

Pretty Flamingo

Perry Martin

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PRETTY FLAMINGO by Mark Barkan

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To my friend and business-partner, Sandy Hockenbery. You saw the diamond in the rough and helped me polish it. Your enthusiasm and passion for this story inspired me to bring it to life. It exists now because of your commitment and insistence that I keep going and “write the next chapter!”

I would also like to thank Alice Lui, my old band mate from my days in Hong Kong, for coming out of the past and showing me the true meaning of the word “friend.” I will never forget your generous and unselfish contribution. You have the heart of a lion and the soul of an angel.

Finally, a special acknowledgment is due to my friend and all-around miracle worker when it comes to matters of the human body, Dr. Tom Skrenes of the Holistic Health Center. You have kept me fit and healthy for over twenty years. May we both continue to stay that way for many more years to come.

FOREWORD

The characters appearing in this book are largely fictional, or composites of people I have known, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is unintentional and purely coincidental. While I have used actual cities and towns, the addresses are fictional and do not exist in reality.

However, quite a number of the events within are based on fact. Most notably, that I did, indeed, travel to South Vietnam when I was fourteen, and play bass guitar with country and western show band, “The Donny James Show.” I also traveled extensively throughout South-east Asia in the 1970s, finally settling in Hong Kong for twelve years where I enjoyed a successful music career.

The story is set dually in California, 2004 and Queensland, Australia in the 1960s. In an effort to add a ring of authenticity to the chapters that are set in Australia, I have used a number of slang terms and expressions that I remember from that time period. As an aid to readers not familiar with the Aussie’s colorful lingo, I’ve provided a short glossary of these words and phrases. For the sake of those readers who were born “post-vinyl”, I have also included definitions for a few other terms in reference to how music was played and listened to prior to the advent of CDs and MP3s.

Glossary

Are your ears painted on?: Are you listening to me?

Around the twist: Insane

Arvo: Afternoon

Be mum with (as in, “will you be mum with the tea?”): Will you pour it into the cups?

Boomerang: A flat, curved piece of wood designed to return to the person who throws it; used as a weapon by Australian Aboriginals

Bloody ripper: Fantastic. “Bloody ripper of a weekend, hey?”

Brekkie: Breakfast

Chemist: Pharmacy; drugstore

Chips: French fries

Crikey: An expression of surprise. “Crikey! You frightened the life out of me!”

Delish: Delicious

Dunny: Toilet

Esky: Portable cooler

Fire Brigade: (Has since been changed to the **Fire and Rescue Service**). Fire Department.

Flat: Apartment

Funny Turn (as in, “She had a funny turn.”): A funny turn generally means a sudden, short-lived episode when someone becomes dizzy, wobbly on their feet, confused, or perhaps blacks out altogether

Grog: Booze; alcohol

Headmaster: Australian and English term for the school principal

Knock for a six: Utterly surprise or overcome someone. “I knocked him for a six.”. (With allusion to a forceful hit that scores six runs in cricket)

Kookaburra: Australian Kingfisher having a loud, cackling cry

LP (Long Play): The LP (Long Play), or 33 1/3 rpm (revolutions per minute) microgroove vinyl record, is a format for phonograph (gramophone) records; an analog sound storage medium. LPs generally had five or six songs per side as opposed to a 7-inch Single which only had one song per side.

Magnavox Stereo Hi-Fi Console: Back in the days when music was played on vinyl records, many people owned record players that were designed to look like pieces of furniture. Most models also included a radio. They were usually varnished, carved wood units that offered storage for one’s record collection. A few examples can be seen at the link below.

<http://www.audioarchaeology.com/#!vintage-audio/cj1i>

Not on the phone: Unlike today’s modern world, in the 1960s not everybody had a telephone. Consequently, one would commonly hear the expression “we’re not on the phone”—meaning “we don’t have phone service”.

Pash (as in “having a pash”): To kiss passionately

Pull the other leg, it's got bells on it: Response to having one's "leg pulled", which means to be teased in a joking manner, and now you're teasing me again. Hence, "Pull the other leg . . ."

Poofter: Homosexual

Pressie (pronounced prezzy): Present; gift

Reel-to-Reel Tape Recorder: A machine which uses magnetic tape to record and play back music or spoken word. A full description with accompanying photos can be found at the link below.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reel-to-reel_audio_tape_recording

Righto: Okay

Sarny; sarnies: Sandwich; sandwiches

Shouting: Paying for; treating. "David's shouting the pizza."

Single (45 RPM single): Small vinyl record used for reproducing music. The most common form of the vinyl single is the 45 or 7-inch; the names are derived from its play speed, 45 rpm (revolutions per minute) and the standard diameter 7-inch (18 cm).

S'truth: An exclamation used when surprised or in disbelief

Sticky beak: Nosy person

Too right: Used to express one's enthusiastic agreement with a statement. "Too right, mate!"

Tucker: Food

Up the duff: Pregnant

Vegemite: Yeast-based sandwich spread. Definitely an acquired taste if you're weren't brought up eating it.

LINKS TO SONGS

At least half of this story is set in the late 1960s. Readers who lived through that era will most likely be familiar with many, if not all, of the songs mentioned within. However, for those of you who, for whatever reason, missed out on what some have called “The Fabulous Sixties”, I have provided You Tube links to each song in order of appearance in the book. Familiarity with these songs is certainly not essential to your enjoyment of the story, but it may very well enhance it.

We Gotta Get Out Of This Place performed by The Animals

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LUpBSvN1a50>

Green Tambourine performed by The Lemon Pipers

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S5Vz-z4PEkk>

House Of The Rising Sun performed by The Animals

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2oKRKZnEoA>

Mustang Sally performed by Wilson Pickett

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CwB40qTfuVI>

All My Loving performed by The Beatles

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twjKjcEO8qI>

Pretty Flamingo performed by Manfred Mann

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28_gnIoXANa

Do You Want To Know A Secret performed by The Beatles

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G7UbcMnHCTs>

Good Vibrations performed by The Beach Boys

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eab_beh07HU

Silence is Golden performed by The Tremeloes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbcHr80v7UYc>

You Really Got Me performed by The Kinks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fT7sY-oz6Go>

It Won't Be Long performed by The Beatles

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uUmXXFbhokc>

If I Fell performed by The Beatles

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bA9ALtk82Vg>

Friday On My Mind performed by The Easybeats

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3iW2_Ec3uEU

My Generation performed by The Who

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=594WLzzb3JI>

Day Tripper performed by The Beatles

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXQITH-9i20>

Strangers In The Night performed by Frank Sinatra

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mugAN5aNSStM>

Surfin' U.S.A. performed by The Beach Boys

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDb303T-B1w>

Hanky Panky performed by Tommy James and the Shondells

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ago-acfPgA>

Light My Fire performed by The Doors

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=deB_u-to-IE

Dear Prudence performed by In Focus

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gw4BjU62t5Y>

Tired of Waiting for You performed by The Kinks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QkBvsBpgGbo>

San Franciscan Nights performed by The Animals

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hv0M5etXFA>

Truckin' performed by The Grateful Dead

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QuyaK0hGxWk>

Poison Ivy performed by Billy Thorpe and The Aztecs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WrfHoEx7cpDM>

Eight Miles High performed by The Byrds

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J74ttSR8IEg>

REFERENCES TO TV SHOWS OF THE 1960s AND 1970s

During the course of this novel, a few popular 60s and 70s television shows are mentioned, either by title or by reference to characters appearing in them. For those readers unfamiliar with those particular shows, I have included information about them below, along with relevant You Tube links.

Dragnet

Police drama that starred Jack Webb as Detective Sgt. Joe Friday.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4B-tvhEa_s&list=PL5q8VRGX_yLIDj-WwthUSxp4KO02E08zz

Get Smart

Maxwell Smart, a.k.a. Agent 86, works for CONTROL, a Washington, D.C.-based counter-intelligence agency. Totally inept as a secret agent, Smart can barely use the gadgetry the agency provides him (including a phone embedded in his shoe). Nevertheless, he and his fellow agents always seem to thwart the operations of KAOS, an organized crime outfit dedicated to evil. Agent 99 is Smart's smarter female partner, a resourceful agent who eventually marries her bumbling cohort. Smart and Agent 99's boss is a man known only as The Chief. (Source: IMDB)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEGA7eyWeAA>

I Dream of Jeannie

Rescued from a bottle (and a deserted island) by a U.S. Astronaut (Larry Hagman), a scantily clad genie named Jeannie (Barbara Eden) becomes his slave and eventually falls in love with him. But unlike most genie stories, there is no three wishes rule—so Jeannie uses her magic all the time, often without talking to her rescuer about it first. (Source: IMDB)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9L4NVc4HJo&list=PLr_eMY8BNSHJK185dgiwyVjPP-IDqyty0

The Beverly Hillbillies

This series follows the Clampett family from the Ozarks to posh Beverly Hills after they strike oil and become millionaires. Banker Mr. Drysdale tries to keep them from foolishly spending their newfound wealth, and he also tries to “civilize” them—usually succeeding in making a fool of himself in the process. (Source: IMDB)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCOriPvA-YQ>

Bonanza

Ben Cartwright is the patriarch of an all-male Nevada ranching family. Set during and after the Civil War, *Bonanza* is the story of life on the family's thousand-acre spread, known as the Ponderosa, near Virginia City. Ben has three sons, each with a different (and deceased) mother. Serious eldest son Adam hopes to follow in his father's footsteps; middle son Hoss is a gentle giant—physically strong, but sometimes naive; and youngest son Little Joe is the most impetuous and romantic of the offspring. (**Source:** IMDB)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ZRn1K4p7Wo&list=PL9h9YRarc3dFYb-uq1SGugZ8tDjyXZXL)

[v=1ZRn1K4p7Wo&list=PL9h9YRarc3dFYb-uq1SGugZ8tDjyXZXL](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ZRn1K4p7Wo&list=PL9h9YRarc3dFYb-uq1SGugZ8tDjyXZXL)

The Rockford Files

Jim Rockford (James Garner) is an ex-con and private detective. Nothing comes easy for Rockford, but he works hard and usually gets shot at or beat up at least once per episode. (**Source:** IMDB)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yg1Cx26-](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yg1Cx26-928&list=PLQ411_vNoPd8CZE3qiZZxOkHjklFxtsp9)

[928&list=PLQ411_vNoPd8CZE3qiZZxOkHjklFxtsp9](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yg1Cx26-928&list=PLQ411_vNoPd8CZE3qiZZxOkHjklFxtsp9)

The Twilight Zone

The Twilight Zone was the brainchild of Emmy Award-winner Rod Serling, who served as host and wrote over 80 episodes of the original show's 150-plus episode run. It's a strange mix of horror, science-fiction, drama, comedy and superstition. The series still plays in syndication on American television. (**Source:** IMDB)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmLh2LMT2Gc>

REFERENCES TO MOVIES, MOVIE ACTORS AND CELEBRITIES

Thunder Road (1958) Starring Robert Mitchum

A veteran of the Korean War comes home to the mountains and takes over the family moonshining business. He has to battle big-city gangsters who are trying to take over the business and the police who are trying to put him in prison. (Source: IMDB)

White Heat (1949) Starring James Cagney

A psychopathic criminal (James Cagney) with a mother complex makes a daring break from prison and leads his old gang in a chemical plant payroll heist. Shortly after the plan takes place, events take a crazy turn. (Source: IMDB)

Patton (1970) Starring George C. Scott

Oscar-winning movie (seven total, including Best Actor for George C. Scott) that chronicles the World War II phase of the career of controversial American general, George S. Patton. (Source: IMDB)

Support Your Local Sheriff (1969)

Comedy-western starring James Garner as a man who becomes a sheriff just for the pay, figuring he can decamp if things get tough. In the end, he uses ingenuity instead. (Source: IMDB)

On Her Majesty's Secret Service (1969)

Sixth movie in the James Bond franchise. It starred Australian model, George Lazenby in his one and only outing as 007.

Mary Poppins (1964)

Disney movie-musical that starred Julie Andrews as the magical title character. One of the many memorable songs featured in the movie was "A Spoonful Of Sugar".

Groucho Marx

The bushy-browed, cigar-smoking wise-cracker with the painted-on moustache and stooped walk was the leader of The Marx Brothers, (Groucho, Chico, Harpo and Zeppo) a group of actors known for zany comedy movies *Duck Soup* (1933), *Animal Crackers* (1930), *Horse Feathers* (1932), *A Night in Casablanca* (1946), *A Day at the Races* (1937) and *A Night at the Opera* (1935). With one-liners that were often double entendres, Groucho never cursed in any of his performances and said he never wanted to be known as a dirty comic. (Source: IMDB)

Lucille Ball

Red-headed comedienne, star of movies and television; best known for her role as the scatter-brained, accident-prone Lucy Ricardo (opposite husband Desi Arnaz) in the long-running television show “I Love Lucy”.

Joe Frazier

Joseph William “Joe” Frazier, nicknamed “Smokin’ Joe”, was an American professional boxer, Olympic gold medalist and undisputed world heavyweight champion, whose professional career lasted from 1965 to 1976, with a one-fight comeback in 1981.

Humphrey Bogart

Humphrey DeForest Bogart was an American screen actor who made a slew of movies between 1928 and 1956, many of which are considered to be classics. One the most famous, and certainly a classic, was *Casablanca* (1942) in which Bogart starred opposite screen legend Ingrid Bergman.

Mary Tyler Moore

Mary Tyler Moore is an American actress, primarily known for her roles in television sitcoms *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961– 1966) and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977).

Bing Crosby

Harry Lillis “Bing” Crosby, Jr. was an American singer and actor. Crosby’s trademark warm bass-baritone voice made him the best-selling recording artist of the 20th century.

SPECIAL DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to my eternally beautiful wife,
the enormously talented Rowena Cortes.
You, alone, know the ultimate truth that lies at the heart of this story.
I will love you forever.*

Chapter One

Orange County, California

July 2004

Sunday

When David Perry awoke in the early hours of Sunday morning, he was sobbing. Sobbing so violently that his chest was heaving as if he was choking, gasping for air. Tears—hot, salty and stinging—were burning down his cheeks. In that no man’s land between slumber and wakefulness, he struggled to find an answer to what had roused him in such dramatic fashion. He was immediately struck by an inexplicable feeling that he’d been torn from a place he desperately longed to stay—cruelly wrenched away against his will. With an effort, he pulled himself out of the clutches of sleep, wiped his eyes and brought them to focus on the digital readout of his bedside clock. It was a few minutes after five o’clock. He’d been asleep for just three hours.

He frowned thoughtfully. He had the distinct impression he’d been dreaming just before he awoke, but the content of the dream completely eluded him. Closing his eyes once more, he lay there in the predawn dark, ransacking the nooks and crannies of his mind like some ethereal detective searching for clues. All he saw was blackness.

And yet . . .

He frowned again. There was something there, he was sure of it. But the memory danced tantalizingly on the outer edges of his consciousness, just out of reach. Concentrating his efforts, he sought to recapture anything that might give him a clue as to what had stirred up his emotions to such a degree. He was rewarded with a longing that seemed to swirl through his being like an icy wind howling through a dark, empty cavern.

Stretching a hand toward the bedside table, he switched on the lamp, and sat up. As he looked around the dimly-lit bedroom, his eyes fell on the walk-in closet, and he experienced a pang of regret. The louvered doors had been left open and, even in the subdued light, he could clearly see that only *his* clothes remained. There were empty shelves and hangers where Sandy’s things had once been.

Sandy. The latest addition to his unbroken record of failed relationships. Was *that* what this was all about?

He had to admit to feeling bad about the way things had gone. Mostly for Sandy, though. She’d been justifiably upset when it finally became apparent their relationship wasn’t headed down the aisle anytime soon, if ever. There had been tears and some mention of his inability to commit—and then

there had been what he'd come to think of as "the leaving".

They'd been together a little under a year, and she'd only moved in with him about three months ago. She'd shown up with her clothes, a small, portable stereo, some kitchen utensils, and the usual feminine odds and ends. The rest of her stuff she'd left in storage—temporarily, of course. "*We'll sort it all out once we're married*" was what she'd said. David recalled nodding noncommittally at that statement, while an inner voice had sung a well-worn refrain: "*Marriage? Not in this lifetime.*"

At that precise moment, he'd known their relationship was headed in the same direction all of his previous relationships had gone—toward the rocks. *Damn!* He should never have let her move in with him. He'd thought—with what turned out to be foolish optimism—that Sandy would be content to let things glide gently along as they had been, and that somehow it would all just *magically* work out. Typically, it hadn't.

The fault was his. He knew that all too well. He'd been here before and it had become, by now, familiar territory. It always came down to the same thing—he found it impossible to open his heart to anyone. There was a part of him—perhaps the most important part—that, so far, no one had ever been able to reach. Over the years he'd come to believe that he might even lack the capacity to love. Was there such a thing as a "love gene"? If there was, it was noticeably absent from *his* DNA.

With a grimace, he recalled once making the mistake of telling one of his ex-girlfriends that he was "*fond of her*". Her reaction let him know, in no uncertain terms, that those were *not* the three little words she'd been expecting to hear. Nevertheless, even without that kind of faux pas, it eventually became clear to the women in his life that the man they loved was incapable of returning that love. But David was nothing if not persistent, and he kept doggedly trying. When he met someone new, and the chemistry seemed right, he remained steadfastly optimistic. Maybe *this time* he'd found that special someone who would break through the defenses he'd erected around his heart, and he'd finally know what it felt like to truly love someone. So far it had yet to happen, and every relationship had eventually foundered like a ship lost at sea.

And now there had been Sandy, his latest failure. It had taken her less than a day to get completely moved out. The last items to go had been the speakers for her stereo and, ever the gentleman, he'd carried them out to her SUV.

After setting them in the back and closing the hatch, he walked around to the driver's side window. He searched desperately for something meaningful or comforting to say. The best he could manage was: "I'm sorry."

As soon as the words left his mouth, to his ears they sounded trite and inadequate. "Brilliant!" he thought sarcastically. "Who couldn't fail to be moved by such

understated eloquence?”

Sandy started the engine and then turned to face him, her eyes misting. “I know you are, David,” she said softly, and he was surprised at the tenderness in her voice. “I don’t know what it is you’re looking for; but I hope someday you find it.”

She touched his cheek lightly with her fingertips. Then, without another word, she drove off, leaving him standing in the street. He watched her drive to the end of the block, turn right toward the freeway, and then, just like that, she was gone.

He lingered there a while, listening to the sounds of the neighborhood. Somewhere in the distance a lawnmower started up. A few houses farther down, a dog started barking at something until its owner yelled for it to shut up.

Shit!” was all he said as he walked back into the house.

That had been five days ago. Could he have just now experienced a delayed reaction to losing Sandy? He shook his head, abruptly dismissing the thought. No. Not likely. Try as he might, when he examined his feelings regarding their breakup, he couldn’t contact anything *remotely* resembling the depth of emotion he’d felt just a short while ago.

He reflected on Sandy’s comment regarding his inability to commit. She was right. He couldn’t deny it. It was something he’d known about himself for most of his life. It was as if he was searching for something in every relationship; some *indefinable* element that always seemed to be missing.

Sighing, he threw the bed-covers aside, padded to the bathroom and turned on the light. He relieved himself and, as he washed his hands, he regarded his reflection in the mirror. David Perry, musician/recording engineer and owner of a small but successful recording studio in Newport Beach. A transplanted Aussie, he’d been a resident of California since 1983. Five-feet ten, hazel-eyed and quick to smile, his medium-length, brown hair was just showing the first traces of gray. He was still holding on to the good looks of his youth, although with each passing year he could feel his grip loosening. Those laugh lines were slowly but surely becoming wrinkles. As it stood, he could easily be mistaken for someone in their early-forties, which was quite a compliment considering he was actually fifty-one.

He returned to the bedroom and sat down on his bed. Resting his forearms on his knees and clasping his hands, he cast his mind back to the instant just before he’d awoken, searching for some trace, any slightest hint, of what might have evoked such intense emotion. He experienced that same, aching longing. And then, a ghost of something floated into the distant reaches of his mind. But when he tried to examine it more closely, it disappeared like a wisp of smoke carried off by the wind.

Settling back into bed, he switched off the bedside lamp and closed his eyes once more. Curiously, random images from his teenage years began parading through his mind and held his interest for quite some time. Eventually the drowsiness of approaching sleep overcame him. But just

before it claimed him completely, he thought he saw something—No! *Someone*—way off in the distance, and he caught the echo of a harsh, emotion-filled whisper: “*Promise me.*”

* * *

When David next awoke, it was almost nine-thirty. He’d left the curtains open last night, and the bedroom was now being bathed in bright, Southern California sunshine. He clasped his hands behind his head and lay there for a time, enjoying the fact that it was Sunday and there was no pressing business.

Eventually he roused himself, showered, put some coffee on, and scrambled some eggs. As he sat at the kitchen table, eating breakfast, he reflected on last night’s curious episode. The only other time he could recall a similar outburst had been after the untimely death of his father. But if he was brutally honest, as heartbreaking as that event had been, it hadn’t carried anywhere near the same intensity of emotion he’d felt coursing through him when he’d first awoken last night.

Swallowing the last of his coffee, he got up and went over to where the coffeepot sat, and poured a second cup. He turned the radio on and started scanning through the stations. His musical preference these days was country, but as a recording engineer and producer he generally listened to a wide variety of music to keep himself up-to-date. Today, for some reason, he was in the mood for reminiscing—so he set the radio to the local oldies station.

He returned to the kitchen table to the strains of Eric Burdon and the Animals’ “We Gotta Get Out Of This Place.” The words of the chorus brought a nostalgic smile to his face as he recalled singing that very song himself when he was barely fifteen years old, playing bass with a country and western band in, of all places, South Vietnam. He’d traveled the length and breadth of the war-torn country with that band, entertaining American and sometimes Australian troops, and that particular song had never failed to get them up on their feet, singing or yelling the chorus along with him.

In later years, he sometimes wondered how many of them actually *had* gotten out of that place and made it back home. Perhaps it was a little egotistical, but he liked to think that the people he met, the lives he touched, were somehow protected because *he* knew them. That was something he’d never know for sure, and maybe it was better that way. He could continue to believe that the countless soldiers who’d bought him drinks, shook his hand, and asked if he could introduce them to the girl in the show—all of them had made it back to Ohio, Illinois, Texas, or wherever they were from. They had married their girlfriends or reunited with their wives and children, leaving the horrors of war far behind them.

“Call me sentimental,” he thought, *“but I prefer happy endings.”*

That set him to thinking about how he'd come to be in Vietnam in the first place, and of his emotional goodbye to Jackie Lanagan, the girl he remembered as being his first, real love. As the years rolled back and he drifted into the past, he couldn't help but wonder if that might have been the last time he *had* actually loved someone.

Chapter Two

*Queensland, Australia
August–December 1967*

When David was five years old, he learned a new word. Divorce. At the time, he didn't fully comprehend its meaning, despite his father's best efforts to explain it. But one thing became crystal clear—childhood, as David had known it for the last five years, was about to change.

David's father, Clark Perry, was in show business. A gifted singer, whose voice put one in mind of Bing Crosby (and who even bore a slight resemblance to the famous crooner, with his bright-blue eyes and slightly protruding ears) he was on the road frequently; often out-of-state, sometimes overseas.

David's mother, Diana Perry, was a long-legged, flaxen-haired beauty with dark, flashing eyes. When she and David's father met, she'd been part of the chorus line in a summer season variety show that Clark had been the featured act in. Years later, when David was old enough to appreciate such things, his father confessed that it was Diana's dancer's legs that had first attracted him to her. What began as a causal relationship became a little more complicated when Diana discovered she was pregnant with David. Clark did the honorable thing, and they were married in a quiet, sparsely-attended civil ceremony.

Her unexpected pregnancy effectively ended Diana's dancing career, such as it was, and she was forced to adjust to being a home-bound wife and mother. As both David and his father would later learn, that was an adjustment she was largely unwilling to make. Whenever Clark was around, Diana played the part of doting mother. But as soon as he set off on his travels, pursuing his career wherever it led him, Clark's son was placed in the care of his mother's parents while she carried on as if she was a single woman. For the longest time Diana's extra-curricular activities were relatively innocent, if somewhat irresponsible. She went to clubs, pubs and parties with her single girlfriends, where she'd drink a lot and flirt a little. But eventually, and perhaps inevitably, she met someone else.

Not long after David's fifth birthday, Clark arrived home from an overseas trip to find his wife sitting on the living room couch, a gin and tonic in her hand. From the looks of her, it hadn't been the first. David had once again been shunted off to his maternal grandparents, perhaps to spare him from what was to come. Fortified by the alcohol she'd consumed, Diana confessed to carrying on a long-term affair with one

Gerry Knudsen—a tall, wispy-haired man with a mustache and smoky, gray eyes—and she announced that she was leaving her husband and son to live with Gerry in Western Australia. Clark was stunned by this completely unexpected admission, and a furious argument ensued. Diana maintained she'd never wanted marriage and children in the first place, and further complained that Clark was hardly ever home, leaving *her* to look after their child. (The fact that, most of the time, she actually *didn't* look after David when Clark was away, appeared to be lost on her). Divorce seemed to be the only option. Being the guilty party, Diana, to her credit, agreed not to insist on alimony. Not surprisingly, she also suggested that it might be best if their son stayed with Clark. Since the divorce was essentially non-contested, the whole affair was over and done with fairly rapidly. His mother's openly-admitted infidelity, and willingness to virtually abandon her child, no doubt contributed to the divorce court's decision in granting sole custody to his father. At some point during the proceedings, David's mother sat him down and tried to make him understand her decision. With Clark away so much, she had become lonely. She needed a man in her life; a man who would be there all the time, not just a few days out of every month. It occurred to David to mention to his mother that *he* was in her life. Didn't that count for something?

David had met Gerry Knudsen only once, and hated him on sight. For all David knew, Gerry might well have been one of the nicest people in the world; but the way David saw it, he'd come between his mother and father, and so he was deserving of hate. For a long time after, whenever David watched a movie or television show, he would always pretend the villain was Gerry, and he'd cheer when he came to a bad end—preferably a gruesome, painful end. It would be years before David would arrive at the conclusion that his mother was probably the *real* villain. It was entirely possible that Gerry had no idea that Diana was a married woman when they met. It didn't absolve him completely, but David now viewed him as more of an unwitting accomplice than an outright homewrecker.

Whenever he looked back on the tears and heartbreak his mother had caused him and his father—and the way she'd so easily given up her only son—he found it hard to forgive.

So when all was said and done, David got to be with his dad. Technically. The reality, however, was a little different.

Clark's show business lifestyle made it extremely difficult for him to be a normal father to his son. He traveled the country and the rest of the world constantly, and it just wasn't feasible for David to accompany him. So it fell to his paternal grandparents to raise David, for the most part. In the final analysis, David's childhood actually *badn't* changed that much. He'd merely traded one set of surrogate parents for another.

His father visited as often as he could, though rarely at Christmas, as that was traditionally one of the busiest times in the “Biz”. Christmas, apart from anything else, became a time of “*sorry I can’t be there*” gifts. Nevertheless, David loved his father and always looked forward to his visits, while at the same time dreading the inevitable, tearful goodbyes. They would spend a few glorious days together as father and son, until it came time for his dad to once again embark on his travels. David always hated that part. Ever since then, the “going to” was his preferred aspect of a trip, vacation, or even a day off. The “coming back from” always made him a little melancholy.

David had been lugging around an old acoustic guitar since he was eleven years old, but it wasn’t until he was thirteen that he started learning to play it. With a little help from a friendly high school teacher, who played pretty mean guitar himself, David quickly became proficient and was soon figuring out the latest pop songs. He formed a band with two high school friends, one a drummer and the other a guitarist who David talked into taking on the role of bass player. He wasn’t entirely sold on the idea until David reminded him that Paul McCartney had swapped *his* guitar for a bass. Under the name *The Trybe*, and using equipment they’d begged, borrowed, or stolen—including a Hofner bass guitar “*just like Paul McCartney’s*”—they played a few high school dances and local parties during the months they were together. Their biggest claim to fame was winning an Honorable Mention at a local talent quest. Unfortunately, *The Trybe* weren’t destined to become “the next big thing”. Neither the bass player, nor the drummer planned on making a career out of music, and so the Honorable Mention at the talent quest became both the apex and the swan song of the band’s brief foray into the world of pop. They disbanded soon after, with the bass player moving to another state and the drummer heading off to Military Cadet School.

The place the ill-fated *Trybe* members called home was Caloundra, a picturesque, little-known coastal town sixty miles north of Queensland’s capital city, Brisbane. After the band split up, most weekends would find David hitchhiking to Brisbane to visit his best friend, Gary Freeman, who had recently moved there from Caloundra. Like David, Gary’s parents were divorced; leaving his mother, Alma with the task of single-handedly raising him, his younger brother Michael, and older sister Melissa. Through long and intimate association with them, David had come to regard the Freemans as family, and Mrs. Freeman had become like a second mother to David—or more accurately, the mother he’d never really had.

David would usually hitch down early Saturday morning, stay the night, and then head back mid-afternoon Sunday. His grandparents always

assumed he was making the trip to and from Brisbane via Greyhound bus and, knowing they'd forbid him to go if they ever found out otherwise, he thought it wise to keep up the pretense. The money he saved by thumbing a ride came in handy for those weekends in the city.

Looking back, David had to admit he'd been pretty lucky that he'd never been picked up by a child molester or serial killer. Maybe there was some merit to the old adage, "*God takes care of children and fools*". If true, it was just as well because, back in those days, he'd been both.

It was on one of those treks to Brisbane that David encountered local girl, Jackie Lanagan. She was a looker and a half with her Mia Farrow-inspired, short-cropped, sandy-blond hair, chestnut-brown eyes, and what he could only describe as "seriously kissable lips". There was instant chemistry between them and, before long, they were spending every possible moment together; their teenage hormones raging and pushing self-restraint to the limit. From that point on, David hitched to Brisbane *every* weekend, getting there as early as he could on Saturday and staying as late as he dared on Sunday, leaving just enough time to hitch back before darkness increased the risk he was already taking.

It was late-November when David's grandparents surprised him with the news that, in the second week of December when summer vacation started, he would be traveling to Hong Kong to spend a month with his father. For the first time in his life, David experienced mixed feelings at the thought of spending time with his dad. On the one hand, the prospect of spending Christmas with his father in a place as exotic as Hong Kong filled him with excitement. On the other, he would be away from Jackie for a whole month. To a lovesick fourteen-year-old, a month could feel like a lifetime.

The final weekend before David was to leave was a combination of passion and tears for the two teenagers. By late-Sunday afternoon they were sitting on a bench in the park near Gary's house, wrapped in each other's arms, willing their last hours together to pass slowly and praying that the month they would be apart would fly quickly by. With time growing short, David decided that now was the time to let Jackie know just how much she meant to him. Reaching into his jeans pocket, he pulled out a ring he'd somehow scraped the money together to buy.

"I'll miss you every single day I'm away," David said as he slipped the ring on her finger.

The ring itself was nothing special; but David could see that, at that moment, it meant everything to Jackie. She blinked back tears as she said, "I swear I'll never take it off."

By now the trees in the park were casting long shadows as the afternoon

sun slipped slowly toward the horizon. Reluctantly, David told Jackie he'd better get going if he was to catch a ride before it got dark. He walked her home and, at the bottom of the stairs to her house, they embraced and kissed one final time. With tear-filled eyes she promised she'd wait for him. Then she turned away, ran up the stairs, and went into her house without looking back.

David walked toward the outskirts of the city, thumbing the passing cars, feeling as if his world had just come to an end.

Chapter Three

Hong Kong December 1967

Nothing David had seen, heard, or read could have prepared him for the actual experience of Hong Kong. On the evening of his arrival there, his father and he were walking the streets of Tsim Sha Tsui, the tourist district of the Kowloon Peninsula, and David found the sights and sounds of this “Pearl of the Orient” mesmerizing. At that moment, all thoughts of Jackie took a distant second place to the gaudy, neon signs that littered the streets, with their odd combination of English and Chinese characters advertising restaurants, stores, hotels, guesthouses, bars and nightclubs.

One street boasted an open-air food market where you could purchase various meats, vegetables, fruit, assorted spices and other delicacies. Several food stalls were scattered throughout, where Chinese men and women sat perched on stools, wielding chopsticks with practiced ease as they scooped food out of small bowls. David’s nostrils twitched sporadically at the mixture of familiar and unfamiliar smells that wafted his way. Of particular interest to him were the openly-displayed animal carcasses that hung above the stalls where the food was cooked. He’d never seen anything like it.

Then there was the Star Ferry Company, with its white-and-green, double-decked ferryboats that transported people back and forth between the Kowloon Peninsula and Hong Kong Island. First-class passengers traveled on the top deck, which provided better seating and fresher air, while second-class passengers were relegated to the lower deck and suffered the fumes of the diesel engines that powered the ferries.

The sidewalks were teeming with people. Most were Chinese, of course. But David also saw Caucasian faces (English ex-patriots he assumed, although they could just as easily have been Australian or American) and at least one group of Japanese tourists following their tour guide’s flag as they rushed around seeing all the sights they could possibly cram into one evening.

Several times, as they jostled and bumped their way up crowded Nathan Road, they were accosted by dark-skinned individuals who, judging by their accents, were either Indian or Pakistani. They thrust their business cards at David and his father, urging them to have a suit made at their tailor shop, or to buy a “genuine Rolex watch, special price for you”. David was close to being overwhelmed by the sheer number of bodies on the streets. He’d never seen so many people all in one place, all going somewhere, and all

trying to get there at the same time. In comparison, Brisbane seemed like a one-horse town.

They were approaching the street-side entrance to a nightclub his father had told him featured one of the best bands in Hong Kong. The club was located in the basement of one of the better hotels and, just before they reached the top step of the stairway that would take them down to where the action was, his father stopped and turned to David. “All right, mate; moment of truth.” He arched an eyebrow. “Have you ever snuck a beer or two?”

David hesitated, concerned that the truth might get him into trouble. Hedging, he said, “Why?”

His father smiled and nodded knowingly. “I’ll take that as a ‘yes’.” Catching David’s concerned look, he said, “Don’t worry; I’m not going to get on your case about it. Things are fairly loose here, and I doubt that anyone is going to ask you if you’re old enough to drink—especially if you’re with me—so if you want to knock back a few while we’re out, go ahead. Just pace yourself. You’re a bit bigger than you used to be, and I don’t particularly want to have to fling you over my shoulder and lug you back to the hotel.”

David laughed, relieved and privately thrilled at the prospect of “knocking back a few” with his father. “Okay, Dad. I’ll watch myself.”

As they descended the stairs, the muffled, low-frequency booming of bass guitar and drums reverberated up the stairwell, filling David with excited anticipation. Clark pushed the doors open and, as father and son entered the club, they were assaulted by the full sound of the band. To David’s teenage ears they sounded incredible. They were a five-piece group—two guitars, bass, drums, and organ—and they were currently performing an unbelievably perfect rendition of The Lemon Pipers’ “Green Tambourine.” If you closed your eyes and just listened, it *was* The Lemon Pipers.

The dance floor, a kaleidoscope of flashing lights, was full to overflowing with gyrating couples. David was immediately struck by how attractive many of the Chinese girls were, with their long, straight, black hair and slender bodies. By the time he and his father made it to the bar, David was already feeling intoxicated by what he’d witnessed so far. He settled himself on a bar stool while his father ordered two bottles of San Miguel from the bartender, paid for them, and handed one to his son.

“Cheers,” Clark said, hoisting his bottle.

David returned the gesture and they each took a generous swig. Just then, the band launched into the Animals’ hit “House of the Rising Sun.” As the music pulsed all around him, and the ice-cold beer washed down his throat, David savored the experience and filed it away under the heading:

Greatest moment of my life, so far.

They listened in silence for a time, then David said, “So you’ve been in Vietnam lately, right?”

“Uh-huh. I was part of a variety show that toured the place for about six months.”

David nodded and watched as a couple of mini-skirted girls sashayed onto the dance floor. Turning back to his father, he said, “Are you going back?”

“Yeah, but not as a performer. I’m gonna give that a break for a while. I’ll be taking over a booking agency from a couple of Yanks. They’ve been bringing in acts to entertain the troops for the last few years—made the money they wanted to make, I guess—and now they wanna go back Stateside. They’ve spent a couple of months showing me the ropes and introducing me to all their contacts, and they’re about ready to turn the agency over to me. I’ll be paying them a percentage of what I make for about six months, and then the business will be mine, lock, stock and barrel.”

“How long do you reckon you’ll stay?”

His father lit a cigarette and gave that some thought. “I’m not sure. Couple of years, at least. I wanna be able to leave with a decent amount of money.” He took a drag from his cigarette and let the smoke curl lazily out of his mouth and nose. “Why?”

“I was just wondering when I’d see you again. I mean . . . I know we’ve got a month together here in Hong Kong—which is great—but after that you’ll be going back to Vietnam. I can’t see me visiting you there. I don’t reckon it’s high on the list of most-desired vacation spots right now.”

His father laughed and then said, “I’ll be taking time off from work every so often. I could arrange for us to spend a week or so together when I do that. Maybe somewhere different, like Thailand or the Philippines. How does that grab you?”

David brightened at that, and nodded enthusiastically. “Aw, yeah.”

Clark held up his empty beer bottle. “Ready for another?”

“Sure,” said David, already feeling warm and fuzzy after the first one.

Sometime later, after his fourth beer, David reluctantly admitted to himself that he’d reached his limit. Mrs. Freeman would occasionally let him and Gary have a glass of beer on a Saturday night, but he could in no way be considered a seasoned drinker. He was *definitely* feeling the effects of the alcohol he’d consumed. Either that or the club had suddenly pulled out to sea.

Despite his best efforts, he slurred slightly when he leaned over to his dad and said, “You know, I think I should probably go back to the hotel. I’m pretty tired. Probably jet lag or something.”

His father smiled knowingly. “Yeah, probably.” He patted David on the back. “I’m going to hang on here a while longer. Can you find your way okay?”

“Sure. It’s just up the street, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh. Turn right when you leave the club, and then it’s two blocks up on the left.”

“Got it. All right, see you later.”

His father raised his beer bottle in salute as David turned and made his way to the exit. With a great deal of concentration and effort, he ascended the stairs without lurching too much, and found his way back to the hotel. By the time he got to his room, the world was in full flight. The keyhole eventually kept still long enough for him to insert the key and open the door. Closing it behind him, he made it to the bed and collapsed on it, fully-clothed.

Sitting in his kitchen thirty-seven years later, David couldn’t help but smile at the memory of that night, or the way he’d felt the next morning. He recalled paying for his good time with an aching head, queasy stomach, and a mouth that tasted like the bottom of a birdcage. Nevertheless, being young and resilient, he soon recovered, and that day and the ones that followed were filled with experiences he knew he wouldn’t soon forget.

For the next three weeks his father had shown him the sights of Hong Kong by day and by night, while he’d drunk it all in, excited at the prospect of sharing all he’d seen with Jackie. He wanted to be able to remember it in its entirety—every sight, sound, and smell—so that he could then impart it to her in such a way that she’d feel like she’d actually been there herself. Then, during the fourth week of his vacation, something happened that would change everything for him.

It was an unseasonably warm, sunny afternoon, and David and his father had just returned to the hotel after a visit to Hong Kong Island. They’d taken advantage of the weather and ridden the Peak Tram up to Victoria Peak, where they had lunched at a café overlooking the breathtaking view of the harbor below. When they approached the front desk to pick up their room keys, the receptionist handed David’s father an envelope.

David followed his father to a seating area in the lobby, and they both sat down. Clark tore the envelope open and pulled out a single sheet of paper. David couldn’t be totally sure, but he thought he recognized his grandmother’s handwriting. His father’s brow furrowed as his eyes scanned the letter’s contents. When he was done, he folded the letter and tucked into his shirt pocket.

David looked at him expectantly. “It’s not bad news, is it?”

Clark lit a cigarette and then gestured toward the lobby bar. “Let’s grab a

beer, mate. We need to talk.”

David’s heart sank when he heard his father’s tone of voice. This didn’t sound like good news. As they entered the bar, David took note of the décor. Above him were slow-moving ceiling fans, beneath which sat rattan chairs and tables. Scattered throughout the place were lush, green tropical plants. It reminded him of an old movie he’d once seen, set back in the colonial days of the British Empire.

They sat at the bar, and his father ordered two beers from the bartender. Once the drinks arrived, Clark turned to David and said, “The letter’s from Nana. Apparently your granddad had a heart attack and was hospitalized for a few days.” Noticing David’s concerned look, he added reassuringly, “He’s back home now, and doing fine, but he’s been told to take it easy. Nana’s taking care of him, and she says for us not to worry. But she’s not sure if they’re going to be able to continue looking after you—at least for a while, anyway. She’s worried that it might be a bit of a strain on your granddad.”

Once David realized his grandfather was going to be okay, the uncertainty of his own future suddenly became apparent to him. “So what’s going to happen to me? Where am I going to stay when I go back?”

His father seemed to be deciding how to answer, and David took a few nervous sips of beer while he waited for a reply. The growing uneasiness he felt made the lager taste stale and flat.

“Well, mate,” his father said, “that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Unfortunately, I don’t think you going back home is an option at the present time. From what I understand, your mother’s parents are in no position to take care of you. And since nobody has a clue where your mother is—even *if* she’d consider looking after you—Nana wanted to know if I could take you to Vietnam with me; maybe put you to work somehow. Given the circumstances, I *may* just have to do that.”

David was stunned. What the hell was he going to do in Vietnam? “Shit! What about Jackie?”

His father gave a puzzled frown. “Jackie?”

David hadn’t realized he’d voiced his concern aloud. “I was just wondering what I’d tell Jackie, my girlfriend,” he explained. “I mean . . . how long do you think I’ll be gone? I was only supposed to be away a month. She’s expecting to see me in about a week.”

As the realization that he may not see Jackie for quite a while longer slowly sunk in, David felt the heat of tears building up behind his eyes and he did his best to quell them. He didn’t want to cry in front of his dad if he could help it. Turning his head away, he pretended he was looking at something elsewhere in the room.

Clark placed a sympathetic hand on David’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, mate, I honestly don’t know how long you’ll be there. If you’re lucky, it might only

be for a few months. I know it's a bit rough on you, and it's not an ideal situation for me either. But, for the time being, we're just going to have to make the best of it."

David hardly heard a word. All he could think about was Jackie. For him, at that particular moment, the Pearl of the Orient had completely lost its luster.

Chapter Four

Orange County, California

July 2004

Sunday

The kitchen phone rang, startling David. He'd drifted so thoroughly into the past while reminiscing, that it took him a few moments to pull himself back into the present. The phone continued its persistent appeal for attention and, since it was Sunday, he considered letting it go to voice mail. But then he changed his mind. It might be important.

He got up, crossed the kitchen and picked up the handset. "Hello?"

The voice on the other end of the line belonged to Phil Graham, David's junior partner in the recording studio. "Hey, David. Sorry to call you on a Sunday, but I thought you'd want to know; Rick Harper called to say he was postponing his project. He wanted to reschedule for mid-August, so I penciled him in. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, that's fine. 'Course it means I'll be at a loose end for the next few weeks—unless Tim McGraw decides to come and record his next album with us."

That earned a chuckle from Phil. "You want to see if we can move some of our other upcoming projects forward?"

David thought for a moment. "Nah! We're in pretty good shape financially, so maybe I'll take a little time off. How are you doing on Larry Turner's album?"

"We start mixing tomorrow, which is why I happened to be here today. I figured I'd prep a few things in advance." That was Phil—conscientious. "If you *really* feel at a loose end, you can always drop by and sit in on some of the sessions."

"That's okay. I feel like doing a bit of soul-searching, anyway."

"It wouldn't have anything to do with you and Sandy would it?"

David and Phil were close enough for that kind of directness. They'd been friends and business partners for almost ten years. David often visited with Phil and his wife Julie, and when he and Sandy had been together they'd sometimes gone out as a foursome. He hadn't spoken with Julie since he and Sandy had broken up, but he was sure she was disappointed. Julie had really wanted his relationship with Sandy to work out—probably more than *he* had.

"It's hard to explain, Phil. I had an odd experience last night and... well, like I said, it's hard to explain. Maybe I'm finally getting around to having mid-life crisis or something."

“Midlife? You planning on living to a hundred?”

David laughed. “At least!”

“You want to come over tonight? I’ll have Julie fix us something, and we can get drunk and watch *Braveheart* again. I always enjoy watching the Scots kick the crap out of the English.”

David smiled. “Sounds like just what I need. By the way, has Julie forgiven me yet?”

“She still loves you. She just thinks you’re an idiot for screwing it up with Sandy. Fortunately for you, she has a high tolerance for stupidity.”

“She must have. Look who she married.”

Phil laughed. “Screw you!”

“You wish.”

Phil laughed again. “See you tonight. Come over around six-thirty or so.”

David said he’d be there, and ended the call. After he hung up the phone, he thought about his two friends. To him, they seemed like the perfect couple. They were obviously in love and committed to one another. Oh, they’d had fights and upsets, he knew that. It wasn’t an idyllic, fairy tale, “happily ever after” relationship. But it was a *real* relationship, where both sides gave completely of themselves—he knew that, too. And, not for the first time, he wondered why it was that *he’d* never experienced that degree of closeness and commitment in any of the relationships he’d been in—at least on *his* side, anyway. He sometimes imagined he could actually *feel* something holding him back, preventing him from opening his heart to anyone.

It was early-evening when David pulled up outside his friends’ place, a quaint, two-bedroom, two-bath house on a pretty, tree-lined street in Old Town Orange, a part of Orange County where the houses still had some character and individuality. Phil had converted one of the bedrooms into a small home-recording studio in an effort to satisfy the frustrated musician in him. He’d been recording demos of original songs for several years, and kept threatening to go all out and have David help him record them properly at their studio. David was more than willing, but so far, Phil hadn’t made good on his threat.

After locking his car, David negotiated the short, winding, cobblestone path that led to the front entrance of the house. He rang the doorbell and waited until Phil came to the door and welcomed him in. Phil was a shade taller than David, and eight years his junior. He had sandy-blond hair, blue eyes, and an impish grin that perfectly complimented his sense of humor, which was one of the reasons he and David got along so well. He enjoyed their banter and never missed an opportunity to engage in verbal one-upmanship.

In the living room, the soundtrack from *Titanic* was playing softly through Phil's state-of-the-art stereo. The lighting was pleasantly subdued, and there were flickering candles scattered around the place. Julie was just placing a freshly-opened bottle of red wine on the dining table and, when she looked his way, he half-expected a caustic remark regarding the breakup with Sandy. Julie was an attractive, green-eyed redhead of Irish descent, who wasn't averse to speaking her mind, and she wouldn't spare your feelings if she felt you'd screwed up. There *was* that inimitable raised eyebrow when she first saw him, as if she was about to comment on the stupidity of the male gender—and one male in particular—but then she seemed to think better of it. Her face softened, and she came over and hugged him. “Hi, David. How are you?”

“I'm good. You, as usual, look fantastic. What you're doing with a schmuck like Phil, I'll never know.”

Phil, who by now was over by the dining table, his mouth full of onion dip and celery, mumbled something that sounded like, “Fug oo and the horsh oo roe in on!”

Julie smiled and said, “Flattery will get you everywhere. Help yourself to wine. Glasses are on the table. I need to get back to the kitchen.”

As David poured himself a glass of wine, Phil sidled over to him and, in a conspiratorial manner, said, “I made it clear to Julie that she's not to give you any grief about you and Sandy.”

“And she listened to you?”

“Hey!” said Phil, feigning a hurt look. “I wear the pants in this family.”

“Sure you do. As long as they're the pants she's picked out for you.”

Before Phil could offer a retort, Julie reappeared. She placed a serving bowl of salad on the table, and then directed her husband to help her bring in the rest of the food. As Phil followed his wife into the kitchen, David made whip-cracking motions at him. Phil grinned and flipped him the bird.

The evening had been fun. The food had been wonderful and the wine plentiful—a little too plentiful, in fact. David didn't drink anywhere near as much, or as often, as he had in his younger days, and he was suffering the effects of his unaccustomed over-indulgence. By the time the last echo of William Wallace's cry, “Freedom!” faded, he knew he'd probably be sleeping on Phil and Julie's couch. Driving home wasn't an option.

As if she'd been reading his mind, Julie said, “I think you'd better sleep over, David. I won't let you drive home in your condition.”

David gave her a wry smile. “Thanks, Julie.”

She got up off the couch, moved past David and Phil and went over to the hallway cabinets where the spare bedding was stored.

Meanwhile, Phil was busily shutting down his entertainment system. From across the room, he said, “There are towels, travel-size toothpaste

and stuff in the guest bathroom. Help yourself.”

Julie returned, armed with sheets, a blanket, and a pillow, and tossed them on the couch. “It’s summer, but Phil likes to run the air pretty cool, as you may have noticed, so you might need the blanket.”

“Aren’t you going to tuck me in?”

Julie made a face at David and then crooked a finger at her husband. “Come on, ‘Braveheart’, let’s get to bed. You, unlike your lazy partner, have to work tomorrow.”

In a halfway decent Scottish accent, Phil said, “Aye, lassie, just wait ’til you see what I’ve got for ye under ma kilt!”

David laughed. Julie just rolled her eyes.

As the couple made to leave, David said, “Hey, guys. Thanks for having me over tonight. I didn’t realize how much I needed this. I’m lucky to have a couple of friends like you.”

Julie smiled at him, and Phil said, “In vino veritas. And now, I bid you good night!”

Julie took her husband by the arm and led him into their bedroom.

“Goodnight, guys,” David called after them.

After brushing his teeth, he returned to the living room. He turned off his mobile phone, placed it on the end table and made up the couch for sleeping on. As he settled down in it, he thought that, in his drunken state, he’d probably pass out pretty quickly. However, as he lay there in the dark, he was reminded of times gone by, in other lands and different circumstances, where excess had been the norm rather than the exception. His thoughts wandered back to when he was younger, playing music, traveling the world, and living the clichéd life of sex, drugs and rock and roll. It seemed to David that, at some point, not long before his seventeenth birthday, he’d decided to embark on an almost suicidal course that included as much alcohol as he could drink, any drug that happened to be available at the time, and as many women as his stamina would allow.

“*What the hell was that all about?*” he thought. “*What demon was I trying to kill?*”

As if in answer to his self-posed question, his eyes filled with tears and the sense of loss and longing he’d experienced last night returned. He tried to suppress his emotions, but his resolve was weakened by the excess of wine he’d consumed and, as thoughts of the largely wasted years of his youth passed through his mind, David just let go and wept silently and uncontrollably in the darkness of Phil and Julie’s living room.

For the first time since he was a child, David cried himself to sleep.

Chapter Five

Orange County, California

July 2004

Monday

He is lying on a bed in a room with light-blue walls. It is late-afternoon on a sunny day. There is a window to his left, and a thick, rust-flecked, white metal door directly ahead of him. When he examines the window more closely he notices bars in the opening. He frowns. Bars? He is confused, disoriented. Where is he? And why is he here?

The door opens, and a middle-aged man with a Van Dyke beard enters. David is instantly ill at ease when he sees this person. For some reason, he does not like this man. Something is wrong, but he can't remember what it is. He can't remember. He can't remember. He . . . can't . . . remember . . .

David awoke with a start. He sat up quickly and looked around him in the early-morning light, trying to get his bearings. His head throbbed painfully. Uncomfortable, but it helped orient him. “*Phil and Julie’s living room. Too much wine last night,*” he thought.

He reached over to the end table where he’d left his mobile phone, and activated it to check the time. It was just before six. Mindful of his two sleeping friends, he set the ringer to “Off” and slipped the phone into the pocket of his jeans. He got up, rubbing his forehead and temples. As quietly as he could, he made his way to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door in hopes of finding chilled, bottled water. The inside of his mouth felt as if he’d been chewing cotton wool. He spotted several bottles of Fiji water on the top shelf and helped himself to one. Opening it, he chugged the contents gratefully and then set the empty bottle and cap on the kitchen counter.

A hint of daylight was now flickering through the blinds that adorned the living room windows. David walked over to the window opposite the couch he’d been sleeping on, and adjusted the blinds so that he could peer through them at the oncoming sunrise. The main road was visible from this part of the house, and he could see one or two small, office buildings, a convenience store and a Chinese restaurant.

Chinese restaurant. Something stirred in the back of his mind, and he was struck by an inexplicable feeling of desolate loneliness.

He pondered the dream he’d awakened from. There was an eerie familiarity to the scene he’d just witnessed. In his mind’s eye he saw, once again, the man with the Van Dyke beard. The sight of him sent a shudder through his body, as if some spider-like creature with malevolent intent had

just run up his arm. His heart began racing and his mildly throbbing headache suddenly intensified to an agonizing pounding. He grimaced painfully, caught in the vice-like grip of something exerting mind-numbing pressure to his temples. His eyes were burning as if they'd been set on fire, and he was—seeing? imagining?—cobalt-blue flashes and arcs of lightning in and around his head.

“What the hell?” he cursed in a hoarse whisper.

David reached a badly shaking hand out to the living room wall and steadied himself; fearful that, at any moment, he would pass out. He was close to gagging, and fought the urge to throw up. With both hands against the wall he slid to his knees, panting like an overheated dog. He forced himself to regulate his breathing and relax.

“Breathe in. Breathe out,” he murmured while taking long, slow breaths and exhaling gently.

Little by little the pounding in his head subsided to a more manageable throbbing, and the need to vomit passed. He pushed himself carefully to his feet, and on weak, trembling legs went over to the couch and sat down.

“What the hell *was* that?” he muttered incredulously.

As his heart rate slowly returned to normal, he made a mental note to see his doctor later that day and get himself checked out. He sat on the couch for a while longer, purposely steering his thoughts away from what had just occurred. Gradually his strength returned and, other than the slight throbbing in his head—which he put down to being the symptom of a mild hangover—he began to feel more like his old self.

Definitely fully awake now, David decided he might as well go home. He folded up the sheets and blanket, and placed them and the pillow on an easy chair that sat nearby. Then he straightened up the couch, re-positioning the cushions where he thought they belonged. Leaving a note on the kitchen table for his two friends, he left the house and stepped out into the brisk early-morning air.

He shivered as he got into his car and started the engine. The interior still held the chill of the night, and he silently cursed his lack of foresight in not bringing a sweatshirt or jacket with him. A hot coffee would go down well around about now. As he pulled out onto the street, he remembered there was a drive-through Starbucks nearby, and it was on his way. It would save him having to walk up to the counter in very obviously slept-in attire.

Now, driving home with half a Grande coffee consumed and warming his insides, the car heater warming the outside of his body, and the sunrise heralding the start of what promised to be another glorious Southern California day, David felt his mild headache evaporating along with the dew on the hood of his car. He decided that, all things considered, life wasn't too damn bad after all.

Later that day, just to be on the safe side, David made good on his promise to visit his doctor, Thomas Stevens. The events of the morning were still fresh in his mind and, although he now felt totally fine, he wanted an expert opinion. He'd been introduced to Thomas by a guitarist friend over ten years ago, and had stuck with him ever since. Thomas was a holistic medicine proponent who used herbal and homeopathic remedies, chiropractic, acupuncture, and acupressure. His whole approach appealed to David who had drastically changed his lifestyle over twenty years ago to one of fitness and good health.

As he sat in the waiting room, he recalled the event that had finally brought him to his senses—the tragic and untimely death of his father in March of 1983.

By 1971, he and David had taken up more or less permanent residence in Hong Kong. His father had remarried to an attractive Macao-born Portuguese woman and opened a nightclub, while David set about making his mark on the English-language music scene. Despite his self-destructive tendency toward excessive drinking and drug use, he nevertheless managed to make a name for himself over the years as a singer, songwriter and producer. He released three albums of his own, and co-produced a number of others for local artists.

His father and he remained close and saw each other fairly often; perhaps in some way making up for the lost years of David's childhood. More often than not, their time together included heavy drinking. Now that he thought about it, as close as they became in later years, he found it odd that his father never once questioned his son's rock and roll lifestyle. David pondered that for a moment. "*Maybe he understood because he had his own demons.*"

On a gray, chilly March morning, his father died suddenly and unexpectedly of a heart attack brought on by an unsuspected blood clot. David was devastated when his distraught stepmother called with the news. He drove to the morgue to identify the body and, at that point, the whole experience became surreal. He felt numb. Completely unable to grasp what had just occurred.

Later, back at his house on the coast of the South China Sea, his stepmother and a few close friends came by to commiserate. During the course of the afternoon, David consumed several double-brandies, attempting to dissolve, or at least dilute the thick, nauseating mixture of sorrow and loss that was lodged in the pit of his stomach. For a while he'd been stoically holding his own. Eventually though, he felt tendrils of grief winding their way through his body, searching for an exit, and he could hold back the tide no longer. Excusing himself, he went upstairs to his home studio and locked himself in. He leaned against the wall, brandy glass in hand, and slid slowly to the floor.

He sat there, surrounded by musical instruments and recording equipment, tears streaming down his face as he cried, “Why? Why? Why?”

Even now, more than twenty years after the fact, he still felt a twinge when he thought about his father. *Time heals all wounds*. He wondered how true that old platitude actually was.

At first, it seemed this tragic circumstance had given David even more reason to continue on his self-destructive course, and for a month or so he’d pursued it with a vengeance. However, one morning after a particularly rough night of drinking and carousing, he had something of an epiphany. In a moment of unexpectedly stark clarity, he actually considered his own mortality. He came to the eye-opening realization that, just like everyone else, he wasn’t invincible or immortal; and if he continued down the road he was currently on, an early death may well be his reward. It was a sobering thought. Literally.

In the midst of this, he’d been heartened to discover that, beneath the pain and sorrow of loss, the desire to create artistically still burned within. And so he found himself at a crossroads. In one direction lay the misery and degradation of a slow suicide—in the other direction, survival. David chose survival.

He quit the drugs completely, kept the drinking down to an occasional glass of wine or two with dinner on weekends, and started working out regularly. He also revisited an opportunity that had come his way in late-1982, while he’d been working on what would turn out to be the last album he’d ever record in Hong Kong. A chance meeting with a visiting representative of an American production company had opened the door to the possibility of David signing with a major label, and consequently traveling to somewhere he’d always dreamed of going—Los Angeles, California. He’d been flattered, naturally—but also a little scared. This was the big leagues. Did he *really* have what it took to make it? Keeping his reservations to himself, he’d kept his options open and signed a preliminary agreement which basically gave him six months to decide what he wanted to do.

Six months later, David made the decision that would take him away from the place he’d called home for the last twelve years. He knew he’d miss Hong Kong in many ways, but living there was no longer an option; there was just too much about it that reminded him of his deceased father. With his last album completed and set for release, he made the necessary preparations for his journey to the land where rock and roll was born. By October 1983 he was on his way to Los Angeles.

Unfortunately, David’s star never shone as brightly in the U.S. as it had in Hong Kong, and by the time he reached his mid-thirties he was forced to admit that he’d gone about as far as he could go as a performer. He’d learned a lot about production and recording in the interim, and decided to

move into that area of the music business. By then he knew that Southern California was where he wanted to settle down, and with the help of the production company that had originally brought him to the U.S., he applied for and was eventually granted Legal Resident Alien status. In the early 1990s, as his taste in music drifted over into the country genre, he used the money he'd saved over the years to build his own recording studio, where he was able to pick and choose the projects he was involved in, and otherwise rented it out to other producers, artists, and freelance recording engineers.

“David? David?”

The sound of his name being called broke into his thoughts. It was Kate, the doctor's receptionist, an attractive, thirty-something Vietnamese-American girl, who had worked in the office for as long as David had been going there.

“Sorry, Kate. I went off to another time and place for a while there. Is he ready to see me now?”

She smiled and nodded. “Go on back.”

Dr. Thomas Stevens, a cheerful, balding man in his mid-fifties had examined David every which way but sideways, and come to this conclusion: “I can't find a damn thing wrong with you, *physically*, my friend. You're a living, breathing testament to my talent and expertise in the field of the body.”

Chuckling at his own humor, he walked across the room to his desk and sat at it, setting David's patient folder down on the glass desktop.

David, still perched on the examination table, said, “You emphasized *physically*, Tom. Can you elaborate?”

Thomas fiddled with his pen, rolling it back and forth between his finger and thumb. “The concept of psychosomatic conditions and illness has been around for quite a while, David. It's not completely accepted across the board, but there's too much evidence in favor of it these days for it not to be a factor, in some cases.”

David regarded Thomas quizzically. “Psychosomatic? Meaning, and correct me if I'm wrong, a *mentally* caused condition?”

“That's the basic idea. Stress, emotional disturbance of some sort, things like that, can sometimes bring on a condition that appears to have no physical reason for its existence. Like I said, there's definitely evidence to support the idea that the mind can influence the body. It explains why, in clinical trials, a certain percentage of people respond favorably to the placebo. Just the *idea* that the pill they've been given is going to make them well is enough to *actually* make them well. Logically, the reverse could be true. The mind, hit by some emotional shock, can convince the body that it's suffering an illness. Or, as in your case, bring on a host of unusual

physical manifestations.” Thomas set down his pen, shifted in his chair and crossed his legs before continuing, “Some schools of thought go so far as to say that a possible traumatic experience from a person’s past can somehow be *restimulated* by something in the current environment, and cause emotional and physical reactions, sometimes quite severe.”

David mulled this over. “So you’re saying it’s possible that what I experienced is mentally caused?”

“Since I can find no physical reason—yes.” Thomas uncrossed his legs and leaned across the desk. “Just out of curiosity, have you suffered any emotional upsets lately? Or been under stress particularly?”

David hesitated briefly as he rapidly scanned through recent events. There seemed to be no logical reason for their appearance; but it couldn’t hurt to describe them to Tom. So David told him about the breakup with Sandy; waking up crying for no apparent reason; the “tear fest” at Phil and Julie’s last night before he’d fallen asleep and finally, the episode early that morning which had prompted him to come in for a checkup.

“So what do you think, Dr. Freud? Am I going nuts?” said David, only half-joking.

Thomas smiled. “No, I don’t think you’re going nuts. In my opinion, only a sane person is stable enough to question their own sanity. But there’s no doubt you’ve got something going on emotionally. I’m by no means an expert in this area, but I’d venture a guess that the breakup with Sandy was the catalyst for everything that followed. At least it certainly looks that way.”

“So what do you recommend, Tom?”

“I wish I had a definitive answer, David. Some kind of analyst or psychotherapist, perhaps. Or maybe someone who deals in hypnotic regression therapy.” Thomas shrugged. “I’d have to leave that decision to you. All I *can* say is that, if it was me in your position, I’d listen to what I was trying to tell myself. It’s entirely possible that something traumatic happened somewhere in your past and, for some reason, it’s choosing now to try and surface. I’d say: ‘Let it’.”

The doctor stood up and walked around his desk. Taking this as a cue that his visit was coming to a close, David pushed himself off the examination table.

Thomas went on. “I’ve built my whole practice around the idea of expelling unwanted, undesirable elements from the body. I’ve created and maintained a lot of healthy people with that methodology. Maybe that’s the way it should be for mental issues, too. What’s the old saying? ‘Better out than in’.”

David chuckled. “Well, I’ve got to admit it sure feels like *something’s* trying to get out.”

He opened the door to the office and was just about to step into reception when Thomas said, “No charge for this visit, David. Just tell Kate

this one's on me.”

That caught David by surprise. “You don’t have to do that.”

Thomas smiled. “I know. I’m just glad you checked out okay. You crossed the line from patient to friend some years ago, and you’ve caught me in a generous mood. Now beat it before I change my mind.”

Never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, David did as he was told and left, informing Kate of Tom’s generous gesture on his way out.

Driving back home from the doctor’s, David felt a mixture of relief and curiosity. Relief, certainly, to have had it reaffirmed that he was in great shape physically; and curiosity as to what exactly it could be, mentally, that had caused such strong physical reactions in him. He reviewed his discussion with Tom, and was struck by the thought that perhaps there *was* a traumatic incident in his past that had somehow remained hidden all these years. It was an intriguing, and slightly unsettling concept to consider—that one could be influenced by something one had no conscious memory of.

He pulled into his driveway, not bothering to park in the garage, and exited his car. Grabbing the day’s mail from his mailbox, he trotted up the short pathway to his front door and let himself in. Once inside his house, he made for the kitchen, threw the mail and his keys on the counter, and set about brewing some coffee. While the coffee percolated, he switched on the radio. As it came to life, he caught the last strains of the old Wilson Pickett hit “Mustang Sally”. He remembered setting the radio to an oldies station the day before, and reached over to tune in the local country station. But before his finger touched the dial, The Beatles’ classic “All My Loving” came through the speakers, and he changed his mind. It had once been he and Jackie’s favorite song.

David felt a twinge of regret when he recalled how he’d let that relationship slip away.

Chapter Six

Queensland, Australia *July 1969*

David arrived back in Australia on Wednesday, July 21, 1969—right about the time almost every television set in the country (and the rest of the world, for that matter) was tuned in to Neil Armstrong’s giant leap for mankind. In total he’d spent eighteen months in Vietnam; the first three of which had been spent in Da Nang, a city in the northern part of South Vietnam, assisting his father with the running of his booking agency.

In early-April 1968, circumstances arose where he was able to bluff his way into a position as bass player for an all-American Country and Western group. David didn’t find the transition from guitar to bass particularly difficult and, with a few minor adjustments in playing technique, he soon became quite proficient. For the next fifteen months he toured the length and breadth of South Vietnam, playing to American and Australian troops. By the end of this stint, at the tender age of sixteen, he was pretty much a seasoned pro.

For the first few months David had written to Jackie religiously, pouring his heart out in every letter, swearing he’d be faithful and promising he’d be back in her arms soon. However, the excitement of touring with a band where he was treated as an adult, and the subsequent opportunities for “whiskey and wild women” (as Mike “Sticks” Carter, the drummer from Evansville, Indiana had so quaintly put it) soon pushed Jackie to the back of his mind. In fact, Mike, fifteen years his senior, had taken it upon himself to educate David—or lead him astray, depending on your point of view—in the finer points of drinking and procurement of said wild women. David was a fast learner and soon became an expert in his own right in both areas. From that point on, and as he would later regret, Jackie never crossed his mind.

David had grown up quickly during those eighteen months. He was no longer the same naïve teenager who used to hitch from Caloundra to Brisbane. The life experience he’d gained, as well as the knowledge he’d assimilated, gave him the confidence to strike out on his own, and he decided to go back to Australia and follow his own musical path, wherever that may eventually lead.

The country band were playing in the Da Nang area when David made this decision, so he was able to make his farewells to his father in person, with a solemn promise that he’d write as soon as he settled in back home. Then it was back to Saigon where he performed a few more shows until a

replacement bass player was found. There ensued one, final evening of bar hopping with the band members, followed by sloppy, drunken promises to keep in touch (promises that would never be kept, of course) and the next morning found David on a plane, hungover and homeward bound. By the time he arrived back in Australia, he hadn't written to Jackie in well over a year.

David landed at Brisbane Airport with a suitcase full of clothes, an electric guitar, a Sony reel-to-reel tape recorder and \$300—all that was left of his last month's salary. He thought ruefully of how much money he'd made and then spent like a drunken sailor on leave while he'd toured Vietnam. He'd spared no thoughts for the future, living only for the present and the pleasures before him. "*Whiskey and wild women, indeed,*" he thought wistfully, with a fond mental nod to his former band-mate, Mike Carter. All things considered, he figured he was lucky to make it back with anything at all, and vowed to be more fiscally responsible in the future.

David had written his grandparents to inform them he was coming home, but that he'd arranged to spend a week with the Freeman family first. He'd also assured them he was now mature enough to take care of himself—eighteen months in a war-torn country had convinced him of that.

On his way out of the airport, he stopped by a bank of phones and called to let Gary's mother know he was on his way.

"Now, you're sure it's all right with your grandparents?" she asked with a trace of concern. "If I were them, I'd be anxious to see you again."

"They're not expecting me for another week," David reassured. "And I've told them all about you. How you're like a second mum to me."

That was all the convincing she needed. "Well, in that case, hurry up and get your bum here. Mind you, I give you fair warning that your triumphant return might be upstaged just a teeny bit. They're showing the moon landing on the telly, you know. Everyone's glued to their sets."

"I know. It's amazing, isn't it?. I actually arrived two hours ago and I've been watching it on the TV in the airport restaurant ever since. It was all I could do to pull myself away to come and call you. I guess whoever said, 'It'll never fly', way back when, is feeling pretty stupid round about now."

She chuckled. "I wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes." The distant whistle of a boiling tea kettle thrust its shrill cry through the telephone receiver. "Kettle's boiling. Must run. See you soon, love."

"Righto," said David. "See you in a few."

He hung up the telephone and wheeled his baggage over to the taxi rank.

The journey from the airport to the Freeman house took about thirty-

five minutes. As the taxi negotiated the city streets, David reflected on the last eighteen months of his life—mostly good, with one or two notable exceptions. He grimaced as he recalled one in particular. The time he'd gotten blind drunk in one of the bars in Saigon, and stupidly tried to ride home on a motorcycle he'd recently purchased. He'd had an argument with a barbed-wire barricade that had blocked off one side of the street he was racing up—and the barricade had emerged the victor. That little episode had resulted in his needing three stitches above his left eye, and a few months with half an eyebrow. (You could still see a slight scar if you knew where to look). For about a month after, he'd had to play shows wearing sunglasses to cover up the stitches, as they didn't exactly enhance his boyish good looks.

"*Lucky, I didn't kill myself!*" he thought as he reached up and reflexively stroked his left eyebrow.

And now, here he was back in Brisbane, just four months beyond his sixteenth birthday, with more experience behind him than most people accumulate in a lifetime.

The taxi was just now making its way down the hill that led to the Freeman house. He leaned forward and peered through the front windshield. Just ahead was the park where he and Jackie had often come to make out, or just talk about what the future held. It was currently deserted; the roundabout and swings sitting idle, park benches empty, grass-covered playing fields devoid of people. It was as if he'd somehow been transported into the middle of a science-fiction movie where aliens had abducted the entire area's inhabitants. He supposed it was just as Mrs. Freeman had said—everyone was glued to their sets, watching the moon landing.

Casting his mind back eighteen months, he could clearly see Jackie and him sitting on a bench in that park, making promises to each other on their last weekend together. A brief but unsettling twinge of guilt stirred in his stomach. When had he last written to her?

The taxi driver's voice intruded on his thoughts. "We're here, mate!"

David looked out the window of the taxi and, sure enough, there was Gary's house—single-story, with a light-blue, ship-lap wood body and white trim. It hadn't changed a bit. The driver helped him get his belongings out of the taxi and onto the pavement in front of the house. David paid him, slipping him an extravagant five-dollar tip, which elicited a grateful smile and a "thanks a lot, mate" from the driver as he pulled away.

Picking up his guitar and suitcase, (he figured the tape recorder would be safe enough in this neighborhood for a few minutes) he walked up the short pathway that led to the front door, set his things down, and knocked. A few seconds later the door opened and there stood Gary, his best friend. An inch or so shorter than David, he had jet-black hair, gray-green eyes, a swarthy, olive-skinned complexion, and the most Italian of noses.

When Gary saw David standing before him, a broad grin dimpled his cheeks, and he called out over his shoulder, “Hey, Mum! David’s here!”

From the far end of the house, David heard Mrs. Freeman sing out at the top of her lungs, “I’m in the kitchen! Bring him back here!”

The two boys shook hands, and David asked Gary if he wouldn’t mind bringing his tape recorder in. His friend was glad to oblige and, while he went to get it, David carried the rest of his stuff into Gary and Michael’s bedroom. It was the first room on the left, just down the hall from the front door. Inside it, a single bed sat next to the street-side window, and a double bunk bed had been positioned against the wall by the bedroom door. Separating the beds was a chipped, light-blue chest of drawers. David set his belongings down in the center of the room and turned as he heard Gary enter.

“You can have my bed while you’re here, mate,” his friend said, placing the tape recorder on the floor and then indicating the single bed. “I’ll share the bunk bed with Michael. I’ll probably have to arm-wrestle him for who gets the top bunk, but I always win so, no worries.”

David smiled at Gary as he moved his things over by the foot of the bed. “Thanks mate. It’s really good to see you again.”

“You too. I bet you’ve got tons to tell us.” He inclined his head in the direction of the kitchen. “We’d better go see Mum. She’s dying to see you.”

“Okay. Just a sec.” David looked around for a power outlet, and spotted one between the single bed and the chest of drawers. He slid the tape recorder over in that direction. It fit nicely in-between. Then he switched the voltage selector to 240v, plugged it in, and flicked the on-off switch to ON. The power indicator light glowed green, and he could hear the whirring of the motor. Good. It seemed to have survived the trip. Satisfied, he gave Gary a nod, and they exited the bedroom.

As they made their way to the kitchen, they passed Michael and Melissa, both sitting on the living room couch, transfixed by Neil Armstrong’s antics on the moon. They looked up briefly from the images on the television, and welcomed David back. Michael was fourteen, with dark-brown hair, brown eyes, and a fair complexion—a physical trait he’d inherited from his English-Irish father. He’d stayed home from school, as probably many kids had, to watch America’s lunar conquest. Melissa was more or less a female version of Gary, albeit an extremely attractive version. At eighteen years old she would soon be college-bound.

David and Gary entered the kitchen to find Mrs. Freeman, a large wooden spoon in her hand, mixing cake batter in an oversize bowl. She was around five-feet-four with black, curly hair, bright-blue eyes and a friendly, weathered face, and would have once been called “pleasantly plump” before political correctness came along. To David, she was the stereotypical Italian mother, and he loved her for it. She turned from what she was doing when

she heard them enter. Dropping the wooden spoon into the mixing bowl, she came over to David, exhibiting a smile that exuded love, warmth, and welcome. She enveloped him in her meaty arms and kissed him on both cheeks.

David returned the hug. "Hello, Mum."

Holding him at arm's length, she let go with a laugh that rattled the rafters. "Hello, son!"

A warm glow filled David's heart. He'd forgotten how much he loved this family. They treated him so much like one of their own that coming here was akin to coming home.

"Okay," announced Mrs. Freeman. "I'm gonna put this chocolate cake in the oven, and then I want to hear all about your adventures in Japan."

"Uh ... Vietnam, Mum," said Gary, correcting his mother and rolling his eyes at David.

"Yeah! Yeah! Vietnam, Japan, Pakistan. Same difference. Too many people and not enough food." Picking up a dish towel, she swatted playfully at the two boys. "Now get out of here and go watch the man on the moon. I'll join you in a little bit."

Gary put his hand on David's shoulder as they left the kitchen. "Mum hasn't changed a bit, has she?"

David smiled and shook his head. "No. Thank God!"

A little later—as the mouth-watering aroma of chocolate escaped from the oven, filling the house with its promise of culinary delight—Mrs. Freeman and Gary were seated at the dining table, held in thrall while David related some of his more entertaining experiences in Hong Kong and Vietnam. Curiosity eventually got the better of Melissa and Michael, and they temporarily gave up their moon-landing vigil to join the others in the dining room.

During a break in the proceedings, while Mrs. Freeman went to check on the progress of the cake, David consulted his watch—a Rolex knockoff courtesy of a back-alley vendor in Saigon. It was almost four o'clock. Now might be a good time to head over to Jackie's house and surprise her. He imagined she was probably gazing at her television in rapt wonder just like everyone else. He went into the kitchen and let Mrs. Freeman know where he was going and told her he'd be back later.

"All right, love," she said. "We're having dinner at seven, so try not to be late."

"Yes, Mum," he said, and pecked her on the cheek, leaving the kitchen with the sound of her laughter following him.

"See you two later," he said to Melissa and Michael, who had seized this opportunity to get back to watching the historic images being transmitted

from the moon.

Gary walked him to the front door. David paused at the threshold and asked his friend if he'd seen or heard much from Jackie while he'd been away. "I'd see her at school sometimes, and she'd tell me when she'd gotten a letter from you, and how you were doing. After I dropped out of high school, I hardly saw her at all. She did call a couple of times to see if I'd heard from you. She sounded worried. I guess, by then, it had been quite a while since she'd gotten a letter from you." Gary gave David's shoulder a reproachful punch before continuing. "I told her I'd *never* had a bloody letter from you, so she shouldn't feel too bad." He paused, a slight frown creasing his brow. "*Did* you stop writing to her?"

David nodded sheepishly. "Yeah, I feel a bit guilty about that."

"Don't worry, mate," Gary said optimistically. He patted David on the back as he passed through the doorway. "Just turn on the old charm when you see her. It'll be okay."

"I hope so," David said as he stepped onto the pathway that led to the street.

Thirty minutes later, David was sitting on the couch in the living room of Jackie's house, sipping on the cup of steaming hot, sweet tea she'd made for him. She'd been surprised to see him, of course, since he'd just shown up on her doorstep after being gone for eighteen months. But she'd recovered her composure quickly, hugged him, invited him in, and immediately run off to the kitchen to put the kettle on while he'd settled himself on the couch. Naturally, Mrs. Lanagan's television was on; broadcasting the now familiar figure of the space-suited Neil Armstrong who, by this time, had been joined by Buzz Aldrin. Like everyone else, Jackie's mother had been watching the lunar landing. She'd told him her husband, Frank, was down at the local pub where they'd set up a television for everyone to watch this incredible event and didn't David think it was marvelous? David had agreed that it was, indeed, *marvelous!*

So now here they sat, drinking tea and making small talk. He asked about Jackie. Mrs. Lanagan told him her daughter had left school after junior high. She now worked the day shift, five days a week, at *Ginella's Cafe*.

"They paid her extra to work today, what with the moon landing and all." Jackie's mother said, glancing at her watch. "Come to think of it, she should be back any minute now." Turning her gaze back to David, she placed her hand over his and said hesitantly, "Um . . . I think there's . . . there's something you should . . ."

But before she could continue, the front door opened and Jackie, still in her light-pink waitresses' uniform, stepped into the house. As soon as he laid eyes upon her, eighteen months melted away and, in his mind's eye,

David saw them once again kissing and caressing in their favorite out-of-the-way spot.

“Look who’s here,” said Mrs. Lanagan, indicating David.

David had played this scene over and over in his head while walking to Jackie’s house. He’d take her in his arms and, lost in the sheer joy of seeing her again, the fact that he hadn’t written to her in so long would be forgiven and forgotten; they would kiss passionately and live happily ever after. Fade to black.

However, as he rose from the couch, he became aware of two things: Jackie was somewhat less than overjoyed to see him, and she wasn’t wearing the ring he’d given her—the ring she’d sworn she would *never* take off.

“I’ll be back in a little bit, Mum. I just need to talk to David. *Outside*,” Jackie said in a flat, emotionless voice that didn’t bode well for him.

The sinking feeling in his stomach reminded him of times he’d stood outside the headmaster’s office, anticipating the “six of the best” he would likely be receiving for misbehaving.

“Okay, dear.” The sympathetic look Jackie’s mother cast at him only served to heighten his unease. “It was nice seeing you again, David.”

“You too, Mrs. Lanagan,” he said, smiling politely and trying to disguise his sense of foreboding as he followed Jackie outside. She closed the door behind her, and they stood on the landing at the top of the stairs where they had tearfully parted on the weekend before David had left for Hong Kong.

“Your ring. When did you . . . ?” David began, pointing at the empty space on her finger.

Jackie interrupted him, clearly upset. “David, why did you stop writing to me? I waited and waited. A *whole* year! A *whole* year, making up excuses for why you hadn’t written. If I’d gotten *one* letter, *one* postcard saying you still loved me and wanted me to wait for you . . .” She faltered, her eyes filling with tears.

And then, amidst the tears, David perceived something else in those eyes. He’d lost her. She’d found someone else. He just *knew* it. He knew it without her having to say it.

“*Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!*” he thought, remembering how he’d carelessly and callously put her out of his mind while he’d played the part of the hard-drinking, womanizing musician back in Vietnam. It hadn’t ever occurred to him that he was being unfaithful to Jackie, or that she’d been patiently and forlornly waiting to hear from him.

Now, seeing the hurt and betrayal in her eyes, he suddenly realized what he stood to lose, and he struggled for something to say that might explain why the letters had stopped. “Jackie, I’m sorry. I . . .”

But no words would come. He could think of nothing to say that wasn’t a lie. His throat tightened and his eyes were burning with the salty sting of

imminent tears. Still, he had to know for sure. He had to hear it from her lips; the lips he was beginning to believe he'd never kiss again. He *had* to hear her *say* it. Then it would be real. Swallowing hard, he said, "Did you find . . . someone else?"

Jackie's voice trembled when she replied. "Yes, David. Six months ago. I finally gave up. I honestly didn't think I'd ever see you again. You might've been *dead*, for all I knew. Damn you! Why didn't you just stay gone?"

"I'm sorry, Jackie! I wish I could go back in time and change everything. I never would have left you. *Never!* Please, Jackie!" Desperation in his voice now. "Can't you forgive me? Please?"

For one brief moment—a moment that seemed to stretch into eternity—Jackie regarded him with tear-filled eyes. He could almost feel her wavering and, as he held her gaze, he felt a tiny shred of hope that maybe, just *maybe*

But the moment passed. Like a flickering candle snuffed out by a sudden gust of wind, his hopes were crushed as Jackie turned away. "I'm sorry, David. I've already cried too many tears for you. I can't let you walk back into my life as if you'd just left yesterday. I wish things were different. I wish you'd never left. I wish . . ."

A sob escaped her throat as she opened the front door and rushed into the house, slamming the door behind her. David stood there for a frozen moment, too stunned to move. He shook his head in disbelief. It wasn't supposed to end like *this*.

He negotiated the stairs in a daze. As he walked away, a distant memory of another lonely walk from Jackie's house came to mind. A time eighteen months earlier, when he'd felt almost as miserable, but had at least been comforted by the knowledge that he'd be coming back to her.

This time he wasn't coming back.

* * *

Orange County, California

July 2004

Monday

David glanced at the microwave clock in his kitchen, and was mildly shocked when he saw the time. It was five-thirty. The sun was low in the Orange County sky, and his kitchen was being bathed in a reddish-orange glow. He'd been lost in thought for well over an hour.

A familiar aroma reminded him that he'd started brewing coffee when he first arrived home. He went to the kitchen cabinet, grabbed a mug and poured himself some. Settling down at the table once more, he sat there in the waning light and sipped his coffee while he cast his mind back to that

long ago July.

He'd met Gary's new girlfriend, Debbie. It was a Friday, if he remembered correctly, and she'd come over to spend the evening with Gary. It seemed to David that there had been someone with her; but for the life of him, he couldn't remember who.

Hadn't they played at having a séance in Gary's darkened bedroom, and scared themselves silly? The memory brought a smile to his face, and with it came the certainty that there *had* been four of them present. He found it odd that he couldn't remember who the fourth person was. He was suddenly struck by an image of them running out of the bedroom screaming, and he erupted into laughter. The laughter seemed to trigger more memories, and the events of that evening began to unfold in logical sequence.

Gary's mum had gone to the pub with friends. Melissa and Michael had been at the local cinema—which meant that neither of those two could have been the unknown entity. Gary, Debbie, David, and whoever this fourth person was, had opted to stay at the house. *"Mainly because Gary was planning on making out in the bedroom with Debbie,"* David recalled with a smile.

Gary produced a Ouija board from under the bunk bed and jokingly suggested they have a séance. They drew the curtains, switched off the bedroom light and, in the almost pitch-black room, sat in a circle around the Ouija board, holding hands. Gary, who claimed to be more familiar with the protocol, chanted, *"If there is a spirit in the room, make your presence known"* a number of times.

Everyone was laughing nervously, pretending they weren't just a little apprehensive. At some point, Debbie looked up, noticed a strange, green glow on the ceiling, and shouted, *"What's that up there?"*

Four pairs of eyes stared at this "apparition" and, in a split second, four pairs of feet were moving their bodies out of that bedroom at light-speed, screaming at the top of their lungs. It wasn't until they were safe and sound in the well-lit living room that David realized what the "green ghost" was in reality. Armed with that knowledge, he walked calmly back into the bedroom, much to the amazement and admiration of the others. A few seconds later, he started laughing.

"Come here! It's all right!" he shouted.

He turned on the light and, as the other three crept cautiously into the room, he pointed down at the floor, where sat his reel-to-reel tape recorder. David had turned it on earlier that day to listen to some recordings he and his father had made over a weekend they'd spent together in Saigon. Next to the power switch was a light that verified that the machine was on. A green light—a green light that, in the darkness, cast a reflective glow on the stark, white ceiling. The mystery of the "green ghost" exposed had them all laughing in relief.

In the kitchen of his Newport Beach house, David laughed again at the memory of that incident. Once again, he briefly pondered, the identity of the mysterious fourth person—but to no avail. With a dismissive shrug he let the matter drop and resumed reminiscing.

He remembered making his fond farewells and leaving the Freeman house for Caloundra, promising he'd be back to see them soon. A taxi had picked him up and driven him to the Greyhound station, where he'd taken a bus the sixty-odd miles north to Caloundra. He spent a month there. It was great to see his grandparents and catch up with some of his old friends, but after a while the sleepy little coastal town he'd grown up in began to feel confining and claustrophobic, and he became restless. So he made his way back to Brisbane and, with some of the money he had left over, put down a couple of months' rent on a flat in the city and set about looking for work.

Back in those days, Australia was still fairly wild and woolly. Driver's licenses carried no identifying photo, and neither was there any type of identification card; so, in order to rent the flat, all David had to do was convince the landlord he was eighteen years of age. The maturity he'd brought back with him from his time in Vietnam made that task relatively easy. He then secured a part-time job on a road crew, so he'd have a source of income while he figured out what he was going to do musically. It was hard work, but it paid fairly well.

Curiously, the details of his life seemed to blur at this point—like an out-of-focus camera—and then completely disappear into a seemingly impenetrable blackness. He had the distinct impression he'd spent more time at the Freemans. But that's all it was—an impression. David frowned as he tried, unsuccessfully, to recall anything more. So much of his life was an open book to him—he'd always had good recall—that he found the nebulous nature of this particular time period a little unsettling.

He stood up and paced the kitchen while he tried to pierce the mental fog that seemed to be shrouding his memories. All he received for his efforts were fragments of images here and there. *The park at the bottom of the hill. Gary and Debbie walking toward him, somber expressions on their faces. Mrs. Freeman sitting at the dining table crying.* David was puzzled. Why was she crying? *And Debbie . . . Debbie yelling at him for some reason.* What was *that* all about?

The feelings of longing and loss returned briefly, but brought with them no images or answers. Try as he might, David could not penetrate whatever barrier was blocking his access to the memories he was sure *must* exist beyond it. He found this frustrating. It went beyond merely having difficulty remembering the specific details of a time in his life. That was normal for him. Usually, with a bit of mental digging or help from others who were involved, he could recall just about any part of his life—with the possible exception of his early childhood—and even then he still had some

vivid memories. It was as if something was actually *preventing* him from recovering any memories from that period. A frown wrinkled his brow as he puzzled over this.

He clearly recalled reuniting with his father in mid-January, 1970; forming a father-and-son musical/comedy act, and then touring Southeast Asia for a year. From that point on, up to the present, he could have written a fairly detailed autobiography of his life—give or take a few lost weekends. Yet for some reason, the period from late-August 1969 to mid-January 1970 was virtually *nonexistent*. It was a complete and utter blank. How could that be?

The prickly heat of irritation flushed his neck and face, accompanied by the beginnings of a mildly painful throbbing in his temples. “*Ab hell,*” he thought as he pulled his attention from the past. “*Maybe it’s best to leave it alone for now.*”

With that, he decided tonight might be a good night for dinner-for-one and a movie. He always preferred going to the cinema on a Sunday or Monday evening, when there were less crowds. At first, he considered going online to check the latest movies, but then changed his mind. He wasn’t in the mood for a Hollywood major release. He’d run down to the local art house cinema and see something as off-the-wall as possible. David turned off the coffeepot, put his empty cup into the dishwasher, and headed to the bathroom for a quick shower, switching some of the lights on in the house as he went.

A short while later, while he was putting on fresh clothes, he started idly whistling a tune from long ago. “*What is that?*” he thought, frowning in puzzlement.

He continued, now humming the melody to himself, when it suddenly came to him:

*On our block, all of the guys call her ‘Flamingo,’
Because her hair glows like the sun
And her eyes can light the sky . . .*

He shook his head in wonder. “Wow! That’s Manfred Mann’s ‘Pretty Flamingo.’ God, I haven’t thought of that song in years.”

It had been a huge hit in Australia and England back in 1966. For some reason, it had only been a minor hit in this country, though. David imagined there were oldies stations that played it *somewhere* in the United States—but *he’d* never heard it the whole time he’d lived in California.

He conjured up a mental image of himself at Gary’s house, when the Freeman’s had lived in Caloundra, stretched out on the floor in front of an old, carved-wood, stereo hi-fi console, surrounded by a stack of records, singing along to “Pretty Flamingo.” He’d always loved the intro of that song—the rhythm guitar kicking it off, and then the bass bringing in the rest of the band.

“What could have brought that song to mind after all this time?” he thought with mild curiosity.

As he headed off to the cinema, the song still rattling around in his head, David had no idea that that question would soon be answered.

Along with some startling revelations.

We hope you enjoyed this excerpt from **“Pretty Flamingo”**.

The full version can be purchased in **Kindle** format and **Paperback** from:

<http://amzn.to/1Nsxsvc>

