



# Saigon Sunset

A saga in several episodes by Graham Price  
Chapter 8

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Last para from chapter 7: ‘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 and her brother, 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 Kim. 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 avenged, 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.’

Cuc, now known as Nhan Lien, stepped out of the pedicab on the edge of Arroyo Chinois, the creek that ran into the Saigon river. She stared at the red-brick building opposite which had seen better days. At one time it may well have been a grand and luxurious home, possibly owned by a French overseer or a high ranking Vietnamese government official. Now, it seemed, it was recognised as the home of a respectable Vietnamese family with parents passed on and only son and daughter living within, though there were some tenants on the first floor. An alley-way ran down the left side of the building where hawkers had set up a small market. On the right was the vacant remains of an old theatre with ragged billboards still displaying French films of the 1940s. Lien, having become used to her new name, walked up to the red brick building and banged on the door. A tall, slim young man with a tiny goatee opened the door, after first looking through the small visual opening. He nodded. ‘You are Lien, formerly known as Cuc?’

Lien hesitated to enter. The man asked for a password — she gave it and he took her small suitcase. ‘We have a room for you at the back; you will find it comfortable enough. I am Tai’s brother, Giang; it is so good to see you and you have an interview with Colonel Khuu tomorrow morning. But first things first, you must be tired after your journey. Follow me to your room, where you may rest.’

She caught his smile. He bore an amazing similarity to her lost Kim, slight cheekbones showing in a narrow face and eyes that seemed to sparkle behind long lashes. Handsome.

‘I have no need for rest . . . the journey was long but it doesn’t bother me. I would prefer to be instructed about our section here in Saigon — to know what you know, and Tai also. It would help prepare me for the days ahead.’

Giang shook his head. ‘I’m afraid we cannot do that. You have to wait for further instructions which will come by courier some time tonight. We must follow the leader of this section and his instructions. We are informed not to discuss anything at this time.’

Lien sighed. Was it to do with trust? She would not have been selected if they could not trust her. He placed the case on the floor of her bedroom and she sat on the bed. She needed to think, to prepare herself for the days to come. But Giang’s uncanny likeness to Kim saturated her thoughts. Oh so strange. How could this be? They could almost be twins.

Charmaine had supervised Ngan the cook and the extra help from the agency and was quietly satisfied with the results. This would be a dinner feast to be remembered. The children had been ushered upstairs, having had their own supper. Charmaine felt somewhat guilty about leaving them up there away from the activity, but it was a grown-up meeting and feast. She was particularly drawn to Samantha, who seemed still troubled after the recent confrontation with the CT’s on the road towards Tan Uyen. It had been a shock to the children, with Samantha suffering the most. Charmaine had given her a hug as she ushered the children up the stairs. Now to see to the place settings. She would put the Bishop on her left and Claude, her fiancée on her right. She fussed over the other placings, being a little uncertain where to put the newly known



American Captain, Charles Reynolds, who was integrated with the recently organised Military Assistance Advisory Group Vietnam, known as MAAGV — a young man seemingly a little lost according to Claude, but known to have a great affection for Vietnam. After some deliberation she placed him next to Bishop Jean Baptiste-Lacroix. She worked the remainder of the round table next to Claude with James's boss Justin and his wife Nguyet, Chef Victor Moulineaux and his wife, the writer Isobelle; then General Dao with his wife Trinh. Finally, James and his fiancée Phuong which brought Phuong to the left side of Charles Reynolds. Charmaine thought that this arrangement was perfect but she would have to insist that Victor kept out of the kitchen. She didn't need a world class chef interfering with the menu.

By 9.00 p.m. they were all seated and enjoying a glass of white wine. The chatterbox as usual, was General Dao, who, once the alcohol had settled into his brain, became so impressive with his language. Trinh smiled and laughed at his spiels and every now and then she would dig him in the side with her fingers and frown.

The night became hilarious, with each guest joining into the conversation. Finally, it came around to something more serious — the secret war going on between North and South, even though they had been divided at the 17th parallel by the Geneva Convention.

"We are quite safe here in Saigon," said General Dao, "Things are working well for us; we are rooting out infiltrators and spies from the North. Now and then, in the far northern counties my army has contact with some small bands of the Viet Minh, and sometimes those known as the Cong. They prefer to be known at the National Liberation Front, but the only thing they seem to be liberating is the mosquitoes, because some of those captured show signs of malaria. It would seem that the insects are helping our cause, ha ha."

The people around the table laughed and clinked glasses. Charles Reynolds said: "Some of my people are helping to advise your troops, General; after all, we have had long experience with skirmishes and battles."

"Yes, Korea has so far turned out in favour of the United States," said the chef, Victor Moulineaux, "but sadly at the loss of . . . what was it now . . . almost forty thousand of your troops within three years. That's a heavy price to pay for democracy. We appreciate the arrival of your advisors here, but really, we do not wish to see an escalation that would involve your on-the-ground fully equipped battle troops."

The room was silent. Charles Reynolds stared at the chef. "I do find it somewhat difficult to understand, with all great respect Victor why you French people remain, especially after what occurred at Dien Bien Phu."

"Well, said Victor, "That was over five years ago and things have settled somewhat for us civilians. We don't have anything to do with the military, even though we are good friends with General Dao and Trinh. And several of us are married to wonderful national Vietnamese ladies . . . so here we stay, until a better offer comes up." He shrugged his shoulders. "*c'est bon.*"

Charles, having imbibed several glasses of wine seemed not to be put off. He was smiling at those around the table as if he was far more knowledgeable than they had expected. "*Touché!* . . . but things for your countrymen have not settled in other colonies, have they? Look at Algeria; your troops are still there doing what? Struggling to hold on to a colony that they haven't done much for in the past and are now bombing and killing innocent people who only wish for independence."

Phuong spoke up. "I'm not sure where this conversation is going, can we talk about more happy themes?"

"I'd agree with that," said James, raising his glass as the first course of Vietnamese food was served — *Canh Bun Tau* — fish and cellophane noodle soup.

Charles was not to be put off, as he gulped another fair quantity of white wine. "But you are all missing the point. France has a very long history of colonising and won't give up any of its colonial territories without a fight."

Phuong could see that General Dao was fuming. France had given him an education. France had accepted him into the military academy in Paris. France was his friend. Everything about Vietnam these days was half French — that could never be denied.

"So, France had lost their war here in Vietnam, but that didn't mean the collapse of French culture here. No way."

Phuong could not help herself. "And America! I have recently taught my students about the numerous American wars on their own land, first the Civil War, and secondly the numerous wars with the native Indian Americans. Did you know, Charlie, that your land committed virtual colonialism onto the native Indian tribes. There were virtually hundreds of battles by the United States army with the native American Indians. Massive slaughter took place. The history of your army is just as bad as some of the earlier French army massacres. That's the past. We now have to live in the present for the future. I love my country and I would die for it, but we are kind of in a holding pattern at the moment and your comments are not helping."

Charles stared at her. "I thought you taught English!"

"I stand in for History now and then, and my students like my preparations."



Bishop Jean Baptise Lacroix, sitting next to Charmaine, held his wine glass high above his bowl of soup. “A toast, my friends . . . a toast to the future . . . a future of peace and harmony when the South with the help of its Christian soldiers and American military advisors, will overcome the North. . . . a toast my friends, to the future!”

Cuc, now known as Nhan Lien awoke in the strange bed. Difficult to sleep, she tossed and turned during the night on a mattress somewhat hard. She would have to do something about that if she was to stay, but then perhaps her stay would be short if she accomplished the plan that was set out for her to follow. She knew there would be one, though it was too early to tell exactly what it was. She was due to meet the Colonel in a few hours, but where and when were her NLF instructions coming from? She dressed quickly and made her way down to the kitchen where a woman who seemed to be a cook was cooking fish and noodles. She sliced some bread, put it into a plate with some fat and shoved it towards Lien who had seated herself at the table.

“You hungry, better put that into you before the others wake. Fish noodles coming up in a minute. The others are ravenous eaters so better you here first. I am Hwa, you know what that means, eh? It means flower, so I flower all over these people with my fabulous cooking, don’t ever forget that. I flower the better cook anywhere's in Saigon. You will like living here, and maybe you slip me some *dong* now and then, eh? Just to keep you and me happy.”

Lien couldn’t help but chuckle at the nerve of this woman. “Sure, I’ll drop you something now and then, as long as the party agrees. You do know, of course, why I am here, don’t you? And you do know what kind of a person I am with the Kalashnikov rifle, surely? And you are not stupid enough to understand that I may return from my mission very much upset or almost dead, don’t you? You know how important I am, Hwa?”

The elderly cook turned to look at Lien. “Sometimes, in the past, my cooking faltered and I made mistakes. As long as you don’t make mistakes, that fine by me. I am weary of things political and I take little interest in them. The army inquisitors do not frighten me, nor do any of your people whom I trust at this moment of time, but who know of the future?. I have lived to see it all, from Japanese incursion and then Chinese who want our land, and now differen’ ideology arise to which I put my support that we are same, you and I, to kill . . . to poison . . . if need be.” Lien nodded sagely as she bit into the warm bread, trusting. This cook would do. And, she had given her an idea.

The round table of guests at the James McKinnon’s residence in Saigon, was full of hilarity. Having consumed the delicious fish soup prepared by James’s elderly cook, Ngan, and much approved by the chef Victor Molinix. “So superb,” he had said, “I shall have to steal your most perfect cook away from you, James. It has been some time since I have savoured a soup so delicious.”

James, slightly under the influence of the white wine, smiled graciously at his friends around the round table. Such a wonderful arrangement, hosted by Charmaine. She was so perfect; he could not have assembled this night without her management. Of that he was most appreciative. He proposed a toast to Charmaine, knowing that she was now engaged to the inspector of police, Claude Bastien. Everyone responded with a lift to their glasses, while the American, Charles Reynolds seemed to nod and almost fall asleep at the table. He had become silent, which was what the majority of the diners preferred, especially General Dao and his wife, Trinh. Trinh thought she might be about to explode in defence of her husband and the South Vietnam regime, but as Charles had softened and quieted down, she kept the thoughts close to her heart. After all, Dao was looking after himself and responding well. No need for her to interfere, but if necessary she would, no doubt about it. Okay, let the North do their worst and let the Chinese come . . . sneaking mongrels as they were, supporting North Korea and now supporting their comrades of North Vietnam. They were vermin and they had to be stopped, but she feared that the South was not up to the job, even with the American advisory group. It needed more than this, it needed American troops on the ground, and the sooner the better. Even though somewhat overcome by the white and red wines of the evening, she thought that she had more to offer. And she was now determined to let it be known.

“You know, we have been infiltrated by China in centuries past. Continuously. Time and again they have attempted to rule us. And rule us they would now, through the North. Don’t be misled,. The influence of the North comes out of communist China which has exceedingly expansionist ideas. Let me tell you something — they wish to rule the world. They want to spread their propaganda far and wide. The North calls for independence, but at the same time bows to the authority of Mao Tse Tung. The North will never win in this battle, never, never! Not ever. Not as long as Dao and myself are alive!”



There was silence for a moment around the table. Phuong looked at James and he raised his eyebrows. He smiled, while the hired help began to serve Ngan's specialty, *Dui heo kho noi dat*, a pot roasted pork served with a lush salad. The table calmed and savoured the special pork with its taste of garlic and mixed peppers. And the evening stole on as the talk moved away from politics.

Cuc was becoming used to her new name, Nhan Lien, as she presented her identity card to the military police at the steps of General Dao Loc's AVRN headquarters which was within walking distance of the Presidential Palace, to which she thought she might gain entrance once day if she was clever enough at her job with General Dao. The MP waved her in and she stepped up into the interior of the concrete and marble building where she was greeted by a cool blast of air. She had a note which gave her entry through the vast interior lobby and to the several elevators at the rear. There was an MP in front of each elevator asking for ID. She joined the rush of morning workers, mostly female, pushing forward in line. Her stamped note showed permission for her to travel to the third floor to Colonel Khuu Anh's office. So far, so good, she thought as the elevator clunked and levelled, while the door slowly slid its way back. She stepped over the stainless steel plates, making sure she did not trip and walked into a hushed corridor with frosted windowed doors set in dark paneling. She stared left and right down the empty corridor, looking for some guidance, but it seemed there was none. She would have to walk along and search for the Colonel's rooms. She passed several offices, having no knowledge of what was inside and eventually came to one with the Colonel's name emblazoned onto the frosted glass window. She turned the knob on the door and stared at the scene before her. Seated behind a small metal-framed desk was a young Lieutenant attempting to make sense of some papers in front of him, while a telex machine chattered away on a small table by his side. He looked up with an anxious face as Lien entered the room, lines furrowed on his brow.

"Yes, what is it?" he snapped, pulling a fountain pen away from his lips. It had several grooves on the top casing, which indicated teeth marks. Lien registered in her mind that this was one slack jock to be cultivated if necessary. Also, he was reasonably handsome, which would make things easier. But what of the Colonel, the one who was compromised and seemingly willing to help her on her crusade. Where was he? She heard a cough behind a frosted glass door and the Lieutenant after checking her papers, rose from his desk, knocked on the frosted pane then entered, turning aside to usher Lien into the spacious office. The Colonel was lighting up a Havana cigar and staring out of the window. He indicated for Lien to sit. She drew a small cane chair up near his desk, sat comfortably with her hands folded on her small handbag, and waited. He certainly did not look like a man who could be compromised. She noted the braid and the heavy pips on his shoulders. His light khaki uniform appeared to have been made of fine linen or silk to suit the climate and she thought the heavy yellow service cuffs were meant to intimidate those of lesser ranks and no doubt civilians. Possibly, he once was true to the cause of the South, but lavish living had exposed him to compromise himself so as to save face and hedge his bets. He had opened himself up to so much blackmail by his foolish acts and was now aware of the price that was asked of him. Lien didn't attempt to flourish that in his face. She remained demure. She may well become one of the instruments of his further undoing, but she was not going to spoil the larger advantage by showing that. No, she would remain courteous, and although he would well be aware of why she was there, she had no intention of showing her hand. Any further pricking of the Colonel would be done by others. She was there for greater riches — she gazed out of the window at the prize waiting for her — the Presidential Palace.

The Colonel leaned back in his chair. She thought he seemed a little uncomfortable with her presence. His dark brown eyes looked her over, then he smiled quickly.

"Naturally, I am aware that what you go by now is not your real name, but that does not matter. Neither does the fact that I have arranged for General Dao's secretary to become indisposed. That is as far as I may go. Your superiors have assured me that will be the end of my responsibilities. Once I hand you over to the General it will be up to you."

Lien nodded. "And you will be leaving Vietnam?"

Colonel Khuu blew cigar smoke toward the window. He felt like blowing it into the girl's face, but thought he'd better not. "Yes, arrangements have been made for me and my family. You are to tell no one."

"Understood." She gave no indication that she sympathised with him. She wouldn't give him that satisfaction — he'd made his mistakes and he must live with them. "So, when do I meet the General?"

"You will begin as his secretary tomorrow morning at 8.00. I am told you have the necessary skills and have the correct security clearances?"

"Yes Colonel, all in order."

"Then present yourself to my Lieutenant in the morning and he will take you to General Dao's office on level four. I doubt if we will meet again . . . indeed, if that were to happen it would give me no pleasure."

Lien stepped out into the warm sunshine. It had been that easy! The man was a fool. She had expected some breathless moments, but it had all gone smoothly. The greater test would come tomorrow when she fronted the General, but then she knew that Dao was another ladies man and a sucker for a warm smile. While she wasn't full breasted, she would make certain to wear her tightest *ao dai* tomorrow, and she was fortunate that her rough time in the countryside had not affected her good looks, but a little paint and powder in the morning together with a subtle perfume surely wouldn't do any harm.

She felt light of heart. Things were going well, she was on the way to avenging her beloved Kim in a big way. She smiled as she mingled with the crowd, knowing that some of her comrades would be among those people — unrecognisable to the average onlooker. Well, if there was not one or two upstairs in the building she had just left, there soon would be. Despite the crowd, she felt like a walk through the city and might even go in search of a good coffee, considering that the Colonel didn't offer her one, nor a cool drink. Ha, something she hardly expected! It was such a pleasant day that she decided to walk up the Rue Catinat to enjoy the surroundings of the old colonial buildings — a short walk to the Continental Palace Hotel where she might peep in and watch the rich at play. Much of the workforce had now thinned out on the pavements, dispersed at their places of work, which left soldiers, shop-keepers and tourists roaming the streets. She felt a little peckish and thought she might look in at the Givral Cafe opposite The Continental Palace. Normally, it would be a little out of her payment range, but once certainly wouldn't hurt considering that she'd been given enough francs and dong's by the movement, besides that was the place where all the foreign journalists hung out, even that author Graham Greene, though that was some years ago. Not likely to find him there now. And she had never read his book about Saigon, published in English and named *The Quiet American*. She didn't like Americans, neither did Greene apparently — too loud, too noisy, don't know much about Asia, especially the South. But to see where he sat at the bar, and to indulge in a pastry or two as the elite of Saigon did, well why not?

She came in sight of the Continental Palace Hotel with its 1880's French facade. She'd heard somewhere that the present owner, Mathier Francini, was a gangster who had come across from Corsica. She was not surprised. There were many French gangsters in Saigon. She wondered what he looked like? Probably had the same bony face with a dark moustache and tiny goatee beard as many of the French did. Somewhat a hangover from their earlier centuries, she thought, when they ruled the world. Or thought they did. Didn't Vasco de something or other get there before them to the Americas? Ah, there was the Givral, on the opposite corner looking so elegant underneath the Eden building with its French lattice windows above and the flats that may well have housed ladies of the night. And she was under no illusions that she may well have to temporarily join them if she was to carry out her aim. A sacrifice worth committing, she thought. Oh Cuc, you've come a long way. But then, it was so easy to get used to her new name Lien. It rolled off her tongue so easily and she had slipped into her new identity so well.

She passed by the window, looking in at the polished bar and shiny booths and thought, capitalists all of them, why should I mix with them? Why bother? And she remembered when the French troops left but three years ago, marching down this very Catinat, as if in honour. All of them, with their colours flying as if *they* had won the battle and not the North. A Drum Major flourishing his baton as if in admiration, paratroopers presenting arms, the defeated General kissing the South Vietnamese flag! What bloody hypocrisy, she thought. What utter lunacy, which made a mockery of the North Vietnam victory at Dien Bien Phu. She spat on the pavement and turned the corner, continuing down Boulevard Norodom. There was another cafe and bar around the corner, the *Fleur de lis Cafe*, which she thought she might check out. She was about to enter when she noticed the man sitting close to the bar. He was at a table as if he was waiting for someone. Cuc suddenly felt drained of all recent padding — she was back into her own skin, harshly remembering and knowing that the man she was looking at was none other than the Inspector of the Sûreté, Monsieur Bastein. What kind of destiny had brought her to this? Here was this man who had obviously tortured her Kim to his death and here was she almost standing in front of him! This could not be! Never! The impossibility of it all hit her like a heavy slap in the face. She felt herself bending to the waist, feeling sick. She had to get away . . . but her feet would not obey . . . she could not move. Her prayers immediately went to Son Trinh, the mountain spirit, for help. "Oh beloved Son Trinh, help me in this time of my distress . . ." She stumbled back around the corner into Rue Catinat, away from the scene that she had just witnessed. Difficult to believe what had occurred. She felt sick, but she could not vomit. The feeling swelled in her abdomen until she was sure she would burst. A man came up to her. "Are you all right? You don't look well." She shrugged him off and stumbled down the street past The Continental Palace Hotel. Wrong way, she thought, wrong way . . . how could those people in there see her like this?

She sat on the pavement . . . now she didn't care who looked at her. It didn't matter. Her thoughts began to stabilise as she hung her head. There is only me. There is only the quest I have been given to carry out. I believe in it. I believe in the future of Ho Chi Min. I am sent for a purpose which must be carried out, for there is no other way. But a voice within said





'some others must pay,' and she wondered if the inspector attended there regularly? And if he did . . . well, there might be an opportunity just too good to be missed!

Charmaine woke, feeling somewhat ragged. It had been an interesting evening, but not quite what she had been expecting, though she thanked God or whatever for the fact that the children were well and truly out of it, asleep — upstairs, and away from the strange shenanigans that were proposed during the night. She didn't believe most of what Trinh had blurted out, but was satisfied that the night was a qualified success. Even so, perhaps a more moderate grouping next time . . . if there ever was a next time! There were shadows over the land. They were living in times when it was becoming difficult to know if the person in the street was friend or foe - somewhat like wartime Paris once was. But here, the local people all spoke the same language, so how did one know who was different? Even Northern dialects didn't mean much anymore in the South, for there were refugees and others simply down here for business. Anyway, that was something to be concerned about another time — she had to get the household up and running, the children dressed, breakfasted and off to school. And as it was market day, she needed to take Ngan shopping and might have to ask James for a little extra cash. He was always generous, though the dinner feast last night had blown her budget somewhat. She showered and dressed, staring in the mirror at what she thought were small wrinkles each side of her eyes — surely not crows feet at her age? She looked again, then satisfied that they were not, gave a little laugh and applied a medium red French Besame lipstick. She thought that age was only how one thought and she certainly didn't think she was into anything middle-age. But the time will come, no doubt, and one should be prepared. Where was she going these days as a governess? And the arrangement with Claude? The marriage soon to take place! How does that leave James's children? She had been with them for so long — she was part of the family, and now the thought of leaving them was overwhelming. How could she? The emotion welled up within her and the tears came, almost solid, heavy drops that exposed her very soul. She could not leave these children. I'm sorry, Claude, she thought. I'm so sorry . . . It breaks my heart, but the tear and break would be too much for me . . . I have to let you go, my darling.

He was in his office at the when the message came through with a courier. They were supposed to meet at the Cathedral with the Bishop for a run through before the wedding, but Charmaine had cancelled. "I love you so much, but I can't do this . . . I cannot betray the children. I'm sorry, Claude, I'm so, so sorry . . . forgive me." •

To be continued