

Chapter One

July 1968

Where the hell was Arlene?

Kate Prescott scanned the crowd of sweaty strangers, searching for her co-worker, who had coaxed Kate into driving to the Griffith Park Love-In on a hot Saturday afternoon. As soon as they arrived, Arlene had moseyed off with a fellow wearing a crown of flowers in his long black hair. Kate feared she'd seen the last of Arlene for the day; it was impossible to pick her out in this ocean of bodies and noise and blinding colors.

People jostled past, and the summer sun singed Kate's skin. Had she ever felt more out of place?

A grubby man approached, dirt-caked hand extended. He grinned, revealing two rows of yellowed teeth. "Here, sister."

Kate backed away, shaking her head as her silver earrings jingled. No way in hell was she going to take the brownie he offered; her stomach clenched, and she was sure there was more to that brownie than eggs, butter and baking chocolate.

"Don't get all uptight, Blondie."

"My name isn't Blondie—it's...Alice. And you need to back off!"

With his free hand, the man stroked his sparse beard; his disheveled auburn hair looked like it hadn't been washed in a month. He squinted red-rimmed eyes at her. "Come on, then, Alice. This will help you get where you want to go."

Behind Brownie Man, the hills of Griffith Park had turned summer beige, rising to meet a fair blue sky, oak and Manzanita branches puncturing the shimmering canvas. More revelers oozed past, giving off odors of perfume, incense, and cigarette smoke. Pucci prints swirled against glistening bare skin.

The scruffy guy took a step closer.

"Alice," said a voice behind her, "there you are! We've been looking all over for you."

Kate turned, baffled because she didn't recognize the man who'd spoken, but he seemed to be talking to her. *Who are you?*

In worn jeans and a blue shirt, he looked cleaner than Brownie Man. Curly brown hair, a little on the long side. And eyes the color of dark chocolate.

He held out his hand. "Come along, Alice. The Wonderland Express is leaving."

He winked at her, and time stopped. She was no longer alone in a sea of frolickers who all knew something she didn't. Drums and voices faded as she took a step toward this man she didn't know but somehow *recognized*, the two of them apart from the crowd.

She took his hand: strong, with spatters of blue and green paint along the back.

He nodded to Brownie Man. "It's cool, we're already trippin'."

"Thanks," she murmured to the man who held her hand.

He pointed toward the shade of a nearby eucalyptus. "My friend over there says he knows you, but he was too stoned to help you out."

When he released her hand, Kate wished he hadn't. She squinted through the sunlight at a long-haired fellow leaning against the eucalyptus. Then she made the connection: Leonard Ryder, from Bright Street. They'd been neighbors until high school graduation. But he looked so *different* that afternoon.

She remembered Leonard as acne-scarred and pudgy, but this guy was slender, and a beard camouflaged his pitted cheekbones.

"Little Katie Prescott," he said, "fancy meeting you here."

Speechless, Kate groped for a greeting. In their senior year, Leonard had discovered music, playing his guitar and singing folk songs in coffee houses, using only his last name.

"Hello, Ryder," she replied eventually. "Thanks for sending your friend to save me."

Ryder's smirk and his indifferent posture triggered memories of summer afternoons on Bright Street, playing hide and seek with other kids on the block. Ryder always lost; he was too slow and too chubby to find good hiding places, but he always pretended not to care.

"My friend," Ryder said, "*wanted* to save you. But did you need saving?"

"Probably," Kate replied. She turned to Ryder's companion. "I'm Kate Prescott."

"Jack Morrison." He extended that wonderful, paint-spattered hand again. "And what brings you here, Kate Prescott?"

Kate forbid herself to prolong the handshake. "Curiosity."

“Which killed the cat,” Jack Morrison pointed out with a slow grin.

“But satisfaction brought it back.”

Jack looked at Ryder. “You didn’t tell me she was smart.”

Kate studied his profile for a moment; he was quite handsome.

“I came with somebody from work,” she continued, “but she ditched me.”

Ryder sat down, cross legged, and motioned her to join him. “Work? I thought you were a college girl.”

Kate sat, fanning her sundress around her knees. “You haven’t been home lately, have you?”

Ryder flinched. “Shit, that’s right. Man, what a bummer about your dad. I really liked him.”

Kate started to tell him more when a line of dancers snaked past in a wild swirl of bright colors. Tambourines and voices drowned out any chance of conversation, so she leaned back and breathed in the thick, minty fragrance of eucalyptus, mingled with incense and another, sharper smell.

Jack Morrison eased down on the grass next to Kate and raised his voice above the racket. “You stick with us. Pretty girls shouldn’t run around here on their own. Too many stray wolves hunting.”

Kate shivered. “Thanks for the cheerful thought.”

He smiled, and the world turned brighter.

Ryder reached in his shirt pocket and produced a thin cigarette. *Weed*, Kate realized, as Ryder lit it, inhaled and offered it to her. Kate shook her head.

“Come on, Kate—join the party,” Ryder said as he exhaled.

Reluctantly, Kate put the joint to her lips and took a careful puff, unable to suppress the urge to look over her shoulder.

Jack's laugh came out low and throaty. "Don't act so nervous. Pretend it's a cigarette. Breathe in. Good."

The smoke tasted strangely sweet. A cough rose in her throat, and she swallowed it away, then handed the joint to Jack.

Their hands touched, and she felt a sizzle along her skin, as if she'd brushed a live electric wire. Did he feel it too? He gave no sign but inhaled deeply and held the smoke in his lungs for an impossibly long time as he passed the joint to Ryder.

Through a stream of exhaled marijuana smoke, Jack asked, "So what were you doing before you got lost?"

"I wasn't lost," she told him.

"We're *all* lost, but some of us don't know it."

"Be careful of him, Katie Girl," said Ryder. "He's a mad artist."

He turned away to gaze at the people flowing past, tapping his thighs in time to the drums. Kate watched the collision of colors, reds and greens and golds and blues, merging and separating. She felt drab in comparison, a wren among flamingoes and peacocks.

The chain of dancers circled back. Bangle bracelets jingled as they beckoned. Ryder pinched out the roach, swallowed it, and rose in one graceful movement, as if defying gravity, brushing leaf fragments from his jeans.

"C'mon, folks, let's groove." He swayed and clapped in time to the tambourines' tempo.

Kate shook her head. "I'm a terrible dancer—don't you remember?"

"Nobody cares. C'mon."

“Let her be,” Jack said. “She can keep me company.”

Ryder cocked his head and started to say something, but a woman whose breasts were falling out of her orange tank top grabbed his arm and pulled him into the crowd.

Jack took out his Marlboros and offered her one. Kate studied the pack, and he laughed—a soft, teasing sound.

“They’re plain old cigarettes,” he told her, so she accepted and cupped her hands around his as he struck a match flame and touched it to the tip of her cigarette. Kate’s flesh tingled again.

“Thanks,” she said, breathing smoke into the pristine summer air.

Jack blew two small, perfect smoke rings and poked his finger through one as it drifted skyward. Kate giggled.

“So, did you like that weed?” he asked.

Kate considered her answer. “I guess. Don’t feel it all that much.”

“Give it time,” Jack said.

She reclined on her elbows and waited.

“You have good skin,” he said.

“Me?” Kate tried not to look surprised.

“I’ve started noticing the models’ skin in drawing class,” he said, as if that explained the off-the-wall compliment. “You don’t go out much in the sun, do you?”

She shook her head. “I burn.” She looked down at her bare arms. “I’ll be sorry I wore this dress today.”

He motioned her closer, into the deeper shade of the eucalyptus, and she scooted toward him.

“You’ll be a beautiful old woman when the rest of them are wrinkled crones,” he said.

Kate felt the blush on her nineteen-year-old cheeks.
“I have a long wait.”

Silence descended. *Say something!* Kate admonished herself. Here she was with a good-looking man who paid her *compliments*, and she was totally tongue-tied. She’d never had this kind of trouble talking to men before; had she lost the ability to flirt? Her vocal cords were tight, her muscles as taut as her mother’s back-yard clothesline, her brain slow and useless.

Finally, a few feeble words came to her. “How do you know Ryder?”

Jack rubbed the tip of his smoldering Marlboro into the grass to extinguish it. “Roommates,” he replied.

“At college?”

His smile held a touch of something she didn’t understand. “Yeah. Off campus.”

“Which college?”

“You’ve heard of Chouinard?”

She had. “The art school? Ryder’s in *art school*?”

Jack smirked. “Not any more—but don’t tell his folks, okay? They’re under the illusion he’ll make more money as an artist than as a folk singer. Which I suppose he could, if he got a teaching credential.”

“Is that what you’re working toward?” Kate asked.

In answer, Jack pulled a folded paper and a pencil from his jeans pocket and began to draw. A few minutes later, he held up a remarkably flattering sketch of Kate herself. She took the drawing and studied it, unable to keep from grinning. He’d made her look prettier than she was, her hair smoother and longer, her nose straighter.

“Very nice; I wish I looked like that.”

“You do. Very Alice in Wonderland, except for your green eyes.”

He'd noticed her eyes. She'd have to be careful with this guy.

When she offered to return the drawing, he said, "No—keep it. A souvenir."

Kate folded the sketch carefully and tucked it in her pocket. "Thanks." After a pause while she searched for clever words and failed to find them, she asked, "Are drawings your specialty, then?"

He clicked his tongue. "Mostly paintings, but they're harder to carry around. Someday maybe I'll show you, though."

Kate fought more embarrassing shyness. "I'd like that."

"So, you know Chouinard."

Kate nodded. "My dad went there."

"Your dad's an artist?"

"To me he was. He was an animator at Disney."

"Was?"

Pain, the non-physical kind, stabbed through her. "He died last year. Drunk driver ran into him."

He put his hand on her bare calf. "I'm sorry."

She should have expected the tears, but they took her by surprise and she swiped at them, mad at herself for acting maudlin. *Time to grow up, get used to it. Get over it.*

He didn't question her tears, and she was grateful for that. Kate couldn't explain why, but she cared what Jack Morrison thought of her.

"And you," he continued. "You've had more education than most, haven't you?"

Kate mimicked his way of putting out a cigarette but found herself empty-handed; she waved toward the mountains surrounding the park. "I almost did."

"Almost?"

“A year at UC Santa Barbara—liberal arts stuff. Nothing you can earn a living with.”

“Is that why you quit?”

“Sort of. When my dad died, the money ran out.”

“Ouch.”

She shrugged. “Life’s a bitch sometimes.”

He smiled, and again there was that touch of something the exact opposite of mirth. “Right.”

Then he lay back on the grass, staring up at the eucalyptus canopy. His eyes drifted shut, and Kate thought he might have fallen asleep, but she didn’t mind. Somehow being next to him made her feel safe.

A woman in a vivid emerald gown glided up to them, a matching green scarf around her shiny black hair. Her skin was the color of dark chocolate. She held out her hand, fingers long and tapered. In the middle of her palm was a small white pill.

“One to grow on,” the woman said, then threw back her head and laughed. She had immense white teeth.

Kate shook her head and echoed the polite refusal she’d heard Jack use. “Thanks, but we’re already trippin’.”

The woman laughed again and frolicked off.

Jack sat up. “You learn fast,” he said.

Kate watched the woman move away. “What *was* that?”

He pursed his lips. “Acid, probably. LSD. You know LSD?”

“Of course. I didn’t just fall off a turnip truck.”

What a stupid thing to say. But he seemed to accept it. Kate began to feel like Jack Morrison would accept almost anything she said, or did. He had her father’s attitude of competence and comfort in his skin.

“And you know better than to take candy from strangers,” Jack said, and Kate felt a glow of pleasure.

That one hit of pot had begun to muddy her thoughts and perceptions, and the voices around her became an incoherent buzz. The air reeked of burning marijuana and incense; her pulse throbbed in sync with the bongos.

Then she heard other sounds: a whistle's shriek and an amplified voice. "THIS IS THE LOS ANGELES POLICE DEPARTMENT!"

Panic seized her. She'd seen news reports of uniformed officers, faces hidden by reflective shields, wading into crowds of unarmed Hippies, cracking clubs against skulls and hauling scores of people off to jail—all for the bad luck of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The crowd began to disperse like stampeding cattle. Kate scrambled to her feet, and so did Jack.

"We have to get out of here," he shouted above the commotion.

"I know a back way," Kate yelled. "What about Ryder?"

Jack shook his head. "No time. Besides, Ryder always lands on his feet."

She felt a momentary flash of protectiveness for her old neighbor, always the butt of childish jokes, always the one left behind. She wanted to try and find him, and her co-worker Arlene, but the pandemonium made it impossible. She took Jack's hand and pulled him toward a parking lot above the carousel, away from the field where people churned in noisy confusion.

Kate knew the way by heart; she and her dad had hiked every trail in Griffith Park at one time or another. The parking lot ended in a rough strip of asphalt, ringed by a low stone wall topped with a chain link fence. And there, right where she remembered, was the slash in the

fence some impatient hiker had cut years ago. Kate squeezed through, Jack followed, and she led him up a bridle path, around the parking lot, above the melee playing out in the park.

Sirens wailed in the distance, and she heard screams and shouts and whistles.

Jack patted her back. "Nice going, Girl Scout. But now what? We can't camp out here all night."

"We don't have to," Kate told him. She pointed to her left. "That takes us down to the road. My car's half a mile from here."

He rubbed his chin. "Well, I'll be damned. Looks like I picked the right person to rescue."

I sure hope so.

"Can you give me a lift home?" Jack added. "I came with Ryder."

Well, well. Maybe the universe is finally giving me a break.