

Chapter 1

In my dream a flower blooms, a tiny wild flower. So tiny I can hardly see it, a scent so subtle I can hardly smell it. And yet, when I wake, it is the only thing I remember.

Every morning a girl in her *qipao* smiles at him and dances, a cigarette between her lips. Ever since he put her poster on the wall opposite his bed.

God! Ten past eight already. Lethargic because of the air con churning away in the corner of his window, he stretched and wondered why his alarm clock hadn't gone off, until he remembered Valiant Heart, number 9 in the fifth at Happy Valley the night before. At three to one, he hadn't made a fortune but it was nice all the same. There it is, stupid, the whole racing programme from last night, on your chair. In big letters: 13th of July.

So today is the 14th, French national day and a holiday. That's why he hadn't set his alarm. The 14th of July... the parades on the red hot avenues of Haiphong or Hanoi... "From the steel grey skies they are falling in their hundreds, the red berets who dare and who win..." Tch tch. He hadn't won much, just the right to die, years later, in his bed or in the street, of a stroke or a heart attack, just like anybody else. Watch your cholesterol, Monsieur Chambon...

He got up and stumbled past the smoker, a present from Martin Mack, a regular at the race course who, when he needed the money, occasionally did a bit of door to door for Lucky Strike. Damp and badly stained, the poor girl looked more and more like an icon in the fight against cancer. She had been hanging there for less than two months... This damned humidity! Tomorrow, get rid of her. Having said that, his wardrobe was in an even worse state; a nursery for mushrooms, a tropical cellar for Roquefort. To wear nothing but polyester; it makes one's skin itchy but at least it doesn't rot.

His bathroom already felt like a sauna. The inevitable cockroach fled into the air vent. Cold shower, energetic scrub, teeth and shave... Music, suddenly. A neighbour's radio, next door or below. The latest hit of Anita Mui the queen of canto pop, announced the loud speaker.

The lyrics didn't mean anything, Cantonese was like double Dutch to him, but the tune didn't displease him. His blade cut a neat line through the white foam spread on his cheek and, for a brief instant, he was back by the Red River cutting through the mountains of Tonkin.

Oh shit! The phone.

He pretended not to hear and steadfastly attacked the stubble on his Adam's apple. They'll soon tire and hang up. But no, they persisted, someone who must have known he was at home, was even annoyed perhaps by his lack of response. It's all instant gratification nowadays. He went and picked up the phone.

"Hello, is that Roger Chambon?"

“Yes”

“It’s Lavinier... Tell me, you are coming for drinks at the Consulate, aren’t you?”

He confirmed with a grunt which didn’t put off his caller.

“Must talk to you about some business... We can discuss it there, all right?”

New grunt, begrudgingly affirmative. Some business, here we go again... With tips from Captain Lavinier, the military attaché, one had had to be careful. Nine times out of ten they led nowhere.