



CHAPTER TWO

THE PATH twisted up the slope, crested over a rise, then carved its way through a meadow dappled with vibrant, psychedelic yellow and purple wild flowers.

The hiker's cranium pounded with his pulse. The *thump thump* in his head was driven by a heart gone mad trying to deliver oxygen to his brain in the thin mountain air. He slowed his pace.

That was when he saw her – sitting cross-legged under a tree, at the far end of the meadow. The sculpted folds of her diaphanous blue dress pooled on the ground. Her hair was pulled back, framing her pale face set off by strikingly intense blue eyes.

For a moment, the hiker imagined he had stumbled upon Alice

– in Wonderland.

If she was aware of his presence, she gave no indication. She appeared as unperturbed as the flowers. Her eyes seemed to take in everything and nothing at the same time.

He crossed the meadow, keeping to the trail, which wound past the tree under which the unusual young woman was seated.

An unwritten law dictates a hiker encountering another on the trail shall respect the sanctity of solitude; one nodded a greeting, tossed a knowing glance, and passed on. In spite of the curiosity aroused by his chance encounter with this striking young lady, the hiker adhered to proper mountain etiquette: as he came upon her position, he nodded a greeting and quickened his pace.

“You’re not on the path,” she said, cordially.

He shot her a challenging look. “I’ve not been trampling the flowers, if that’s what you mean.”

“Not that path, silly.” She flashed a patronizing smile.

“Ah, that path.” It was his turn to patronize. *She’s a commune chick?* he wondered.

In the late sixties, communes, populated with hippies, spiritual seekers, and social utopians, flourished in these foothills. Not far from here, a self-styled guru had penned the book *Be Here Now*, which seemed to the hiker to be good, though obvious, advice. The commune scene died out years ago, but sporadic attempts to resurrect the era were not uncommon. No doubt the young lady under the tree was part of the latest such effort.

“How do you know I’m not on the path?”

“Not ready. I can see that. Sorry, I interrupted your hike. Have a good day.”

Her evaluation was insulting and awakened a desire in him to wilt her arrogance with blistering sarcasm, but he held back and responded politely, “I don’t mind the interruption. I want to know what you see. *Why* am I not ready? You can be honest.”

“Didn’t mean to hurt your feelings,” she replied. “Just making an observation, that’s all.”

“You’re part of some cult. Meditating and trying to get out of your head, is that it?”

Though the hiker was not one to engage in the ubiquitous flame

wars between believers and skeptics, which erupted soon after the Internet shrunk the planet into a global sandbox, Alice's observation hit the same raw nerve that sent skeptics spinning into mad rants. It was the *attitude* to which he objected: believers conveyed their observations as though only holy water touched their lips, while you, the heathen non-believer, were a puppy to be rubbed behind the ears when good and swatted on the bum for speaking forbidden thoughts.

"Now you're angry, and upset. I've ruined your hike. And all you wanted was to get away, away from all those obnoxious people pushing and shoving their way through shallow lives."

The sarcasm stung. He wasn't sure why.

"You didn't ruin any thing. I'm not escaping from anyone. At that moment, in fact, I was amusing myself, imagining you were Alice ___"

"Alice?"

"*Alice in Wonderland.*"

"Oh, *that* Alice."

Her smile – was it sarcasm or genuine amusement? He could not tell.

"When you fired off that wise crack about the path, you reminded me of the Evil Queen."

"Well, you're not ready, are you?"

Ouch. She aimed to kill, not wound. He wondered why he found it so hard to disengage from her banter and get on with his hike – and came up empty-handed.

"I've given a fair amount of thought to spiritual matters," he said. "I'm not the Neanderthal you think I am. I know life is more than beer and pretzels. I understand that. I understand compassion. It pays to be nice."

He winked, a poor attempt at conveying warmth, and then gave up any pretense of politeness. "I don't buy the mumbo jumbo. Not into Ouija boards. I don't phone the Psychic Hot line. And I don't have a guru to tell me to breathe."

"Then we'll get along. We're both realists. Though reality may not be what you think it is."

"Oh? You know this? You walked the path? And I'm not ready?"

“Yes. I suppose. Good observation.” She rose to her feet, preparing to leave. “You’ve thought about spiritual matters?”

“Right,” he replied.

“Then you know you’re a spirit, not a body, right?”

“Like I said, I’m not into mumbo jumbo, but I live a spiritual life —”

“I don’t get it,” she said, as though talking to herself with an exaggerated look of puzzlement. “How can one live a spiritual life if one is not a spirit?”

“They’ve shown spirit doesn’t exist.”

“Who’s shown that?” She gaped with disbelief, prodding and antagonizing.

“Scientists. You know ...”

“No, I don’t know. I’m disappointed. I thought you were a realist.”

Again, she rubbed that nerve, setting him off. As much as he wanted to, he couldn’t let it go. “Science is real, sweetheart. It’s what *is* real. Not —”

“Spirit? If so, then you cannot be spiritual. That’s only logical.” She winked, signaling she was playing with him.

He couldn’t find the spirit of play within himself; he was much too serious and he knew it. Was his real concern the young lady who had appeared magically on the trail? Or was the actual problem the persistent and nagging feeling that he’d forgotten some thing, something important? He vaguely recalled he had an important message to deliver, but as hard as he tried he still couldn’t grasp what that message might have been. It would come to him eventually. It always did.

“If you’re not a spirit, you must be a robot. A nice robot, a polite robot, but a robot nonetheless.”

“Forget it.” *This wasn’t going anywhere.* Alice had imbibed too many drugs, crawled down too many rabbit holes, and chased too many mad hatters. Besides, he was going on thirty-two, she was at least a ten years younger. He was debating with a child.

She walked away, disappearing behind the trunks of the birch trees, reappearing, then disappearing again.

A voice emerged out of the memory that was failing him: “Get him up the hill. Let’s move it.”

Disappointment lashed his emotions. A nebulous fear of impending loss swelled in his chest. He didn't want her to leave, he didn't want to be alone – but he was frozen, unable to act, unable to make a decision. A moment ago, only his memory was failing him; now it seemed the crisis had spread to all his faculties.

She called back over her shoulder, “So the next time we meet we will talk about spirit?”

“Next time?”

“I have to go now.”

“What shall I call you?” he shouted.

“Alice is fine.”

“I'm Ray. Ray Carte. Wait —”