ordered Valerie out of her home and told her not to return. The argument that followed provoked Valerie to seek revenge, and then there was the accident. How could she go to Cora now with her hand out, especially about such a private matter?

Father's words played over and over: "None of this is going to be easy. Think of it as practice for a *life* that won't be easy. Cora has the skills and experience you need to solve the mysteries that threaten your future. She's also a caring and forgiving sort. Settle the argument; rekindle your friendship."

"But we were never friends," Valerie had said. "We were oil and water from the start."

He had replied, "That doesn't change the advice. You were the antagonist in the relationship, remember? That's another thing you need to deal with. Cora's the right person, and I advise you to have at it."

Father McGrath was her only friend at the moment. She had always thought friends unnecessary, but he had pointed out more than once that her situation was different now. With the absence of dependable family, she needed friends. He wouldn't always be there.

Thinking about it now, her hands shook and she gripped her knees in panic. Corky stood and put her head in Valerie's lap, nudging, sensing her mistress's distress.

Valerie stroked the silky head and gradually calmed.

Where was the proud, confident person she used to be? She must reawaken that person. She had to—her future depended on it. She'd try Cora and if that didn't work, well, then she had to try something else.

She reached for her phone. She'd give Father permission to call Cora and explain. Would Cora even agree to talk to her? She'd soon find out.

She could do this! What else *could* she do?



Billy Nokoy didn't try to fool himself. He was what he was, and in the opinion of most people he was a loser, like his father.

Billy grew up spending long hours alone at home, waiting up to help his single-parent father to bed after lengthy days of janitorial work followed by nights at the local watering hole. Often his father, who dearly loved his son, came home sad and ashamed, sobbing because he could not be a better parent and his son deserved so much more than he was able to give. Billy often feared his life would be the same as his father's.

No, Billy had to confront his problems and build a better life.

Today he sat at one of the library's public computers, sliding the mouse aimlessly on the mouse pad, following the cursor with his eyes on the screen, oblivious to everything around him. He had come to the library to research paranormal phenomena, but he couldn't settle his thoughts.

What the hell had he done? What could he do about it now?

His friend Nick had said, "I had a crazy notion you ended the matter by releasing a bolt of lightning at him."

"What do you mean?" Billy had asked.

Nick explained that everyone present told a different story. Nick's version was that Billy sent a visible bolt of energy that pinned the man to a tree.

"Of course that couldn't have happened," Nick said, laughing. "There was lightning and a storm."

Billy had gone still, realizing Nick's story was similar to what he remembered himself. Having someone confirm his impression made it more believable. He hadn't been able to shake the wild idea.

His powers of reasoning would never measure up to those of his childhood friends Nick and Dawn, brilliant scientists at nearby Argonne Laboratories. During their school days, his friends got top grades effortlessly while he studied endlessly. He wasn't stupid; his mind just worked slower. Nick and Dawn tried to coach him, but he wanted to succeed on his own. His track record had been abysmal.

While his friends had been accepted into the biological science program at Washington University, Billy had been rejected by the seven schools he applied to. He tried to remain cheerful as Nick and Dawn left the reservation to start their important lives, while he stayed behind in Dowagiac, Michigan, to attend junior college and work as a dealer at the casino. He planned to treat his friends to an evening out, but it didn't

turn out the way he expected. After two months of training, he found himself assigned to the five-dollar tables, where the tips were paltry and the hours few.

One evening he got assigned to one of the twenty-dollar-minimum blackjack tables. He hoped to finally prove himself. At last. A chance to turn things around.

He dealt a card to a large man with a shaved head, bulging forearms, and a surly expression. The card put the player over twenty-one. "Hey, asshole," the man said, "you dealing off the bottom of the deck?"

Billy blinked. Unsure how to handle angry losers, he was hurt that someone would accuse him of cheating. He didn't know what to say.

"No," he said, glancing around for help that didn't materialize.

The player took advantage of Billy's obvious discomfort.

"They teach you that in dealer school?" he went on. "Hit me—no, you'd just want the card back, you Indian giver." And later, "My momma always told me never to trust an Indian." Similar insults continued until Billy's dinner break.

When Billy returned to the table, the bully was gone, probably asked to leave by the more experienced dealer who covered while Billy was off the floor. In the player's place was a white-faced man who was sweating profusely. After losing hand after hand, all his chips gone, the man looked around desperately as if there were somewhere else to go, someone who would bail him out. He turned to Billy, trembling. "Can you loan me fifty dollars?" the man said. "Please, I'm good for it."

Billy had seen men like this before, men who lost everything—frightened, desperate men. Men who couldn't stop when they were losing, and if their luck turned they couldn't stop because they were winning. Compassion overcame him...but for the last time. When his shift was over he handed in his license and left. His dream of impressing his friends evaporated.

That had been years ago. He sighed now and clicked his mouse. As he waited for Google to launch, he caught motion with his peripheral vision and glanced away from the screen. An attractive woman wearing dark glasses was leaving the library, accompanied by a golden retriever. He realized the woman was blind and was impressed by how confidently she moved through the library.

She walked past a tall, muscular-looking man who stood viewing the "new books" racks. The man turned to watch her leave; then he glanced around before going quickly out the door without any checkouts. He looked older than Billy's first impression of him.

Billy returned to his thoughts. If only he could get the right break. But he was the guy who never got the breaks, never got the job, never got the girl. His latest venture, the one that had brought him to Lemont, had proved it once again, ending in catastrophe like everything else he touched.

If only he could succeed at something...anything.

An elderly woman at the computer next to Billy waved to the reference librarian. "What's wrong with this thing? Is it something I'm doing? The screen keeps going black."

The librarian leaned over her and clicked for a while, then shook her head. "I guess you'll have to move to another computer. I'll get our tech guy to look at it," she said.

"The same thing happened at the other one," the woman said, pointing to the end of the table.

"Yes, that is odd," the librarian said, rubbing her mouth with a forefinger.

It seemed he wasn't the only loser in here today. Some people just weren't meant for computers.

Billy returned to his thoughts. His only real friends in Lemont were Nick and Dawn, although Cora and Cisco had been kind. Before he brought the matter up with Nick again, he wanted to be sure it wasn't overactive imagination. His friends knew he was prone to wild ideas and bizarre explanations.

But he had to know: What if what Nick said was true, if he had suddenly developed an unexplainable power? Was it an answer or an obstacle? Could he control it or shut it off? Could it give him a chance at a life that didn't leave him feeling inferior? Or was it another stroke of bad luck that would set him back further?

Who might help him? His coworkers at OfficeMax or casual friends at bars? No. He imagined what they would think if he broached the subject—that he was a crazy Indian, probably.

Cora, though. She had been there when it happened. She could tell

him what she saw that day and give him an opinion. She had hinted once about having a supernatural experience, so she might take him seriously.

He logged out, pushed himself up from his chair, and reached for his hoodie. Yes, he would get Cora's advice.



Cora Tozzi felt the weight of guilt. If it weren't for her, Valerie wouldn't be blind.

She peered out the window near her front door, standing to the side so she wouldn't be seen. She gave a nervous laugh. How silly. Valerie wouldn't see her waiting.

She wandered back into her kitchen; straightened the tablecloth that was already straight; checked for the fourth time that the coffeepot was ready to switch on; wiped the countertops she had wiped minutes before; and fingered cups, plates, and silverware stacked ready for use. Valerie wouldn't see the newspapers, magazines, and mail on the sideboard, but Cora hoped the kitchen smelled clean. She sniffed. Waiting coffee grounds overpowered any other scents.

She wished she could just pick up a book, curl up in a comfortable chair, and drift asleep instead of meeting Valerie. Lately things she would have happily looked forward to seemed burdensome.

Cisco kept urging her to unload some things on her plate, but that would mean giving something up, and what was she willing to part with? Back in her college days she had worked two part-time jobs and had taken twenty-four credit hours her senior year...so she wouldn't miss anything. She got it done, didn't she? She was proud of her accomplishment, but she'd never want to live that year over.

"You're not twenty years old anymore," Cisco said. True, but in her mind...she wasn't ready to make any changes.

Today—was she accepting responsibility for someone else again? When Father McGrath called her yesterday he talked her into it, and she *did* feel she owed Valerie. This time she wouldn't get involved, just make peace and give Valerie some encouragement. She promised.

Memories replayed in her mind—the women around her table, Fran-
nie in tears, Cora telling Valerie, "You're not welcome here anymore,"
Valerie's furious face.

Then the news from a neighbor: Valerie's car ran into a ditch. She hadn't seen Valerie since the accident.

She hung a towel on the handle of the oven and returned to her vigil at the front door. A sudden breeze swayed the branches of the pear tree in the center of her front lawn and blew stalks from last season from the nearby cornfield across her driveway. Cisco would be none too happy about the mess—he would worry about the grass getting off to a good start.

Cora saw the field through the eyes of a historian, one of the last vestiges of farmland from which her quiet subdivision had been carved. Massive farm equipment would soon arrive, turning the clock back 175 years when Lemont was mainly fields of crops, like the fifteen-acre patch a hundred yards from her home. The sun moved behind a cloud as if catching Cora's mood. A shiver ran down her back, and for no apparent reason she had a sense of foreboding.

She transferred her weight from one leg to the other. She wanted to be positive, but one of the reasons for this meeting was to confront and resolve old differences. She glanced over her shoulder, despite the fact she was alone in the house, and rehearsed a few greetings in her mind.

"Hi Valerie! How are you?" No, too cheery. And if Valerie was well, she wouldn't need Cora—wouldn't be coming at all.

"Valerie! It's so good to see you again." An obvious lie. And would Valerie think she was insensitive if she used the word "see"?

"What can I do for you today?" Not a greeting at all, too uncaring and too businesslike.

Cora wanted to help Valerie, of course, but she didn't understand why Father McGrath insisted she was the right person. What good could she possibly do? "Let her tell you," he'd said.

Valerie probably hated Cora and she would have every right. Did she believe their argument had anything to do with the accident...what?...two years ago? The rumor was that Valerie said a wolf caused the car to veer off the road, but no one believed her story. Did she still think that? Cora could shed light on what happened, but Father McGrath had cautioned her not to discuss it too soon—it could create more hard feelings and set Valerie's recovery back.

What would Valerie do if she figured out Cora's part in her blindness?

Despite their anger with each other at the time, she'd been stunned

when she heard Valerie had lost her sight. Their argument seemed so petty now. Would Valerie sense her true feelings? Valerie had been rude and difficult, but she was never a fool.

Cora didn't know how to act around blind people! She avoided people with disabilities. She wasn't proud of that, didn't *want* to be like that. She remembered how important dignity would be to Valerie.

She was going to botch things up; she just knew it. She couldn't think straight when she had the fidgets. She was overthinking, creating imaginary outcomes.

Why hadn't she insisted that Father McGrath be present today or even Cisco—people who knew the whole story? Should she have refused to meet Valerie at all? Maybe she should call Father now to see if he could join them. She took a step back from the window and reached into her pocket for her cell phone.

It was too late. A tan minivan came up the street, pulled into the circular drive, then backed out, turned, and parked so the passenger door was near her front stoop. The driver, an energetic, elderly man wearing a navy-blue jacket with a Chicago Bears logo and matching baseball cap, got out, circled the van, and opened the passenger door. A golden retriever jumped out and waited.

A guide dog! She hadn't thought about that. The dog would have to come in the house. Cora used to own dogs, but a *strange* dog had never been in her house. Would it sniff around, lift its leg, or leave hair all over? Service dogs were supposed to be well mannered, but there was a service dog that came to the library and it gagged and left puddles of vomit on the rug. She squeezed her eyes shut, ashamed of her uncharitable thoughts.

She backed away from the window, pulled back her shoulders, took in a deep breath, and opened the door. Stepping onto the front stoop, she called, trying to inject a welcoming tone to her voice, "Hello, Valerie. Is there anything I can do to help?"

A hand grasped the edge of the van roof and Valerie slowly emerged, got her balance, and straightened. She looked much the same as the last time Cora saw her, except for the dark glasses she wore. Valerie's cheeks and the sides of her mouth quivered, like when one tries to smile but fails.

I wonder if she's as nervous as I am.

"Hi, Cora. If I could hold your arm...?"

Valerie had always been fashion conscious and was dressed impeccably today, her trim body in well-fitting jeans, a solid top, and multicolored fitted jacket. The color combination was imaginative and perfect. Did a friend or relative select her outfit each morning? Her dark hair was short now, in a pixie cut that suited her, every hair in place, and her lips were carefully colored. Cora pulled her hand through her own hair, white, thin, and stubborn, and she felt a moment of envy. Valerie probably never had a bad hair day and had never struggled with an extra thirty pounds.

Valerie grabbed the strap attached to the dog's harness. Cora stepped from the stoop onto the driveway and moved next to her, nodding to the driver, who stood aside watchfully. Valerie, moving confidently, reached out and placed her free hand just above Cora's elbow. Cora moved toward the stoop and Valerie followed.

"There's a step up here, and then a few steps to the doorway," Cora said.

"I remember that," Valerie said, her voice soft and polite.

Damn! She'd probably insulted her already.

Chapter 2

VALERIE had been a self-centered, demanding, rude person, in Cora's opinion. Why should she be any different now? Cora set a mug of black tea on the place mat in front of Valerie. She hoped Valerie caught her hint that the oak table in her eat-in kitchen needed protection from spills. Cora had made coffee, but Valerie preferred tea. She offered coffee cake, still warm. Valerie said she never ate sweets, which hadn't been true at their book club discussions. Cora started to pet the dog. "She's a working dog. She can't do her job if you distract her," Valerie said. At least the dog was well mannered.

It was like trying to get one of her grandsons interested in gardening or history, while the only things they cared about were computer games and food. Valerie's responses to Cora's awkward "safe" questions had been polite but verging on curt.

She shook her head. Cisco had warned her against getting involved in people's problems. The visit had just begun and she already wished it was over. But they were both captives—Valerie couldn't leave until the Dial-a-Ride driver returned. They'd have to make the best of the situation.

The old Valerie would have looked smugly superior and made snide or derogatory comments. Today Valerie was reserved but fidgety. She sat stiffly with her chin in the air and jumped when the refrigerator kicked on. She wrapped her arms across her chest and rubbed them as if she were chilly, but when Cora asked if she wanted a sweater Valerie said she wasn't cold. The visit must be very important to her—so important she went to great lengths to seek the help of a person she probably despised.

"Father McGrath said you're living with your brother here in Lemont," Cora tried again, hoping Valerie would embellish on that fact.

"Yes."

"It must be a relief to have someone who cares about you to fall back on." *Oops! Was this a mistake?*

"You could say that." Valerie's right hand clenched into a fist.

Cora went to the sink, picked up a dishcloth, and dabbed at a non-existent spot on the table, trying to think of what to say next. The dog, lying on the floor next to Valerie, jerked her head up and Cora jumped, having forgotten...Corky, was it?

Maybe she should have served wine....

"How's Molly?" she said at last, sitting down again. "How old is she now?"

"She's eleven. She's with her father." Valerie put a fist over her mouth and sat facing the window, as if looking into the sun through her dark lenses. Perhaps she felt the warmth. After a moment, she added, "Sally and Grace don't feel they can deal with both me and a preteen."

So—there *was* something behind the short answer about her brother. Before the accident, Molly was the only thing Valerie enthused about, but her ex-husband had been seeking custody of their daughter and planning to bring her to California, Cora remembered. He must have done that. Odd, Valerie didn't seem to want to talk about Molly. Sally and Grace?

"Oh," Cora said. "Sorry...what's your brother's name?"

"Salvatore, Sal Junior. Sally, we call him."

She watched Valerie jiggle a leg, readjust her seat, and tap her fingers on the table. Her responses, though, were self-assured. She realized Valerie was feigning confidence so Cora would know how competently she was dealing with her blindness. Ironic—why would Valerie want to impress her? But wasn't *she* trying to impress Valerie, to make her believe hard feelings had been forgotten?

Perhaps they both felt guilty, each believing they did something awful to the other.

Cora glanced at the time. The driver wasn't due for an hour.

Cora fidgeted too, looking at her hands on the tabletop and playing