

Pretty Flamingo

Perry Martin

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DEDICATION

For Sandy Hockenbery. You saw the diamond in the rough and helped me to 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!"

Introduction

The following story was inspired by actual events. However, the characters appearing in this book are largely fictional 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 fact.

Most of the story is set in California and Australia. In an effort to be as authentic as possible, I have used Aussie slang terms and expressions for the chapters that are set in Australia. As an aid to readers not familiar with the Aussie's colorful lingo, I've provided a short glossary of these words and phrases. I have also used English spellings of certain words for the chapters set in Australia. For example, centre as opposed to center, colour as opposed to color.

Glossary

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

Brekkie: Breakfast

Chemist: Pharmacy; drugstore

Deadshit: Person with limited understanding and experience of the real world; idiot

Didgeridoo: An Australian Aboriginal musical instrument.
A long thick wooden pipe that when blown into, creates a deep, humming sound

Dunny: Toilet

Esky: Portable cooler

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 the feet, confused, or perhaps blacks out altogether.

Grog: Booze; alcohol

HP Sauce: Spicy brown sauce similar to A1 sauce

Jacket potatoes: Baked potatoes

Jumper: Sweater

Kookaburra: Australian Kingfisher having a loud, cackling cry

Lollys: Candy

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 . . ."

Pasty (Cornish Pasty): Meat pie with a filling of meat and vegetables

Pavement: Sidewalk

Pom: (short for POME, derived from Prisoner of Mother England) English person

Pofter: Homosexual

Pressie: (pronounced: prezzy) Present; gift

Serviette: Napkin

Shouting: Paying for; treating

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

Sticky beak: Nosy person

Thongs: Flip Flops

Tomato Sauce: Ketchup

Tucker: Food

Up the duff: Pregnant

Vegemite: Yeast-based sandwich spread

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You guys rock!

Thanks to Embassy Music Corporation for granting permission to reprint the lyrics from the song "Pretty Flamingo":

PRETTY FLAMINGO

by Mark Barkan

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Special Acknowledgment

I want to particularly thank Alice Lui, my old bandmate 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.

Chapter One

Orange County, California
July 2004
Sunday

He was crying—sobbing, actually. His chest was heaving, and hot tears were streaming down his cheeks. He was still half-asleep and not quite sure if it was the crying that had woken him up or if, in waking, he'd been torn from somewhere that he didn't want to leave, and the leaving had brought on the tears.

Pulling himself out of the clutches of sleep, he wiped his eyes with his hands, turned his head, and squinted at the luminous dial of his bedside clock. 5:00 a.m. He'd been asleep for just four hours. With one hand, he groped around on the bedside table until he found the Kleenex box he knew was there somewhere, tugged out a couple of sheets, and blew his nose. Then, closing his eyes again, he lay there in the predawn dark and tried to recall what he might have been dreaming about. All he saw was blackness. And yet . . .

He frowned. There was something there, he was sure of it, but the memory of it seemed to be just out of reach. Concentrating his efforts, he tried to recapture anything that might give him a clue as to what had caused the crying, but all he felt was a longing that surprised him with its depth of emotion, and he felt tears welling up inside him once more.

"Okay, David," he muttered to himself. "Get a grip!"

He reached over, turned on the bedside lamp, and sat up in bed. As he looked around the room, his eyes fell on the walk-in closet. He'd left the louvered doors open late last night when he'd gone to bed, exhausted from two marathon sessions in a row at his recording studio. Only his clothes remained. There were empty shelves and hangers where Sandy's things used to be.

Sandy—the latest addition to his unbroken record of failed relationships! Was that what he'd been crying about? He'd felt bad about it, admittedly. Mostly for her, though. She'd been justifiably upset when it finally became apparent that their relationship wasn't headed down the aisle anytime soon, if ever. There'd been tears and some mention of his "inability to really commit himself to a relationship," and then there'd been the leaving.

They'd been together a little under a year, and she'd only moved in with him about three months ago, so, thankfully, there hadn't really been time to accumulate a lot of possessions to argue over. Just her clothes, a small stereo, some kitchen

utensils, and the usual feminine odds and ends. She'd left the rest of her stuff in storage—temporarily, of course. "We'll sort it all out once we're married" was what she'd said. David recalled sort of nodding noncommittally at that statement. Right then he'd known they were in trouble. She was getting serious, and as usual, he wasn't. Damn! He should never have let her move in with him. He'd thought that somehow it would all work out, and typically, it hadn't.

It always came down to the same thing—he just couldn't give himself completely to anyone. He couldn't really love. With a grimace, he recalled once making the mistake of telling one of his ex-girlfriends that he was extremely fond of her. Apparently, that's not what you tell someone who loves you. Nevertheless, even without that kind of faux pas, it always eventually became clear to the women in his life that the man they loved couldn't return that love. That was always a deal breaker. Yet David kept trying. When he met someone he got along with, and the chemistry seemed right, he always thought, "*Maybe this is the one!*" And yet, for him, it never went beyond that fondness he felt for them.

And now there'd 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 he'd carried them out to her SUV the afternoon she'd left.

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. All he managed was "I'm sorry." As soon as he said it, it seemed trite and inadequate. "Brilliant!" he thought sarcastically, "Who couldn't fail to be moved by such understated eloquence?" Nevertheless, he meant it, and he hoped she knew that.

Sandy started the engine and then turned to look at him, her eyes misting. "I know you are, David," she said softly, and he was surprised at the tenderness in her voice. "I hope someday you find what you're looking for." 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 she was gone. He lingered there for a little while, listening to the sounds of the neighborhood. A lawnmower started up somewhere in the distance, and a couple of houses 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. He wondered, now, if the crying had been a delayed reaction to the breakup. He had felt bad about it, and he would miss her. They'd had some good times together. But, try as he might, when he looked back on that day, he couldn't contact anything remotely resembling the emotion he'd experienced just a little while ago.

Throwing the bedcovers aside, he padded to the bathroom and turned on the light. He relieved himself, and as he washed his hands, he regarded himself 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. His medium-length brown hair was just showing the first traces of gray-hazel eyes, quick to smile, and the physique of someone who exercised regularly. "Wiry-tough" was how he'd once been described when he was younger. He was still holding on to the good looks of his youth, although with each passing year, he could feel his grip loosening. Somewhere along the way, those laugh lines had started becoming wrinkles. Usually, he looked like someone in their early-to mid-forties, which was pretty good, considering he was fifty-one. This morning, though, with his eyes puffy from the crying, and face somewhat drawn from not-quite-enough sleep, he definitely looked and felt his age.

He went back into the bedroom and sat on the side of the bed. Resting his arms on his knees and clasping his hands, he cast his mind back and tried, once again, to recall what could have caused such intense emotion. He experienced a longing that felt almost unbearable. Then, a ghost of something floated into the distant reaches of his mind, but when he tried to look at it, it evaporated. Only the longing remained.

He glanced at his bedside clock. 5:30 a.m. "*Shit! I need to get some sleep!*"

He settled back into bed, turned off the bedside lamp, and closed his eyes. Random images from his teenage years started passing through his mind, for some reason, and held his interest for quite a while. Eventually the drowsiness of approaching sleep started to overcome him. But just before it claimed him completely, he thought he saw something—No! Someone—way off in the distance, and he heard them call his name, "David!"

When he woke again it was almost 9:30. He'd left the curtains open last night and the bedroom was being bathed in bright California sunshine. He stretched his arms and legs, then clasped his hands behind his head and lay there for a while, enjoying the fact that it was Sunday and there was no pressing business.

Eventually, he got up, showered, put some coffee on, and scrambled some eggs. As he sat at the kitchen table, eating breakfast, he thought back to what Sandy had said about his inability to commit to a relationship. He hated to admit it, but she was right. It was something he'd known about himself for most of his life, and yet, so far, had no answer for. It was as if he was somehow searching for something in every relationship, some indefinable element, that always

seemed to be missing.

Rising from the kitchen table, he went over to the coffeepot and poured himself another cup. Then 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 felt like 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." He smiled as he recalled singing that very song himself, when he was 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 country with that band, entertaining American, and sometimes Australian troops, and this 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 guessed 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 kids, leaving the horrors of the war far behind them. A slight smile wrinkled the edges of his mouth. "Call me sentimental, but I prefer happy endings."

That set him to thinking about how it was that he'd come to be in Vietnam, in the first place, and of his emotional good-bye 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 was the last time he had actually loved someone.

Chapter Two

Queensland, Australia
August–December 1967

David's parents had been divorced when he was five years old and his father had been granted sole custody. His mother had apparently fallen out of love with his father and in love with a sailor. Not very original, but sometimes truth isn't stranger than fiction. His mother's open infidelity and her boyfriends' apparent lack of regard for children no doubt contributed to the divorce court's decision in granting custody to his father.

So David got to be with his dad—technically. The reality was a little different, however. His father, Clark Perry, was in show business. A gifted singer, who sounded a lot like Bing Crosby (and even looked a little like him), he was on the road frequently, often out of state, sometimes even overseas. It fell to his grandparents to raise him, for the most part. There were occasional visits from his father, 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, in spite of all, and always looked forward to his visits, while at the same time, dreading the inevitable, tearful goodbyes.

They would always go out somewhere: an amusement park, mini-golf, the beach, and they'd spend a few glorious days together as father and son, until it came time for his dad to move on again. David had always hated that part. Ever since then, the 'going to' somewhere was his favourite part of a trip, vacation, or even a day off, and the 'coming back from' always made him feel a little melancholy.

David had been lugging an old acoustic guitar around with him since he was eleven years old, but it wasn't until he was thirteen that he started learning how to play it. With a little help from a friendly high school teacher, who played pretty decent guitar himself, David picked it up quickly and was soon figuring out the latest Beatles' or Stones' songs. He formed a band with two high school friends, one a drummer and the other a guitarist, who David talked into being the 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 Hohner bass guitar, just like Paul McCartney's—they played a few high school

dances and local parties during the months they were together. But their biggest claim to fame was winning an 'Honourable 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 had plans for making a career out of music, and so the "Honourable 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 that, 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, David took to hitchhiking to Brisbane most weekends to visit Gary Freeman, a good friend of his, (probably his best friend) who had recently moved there from Caloundra. Gary's mother, Alma Freeman, had divorced her husband some years ago and was single-handedly raising Gary, his younger brother, Michael, and his elder sister, Melissa. David had become very close to the whole family, particularly Mrs. Freeman, who had become like a second mother to him or, more accurately, like the mother he'd never really had.

He'd usually hitch down early Saturday morning, stay the night, and head back mid-afternoon Sunday. It was on one of those treks to Brisbane that David met Jackie. She was the friend of Gary's current girlfriend and was interested in meeting the 'boy from out of town'. He was fourteen and so was she.

They found out they'd both been born in March 1953, she on the 23rd and he on the 24th, which made her older than him - if only by a day.

They hit it off right away, and David remembered her laughing when he quipped, 'It's lucky for you that I've got a thing for older women.' She was very pretty, with brown eyes, brown hair, and what he could only describe as very kissable lips. Given the immediate attraction they felt, it wasn't very long before they went off by themselves and found somewhere secluded to make out.

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 it started getting dark. Jackie and he spent every possible moment together, hugging and kissing, their teenage hormones raging and pushing their self-restraint to the limit.

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 going somewhere to be with his dad. On one hand, the prospect of spending Christmas with his father in a place as

exotic as Hong Kong was very exciting. On the other hand, he would be away from Jackie for a whole month, and at that point in his life, that was hard to imagine. It seemed an incredibly long time.

The final weekend before he was to leave was a combination of passion and tears for David and Jackie. On Sunday afternoon, they were sitting on a bench in the park near Gary's house, holding each other tight and kissing as they never had before, willing their last day together to pass slowly and praying that the month they would be apart would pass quickly.

He held her away from him for a moment so that he could look into her eyes while he spoke. 'Jackie, I love you, and I promise you, here and now, that not a day will go by that I won't be thinking of you.' Then, he reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a ring that he'd somehow scraped the money together to buy for her. He took her left hand and slipped the ring on her finger. The ring in itself was really nothing special, but David could see that to Jackie, at that moment, it meant everything.

She blinked back tears as she said, 'I swear I'll never take this ring off.'

The afternoon sun was slipping towards the horizon and, reluctantly, he told her that he'd have to 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. She promised she'd wait for him, then turned away with tear-filled eyes, ran up the stairs, and went through her front door without looking back. David walked away from her house towards 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 the sights and sounds of this "Pearl of the Orient" mesmerized David. 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 and nightclubs.

On one street was an open-air food market where you could purchase various meats, vegetables, fruit, assorted spices and other delicacies. There were several food stalls scattered throughout where Chinese people sat expertly scooping food out of bowls with their chopsticks. There was a mixture of familiar and unfamiliar smells coming from the market, but what interested David most 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 to and from 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 with the fumes of the diesel engines that powered the ferries. The sidewalks were teeming with people, mostly Chinese, but he also saw Caucasian faces (English ex-patriots he imagined, although some could 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. There were other nationalities (some of them looked like they could have been Indian or Pakistani), but by then, David had given up trying to figure them out, 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 apparently, all trying to get there at the same time. It made Brisbane seem like a one-horse town in comparison.

They were headed to a nightclub that his father had told him featured one of the best bands in Hong Kong, and David was anxious to hear them. As they approached the entrance, they stopped by the doorway where his father turned to him and asked, "All right, mate, now tell the truth. Have you ever drunk beer before?"

David hesitated for a moment, not sure how to answer, then, hedging, he said, "Why?"

His father smiled knowingly. "I'll take that as a 'yes.'" He noticed David's concerned look and said, "Don't worry, I'm not going to give you any crap about it. I just want to know where we stand. Things are fairly loose here, and I doubt that anyone is going to ask you if you're old enough to drink, so if you want to knock back a few beers while we're out, go ahead. Just pace yourself, that's all. You're a bit bigger than you used to be, and I don't want to have to carry you back to the hotel."

David laughed, relieved, and also thrilled at the prospect of being able to go to a nightclub and actually have a few beers with his dad. "Okay, Dad, I'll watch myself." He spared a thought for his friends back in Caloundra and wondered what they were doing. Nothing like this, he was sure!

The club was downstairs, in the basement of one of Hong Kong's better hotels, and as they descended, David heard the muffled sounds of the bass and drums through the doors that opened into the club. They entered, and he was immediately hit by the full sound of the band, and to David, they sounded incredible. They were a five-piece group, two guitars, bass, drums, and organ, and they were in the middle of an almost 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 couldn't help but notice how pretty some of the Chinese girls were, with their long, straight, black hair and petite bodies. By the time he and his father made it to the bar to order drinks, David already felt intoxicated by what he'd experienced so far.

He settled himself on a barstool while his father ordered two bottles of San Miguel from the bartender, paid for them, and handed one to him. "Cheers," he said as they clinked their bottles together. They each took a swig and turned to face the dance floor just as the band started into the Stones' hit "Satisfaction." David savored this moment, as the cold beer washed down his throat, and filed it away under the heading: "Greatest moment of my life, so far!"

His father leaned in close and spoke loudly so as to be heard over the music, "What do you think of the band?"

"They're great!" yelled David enthusiastically. "Better than any band I've heard before. Are they Chinese?"

"No, they're Filipino," his father replied. "There're a lot of Filipino bands in Hong Kong, actually. They have a good reputation as musicians, and they work comparatively cheap, so hotels and clubs like to hire them. From what I know, the

money they make here, even though it isn't great, is a lot better than they can make back home, where good bands are a dime a dozen. So the really good ones try to get out of there. There're also quite a few Filipino groups working the military bases in Vietnam."

David took a pull from his bottle of beer and then asked, "That's where you've been lately, right? Vietnam?"

"Uh-huh! I was part of a show that toured there for about six months. We had a comedian, a female vocalist, a couple of dancers, a five-piece band, and me."

"Were you the star of the show?"

His father laughed and said, "Not over there, mate! It's the women that are the stars in that place. Oh, they enjoyed my singing, and they laughed at the comedian, but it's a bit different than working clubs here or in Australia. You're dealing with guys, who are about as far away from home as they've ever been and who're living with the fact that any day could be their last, so you'd better give them what they want. And they want to see women! Who can blame them?"

David silently agreed as he watched a couple of mini-skirted girls make their way to the dance floor and then, turning back to his father, he asked, "Are you going back?"

"Yeah, but not as a performer. I'm taking over a booking agency from two Yanks, who've been bringing acts over there for the last few years. 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 it over to me completely. I'll be in partnership with a guy who used to perform over there with his wife. We'll be paying the Yanks a percentage of what we make for about six months, and then the business will be all ours."

David finished the last of his beer and asked, "How long do you think you'll stay?"

His father lit a cigarette and thought for a moment. "I'm not sure, really. I imagine a couple of years, at least. Possibly more. I want to be able to leave with a decent amount of money." He took a drag on his cigarette and then asked, "Why?"

"I guess 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 then, after that you'll be in Vietnam. I can't see me visiting you. I imagine it's not exactly high on the list of most-desired vacation spots right now."

His father laughed. "You're right about that. Although, I have to say, parts of it are actually very beautiful. Anyway, I'm sure I'll be taking vacation time once in a while, so I could arrange for us to spend a week or so together when

I do that. Maybe somewhere different, like Thailand. How would that be?"

David brightened at that. "That sounds good."

"Good." His father held up his empty beer bottle. "Do you want another?"

"Sure," said David, already feeling warm and fuzzy after the first one. "Why not? After all, it's not like I have to go to school tomorrow!"

His father chuckled as he ordered two more beers.

The band launched into The Animal's version of "House of the Rising Sun" at that moment, which was one of David's favorite songs, so he turned and gave his attention to the music.

Later, after his fourth beer, David realized that there was no way he was going to be able to keep pace with his father. Mrs. Freeman had occasionally let him and Gary have a glass of beer on a Saturday night when he visited. And once he and a friend had gotten plastered sharing a bottle of port on the beach in Caloundra (he'd thrown up about twenty minutes later), so he wasn't exactly what you'd call a seasoned drinker. He was definitely feeling the effects of the beer. 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 now. I'm pretty tired. Probably jet lag or something."

His father smiled and said, "Yeah, probably." He patted David on the back. "I'm going to hang on here a while longer. Can you find your way, okay?"

David said, "Sure. It's just up the street, isn't it?"

"That's right. Just 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, winked at him, and said, "Good night, mate."

David turned and walked out of the club. With a great deal of concentration and effort, he ascended the stairs without lurching too much and made his way back to the hotel. By the time he got to the 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 and was almost instantly asleep.

Sitting in his kitchen, years later, David couldn't help but smile at the memory of that night, so long ago, 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 had tasted like the bottom of a birdcage! Nevertheless, being young and resilient, he'd soon recovered, and that day, and the ones that followed, were filled with experiences that he knew he wouldn't soon forget.

For two 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'd wanted to be able to remember it all, 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 third 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 a letter. David followed his father as he walked over to a seating area in the lobby, and they both sat down. His father's brow furrowed when he opened the letter and started reading it. David wondered who it was from and what it said. He hoped it wasn't bad news. When his father finished reading, he folded the letter and tucked into his shirt pocket. David looked at him expectantly and asked, "Who's it from? It's not bad news, is it?"

His father took out a pack of cigarettes, shook one out, put it in his mouth, and lit it. As he exhaled, he gestured toward the lobby bar and said, "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 at all.

As they entered the bar, David looked around at the décor. There were slow-moving ceiling fans, rattan chairs and tables, and lush green plants scattered throughout the place. It reminded David 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 had arrived, his father turned to David and said,

"It's a bit of bad news from your grandmother. Apparently your granddad had a heart attack and was hospitalized for a few days." He obviously noticed David's concerned look because he added, reassuringly, "He's back home now, and doing fine, but he's been told by the doctor to take it easy. Granny'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 finally, "that's what I wanted to talk to you about. Unfortunately, I don't think your going back home is an option at the present time. Your granny wanted to know if I could take you to Vietnam with me and 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? "*And what about Jackie?*"

His father looked puzzled. "Jackie?"

David realized that his concern about Jackie had been spoken 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 another week." The realization that he may not see her for quite a while longer was starting to sink in and David could feel tears welling up inside him. He did his best to quell them, as he didn't want to cry in front of his dad, but he could feel the telltale moisture in his eyes. He turned away and pretended he was looking at something elsewhere in the room.

David felt his father's hand on his shoulder and heard him say sympathetically, "I'm sorry, mate, I honestly don't know how long you'll be there. I know it's a bit rough on you, and it's not an ideal situation for me either, but somehow we're just going to have to make the best of it."

David hardly heard a word his father said. All he could think about was Jackie. She said she'd wait for him, but for how long? For David, right at that moment, the "Pearl of the Orient" had definitely lost some of its luster.

Chapter Four

Orange County, California

July 2004

Sunday

The phone rang, and David started at the sound. He hadn't realized he'd drifted so thoroughly into the past while he'd been reminiscing, and it took him a moment to realize where he was. It continued ringing, and he debated mentally whether or not to just let voice mail get it. On the fifth ring, he got up, crossed the kitchen to the phone on the wall, and picked it up.

"Hello?"

The voice on the other end 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 a few weeks. He wanted to reschedule for mid-August. I checked the calendar, and we don't have anything until the end of August, so I penciled him in. Is that okay?"

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

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

David thought for a moment and replied, "Nah! We're in pretty good shape financially right now 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," said David, "I kind of 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, as well as 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 wanted his relationship with Sandy to work out; probably more than he had.

"In a way," he replied. "It's hard to explain, Phil. I had an odd experience last night and . . . well, like I said, it's hard to explain." David lightened up and added, "Maybe I'm finally getting around to having 'midlife crisis' or something."

"Midlife? You planning on living to a hundred?"

David laughed. "At least!"

"You want to come over tonight?" Phil asked. "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," David quipped. "Look who she married!"

Phil laughed and said good-naturedly, "Screw you!"

"You wish!"

Phil laughed again and said, "See you tonight. Come over around six thirty or so."

David said he'd be there and hung up the phone.

Later, as David drove to Phil and Julie's, he thought about his two friends. They seemed like the perfect couple to him. 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 of it, anyway. He sometimes imagined that he could almost feel something holding him back, preventing him from really giving his all.

Phil and Julie owned 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. As he pulled up outside their house, thankful that, for once, there was a parking space

that didn't require a two-block walk, he felt a slight twinge of envy for what Phil and Julie had. He immediately felt guilty for feeling that way, dismissed it as unworthy of him, and walked to the front door, ready for an evening of good food, good wine, good company and of course, William Wallace-'Braveheart'.

David 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 went perfectly with his sense of humor, which was one of the things David liked about him and why they got along so well. They loved to banter with one another and never missed an opportunity at verbal one-up-manship.

The soundtrack from 'Titanic' was playing softly in the background through Phil's state-of-the-art stereo. The lighting was pleasantly subdued, and there were flickering candles scattered around the place. As he entered, he saw Julie placing a freshly opened bottle of red wine on the dining table and he half-expected her to give him something of a hard time regarding the breakup with Sandy. Julie was a pretty 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 were 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! It's good to see you."

"Hey, Julie, you look fantastic, as usual. What you're doing with a schmuck like Phil, I'll never know."

Phil, who by now was over by the dining table, with 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 food."

As she walked back into the kitchen, David called after her, "Smells good! What are we having?"

"My version of Beef Stroganoff!" she called back. "Don't worry, you'll like it!"

"I'm sure I will," said David, pouring himself a glass of wine.

Phil, already on his second glass, sidled over to David and in a somewhat conspiratorial manner said, "I made it clear to Julie that she wasn't 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."

"Oh, sure," said David playfully, "as long as they're the pants she's picked out for you."

"Screw you!" said Phil, laughing.

David, laughing too, replied, "In your dreams."

At that moment, Julie came into the dining room, and after placing a serving bowl of salad on the table, told Phil to help her bring in the rest of dinner. As Phil followed his wife into the kitchen, he noticed David grinning and making whip-cracking motions at him. Phil smiled and flipped him the bird.

The evening had been fun. The food had been wonderful and the wine plentiful. A little too plentiful, actually, and David, who didn't drink anywhere near as much, or as often as he had in his younger days, was feeling the effects of it. 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, as she got up off the couch and moved past David and Phil, "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."

Phil, in the meantime, was busily shutting down his entertainment system. From across the room, he said, "There are spare towels, travel-size toothpaste, and stuff in the guest bathroom. Help yourself."

Just then, Julie came back 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?" said David jokingly, in a plaintive little-boy voice.

Julie made a face at him and crooked a finger at Phil. "Come on, 'Braveheart', let's get to bed. You, unlike your lazy partner, have to work tomorrow."

Phil said, in a halfway decent Scottish accent, "Aye, lassie, just wait 'til you see what I've got for ye under ma kilt!"

This got a laugh from both Julie and David. As they made their way out of the room, David, sitting on the couch amongst the scattered bedding, 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 him by the arm, and they went off to their bedroom.

"`Night, 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 somewhat drunken state, he'd probably pass out pretty much right away. 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 literally 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? What demon was I trying to kill?"*

As if in answer to his self-posed question, he felt tears well in his eyes, 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. There is a window to his left and a thick-looking white metal door directly ahead of him. It is late afternoon on a sunny day. He looks at the window more closely and notices bars in the window opening. He feels confused and disoriented. Where is he? Why is he here? The door opens, and a man in his fifties with a Van Dyke beard enters. He feels 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 the living room in the early-morning light, trying to get his bearings. His head throbbed and ached slightly. Uncomfortable, but it helped orient him. "*Phil and Julie's living room. Too much wine last night.*" He reached over to the end table where he'd left his mobile phone and activated it to check the time. It was 5:47 a.m. 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, and as quietly as he could, made his way to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door in hopes of finding chilled bottled water. His mouth felt like 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. He felt an odd sense of déjà vu as he looked out onto the quiet street. The main road was visible from this part of the house, and he could see one or two office buildings and a Chinese restaurant. Chinese restaurant. Something stirred in the back of his mind, and he was struck by a feeling of incredible loneliness.

He pondered the dream he'd just awakened from. There was a strangeness, and yet, an eerie familiarity to the scene. He thought of the man with the Van Dyke beard, and a chill

ran through his body. At that moment, his mildly throbbing headache suddenly intensified to a severe pounding, and there was intense pressure on his temples. His eyes felt as if they'd been set on fire, and he was (seeing? imagining?) arcs of lightning in and around his head. "What the fuck?!" he cursed in a hoarse whisper.

David reached a badly shaking hand out to the living room wall and steadied himself, feeling at any moment that he may pass out. He was close to gagging and was fighting the urge to throw up.

With both hands against the wall David slid to his knees, breathing shallowly and rapidly. He forced himself to regulate his breathing and relax.

"Breathe in. Breathe out," he told himself while taking long, slow breaths and exhaling gently. After what seemed an eternity, the pounding in his head gradually subsided to a more manageable throbbing, and the need to vomit passed.

He rose carefully, and on slightly trembling legs, went over to the couch and sat down.

"What the hell was that?" David muttered to himself, somewhat incredulously . . . and made a mental note to see his doctor and get it checked out later that day. He sat on the couch for a while, purposely not thinking about what had just happened, until he felt his strength returning, and other than the slight throbbing in his head, which he figured was just the symptom of a mild hangover, he began to feel more like his normal self again.

Definitely fully awake now, David decided that he may as well go home.

He folded up the sheet and blanket and placed them and the pillow, on an easy chair that sat nearby. He then straightened up the couch, repositioning the cushions where he thought they belonged. Leaving a note on the kitchen table for Phil and Julie, 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. As he pulled out onto the street, he remembered that there was a drive-through Starbucks on the way home. 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 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 that what had finally brought him to his senses was 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.

David's dad had remarried to an attractive Portuguese woman and opened a nightclub, while David had set about making his mark on the English-language music scene. Despite his self-destructive tendencies he'd nevertheless managed to make a name for himself over the years as a singer, songwriter and producer. He'd released three albums of his own and co-produced a number of others for local artists.

His father and he had remained close though 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 had included heavy drinking. In fact, now that he thought about it, as close as they became in later years, his father had never once questioned his son's "rock and roll" lifestyle. David thought about that for a moment. *"Maybe he understood because he had his own demons."*

His father had died suddenly and unexpectedly one morning of a heart attack, brought on by an unsuspected blood clot. David had been devastated when his stepmother called with the news. He'd driven to the morgue to identify the body, and the whole experience had been somewhat surreal. He'd felt numb. At that point, he'd been 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 had come by to commiserate. David had consumed more than a few drinks and had been holding his own for a while. Eventually, though, he'd gone upstairs to his home studio and locked himself in. He recalled leaning against the wall, drink in hand, and then sliding down to the floor where he sat, tears streaming down his face, crying out loud, "Why? Why? Why?" Even now, more than twenty years after the fact,

he still felt a twinge when he thought about his father. He wondered how true that old platitude about "time healing all wounds" actually was.

For a while, it seemed that 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, he'd had what would be called these days "a reality adjustment." In a moment of unexpectedly stark clarity, he'd actually considered his own mortality and with that came the realization that not only wasn't he invincible or immortal, but that, deep down, he still had a desire to create artistically and that somehow, somewhere he'd find the happiness that had eluded him for so long. David remembered that as being the morning he'd decided to live. He'd 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'd 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—Hollywood, California. He'd been flattered, naturally—but also a little scared. This was the big leagues. Did he really have what it would take to make it over there? Keeping his reservations to himself he'd kept his options open and signed a preliminary agreement which basically gave him twelve months to decide what he wanted to do.

Six months later David had made the decision that would take him away from the place he'd called home for the last twelve years. He knew that 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'd 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'd had to admit to himself 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 now 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'd applied for and eventually been granted Legal Resident Alien status.

In the early 1990s, as his taste in music drifted over into the country genre, he'd used the money he'd saved over

the years to build his own recording studio, where he was mostly 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?"

He heard his name being called and realized he'd been completely lost in thought. It was Kate, the doctor's receptionist, an attractive, thirty-something Vietnamese-American girl, who'd worked in the office for as long as David had been going there.

He smiled sheepishly and said, "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, David. You're a living, breathing testament to my talent and expertise in the field of the body," he said, laughing at his own humor. He walked across the room to his desk and sat at it, setting David's patient folder down as he did.

David, still sitting on the examination table, laughed with him and then said, "You emphasized 'physically,' Tom. You wanna elaborate?"

Thomas regarded David from across his desk and replied, "The concept of psychosomatic conditions and illnesses 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 looked at 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 partly explains why in clinical trials a certain percentage of people respond favorably to the placebo. 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, a host of unusual physical manifestations occur." Thomas 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 thought for a moment and then said, "So you're saying it's possible that what I experienced is mentally caused?"

"Since I can find no physical reason, I'd have to say 'yes, that's what I'm saying.'" Thomas uncrossed his legs and leaned across his desk toward David. "Just out of curiosity, have you suffered any emotional upsets lately? Or been under stress, particularly?"

David hesitated briefly and then thought, "*What the hell.*" And went ahead and described recent events to Thomas. 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 that had brought him here to get a checkup.

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

Thomas smiled and replied, "No, I don't think you're going nuts. It's my opinion that only a sane person is stable enough to question their 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? A psychiatrist?"

Thomas shook his head emphatically. "No, I don't think so. These days a psychiatrist would most likely just put you on an antidepressant of some kind, and I don't think that will help you find out what it is that's troubling you. It may mask it, the way a painkiller masks a physical condition that needs attention, but whatever it is that's causing these emotional and physical manifestations will still be there."

"Okay. So what do you recommend?"

"I wish I had a definitive answer, David. Possibly, someone who deals in hypnotic regression therapy might be able to help you dig it out." 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, and David, taking this as a cue that his visit was coming to a close, got 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 as he said, "Well, 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."

David, surprised by this, turned to Thomas and said, "Thanks, Tom. You don't have to do that."

Thomas just 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."

Not 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 maybe there was some traumatic incident in his past that had somehow remained hidden for all these years. Tom's suggestion of hypnotic regression therapy came to mind, and he wondered if he should explore that option. But then he frowned at the thought of being hypnotized. For some unaccountable reason it really didn't appeal to him.

He pulled into his driveway, not bothering to park in the garage, exited his car, grabbed the day's mail from his mailbox, trotted up the short winding pathway to his front door and let himself in. Once inside his house, he made for the kitchen, threw his keys on the counter, and set about brewing some coffee. He checked his home phone voice mail, and there was a message from Phil calling to make sure he'd got home safely. The call had come in while David was with the doctor. Looking at the missed calls on his mobile phone, he saw that Phil had called him at that number too. *"Funny, I never heard it ring."*

Then he remembered he'd turned the ringer off this morning. He set it on "vibrate" and called Phil back, but it went straight to voice mail. "Must be in the middle of something at the studio." He left a message, letting Phil know he was safe and sound and thanked both him and Julie again for their hospitality.

While the coffee brewed, he switched on the radio. As it came to life, the last strains of "Mustang Sally" were playing. He remembered having left it on the oldies station the day before and reached over to tune in the local country station. Just then, The Beatles' classic "All My Loving" started, and

he changed his mind. "That had been his and Jackie's song! God, how they'd loved that song!" David felt a slight 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 from Vietnam on Wednesday, July 21, 1969, right about the time almost every television set in the country was broadcasting Neil Armstrong's giant leap for mankind. He'd spent eighteen months in Vietnam. The first three months were spent in Da Nang, a city in the northern part of South Vietnam, helping his father, one way or another, with the running of his booking agency. He'd help load and set up equipment for the various shows that came through and he even got to play a couple of tunes as a guest artist with one particular band. Eventually he bluffed his way into a position as bass player for an all-American Country and Western group, whose previous bass player had become homesick and left them for a job with a house band in Las Vegas. For the next fifteen months, David toured the length and breadth of South Vietnam, playing to American and Australian troops. By the end of this stint, he was pretty much a seasoned pro at the tender age of sixteen.

For the first few months or so, David had written to Jackie religiously, pouring his heart out in every letter, swearing he'd be faithful and that he'd be back as soon as he could. However, the excitement of touring with a band, where he was treated as an adult, and the subsequent opportunities for 'whisky and wild women' (as Mike 'Sticks' Carter, the drummer from Evansville, Indiana, had so quaintly put it), soon pushed Jackie to the furthest reaches 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 fast in those eighteen months. The life experience he'd gained, as well as the musical knowledge

he'd assimilated, gave him the confidence to strike out on his own, and he decided he wanted to go back to Australia and form a band of his own. The country band were playing in the Da Nang area when David made this decision, so he was able to say his goodbyes to his father, with a solemn promise that he'd write as soon as he settled somewhere and then it was back to Saigon for a few more gigs while a replacement bass player was found. As luck would have it, they discovered that the original bass player was available, having tired of the Las Vegas scene, and he was brought back over to rejoin the band. David played the last few shows on guitar, which was a welcome change for him after so long playing bass which, while he became very proficient at it, was not the instrument he really loved playing. Guitar was his first love. Then, there was one final evening of bar hopping with the band, followed by sloppy, drunken promises to keep in touch (promises that were never kept, of course), and the next morning found David on a plane, hung over and homeward bound. By the time he arrived back in Australia, he hadn't written to Jackie in over a year.

David landed at Brisbane Airport with a suitcase full of clothes, his guitar, a Sony reel-to-reel tape recorder and \$500, 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 and had lived only for the present and the pleasures before him. 'Whisky and wild women, indeed,' he thought wistfully, with a fond mental nod to his former bandmate, Mike Carter, 'I guess I didn't think it was ever gonna end.' All things considered, he figured he was lucky to make it back with anything at all and vowed to be a little more careful with his money in the future.

David had written his grandparents to tell them he was coming home and that he'd be spending some time in Brisbane first, before heading to Caloundra. He also assured them that he felt grown up enough to take care of himself now. Eighteen months on the road in a war-torn country had convinced him of that. He figured that would probably be something of a relief to them.

He'd decided to spend a week with the Freeman's and had called from the airport to let Mrs. Freeman know he was back. She'd been delighted to hear from him and was touched that he would make her, and her family, his first port of call.

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

'They're not expecting me for another week,' David said reassuringly, 'and anyway, I know they'd be fine with me spending some time at your place. I've told them all about you and how you're like a second mum to me.'

That was all the convincing she needed. 'Well, in that

case, hurry up and get here. I can't wait to see you again, and as soon as I tell Gary you're back, I'm sure it'll make his day. Mind you, it might be hard to pull him away from the telly, even for you. They're showing the moon landing, you know.'

'I know. I saw some of it at the airport. I guess whoever said "it'll never fly", way back when, is feeling pretty stupid round about now.'

The distant whistle of a boiling tea kettle came through the telephone receiver and Mrs. Freeman said, 'Kettle's boiling. Must run. See you soon, love.'

'Righto!' said David. 'See you in a few.'

David hung up the telephone and went to see about getting his baggage transported to the taxi rank.

The journey from the airport to the Freeman house took about twenty-five minutes. As he sat in the back of the taxi, David reflected on the last eighteen months of his life—mostly good, occasionally bad. Like the time he'd gotten 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 won. That little episode had resulted in his needing five 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, 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!'

Mostly he thought about the thrill of playing with a band of professional musicians to always-enthusiastic crowds. There was nothing quite like the feeling of an appreciative audience cheering and applauding you. David smiled at the memory of that. And now, here he was, back in Brisbane just four months beyond his sixteenth birthday with more experience behind him than most people encounter in a lifetime.

It suddenly occurred to him that here, in Brisbane, he wasn't considered an adult. There'd be no going to bars for a drink, at least not for another five years. The drinking age was twenty-one in Queensland. Life was going to be quite different from what it had been for the last eighteen months. He'd have to get used to being a teenager again. Still, on the other hand, there was always Jackie, and he brightened at the thought of her. He couldn't wait to see the look on her face when she saw him again after all this time.

The taxi was making its way down the hill that led to the Freeman house. David looked around him and felt on familiar

ground here. Looking ahead, he could see the park at the bottom of the hill, where he and Jackie had often come to make out or just talk about what the future held for them. The roundabout and swings were sitting idle now. There wasn't a soul around. He supposed everyone was glued to their sets, watching the moon landing. Casting his mind back, he could clearly see Jackie and him sitting on those swings, swaying gently, and making promises to each other on their last weekend together. He felt a slight tug at his heartstrings and then a sudden thought occurred to him. 'When had he last written to her?'

His thoughts were interrupted by the taxi driver. 'We're here, mate!'

David looked out the window of the taxi, and sure enough, there was Gary's house—single-storeyed, with a light blue shiplap wood body and white trim. It hadn't changed a bit. The driver helped David get his belongings out of the taxi and onto the pavement in front of the house, and David paid him, slipping him an extra \$5 as a tip, which elicited a broad 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 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. He was sixteen, the same age as David, but with jet-black hair, grey-green eyes, a swarthy olive-skinned complexion, and the most Italian of noses. Gary and his elder sister, Melissa, had inherited more of their mother's Italian side of the family than the Freeman side. While Michael, Gary's younger brother, had taken after his estranged father's English-Irish heritage. Grinning broadly, Gary called out over his shoulder, 'Hey, Mum! David's here!'

He heard Mrs. Freeman sing out at the top of her lungs from the far end of the house, 'I'm in the kitchen. Bring him back here!'

They shook hands, and then David asked Gary if he wouldn't mind bringing his tape recorder in. His friend was glad to oblige, and while he went out 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, there was a single bed next to a window on the street side of the room and a double bunk bed against the wall by the bedroom door. In between, there sat a chipped, light-blue chest of drawers. David set his belongings down in the centre of the room and turned as he heard Gary enter.

'You can have my bed while you're here, mate,' he 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 probably got tons to tell us. Well, 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 bed and the chest of drawers. He slid the tape recorder over in that direction and was glad to find that it fit nicely in between. Then he switched the voltage selector to 240v, plugged it in, and flicked the on-off switch. The power indicator light came on, 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 watching Neil Armstrong's antics on the moon. They looked up from the images on the television and welcomed David back. Michael was fourteen, with dark brown hair, brown eyes, and fair skin. 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 a very attractive version. She was eighteen years old and would very soon be college bound.

'Thanks,' he said sincerely. 'It's great to see you both again.'

David and Gary walked through the dining room and into the kitchen to find Mrs. Freeman mixing cake batter in a large bowl. She was what they used to call 'pleasantly plump', around five foot five with black, curly hair, bright blue eyes and a friendly, weathered face. To David, she looked like the stereotypical Italian mother, and he loved her for it. She turned when she heard them enter, and dropping the wooden spoon she was using into the mixing bowl, came over to David, exhibiting a smile that exuded love, warmth, and welcome. She gave him a hug and kissed him on both cheeks.

David hugged her back and said, 'Hello, Mum!'

She held him at arm's length and laughing, said, 'Hello, son!'

David felt a warm glow inside him. He'd forgotten how much he loved this family. They treated him so much like one of their own that coming here was like coming home.

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

'Uh, Vietnam, Mum,' said Gary, correcting her and rolling

his eyes at David.

'Yeah! Yeah! Vietnam, Japan, Pakistan. Same difference. Too many people and not enough food!' She picked up a tea towel and swatted at them playfully. 'Now get outta here and go watch the man on the moon! I'll join you in a little bit.'

The two boys left the kitchen and headed into the dining room. Gary put his hand on David's shoulder and said, 'Mum hasn't changed a bit, has she?'

'Thank God!' said David, and they both laughed.

A little later, while the cake was baking, Mrs. Freeman and Gary sat at the dining table, completely enthralled while David related some of his experiences in Hong Kong and Vietnam. Curiosity got the better of Melissa and Michael, and they temporarily gave up their moon-landing vigil to join the others in the dining room to hear some of David's stories. During a break in the proceedings, while Mrs. Freeman went to check on the progress of the cake, David looked at his watch (a Rolex knockoff, courtesy of a back-alley vendor in Saigon), and seeing that it was almost four o'clock, decided he'd better get over to Jackie's house. He went into the kitchen and told Mrs. Freeman where he was going and that he'd be back later.

'All right, love,' she said. 'We're having dinner at seven, so try to be back by then.'

'Yes, Mum,' he said playfully 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 to the front door with him. David stopped 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. Then, 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 said she hadn't gotten a letter from you for quite some time and was worried.' Gary punched David playfully on the shoulder and continued, 'I told her I'd never had a bloody letter from you, so she shouldn't feel bad.' Gary paused, and then asked, 'Did you stop writing to her?'

David nodded and said, somewhat sheepishly, 'Yeah, I feel a bit guilty about that.'

'Don't worry, mate', said Gary, patting David on the back as he went through the doorway, 'just turn on the charm when you see her. It'll be okay.'

'I hope so,' David said, stepping out onto the pathway that led to the street.

He set a brisk pace as he walked along; even with a shortcut through the park Jackie's house was still a half hour away. David sat on the couch in the living room of Jackie's house making small talk with her mother while sipping on the cup of steaming hot, sweet tea that 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.

He'd noticed a television set up against the living room wall showing 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 marvellous? David had agreed that it was, indeed, marvellous!

He'd watched her move about the kitchen and realised that he'd forgotten how attractive Mrs. Lanagan was. It was obvious where Jackie had gotten most of her looks. She was in her early forties, slim, medium height, with brown hair and dark brown eyes, physical traits she'd passed on to her daughter.

So now here they sat, drinking tea while he told her about some of his adventures in Hong Kong and Vietnam. He asked about Jackie and found out that she'd left school after junior high and that she worked four days a week, Monday through Thursday, at Ginella's, a local cafe.

At this point, she placed her hand over his and said, 'David, I think there's something you should . . .'

Just then the front door opened and Jackie, dressed in a light pink waitresses' uniform, stepped into the house. As soon as he saw her, he remembered why it was that he'd been so attracted to her when they'd first met. Eighteen months melted away in that moment, and in his mind's eye, David saw them once again kissing and caressing in one of their favourite out-of-the-way spots.

'Look who's here,' said Jackie's mother, 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 him 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

noticed two things; Jackie didn't look overjoyed to see him and she wasn't wearing the ring he'd given her—the ring she'd sworn that she would never take off.

He felt a sinking feeling in his stomach when Jackie said to her mother, 'I'll be back in a little bit, Mum. I just need to talk to David outside.'

'Okay, dear.' She looked at him, somewhat sympathetically he thought, and said, 'It was nice seeing you again, David.'

'You too, Mrs. Lanagan,' he said as he followed Jackie outside.

They stood on the landing at the top of the stairs where they had tearfully parted on their last weekend together before David had left for Hong Kong.

'Your ring. When did you . . . ?' David started, pointing at the hand that it used to be on.

Jackie interrupted him, obviously upset, 'David, why did you stop writing to me? I didn't hear from you in so long. I waited. I 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, tears forming in her eyes.

'Oh God, those beautiful brown eyes!' And then, he saw something else in those eyes. He'd lost her! He knew it without her having to say it. She'd found someone else. He just knew 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, womanising 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. He cursed himself inwardly. *'How could I have been so selfish and so bloody stupid?'*

Now, seeing the hurt and betrayal in Jackie's eyes, he suddenly realised what he stood to lose and he struggled for something to say that might explain why the letters had just stopped. 'Jackie, I'm so sorry. I . . .' But he couldn't think of anything to say that wasn't a lie. He could feel himself choking up; his eyes 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 asked, 'Did you find someone else?'

Tears rolling down her face Jackie said in a trembling voice, '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.' Crying earnestly now, she shouted, 'Damn you! Why didn't you just stay gone? Why did you make me

chose someone else?'

David, fighting back his own tears, said, '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. 'There must be a way. We were so much in love. Can't you forgive me? Please?'

For one brief moment, a moment that seemed to stretch into eternity for David, Jackie looked at him with her tear-filled eyes.

In those eyes he saw the truth of the love for him that still lived within and, as he held her gaze, he felt a tiny shred of hope that maybe, just maybe

But the moment passed, and David's hopes were crushed as Jackie turned away and said, 'I'm sorry, David. I've already cried too many tears for you. I cried myself to sleep so many times waiting to hear from you. As much as I may want to, 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 turned, opened the front door, and rushed into the house, slamming the door behind her.

David stood there for a moment, too stunned to move. 'Jackie! I've actually lost Jackie!' 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 entered his 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! David swore to himself that if he ever found someone like Jackie again, he'd always be faithful, and he'd never, ever let her go.

Orange County, California
July 2004
Monday

David looked at the microwave clock in his kitchen and saw, with a mild shock, that it was almost 5:00 p.m. The sun was low in the Orange County sky, and his kitchen was now bathed in a reddish-orange light. He'd been lost in thought for over an hour! No, "lost in thought" wasn't quite right. It was as if he'd actually gone back in time. He'd been feeling emotions and sensations from years ago as if they'd been happening right here and now.

A familiar aroma reminded him that he'd started brewing

coffee when he'd first arrived home. Rising from the table, he grabbed a mug from the kitchen cabinet and poured himself some.

Settling himself back down he sat there in the waning light, sipping his coffee and thought about his "journey back in time".

He remembered that by the time he'd walked back to the Freeman's house from Jackie's, he'd managed to get his emotions more or less under control. Knowing that it was pretty much all his own stupid fault had helped to ease the pain-somewhat. As far as he could recall, he'd managed to enjoy the rest of his stay with his "surrogate family" with only minor twinges of regret surfacing occasionally.

He'd met Gary's new girlfriend, Debbie. Nice girl. It seemed to David that there'd been someone else there, too, but he couldn't remember who. Gary's brother? Some other girl? Perhaps a friend of Debbie's? Hadn't they played at having a séance in Gary's darkened bedroom one evening and scared themselves silly? He smiled at the memory, and with it came the certainty that there had been four of them in the bedroom. It struck him as odd, though, that he couldn't remember who the fourth person was. An image of all of them running out of the bedroom, screaming, came to him suddenly, and he erupted into laughter.

The events of that evening came back to him. Gary's mum had gone out to the pub with friends. Melissa and Michael had gone to the movies. (So, at least he knew the other entity wasn't Michael). 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 at some point," David recalled with a smile. Gary had produced an Ouija board from under the bunk bed and suggested they have a "séance."

They had drawn the curtains, switched off the bedroom light, and sat in a circle around the Ouija board, holding hands. Gary, or maybe it was Debbie, had chanted, "If there is a spirit in the room, make your presence known" a number of times. At some point, one of them had looked up, noticed an eerie, green glow on the ceiling, and shouted, "What's that up there?" Four pairs of eyes had 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 had realized what the "green ghost" actually was and he'd walked back into the bedroom, much to the amazement and admiration of the others. A couple of seconds later, they'd heard him laughing.

"Come here! It's all right!" he'd shouted. He'd turned on the light, and as the other three crept cautiously into the room, he'd pointed down at his reel-to-reel tape recorder there on

the floor. It had been turned on earlier that day when David had been playing 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 ceiling. The mystery of the “green ghost” exposed had had them all laughing in relief.

David laughed again at the memory of that incident. Then he briefly pondered the identity of the mysterious fourth person, but to no avail. For some reason he just couldn't picture who they were or what they looked like. Obviously not someone who'd made much of an impact on his life. With a dismissive shrug he let it drop.

He remembered making his fond farewells and leaving the Freeman house for Caloundra, promising he'd be back to see them soon. There'd been hugs from everyone and some tears from Mrs. Freeman.

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'd 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'd become restless. He'd needed to be somewhere where there was a little more action and opportunity.

So he'd made his way back to Brisbane, and with some of the money he had left, he'd put down a couple of months' rent on a flat in the city and set about looking for work. Back then, driver's licenses had no pictures, and there were no identification cards, so all it took for David to rent that flat was a good acting job in convincing the landlord that he was eighteen years of age. He'd secured a part-time job on a road crew to make money 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 became a bit fuzzy at this point. He had the distinct impression that he'd spent more time at the Freeman's. But that's all it was—an impression. He vaguely remembered calling Gary and letting him know that he was in the area. Then what? David frowned as he tried unsuccessfully to recall anything more. This was odd. So much of his life was an open book to him (he'd always had good recall) that the nebulous nature of this time period bothered him.

He stood and paced the kitchen while he tried to pierce the mental fog that seemed to be shrouding his memories. All he could get were fragments of images here and there: the park at the bottom of the hill, Gary and Debbie walking toward him with somber expressions on their faces, Mrs. Freeman sitting at the kitchen table crying. David was puzzled. Why? Why was she crying? And Debbie . . . Debbie yelling at him for

some reason. He frowned. What was that about? The feelings of longing and loss started to surface again but brought with them no images or answers. Try as he might, David could not seem to penetrate whatever barrier was blocking his access to the memories he was sure must exist beyond it.

This was frustrating. It went beyond merely having a difficult time remembering the specific details of a time in his life. That was normal for him and usually, with a bit of mental digging, or help from others who were involved, he could recall just about anything he'd done with the possible exception of his early childhood—and even then he still had some vivid memories. It almost felt as if there was something actually preventing him from remembering anything about this period.

A frown creased his face as he puzzled over this. He recalled traveling down south to Kyabram, Victoria in January of 1970 and working the pear orchards for a few months. He clearly remembered reuniting with his father in mid-March, 1970, forming a three-piece musical/comedy act with him and his sideman, Harry and touring Southeast Asia for a year. From 1971, to the present, he could have written a pretty detailed autobiography of his life (give or take a few "lost weekends"), even the boring parts. Yet, for some reason, the period from late-August 1969 to mid-January 1970 was virtually nonexistent! It was a complete and utter blank!

He could feel himself becoming irritated, and there was a mildly painful throbbing in his temples. "Ah hell," he thought resignedly, "*just leave it alone for now.*"

With that, he decided tonight was a good night for dinner-for-one and a movie. He always preferred going to the cinema on a Sunday or Monday when there were less crowds. At first he considered going online to check what was playing but then changed his mind. He wasn't in the mood for a Hollywood major release. He'd just 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, turning some of the lights on in the house as he went.

Later, after his shower, while he was putting on fresh clothes, he started whistling a tune from long ago. "*What is that?*" He continued, now humming the melody to himself . . . and 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 here, though. David imagined there were some oldies stations that played it somewhere in the United States—but he'd never heard it since he'd lived in California.

He saw a mental image of himself at Gary's house, when the Freeman's had lived in Caloundra, sitting on the floor in front of an old carved-wood stereo hi-fi console, a stack of 45s around him, listening 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?" 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.

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