



# Saigon Sunset

A saga in several episodes by Graham Price  
Chapter 7

**Jean-Baptiste Lacroix, Bishop of Saigon, leaned back in the rear seat of his black Packard as it swung out of the driveway.** The military guard of the Presidential Palace had saluted and opened the car door for him. The Bishop's Vietnamese driver, Duy, frowned slightly. Being Catholic himself, he was dedicated to his Bishop, though he couldn't help but feel something untoward was going on here. Why all these trips to the Presidential Palace? There had been three in as many weeks. And the number of military generals and air force officials who also attended made him wonder. Was there a crisis for Saigon occurring? The guard around the presidential palace had been strengthened three times over and he noticed the mortar and extra machine gun emplacements on the roof. Something's not right.

He swung the car out into the traffic, narrowly missing a pedi-cab driver and several pedestrians, but the Bishop had not noticed. Obviously deep with his own thoughts, considered Duy. And the Bishop was. All he said to Duy was "You might speed it up; I'm a little late for a meeting."

"Yes, my Lord," said Duy, and stepped on the accelerator.

Jean-Baptiste Lacroix patted the red Zucchetto on his head and considered the meeting he was late for — the preparation for the wedding of James McKinnon with Phuong Duval, and also that inspector of police Claude Bastein with Charmaine Curtaine. He smiled; he was light of heart — two Protestant men marrying two Catholic women, most unusual during his time in Saigon, and how to counsel them? They would have to agree that any forthcoming children be baptised and brought up in the Catholic faith. There was no question about that. And a double wedding, eh? That would set the social pages of Saigon alight, both Vietnamese and French, and perhaps the English language ones also. Of course, it would have to be a celebration without the Mass, but as all were baptised in both Protestant and Catholic churches, it was quite legal according to the Vatican. At the same time he was thinking, do we need these complications? They will not be able to marry before the main altar, due to these mixed religious marriages, but would it not be a desirable thing for them to do? Would they not live their lives wondering whether the Catholic Church had been fair to them on their most precious day, or not? Marriage in a side altar without the Mass . . . perhaps things need to change? Why must it be this way? But I would be incurring the wrath of Rome if I dared marry them in front of the main altar. That is a risk I dare not take. Ah, why am I thinking this way? What is it to me, as long as these lovely folk are married in the sight of God and registered with the state? Why should I query age old Vatican religious laws and cause myself a ton of worry? Why indeed! But when Duy dropped him off, he entered the presbytery with these thoughts still on his mind.

Pierre Marchand watched the National Liberation Front cadre under the command of Commissar Chu disappear into the jungle. He could not believe his luck. He turned to where his female Vietnamese first aid assistant was attending to Chun Li. The doctor had long gone but had left medication and advice that Chun Li required hospitalisation. The big Chinese shook his head. "Not necessary. I am strong, stronger than anyone here. It is nothing."

"That may be," said Hinh Thuy, as she dressed the wound. "You are fortunate that bullet went right through you, so there no damage to bone or nerve as far as known. But you need expert opinion. It will take long time before you can use your arm. Must keep still long time. If you foolish enough not go to hospital or doctor again, nothing we can do but pray to ancestors for healing. You need to understand not so strong as think you are."

Chun Li laughed. "I come from long line of warriors. Ancestors were war lords of old China, never ran away from fight or sickness. Me the same. Never weak like most these people rubber tappers sit around half the day after work, do nothing. Sometimes get drunk. No good people, lazy."

Hinh Thuy finished the dressing and turned away. "Maybe you learn lesson from all this. Why you supply liquor just to keep peace, eh? That also no good! My husband says wrong."

"You Vietnamese are weak, see how easy these men drink up? Anyways, it keep them satisfied after day's work. What wrong with that my little white magpie?" alluding to her fair skin. She blushed; she felt like slapping him, but that would only cause ructions. Perhaps she should talk to her husband about this man who seemed to rule over all and possibly, if the Liberation people came back there would be a time . . . after all Chun Li was not popular with the rubber tappers and seemed to over-reach his authority at times. He should go, she thought. Pity the bullet hadn't hit him in a more sensitive area.



He would not be missed. She wondered, considering how things would be on the plantation if Chun Li and his Vietnamese second-in-charge might somehow be dispensed with. It seemed that the owner Pierre Marchand had also been in some trouble, not only with the Saigon police, but also walking on a razor's edge with the Liberation army for some reason. Could they come back . . . would they come back, if a message could be sent to them about conditions within the plantation? The tappers had been too frightened, she thought; too scared to say anything when the cadre was here, but perhaps there could be a means of bringing the Commissar back? She would talk to her husband, Bao, about that tonight. Things could not go on as they were.

Cuc slung her AK47 over her shoulder and trudged behind the cadre as they made their way through the jungle. Everyone had gone ahead of her and she was last in line. That suited her, it suited the mood she was in, for she was furious, not only with Commissar Chu for what she perceived was his weakness, not once but twice in a matter of days, but also having lost the opportunity to execute that Chinese overseer at the Loyer plantation. Then there was that French inspector of Saigon, whom she suspected of having something to do with the torture and eventual death of her beloved, Kim. They will all pay, she considered. I will have my time. It's early days yet.

Linh looked back at the line of men and the one woman at the end. She wondered why Cuc had suddenly decided to remain as scout at the rear. Previously, Cuc had been close to her in all their travails, up front, but she seemed somewhat distant ever since the day they had intercepted the French at the helicopter clearing. She cared for Cuc, having brought her under her wing and knowing full well of the suffering that Cuc must have gone through, losing her beloved Kim. There was an ache in her heart as she looked back at the young girl lugging the AK47. Well, thought Linh, she had toughened up very fast, very fast indeed. And oh, she is so beautiful, perhaps so much a waste of that beauty out here in the wilderness when she could have been on stage in Saigon, or even married to a high official. But then, we are committed, we are not to be concerned about beauty or comfort or any of those things. We are here to serve Ho Chi Minh and bring about unification of the country under one leadership. And we shall not fail.

The cadre under the command of Commissar Chu reached their camp in the deep forest outside of the village of Cho Lat. After a small meal of rice and fish, Cuc lay on her ground sheet, pulled a grubby blanket over her body and fell asleep. She dreamed. It was a dream that would change her life.

She was walking past the Quan Âm Pagoda in Saigon, hand in hand with her beloved Kim. He kissed her on the cheek and said "We should go and talk to the priest about getting married."

"I'm not sure I believe, but if it's your wish." The statue of Guanyin loomed up before her, towered over her with the index finger of the right hand pointing at her like a sword. She was confused. It could not be a sword because Guanyin was the Goddess of Mercy. The goddess's fingernail widened and widened until it became a sheet of sharp edged steel. Cuc cowered back, turning to Kim for support, but he was gone. The sheet of steel swung toward her, she ducked and ran further into the temple and there, before her, was the bodhisattva Manjusri in female form mounted on a lion. The lion swung its head around and roared at her. She could smell its breath, powerful and stagnant. The flaming orb in the bodhisattva's left hand suddenly exploded and flames shot out toward her. And out of the flames came a male face . . . the face of the inspector of police, Claude Bastein. She screamed.

"It's all right," said Linh, shaking her by the shoulder. "It's just a nightmare. Easy now. Easy."

"Oh. So real . . . so . . . Oh Linh, where am I?"

The elder woman caressed her cheek. "It's okay . . . you're here with me . . . you're safe."

Cuc smiled. "You are such a comfort to me. It's never been the same since I lost Kim to those torturers in Saigon. Oh, that dream . . . he was there, you know, that inspector. He had something to do with Kim's death I need to go to Saigon to find out more."

"But you can't," said Linh. "You are part of us now and comrade Chu will not allow it. We need you so much. You are a credit to our cause and an example to other young women to come and join us." She wiped Cuc's forehead with a damp rag. "You have to stay . . . we will find some other way for you . . . there are many undercover men in Saigon who will be only too glad to help out."

"I don't need men. Anyway, it would take only a woman to infiltrate and discover the truth . . . one who could go undercover as a dance hall girl, or bar girl."

Linh looked shocked. "You would not want to lower yourself to that level. Surely not!"

Cuc stared at her, thankful for the attention and the soothing touch. "I would do anything to revenge Kim . . . anything. Even if I had to sleep with the ugliest official in Saigon."



Charmaine was fussing about in the kitchen, but not wishing to interfere with the Vietnamese cook, Ngan, she kept her distance. She sat at a small table, fishing through some notes she had made the day before. This was going to be awkward. How was she to reconcile inviting the writer Isabelle Tran and her husband Victor Moulineaux without upsetting the diplomatic crowd that James often moved with? It was difficult. The novel by Isabelle, *La Belle Officielle*, had stirred up quite a reaction among Saigon's elite. She knew some of the Generals were not particularly happy with the way Isabelle had portrayed them — much too close for comfort, though when she overheard General Dao's wife, Trinh, laughing about it, she felt some relief. "So true . . . Oh, so true," Trinh had said when they had met for coffee downtown the other week. "You know, some of the exploits in that novel are really happening at the highest levels of government in this city. I am no fool. I know what some of the wives are up to, sleeping with other men. Isabelle has only produced some facts disguised as fiction. I told Loc to read it, but he sniffed and said it was only for you girls . . . a lot of tripe, he called it. Oh, I do wish he wouldn't use those stupid Western words. He's becoming too much like the Americans, but, you know, I wouldn't mind living in California or some place just as nice if things go wrong here. But you and Claude are moving back to France, eh? So, the McKinnons will be looking for someone to take your place?" She flashed her carefully manicured pink fingernails and nodded sagely. "My gardener has a sister who is looking for a position. She may well suit . . . twenty or so, unmarried, not all that pleasant looking, but I think honest enough, comes from a good family. Let me know if you would like to interview her."

Charmaine had thought about that, but she was in no hurry for anyone to replace her. Besides, it was a few weeks yet before the wedding. And she must concentrate upon the forthcoming dinner. James's boss Justin and his Vietnamese wife Nguyet were still in Saigon, so they would have to be invited. That, with Phuong and James, myself and Claude, Victor and Isabelle makes eight. Another couple? Oh, why not invite the Bishop? Nine would surely be enough around the table. Then there was a new man in town, talked about by Claude who had met him at a security conference — an American Captain in the Military Assistance Advisory Group that had been set up in 1954 by President Truman and recently re-named with the extension of Vietnam. A young man, mid twenties, said Claude . . . seemed a little lost in Saigon . . . didn't wish to go partying with his comrades, but appeared to have some understanding of Vietnamese culture. Why not? He would perhaps give a fresh insight into the American aid community. A round ten, then! Settled. She picked up her notes, smiled at Ngan, and went to check on the children. As she passed through the door, the old Vietnamese cook shook her head and muttered in French: "Why you leaving . . . why you leave . . . no good."

Charmaine was sure that is what she heard, and paused in the hall. Yes, it was going to be very difficult. She knew that. The children knew that, but there was no way she could hide from them the fact that she was leaving them for the love of a man. She'd had them come to her in tears over the past few days, and it hurt. It hurt her so much that she wondered how this pain could last so long, and whether or not it would ever depart from her heart and soul. Her nights had been sleepless and she noted the bruising under her eyes when she awoke and looked into the mirror. Something's not right, she thought. I am torn between two loves . . . the love of a man I would give my life for, and the love of these children who have meant so much to me over the years. It's not fair. It's not real. Something has to break. Why can't we all leave together? Be together for years to come? But that was not going to happen. James was centred here in Saigon for a very long time . . . she knew that. He and Phuong had a life together in Vietnam and would never leave, she was sure of that. She stumbled into the drawing room, slipped down onto a divan and began to cry, the heavy tears and the shuddering of her lungs only met by the chick-chack of the tiny lizards on the ceiling. And there was no one to hear or notice the agony that issued from her mouth as she gripped the side of the divan, digging deep with her fingernails and gasping in pain.

Colonel Khuu Anh was annoyed. He'd only just woken at 6.17 on Sunday morning when the phone beside his bed rang. He slowly picked up the receiver, still somewhat groggy from the effects of the party last night. His wife, Truc, stretched in her sleep and uttered a low moan. He looked at her slim body and shook his head. They had overdone it somewhat last night, he thought. The Saigon air was still cool, but not for long. Warily, Anh snapped loudly into the phone "Yes!" And the words that came down the line made him shiver. "Dragonfruit peel at ten. You know where." Silence. The caller had hung up. He cursed . . . on a Sunday! He and Truc had planned to go to Mass, but then she would understand — it was army business or other. Let her go with the children, the chauffeur and the bodyguard. It was all for show, anyway. He didn't have any belief in a supreme being, but went along with it anyway. The time would come when all that would be supplanted by the leader's regulations. Meanwhile, let them have their illusions. He placed the phone back into its cradle. Things were spinning out of control. He wondered how he had got himself into such a situation? It was blackmail, of course.



His philandering ways had not gone unnoticed by the National Liberation Front, and now to his despair they had the evidence of proof. The photographs he had been sent in the mail some months ago had shocked him. How could he have been such a fool? But then, the money that also came with them and the extra bank accounts in his name, was of great interest . . . it would help keep his lifestyle of partying on the go, for there was one thing in life that Anh loved above all things, and that was parties and the liquor and female benefits on the side that went with it.

Slowly he swung himself out of the bed. His corpulent body growled at him as he made to stand up. Not getting any younger, he thought. Not sure about all of this, where was it heading? He grabbed the light dragon motif dressing gown from a chair and swept into the bathroom, heavy feet thudding on the shiny timber floor. One thing about these old French colonial villas, he thought, was decent bathrooms, unlike the shit holes out there in the suburbs. Still, the room could do with an upgrade. He thought that the shower recess needed re-tiling . . . couldn't stand those tiny green and lemon tiles, some of which were cracked and breaking away from the wall, and the shower-head was rusty. Not unusual, he thought, with the humidity that reigned in Saigon much of the year. A gecko ran across the ceiling and crawled into a crack. Paint's peeling, he thought, but we won't be here to be bothered about that . . . no, not much longer. There's only two ways out of this for me Huyen and the kids, Hanoi or Paris. My troops are weak, don't have the dedication of the NLF, and are not popular with the villagers. I am caught with nowhere to go, except perhaps to quit. He stepped into the shower and reached into the small alcove in the wall. No soap! No bloody soap! I'll murder that bloody Nguyen! What in hell do I pay him for?

Cholon on a Sunday was wild with people. The warmth of the sun was high, but a breeze had sprung up which helped to negate the heat. The Colonel hadn't been there for several months. The last time was with Truc when she wanted some furnishings for the children's rooms. It was fine to shop in Saigon, but if you wanted good quality at a low price, then the Cholon market was the place. Anh didn't like it . . . it was too Chinese and there were numerous gangs about but worse, he thought, his meeting had to take place in one of the seedier districts. You could finish your business, come out and find all the wheels of your car gone.

He'd told his chauffeur to take the family to Mass while he had gone to the rear of his garage and fired up the little Fiat 500 which had seen far better days, and which was unknown to most of his staff and certainly unknown — hopefully — to anyone in the NLF. By the time he had negotiated the main streets and swung into minor alleyways, looking for the Tiger Monkey bar, it was well after ten. He was late. Would the contact wait for him, or would he or she give up and return to the North?

He had parked the Fiat several shops away, handing a small Chinese boy a few đồng to watch it for him and walked the distance, turning now and then to scan behind him. Apart from the usual people going about their daily business and children playing in the alleyways, nothing suspicious came to him. Eventually, he turned the corner and stared at the bar. It was a typical small Chinese bar and restaurant, two stories, living quarters above. All the signs were in Mandarin . . . he noted that there was a total absence of Vietnamese signs. He was on unfamiliar territory and he wondered why the invisible people had picked this place for a meeting. Sure, he had known about it previously due to earlier contacts, but he had never set foot in the place until now. There were three small tables out front with rattan chairs around them, but totally empty of persons. Would he have to enter what was perhaps a dark and unknown bar to find his connection? Anh had never been a nervous person, but now he felt that the whole world was coming down upon him like a crushing weight. Go back, he thought. Quit this and go back. Get your family out of here before it is too late. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead and looked around. It was strangely quiet, totally different from the rest of Cholon that he knew about. And of course, no one would know that he was a senior member of the cabinet, a Colonel of distinction, simply because of his bright shirt and cheap flared trousers. He could be taken for a tourist from Hue or anywhere. He paused. There seemed no reason in hell that he should enter that bar, but he saw no alternative. He gripped the small Beretta pistol in his right-hand pocket and headed for the front door.

The Vietnamese at the very end of the bar, slowly toying with a straw within a tall frosted glass of Coca Cola looked up as the large man settled in front of him. The cracked red vinyl seats were in pairs, shades separating, as if designed for other than normal eating, which reminded the Colonel of prostitution parlours in the capital. The man in front of him was thin, immensely tanned, clean shaven and narrowed of eyes, and Anh felt the perspiration on his right hand, nestling hard against the weapon in his pocket.

“Dragonfruit peel,” he said, as he slipped into the firm seat.

And the answer, as expected, came back “Jackfruit leaves. You can take your hand off the gun. That won't be needed.”

There was silence. They were staring at each other, both knowing what this meeting meant and desperate for it to be completed and to be out of there. The young Vietnamese smiled, a hard fixed smile without it seemed, any sympathy, and





said: “This is from Hanoi command and you are invited to agree or not. There is no requirement for you to assist. We understand your delicate position and the instability of your living. But . . . but, you have agreed in the past that you wish the corruptions of your leaders is diminished, no? This is why you have been chosen. We are not here to harm you or your family, though your cooperation is much appreciated and valued. General Giap, himself, sends greetings to you.”

“What is it you want? I assume you need something from me?” said Anh, easing his hand off the pistol in his pocket.

The young man laughed: “It is not a matter of what we want, but it is a matter of your cooperation. You are satisfied with your new bank accounts, eh?”

Anh shrivelled in front of the slim young man almost half his weight, but bony, muscular, and perhaps not to be trifled with. Caught. Just like a fly in a spider’s web, he felt himself being drawn into a web of darkness. The young female waiter came up and asked his pleasure. He looked up at her, perhaps not even fifteen, and ready perhaps to give her favours for more than food or drink. “Whisky,” he said, “If you have some. For both of us.”

“Good choice,” said the young Vietnamese. “My name is Sinh, of course you will forget that very fast, no? What we now have to discuss is for you to agree or not. We have selected a young intelligent woman from the provinces to come to Saigon for infiltration into your military and presidential discussions.”

Anh sneered. “What you expect a female from the provinces to have any idea of military or even of Saigon?”

Sinh smiled, “It is not for you to question that. The Liberation Front decides what is best. Besides, this person was born in Saigon, so she is no stranger to your evil capitalist ways.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will introduce her to one of your most senior colleagues, perhaps the Air Marshall Vuong or that liberal mongrel General Dao whom you work for. You will organise for her to be infiltrated into one of his departments as a secretary or other. She is exceedingly accomplished and will fit in without any problem. I will leave it up to you to use your imagination as to how she will fit in with the current bureaucracy, but she has to be very close to the General. Is that clear? Very close! You may ask any questions of me but all of this has come from Hanoi, so I would expect that you would understand the grave importance of this and would comply. No?”

The Colonel felt his hand again touching the pistol in his right-hand pocket. He was of two minds. Perhaps he should kill this messenger, return to Saigon, arrange for his family to be shipped out to France? That would be an end to it all.

But then, the cold thought of the reach of the National Liberation Front hit him like a sudden hammer blow to his head. They would kill his family before he had a chance to organise anything! Of that he was certain. Their reach was far and somewhat brutal. So, for the time being, he would accept a meeting of this unknown NLF female spy and attempt to find some way of working it all out.

The cadre under the command of Commissar Chu Lam Long had attacked a convoy of the Army of the Republic, with what Cuc considered were excellent results. She had taken down several AVRN soldiers with her Russian manufactured AK47. The ambush had taken place within Binh Tuy province, where an AVRN supply column was moving onward to re-supply one of its divisions. Commissar Chu’s people had come off reasonably well with only two wounded and then as they made their way back into the mountainous region forests away from the activity Linh had slapped Cuc on the back and smiled at her. “Sure did well, my lovely. Congrats.” And the Commissar, Chu Long, also gave blessings to Cuc for her fine performance. So, she was feeling on a high, happy that things had gone well and now that they had trudged back towards their camp at Cho Lat. The sun was setting, but she was kind of wired up and couldn’t settle, so she grabbed Linh by the shoulder and said : “Let’s go for a walk, perhaps into the village. Might be able to help out. After all, they don’t have much more than we have and the last time we were there Lung wasn’t very much helpful with that old man. I’d like to see if he’s still around. After all, our elders are to be respected, and if I remember well, that was Chu Long’s decision, that the old man be looked after.”

Linh kissed her on her cheek. “You know, you should be back in Saigon as a mother of ten children or more. You are so compassionate, so caring. Oh, I know you have your fierce problems with some of the Saigon police and all of that, but really, you are more important to this country than any of us. Your strength is unbelievable. When all of this is over, you and I could set up a hospital or a first aid clinic somewhere. I have had visions of being a teacher, but I think that healing the physical wounds of this country might come first. Worth thinking about, eh?”

Cuc bit her lower lip. “You are so kind. You have taken me in and made me what I am. Of that, I am so, so very grateful. But there is a war to be fought and a long way to go before we can even consider setting up a hospital or such. But yes, a great need. A very great need.”



Later, Commissar Chu had called for her. Cuc came out of her make-shift shelter and walked to the meeting place. The night was cold. She wrapped a worn blanket around her shoulders and looked at the three people sitting around drinking heated coconut water. There was Commissar Chu, his 21C Linh and her boy-friend Lung, the Commissar's brother. They seemed subdued. Linh handed her a steaming mug.

"Come," said the Commissar. "We have news."

She squatted on the ground beside Commissar Chu. She placed the mug on the ground, rubbed her hands together and glanced querulously at him.

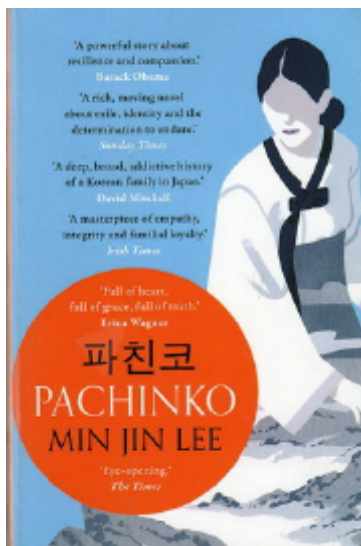
He stared at her and then smiled. "We have received a courier from Hanoi, and it seems that you, for some reason . . . perhaps because of your earlier background, have been chosen to go to Saigon and work for the cause."

"What do you mean?"

Long laughed. "Need I spell it out? You have been chosen to infiltrate the highest command in Saigon. Our organisation will get you so close to the president and his lecher rats that will so delight you, fill you with pride and hopefully give you some satisfaction for the loss of your loved one, Kim. Such an opportunity is not given to all, and you should be very grateful for this. You are no longer Tang Cuc . . . your new identification papers state that you are Nhan Lien, born to a respectable Saigon family, who for obvious reasons are dead, with the exception of your sister Tai, whom you will be living with." He grinned. "Your new name is very appropriate, no? Lotus flower! Our national symbol."

Cuc was stunned. She could not believe it. Her mind swung everywhere it could possible go, until it centred upon the last time she had seen Kim. Oh, his smile, his touch, his look! She lowered her head and turned away from Chu, lost in her own remembrance of those last few days with him. She could almost reach out and touch him on his face, smooth his brow, kiss his cheek, murmur her love for him into his soft ear, while at the same time tickling him with her tongue. Oh Kim! Kim! Yes, she would go to Saigon, no matter what it was that they wanted her to do . . . she would go. She had a mission to fulfil; she had Kim's death to be revenged, and if this re-visit to Saigon was to help that, then so be it. She was ready for what she considered might just be her last chance, even if it meant her death. •

*To be continued . . .*



**This is a ripper of a novel. Min Jin Lee is outstanding as an Asian novelist. The narration commences with the Japanese colonization of Korea in 1910.** This is the story of a Christian family, some of whom move from Korea to Japan due to the immense poverty in Korea. Though not accepted in Japan as citizens, love blooms between the two races and fascinating liaisons are made.

The author weaves a stunning image of the two countries before, during, and after World War II. Her characters are so alive, so real and being human as such also open to faults and mistakes. The novel shows the emergence of women's roles in society — how they draw upon their inner strengths to survive and grow in character, despite cultural and political differences.

The title 'Pachinko' lurks in the background and doesn't make itself known until almost mid-way through the book. Min Jin Lee weaves an addictive yarn that we simply ask for more. Her in-built sympathy for Korean and Japanese culture is real and visible within the various chapters. It is a story that simply had to be written. •

*Pachinko*

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# Pebbles in the Stream

An Australian saga in several episodes by Graham Price  
Chapter 2

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