



Saigon Sunset

A saga in several episodes by Graham Price

Chapter 9

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Cuc, now known as Nhan Lien, stepped out of the elevator onto level four of the AVRN building in Saigon. This was to be her first day as secretary to General Dao, having been instructed by Colonel Khuu Anh the previous day.

Compared to Colonel Khuu's office on the third floor, this was a wonderland of furnishings — the stark furniture of the floor below was inferior to what was before her. The corridors were wide and bright, festooned with brass and light beige wall lamps and French opaline ceiling domes. At the end of the corridor was a frosted double glass door with bamboo and green fern sketchings, that appeared to lead out to a balcony. Her first thought was 'luxury, a General's domain — I may enjoy my time here'. She felt the maroon carpet sink beneath her flat heels, it smelt and looked new. Close to the end of the corridor was a small desk, and sitting behind it — much the same as in Colonel Khuu Anh's office — was a young Lieutenant. Upon seeing her he lifted his chin as if to say 'come here'.

Perspiration broke out on her forehead and she could feel her hands becoming sweaty. Well, this was it, then. Time to perk up and do what has to be done. She stepped forward, her legs feeling somewhat like jelly. She cursed under her breath — it was easier out there in the jungle with her AK47 beside her. She had killed and there was no reaction like this. Surely, this was the harder task; well, she would soldier up to it no matter how hard it was or how long it took.

The Lieutenant stood, right hand on pistol butt and left hand reaching for her identity card. "Name?"

"Nhan Lien, General Dao's new secretary."

He flipped the card with his left hand and eased his right hand away from his pistol. "Go in," he said, barely looking at her as he handed her card back. Lien took her card and replaced it in her handbag. The Lieutenant neither smiled at her or opened the door. She grasped the knob of the frosted windowed door and turned it. There was her work station before her with a polished desk, chair, filing cabinets and a small bookshelf with fat files on it. The smell of whisky combined with lavender greeted her as she knocked on the inner door.

"di vào . . . entar!"

Trying to give the impression that she was demure, she opened the door slowly, but her legs seemed somewhat even slower to follow. Her heart was beating faster as she gazed upon the short General who was sitting relaxed behind his formidable blackwood desk. There were large maps of North and South Viet Nam and many of the provinces on the walls with a blackboard near the entrance door. A tall bookshelf sat behind the General and another door behind the General's desk appeared to lead to the balcony. But it was the elegant dragon-headed mahogany and velvet couch alongside the far wall that attracted her attention. A place where three or four people could sit while in consultation with the General, or perhaps to be used for something else?

He lifted his head slightly and smiled, and then it all fell into place — her nervousness gone — she was now the secretary who would be superior to any he may have had in the past. The General raised his eyebrows and pointed to a cane-backed chair in front of the desk. "Please be seated, Miss Nhan". He leaned on the desk and clasped his hands. He was dressed much the same as Colonel Khuu had been, with a light khaki uniform of impeccable linen or silk. She could feel that her beauty preparations earlier seemed to be having an effect, and her choice of a tight fitting *ao dai* was attracting General Dao's deep brown eyes.

"I am not one for strict formalities," he said, leaning further across the desk so he could peer at the firmness of her breasts, "So, from now on I shall be calling you Nein, though . . ." he coughed, "for appearance sake you will continue to call me General or Sir at all times when there are others about. Now, I am sure we shall get on famously. I have read your CV, and am finding it more or less unbelievable that you have all of these virtues!" He laughed. "But of course you have . . . of course you have!"

"I can assure you, General Dao, that I am exactly as those papers state, perhaps even more so."

He was smiling again and his eyes were sparkling. "More so, yes . . . more so *indeed!*"

Later, when she had settled herself at her desk, she broke out into a grin. It was going better than expected. She had thought that there would have been a few stumbling blocks, but everything had gone smoothly — General Dao had caught



the bait, laid out there by her perfume, a little foundation to the face, and the daring *ao dai* she was wearing. The new and now composed Nein pondered her security clearance by Colonel Khuu — he must be in very deep trouble to have arranged that for her. But how long would it be before his troubles were discovered? She would have to move fast, but not so fast that General Dao would become suspicious. She knew that she would not have weeks, but only days to carry out her mission. She looked again at the stamps on her papers, such a high security clearance . . . was the Colonel playing with fire by covering her as such? And what would happen if he left Vietnam faster than he had planned to do? Her cover could be blown and the Colonel then in France under an assumed name would win both ways. But even under an assumed name, together with his family, there were secret individuals who could discover and reach out to silence traitors. It would not be her comrades of the north, it would be secret groups within the south, or even — she shivered at the thought — the French Sûreté which had eyes everywhere. The image of the Inspector of police, Monsieur Bastein, came up before her and she could feel her skin prickling. She pondered . . . perhaps she could kill two birds with the same stone, so to speak, or perhaps even three . . . !

On Saturday afternoon Claude Bastein was into the semi-circular driveway of the McKinnon household as fast as his green Peugeot 203 would take him — he'd almost side-swiped several pedicabs and a car during his speeding haste to see Charmaine. She had cancelled their meeting at the Cathedral for a run-through of their wedding details with the Bishop — Claude receiving the telephone message with utter disbelief. How could this be? She loved him . . . there was no doubt about that, but it seemed that the McKinnon children had become her main concern. She could not leave them. He slammed on the brakes at the gravelled driveway, sending dust into the air and causing James McKinnon at the front door to cough and brush away the fine particles from his face.

“Good lord, Claude, do you have to . . . ?”

Claude stepped from the car, perspiring profusely. “Sorry about that, James. Where is she?”

“I don't know. She left a quarter of an hour ago after the Bishop telephoned me with the cancellation news. There was no point Phuong and me attending if your marriage wasn't to go ahead. Lacroix said he would counsel her if it was necessary, but where she has gone, heaven only knows. Come inside out of the heat.”

Claude kicked at the gravel and stepped onto the paving slabs at the entrance. “Could do with a beer or two — something to settle my nerves. You too, no doubt!”

“A very wise idea.” James ushered Claude in through the door and closed it. In the hall the slight drop in temperature was apparent. They moved into the drawing room that looked out over the semi-circular driveway, to which Claude immediately turned as if searching through the windows for an arriving taxi or pedicab. “You don't suppose she's gone to Phuong's?”

“I've left a message for Phuong to telephone if she turns up. She may, they are very close, Claude.”

“Yes, but the problem seems to be that she is even closer to your children, James — especially Samantha. *Mon Dieu*, I cannot compete with that! They have taken her heart, which I thought was mine. Oh, *pour l'amour de Dieu*, what am I to do, *mon ami*?” He sat, with his hands pressed to his face, several light tears dropping from his eyes. “James, she is my life . . . what is it without her? Without her it is nothing . . . nothing!”

Ngan came in with a silver tray containing two large glasses of cold Malayan *Tiger* beer together with a bottle on the side. “Now I know why I import this glorious stuff,” said James, just for occasions such as this.”

“*Oui*, it's the beer for dramatic situations and the champagne for the happy ones, eh?” said Claude, reaching for a glass, “If you don't mind, this situation calls for a long draught.” He downed half the glass in one swift movement.

“I don't mind at all, Claude. In fact, I'll be needing this as well!”

Claude downed another mouthful. “Do you think we should motor over to Phuong's?”

James shook his head. “No, better to stay close to the telephone in case Phuong rings with news. Then we can go over if necessary.”

Samantha appeared in the doorway, clutching a doll. She wandered forward and sat on James's knee. “Papa, where's Charmaine? She went out before and she was crying.”

James patted her back. “We don't know, my little dove, but I'm sure she will be back before long.”

“Is that why uncle Claude is here?”

Claude, sitting with James on the brocade-covered sofa moved closer and touched her hand. “Charmaine will be back to see you soon . . . we are sure that she has gone to visit someone, that's all *mon chérie*. It's just like you wish to leave your doll and go and talk to others at times, isn't it?”

“I suppose. Do you like my doll, uncle Claude? Charmaine bought her for me . . . her name is Colette, that's French you know and look at how beautiful she is, just like Charmaine.”

“*Mon Dieu, Mon Dieu* . . . how is all of this to end? Oh *chérie*, sorry, but yes, you have a beautiful Colette whom you love as much as you love Charmaine. But, one day there will be others for you to love . . . many others, and perhaps there will be more dolls like Colette for you to love as well. That's what you would like, isn't it?”



“Oh yes, a sister and a brother for Colette. We could start a family, couldn't we uncle Claude?”

Claude turned away and James could see that he was silently weeping.

“Well, hop down now, Sam, and go and play with Colette. Uncle Claude and I have some men talk to do. Okay?”

“Okay, Colette is feeling sleepy now, so I must put her to bed. Goodbye uncle Claude.”

Claude snuffled a small “Bye bye, *mon cherie*.”

Charmaine stepped out of the blue and cream Renault taxi giving the driver more *dong* than she needed to. She had considered going straight to Phuong's residence, but thought that would be embarrassing for the young teacher. Her mind settled upon Trinh, General Dao's wife, and she re-directed the taxi. The Dao's lived in an apartment block off the old Rue Paul Blanchy, now known as Trung nu Vuong. She was unsettled in mind, knowing that she had just made the biggest decision of her life, torn between two destinies, torn between two of the dearest loves of her life. But she needed consultation, she needed solace — she needed someone to tell her that she had made the correct decision. The heat clung to her like a closet, humidity sinking into the pores of her skin, and suddenly she felt weary, as if she were old and wrinkled. She knew she was close to breaking point — she could feel it in her bones. The elevator was out of action, so she slowly climbed the stairs up to the Dao apartment situated on the fourth level, stopping at each level to catch her breath. A young Vietnamese girl came down the stairs and saw her leaning against the wall.

“Are you alright? You don't look well.”

Charmaine nodded twice and raised her hands. “I'm fine . . . I'm fine, just a little puffed, that's all . . . the stairs, you know.” The girl passed on by. “Okay.”

When she finally came to the door of the Dao's apartment, she rested for a moment against the wall, looking out through the grilled opening of the passage over the tin and terracotta tiled rooftops of Saigon. She'd spent many fond years in Vietnam, first with her father in Hue and recently with the McKinnon family in Saigon. The country had become her home, she loved it so, but there was change and perhaps even more than that coming. Nothing can ever be the same, she thought. It's all about burning one's bridges and moving on no matter how much it hurts. She pressed the buzzer . . . silence . . . she pressed it again . . . no sound from within. She leant back against the chill of the concrete wall, feeling a scream arising from within . . . nothing she could do about it . . . nothing . . . but instead, there came a low sobbing as she crumpled to the concrete passage floor.

Cuc, now known as Nhan Lien, was whistling as she entered the house. She could smell something cooking in the kitchen and gravitated there. The elderly cook, Hwa, turned to look at her as she almost danced into the room.

“So, what makes you happy, eh? Did you kill someone today — maybe put poison into someone's lunch, eh? I know what you're about, Missy Lien, but maybe it is better for my health that I do not. What you think?”

Lien laughed. “Oh cookie, you are too smart for me. But you need to keep your trap shut, you know, otherwise some of my people may come and take you away.”

Hwa shrugged her shoulders.

“So what? I am old. I have seen everything come and go so there is nothing that can surprise me now. As I told you yesterday, I have lived through the Japanese and Chinese incursions into this land, so I am not afraid of your people who come from the North. What can they do to me, eh? You do what you have to do and I will do mine. It pleases me to cook for this house. I do not have family anymore, so whoever comes into this home becomes my family. You see, the proper preparation of food is the most important work anyone can do in this life. Any true Vietnamese person knows that, though some have forgotten along the way in their quest for power.”

Lien laughed. “You talk about power? It is something you know little of, Hwa. Yes, you have a domain of sorts here in this home where it seems you rule, or rather, pretend you rule.”

“You have big mouth Nhan Lien, if that is what your name really is. I know you are here for some grave purpose, but perhaps it is you who should shut their mouth, not I?”

Lien was silent. She had been moving toward a conversation that was forbidden and she needed to retreat before she said things that she would regret. The day had been successful and there was no sense in destroying the joy that she felt, knowing that she held the key towards bringing down one of the most senior Generals of the AVRN. She forced a smile at Hwa, shrugged her shoulders, and said. “Perhaps you know best, Auntie Hwa, after all you have had decades of experience not only living under the Japanese but the imperial French also. Well, we are both pleased that the French soldiers have gone back to their country, though they do seem to have left some civilian remnants behind. These must also go, do you not think? We must wipe Vietnam from their influence.”

“Except,” said Hwa, “From some of their most delicious recipes to which I must admit, I treasure.”

They both laughed.



Lien had relaxed in her room after the evening meal, which indeed had some delightful French cuisine flavours added to it, when there was a soft knock on her door. She had been reading a manifesto from Hanoi and quickly hid it underneath the mattress of her bed. Just in case, she thought, as she slowly opened the door.

Tai's brother, Giang, stood there with a bottle of red wine and two small plastic cups. He smiled. "Just thought you might like to celebrate after your day of victory. Tai has told me of your success with the General, which can only lead to his destruction. May I come in?"

Again, Lien was struck with his incredible resemblance to her murdered fiancée, Kim. So, what harm would it do? Invite him in, because tomorrow who knows, we could all be dead.

"Come, there's a small table here near the bed."

He moved as if he was walking on silk. Before she knew it, he was sitting on the bed beside her and placing the bottle with the two cups on the small metallic folding table. She smelt his body scent. Curiously, it was much the same as Kim's had been. She felt herself remembering the days prior to his death, when they were cozily wrapped up together in the field on that final moonlit night. And now, here he was back with her again with a change of name, same as she. We are travelling this road together, she thought. Kim is here with me again and destiny is to be fulfilled.

Giang had extracted the cork from the bottle of wine and poured into the two cups.

"Thanks, Kim,"

He didn't seem fazed by the mention of her deceased fiancée's name. "To you, Nhan Lien, and our success in the destruction of the Southern Generals, and Ngo Dinh Diem, and a blessing to our comrades from the North who are now surging toward Saigon as we speak. Success!"

Lien picked up her cup, touched it with Giang's and drank deeply. It had been a wonderful day. She had accomplished something that few could only dream of and now, here she was, almost in the arms of her beloved Kim again, drinking a toast to success and the future destruction of the South. Giang smiled at her, placed his cup on the table, and leant towards her.

"You're very beautiful, Lien. But I know that your real name is Cuc, and I should like to call you that if that is alright with you."

Her lips were so close to his. She closed her eyes. Kim, my darling, she thought. Yes, Cuc she was born, and Cuc she would remain till the day of her death, regardless of the new names she had been given for political purposes. Kim had always loved her name. He would hold his head on one side, smile at her and softly speak her name. "Cuc, my lovely Cuc."

And she heard Giang, so close beside her, softly whispering her name "Cuc, my beautiful Cuc."

Their lips met and she dissolved into a warm and cozy feeling of heightened sexuality.

Bishop Jean-Baptiste Lacroix made sure that his red zucchetto was firm on his head as the black Packard swung through the gates of the Presidential Palace into the circular drive. It wouldn't do for the President's sister-in-law, Madame Nhu, to comment that it might need straightening — speaking as she often did about petty things as was her want. He didn't like her, had little time for her picking — especially her sarcasm directed to her brother-in-law, Ngo Dinh Diem. Even so, Jean-Baptiste enjoyed these presidential meetings and felt honoured to be invited by his old friend. And the president listened to his advice, which was more than some of his generals did. In fact, thought Jean-Baptiste, some of them were simply waiting for the opportunity to remove the president and install themselves into the palace.

His chauffeur, Duy, opened the passenger door for him to alight. The Bishop patted him on the shoulder: "Return to the Presbytery, Duy. I shall have someone telephone when I am ready to return. This meeting may take some hours."

"Yes, my Lord. Will you be wanting to visit the McKinnon household this evening? You did mention something about it earlier."

Jean-Baptiste turned. "Ah, I am unsure about that. There are some disturbing incidences that may require me to remain at the Presbytery. I will advise further. Now, you have a few hours to yourself, but stay at the Presbytery where I may reach you by phone."

The chauffeur touched his cap. "Thank you, my Lord."

The Bishop was thinking, why doesn't he get himself married? He's been with me for several years and I see no sign of anyone in his life, except his parents and sister. He's a good Catholic, very attentive to my needs and always punctual. I'm sure he would make a dedicated husband for someone. I must have a look through my congregation for someone suitable.

He was early — none of the generals had arrived. Ngo Dinh Diem sat behind his large desk, shuffling some papers. He looked up as Jean-Baptiste entered the room and smiled.

"Well, my Lord Bishop, welcome again to my humble establishment."

Jean-Baptiste laughed. "Not so humble, Mr. President, eh?" He seated himself in one of the the lavish brocade-backed chairs in front of the desk. He looked around the room. "No changes since our last meeting? I thought your glamorous sister-in-law may have been fiddling with the furniture again?"



“She tires me somewhat, with her orders to the staff. But, what can I do? She has a brilliant mind and she is useful in consulting with foreign leaders.”

The Bishop nodded. “Yes, I give you that, and she is a good Catholic, though some of her earlier Buddhist ideology shows through at times.”

Diem screwed up his nose. “Yes, I am aware of that.”

“Do you think she has too much sympathy for the Buddhists here in Saigon?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, my friend. Anyway, what news have you for me about the British?”

Jean-Baptiste accepted the cognac that was poured for him, tasted it and placed the glass on the edge of the desk in front of him.

“His Holiness put forward your proposal to Whitehall and the good news is that although nothing is set in concrete, the indication is that the British are looking on this favourably and may send a number of troops to help train our men. Of course, they are still engaged in mopping up the communists in Malaya, but they hinted that they could free up a regiment of men any time soon. They’ve had great success in combating the insurgents. I am told that the troopship HMT Oxfordshire sails regularly to Singapore and Hong Kong and can carry one thousand men at a time. She could take on board a full regiment of battle experienced troops from Malaya and soon be here in Saigon. That would give an immense boost to our cause.”

“Yes, I was hoping for a little more than that. I need something definite, but it may give the Americans a little push to be more active than they are at present. Nothing like a little jealousy let loose, is there, my Bishop? Ah, but you have done well, my friend, done well. I was talking on the phone to president Eisenhower yesterday, and he seemed to be far too cautious for my liking, but he had great success in Korea pushing the communists back. Well, some perceived opposition by the British may see him doing a little more than pushing here.” He chuckled. “We can do this — with our allies, we can easily subdue the North.”

Jean-Baptiste took another sip of his cognac. “There is talk of Ho Chi Minh looking somewhat frail. My sources are usually accurate enough. Do you suppose he might be dying?”

“Oh, I fervently hope so. Forgive me, but though it would change the chain of command very little, the psychological effect among NVA troops would be significant. Another win for us.”

An aide knocked and opened the door. “General Dao, your Excellency.”

Dao took his cap off and strode across the room. “Ah Bishop, good to see you here. Any of my young officers confessing things to you that I should know about?” he chuckled. “And good morning, Excellency. Air Vice Marshall Pho cannot make it, down with a fever I’m told.”

Ngo Dinh Diem sucked his teeth. “Another excuse . . . I’m becoming very tired of his excuses. When the Americans are fully with us, he will find himself in a backwater, cleaning toilets. Ah, Lacroix has some news for us . . . the British are looking favourable to sending us troops. It’s just a matter of time; they are having great triumphs in Malaya against the communists. Soon, they will be able to free up a regiment or two of their crack soldiers to assist us.”

Jean-Baptiste looked concerned. “There is nothing certain as yet. They are pursuing all possibilities, so we shall simply have to wait and see.”

General Dao sat next to the bishop, looked directly at the president and made some clicking noises with his tongue. “Well, Mr. President, would you like me to travel to London to shake things up somewhat? After all, the British with the Americans and Australians were very successful in Korea. And there’s a thought . . . we should invite the prime minister of Australia here with view to helping out. Those Diggers of his can fight like tigers. And then there’s the Canadians, they were there as well.”

“Yes, but that was under the United Nations umbrella,” said Jean-Baptiste, more than fifteen nations helped out. I suppose we could lobby some of them, but I think most will have had enough of fighting for now. It’s too close in time.”

Ngo Dinh Diem drummed his fingers on the desk. “I need more men and more arms. It’s as simple as that. I shall be phoning Harold MacMillan in London this evening. We need to push things along fast, very fast. We are so close to victory and I do not wish to lose the edge.”

The uniformed aide at the door announced. “General Tran Huy Lam, General Nguyen Thanh Minh and General Hoang Tan Linh.”

Two other aides hurried to arrange chairs for the three, then departed. The president’s eyes roamed the faces of the latecomers. His lips firmed. “How do you think we are to win this war if you men keep turning up late for appointments? I should sack all of you. If I handed you over to my chief advisor, Ngo Dinh Nhu, you would be gone this very day.”

Commissar Chu Lam Long of the newly established National Liberation Front, or Viet Cong, led his men and his female second-in-command, Du Truong Linh, into the village of Binh Chai. The cadre had been there numerous times, raiding the hamlet of food, in particular the rice the farmers had gleaned from their fields. But on their last visit, Long had relented, and much to his team’s astonishment, had handed some rations to the more elderly of the place. All the men in the village were



old, or ill of health, and so no use for recruiting. Some had even disappeared to join the AVRN, the army of the south. Long had been angry about that and had decimated several huts where the young men had lived, taking anything of value and setting the huts on fire. The women and children had no choice but to find accommodation with others in the village or leave for the south.

Linh walked beside him, her AK47 slung over her right shoulder. “There’s the old man that your brother knocked down . . . Doesn’t look any worse from it.”

Long stared at the peasant, sitting and smoking outside his rough hut with its sagging bamboo walls. “Yes, I wasn’t happy about that. He was rude, but that was no reason for Hung to go off like that. Anyway, old people like him aren’t much use to anyone these days. They can’t work in the rice fields anymore, so his hut should be given to a family that needs it.”

“Where would he go?”

“That’s not our problem. When Ho Chi Minh is victorious there will be a separate old people’s village for him to die in. At present he is living a capitalist life going nowhere fast.”

“But that could be some time. He does have a daughter who works in the fields and who supports him. These people are no trouble to us. They have nothing.”

“Except for their bad attitude and playing both sides against each other, north and south. How old is this woman? She should be fighting with us, not lazing away her time here in this place, and I want to know if she has brothers who have gone over to the pigs of the south. Find her and bring her to me.” •

To be continued.

A Day in the Life of Adam Bandt, Leader of the Greens Party

With apologies to Punch



Member of the public (standing): “Hey Adam, wot’s with the donkey and cart? Where’s your electric car?”

Adam Bandt: “It’s really weird, you know. The wind’s stopped blowing and the sun’s been blocked out with cloud for a fortnight, and a great storm of hailstones has knocked out an entire field of major solar panels. We’re low on power.”

Member of the public: “Wa’ll, looks like you made the right choice with puttin’ yer money where yer mouth is. Keep it that way; save energy, mate.”