



Saigon Sunset

A saga in several episodes by Graham Price

Chapter 10

Earlier chapters are available on:

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The pedicab driver dropped Charmaine off at the old Jardine de la Ville gardens, known as Tao Dan gardens since 1954 after the French colonial and military powers had left Saigon. The large park was a massive green lungs of the city and a welcome relief from the clatter of daily life. She needed some time alone with what she hoped would be the quietness of her mind, that is if it ever would become quiet again. There seemed to be a frothing torrent within her, raging back and forth like a wind swept dam waiting to breach its walls. If a mind could crack and shatter, she thought, then hers was already in advanced stages.

There were few people about, the sun already reaching its zenith, but she dragged herself into the interior of the gardens, seeking out a shady spot where she might come to terms with the infuriating argument going on within her. She was rubbing her face as she walked along, receiving some quizzical looks from passers by, knowing that she probably looked somewhat bedraggled and red of eye. But she didn't care. It wasn't something that she could share with any of these people. Phuong yes, Trinh yes, but there were very few others she could hand her heart over to, and sadly not Claude at this present time, nor her caring employer James McKinnon. The Bishop, perhaps, but only perhaps and in secret. James' children suddenly flooded her mind with their antics, their passions, their loves, and she almost tripped as she cut across the cool lawn underneath a proliferation of tall palms. This was the problem, their care and love for her. How could she leave them? How could she have ever even brought that to mind? They had captured her heart and explored all its corners so surely, down to the very depths of love, so that undoubtedly there was little room for much else. But the separate love — the other kind of love — that she felt for Claude, where was that to go, to grow as she had fondly thought — to expand, to bloom? And for it to end? Which she knew her recent actions would be attributed to, and that also could not be. Never! The darkening of the tunnel within her became more dark, more and more dark as the hours went by.

Almost exhausted, she slumped by a small lily pond, dipped her hand beside the pink and white lily flowers and splashed some of the cool water onto her perspiring face. She looked into the pond and saw someone she did not recognise. Her reflection rippled in small waves with the presence of several golden carp coming to the edge of the pond near her hand. I am two people, she thought, opposed persons caught in a loving but dark web of my own making and entrapped with broken strands that cannot be mended. Cannot be mended! Instantly, the carp swam away from the tears that were dropping like rain upon the surface of the pond.

Thang Cam Tai felt her teeth clenching as she stared down the commissar. She was angry that she had been pulled from rice seedling planting by Chu's men. The heat of the day was already prolific and soon it would be too late for planting until the next day. With her younger cousin, Ping, who had also been pulled from the sun-washed paddy, she stood firmly surrounded by these people who could only be National Liberation Front, or what she definitely knew as Viet Cong—Vietnamese communists!

She swallowed, adjusted the strap of her pointed *non-la* hat, and taking courage from where she knew not, flared at him: "Why do you do this? We have to feed the village, but you people come and take everything away from us. Our men? You have taken our men—the young men of this village who will never return; I know that. Everyone knows that!" She spat in the dirt, lifted her pointed chin and gave him that brave cold stare again. "Alright then, do what you must. Question us, but let us go back to the fields. We have work to do to prevent future starvation. But of course, you would rather let us starve, wouldn't you? That is your way. This is how you roll out your so-called superior communist justice!"

Linh, the Commissar's second in command, slung her AK47 machine rifle over her shoulder and shook her head. "Fiery piece of shit, aren't you! You either work with us, or against us! Seems you have already chosen the path you must take. You have capitalist ideas, rather entrenched, I would imagine. You speak of us taking your young men, but are you crazy, it is the South that has taken them — it is that mad bastard president Diem and his cronies who has put them into the ARVN as they call it — an army of misfits and pigs that will not survive this year!"

Tai held tightly to Ping's hand. Tai was the elder of the two, coming on now for almost seventeen, having been the youngest born of the Thang family, her elder brothers gone to war and her father so old and almost incapacitated, her mother having died in childbirth at only twenty-three years and Ping from her mother's sister's family just thirteen and already an orphan. The war had seen to that.



Tai planted her legs into the dirt in a defiant manner, holding fiercely to Ping. “I will not let you take anything more from this village. For many years before any of you were born, my father, mother and grandparents worked the fields to keep this village in food and to keep us and our cousins from starvation. You who come from the north know nothing of this. You simply read your leader’s propaganda and think you can change everything, but you don’t really understand. I have had some schooling . . . there’s no need to laugh at that . . . I see you do laugh, but it’s probably more education than you people have ever had, Like you, we give thanks that the French colonists have long gone. Of that, we all are agreed, no? So, why cannot we simply go back to our fields, our homes, and live in peace?”

Linh made as if to speak, but Commissar Chu Lam Long waved her back. He handed his AK47 to his younger brother, Lung, and strode toward the two girls. He was so close to Tai that she could smell the stink of his body odour. He stopped merely centimetres in front of her face, nodded at her, smiled and turned back to his cadre. “It seems that the women in this uncomfortable village are stronger than men. Or more stupid!” There were some laughs, some titters. The men of his group chattering among themselves, but the two Viet Cong women remained tight-lipped. Tai wondered. Which way was this going to go? She might be able to stare down the men, but the women looked dangerous. Whatever happened, it would need to be played out very succinctly because she was not going to allow Ping to become involved in any further confrontation that may jeopardize her life. She had made her statement, set her plan knowing how these people worked. Their minds were an open book to her — experience had given her that facility. Now she needed to back off a little, though not to the point of groveling to these communists. Never! She waited to see if her plan would work. From what she gleaned from the stance and attitude of this commissar, she felt confident that she would come out of this on the safe side, together with her cousin Ping.

The laughter had died down. The commissar’s brother, Hung, shouted out: “Why are we wasting time here? We don’t need these people. If they won’t join us, then let’s be rid of them!”

Commissar Chu said: “Strategically, we need this village. It is an important link in the trails that cross with the South. We need to keep it open, and in time we will need the rice they have planted.”

Hung said: “At what expense?”

“I’ll be the judge of that. Everyone, stand down!”

Tai glanced sideways at Ping and squeezed her hand. Ping squeezed back.

Phuong was devastated. She placed the green telephone receiver into its cradle and sat back against the soft plush cushions. Charmaine had gone missing! Immediately, she wondered why her dear friend had not contacted her if there was a problem? They were so close, which left Phuong fearful that something grave had occurred. This was not good. Something very strange had happened; here was Claude ringing and enquiring but without telling her much. It was so strange. They had been due at the Cathedral to be given a run through by the Bishop for the forthcoming double marriage, but now that seemed very unlikely. James had come on the phone after Claude, and had asked if there was something that Charmaine may have confided to her that might shed a light upon the situation. Phuong had said there was not, and when her adopted daughter Mia had come into the room she felt the need to hold her, and hold her tight. It seemed that families were fast becoming fragile.

“Mia darling, would you ask Kam to bring the car around. There is something I must do, but I’m sorry, I can’t take you with me.”

Mia scrunched up her face. “Why can’t I go, mama?”

Phuong stood up and embraced the child within her slender arms. She ran her hand down the child’s long black hair, feeling the silkiness. “Sometimes, there are things that older people have to do, my darling. It’s not that I don’t want you with me, it’s just that there needs to be a space between us just for a little while, because as you know there are grown up things to be done and talked about and it would simply bore you to tears to be caught up with all of that. But, if you like, we can talk about it when I return.”

Mia kissed her and unclasped herself from Phuong’s hold. “I’ll get Kam.”

The black Citroen Light 15 growled along the boulevards, sharing with bicycles, pedicabs, lop-sided trucks and French cars with Phuong peering anxiously along the sidewalks, looking for any sign of Charmaine. Where would she go, she wondered? It became a game of hide and seek, with Phuong musing over all the possibilities . . . perhaps the Dao’s . . . Trinh? Or the English Pendlebury’s? Kam was fiddling with the tuner on the dashboard radio, trying to get some music amid the crackles. He’d stopped at some unknown radio station that was playing one of Elvis Presley’s songs ‘Now and then there’s a fool such as I am over you’. Kam was trying to bring the station in clearer as it dipped and dived in and out until the popular singer and film star came in clearly with ‘You taught me how to love, and now, you say that we’re through . . .’ Phuong shook her head, surely not! How incongruous!

She called out “Kam, please . . . find something else.”

The chauffeur grunted and turned the radio off. “Sorry, nice American voice though, this man.”

She couldn’t help a smile. She laughed. “Yes, he makes the girls happy, almost at the same time he makes them sad.”



“Why so?”

“Because they fall in love with him, thousands of them, and he can only fall in love with one.”

“Ah, like you and Mister James, eh? And like *Gone With the Wind*?”

“Good lord no. Oh, it’s difficult to explain . . . can you drive to the Continental, I wish to see if Miss Charmaine has booked in there. And then we’ll try the Majestic.”

“Okay.” Kam turned into Tu Do — the old rue Catinat — and slowed as the car made its way through the array of lesser machines. Suddenly, he jammed on the brakes, causing Phuong to fall forward to the back of his seat. She steadied herself with her hands. “What’s happening?” And then she heard the chanting.

“Buddhists!” said Kam. “Too many! Very young, most of them. How can they be so young?” There was a heavy bang behind the car and Phuong turned to see a pedicab jammed up the back of the Citroen. “Oh Lord, what’s happened now! Kam, can you check?” As Kam stepped out of the Citroen and went to the rear, Phuong had a clear view forward. The traffic was cluttered up in front of a group of Buddhist priests squatting in their saffron robes at the centre of the cross streets, some holding placards calling for the resignation of the president. Others, for the end of war crimes. The chanting seemed to become louder as Phuong wound the rear window down and leaned out for a better view. A squad of helmeted police stood around with shields and batons. Phuong thought they looked rather ugly and dangerous but they were not doing anything, except watching. She thought they looked rather bored, as if they had no idea of why they were there. Unlike some squads that she knew of, that went about harassing people they considered a threat to the Diem regime. She wasn’t surprised at the Buddhist protest — seems that it had been working up a storm of recent times, but did the Buddhists want peace with the North on the North’s terms? Her Catholic upbringing had made her somewhat suspicious of the Buddhist’s motives. There was no doubt about it, their attitude had changed in recent years.

Kam came from the rear of the car. He wiped perspiration from his brow. “A problem. No damage to the car, the fenders have taken care of that, but he is asking for compensation, saying our fault we stop in a hurry. What to do?”

Phuong rummaged through her handbag and pulled out a handful of *dong*. “Here, give him this and tell him to get out of our sight before we have those police over there, arrest him.”

Kam laughed. “No problem Miss.”

Cuc, now known as Nhan Lien, was feeling fulfilled. The sex with Giang had been the best she had experienced. And she couldn’t help but agree that his resemblance to Kim was remarkable. How could two people be so alike? But she was still determined to avenge Kim’s death and her insertion into General Dao’s close office community was going well. She had not seen Colonel Khuu since the time when he had literally signed her over to General Dao’s office, but she had seen the Colonel’s Lieutenant several times and also General Dao’s Lieutenant, the half Vietnamese/Chinese and very handsome Han Chen whom she now saw every day. Despite her political priorities she liked Chen. He was amusing, telling her jokes and spending quite considerable amounts of money on her at restaurants and Cafés. It was amazing; she had men falling at her feet like never before. But it was becoming somewhat difficult to keep them separated and she had made sure that her diary was not compromised. It was not easy, but she managed it — she, who had once been a tiger in the provinces, fighting alongside the best of the Cong. She should have shot that plantation manager who was abusing his hired help . . . what was his name? March something . . . Marchand . . . arsehole Frenchman. When this was all over, she might travel to that plantation and put him out of his misery! Right between the eyes, she thought. She knew where to get her hands on a heavy caliber pistol, .45 no problem. And if any of his co-workers intervened, well bad luck for them. She could feel the firm pressure of the barrel right up onto his brow as she slowly squeezed the trigger. BANG!

But for the time being, it was Saigon and enjoyable times amid the plotting to bring down the corrupt Diem machine. Target the military chiefs, and then the rest would tumble like a deck of cards. That was the aim. Which is why she was at the Solaire restaurant this evening with Han Chen. She knew he was one of Dao’s favourites due to a family connection. No uniform tonight. He was attired in a loose white open-necked shirt, satin grey jeans and light tan sandals. Quite a fashion statement, thought Lien as she sipped her gin and tonic. Really, this guy is something else! She looked at the crowd in the restaurant, all glitter compared to what she had experienced in the field. Some of them would be dead by the time they reached thirty. In fact, if she had her way, most of them would. She had dressed for evening, somewhat wishing that Chen would get ideas above himself. The *ao dai* she wore was a plain pale green and hugged her contours as tightly as did those which seduced General Dao and his cronies. Not that she would have minded showing off her contours for any of them, for as she well knew — and as many men had told her — she had a superior sexy figure that appealed to them. And then, a wave of remorse came rushing over her. Was she rubbishing Kim’s memory with all of this reference to sex? She took another gulp of the gin and tonic. No, she thought, no, whatever I have to do, no matter what, it is all in the cause we are fighting for and what Kim was fighting for. I hold his memory up high and will do what I must to vindicate his heroism.



Chen paid the bill and suggested to Lien that they move on to the succulent outdoor eating stalls. She was happy with that, keen to get away from the lavish and expensive Solaire restaurant. They settled on some bowls of mee and shrimps under canvas and white lantern glow and then he said “You wanna go dancing?”

Opportunity, she thought. Get him in the mood and then? She looked up at him, pushing the empty bowl and chopsticks away. “That would be good. And later?”

His eyes lit up. “And later? Well, that’s up to you . . . we have to work together, but . . . as long as the General doesn’t find out . . .!”

Lien took his hand. “I’m sure he won’t.”

She woke. It was Sunday morning. He was lying naked next to her in the first floor bedroom above the market, snoring lightly, his head hanging off the edge of the pillow. She noted that dawn was breaking and carefully as she could manage, she slipped out of bed. Her clothes were on the floor — they had almost ripped at them, tearing them off. So hot was she. And now, looking back as she slowly and quietly picked up her clothes, she knew what she had become — a lady of the night, much the same as the prostitutes who ran their living in the market place above some of Saigon’s main streets. The only difference being that she wasn’t paid. Already the day was alive. The stall owners had been to the vegetable, meat and fish markets and were setting up for the day. Soon, people would be out looking for breakfast. The army would have been awake some time, out and about through the provinces attempting to catch any insurgents on the hop. But Diem’s ARVN army was somewhat disorganised and unsure of how to hold off the North and the various insurgents that were attacking southern provinces. Saigon was seen as impenetrable, safe, except for the occasional grenade tossed into various businesses and open restaurants — the reason why most of them had wire grilles over open areas. Saigon was secure. Or so concluded President Diem and his advisors.

Lien knew this was not so. And she was determined to make it even more upsetting. She knew there would be no officers such as Chen on duty today, so if she could make up a legitimate excuse for attending the office she could do some spying within General Dao’s office. There was no lock between her room and the General’s, so as long as she could get past one of the non-com week-end guards in the hall, she would be up and away. And she needn’t worry about the General because being such a lover of the high life, he would be enjoying his Sunday in the style of luxury that he was used to. She hailed a pedicab.

With all the high security clearances that she had, it was almost a breeze getting back into the building. She thought that things were somewhat slack; you wouldn’t get away with this in Hanoi. And perhaps not even with some of the French police who were now gone from Vietnam. So, how would it be outside the General’s office? The elevator rumbled and gave a jerk. Waiting for the door to open she summoned up her courage — the final barrier. A young corporal was sitting at the end of the hall, fast asleep in his chair. If she wished to take his life, it would be no trouble as she silently crept up on him. The French SACM service pistol was firmly clipped into a closed holster on his right side, so that would be difficult to reach, but if she had a knife! Well, that would have to wait, all she wanted at this time was to greatly embarrass him.

She was only two metres away from him when she shouted “chú ý — ATTENTION!”

He spluttered “What! What are you doing!”

She stared him down, moving close . . . allowing him the pleasure of scenting her body odour. “I am General Dao’s personal secretary! You would have seen me around during the week. The General will not be amused to know that you were found to be asleep on duty, negligent in your service.” He began to speak, but she barked at him, “If I had been someone from the North, I could have wiped you from the face of the earth. How do you think the General would have reacted to that? Blood all over this nice clean carpet!”

His face went red. “It’s been a long duty. It’s so boring here; I should be out in the fields after the Cong, but sorry, please don’t tell the General. I’d be up for a firing squad.”

She thought that was somewhat exaggerated and couldn’t help but feel sorry for him; so young, sixteen, seventeen perhaps — a baby. But she kept up her strong countenance. “I have important work to do — General Dao has given me a pile of papers this high to get through today.” She stretched her arms from waist to neck. “This work cannot be done during the week. I was hoping it could be done Saturday, but I needed a break . . . needed to relax, you know, to have some fun dining, dancing, looking at the moon. You seem as if you could do with some time off with a girl friend? Perhaps I might inform the General that you were alert and very conscientious in your duty, and even suggest that you need some leave. We are not all that strict, you know. We do have a heart.”

The soldier nodded, seeming thankful for being let off from a roasting by not only the General and his aides, but his sergeant, who in his mind was an absolute bastard.

“Thank you. It’s very kind of you.”

“As you would know, this is secret work, the analysing of priority papers . . . many stolen from the North. It’s work that cannot be leaked to any other department in this building. Nothing leaves this floor. Nothing! You know that, don’t you?”



The walls have ears and people have tongues and then there's the weakness of wanting money in exchange for secrets. So, you are guarding the future of this nation, Corporal. You're not simply one soldier sitting in a hallway vetting people, you are part of a greater combination of special forces. Very special . . . very special!"

He nodded, and with that she turned quickly, placed her key in the lock and entered her office. The door to General Dao's office was open. She hesitated . . . was there someone there? But no lights were on, so she slowly edged up to the office and stood carefully just inside the door. Nothing. How beautiful the day was! There was enough light entering the room from the balcony beyond the frosted glass door, which would work in her favour upon the slim chance that someone might come in — she didn't need the General's office lit up for what she was about to do. She would like to booby-trap one of the cupboards with a grenade, but that would wait; her aim now was to look for useful information on regiment sizes and positions and any meetings the General might be having with the President. Where and when. One day he would have need to take her with him as his secretary for a meeting with the President. She could hardly wait!

The small safe in the corner was out of her league, but some of Dao's drawers had interesting maps about troop movements, so she took the tiny Minox spy camera from under her *ao dai* and began photographing. There was some interesting memorandums about shipments arriving at Tan Son Nhut airbase this coming week and she took shots of that. She was turning her attention to the wall maps with coloured pins stuck into them at various landmarks when she heard voices from the hall. It couldn't be! This was not supposed to happen. Where could she hide? She stared at the frosted glass door leading to the balcony, her only hope. She moved fast as she heard the outer door to her office being opened; someone was coming in — she only had seconds!

The humidity slapped at her as she quietly closed the frosted door behind her and looked around for some place to hide. There was nothing, but there was a rusted iron fire-escape to one side of the balcony, out of sight from any of the office windows. Several spotted doves on the concrete balcony looked at her quizzically before taking flight, gliding to the top of the next building. The fire-escape would descend several floors into an alley behind the two buildings. She could only hope that the alley was somewhat obscured and not under guard. The voices came closer. She had to move. She stuffed her sandals into her shoulder bag and began the descent, with rusted black paint from the iron steps flaking off onto her feet. Just what she didn't need! She'd not had a tetanus injection in years and surely didn't wish to end up in hospital with blood poisoning. But she'd never manage the escape rungs with slippery sandals. She took several deep breaths as her head disappeared out of sight from anyone who might open the door — black clouds were lining the sky and she knew that heavy rain was on the way. The fire-escape was flimsy and loose; seemingly hadn't been maintained for decades, and if she slipped now? Well, it would all be over. No success in what she and her superiors of the NLF had expected. A terrible waste.

Lien was half-way down when the clouds burst open, sending a torrent of rain upon her. She froze, clinging tightly to the iron structure. Her feet were wet, her hands were wet, slipping seemed to be on the cards as she reached the second floor balcony, and being Sunday she was hoping against all hope that there would be no one behind the windows of that floor looking out at her. A black cat came to the window and meowed at her. She contemplated trying the balcony door to see if it was unlocked, but that floor was an unknown quantity and she might simply be running into more trouble. At least there was some relief from the heavy rain as she paused underneath the concrete overhang. The cat began pawing at the window, as if wanting to be let out. We're both in trouble, little puss, she thought, waving her hand at the animal. Out of our depth. Did they leave you there all week-end without food or water, my little darling? It was strange that these kind of thoughts came to her when she was in this desperate situation. Very strange. She looked into the alley, no sign of anyone. Had the rain chased them away, or was it one of those that had been blocked off by the military and therefore had no entrance? I have to keep going. I have to get out of here regardless of the downpour. She edged back to the fire-escape and very gingerly resumed her descent. She was soaked to the skin, but made her way down the rungs slowly and carefully. Can't stuff this up now that I am so close to Dao and his mob; now that I am in the position to send them all to hell.

At the first floor balcony there was a soldier sitting with his back to the window, watching a film being projected onto a screen in the background. It seemed to be a French movie — she could see the Eiffel Tower as a young couple walked past. They looked so happy, enjoying what appeared to be Springtime in Paris. Should she wait before she stepped onto that balcony, or risk it? She gave thanks to whatever gods there were that this fire-escape was a fixed one and not like others that unravelled as you went down floor by floor. Noisy brutes! As if in answer to her prayers, the soldier clicked the machine off and strode from the room. She waited in the rain for a few moments, then re-commenced her descent. At the ground level there was a very wet and mangy white terrier dog, which stared up at her. She put her finger to her lips and shushed softly. The dog barked once and she waved her finger at him. He sat. Well, she mused, someone obeys orders around here!

Samantha, the youngest of the McKinnon family, put her dolls away and ran down the timbered stairs to the kitchen. Ngan was chopping green vegetables on the wooden bench. She turned as the child entered. "I have some lemon tarts in the oven, Sam, would you like some? Only be a few minutes."



“Yes, please, but I am missing Charmaine . . . she has been gone a long time and papa doesn’t know where she is? Do you know where she has gone?”

Ngan looked at the child. The eyes were teary, surely she had been crying? The lids were red and perhaps sore. Ngan sniffed and held back her own tears . . . the child had lost her mother some years ago and she knew that Charmaine had been the replacement that James McKinnon had needed when coming over from Malaya to Saigon. A lovely and loving family, and it had been Ngan’s earlier hope that perhaps one day, James and Charmaine, well . . . seemed not to be, because she had fallen for that French policeman. Not my place to criticise, she thought, but things haven’t worked out so far. If I were younger I could take these children under my wing and love them as my own. She sighed. But I am old and my own children were never to be . . . barren they told me, not able to have children. And my dear husband, Huy, long gone now. He never said anything about it, never looked upon me with sadness or disapproval. Loved me all those years as if I was still a virgin. In his eyes I was always sixteen. Such a loving and tender hearted man! Now she could feel the tears coming and she took Samantha and cuddled her in her arms.

“I know, I know, dear one. I know how you feel. Like the weather, there are storms in life. Things are torn apart sometimes but everything can be mended, my sweet. Everything. When Colette had lost one of her arms, don’t you remember, Charmaine found it for you and put it back where it belonged? So, Colette is still so beautiful.”

Samantha clung to Ngan, feeling comfort with the closeness of this warm body amid the various smells of vegetables, chicken, and tarts cooking. James McKinnon stood in the doorway and watched this scenario, almost moved to tears himself.

The rains came and he took Samantha by the hand up to her bedroom, with the child holding a small plate of lemon tarts from the kitchen.

“Time for an afternoon sleep, my darling. You hop onto the bed and I’ll get Colette for you, tuck her in beside you. Okay?”

“Okay, and when I awake Charmaine will be back, won’t she papa?”

And James bit his lower lip as he lowered the mosquito net around his youngest.

Monday 28th September 1959. 11.29 a.m. AVRN Headquarters, Saigon.

Colonel Khuu Anh slid the silver paper knife through the pale blue envelope bearing French diplomatic insignias. It had come through French Embassy courier bags via Air France to Saigon and swiftly transferred to his office by secret messenger the same day. The large red ink stamp at the bottom of the page read DESTROY IMMEDIATELY AFTER READING.

The colonel’s sweaty hand was shaking slightly as he read the typed contents and stared at the colour photographic image. The two-storeyed villa almost hidden in one of the back streets of Paris was more than he had hoped for, situated well away from main railways and highways. Yes, that would suit. It had taken almost all of his savings of over 20 years, but the French secret service had done well. The *Service de documentation extérieure et de contre-espionnage* was secretly hidden in the background of almost all Asian countries — always there, even in the Vietnam of 1959 long after the French military had pulled out defeated in 1954. All was going smoothly; he was happy about the manner of communications through the embassy, quite safe enough because coded letters and cables could be broken, interfered with, and end up in the wrong hands. He could rely upon the French embassy staff and the *Service*. He could no longer rely upon his Vietnamese compatriots.

He knew he was a traitor, a turncoat, but he also knew that he had no other choice in the matter after the North had blackmailed him with those incriminating photographs. Whatever, it was the end of his career with the South. He’d even contemplated changing directions and offering himself over to Ho Chi Minh’s army, but dismissed that because of his young family here in Saigon. They would never understand — they were dedicated Catholics. He’d also considered America, but that country was far too open to infiltration by communists and it wouldn’t take long before they found him there. His earlier approaches to the French were welcomed and the money helped to grease many palms.

He and his family were to board the tramp steamer MV Argos on Sunday Nov 15 at Cang Sài Gòn, which would take them to Singapore, and from there a flight would be arranged direct to France. It would be good to see Paris again after all these years.

The letter concluded that further instructions would be given near the time. It is too long, he thought. We must get away this month . . . there are too many incidences happening. On his desk there was a report from the weekend, which specified the routing of some of his own AVRN troops on Friday in the Mekong Delta near the Cambodian border. The Viet Cong one hundred strong had ambushed 340 of his men and killed at least twelve, with a number wounded. Most of the AVRN’s weapons had been captured and a large number of AVRN personnel were missing. Not the first time in that area, thought Khuu, and won’t be the last. The Cong were becoming far too clever for his liking. And only a few weeks ago an American intelligence report had concluded that the situation in South Vietnam was improving. He smacked his hand onto the desk. Oh how can they be so bloody naive? They are pouring millions in aid into shoring up this corrupt regime of ours,



but they have no idea . . . absolutely no idea of what is going on at ground level. I must insist upon the French updating our travel papers. There is too much at stake here. Too much to lose.

He picked up his chromed Ronson cigarette lighter, flicked it, and caught the flame to the edge of the letter. There was work to be done.

Charmaine was not sure how she had made her way out of the park and into one of the back streets of Saigon. The past few hours were a blur. She was standing before the Saigon Royale Hotel, a small two storeyed hotel she had stayed at when she first came down from Hué. Not many foreigners knew of its existence, except perhaps if you were French as the owners were. Opened during the 1920's, it maintained an old world Gallic charm, and as she stepped inside the front frosted glass door it was like being back in the hub of Paris. Fortunately, she had grabbed her handbag when she left the house, for it contained her identity papers and passport. She remembered the previous comfort of the building, the good service, and the excellent French and Vietnamese cuisine with the delight of French wines. Travel writers seemed unaware of the hotel or perhaps none had seen fit to give good ratings, of which she was surprised. But thank God it was like that, somewhat obscure and kept away from prying eyes. She would be safe there for a day or two while she decided on the way forward.

"Ah, Mademoiselle Curtaine," said the male receptionist, staring down at her passport. "I remember you from earlier . . . I have a special gift for faces, you see. You are very much welcome, so, a room for one is it? We have an élégante first floor special, looking over the small park at the rear. Very peaceful, most pleasant surroundings. I can recommend."

Charmaine didn't want anyone remembering her at the present moment, but she braved up. "Yes, I recall, much the same as my room previous. It is a beautiful hotel, Monsieur . . .?"

"Bernard . . . Jaques Bernard."

"Ah, yes. You were very gracious to me last time as I remember. Very gracious."

"Always a pleasure Mademoiselle Curtaine, always a pleasure. I see you do not have luggage? Perhaps it is still outside in the cab?"

Charmaine became flustered. "No, no. I have left it with friends, but they are having other visitors for a few days so there was no room for me at this time. No free bedrooms, you see."

Jaques Bernard peered at her over his half frame spectacles. "Yes, I do see. Never mind, I am sure we can accommodate anything you wish for your stay here. How long would you think that may be?"

"Well, at this stage . . . a few days . . . yes, no more than a few days, say three at the most."

General Dao Hu Loc was slightly hung over from the night before. He nodded at the young corporal sitting outside his office. The man seemed somewhat nervous. Dao had picked up on these vibes before. And where was the Lieutenant? Late again.

Dao paused, looking intently at the young soldier. "Why are you still here and where is the Lieutenant replacement? It is almost half past seven. Doesn't your shift finish at seven?"

The corporal stood and saluted. "Yes sir. The lieutenant has called in sick, sir. My sergeant is looking for a replacement. I am to stay until relieved, sir."

"Hmm, this will not do. Your uniform is creased and somewhat untidy. Ha, are you not the same person who was here on Sunday afternoon when I came to check some correspondence? Dao laughed. "Looking for lots of overtime are you so you can spend it on some crazy wench? Wasting your time, soldier, wasting your time. I should know. Anyway, someone like you should be out in the field, checking on the Cong, yes . . . is that not so? Leave these desk jobs to other people. We need soldiers of this nation to be active and not sitting on their bums within offices. You should apply for a transfer to the field, do you not think?"

"Yes sir, definitely sir. I'm sure my sergeant will arrange that."

Hmm, the sooner the better, Corporal. No point wasting your talents here. Some of the junior officers, who are not much good at anything, can take your place."

"Yes sir. Thank you, sir"

"By the way, soldier, during your shift yesterday morning, was there anyone else on this floor? I may have been mistaken, but I thought one of my maps wasn't in the right place on my desk where I had left it on Friday."

The young corporal froze. This was what he had dreaded. He had allowed the general's secretary entrance, but he couldn't recall her leaving. Did he fall asleep again on duty due to too much to drink the night before? This was probably a firing squad offence. His mind was a blank, he couldn't remember. Caught with his pants down, so to speak — caught out by that beautiful young person who had woken him from his sleep. Oh shit, I am in trouble here. This general is asking too many questions. He had to think fast.

"I think the cleaners were in on Friday night, sir. They may have disturbed things in your office, but I am sure they have top security clearance. So, really, that should not be a problem. Sir."

Dao was a few seconds responding and the young corporal's anxiety was growing while he waited. "Well, perhaps, perhaps. I may have been mistaken about that." He turned with his key to the door then looked back. "If you are looking for promotion soldier, get yourself out into the field."

"Sir."

The phone was ringing as he entered his office. Her picked up the black receiver from it's cradle. "Yes?" It was his wife, Trinh.

"Have you heard?"

"I haven't heard any thing this morning, my love. What are you talking about?"



“It’s Charmaine, she’s been missing since yesterday. Do you think you can put some men onto it, get them searching around?”

Dao snorted. “This is not a detective agency Trinh, ring the police.”

“The police don’t know anything and Claude is out of his mind with worry. C’mon Loc . . . these are special friends of ours. Pull your finger out and do something.”

I’ll never touch that whiskey bottle again, he thought. Everything was so confused this morning, nothing sensible seemed to be occurring. He breathed deeply and spoke into the receiver.

“All right, all right. I’ll see what I can do. I’ll pull some off-duty military police in and see where we go from there. They can search all the hotels, boarding houses, pubs, theatres, parks, whatever. We’ll find her.”

He slammed the phone down. Now where the hell was his new secretary, Lien? Oh, she wouldn’t be in until after 8.00, yes, that’s right. I’m getting a little off the beam this morning, not like me. Yes, have to cut back on that whiskey, for sure. Oh well, I’ll leave it to her to organise the MP’s looking for Charmaine. I’ve got enough on my hands what with the Cong making inroads over the week-end. I must organise an extra regiment for the Kampuchean border immediately. The Cong are sneakily using that area to their advantage and we should have woken up to that fact months ago, but no one’s listening to my advice these days. I did warn the junta. Need to have a conference with Ngo Go Diem about that. Today, if possible. Where’s that bloody secretary?

Cuc, having become so used to her new name, Lien, and wondering how long this facade could be stretched out until she reached the climax of her role, rode up in the elevator of the AVRN building and waited for the sliding door to open at the office level. There was a queasy feeling within her stomach which didn’t help. How was this going to be played out? Had she been compromised? What about the young corporal who had been on duty during the week-end? Was he trouble? Did he spill on her? She shuddered a little as she entered the corridor and there he was sitting as he had done so on Sunday, at the small desk outside of General Dao’s office. He raised his head as he saw her approaching and his face seemed to go pale. Summing up her courage, Lien marched directly up to him, smiled and said. “I want to assure you that what happened yesterday was simply between you and me, Corporal. That’s it, nothing to be seen there. Nothing.”

He nodded. “Thanks. The General is in, but not in a good mood, I’m afraid. Good luck with that.”

“Thanks. Be kind to yourself; it’s a short life, my friend.”

He smiled. She thought, well that was a first. Actually, he was quite good looking . . . another time, another place and what might be? Stop that, she thought, stop that, you are becoming too involved with all these men. Concentrate on the plan, the final decision.

General Dao looked up as she entered his office. “You wished to see me, Sir?”

“Ah, Lien, yes, there are some troubling things going on at present . . . other than the fighting that is occurring all over the damned place. Well, it’s good to see that you have survived the week-end. I’m not sure I have, a little too much partying yesterday I’m afraid, but then that’s how we cope is it not? If we don’t party, we lose sight of the future. We see too much death and destruction and . . . have you seen that, Lien? Have you seen the destruction that goes on in the countryside . . . in the provinces that once were safe but no more? Have you seen that?”

“Sir, I haven’t been all that much out of Saigon, so no, not really. I’m more or less a city person,” she lied. “But I understand that most of the villages are suffering — there are peasants who have no rice at times and their homes are subject to being taken and burnt by the vicious Cong.”

“Ah yes, you are so young. You have not seen what I have seen. You never saw what the war did to us during the 1940’s, never saw us being played on a chessboard after that by both China and Russia, did you? Each competing for our suffrage. As if we were puppets to be played with. Never saw the ambitious colonial French coming back attempting to take control of their empire, which was long dead. The Japanese had seen to that. Nothing was the way it was before. Nothing. We wanted independence, freedom, but the French were not willing to give us that on our terms. That was a grave mistake because if that had been so then the North would not have carried out their ruthless campaign. We could have settled on a compromise. I am getting old, but I see from both sides of the coin, dear Lien. It doesn’t make me a traitor to my own cause, absolutely not because this communism — this uprising — can only destroy. No good can come of it, ever. Look at the poverty and vicious cruelty that has happened in China since Mao’s revolution! People are starving, dying as flies, as they are in the North of this country under Ho Chi Minh’s rule. Starving. Death is in every village. And it will soon reach the cities in plague proportions if we do not find some means to stop it”

Commissar Chu and his cadre of Viet Cong men and two women passed through the rice fields north of the village. Some water buffalo were still in the fields, swishing their tails against the insects that were annoying them and casually looked at the humans passing by. The bold red sun, gradually disappearing beyond the humid jungle, cast long shadows out of the moving bodies of the Viet Cong which became distorted in the rippling grey waters of the paddy. They marched in single file across the bunds between the planted seedlings, headed for that vast forest of trees and undergrowth that would give them the advantage over an AVRN patrol that they knew was close by. The National Liberation Front intelligence was working well.

There were three AVRN patrols in the area, about the same size as Chu’s cadre — they would be an equal match, thought Chu Long. But he would have the advantage. No doubt about that. He could finish off one of the patrols and then concentrate on the other two, perhaps within 48 hours. No sense rushing it. Stealth, strike and retreat! He’d learnt that some years ago. Once you had done your damage, get the hell out of there and lay quiet for a while, then come back and hit them harder. The problem for the AVRN was that they close kept to organised tracks, making them easy prey for a cadre such as

Chu's. Which is what the new American advisers were probably doing as well. Will they ever learn, pondered Chu? Their whole strategy was weak.

They left the rice fields and entered the forest. He pulled at the sweat band on his forehead and adjusted it. The humidity was still high and he'd heard some of the cadre complaining about that. Stiff luck, he thought. Wear it. You'll go through much worse than that by the time we are finished. Mosquitoes buzzed him. He slapped at them, aware that there had been a recent outbreak of dengue fever in the country — he'd have to get a supply of that clove oil that was said to be effective against mosquitoes. Didn't want any of his troops coming down with dengue or malaria, that's for sure. Some dark clouds were appearing and he thought he heard a distant rumbling of thunder. Not what he wished for at this time. It was important to remove at least one patrol of the AVRN military, and then perhaps come back for more.

The group had come through a grove of coconut palms and found themselves near a winding dirt track. Commissar Chu Long dug out his district map and studied it for a moment by torchlight. Spot on, he thought. There will be a patrol coming through here before midnight. Idiot mongrels; just waiting to fall into the trap he would lay for them. He turned to his cadre and began issuing orders for the ambush, when the sudden whistle and blast of AVRN mortars began to fall among them. There were loud screams and the sudden force of splintered metal shattered his jaw and pierced his neck as he felt something sharp thud into his back near his left kidney. The palms above him spun and vanished.

Charmaine was lying in the comfortable bed at the Saigon Royale Hotel, thankful for the room that the attentive French receptionist, Jacques Bernard, had allocated to her. She thought there was rain in the air, she could almost smell it approaching within the intense humidity. There was a very low babble coming from the lane-way below her, but it was normal evening shopping and dining and didn't bother her; in fact just hearing that low murmur of humanity going about their business eased her mind somewhat. She turned a few times on the bed, trying to sleep, but found it difficult because of the thoughts that kept entering her mind about Claude and James McKinnon's children. There had been trust, given and received, and now — had she broken that? And was there no going back? How could she choose? She breathed deeply, folded and squeezed her fingers together. There was no way out of this, no way at all. She lay back, pressing her head against the pillow and then heard the sounds of an orchestra playing somewhere within the hotel. The female vocalist was singing in French. And it was just what she didn't need at that moment in time. Oh hell, she thought. *Plaisir d'amour!*

“Plaisir d'amour ne dure qu'un moment, chagrin d'amour dure toute la vie.” The pleasure of love lasts only a moment, The grief of love lasts a lifetime.

And it went on, about the unfaithful Sylvia, which helped to grind Charmaine's face deep into the pillow. She wasn't unfaithful to Claude in that sense, but the song with some female singing so deep and emotionally, aroused feelings of despair within her heart. I could stop breathing at this moment, she thought. I could snuff myself out by pushing my face deep within this pillow and holding my breath forever. She rolled over on her left side, looking out of the window. Yes, there were clouds forming and she knew that a storm was on the way. The storms in life, she thought, are always there . . . always there. We cannot escape them, they are part of life, but what am I to do?

The grief of love! That's not what I want. I must go back, she thought, I must go back and face the decision I have to make.

The next day the ones mostly concerned about Charmaine's disappearance arranged to meet at one of Claude's favourite restaurants, *Fleur de lis Café* around the corner from the Continental Palace — James, Phuong and Claude, to work out a plan of action about finding the governess. James' children were in school, Phuong had taken the day off from teaching, claiming legal problems she had to attend to, and Claude was not accountable to anyone much. They wished to invite Bishop Jean-Baptiste Lacroix, but he had considered it unwise for him to interfere in that particular domestic matter at this time.

Claude, perspiring slightly, turned to Phuong as she was studying the menu. “James is late, but you know Phuong, you always look so fresh. I don't know how you manage to be this way, but I'm sure James appreciates it very much. So wonderful how you two have hit it off and are now engaged, as I thought I was, until . . . well, until Charmaine disappeared. Isn't love strange? How can a person be torn between two kinds of loves? Love of a man who is soon to be a husband, and love of special children that one has given your heart to? What really is love, Phuong?”

Her almond eyes focused on him. She hesitated to answer, knowing the grief he was going through. She reached out and placed her right hand on his and smiled. “I . . . I think she loves you very much, and . . . and, I am certain that this situation with James' children will be resolved. She loves them, yes, but at the same time I know that her feelings for you will rise above what she feels for the children because she will understand that as they grow they also will realise the difference between adult and a child's love for a governess. You must wait, Claude, no matter how long it takes . . . you must wait, and waiting can sometimes be a healing time for all involved.”

“Merci mille fois! tu es un ange! Bless you, you are so kind. You will be such a treasure to James and the children. So, really, Phuong, you will take Charmaine's place. So, she has no reason to be caught between two worlds for you will be their mama forever, together with Mia. How is it that she has somehow missed this truth?”

Phuong shook her head slowly. “She will come to that conclusion, of that I am certain. You will need to be patient my dear friend. It's something we all have to learn here in Saigon . . . patience, not only with our friends and lovers, but patience also with this administration. You know, Claude, I am not sure where we are all heading with this government. Everything seems to be falling apart. Oh, look, there's James, over the road parking his Citroen. Should we order for him, do you think?”



The National Liberation Army spies hidden away in one of Saigon's nondescript back alleys had passed onto Cuc, now known as Lien, what their telephone tapping had given up as information of a meeting being held at a small restaurant near the Continental Palace. Might it be to her advantage to eavesdrop of the conversation of the mongrel Inspector of the Surete and his highly connected companions? The telephone caller knew she was in the district and thought that as a favour, considering the loss she had experienced of her fiancée, Kim, under that inspector's watch, she might be interested. After placing the phone back on its cradle Cuc considered that, yes, she was very much interested. In fact, much more than interested, because this seemed like an opportunity too good to miss. She could learn much from this meeting if she went in undercover. She'd viewed the inspector not so long ago at the same restaurant, quite by accident, and had this strange feeling at the time that destiny would play some part in meeting him again in similar circumstances. Now, she was dead certain of this.

She hailed a pedicab. Wouldn't take long to get there ahead of the meeting of those very interesting people. The electronic hearing device and attached miniature tape recorder in her hand-bag, that had been given to her when she first came to Saigon, would at last be of use, and if she was lucky might divulge more information than she expected. The pedicab driver deposited her outside the *Fleur de lis Café* and knowing that she was suitably attired for a mid-day meal at such a French restaurant, she boldly entered and ordered a table for two, explaining that her husband would be joining her, but was running late. Sitting at the rear of the restaurant, she had a clear view through to the street of all tables and it wasn't long before she saw the inspector and the young Vietnamese school teacher enter and seat themselves at a table for four. Yes, thought Cuc, you are expecting that English man and his governess, what was her name . . . Carmen, no . . . ah yes, Charmaine. The four of them were so well connected with Saigon society and the high echelons of the military and would have some very interesting conversations to be recorded. For the present, General Dao and his cohorts were forgotten. There was plenty of time for what she had planned for him and the president. She clicked on the electronics, casually slipping a hearing device into her right ear, hidden within her long dark hair. The words came through sharp and clear. She was home and hosed. Of course, depending upon what she heard, she wouldn't have minded having her old AK47 with her so that she could blast everyone in front of her away to the heavens. It would be a fitting denouement. She silently laughed at that, turning up the volume to listen in. At the same time she felt through the side of her hand-bag, to feel assurance of the object within, which she had never used and surely wasn't planning to for the foreseeable future. No, that could wait; this conversation was more important.

"She can't be too far away," said Phuong. "To my mind I would guess that she is somewhere close by, but well hidden. Do you know of any place she may have stayed at when she first came down from Hué? Did she board with anyone?"

"Not that I know of. I think she went almost immediately to James' home."

"But how would she know to do that? Unless, of course, she had read his advert in a newspaper at Hué?"

Claude shook his head. "I'm sure she went through an agency here in Saigon."

"But if she did, she would have had to stay somewhere — a small hotel, perhaps, or a leased apartment."

Claude turned his attention away from Phuong and seemed to pale. Phuong, alerted to this change, said "What's wrong?"

He lowered his voice to a whisper. "See that Vietnamese man looking through the window; I know it cannot be, but he bears a striking resemblance to a traitor I had imprisoned. With the help of the Cong, he escaped from hospital and I suspected that he died, but perhaps not. No . . . no, it cannot be."

"What was his name?"

"Kim. Pham Van Kim."

"Why don't you go and ask him?"

Claude leant back in his chair and sighed. "No, I'm sure he's not the same man. What my Chinese master interrogator put him through was enough to ensure that he would not survive. I'm afraid it's simply ghosts of the past come back to haunt me. I think my anxiety about Charmaine is getting the better of me."

Cuc froze at the mention of Kim. Here was the proof she needed about the treatment of her beloved. A fury began to arise from within; of course the man at the window was not Kim, he was shorter for a start; he didn't have the small scar that Kim had near his left ear. But just the mention of Kim's name and the details concerning Kim's torturer, was enough to cause her to be once again overcome with grief and anger, and she had to do something about it. She would confront the inspector. She pulled the listening piece from her ear, threw it onto the table and stood up. She caught Claude's eye.

There was something strange about this one, he thought, as she brushed aside a waiter and strode to where the inspector and Phuong were seated.

Claude's right hand hovered over his pocket where the 9mm Beretta sat, his fingers reaching in. Cuc stopped at the table and hissed: "I heard you, you bastard. I heard what you said . . . what you did to my Kim! You're nothing but an animal and animals have to be destroyed." She watched the inspector's right hand creeping within the bulge in his pocket, then swung her left hand out from behind her back. She quickly pulled the pin from the Russian F1 grenade, watched the lever spring up with a sharp clack, and knowing that she had less than three seconds to live, spat directly into the inspector's eyes. Claude had the pistol in his hand, but he knew it was too late. He swiftly leant across to protect Phuong, and then the terrible whooshing darkness came.

James McKinnon was opening the front door, feeling the cold air-conditioning slap into his body, when the crushing noise erupted from within the restaurant. The force of the explosion threw him back onto the pavement where he rolled over and watched the flames bursting almost everywhere within. Flames, smoke, loud cries and screams from within as shattered glass fell over his body. He tried to stand but a fractured pane of plate glass still within half its frame, held him down. Am I going to die, he thought. Am I going to die? Phuong . . . Phuong, my lovely sweet Phuong. Don't let this be!



The day was overcast as if in sympathy. Notre Dame Cathedral in Saigon was packed with Phuong's students and associate teachers for the Requiem Mass. Many friends and others who had known her were tightly congregated in most of the pews. James, his left arm in a sling and a bandaged left ear, sat in the front pew with his two eldest, Michelle now fourteen and Jules coming up for thirteen, each holding an order of service. Charmaine was sitting on James' right side with his youngest, Samantha, and Phuong's adopted daughter, Mia.

The choir of young Vietnamese boys was singing *Panis Angelicus*, their white robes almost sparkling in the reflected light — with the bespectacled French choirmaster determined to have the very best from them, vigorously conducting with grand flourishes. James thought that if he'd been brought up Catholic, Jules could well have been in that choir, but Fate doesn't make all things dovetail, does it? He turned to his right and looked at Charmaine. Her face was puffy, eyes teary and red as if she hadn't slept for weeks. Yesterday, they had attended the Protestant French Church for Claude's funeral service and his burial at Bing Hung Hoa Cemetery. It is too much, thought James, far too much for anyone to have to go through. While his own injuries were minor, he wondered why Phuong had not survived, after all it was said when the authorities found the bodies that Claude was lying across her. A vain attempt, perhaps, to sacrifice himself for her. But it was not to be. James didn't know the full details, but it appeared that her head may have been exposed to the grenade shrapnel that had sliced into her brain. It was little consolation to him to be told that she would not have suffered for long. They said that it would have been all over in an instant.

Michelle was sniffing. He laid his hand on hers and gave her a smile. It was not easy for any of them as they waited for Bishop Jean Baptiste-Lacroix to commence the service. Where do we go from here, James pondered? He looked across to where Samantha and Mia sat. Mia had her head down. So young, he thought, and it would be the second time she had lost a parent. How do these children cope with that? The Bishop walked slowly down the central aisle, assisted by several priests. He was wearing purple robes with white undergarments, holding his Missal tucked under his right arm. The purple, thought James, not black as selected for most requiems, but purple in honour of Phuong. James and most of the congregation was wearing black, but he had selected a purple tie, for purple was the colour signifying spiritual relationships and he knew that his love for Phuong would go on and on, residing as it did deep within his soul. Until the day I die, he thought. Until the day I die!

A moderate rustle filled the Cathedral as the congregation stood. The Bishop and priests centred themselves in front of the altar and bowed, then Jean Baptiste-Lacroix kissed the golden cross. The litany began "Lord have Mercy," followed by prayers and a reading from the New Testament. James wasn't really listening — he was away in the past — at the Cholon market with Phuong and the children bug-eyed at the vision before them. The service continued on the peripheral edges of his mind and near the closing, the General's wife Trinh Dao, stood behind a small lectern near the choir. James knew that she had a fine Mezzo-soprano voice, for she had sung several times at the dinners he and Charmaine had arranged for some of Saigon's embassy connected folk. The organist in the loft began the intro to *Ave Maria* and Trinh, barely looking at the sheet music in front of her, began to sing. Her voice rose into the vast ceiling of the Cathedral, placing the congregation in awe of this almost perfect angelic voice. It was inspiring, and as the final notes came to his ears, James wept, and that which he had been holding back for days was released as a flood. Michelle took his hand, kissed him on his cheek and whispered "She was to be my mama, to be loved just as Mia loved her. I don't know papa, I just don't know. What will become of us?" James leant across and embraced her. "We'll manage, my darling. It's going to be a long road, but we'll get there."

They buried Phuong in the French and European Le Van Tam cemetery within her parents' grave. James and Charmaine threw white roses onto the coffin as it was slowly lowered into the ground. Jean Baptiste-Lacroix had given the committal and turned away to talk to the numerous mourners who were grouped around the grave. One of Phuong's teacher associates was in tears as she scattered some petals onto the coffin. The headmistress of the Academie stood back, hands clasped in front of her, body held stiff as if not absorbing what she was seeing. James looked at her, seeing the grief in her face and knowing that standing here were many of Saigon's people who simply loved his fiancée. The Pendlebury's, the Dao's, Clement and Melody Harris from the American Legation, Victor, the internationally renowned chef with Isabelle Molineaux and many others. It was not a time of celebration, even though much had been said about Phuong's successful career and generosity. It was a time of grieving and the night that followed this day would be a night of terrible darkness for those who had been so close to her. And what of the morrow?

They were gathered in the drawing room of Phuong's home with the small house geckos cluck-clucking around the ceiling — James, Charmaine, Michelle and the headmistress of the Nguyen Academie. The weather was still overcast and the solicitor who read the will and explained the nuances of it, had just left. James turned to Charmaine. "So, Phuong has left everything to me, apart from the bequeath of this house and a large sum to the Academie. And Mia, she wishes for me to adopt her as my own. I'll do that as soon as I can see my lawyer. We'll have the papers drawn up immediately. How do you feel about that after all you have been through?"

Michelle had grasped Charmaine's hand. "Oh yes, Charmaine, she is family — she is my sister and she belongs with us."

"I . . . I was thinking of returning to France. There is no Claude for me anymore; that love has been taken from me in such a brutal manner. I don't know."

James stared at the floor. His loss the same, a murderous loss of life that was surely not meant to be. An accident and coincidence of time? People simply in the wrong place? Charmaine must stay with them, but he had no right to sway her decision. If she considered that France was the better future for her, then how could he object? But what about the children? They loved her and would be in distress if she left. He had no doubt about that, whatsoever. But, it was out of his hands it



seemed. Only last evening he had urged her to reconsider, but she had turned away from him. It was only the second night in his life in which he had not slept.

Samantha came through from the darkened hall clutching a doll to her chest. “Charmaine, Colette has been looking for you everywhere. She has been so lonely without you and we have missed you so much. She is happy that you have come back to us and she wants to give you a kiss.” She held the doll up to Charmaine. The governess closed her eyes but she could not stop the tears that sprang up, and she could not stop the emotion that overwhelmed her. Her body shuddered with the pain of knowing that she would be leaving this child to a future without her. She took the doll and then she wrapped her arms around Samantha and lifted her to her body. “It’s alright, Sam, I’m here and I know how much you and Colette love me . . . so much . . . so very much. I’ll never leave you, Sam, never ever leave you.” James stepped across and wrapped his arms around the two of them. “Thank God! Oh Charmaine!”

That evening, as the sun was setting, they sat in the living room of what James had hoped would have been his and Phuong’s home with the four children. The young ones had gone upstairs to their bedrooms and Charmaine had made up an extra bed for Mia.

“She is as much traumatised as we are,” he said, swirling the whiskey around his mouth, then swallowing with a gulp. He needed that, and felt like a few fingers more. Charmaine nodded, holding her red wine lightly, not wishing to drown her sorrows in alcohol, though perhaps there would come a time when she might. She was quiet; enough had been said over the past couple of days and she had almost run out of effort to put words together.

“It’s still early days,” said James, “but I’ve been thinking that our situation here is not likely to improve. There are signs that this confrontation with the North is going to dramatically increase and we all could be in much danger. Only last week Justin said to me what do you think about returning to Malaya? I’d given that some thought because if the North is becoming more of a threat, which seems to be, then all our plantations and mines will be taken out of our hands. They won’t need us. In fact, they would do their utmost to be rid of all Europeans. Would you come with us, Charmaine? Would you come and make a new life with us in Kuala Lumpur? The country is stable now — the British have succeeded in virtually killing off those Chinese terrorists. It’s safe.”

“Yes James, I’m tired. I am so tired. And I realise that I cannot leave the children, for what would they do if I wasn’t around to keep them in line? You know how cheeky Jules is, and Michelle is growing so fast. She needs someone to guide her. And Sam, well, you know how she has penetrated my heart. I’ve given it some thought and won’t be all that concerned if I never see France again, but perhaps we could go there on holiday now and then? It would be good for the girls to see my country and learn some proper French culture.”

He smiled. “You’ll find Malaya invigorating, and I had another thought.”

“What’s that?”

“You know, Ngan doesn’t really have much of a family of her own, never had children. Her husband long gone, no siblings that I know of. I’m sure I could persuade her to come with us. She has taken to Sam and I’m sure she would miss her very much if we left her here to look after and cook for the next family. Seems only natural. I’d have no trouble arranging a passport.”

“What a great idea. Yes, I’m sure you can persuade her, and I could have a word with her as well.”

James placed his whiskey glass on the side-table. “It’s great to have you back Charmaine. We need to begin again, put everything behind us . . . nurture the children; watch them grow and become successful in their own way. And when we are old and they are married off, we can sit on the upstairs verandah of my old bungalow outside of KL and watch Malaya’s magical sunsets. There’s a lot to look forward to. And we shall never forget the loves we had.”

Charmaine looked at James, watching him closely. Yes, it was best. It would be a long road to full recovery, but the children were worth it. It was their lives that were the important ones now.

The Bishop of Saigon, Jean Baptiste-Lacroix, fingered the small pectoral cross that hung down in the front of his black cassock. The day after the Requiem Mass for Phuong Duval had not gone well. Several hundred refugees — mostly Catholic from the northern provinces, had flooded Saigon’s streets. Some had been taken in by Buddhist monks, which Baptiste-Lacroix thought was very gracious of them, but his parishioners were still trying to find temporary refuge for the majority. Then, his chauffeur, Duy, had come down with suspected food poisoning, so that the Bishop had arrived at the Presidential Palace being driven by an inexperienced young priest. The Packard jerked to a halt in front of several armed sentries.

“Come back for me in an hour,” he said, “This won’t take long.”

The young Vietnamese priest nodded: “Yes, my Lord. Would ten-o’clock be alright?”

The Bishop’s cassock caught on the edge of the car door as he alighted. “Damn, just as well it didn’t tear. Yes, ten o’clock will be fine, and be careful with that car. Packard’s don’t grow on trees.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Ngo Dinh Diem was leaning back in his chair, a tumbler of whiskey was sitting on his desk. The Bishop took note and said: “A bit early for that, isn’t it Excellency?”

“A terrible night, my Lord Bishop . . . a terrible night. Would you like a shot?”

“Nearer to noon, perhaps. But I cannot stay long. My return to France has been moved up somewhat and the Very Reverend Monsignor Cam Phuc will be consecrated as the new Bishop of Notre Dame here in Saigon next week. As I mentioned recently, Notre Dame is to be upgraded by the Vatican to an Archbishopric. So, in time Phuc will be the first Vietnamese Archbishop of Saigon.”



“Which is surely on the cards for you when you return to Paris for your good service, and then my dear friend, it won’t be all that long until you will be wearing the scarlet. That is my prediction.”

“You flatter me, Diem. That’s entirely out of my hands, besides, if that ever occurred it would probably contain me to the Vatican, and as you very well know, I hate being imprisoned within walls.”

The President took a swift drink from his tumbler, smacked it down on the glass-topped desk and sighed. “My dear Lord Bishop, we have been friends since our youth. There is no greater friendship in the world I would have than that of ours. I will miss you as a long lost brother. We haven’t always seen eye-to-eye, but many times I have been to your confessional and it was always a great relief to come away feeling refreshed. When the Vatican or your mother church Notre Dame in Paris, gives you leave, you must come back and see us. We shall miss you more than anything.”

Jean Baptiste-Lacroix nodded. “It seems some time since you confessed your sins. Would you like me to hear them now?”

Ngo Dinh Diem laughed. “Ha ha, that would take hours. But perhaps you could seek out my sister-in-law before you go — her confession would take weeks, if not months ha ha! No, my dear friend, I haven’t time for that and neither do you. Now, what else did you come here to tell me? How are your spies in the Buddhist movements getting on?”

“Well Excellency, as you wish. I don’t have spies as such and there is not all that much information coming out of the temples — those Theravadin Buddhists are a tight-lipped group. I find most of them quite agreeable, but there is that faction among them that will cause trouble before long. You need to watch that.”

A silence stayed with them for a few seconds. Ngo Dinh Diem shifted in his seat and looked at the empty tumbler. He was about to press the buzzer on his desk when Lacroix spoke.

“Perhaps you will have dinner with me at the Presbytery before I leave? A fitting denouement to my time here.”

“As much as I would like to, my Lord, I fear not. There is so much work to be done right here in this palace, that I rarely get out these days. Even now, your time with me is limited and I must say — as much as I regret it so — that I can only give you five minutes more. The generals are on their way and then the American ambassador will be here for a serious discussion concerning more aid, and perhaps putting their ex Korean battle-trained troops into this country.

The Bishop’s eyebrows rose. “That’s been some time now, what is it? Six years or so since the demarcation line was finally settled in Korea, and only an armistice at that. It could break out again at anytime, that’s why Eisenhower keeps his troops there. There were bad losses of his men in that short war, over thirty thousand I think, and why would you consider that he might send troops here? We already have several hundred American advisors, who in my mind don’t appear to be doing much. Why would you want American battle troops on the ground? Don’t you recall President Charles de Gaulle’s warning?”

“What warning was that? Anyway, why should I take notice from a defeated old bastard like de Gaulle?”

“Well, he said something like being bogged down in a quagmire. His troops surely were. And what do you think Saigon would become if you released thousands of American troops here? It wasn’t all that marvellous with our French troops on leave from the provinces, was it? All those illegitimate children they now call *dust!* Orphanages overflowing. I think you are asking for trouble. Why didn’t you accept the offer the British had considered, bringing a regiment or two over from Malaya? They’ve had the experience with completely wiping a terrorist army off the map. Jungle fighting is what they do best. But perhaps it’s too late now to accept their earlier offer? You know, Diem, it’s not good to hesitate in these matters.”

Ngo slapped his hand onto the desk. “No, I want American lads here and I’m going to press the ambassador for that on this very day. The aid is fine and the military advisers also, but I want those battle-trained American soldiers from Korean war days on the ground here now. It will be agreed, I will see to it. I’m not giving up on that. Apart from the American contingent still held in South Korea, what are the mainstream of them doing, eh? Sitting around camps in Carolina and Virginia twiddling their fingers, watching films of Marilyn Monroe? Such a waste of resources. Many of them would be itching to get into battle again for the sake of the free world.”

An aide came into the room. “The generals are waiting, excellency.”

Ngo Dinh Diem stood up. “Yes, thank you. I’ll be one moment.” He walked around the desk as the Bishop rose from the soft upholstered chair, took him by the right hand and wrapped his left across Lacroix’s shoulder. “We have been good for each other, Jean-Baptiste, but you are leaving this country and I must get on with governing. No matter what you think, dear friend, we do need the Americans.”

Jean Baptiste-Lacroix stared at him for a moment, shook his head slightly and released his grip on the president’s hand. “I wish you well, Diem, and may God go with you for a long and happy life, but I think you are wrong about the Americans.” •

La fin

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