



Saigon Sunset

A saga in several episodes by Graham Price
Chapter 6

The story continues: The Bishop of Saigon — Jean Baptiste Lacroix — leaves the Presidential Palace after dinner, wondering how his seeds would germinate. He viewed the evening as a partial success, but of course one could not truly foresee how the Nhu's would react. Meanwhile, Phuong Duval has had to calm her students down, while James McKinnon and the inspector, Claude Bastein have arrived by helicopter near the Loyer plantation, arrested the owner but have fallen foul of a National Liberation Front cadre waiting for them at the helicopter landing site.

Inspector Claude Bastein, James McKinnon, together with the two Saigon police constables knew immediately that they didn't stand a chance. What appeared to be a North Vietnam cadre was four to five times their strength. As they came into the clearing and headed for the helicopter they suddenly found themselves surrounded. Claude Bastein had a tight grip on the arm of Pierre Marchand, determined to get him into the chopper as fast as possible. He didn't need this sudden interruption to his plan. He scanned the group, looking for a leader. There were two women among the men, both holding AK47's, faces smeared with mud, and not looking pretty at all. He'd seen it all before in earlier years around Hanoi, and knew if he didn't think fast, he was in one hell of a mess. What would they want, he thought — our arms, the helicopter perhaps? He didn't like the chances of his two Saigon police. He figured that he and James just might . . . just might, escape with their lives intact, but the others?

James could feel the energy draining out of him. He unbuckled his Webley revolver and let it fall to the ground. The inspector did the same with his Smith and Wesson. The two Saigon police had already lowered their rifles to the ground and raised their hands. The rubber plantation owner had gone pale. Claude still held him by the arm and squeezed a little. He whispered: "Don't do anything foolish. These people mean business." It was then that a solid looking Vietnamese stepped forward.

"You!" he said, pointing to Claude. "You appear to be in charge. What is happening here? I am Commissar Chu Long of the National Liberation Front." He smiled then. "You have all become my prisoners. It appears that you are preparing to leave, but what has been your purpose here, eh? Why did you come here? And who is that man you are holding?"

Claude felt his pulse racing. Tight spot, this one, but he'd been in worse. Need some way to talk us out of it . . . just take it easy . . . slow down . . . keep calm . . . try not to let him get the upper-hand, and hang onto Marchand as tight as you can.

"Greetings Commissar Chu. We mean no harm to you or your party. I am an inspector of police, and I have arrested this man for collaboration with the Japanese, which resulted in the executions of many of my fellow countrymen. I know it was some time ago, but I need to bring this man to justice."

Chu Lam Long narrowed his eyes. "And this other man, who is he?"

But before Claude could speak, Linh had moved forward and touched Long by the arm. "I know that other man. I gave him a free pass some weeks ago. He was with his family in a Citroen, I believe."

Cuc, who had been watching and waiting, also moved forward. "That inspector must be one of the police who tortured and caused the death of my Kim. He should die. They all should die!" She raised the barrel of her AK47 and turned her head towards Long for approval.

Commissar Long raised his hand. "Wait! You, the fair one, what is your name?"

"James McKinnon, Commissar. And yes, it is true; I do have a free pass given by your comrade."

"Lies!" spat Cuc. "Lies!"

"We shall see," said Long. "Linh, go to him and see if he still has your paper."

James went to retrieve his wallet from the pocket of his safari jacket, but Linh said "Don't do that. I'll take it out."

She moved up to him. "Oh yes, I do recognise you. There were your three children in the car and you had a French woman with you. She was somewhat rude, but I forgave her that. Let me see." And she slid her fingers into his



breast pocket and pulled out his wallet. She searched through the leather dividers, and then, pulled out a piece of folded paper. Checked it, and then held it up for Long to see. “This is it! This is the free pass I granted to this man and his family.”

Cuc shouted out. “They have to die. They all have to die! They must be punished.”

“That will be up to me,” said Long. “Take yourself to the rear, now!”

Cuc growled, spat on the ground, turned and went back into the undergrowth where she sat cross-legged and watched. She was rubbing the AK47 . . . itching to spray a host of bullets at the enemy.

The Commissar stared hard at Claude Bastein and the seconds ticked by. He seemed to be struggling with some decision. Finally, he said: “I have to honour the free pass. That is our code and it must not be broken. I would have liked to have taken this fine looking helicopter back to Hanoi, but another time . . . another time. You are free to go, but the rubber plantation man stays with us.”

“But he’s my prisoner!” said Claude.

Long rubbed his chin and stared again at the inspector. “That is my decision . . . go before I change my mind!”

And Claude knew what the Commissar meant. He released his grip on Marchand. The Frenchman laughed. “Seems I have new friends, Inspector.”

Claude nodded. “For the moment, but I will return *mon aime*.”

Marchand rubbed his arm and moved in the direction of the Commissar. “And good luck to you with that. Look for me in China.”

The Sikorsky rose from the ground, its blades swishing loudly. James looked down at the dwindling group below. “Seems Marchand will get away with what he has done. I can’t believe we’ve wasted all this time.”

Claude clapped him on the shoulder. “I don’t think he will get away with anything, dear friend, not when that Commissar Chu Long and his people check out the tappers. If what you told me about some of them being beaten and abused, then I wouldn’t want to be in our dear Pierre’s shoes. No, James, I don’t think I shall ever have to return to bring him to justice. He won’t get to China, and I think the Loyer plantation will be looking for a new owner cum manager some time soon.”

Phuong Duval relaxed on the divan in her drawing room, reading Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* once again. The ceiling fan fluttered quietly above her, while the little house lizards chick-chacked along the tiny cracks on the walls. She looked up at them, scurrying around after each other. She wondered how they formed liaisons, made love, produced offspring. What kept them alive . . . what did they eat apart from the odd mosquito and perhaps tiny spiders? The cracks didn’t bother her. The house was old, but solid — the French knew how to build these old colonial villas. It had stood the test of time and she was grateful for her home, not that it would be for too much longer, she thought. The North was becoming a bother and the latest news of infiltrations down South worried her. She put the book down, stretched her arms and yawned softly. Saturday afternoon, no school and no hysterical children to be concerned about. She pondered over the distress in her classroom the other day when the outburst about the Viet Minh soldiers coming down to rape all the daughters, was so strong. Teenage girls in hysteria! How she had managed to calm them down, she was unsure. Her mind wandered over her comments to the girls, but she could not recall all that she had said. In the end, she managed to calm them, and that was all that mattered. She yawned again. Oh, why is that? I slept well last night, or did I? She glanced at the diamond engagement ring on her finger . . . perhaps I didn’t, remembering that she had gone to bed thinking about her fiancée James McKinnon and his strong, well-muscled body. He was so slim, but stripped off turned into a rippling body of splendour. She smiled, gave a little chuckle and put the book down on a small rosewood side table. It was good to reminiscence . . . oh, they had become so close; it was as if they were one body and one mind. He simply purred gentleness out of the depths of his being. She’d not met a man like him, ever. She did think he was similar to her own father . . . Pierre Duval, who taught her well and guarded over her for so many years. A good administrator, she thought, in what used to be the French colonial government, unlike some that she knew of. James, James . . . where had he gone? Up north with that inspector, Claude Bastein, to a rubber plantation. He hadn’t told her what it was all about, but she figured it had something to do with a police investigation. Her long slim fingers picked the book up again, but she couldn’t concentrate. She book-marked at the page where her father’s namesake, Pierre, was talking to Hélène and she was replying: “So you never noticed before how beautiful I am?”



Silly woman, thought Phuong. Vain like many of them here in Saigon; women who considered they had power over men, but in the end became the losers. And what was his reply? He seemed embarrassed by her words. Yes, she was beautiful, but shallow. Her type would have that power of beauty for a while, but then they would lose their grip on that and their days would be long and weary. Such beauty was no apology for lack of morals. She laughed, placed the heavy hardback onto the table and sighed. She'd never be like that with James.

Her adopted daughter, Mia, called from the hall. "Mr. McKinnon coming. His car in drive. Is he going to be my bapa?" Phuong ran to Mia and wrapped her arms around the girl, "Yes, my darling, he's going to be your bapa."

Charmaine stood in the living room of the McKinnon household, recalling that James wished to invite the chef Victor Moulineaux and his Vietnamese writer wife, Isabelle Tran, for dinner. She was staring at Isabelle's latest book recently published in Paris, *La Belle Officielle* — a best seller in Europe and doing all right so far in Saigon, a mixed race novel of French and Vietnamese, much like Isabelle's own marriage and the coming one of James and Phuong. What an interesting evening that would be! I'd better start making the arrangements, perhaps just the six of us this time . . . might not be advisable for any of the military or diplomatic people to be here, considering that Isabelle's book is somewhat controversial. Charmaine had only begun to read it earlier in the week and was fascinated by its sensitiveness and what she considered to be, accuracy. It didn't do the current government much good, she thought, and wondered if it would end up being banned.

Samantha came through the door and tugged at Charmaine's dress.

"Whoops, you gave me a fright!" laughed Charmaine. "Hmm, you look somewhat tired, did you not sleep well last night, little dove?"

Samantha shook her head. "Oh yes, I did, but you will be leaving us soon, is that not correct? What are we going to do without you?"

It had to come, sooner rather than later. What was she going to tell the child? That she was deserting the family for the man she loved? There was pain in the child's eyes and the beginning of tears. Charmaine had been putting off telling the children, but here was this sweet love wanting to know so desperately, how she would cope once Charmaine was gone. A cold fear crept across her heart. And Jules too, no doubt, would be worried. Michelle would cope, she was certain of that, but the other two . . .? It all tore at her . . . she was desperately in love with a man who would take her away from this family that she had come to love so dearly, and she knew she could not be a martyr. Her destiny was with Claude . . . there was no escape from decisions, and yet looking at the child in front of her . . . a child who seemed to want her so desperately, what could she do? Hearts had to break, children had to learn and grow, but why oh why had this come to her? If she could have, she would have left it to James to tell the children, but it was all out in the open now and she could see no way out of the tunnel. The beating of her heart thumped in her chest. Caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. I don't have the answers, she thought. I just do not have the answers for this child whom I love so dearly. And as she held Samantha tightly to her, the tears formed and ran down her face like a flood.

Commissar Chu Lam Long and his cadre of men and two women came upon the Loyer rubber plantation. The owner, Pierre Marchand, had been walking side by side with Long, and seemed to stagger at times. Long was becoming impatient with this Frenchman. If such a man had survived the Japanese occupation of Vietnam, surely he would be strong enough to walk but a mere couple of kilometres? These French, he mused, is it no wonder that we defeated them at Dien Bien Phu! They don't have the strength or the vitality to carry on when times are tough. And he thought about the Americans, whom he knew were coming into his birth land in the hundreds. They won't stand a chance. They are weak. They are not used to the jungle and all the necessities that go with it. They won't wish to start anything with us. He knew there was already a firm liaison between the South Vietnamese government and the United States, and that America considered Ho Chi Minh a threat to the South. We'll see how it plays out, he thought. Early days yet, but we cannot accept that corrupt government in the South. Only a matter of time before it is crushed. Capitalist! Corrupt! Evil!

He noted the Vietnamese and Chinese rubber tappers who stood around the office, as if they were waiting for some sign that everything was fine, that some sense of normality would reign now that their boss was back again. They were jabbering amongst themselves and looking wild-eyed as the party of NLF troops came up the winding track, rifles and carbines held high. Several turned and ran away through the trees, but the majority stood and waited.

Long smiled. It was good . . . it was how it should be that they should fear him and his party. But he was here on a mission. The inspector of police had said there was trouble here, and if there was, Long was determined to discover it. What was Marchand hiding?



The crowd parted to reveal a Chinese resting on a swing seat, his right arm in a sling with a slight patch of dark blood seeping through the cotton. Long walked up to the man. “You are Monsieur Marchand’s manager, Chun Li?”

The big Chinese stared at Chu Lam Long. His face was pasty and his breathing laboured.

He took some time to answer. “So, what is it to you?”

Long spat into the ground. “It is to me whatever I think it is. You were wounded by one of the police, no?”

Li nodded, his breathing still laboured. “It was because of that French policeman.”

“Yes,” said Long, “Because he was taking away your boss man for questioning!”

Pierre Marchand came up close to Long and attempted to speak, but Long pushed him back. “You will be quiet. I am talking to your manager! Stay back!”

Cuc grabbed the Frenchman by the arm and pulled him back. She held her hand into his face and pushed at his nose. “No speak, understand? No speak.”

“We know,” continued Long, smiling at Chun Li, “There is reason behind questioning of your boss man in Japanese times.” He paused, kicking at the pebbles in front of the office. “And we know something not correct here this plantation.”

Chun Li was struggling with his words. “What . . . what business of yours? This . . . this plantation is economic sound for future of Vietnam. You be grateful for our management and control . . . control those who otherwise be destitute.”

Long laughed. “You are clever man, Chun Li. But you are not Vietnamese and perhaps should not be managing plantation like this. Only Vietnamese can oversee Vietnamese. Is that not so?”

Chun Li coughed. He lowered his head and coughed again. He appeared to struggle for breath and heaved several times. “So . . . so, why you here, anyway?”

Long pointed his finger. “For inspection, big man. Make sure everything okay. No problem with tappers conditions. You agree with that, eh?”

Chun Li sagged back onto the canvas seat, his right hand caressing the patched wound. “Do what you wish.”

It took only fifteen minutes for Commissar Long to find the evidence he needed. He burst his way into some of the shacks and saw at first hand the bruises and cuts on the backs of some of the Vietnamese rubber tappers. But the men would not talk, would not give anything away that might finger Chun Li or his second-in-charge. Long and several members of the cadre came to where Pierre Marchand was standing beside Chun Li.

Long stared at the two of them. He was thinking that the country would be better off without these types. Cuc was watching him carefully, hoping against all hope that a firing squad would be called for. She had no love for any Chinese who made their living off the backs of her countrymen. As for the French, the sooner all of them were out of her country the better. She wondered how it would be if she ‘accidentally’ shot off a burst! Would Long be all that concerned? No, better not, she’d already incurred his anger back at the helicopter field. There would be another time, even if Long didn’t take any action here and now. The Frenchman was speaking. He leaned back from inspecting Chun Li’s wound where a doctor had removed the bullet.

“It is sometimes difficult to maintain order and the men fight when they are drunk. The country depends upon the economic viability of rubber. You of all people should understand that. If the North is eventually to be the government here, people like your Ho Chi Minh would recognise the need for plantations to be well managed so that Vietnam can retain economic superiority.”

Cuc could see the validity of the argument the man was putting forward. Nothing was perfect, but she would still like to put a bullet through his neck. When we are victorious we will dispense of him and his like — send them back to France and replace all Chinese managers with Vietnamese. She could see that Long was wavering in his decision and thought that perhaps she should speak up, but Linh looked at her as if knowing what was on her mind, and shook her head slightly.

The commissar’s young brother, Lung, was tapping his left foot on the ground. He was thinking that we should exterminate these people. His sullen look and impatience had not gone unnoticed by Long, so the commissar concluded that he needed to wrap this up swiftly before the situation got out of control. The atmosphere was unhealthy and he could feel the hate that many of his cadre had for the Frenchman and his manager. He had to make a judgement, and fast. He walked up to Marchand and grasped him by his shirt collar. He stared deep into the man’s faded blue eyes and blew his breath into the Frenchman’s face.



“We are leaving, since there is no real evidence of cruelty or mismanagement here. It is on your conscience, Monsieur Marchand, that truth will be discovered if ever any reports come to me in future. I have spoken to several of your tappers and have given them contacts if anything bad happens here. Messages will be sent to me, so I am telling you now, do not make me return. For if you make me return, I will destroy you and your hirelings. You understand me, eh? I will burn your home down and I will execute anyone I consider responsible!”

Cuc could not restrain herself. “Do it now! These pigs are lying!”

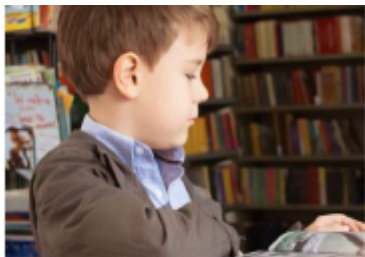
Long stepped forward, pushing the muzzle of his carbine into Marchand’s stomach. “As it should be. There is evidence that these men are abusing their employees. Our fellow countrymen are being ground into the earth by these people. We have the right to try them for their crimes!”

There was a murmur of assent from some of the cadre members, but Long pushed his brother’s carbine away and turned to his group. “We are not animals! There is some evidence here, but it is not enough. It is not foolproof, therefore we must leave them with grave warnings . . . warnings that we will return if necessary. You see this man here?” he pointed to Marchand. “You see him quivering, afraid that we shall return? And if we return, it will be as if the very demons of hell have fallen upon him. Our leader, Ho Chi Minh, would want it this way. There is to be fairness in our revolution. You must trust me that this is the correct decision at this time. Now, we shall go! All go!”

Cuc reluctantly lowered her AK47, but her eyes still blazed with hate upon the Frenchman and his manager — the large Chinese. I will wait, she thought. I will wait until I have reached commissar ranks and then it will be my decisions that matter. I will flatter and get close to Linh, the commissar’s deputy . . . she already likes me, and we shall be deep friends, and I will use her influence to enable me to rise in the ranks. As for Commissar Long, he is weak and there will come a time when he too shall be dispensed with. •

TO BE CONTINUED

OzChild—Children Australia



Stepping Stones to Schools is an early intervention school-readiness program which supports at-risk families.



What is Stepping Stones to School?

Stepping Stones to School is a collaborative, early childhood transition project which enhances relationships and connections between families and providers. The project improves outcomes for children and supports provider capacity, so that more children in the region have a positive transition to school experience.

The program works in partnership with **Beyond The Bell** school retention network across the region.

Who are we supporting with Stepping Stones to School?

The project supports families with children transitioning to kindergarten and primary school and who live in the shires of Glenelg, Southern Grampians, Corangamite or Moyne.

Discover how you can help by contacting:

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