

Chapter 1

Ceil on the Labyrinth Trail

Love & Peace Commune, Brookings, OR Friday, August 9, 2019, early morning

After breakfast and a quick chat with Jade, the greenhouse master, Ceil strode across the commune compound in her purposeful gait. Her long brown hair, streaked with gray, lapped against her back at each step. She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she barely noticed the morning quiet around her. She had to find Sky to find out whether he'd heard from his doctor yet.

He'd had a bunch of tests the day before and they were waiting to find out definitively whether his cancer had returned. Lately, he'd been complaining of a bone-weary fatigue and some abdominal pain and she was worried. While not a doctor, she was a certified midwife. For decades she had been the only medically-trained person at the commune, and over the years she'd learned a lot about health and illness. They called her "The Healer," which both humbled and pleased her. She was as passionate about her vocation today as she had been five decades ago, when she had welcomed her very first newborn into the world.

She came out of her revelry and noticed the sun was just beginning to seep between the branches of the trees around her, dappling the leaves with touches of sunlight. At this time of the morning, she could usually find Sky in the forest, walking the commune's labyrinth trail which wound among the gigantic trees in the hidden grove of sequoia redwoods. He had been making it a daily practice and said it brought him peace. She sighed. He could use some peace, that was for sure.

Oh, Lord, what will I do without Sky? She tripped over the uneven ground and caught herself. *Life without Sky?* The phrase itself felt unreal. After nearly five decades together, she couldn't imagine life without him. And what about the commune? He was the glue that held it all together.

As she neared the center of the compound, the only sound was the ceaseless buzz of insects. Where was everyone? Of course, they must be over at the greenhouses, she decided. They would be packing this week's vegetable harvest onto the trucks bound for Portland to make the weekly deliveries to their upscale restaurant clients.

She could see the rounded roof of one of the greenhouses above the trees. Two of the three greenhouses had been built from old Quonset huts, and they now contained the commune's livelihood, their organic produce business. It always amused her they had recycled these massive military Quonset huts and put them to such a green and peaceful use. "Swords into ploughshares," she liked to think. It was both Biblical and satisfying. She was proud of the commune's flourishing food business, but it had required long hours of

dirty, tedious work. And now, with the summer harvest upon them, it was an especially hectic time.

Although she welcomed the success of the business, she also knew that the more prosperous it became, the harder it was to sustain. With the commune now mostly filled with aging Baby Boomers, how much longer could they continue to keep up with it all? *Heck, where was the next generation of hippies?* She smiled wistfully. Times certainly had changed. It was 2019 and the country seemed to be—not just out of control—but possibly heading off a cliff.

She shooed the negative thoughts away. After all, there were always challenges in life, and sometimes things looked bleak, but you couldn't wallow in the darkness. Times had been bad back in the '70s, too. Nixon was in the White House then, and the Vietnam War was raging. Politics, war, and the changing culture were dividing the American people back then, too. It wasn't so different from now. Except, she thought wryly, *This time, I'm on the other side of the generational fence. What goes around, comes around, huh?*

As she passed the central fire pit, she saw tree branches strewn across the bricks. She would have to find Archer later to ask him to clean up the area before people started arriving for the big end-of-summer Woodstock Reunion next week. She wanted everything to look great.

The commune always timed the celebration to coincide with the dates of the original Woodstock Festival: August 15 to 17th. But this year was going to be extra special. It would not only be the 50th anniversary of Woodstock but also the 45th anniversary of the commune. They were expecting twice as many returnees as usual, plus families and other guests. Her thoughts turned bittersweet when she realized that if Sky's cancer had returned, this might be his last reunion.

As she stepped into the trees, she paused and took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the aroma of verdant pine and woody ash. She loved that smell. It was the reassuring scent of nature. She looked ahead and could just make out the ink-black outlines of the big trees—the special ones—just beyond the stands of pine and ash. There they stood, the commune's silent sentinels, their grove of giant sequoia redwoods.

The huge Goddess Tree marked the beginning of the first twist of the labyrinth trail. Before stepping onto the path of the labyrinth, Ceil rested her hand on the trunk of the tree. The Goddess Tree was the oldest and the largest sequoia in the grove. Ceil caressed the thick grooves of the reddish bark; the hand-to-bark connection was familiar and reassuring, like reaching out and touching a friend's shoulder. Then she started walking and soon the peace of the trees enveloped her. As was her habit, she cleared her mind while slowly letting the smells and sounds of the forest fill her. Gradually, time receded.

Soon she was rounding the last curve of the labyrinth trail and just up ahead was the center of the grove with its group of sequoia redwoods that they called the Peace Grove. The trees stood directly above a huge peace sign made from white river stones which were laid out on the ground.

Immediately, she spied Sky and smiled in relief. He was lying on the ground, his head resting on his backpack, with one arm draped over his eyes. The other arm lay slack at his side, palm up, fingers relaxed and gently curled. He was wearing his favorite pair of ratty-old cut-offs. They were early white from age and bleached by the sun. His legs were

deeply tanned, with stringy muscles, now slack and at rest.

She sat down beside him and then leaned over to kiss his forehead. "Hey, how are you feeling?" she asked softly.

Sky moved, and his arm fell away from his face. His eyelids fluttered as he glanced up and squinted. "Hey, babe," he mumbled, smiling with contentment, and stretched. "Geez, I must've fallen asleep. When I reached the center of the labyrinth, I laid down in this tiny patch of sunlight. It felt so good and cozy."

Ceil leaned back against the tree. "You looked so comfortable I almost didn't have the heart to wake you," she said. She reached over and stroked his hair, pushing the sweaty strands of gray away from his forehead.

He smiled. "I'm glad you're here," he said, pulling himself up to sit beside her. "Want to climb a tree with me?"

"What? You mean, now?"

"I'd like to go up to the top one more time, while I'm still able to climb these giants."

Ceil studied him. "Are you sure you feel up to it?"

He nodded. "I do. Come on," he said as he got up and pulled her to her feet.

She looked down at her clothes. "I'm not exactly dressed for a climb." True, she was wearing a pair of jeans, but she was also wearing one of her nicer tops because she was planning to go into town to see her mother at the nursing home. If she got it dirty, she didn't have many alternatives to change into.

"You look fine. I've got some micro-spikes and a couple of those hard-foam climbing helmets in my pack, plus an extra harness, too." He reached down and picked up the backpack and started pulling out the climbing gear.

"Are you sure about this, Sky?"

He paused and looked at her. "Yeah. I've been thinking about it for a while and I'd really like to climb one more time with you," he said and added, "like old times."

She smiled remembering all the times they'd climbed these wonderful old trees. It started back when the commune rallied to protect them from the timber companies. For months, they used to take turns camping in the canopies of the trees. "OK, then," she said. "Like old times."

They quickly donned the harnesses and pulled on the micro-spikes over their hiking shoes. When they were ready, Ceil untied and tugged on one of the climbing ropes that dangled from the Peace tree nearest her. "Should we do Peace Tree 1?"

He looked up at the tree and nodded. "Perfect."

Ceil studied him thoughtfully. She was feeling a little anxious. *Did he have the strength to climb these huge trees anymore?* His energy levels were erratic lately. Some days he was his old self; unstoppable. But there were other times she thought he looked exhausted and used up. "Sky, how about if you go first and I spot you, then I will follow you up?"

He squinted, trying to read her expression. Then he shrugged. "Alright. I'll try not to be a male chauvinist about it."

She chuckled and it eased the tension.

He checked his gear with easy assuredness, hooked his harness to the rope and threaded it expertly through the pulley.

Ceil checked her harness and climbing gear, too, then held the rope taut as Sky started climbing. Using the friction hitches and pulley, he made his way up the tree. He went more quickly than she had expected. Did that mean anything? *Maybe he's feeling better than I thought.* The notion eased her anxiety a bit.

Soon he was waving down to her from his loft in the branches and she took the rope and began her own climb. She didn't have his upper body strength, but the hitches and pulley system gave her the extra edge she needed. Even so, she was breathing hard by the time she pulled herself onto the platform.

Sky was already sitting on the wooden plank platform the commune had built years ago. He was leaning back against the main trunk. At the time they constructed the platforms, they were in the fight of their lives against the timber companies that wanted to chop down all the big trees and ship them south to satisfy consumer demand for redwood decks, fences, and furniture. To protect the trees, the commune created a team of tree sitting sentries in all the largest trees in their grove, and they took turns sleeping in the trees. Eventually, the timber companies gave up and moved on.

She crawled over to Sky and sat next to him.

"So why were you looking for me today?" he asked, squinting his eyes against the beam of sunlight coming through the branches above them.

"You heard from your doctor about those tests, didn't you?" she asked quietly.

He paused, looked out at the world of treetops surrounding them, then glanced over at her. "It's like we thought, babe. Not good. He says the tests show I'm not in remission anymore."

She closed her eyes and felt a stab in her heart. Even though she'd known deep down—she guessed it a while ago—it was still hard to hear him say it out loud. She looked at him and nodded slowly.

They were quiet for several long seconds. Then she sighed and reached over to take his hand. "Not very good timing with everyone arriving this week."

He let a breath out and smiled. "The Woodstock Reunion. I am really looking forward to it, though."

She shook her head in amazement. "It's crazy that we've been doing this thing for so long, huh?"

"I know! Remember when we started it? We didn't mean it to be any big deal. It was just supposed to be a blowout, end-of-summer celebration; a party for the poor suckers going back to jobs in the straight world." He chuckled and then coughed.

At the sound of his cough, she felt another stab in the heart.

She asked quietly, "Sky, are you going to feel up to it?"

He shrugged. "S'pose so. I'm not on death's door yet. Heck, I just climbed a frickin' redwood, didn't I?" He met her eyes and she saw a lot less bravado in them. He finished more gravely, "Come on, Ceil. I don't want to be a downer for everyone, OK? I mean it, babe. Chances are I probably won't make it to Christmas, so just let me focus on having this last big party without people pitying me or standing around weeping and wailing."

"You think people are going to weep and wail for you? Really? You must think a lot of yourself, huh?" Her voice broke a little, and she could feel her eyes welling. For a second, she looked away. She pressed her lips together to keep the tears from spilling down her

cheeks. She wished she was better at hiding her emotions from him. She wanted to help him feel better, not worse.

He reached up and touched her cheek with his index finger. "It's OK, Ceil. We have a lot ahead of us in the next month or two. Let me have this last Woodstock Reunion without all that depressing stuff hanging over us, OK?"

She nodded and swallowed, hoping her voice would be steady. "I plan to make sure you have a great Woodstock Reunion. I promise you that!"

He patted her arm. "Thanks, babe. It means a lot to me."

She hesitated then gently reached over and touched his stomach with her hand, her fingers spread wide.

He immediately covered her hand and kept it from moving over his belly. "You can't heal this thing, Ceil. You know that, right?"

She closed her eyes in frustration. "Sky, I can sense it. It's right there." She squeezed her fingers into a small, rounded shape. "It's like a nasty little black thing in my mind's eye. Evil."

Sky laughed. "Really? Did you just say it's 'evil'? Now you're beginning to sound more like a witch than a healer."

She batted his shoulder, knowing that he didn't mean it. "Stop it! I am not a witch! Besides, you know how much this frustrates me. I'm supposed to be a healer, Sky. Why can't I heal this thing?" He touched her hand. "Because you can't heal everyone, Ceil.

Some people's illnesses are beyond your capabilities. Who knows

why? You should not be making it about you, anyway. Maybe it's something I must go through that is tied up with my karma, not yours. We all walk our own paths. You know that. Apparently, I need to walk this one. It has nothing to do with you, babe. I'm learning to accept it; you should, too. Besides, I've lived a glorious life, Ceil. All my regrets are small ones."

"You have regrets?"

He grimaced. "Of course. Everyone does." "What regrets?"

He thought for a minute. "Well, I never went to China, for one," he said.

She sat up and snorted, "Really? You wanted to go to China?" "Sure. I wanted to see the Great Wall. I also never climbed Everest." He paused, then chuckled. "OK, even on my best days, I never had the skill or the stamina to do that. So, maybe that's not a solid regret." He shrugged. "I probably would've died trying, and that would've just been ironic."

They were quiet for a moment. She said, "Sky, there's something else we should talk about."

But he interrupted her, "Hey!" He squinted and pointed upward to the top branches above them. "Look at all the butterflies!"

Ceil glanced up. He was right; there was a swirl of dozens upon dozens of blue butterflies above them. The two of them watched the graceful flutter, mesmerized, for several long moments.

"I'm going to do that," Sky said in an awed whisper. "Do what?"

"I will swirl around these trees on my blue butterfly wings, just like that." He looked at Ceil. "Babe, when I'm gone, you'll know I'm fine when you look up and see a kaleidoscope

of butterflies swirling over your head like this.”

She met his eyes. “Promise you won’t dive-bomb and scare the shit out of me, OK?”

“Scout’s honor,” he said, putting three fingers over his heart. “I’ll hold you to that.”

Their eyes met and she realized with a

start that this was the first time they’d talked about a world that

he wouldn’t be in with her. A deep sadness settled over her but she reminded herself that all anyone ever has is today. She knew she would need to remind herself of that in the coming weeks.

They sat on the platform silently looking out at the world of treetops around them. There were tufts of the bushy green canopies of smaller trees extending, like a green ocean, far into the distance where the mountains started. After a while, Ceil noticed the heat haze from the rays of sun streaming through the branches.

“Oh, geez, it’s getting late. I need to get back,” she said. “I have to go into town to visit Esther at the nursing home.”

He touched her arm. “Thanks for coming up here with me, Ceil.”

She smiled. “This was nice, wasn’t it?” He nodded.

They crawled to the edge of the platform and reached for the climbing rope. Soon they were on their way down—a much easier task than climbing up—although Ceil found that it took a lot of concentration not to go too fast. She knew it would be folly to take the chance of a misstep by not paying enough attention. She could end up with rope burns, strained muscles, or even worse. She didn’t need a reminder that the older she got, the longer it took to heal even from the most minor mishaps. *Getting old sucked. No two ways about it.*

Chapter 2

Kate in the Timestream

Timestream, Pacific Crest Trail, Oregon Friday, August 9, 2019, dawn

Kate Truford was confused. She assumed she must be waking up from sleep, but every one of her senses jangled, and the world seemed topsy-turvy. Something was definitely wrong and her thoughts couldn't seem to catch up. She opened her eyes and glanced around trying to get her bearings, but her surroundings seemed blurry, like she was looking through a cloudy lens or out-of-focus binoculars. Where was she? The last thing she remembered was falling asleep in the tent with Cody next to her. But where was the tent? Where was Cody?

She felt lightheaded, like she was flying. Flying? *So then, I'm not awake, right?* The confusion frightened her, and instinctively, she reached out to grab onto something solid. But there was nothing solid around her, there was nothing...but air. Her stomach lurched. Then all thoughts were forgotten as she glanced downward.

Far below, she could plainly see a city with its streets laid out in a grid. After a second, she recognized the place: it was Portland. With horror, she realized the skyscrapers in the downtown were swaying unnaturally in the early morning mist. Low river fog rose from the Columbia River as it flowed past the city on the last leg of its journey to the Pacific. Each highway bridge that spanned the river seemed to be hovering not over water but over a thick cloud. Or was it smoke?

She recognized the I-5 bridge. She could see that it was shaking, and the pavement rippled, causing the cars and trucks to skitter and slide across the expanse. Some ricocheted sideways and piled up against the railing, which appeared to be the only thing stopping them from a plunge into the river below. In the distance, past the parallel runways of Portland International Airport, the bridge carrying I-205 traffic was split down its center lane, and the two halves buckled separately. Pieces of metal fell away, and a small blue sports car tumbled over the edge. She watched the car as it dove through the fog in a graceful metallic swan dive and then it was gone.

Kate reached out as if to stop the destruction, but her hand swam futilely through the empty air. She covered her mouth in dread but couldn't seem to look away. Smoke and clouds of dust rose from the multi-storied buildings below. After a moment, the haze cleared, and she noticed people scrambling from their cars and then running uncertainly down the middle of the street. Others raced out of the buildings but quickly stopped, hunched over, and covered their heads as protection from falling debris. She could see several bodies lying motionless on the sidewalk.

Next, she heard a deep rumbling, like a passing freight train. The sound was a growl so deep she could feel its reverberation in the pit of her stomach. Next, there was

a flash in the sky to

the northeast that looked like a tongue of fire rising from Mount Adams on the Washington side of the Columbia River.

"Oh, no," she breathed but still found it impossible to look away. Mount Adams wasn't the only volcano in the Cascade Mountain range. There were nearly twenty of them lined up from British Columbia, through Washington and Oregon, and down into Northern California. Most were still considered active volcanoes, although there hadn't been an eruption since Mount St. Helens in 1980.

Kate felt herself falling, and she involuntarily paddled her arms as if she could swim through the air. Finally giving up, she squeezed her eyes shut, anticipating a swift and final plunge to the earth below. But instead of instant death, her left wrist hit something hard, and pain instantly shot up her arm. She opened her eyes and quickly looked around, trying to take in her new surroundings. She was relieved to see she was back on solid earth, at least. In fact, she was sprawled on a sandy riverbank near the lapping edge of a wide stream. *Could I have sleep-walked here? Maybe I tripped and that's what woke me up.* As she sat up her arm throbbed in pain. Still, pain was a good thing. It meant she was really awake, didn't it?

Was any of it real? Was there an earthquake in Portland? Or was it all just a very realistic nightmare?

Kate glanced around, trying to get her bearings. She saw that it was growing light out, so it must be morning, and she was on the edge of a thick pine forest. It was still dark under the canopy of the trees. There was a boulder to her left and another to her right. She could hear the gurgling splashing sounds coming from the stream nearby. There were birds chirping in the branches of a tall lacy willow tree bowed low over the opposite bank of the stream. Its green tendrils bobbed gently in a soft breeze. She squinted and thought she could just make out a footpath just beyond the willow tree.

"Kate?" Like an apparition, Cody appeared on the footpath. He was staring at her from the other side of the stream with a stunned expression.

"Cody?"

"Kate? Are you OK?" he asked. He frowned as he glanced down at the wide stream flowing between them. He looked from her to the stream and back again several times, then he squinted. "What are you doing over there? How did you get across the stream?"

Kate shook her head. "Cody, I just had the weirdest...uh... dream." She stood tentatively and slowly stepped down the embankment towards the edge of the water until she was directly opposite him with a span of about fifteen feet of flowing water between them.

"Kate," he repeated, "I don't get it. How did you get over there?"

"I woke up in the tent and you were gone."

The tent. The hike! It came back to her. She and Cody were hiking the Pacific Crest Trail. They'd been on the trail for a few weeks, doing the trail's Northern California and Oregon sections. It had not been going well, which was probably her fault. For one thing, their strides were different. They'd be on the trail and

inevitably he'd get way ahead of her. His legs were longer so to keep up, she had to take a step and a half for each of his steps, which was exhausting. Eventually, she'd end up

lagging behind a bit and when she'd catch up with him, he'd have a disgruntled look on his face, like she was intentionally trying to slow him down.

She was trying hard to be the outdoorsy hiking girl for him because she knew hiking was important to him. But, it was obvious that she was failing miserably and it didn't make sense because she enjoyed hiking in the mountains, and of course, she enjoyed being with Cody. But no matter what she did, she couldn't seem to please him.

She watched as Cody waded through the knee-deep water. When he got close to her, he started to reach out, but he suddenly stopped and just stared at the pant legs of her jeans. "Hey! You're not even wet. How did you get across the stream without getting wet?"

Kate looked upstream and downstream, but she didn't see a bridge or stepping stones across the water nearby. Then she looked down at her jeans for some kind of explanation and that's when she noticed she was wearing her moccasins. That was odd. She never would have left the tent without changing into her boots.

She met Cody's eyes, then shook her head and repeated. "I had the weirdest..." but mid-sentence, she stopped. "Cody, I have to go to Brookings to talk to my grandmother about this."

"What!" he exclaimed, stepping back and nearly losing his footing in the water. "Are you kidding me? You want to go see your grandmother, the hippie, now? Kate, that's insane!"

"I know it probably sounds crazy. But this whole dream experience has been...really strange."

"I thought your dad forbid you to visit the commune. Anyway, we're way north of Brookings now. We're halfway to the Columbia River. Why the rush to see your grandmother all of a sudden?"

"Because she used to have strange experiences like this. She told me about some of them. So she'll know what it means. She'll know what I should do. Don't you see? It's like I've been shown the future. It could be a message or something." She looked up at the sky, noticing the crystal blueness and the fat puffy clouds barely moving. She looked back at him. "Cody, this is important. I know it is. This dream or vision or whatever it was...my grandmother will know what it means."

"Kate, you had a bad dream. Everyone has them. What can your grandmother do about it? You are not making any sense." He tried to pull her into his arms, but she held him off with a palm on his chest.

"Cody, I'm serious. I think it's a warning. Something awful may happen. It's important. I can't just ignore it." She shivered as if she'd felt a cool breeze.

He gently brushed his hands down the length of her arms and said, "This is important too, Kate. This hike. You know it means a lot to me."

She nodded even before he finished. "I know. I didn't mean that you need to get off the trail. I only meant that I do. I have to get to Brookings. I'll hike with you to the next road and then hitch a ride to the coast. It shouldn't take me long to get there. A day or two, tops."

"I thought this hike was important to you too," he said petulantly.

She could hear the hurt in his tone and touched his arm. "It is, Cody. It was. But this thing...I don't think this can wait." As she said the words, a flutter of butterflies took wing from the tall grass along the stream bank and swirled around their heads, and then

suddenly whirled up into the sky.

“Oh, my God,” Kate said in an awed whisper. “Look at all the butterflies! You know, butterflies are supposed to represent rebirth and renewal,” she said to Cody, but when she turned, she saw that he was already heading back across the stream. His head was bent, his shoulders stiff, and his gait determined as he sloshed through the shallow water.

She let out her breath with a sigh as she sat down to take off her moccasins to cross the stream. She paused as she watched Cody step onto the opposite bank. He didn’t even turn to look at her. She rubbed her left wrist and winced. It was tender and sore and she saw the beginnings of a nasty bruise. *It wasn’t just a silly dream.* She was sure of that.

She stood up with the moccasins in one hand and walked slowly along the bank of the stream towards the willow tree that had long tendrils bobbing over the water. The stream seemed a little less turbulent there and when she moved the willow branches aside, she saw a series of flat stepping stones breaking the surface of the water. She rolled up the cuffs of her jeans, just in case, and stepped onto the first stone. She was pleased to see that the water didn’t cover any of the stones. Her feet were dry when she climbed up the bank on the other side.

She glanced around to see if Cody was nearby watching, but he was gone.