

Chapter 1

Saigon, the day before Christmas. Not that it felt Christmassy in the hot and sultry city, which was fine with me. I had come to Vietnam to escape the holiday fanfare in Hong Kong...and for adventure. And I had found it all right, in the tunnels of Cu Chi.

On the northern cusp of the city, this sprawling subterranean network had only recently been opened to the public, and it was as mysterious as it was revealing. Scrabbling on the hard-packed earth uncomfortably below sea level, I found it mind-boggling how the Communist-allied Vietcong forces had managed to sleep, eat and defecate in these multi-layered warrens, waging war against the American enemy. There was no earthly way to describe their powers of endurance. Now I understood how this vastly poorer and smaller country was able to beat its big and mighty foe. The Vietnam war had ended almost twenty years ago—we were in the early 1990s—but in these tunnels time stood still.

Dumbfounded by this lesson in history, I pushed on. It was impossible to stand up or even kneel in parts of this claustrophobic maze. In the last stretch of my private tour, I was reduced to crawling, the ceiling no more than a few inches above my head.

I was beginning to feel a bit queasy—and quite frankly uneasy—when I saw light filtering through the exit a few metres away. Thank bloody god. My guide went on ahead, ascending the ladder first in order to help me out. Then I sensed it, something ticklish across my back, moving over my t-shirt. I looked over my shoulder—and screamed.

A mob of cockroaches was scuttling over me and more seemed about to drop from the surface. These were not the small fry you find in Europe but the finger-long, mottled-brown marauders with spear-like antennae.

Ubiquitous in Asia and my number one phobia.

Horror combined with panic. As in a nightmare I wanted to scam, but I was rooted to the spot. Limbs jellified. I don't know what fate would have reserved if a voice behind me hadn't boomed:

'Down, you lie down.'

Without questioning the command I slumped onto my stomach, face turned sideways. I felt a weight against my legs and a firm arm on my back. A man's head lodged on my shoulder, his body contorted to enable him to reach his targets. I could just make out his hand on the surface, grabbing cockroaches and flinging them somewhere behind me. Then he quickly manoeuvred away.

'Go, you go now.'

I bolted forward on all fours, scrambling up the ladder and emerging into a grassy area in a sunshine haze that hurt my eyes. I sat on the ground feeling shivery despite the heat, pulse pounding, throat parched, tasting earth. I would have flung off my t-shirt were it not for cultural sensitivities. A few seconds later my rescuer emerged with rather more elegance than I had managed.

'You okay?'

He sat down beside me.

'Oh my god thank you, you saved my life in there,' I heaved, the residue of horror now tinged with embarrassment.

'It is nothing,' he said, as if he fended off cockroaches every day. He spoke with an accent. French I guessed.

'No, what you did was...unbelievably courageous, to pick them up like that. Those big cockroaches...' I bore down on the word, 'are my nightmare. It's ridiculous, I know, this irrational fear, but then all phobias are like that aren't they? Once, it took me two hours to muster up the

courage to tip over an empty suitcase with a dead roach inside. I'd killed it with a whole can of insect spray, I mean, talk about...'

'What is your name?' He brought my babble to an abrupt end.

'Ravinia.'

Why mention my full name? I always just said Rai.

'Ravinia.' He rolled the r, more Italian style than French. 'Beautiful name. You want to drink something?'

I nodded, still digesting his daring and wondering how the devil he'd suddenly appeared at my rear, like a genie. I hadn't seen him in the segment of tunnel I'd been shown, where it was just me and the guide. His guide must have been behind him. Then again, I hadn't looked back, focusing only on my next step. My watch said eleven forty-five. Had I been in the labyrinth for only thirty minutes? It felt far longer. Nearby we found a tiny outlet selling drinks, with two plastic tables and a couple of empty chairs inviting us to sit. When my Fanta arrived, I poured it into a glass, gulped it down and ordered another, wishing I'd brought a spare t-shirt.

'Where you from?' he asked.

'From England.'

'I am French. My name is Alain.'

His English was rudimentary—traveller's pidgin—and my spoken French wasn't much better, remnants remembered from school lessons and holidays in France. Fortunately, we didn't need an extensive vocabulary to rave about the Vietcong and their wartime exploits in the tunnels. After repeated utterances of 'incredible' and 'how did they do it?' we moved onto some backpacker trivia: how long our journeys were, where we had been, where we were heading and where we were staying in Saigon.

With my hair mussed up and my face caked with dirt, grit and sweat from the rush of cortisol, I can't have looked good, not that I cared. But Alain was eyeing me in a very, how shall I put it, forthright manner. I was also sizing him up, as you do with someone who has just saved you from a full-on panic attack, if not heart attack. His features were dark and distinct. Brown hair, cut short and a slightly receding hair line. Almond-butter skin tone. Jellyfish blue eyes. The lips—how curious. His lower lip and chin jutted forward slightly, but the disorder that this brought to his mouth was balanced out by a captivating rise at one end of his upper lip. Over his toned torso he wore a light blue t-shirt and dark blue jeans. I might have gone weak-kneed in the presence of such a strongly Mediterranean, masculine face. But the silly way he was gazing at me, like a swooning adolescent, was a damp squib. It didn't sync with the deep-voiced Indiana Jones heroics he had displayed a few minutes before.

My glass long emptied, I made to leave. I craved a shower.

'I can see you tomorrow?' he asked in English as I got up.

'Yes that would be nice,' I replied politely, lying through my teeth. I had no wish for a get-together in the remaining time I had left in this heaving city. But needs must, gratitude and all that. After agreeing the details of where we would meet, I left him, still sitting at the table, to find my guide.

The following day, I half expected Alain not to show up but he appeared at the appointed hour at the rooftop terrace of my hotel, with a ready-made plan.

'We walk to the river? Maybe take boat?'

'Why not?' The Saigon River—I hadn't yet seen it.

Off we set at a leisurely pace, observing the action on the streets as we strolled past noodle shops and women in conical hats selling their wares, men idling on the sides of pavements and others rushing by with heavy packages in their arms.

It was peaceful by the river, where for a time we stood watching the green water hyacinths floating away with the current. Solicited by a gutsy private entrepreneur, we took an hour's cruise in a small pleasure boat. The two of us glided along, enjoying the gentle motions of the craft and the breeze. Alain was funny and flirtatious—in French, having abandoned all attempts to speak English. I didn't mind. It was easier to understand him in his mother tongue, which he spoke slowly and clearly. I just couldn't jest back. His interest in me was obvious and I wished it were mutual. But he was too comical a figure to pump up my sexual adrenalin.

'Would you like to come back to my guest house? I'd like to play you some songs I've composed on my guitar,' he propositioned as we disembarked onto the embankment. I hesitated. I didn't want to have sex with him if that's what he had in mind. But I was curious about his lodgings and music and besides, I was still really grateful.

'Okay yes, to hear your songs,' I emphasised.

We pressed back into the melee of the roads. He led me to a shabby, two-storied building in a back alley reeking of incense and exhaust fumes. His room was large but dilapidated and there was nowhere to sit but the bed. I parked myself on a corner of his mattress. He took up his guitar and began to sing. I noticed how clean and well-trimmed his fingernails were and realised mine still showed bits of dirt. I cupped my hands in my lap, fingers curled in.

'Oh Ravinia I have a big problem,' he strummed with a dreamy, distracted smile. 'I'm attracted to you, I want to make love to you, what am I going to do?'

Seriously? I'd never heard anything quite like it from a man's mouth before.

'*Peut-être tu es la femme de ma vie.*' Me, maybe the woman of his life?

Peut-être pas. It was all I could do to suppress the giggles and just shake my head at this slapstick attempt at seduction. He clearly had talent as a musician though so I stayed on a little while longer to hear him sing, enraptured by the song about his 'magical trip to Madagascar'. He didn't try to touch me, although his soulful eyes stayed riveted on my face.

At a pause in the music, I stood up to leave.

'Can I see you again?'

'I'm sorry. I'm busy tomorrow and Saturday morning I take the plane to Danang. But thank you for a nice afternoon...and saving me from the cockroaches.'

With a farewell wave I left him to his music, never expecting to see him again. But shortly after arriving at the airport for my early morning flight, who do I run into at the check-in counter but the Frenchman with his guitar.

'What are you doing here?'

'I thought it would be interesting to see Danang.'

I think he wanted me to believe it was a spur-of-the-moment decision but spontaneous, my foot. He'd have to have done his bureaucratic legwork since in that era you needed a special permit to leave Saigon. I didn't know whether I felt pleased by his presence or put out by his audaciousness and the assumption I'd be glad to see him, knowing there was no way I could avoid him. The only foreigners on the half-empty flight, we sat next to each other on the plane, an ancient Russian workhorse. Part of my armrest was missing, the safety belt wouldn't buckle and coils of wire poked out from under both of our torn and tatty seats, which provoked a great deal of laughter.

'If the seats are broken just imagine what state the engine's in,' Alain gestured to the front of the aircraft. Cause of more mirth, but I also realised why Vietnam Airlines was known then as Hang on Airlines. The approach and landing in Danang proceeded to do justice to the nickname. After a shaky and seemingly brake-free descent, the wheels hit the tarmac with such a bounce you would have thought they were giant springs ready to bring the plane back up again. I'd landed in hairy rainstorms and blanketing fog before and I did what I always do in such circumstances: screw my eyes shut,

cross two fingers of both hands in prayer and bunch them up against my stomach so my supplication is not too obvious. Alain seemed blissfully unruffled as we rattled towards the ground even though he'd been the one to pan the plane's aeronautics.

'There's nothing to worry about. The pilot probably flew fighter jets during the war.'

The flight survived, we shared a taxi-truck to the same guesthouse in town. It was during the drive that I realised the click had happened, the attraction that once born, seems inevitable. Maybe it had to do with the absolute fearlessness he'd displayed in the air although, god knows, he'd shown more derring-do under the ground but such things weren't dictated by logic. When Alain asked me at the reception desk of the guest house, 'Shall we take one room or two?' I answered with a smile.

The door shut, we made a bee-line for the bed. Our lovemaking was memorable, although not in the way we'd intended. Even before I'd eagerly spread my legs to guide him inside, the sound track had started: clanging from the brass head board rails against the mottled wall and some high-pitched screeching from the Ho Chi Minh-era bedsprings. Once he started thrusting in earnest it was pure discordant symphony, the brass and strings competing for the title of worst offender. It was as if the bed was furious at being woken from a slumber. Which meant I was far from being in the moment. Alain, calling the clamour 'the locals serenading us', took it in his stride—perhaps because there were no other alternatives for coupling, certainly not the cracked, dirty floor.

'I bet you it's all a set-up to liven things up for the staff,' Alain joked after he damn near collapsed the bed with his climax. 'Or maybe it's part of intelligence gathering to keep track of who's having sex with who!'

I made up for the distraction over the next seven days when, as lovers and travellers, we spent every minute together. Hiring an old bus with a driver, we explored nearby Marble Mountain and China Beach. We also ventured further afield to the riverine village of Hoi An and the ancient capital city of Hue. Without him, it would still have been a riveting road trip but much more solitary. And chillier too, since we were able to warm each other up after the cold-water showers and threadbare towels and blankets that were standard at each stop—the climate being much cooler than in tropical Saigon. His compliments were an inextricable part of his humour—perhaps to make himself also laugh and distract from some of the decrepit interiors we stayed in.

'You're beautiful in the morning light, the afternoon sun and the twilight shadows.'

As he touched and kissed different parts of my body, he applied adjectives: 'Long luscious hair, the colour of espresso...deep brown velvety eyes, they reflect your soul...lips like a leaf...a smile like jasmine in bloom...nose straight as a bamboo stalk...stomach smooth like mahogany...legs for dancing...olive oil skin.'

Can you get any cornier? Unable to contain his ardour, Alain waved me kisses for all the world to see from his bicycle rickshaw as we were guided, in separate contraptions, around sleepy, leafy Hue; amid the ruins of ancient palaces he played chase, cornering me for a quick caress. I still found his exaggeratedly chivalric gestures clownish but at the same time I couldn't deny feeling uplifted by his potent desire for me. Comedic or not he was entertaining to be with, resourceful and a gentleman who insisted on carrying my duffel bag and paying for lodging and meals. He bought me a miniature ivory-inlaid perfume bottle and gave me a poem signed with a drawing.

'Don't lose this paper, it's got my address in France. Do you have a photo of you I can have?' he asked. I gave him a tatty passport snap.

Who really was this funny Frenchman? We didn't digress into details. I gleaned only that he was thirty-eight, did some kind of interior design work and was divorced with an eleven-year-old son. I let him know I was twenty-nine and a journalist from London working in Hong Kong.

'Let's celebrate in style,' he proposed on the morning of New Year's Eve. From our forays to the shops we managed to procure a bottle of red wine, a packet of bean cakes and a tin of Russian caviar.

We consumed our feast in the best hotel we could find in Danang, which wasn't anything to speak of but at least the bed was quiet.

'To meeting in Saigon,' we toasted each other, clinking our glasses. Bleary-eyed, I said my goodbyes to him early on New Year's Day to fly back to Hong Kong, where I promptly forgot all about him. As edifying as it had been, it was only a holiday fling after all.