

Excerpted from *Lost in the Summer of '69*, by Eliza Knight. Sourcebooks, 2026. Reprinted with permission.

Prologue

Stomp the Intro

Summer 2019

Nora perched on a wicker love seat on the back patio of her daughter's house, steam curling from her cup into the early spring air. The garden was quiet—until it wasn't. Nora tucked a silver-nearly-white strand of hair behind her ear. Inside, there appeared to be an argument brewing between Anne and her teenage daughter, Ellie.

While it was probably inappropriate to smile, Nora couldn't help doing so. At Ellie's age, she and her own mother had had a few knock-down, drag-out fights over stupid things like boys, length of skirts, and music. And later, she'd listened to Anne stomp off just the same. Time softened the edges, but it never dulled the echo.

She leaned toward the window, snooping, because at her age, a little drama always provided a bit of a thrill.

“Why not?” Punctuating the ever-present *why* was the stomp of a foot.

Nora tsked. Didn't Ellie know by now—at seventeen—that stomping one's foot was simply silly? And with Anne, a prosecutor for the state, that it would get her nowhere?

Anne's words were muffled through the window, no doubt spoken in the calm, cool, collected manner she'd used since she was two and made a very sound argument to her mother about why she should be allowed to stay up later than her usual bedtime. And it wasn't because she wasn't tired; it was because if she'd gone to bed on time, she wouldn't have been able to warn the cow not to jump over the moon—he'd break his legs on the fall down to earth.

Nora had agreed and let her stay up an extra ten minutes.

The argument grew louder, their voices trailing closer, and then Anne was out on the back porch, arms crossed over her slim chest, tapping her foot in impatience, and Ellie stood beside her looking very much like a younger, identical version. Their raven-colored hair was reminiscent of Nora's beloved late husband.

“My, what have I done to warrant the wrath of my two favorites?” Nora worked hard to hide her smile.

“She wants to go to that Woodstock revival concert with her friends—camping and all! Mother, please tell Ellie she can’t go.” Anne rolled her eyes as if the idea was offensive.

“It’s not even that big of a deal!” Ellie’s voice cracked. “Everyone else’s parents said yes.”

Nora cocked her head, staring at Anne. Had her daughter really forgotten about Nora’s epic summer adventure in the summer of ’69 when she’d gone to Woodstock herself? From the confused look on her face, apparently, she had. “No.”

“See,” Anne said, gesturing toward Nora. “Your grandmother said no.”

Nora chuckled. “Oh, Anne, I meant no I won’t tell her she can’t go.”

Anne’s mouth fell open. Nora was certain to get a lecture later about allowing Anne to parent on her own, but then she’d remind Anne—again—that inviting Nora into the debate came with consequences. Not every argument needed a witness.

“Mother!” Anne’s voice held a warning edge.

“I’ll take her,” Nora said with a firm nod, eager to enjoy the evergreen sounds of rock and roll, to relive that amazing summer that had changed her life.

Anne’s eyes practically bulged. “You can’t take her to Woodstock; that’s crazy. Don’t you remember what happened in 1999, the last time they tried to revive that festival?”

Nora laughed a little louder, spilling droplets of tea until Anne took her cup and set it on the cedar table. Woodstock 1999 had been an utter disaster, that much was true. But maybe this time around, the organizers had taken a few pointers from Lilith Fair in the ’90s, which had been all about hope and comradery, well, and female empowerment. Nora and Anne had gone to the Lilith Fair show at the Jones Beach Amphitheater in celebration of Anne’s recent law school graduation, and Nora still had a picture of them, smiling with Sarah McLachlan singing onstage in the background, taped to her refrigerator twenty years later. A snapshot reminder of who they were.

“What is so funny?” Anne demanded.

“Oh, Anne, my darling girl, have you forgotten what I told you about your great-grandmother?”

Anne narrowed her eyes, and Nora could practically see her rolling through the files she

kept alphabetized and in chronological order in the coils of her brain.

“Ellie,” Nora said, patting the seat beside her. “Let me tell you a story about my grandmother, and how she got lost in the summer of sixty-nine. That summer changed everything for me. And maybe it will for you too.”

Part One

California Dreaming

Summer 1969

Chapter One

Eleanor Bell Strickland had always believed in omens. Signs. Little winks from the universe. And tonight, sitting alone in her dimly lit living room, she couldn't help but wonder if turning sixty-nine in the year 1969 was some kind of cosmic joke. A cruel, poetic symmetry.

Her fingers sank into the royal-purple velvet of the couch, the fabric rich and smooth beneath her touch. A jazz record spun on the record player in the corner, its low, scratchy hum curling into the air like cigarette smoke. Overhead, the chandelier she'd found at a flea market decades ago cast jagged shadows against the walls, flickering like ghosts of old laughter, old arguments, old love.

On the mantel, next to the portrait of herself in her twenties—hair swept up, eyes burning with the certainty of youth—was the photograph of her wedding day. A black-and-white relic of a life that had once been brimming, roaring, unstoppable. She stood and brought the picture back to the couch, tracing the edge of the frame with one trembling finger. If only he were here. If only she could turn her head and see him standing in the doorway, smirking at her dramatic sentimental streak the way he always had.

But the room was quiet. Too quiet. And for the first time in her life, Eleanor felt something slipping—something she had spent years clinging to. The fierce, electric hum of life that had always run through her veins. Ebbing now, just slightly, just enough to make her wonder...

Was this what it felt like to fade?

Sixty-nine in 1969. Her golden birthday. That was supposed to mean something—supposed to be special. She and Henry had always talked about doing something big this year, something grand. A trip back to Malibu, where they'd spent their honeymoon tangled in salt air and endless, impossible love. Or maybe New Orleans, where the jazz clubs pulsed like a second

heartbeat, where she could finally dance in a place that made music feel like magic.

But fate, as always, had its own sense of humor. And not the kind that made you laugh. Henry was gone.

One minute he was there, humming some off-key tune while shaving, teasing her about a gray hair she absolutely did not have. The next—just...gone. Vanished into the abyss, leaving her stranded in a life that suddenly felt too quiet too still.

Age was a cruel joke. Death was a bully. It snatched, it sneered. It took what it wanted and left you holding nothing but a hollowed-out heart and a collection of what-ifs.

And now, on this golden day, she was left sitting here, staring at the ghost of a life they'd planned. Wondering how, exactly, she was supposed to celebrate when half of her had already been buried.

Eleanor forgot why she'd sunk so heavily onto the worn velvet of her purple couch, why a slow, creeping melancholy had wrapped itself around her shoulders like a too-familiar shawl. But then her gaze fell again to the slip of paper trembling in her lap, the inked scrawl of her doctor's handwriting etched sharp and final. The pamphlet she held that started a ticking time bomb to the end. And the mourning of what was written there came back all over again.

Dementia. Early signs.

The words blurred at the edges, but their meaning stayed razor clear.

She exhaled—long, slow—and let her gaze drift beyond the paper, toward the taxidermy peacock perched on the painted brick hearth. Its iridescent feathers shimmered dully in the afternoon light, glass eyes staring back with a secret only she knew. Henry had never asked about it, and she'd never offered the truth: that the peacock was a gift from a lover, a young man with calloused fingers and a fedora tilted on his head, a lifetime ago when her days were stitched with electric possibility.

Back when she still believed she could set the world on fire.

She had wanted to be a star once. Could play the drums, strum a guitar and a banjo—but her real instrument had always been her voice. Sweet, clear, a little wild around the edges. That's what they used to say. That's what *he* used to say. *Eleanor Bell, with a voice that rang like a bell.*

She'd been a musician ahead of her time, chasing rhythms and riffs the world wasn't ready to hear in the 1920s.

Her fingers, still elegant despite the years, released the papers, letting them fall to the floor like an afterthought. She stood, feet aching from the heels she'd kicked off, but back straight, and crossed to the record player. Gently, deliberately, she lifted the record from its spindle, set it aside, and replaced it with something with a little more pulse.

Jimi Hendrix.

As the first notes of "Purple Haze" crackled to life, the chords curled around her like smoke. A faint smile came to her lips. This room, this purple couch—it had all been shaped by the echoes of a song, by the girl she used to be.

That girl wasn't entirely gone yet.

With no one here to watch, Eleanor let herself be that girl again. Fingers strumming invisible chords in the air, she twirled through her living room, legs kicking, hips swaying, her body bending and flowing as if she were one more instrument in the band. The music surged through her, wild and free, and she moved like she'd never stopped, like the aches and pains of age didn't exist.

Certainly not how anyone imagined a grandmother should dance—not her daughter, not her granddaughter, and definitely not the friends she swapped casserole recipes and polite conversation with. But they'd never known her secret.

The secret she'd tucked away for the past four decades, folded between grocery lists, laundry, and dirty diapers.

That Eleanor Bell, if the world had let her shine, would have been wild and free—a musician with an unforgettable voice, a wild style and a long list of lovers. Someone who stayed on the stage and evolved as the music did. Maybe even now, she would've been the greatest damn rocker of all time.

Close behind the bully death was time, and time had stolen so much from her.

She spun faster, her laughter caught in her throat, feet skimming across the floor like those of a woman half her age. She let herself believe she had no cares, no doctor's words sitting heavy on her chest, no shadow creeping in to steal the edges of her mind.

But the fact lingered there anyway. Just out of reach. Soon, maybe tomorrow, maybe years from now, her memories would begin to slip like a broken record. Memories of her husband's hand in hers. Her daughter's first cry. The warm weight of her granddaughter curled beside her on Sunday mornings.

And perhaps worst of all—the flashbulb moments she'd hoarded for herself, the ones she replayed when no one was watching. Bright lights, sticky bar stages, the roar of a crowd. The nights before she'd been a mother, a wife. When she had been the Bell of Wartime Music. Sought after, cheered for.

She feared the loss of those memories, of being on the road, a young singer, a budding star. Moments she'd cherished over the last decades raising a family. Moments she'd relished in the night when no one was paying attention or when she was knee-deep in laundry or dirty diapers. Those memories had kept her alive and kept her going. Nights when the hot spotlight of the stage lights had warmed her skin.

To lose those felt like the end of the world. The door closing on a dream.

By the time Jimi crooned his final line, her chest was heaving, sweat beading at her temples. A nostalgic smile on her lips, she was breathless and a little dizzy, as though the song itself had transported her back to who she used to be. At her feet, Roxy yapped and twirled, the little Chinese crested equally giddy. Eleanor scooped up the dog, burying her face against her soft tuft and warm, hairless skin, holding on as if she could bring time to a halt.

“What’s that you say, Roxy?” Eleanor asked the little dog in her arms. “You think I should return to my roots, become a star again?” She scratched behind Roxy’s ear, staring into her devoted brown eyes as if that would give her the answer. Heat tunneled up her spine. “Me too.”

The thought of striding onto a stage, a guitar slung across her shoulder, silver hair wild, her wrinkled and veined fingers plucking out chords as naturally as breath, made her laugh out loud. Her voice might be raspier now, might creak like old floorboards, but damn if she didn’t believe it could still hold a crowd spellbound.

Maybe she needed to prove it to herself, that the Bell of Wartime Music had not left her completely.

Putting down the dog, she padded in her stockinged feet through the house, the wooden floor cool beneath her nylon-covered soles, to her bedroom. Past the massive gold-framed bed draped in silk sheets, rumpled and untouched. She’d stopped making the bed after Henry died, afraid smoothing the sheets might erase the dent he left behind. Past her mirrored vanity, cluttered with elegant little bottles: Chanel N°5, Shalimar, Joy by Jean Patou. Scents that once clung to her pulse points, to the folds of her blouses. On the nightstand sat a crystal ashtray, a

lipstick-smudged cigarette extinguished but forgotten from the night before.

She bypassed all of these things as if they didn't exist.

Instead, she crossed to the closet, sliding open the heavy doors. Cool air wafted out, laced with cedar and the faint traces of Henry that grew weaker with each passing day. She pushed aside rows of silk blouses and sequined dresses until her fingers brushed something solid—the smooth wood handle of her guitar, tucked away behind decades of careful appearances.

She pulled the Gibson L-00 free. Her fingers danced over the rounded shoulders and narrowed waist of solid spruce, admiring that the sunburst finish had hardly faded. The dark outer edge had a nick on one side, barely noticeable because of the appealing honey-colored center, which drew the eye. But she remembered how the nick had gotten there. A kiss that made her jerk and hit her beloved instrument against a microphone stand.

Her thumb grazed the chords' steel wire, eliciting a soft hum that broke the stillness of memory. Eleanor closed her eyes, letting the vibration of the chords ricochet from her fingertips up her arms.

Roxy barked at her feet, pulling her from her memories. Her tail wagged furiously, demanding Eleanor sing.

Eleanor flipped the guitar over, giving it a gentle shake. A tiny, folded note fluttered to the floor, landing like a forgotten promise on the thick shag carpet of her closet.

She crouched, the guitar resting against her knee, and unfolded the yellowed paper, careful not to rip the aged edges. Three words stared back at her, ink slightly smudged.

Until next time.

Her breath caught. The memory washed over her like a swell—laughter backstage, a whisper in her ear, the scent of cigarette smoke and the leather of an old aviator jacket. She smiled, her fingers moving instinctively, languidly, over the strings, coaxing out a lazy melody.

There had never been a next time. She had met Henry, fallen in love. And she'd tucked the note inside the guitar, unable to bring herself to throw it away. Even as she traded away the possibility it hinted at—traded it for family, responsibility, the safety of routine.

That was a choice. A life of stardom and love versus stability and heart.

But standing here now, the weight of the guitar in her hands, the taste of old perfume still clinging to the air, she wondered, if life was about to slip away from her, piece by piece—why couldn't she revisit old choices, decide how life ended?

Why couldn't she make the rest of her *until next time* be right now?

Yesterday, she'd spotted an article folded in the corner of the newspaper, nearly overlooked. The Newport Pop Festival. California. Next week.

All the way across the country, but something about the idea of a music festival buzzed beneath her skin, lit her up like stage lights.

If she packed now, she could be there. She could walk among the crowd, guitar slung across her back, maybe even find a stage where no one cared how old she was or how many years she'd spent stringing laundry instead of chords. The Bell of Wartime Music could make one last appearance.

The thought made her pulse quicken.

But then doubt slithered in—could she make it in time? She couldn't recall what the calendar on the wall in her kitchen marked neatly in her daughter's handwriting said. And she didn't really care.

Flying seemed safest. She had enough money tucked away to buy a plane ticket without blinking. Maybe that would keep her from getting turned around, ending up in the wrong city or on the wrong coast. Driving across the country alone... That felt like tempting fate. A week on the road might be one detour too far for her fraying memory.

The doctor hadn't given her a timeline. First, it had been little things—misplacing her keys, standing in the cereal aisle when she meant to be lighting a candle for Henry at church. Picking up the phone and not recognizing the voice on the other end—her own daughter.

No one could say when the gaps would widen, the pace would speed up, memories and everyday functions would vanish and stay gone for good.

She shook the ugly thoughts away, banishing them like smoke.

She wouldn't give the forgetting, the diagnosis, any more space. Not today.

Instead, she focused on the festival. The hum of guitars in the distance, the thrum of bass vibrating through the soles of her shoes, voices rising into the summer air. A chance to be Eleanor Bell again—the girl who'd never needed permission to be loud.

Eleanor wanted her song to stretch into one endless chord shimmering beneath the California sun.