



Saigon Sunset

A saga in several episodes by Graham Price

Chapter three

The story so far: It is 1959 and widower, James KcKinnon, with his three children Michelle sixteen, Samantha thirteen, and Jules eleven, have recently settled in Saigon having arrived from Kuala Lumpur in Malaya. James is with Asia Barr, a company that excels in buying up rubber plantations and other likely mining investments throughout South-East Asia. James has employed a French governess, Charmaine Curtaine, to attend to his children, but is encouraged to send Michelle to a prestige school in Saigon named the Nguyen Académie. Michelle is excited by the prospect and not quite by accident the family is introduced to the English teacher — the elegant Vietnamese-French Phuong Duval at the market place in Cholon. Also entering the scene at Cholon and being introduced to the family is an inspector of the secret French Sûreté, Claude Bastein. James is at first suspicious of the inspector's intentions, but then comes to accept the big man as a friend. Arrangements are made for a dinner at James' French colonial home in Saigon, with invitations to both the inspector and Phuong Duval. The inspector is attacked by a Viet Cong sympathiser, Phan Van Kim, with intentions of kidnapping him in return for Kim's imprisoned cousin Phan Van Dong, but the inspector turns the tables and Kim is incarcerated, awaiting possible torture. Meanwhile, other members of the Cong are close by, with intentions of attacking American aid transports.

James was in his office on Rue Catinat contemplating lunch, followed by a siesta back home, when the telephone rang. His secretary said, "It's for you sir. Mr. Trevallyn in Hué."

"Put it through. . . Hello Justin, how's things up there?"

"Oh, fair enough, fair enough. Sorry to disturb you so close to lunch, old fellow, but I have some business for you to attend."

James stiffened. "And that would be?"

The voice faded at little at the other end, as if Justin was distracted by something. "Hello," said James, "Are you there? Hello!"

Something rattled down the line and Trevallyn's voice became strong. "We've got a plantation for you to look at. . . Needs some verification to see if it is worthwhile adding to our folio."

"How come it's on the market?"

"Some French people own it and wish to leave the country. I can't understand why because it is in a very fertile area, and well away from any trouble."

James nodded. "So there may be a catch. . . something not quite right with the books, eh?"

"Well, something like that. I need you to go take a look. It's not all that far out of Saigon. You could make it a sight-seeing tour. Take the children."

"When do you want me to go?"

"Anytime this week. I think you are having school holidays down there. Should fit in perfectly for you."

Lunch was at the Aurora Club. James had invited Charmaine to join him. He was seated at a table for two, near a window looking out on Rue Tabert when he saw her silhouetted against the glare of the mid-day sun. She was coming up the marble steps, dressed in a casual pink blouse and matching skirt, with pale pink sandals on her feet. She holds her age well, he thought. You could take her for 25 not 35. . . her curly auburn hair molded around her head never seemed to be out of place, and she had the figure of a teenager. Something shifted inside him as he looked at her heading in his direction, but then the face of Phuong Duval came before him and he felt somewhat confused.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, slipping into the chair in front of him. "There was a mix-up with the fruit that was delivered. . . not what I'd ordered, so I had to send it back."



“Oh, I’m sure you’ll have that sorted out. I’ve had instructions to check a plantation out of Saigon, so perhaps the children might like to come. . . and yourself also? We could arrange a picnic hamper, after all, it won’t take all day to inspect the place and their books.

“Sounds delightful. When do you think?”

“As soon as possible. I was considering. . . let’s see. today is Tuesday, perhaps Thursday as long as the weather holds.”

The Vietnamese waiter came up with the menu and James sighed a little.

“So, Charmaine, take your pick. The food here is always delightful. I personally know the chef, Victor. Not all that long out from Bordeaux. You may recall a write-up of him in *Le Matin Nouvelle* the other week.”

“Oh yes, I remember. Isn’t he the one with that beautiful Vietnamese wife. . . the writer. . . what is her name?”

“Isabelle Tran. She had her recent novel reviewed the other month in *La Femme Premiere*. There’s a copy at home in my study if you wish to read it.”

“Thanks. I read her earlier book. . . so descriptive and poetic.”

“She’s the talk of the town at the moment. Just returned from Paris where the book was launched.”

Charmaine shrugged. “Should have launched it here in Saigon, after all, it is about Vietnam.”

“I’ve no doubt they will, now that she has returned. Would you like me to invite her and Victor for dinner one evening?”

“Are you that close?”

James laughed. “How close can you get?”

Claude Bastein, the inspector of the secret French police — the Sûreté — seconded to the newly formed Vietnamese secret police of Saigon, stood in front of his bathroom mirror on the third floor of the Wanlee Hotel. It was a small building, tucked away behind a small park. On both sides were alleys where vendors plied their wares. It was somewhat noisy at night with the open windows pouring in the last heat of the day, but Claude considered it rather intoxicating. On lower levels there was some prostitution and drug dealing, but he turned a blind eye to that. He was after bigger fish.

He stared at himself, not yet forty, no grey hairs. Some slight disfigurement from childhood smallpox, but other than that he thought a fairly Hollywood-type handsome face. Not quite a somewhat younger representation of Gary Cooper, but close. He smoothed the shaving cream over his face, took the brush and whipped up a lather. Santa Claus, he laughed to himself. Yes, I’d make a good Santa Claus, although I’d need a pillow for a stomach. He was proud of his physique, knew that he was a terror at squash, and had kept up his karate, already reaching brown belt status. And he was looking forward to obtaining black in the not too distant future. Don’t mess with me, he thought. Just don’t mess with me. He picked up the cut-throat razor and began to slice the hairs away. Yes, he thought, not too bad looking at that, and there was Charmaine Curtaine, a vision of loveliness. He must ask her out, to a show or to dinner as soon as possible. Better get her on board before someone else does. She is a treasure. He’d had a few relationships in the past which were bitter-sweet, but from what he had seen and felt so far, Charmaine walked all over them all. It has to be, he thought, it just has to be.

The banging on his door alerted him as he was wiping his face clean. Sure to be one of the Vietnamese officers with some information. He threw the towel into the bath and went to the door, holding the 45 calibre pistol behind his back. The spy hole in the door revealed, as he had suspected, a Vietnamese police officer. He tucked the pistol into the back of his trousers and opened the door.

“Yes, what is it Sergeant?”

The young man hesitated, then smiled. “Good morning, sir. My Captain has asked me to report concerning the prisoner 1157.”

“And?”

“He had to be transported to the hospital, under guard, of course.”

Claude sniffed. “And why is that, Sergeant?”

“They say he is dying, sir.”

Claude stood forward. “Dying my arse! Get me some transport and we shall visit this hospital and see whether he is dying or not. And, I mean now, Sergeant, right now!”



It took all of 20 minutes to get to the hospital through the heavy traffic, and Claude Bastein was sweating profusely. It was not only the heat of the day that caused this, but it was a certain anxiety that loomed up within him, because he smelt a rat. None of the prisoners of the old Sûreté headquarters had ever been evacuated to hospital — none ever, in his recollection. This smelled of an inside job, and he was determined to get to the bottom of it. There were traitors within the police. He was sure of it. So, it had come down to this. . . who could you trust?

They bowled in through the open doors so fast that the receptionist had no time to register who or what they were. She froze, not knowing what to do or who to call. They whisked past her — the Caucasian man in white clothes with four armed Vietnamese police, two of them carrying machine guns.

“Up the stairs.... up the stairs...” bellowed Claude Bastein. “Bugger the elevators... too slow. Up the stairs.”

They arrived on the first floor landing where a security guard reached for his revolver, then froze as he saw what confronted him. Claude Bastein grabbed the man by his shirt collar. “Which ward the Viet Cong prisoner?”

“I... uh... three.”

Claude and his four Vietnamese police raced down the corridor. Ward three loomed up. A nurse came staggering out with blood streaming from her neck and fell to the floor in front of them.

“Shit!” said Claude, “dive in.”

The double-bed hospital room was empty, save for a young male nurse lying on the floor moaning.

“He’s gone!” cried Claude, “They’ve rescued him! Get some help for this poor fellow here and the woman outside, and check the perimeters. go... go....!”

When he had recovered his breath, Claude came to the realisation that it was all too late, and that indeed there had to have been some inside betrayal for Pham Van Kim to have been rescued so easily. He stood at the edge of the bed where broken handcuffs were hanging loose from the iron bed-head. “Shit! Shit! Shit! So this is how it all ends, is it? Traitors within who undermine our best efforts. Well, we’ll see. We’ll just see how far you get, you bloody bastards.”

Chu Lam Long was pleased with himself. The operation to rescue his sister’s boy-friend, Kim, had succeeded. It was somewhat of a diversion from usual operations, but he considered it necessary because who knew what torture they carried out in the old Sûreté headquarters in Saigon? Better to rescue against all odds rather than take the chance that somehow Kim might spill some information, however loyal to the cause. They had smuggled him out of Saigon and into a small village where he could recuperate. Long’s sister, Cuc, had been informed and Long had organised her to visit. It was best that they not be kept apart, even though a certain risk would be if any surveillance of Cuc had been organised by the police. But Long was sure that the detours they had in place and the disguises they had implemented would have totally prevented anyone from the Saigon police or militia from following Cuc. We are too clever for them, he mused. And then thought, how stupid they are to think they can win this war. Tomorrow, as his intelligence had informed him, he would intercept a large transport of what could only be weapons and munitions supplied by the Americans to the AVRN regiments in the provinces under the cover of American aid. There was so much streaming out of Bein Hoa these days, that it had to be arms and not aid. All of it was headed for the districts where there were AVRN regiments and where American advisors were present. He shook his head. Do they think we are blind, or what? Their intentions are just so open. They cannot hide their own stupidity. Oh, how blind *they* are!

The morning was crisp and bright. They were up early before dawn, before the transport left Bien Hoa. As it weaved its way through the provinces, northward, on a long journey to the north-east, it was tracked by various Viet Cong cadres, who radioed the positions of the convoy. 12 trucks, guarded by several troop carriers and armoured scout cars front and rear and interspersed after the first six trucks. It seemed to Commander Chu Lam Long that no chances were being taken by the Americans to get their goods to the waiting regiments in the northern provinces. There was only one point of attack, considered Long, and that was in the hilly region when the convoy would attempt to wind through the pass. This would slow them down so that they would be vulnerable from attack.

Long had joined with two other cadres, and they squatted at the bend of the road in the elevated hills and waited. The convoy was expected around 10.30 a.m. And Long and his men with the other cadres had settled into position. Long’s brother, Lung, came up to him. “How much longer, dear brother, do we have to wait?”

“Don’t be so impatient, brother. Maybe one hour, maybe less. Everything depends upon our cadre members a couple of kilometres or so back there, waiting to give us warning. Are you excited, younger brother? This will be a great feather in our caps and a blessing for Ho Chi Min. We knock off this convoy and any others that follow and that will send a very powerful message to America to keep out of our business. You can see where this is going, can you not? They are only



interested in grabbing all they can from this country for their own use — our rubber, our minerals, our spices, all that we produce will be theirs for the exporting if they succeed, same as the French. They wish to become rich. They will take what they want and we shall be left with nothing. That is why we fight.”

Hung shared his paddy rice-cakes and tea with Long and Hung’s girl-friend, Linh, who was second in command. It would be a long wait, but surely by 10.30 or so their time would come. And then it was almost mid-day and still they had received no notification from the early warning cadres. Long had barked into the radio numerous times, attempting to ascertain where the convoy was, but to no avail. His requests came back negative. No sign. Around 11.20, apart from a steady stream of pedicabs, bicycles and carts, among the few vehicles that were moving up the hill, they noticed a black Citroen 15 coming towards the pass. Long took out his field glasses and focused on the windscreen of the Citroen, which was now labouring up a steep incline.

Possibly French people, he thought, as he studied the driver. He signaled to Linh to get some men down there and stop the car. Whoever was there could be questioned as to knowledge of transports, of what was on the highway, what they may have passed, or if the convoy had turned off to secondary roads. Any information would be welcome at this late time, considering that the convoy was not where it was supposed to be.

James and Charmaine had hustled the children into the car. A large picnic hamper was stowed in the back and no matter how many times he was told not to, Jules insisted on bringing his pet puppy, Harry, a small cream poodle of dubious genealogy. But Harry was no trouble during the voyage, merely sitting on Jules’ lap or at times sneaking up to the window and sniffing at the breeze. But after an hour’s driving the children were become bored and restless, so James pulled the car over at a roadside stall, where he shouted everyone to coconut juice drinks.

An armoured scout car cruised by, followed by a tank., which was followed by another scout car. Probably just on local manoeuvres, though James. Nothing to be concerned about.

“C’mon you lot, we have to get moving. I don’t wish to be at the plantation during high noon.”

Jules piped up “Did you see that tank, Dad. Looked like an American one to me. Too big for French.”

James ushered the children back to the car. “In your dreams, son. I think it was an old German one from World War II.”

“No Dad, there were no Germans here then, only Japanese. You’ve got it wrong.”

“As you wish,” laughed James, “Now hop on board.”

They had come around a bend, surrounded on each side of the road with palm trees and forest, when Charmaine said. “Oh my lord, I think we may be in some trouble.”

“Not a friendly looking lot, are they?” whispered James. “Children, just sit where you are, say nothing, and Jules, keep that dog quiet.”

There were four of them. Two with AK47 automatic rifles, one with a sub-machine gun, and the fourth a woman with her right hand on an open holster containing a revolver. Her left arm was raised with her hand flat and high in a gesture that meant only one thing — stop! James slowed the car, bringing it to a halt on the side of the road. He shut the engine down. He thought that the woman, who was bare-headed, may be the leader. It was a Cong patrol, he was sure of it, and he whispered “Be on your best behaviour, everyone.”

The woman came up to his open side window, looked quickly at the occupants and spoke in French: “Good morning monsieur, have you come from Saigon?”

James scrutinised her. Quite attractive, he thought, and very young. Perhaps no older than 20. “Yes, we are out on a tour of the countryside.” The woman switched to English. “Ah, a British visitor to our fair land, no?” She stepped back, eyeing the car, her right hand on the butt of the revolver, while the three men surrounded the car, weapons pointed skywards so as not to unduly frighten the occupants.

“I need to know, *monsieur*, if you have seen any army trucks on your journey?”

James shook his head. He was perspiring somewhat, with his hands still on the steering wheel. The children in the rear were frozen into silence. “No, only civilian ones.”

The woman placed her hand on the door handle and swung it open. “I need, *monsieur*, to know if you are telling truth. Step out, please.”



Charmaine, who had been quiet so far, could not help herself. “We are no harm to you. Why do you treat us as enemies?”

The woman nodded to one of the men. “Lung!”

The one with the machine gun came around to Charmaine’s window, tore the door open, and barked in French: “Out!”

Charmaine scrambled out of the vehicle, while James did the same opposite. Both of them raised their arms above their heads. Someone in the rear of the car was crying. “You may lower your arms,” said the woman. “We mean you no harm, but you must tell the truth.” She shouted across to Charmaine, “You, with the smart answers! Were there any army trucks? Tell us the truth, or my comrade will take you prisoner.”

Bicycles and a bullock cart went by, with the Vietnamese people keeping their heads low under their conical hats, not wishing to know what the scene was all about.

“If we do not get truth,” said the man named Lung, “You walk back to Saigon, for we confiscate and burn your car.”

“It is the truth, shouted James. Look at us, we are just civilian people. We have nothing to do with anything military.”

“It’s true,” said Charmaine, now shivering somewhat with the menace of the machine gun pointed at her. “There were no army trucks. I swear, there were no army trucks.”

Trinh shook her head in a sign of resignation. She called out “Lung!” and waved him away. The other two men stepped back.

“You may go. I believe you.” She pulled out a small pad from a shirt pocket. “This will give you safe pass for the rest of your journey.” She tore off a sheet, pulled a pen from her shirt sleeve and signed the small piece of paper. “My name is Du Trong Linh. If any issues with further journey, please mention my name, or name of my Commander, Chu Lam Long. *Au revoir* Englishman, or whatever you are.”

Charmaine quickly hopped back into the car, but James stood there watching the foursome disappear into the forest. What had just occurred? He felt some kind of shock, a daze, and he stood there not hearing Charmaine calling to him to get into the car. Was this how it was going to be in the future? Were they to be kept within the boundaries of Saigon for as long as they were here? Was it going to be safe for his children?

The sobbing in the rear seat of the Citroen finally brought him out of his daze. It was Samantha. Charmaine reached over into the rear compartment and smoothed the girl’s cheek. “It’s all right, my little love, the bad people have gone. It’s all right.” Jules was holding Harry so tight that Harry yelped and struggled to get out of his grasp, while Michelle was sitting there staring, just staring.

They reached the turn-off toward Tan Uyen around mid-day. Things had settled and James was determined not to let the earlier confrontation prevent them from continuing their journey or further messing up their day. There were mostly rice fields on either side of the road with patches of forest now and then; the tarmac was in reasonably good condition and they were making good time — should be at the Loyer Plantation by 12.30.

They pulled in at a roadside clearing where there was a small café and a view of the rolling hills to the north. In spite of everything, he thought that lunch was a necessity. But the children only picked at the food, instead swallowing reasonable amounts of orangeade. Samantha, in particular, seemed listless and not interested in anything. Even so, James thought the scenic beauty of the place was exhilarating. The dense green of the forest which gradually merged with surrounding jungle, and the misty blue of the hills in the background was captivating. There was peace here.

Charmaine sat on a grassy verge under several palms next to Samantha and saw what James was looking at. She too was captivated by the scenery. “Oh, isn’t it such a beautiful land? But now somewhat spoiled by all the turbulence that goes on almost hidden within. Do you think, James, that we should report that confrontation to the police?”

He seemed to breathe out rather strongly. It was much more than a sigh. . . it was something within himself that years of growth and determination had built up. . . it was as if to say why this, why now? Instead he said: “And what good would that do us? Here we have, as fortune has favoured us, a safe conduct pass which may well be useful to us in the future. Others, no doubt, have fared less than us when they have met up with the insurgents, but you know Charmaine, I think there is something of value in their uprising.”

Charmaine seemed shocked. “Surely you don’t agree with their politics? Look what they have done to my compatriots, killed and maimed them by the hundreds of thousands. How is it that people such as that can be forgiven for what they have done? It is so one-sided *mon ami*.”



“Ah, but you are looking at it with jaundiced eyes, Charmaine. You only see the French side of things. After all, they were the conquerors, same as some of our British legions across the centuries. I’m not making excuses for my country, but it seems to me that most of the predominant countries of Europe, have at one time or another, sought to impose their military might over peoples of lesser strength.”

“But, you saw how those Cong people stopped us, interrogated us, frightened the children without any care. You saw all of that and had yourself placed in danger.”

“Yes, but after they checked, they gave us free pass.”

Charmaine shook her head. “I don’t understand. . . I just don’t understand. Now you are looking to purchase a rubber plantation on behalf of your British company, so are you not also into a certain exploitation?”

The comment silenced James. He was not willing to answer it because he had been coming to the realisation of late that all foreign companies — no matter who they were — were in Vietnam, and indeed in the whole of South-East Asia, for profit and gain. Of course, it was his livelihood; it was his children’s future. He had a need to sustain a goodly manner of life so that the children could prosper. It was not about himself, it was about what was ahead, so that a foundation must be laid for his future generations. He wished to see the children enter noble professions and make good marriages. Of course it was not for himself, never, but if the gods were somewhat kind to him, perhaps he might find some happiness with Phuong Duval? He was not aware of Charmaine, nor the children, as he sat there and looked at the misty hills in the background. Phuong, the lovely, the intelligent, the exquisite, someone who would give one a reason beyond his own small family, for carrying on for decades to come. Someone, perhaps, would bear him more children of a class almost beyond reality. How strong would be the infusing of blood-streams, so different yet so similar, that could produce a cleaner and sharper brood of children than otherwise, for he had long held the opinion that the mixing of different racial blood-types was the way to a future of much care and acceptance. East and West, the mingling of like souls, the coming together of centuries old lineages, which could only mean one thing — adaptation and creative splendour.

Charmaine noticed the smile on his face and thought. He’s not quite with us at the moment. I wonder what is going through his mind? There’s something deep within him that keeps him going in a more relaxed frame of mind than any other Englishman, or rather Scotsman, I have known. I wonder, perhaps, if there *is* a better future for us? I really didn’t wish to be a mother, or step-mother, of his children, but then I could do worse. He is such a caring man. Of course, there seems to be a little competition now. Perhaps I made the mistake of introducing him to Phuong Duval? Difficult to compete with a woman such as that, she is so smooth and delicate, yet at the same time strong of mind. I wonder. Should I pin my flag to the mast?

Inspector Claude Bastein stood outside the old Sûreté headquarters in Saigon — out of earshot of any of his companions within the heavily fortified brick and stone building. He was talking to Major Do Dinh Thanh about the recent escape of Phan Van Kim, and offered advice that there had to be a traitor or traitors within the Vietnamese public security police.

“What do you think?” said Claude.

The Major puffed on his pipe, stretched himself a little higher than his five feet six inches, and smiled. “Of course, dear friend. Three or four or maybe more. But how to root them out, that is the question. We need to lay a trap.”

Claude nodded. “We could use that clerk, what’s his name. . . Chew something. You know, the one who shot his mouth off and was given the sack. Word him up a bit, furnish him with some fake documents, and allow it all to be spread through the building.”

“Oh, you mean Chung! Hmm, yes, that might work. Could bring the responsible one or ones out of the cracks. I’ll go down to his home and have a word with him tonight. We could bring him back on duty with some excuse. . . of course, we would have to offer him a bribe. I think I can raise that without any problems. Sadly, you my friend, wouldn’t have such access to funds that you had in the old days.”

Claude laughed. Yes, I remember very well, you as a lowly Lieutenant and spending more than you earned. I’m still waiting for that loan I gave to you back in ‘53 to be re-paid”

“Really, Inspector, I thought that was in the interest of goodwill!”

Claude laughed again. “Just joking, Thanh. It was money well spent because you managed to nail some spys for us. Anyway, it wasn’t my money, but the French government’s. Shame I don’t have access to it these days.”

The Major knocked out his pipe on the heel of his shoe, “It’s so good to have you back here again. Oh, by the way, if you need a couple of girls to play with tonight, I can arrange it.”