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# **The Silk Merchant's Daughter**

Written by Dinah Jefferies

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*The Silk Merchant's  
Daughter*

DINAH JEFFERIES

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# *History of Vietnam Timeline*

**1787**

French involvement in Vietnam begins. Versailles Treaty creates alliance between French King Louis XVI and the Vietnamese Prince Nguyễn Ánh.

**1840s–1890s**

French colonization of Indochina (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos). France divides Vietnam into three areas: Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina.

**1927–30**

In the north two heavily repressed communist groups are formed to resist the French.

**1940**

During World War II, Japan invades and occupies Vietnam, allowing French colonial government to continue for a time.

**1941–4**

The Vietminh Independence League is organized by Ho Chi Minh who emerges as a leader of anti-Japanese resistance.

**1945**

The Japanese take over government from the French (briefly). After the Japanese surrender, the Vietminh, led by Ho Chi

Minh, take control (also briefly). British and US military forces assist the French to re-establish colonial rule.

**1946**

The Vietminh resist. French forces shell the port of Haiphong. The first Indochina War (or French War) begins.

**1946–54**

During the Indochina War, China and the USSR support Ho Chi Minh; the US supports France in order to halt the spread of communism.

**1954**

With popular support the Vietminh forces surround an isolated French military outpost in the town of Dien Bien Phu. 12,000 French troops are trapped. France surrenders. The Geneva Accords are signed dividing Vietnam into North and South, with national elections to be held in two years.

**1955–6**

With support from the US, Ngo Dinh Diem declares himself president of South Vietnam, refusing to hold national elections.

**1957–9**

Weapons and men from North Vietnam begin infiltrating the South. Beginning of communist insurgency in the South.

**1960**

The Vietcong, or National Liberation Front, are formed to fight the US in the South.

**1964**

A North Vietnamese patrol boat attacks a US destroyer.

**1965**

US combat troops arrive in Vietnam, beginning the American–Vietnam War. The US drop more tonnage of bombs than are dropped in the whole of World War II.

**1973**

US withdraws troops following Paris Peace Agreements negotiated by Nixon and Kissinger but hostilities continue in the South.

**1975**

Communists take Saigon. Last remaining US citizens are evacuated. Vietnam is unified under communist rule and Saigon is renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

# Prologue

Submerged, she moves in tumbling slow motion, her long hair swirling around her head. Spellbound by golden light pouring through the water, she kicks her legs and thrusts her body upwards, following the bubbles of her breath as they stream towards the surface. The flat sun splinters, spreading droplets glittering far across the water. She throws back her head, gasps for air, sees her sister's face. Seconds pass. Dazzled, as the world filters through, she raises a hand to wave, opens her mouth to shout. But the water swallows her again. The river roars as she treads water, its voice echoing with thuds and thumps. *Thwack. Thwack.* Despite the need to shout for help, she can't make a sound. She's desperate to breathe but knows she cannot. She tries to swim, but something saps her strength. Above her, the iridescence fades. She starts to sink. Deeper down, the darkening river is cold, and as each pulse of light grows fainter, it is happening too fast. She tries to roll over, tries to climb a watery ladder to the top, but the river is too powerful and her feet are slipping through the gaps. Images of home begin flooding her mind, her legs grow heavy and, as the river sucks the struggle out of her, she feels as if she's floating in the depths. She is not floating, but drowning.

I

*Threads of Silk*

*May to early July 1952*



# I

## *Hanoi, Vietnam*

Nicole sniffed air heady with the scent of wild gardenia, the shiny green leaves and fragrant white flowers of the shrub carpeting the partially shaded area of the garden. She glanced down from her bedroom window and spotted her father checking that everything was perfect outside. Still a handsome man, his well-cut dark hair, with just a scattering of silver, made him seem especially distinguished and, although it was irritating that he was using her eighteenth birthday party to show off the garden, she had to admit how pretty he'd made it. Incense burned at the French windows of their honey-coloured villa and the garden ponds reflected bright colours from strings of paper lanterns hanging from the branches of two enormous frangipani trees.

Nicole took one last look in the mirror and deliberated. Should she pin a single fuchsia at the side of her long black hair to match the Chinese-collared dress she'd had made for today? The bodice clung to her slim frame like a second skin and, as she moved, the skirt swirled and fell just short of the floor. She listened to Edith Piaf singing 'Hymne à l'amour' on the wireless, glanced out of the window again and, deciding against the flower, saw that her sister, Sylvie, was now walking at their father's side, the two of them with their heads close together as they so often were. For a moment Nicole felt left out and swallowed a brief flash of envy. She ought to be used to it by now, but even before she'd combed her hair or brushed her

teeth, her sister looked beautiful; wavy auburn hair, chiselled cheekbones and a perfectly tilted French nose saw to that. Tall, willowy Sylvie had inherited their French father's looks, while Nicole resembled their long-dead Vietnamese mother and felt conscious of her amber complexion. She drew back her shoulders, shrugged the moment off and left the bedroom; she wasn't going to let anything spoil her day.

As she strolled through the large, high-ceilinged room leading to the garden, two shining brass-bladed fans freshened the air. The room, like the rest of their home, was elegant and stuffed with exquisite antiques. From her spot in the open doorway she caught sight of a couple of old school friends, Helena and Francine, self-consciously fiddling with their hair in a corner of the garden. She went over to be kissed and hugged. As they chattered about boyfriends and the exams they'd passed, the garden was filling; by the time Nicole finally made her excuses, she saw the French guests had already arrived and were now smoking and drinking, while some of the wealthy Vietnamese had started to promenade in their silks. She noticed a tall, broad-shouldered man in a pale linen suit approach her sister and something about him made Nicole stare for a moment or two. Then she smoothed her hair, drew back her shoulders and went across.

Sylvie touched the man's arm and smiled at him. 'Let me introduce you to my sister, Nicole.'

He held out a hand. 'I'm Mark Jenson. I've heard a lot about you.'

She took his hand and glanced up at his face, but the intense blue of his eyes startled her and she had to look away.

'Mark's from New York. We met while I was over there,' Sylvie was saying. 'He travels all over the world.'

'It's your birthday, right?' he said, and smiled at Nicole.

Nicole swallowed and struggled to find her voice but luckily

Sylvie interrupted. 'There's somebody I just need to have a word with.' She waved at a dumpy woman on the other side of the garden, then turned to Mark and giggled as she touched his hand. 'I won't be long. Nicole will look after you.'

Mark smiled politely. For a moment the air seemed too thin and Nicole's breath failed her. She shifted her weight from one leg to the other, then looked up at him properly and tried not to blink too much. His eyes were the colour of sapphires, made even brighter by the contrast with the deep tan of his skin.

'So,' she said eventually.

He didn't speak but was still gazing at her.

Suddenly self-conscious, she touched her chin. Was there something on her face?

'I didn't expect you to be so pretty,' he said.

'Oh,' she said and felt confused. 'I'm sure I'm not.' But what had he expected and why was he expecting anything at all?

'Sylvie spoke of you when we were in the States.'

Her thoughts slowly untangled. Of course Sylvie had spoken about her. It was only natural to talk about your family, especially when away from home.

She smiled. 'Then you know I'm the black sheep.'

He flicked away a lock of hair that kept falling over his right eye. 'Fire and marquee do come to mind.'

At his gentle teasing, Nicole's hand flew to her mouth. 'Oh God, no! She didn't tell you about that?'

He laughed.

'I was only thirteen and it was an accident. But this isn't fair, you've already heard stories about me yet I know nothing about you.'

An impulse passed through her. As if he too felt it, he reached out a hand, but she realized it was only to indicate the way. 'Let's pick up some champagne and then why don't you show me round? I'll tell you everything you want to know.'

As they moved on, a little of the inner tautness she'd felt since being introduced released its grip, though at just five foot two, she felt tiny beside him and wished she'd worn higher heels.

A waiter in a white suit approached with a tray. Mark accepted two glasses and handed them both to Nicole. 'Do you mind me smoking?'

She shook her head. 'You don't sound as if you're from New York.'

He took out a packet of Chesterfields, lit one and then held out his hand for a glass. Their fingers touched and Nicole felt a jolt run up the underside of her bare arm.

'I'm not. My father has a small dairy farm in Maine. I grew up there.'

'What took you away?'

He stood still. 'Thirst for adventure, I suppose. After my mother died my father did his best but it was never the same.'

The tone of his voice had changed and she recognized the suppressed sadness in it. 'My mother died too,' she offered.

He nodded. 'Sylvie told me.'

There was a moment's silence.

He sighed again and smiled as if remembering. 'I did all the usual country things – fishing, hunting – but my passion was motorbikes. Dirt-track racing. The more dangerous the track the more I loved it.'

'Didn't you get hurt?'

He laughed. 'Frequently! But nothing too serious. It was mostly the odd broken ankle and a few cracked ribs.'

She was close enough to him to smell a warm spiciness on his skin. Something about him made her feel happy, but she twisted away slightly and looked up at a sky shot with stars, listening to the sound of cicadas and night birds shuffling in the trees. Mark had taken a step away and she saw that

his height gave him that loose-limbed way of walking Americans had in movies; a nonchalant walk conveying ease and confidence.

‘People say May is the last month of spring in Hanoi, but it’s so warm tonight it feels like summer already. Would you prefer to go indoors?’ she said.

‘On a night like this?’

She felt exhilarated and laughed. His short light-brown hair had a curl to it and was now tinged with gold. Someone had lit the torches and the light from the flames flickered on his face and hair.

‘Where are you staying?’

‘At the Métropole, on the Boulevard Henri Rivière.’

At that moment Sylvie reappeared and drew him away. After he’d gone Nicole felt his absence and, despite all the people milling around, the garden seemed empty. She remembered one of their cook Lisa’s favourite sayings: *Có công mài sắt có ngày nên kim* – if you polish a piece of iron long enough you can make a needle. Though Lisa was French she spoke enough Vietnamese to get by in the markets, and took pride in quoting Vietnamese sayings. Perhaps it was time to apply a little polish to herself, Nicole thought as the live music started up. Time, too, for dancing the night away.

## 2

The next morning Nicole made her way down to the labyrinth of rooms on the lower ground floor. At the bottom of the narrow stairs, she walked along a long corridor and pushed open the door to the kitchen. There she glanced around at walls lined with white brick-shaped tiles and at a row of gleaming copper pots hanging from an iron bar in the centre. The new green roll-up blinds gave the kitchen a cool feel, and four big wall arches, smelling of paint, divided the room into sections.

Lisa had already made herself comfortable in her armchair, right beside the conservatory doors where she could watch over her precious vegetable plot. From the moment of Nicole's birth, Lisa had been the one constant. She looked just the way you'd want a cook to look: plump. Only in her forties, with her flyaway, greying hair tied in a topknot and her hands red from washing dishes, she had both feet up on a footstool. She fumbled in the pocket of her apron for the first cigarette of the day; a woman whose only concerns were rabbits, lizards or birds, and making sure the longan fruit were brought in safely in July, ready for preserving.

'You okay to get your own coffee?'

Nicole nodded, poured the coffee into a large mug then threw herself into a chair opposite the cook. 'I need this.'

'Hangover?'

'I suppose.'

'I saw you with an interesting-looking man last night.'

'Which one?' Nicole tried to conceal her smile but knew there was nothing she could hide from Lisa.

‘I take it you like him?’

Nicole laughed. ‘It felt extraordinary. I’m probably being silly, but I felt as if I’d just met the person who might change my whole life.’

Lisa smiled. ‘He looked very handsome. I’m happy for you, *chérie*. Did you dance?’

‘Not with him. He didn’t stay long.’

But Nicole couldn’t properly communicate the feeling of being changed, as if all her old feelings of inadequacy were disappearing. The brief meeting with Mark had slid inside her and she couldn’t help but think it was the start of something very different.

‘What does he do?’

‘I didn’t ask.’ She grinned at Lisa and got to her feet. ‘He’s American.’

‘A friend of Sylvie’s?’

There was a noise coming from the housekeeper’s room along the corridor and Nicole pulled a face. ‘Bettine is here then?’

Lisa nodded. Though they had worked together for years, Bettine and Lisa could not have been more different. While Lisa was plump and round, Bettine was stiff and thin as a rake. Lisa’s cosy bedroom and little sitting room of her own next to the kitchen were always a source of strife between the two women; the housekeeper lived out in rooms. The scullery and laundry room were the domain of the housemaid, Pauline, and there was a food preparation room for the part-time kitchen maid, only called in when Lisa needed extra help.

Nicole opened the conservatory doors and, smelling May air thick with the scent of wet earth, she listened to the creaking *cyclo pousse* as it drew up at the back of the house. She wrapped her silk dressing gown across her body, glanced at a few early yellow persimmon lying on the grass – where Sylvie

maintained the bodies had been buried – and spotted Yvette, the baker's daughter, climbing out of the rickshaw, the ribbons of her dark plaits flying in the breeze.

The smell of freshly baked brioche drifted across.

Nicole beckoned the child over and, once inside the kitchen, drew up two chairs at the scrubbed pine table. Lisa had already laid out plates for Nicole's two pains au chocolat and Yvette's slice of soft white bread, spread with butter and honey.

Although she was only ten, Yvette usually delivered their Saturday patisserie treats: crème anglaise tarts, fresh loaves to eat with jam and preserves, the breakfast brioche, croissants and pains au chocolat. Her Vietnamese mother had died at the hands of the Japanese during the war, but Yves was a doting parent, who tried to be both mother and father to his little girl, and Nicole was very fond of her.

Nicole folded her legs under herself and kept an eye on Yvette's puppy. Trophy was already nosing around and, in a flash, leapt on to a chair.

'Bad dog,' Yvette shook her fist, but too late, for the pup had stolen a croissant and retreated beneath the table to wolf it down.

Nicole laughed. 'But he is adorable.'

'I wish I'd been old enough to come to your party. Did you have dancing?'

'Later on, though the evening was so beautiful, nobody really wanted to come inside.'

Lisa glanced at her watch. Yvette wasn't really supposed to have breakfast in the house but it was a little routine the three of them enjoyed. 'You'd better be off,' Lisa said and glanced upwards.

Nicole was set to disagree, but Yvette jumped off her chair, Trophy barking at her heels.

'Quiet or you'll wake up the house,' Yvette said, and picked up



the puppy, who smothered her face with licks. She dashed out through the back door by means of the conservatory, where the spicy smell of ginger from Lisa's reed-like plants infused the air.

As soon as Yvette had gone Nicole kissed Lisa on the cheek.

'I can't believe you're eighteen, my darling girl,' the cook said and sniffed. 'It seems like only yesterday . . .'

Nicole grinned. 'Now don't you get all soppy. I have important things to do.'

'Like?'

'Like planning the rest of my life.'

'Something to do with that American chap you've got your eye on?'

'I don't know when I'll see him again.' Nicole paused at the sudden realization that she had no idea how long Mark would be in Hanoi. But she hoped that the Paris of the Orient, as the French liked to call the watery city, would cast its seductive spell on him.

It was only the three of them at table for supper. The smaller of the two dining rooms in the Duval villa fronted a small thatched pavilion where oversized wicker chairs and a glass coffee table sat beside a lily pond. A pretty carved lacquer screen sat in one corner, partitioning off a small desk and sofa where Sylvie liked to write. As Nicole had wasted what little time she'd had to tidy up before supper, reading a book, she combed her hair with her fingers and glanced at the ceiling. Painted blue with fluffy white clouds and cherubs flying round the central ceiling fan, she'd never liked it.

From the garden next door, Nicole heard the sound of peacocks.

'Damn things,' her father said. 'Dreadful squawking racket.'

'But they are beautiful,' Nicole said. 'Don't you think?'

'Why does she have to keep them in her garden? They drive me crazy.'

‘Father’s right,’ Sylvie said. ‘They are terribly annoying.’

After that they ate in silence. Despite the slow movement of the fan it was too hot. The heavy silk curtains, restrained with gold tasselled cords, had not been closed, and light muslin drapes fluttered through a mere suggestion of air. More peacock shrieks only served to darken their father’s mood.

They were finishing the dessert when he glanced at Sylvie and Nicole before speaking. ‘I’m glad you’re both here.’

The sisters exchanged looks. There had been an uneasy atmosphere in the house lately: messages delivered by thin, tense men in army whites, the phone ringing off the hook and Papa looking increasingly strained. Nicole had noted the rapid rise in the number of Americans visiting the house and had come to the conclusion they must be from the Central Intelligence Agency. When she’d asked Sylvie, however, her sister had been non-committal. It seemed neither girl knew the reason behind it.

Their father shifted a little in his seat. ‘Now that you’re eighteen, Nicole, I want to explain my plans. I had expected to be talking about this when you were both over twenty-one, but as I’m taking on a role with the government now, that has changed.’

‘In what way?’ Sylvie said.

‘In a way that means I won’t be available to take care of the business.’

‘What role is this, Papa?’ Nicole asked.

‘The exact nature of the task is classified, but with all my Vietnamese contacts they seem to think I’m the right man for the job. It is a great honour to be selected to work for the good of France.’

‘But you do mean here in Hanoi?’

‘Mainly.’ He paused briefly. ‘This may come as a surprise, but I believe it’s in the best interests of the company that only one of you should be in charge. As Sylvie is the elder, I have decided to make over control of the business to her, with immediate effect.’

Nicole glanced at her sister, but Sylvie lowered her eyes and fiddled with her napkin.

‘By the end of the year everything will be in Sylvie’s name, but I have saved the small silk shop for you, Nicole.’

‘I don’t understand. Why can’t we share? I always thought that one day Sylvie and I would run the business together.’

He shook his head. ‘Sylvie is older and wiser. She has more experience, especially of the American markets, and it’s only right that she should take control. If you had learnt all your lessons at the lycée, as your sister so diligently did, you would have had many more opportunities. You surely must see that.’

Nicole frowned. ‘So Sylvie will be in charge of Paul Bert?’

He nodded.

Nicole swallowed rapidly, picturing the imposing Maison Duval, with its wonderful domed ceiling, polished teak staircase and elegant balconied upper floors. It was on Rue Paul Bert, often nicknamed the Champs-Élysées, and Nicole loved it.

‘What else?’ she said.

He stared at a spot above her head as he counted off on his fingers. ‘The import and export business, and the emporium in the French quarter.’

Nicole knew much of the silk they supplied came from Hué, where the export side of the business operated, and where she had focused her hopes. ‘But I was hoping to become the chief buyer one day. I thought that was why you took me with you to the silk villages while Sylvie was in America.’

He reached into his pocket for a cigar then tapped it on the table. ‘Look, I’m sorry if it disappoints you, *chérie*, but there it is. You still have the option of finishing your education or you can take up my offer of the old silk shop; otherwise I’ll have to find you a nice Vietnamese husband.’

It was a joke but Nicole couldn't prevent the tears of distress welling up. 'I thought the old shop had been abandoned.'

Another squawk reached them from outside. Her father's cheeks puffed out and his knuckles turned white as he gripped the table. Nicole could smell his scent – the leather wax, brandy and cigars – as she watched his nostrils flair.

'Damn those birds,' he said.

Nicole felt devastated. It had been exactly the same over Europe. Sylvie went and she didn't. Though of course that had been soon after she'd accidentally set fire to the marquee on Sylvie's eighteenth birthday.

Their father got to his feet. 'You two stay and finish your supper. Lisa will be bringing in the coffee any moment now. I shall take mine in my study.'

Nicole managed to hold back the burning at the backs of her eyelids.

'As for the business, do remember that Sylvie is your senior by five years and she is extremely reliable.' As her father reached the door, he glanced back. 'If you will drop out before your exams and disappear for days, what else do you expect me to do? The entire police force was out looking for you. And all the time you and that idiotic friend of yours had decided to get on a bus for Saigon. You must have known we'd be worried. Anything could have happened.'

She hung her head. Were they ever going to let her forget it? 'I know. I'm really sorry. I didn't think.'

'Well, you need to think now and I can only hope you've learnt from your mistakes.'

'I have, Papa. Truly.'

'So make a success of the shop and prove it. Then we'll see what else you might be able to do.'

### 3

The next day the temperature must have touched thirty-two or thirty-three degrees. As Nicole watched a bulging-eyed lizard run up the wall to hide behind the tips of a fern, she knew it would be horribly humid outside, though with a cool tiled floor, giant indoor ferns and the light shining down from a high glass cupola, the hall felt like a shady garden. She glanced down as she picked up her keys from the mother-of-pearl tray, pulled down the skirt of her tight-fitting dress and slipped on the matching high heels. She needed to get away from the house to think over her father's announcement and had decided to walk into the centre.

As she left the house behind, she twisted back to see Lisa throwing open the deep green shutters. Their three-storey house was gleaming, its ochre plaster freshly painted, and the overhanging eaves of the roof shaded the sweeping verandah circling the exterior. An entirely French exterior disguised the fact that indoors Indochinese style had made its mark in the form of red-lacquered panels placed either side of the ground-floor doors and decorated with gold leaf.

Nicole walked in the direction of the town centre but, a few turnings past their road, she was dimly aware of a shout. She hesitated, but hearing another shout and then a shriek coming from a lane running at an angle behind the main road, she took a step back. Glancing down, she saw nothing. It must be children playing, she thought, and began to move on. The shrieks grew louder and more alarming. Without making a conscious decision, she turned into the lane where several

houses with shattered windows overlooked ruined tarmac. After the Second World War and the battle afterwards with the Vietminh, a few streets still awaited repair. She removed her shoes and, as far as her tight dress allowed, jumped over the rubble at the bend where trees hid the remainder of the narrowing lane from sight.

Now she could see half a dozen overexcited French boys. When she drew closer, she was horrified to see they were driving a little girl back against the wall behind a tree. The child, trapped with no escape from the circle of boys, looked younger than her tormentors, who seemed about thirteen. Nicole took it all in and ran closer.

'*Métisse, métisse!*' one of the boys chanted.

The others joined in, sneering at the girl, their faces twisting in contempt.

'Dirty *métisse*.'

'Go back where you belong.'

Nicole tensed, recognizing the child's tear-stained face as she was spun round, her bright blue skirt billowing out – Yvette! She didn't stop to think but tore down the lane. The boys saw her coming and most backed off, though the two biggest stood firm. One of Yvette's blue hair ribbons came loose and a boy snatched hold of her plait.

'Let her go,' Nicole commanded in her most authoritarian voice, trying to appear in control. She was vaguely aware of the sounds of the city around her: car horns, the creak of rickshaws, human voices, though she was more aware of her pounding heart.

'She's a *métisse* herself. Don't listen to her,' the tallest boy said.

Nicole smelt alcohol and glanced at the ground where wine bottles and cigarette ends lay discarded among the leaves and clumps of cement.

‘But her father . . .’ one of the smaller boys piped up.

Nicole raced towards the tallest boy, grabbed his collar and hit him with her shoes. ‘My father will report you!’

Full of himself, he fought back, but one of her heels caught him in the temple. He stood still and, like any bully, began to whimper as he touched his head and saw the blood on his fingers.

Nicole narrowed her eyes. ‘You ever touch her again . . .’

The boy gave her the finger but began to back off.

‘That’s it, run away like the cowards you are. Picking on a little girl! Very brave.’

Another boy turned to come back; one of the quiet ones at the back, whom she hadn’t even noticed. He was thin and well-dressed and, now that she looked, seemed familiar. When she caught the glint of a knife in his hands, she glanced at Yvette.

‘Run, Yvette,’ she yelled and pointed behind her. ‘Back that way. Run home, fast as you can.’

Yvette hesitated.

‘Go. Now!’

As the little girl turned on her heels Nicole squared her shoulders and stood with her legs apart.

The boy sniggered before making a sudden dash at her, waving the knife in the air. She dodged but managed to catch him by the arm and twisted it roughly behind his back.

‘Ow! You’re hurting me!’ he shouted.

‘Drop the knife!’

He struggled and managed to free himself, but not before the knife had caught her on the cheek. He pushed her to the ground and she touched her face in shock, only vaguely aware of a man running past her. When she looked up she saw the man was now holding the boy by his throat. She was even more shocked when she saw him clearly and recognized Mark Jensen.

‘Drop the knife, you little bastard,’ he was shouting, while the boy made a terrible choking sound, his eyes wide with fright.

Nicole looked on in horror. For a moment it seemed as if the American might throttle the boy. She opened her mouth to shout out before things got any worse but then Mark released the youth, pushing him away at the same time. The boy staggered backwards but did not fall.

As boy and man stared at each other, she felt the touch of air on her skin. It seemed suddenly colder, the way it did when the sun went behind a cloud, and yet the sky remained a startling blue. The boy was still waving the knife in front of him and Nicole, feeling the sweat breaking out on her forehead, was certain that in a split second he would run at the older man. But then the moment went on too long and, clearly thinking better of it, the boy took a step back, dropping the knife.

Mark stepped forward and raised his fist. ‘Now get the hell out of here.’

The boy ran off.

For a few moments everything had been too quiet but now she was aware of the sounds of the city breaking through.

Mark turned to her. ‘Here,’ he said and wrapped an arm round her waist. Then, as he lifted her up, she felt the warmth of his hand through her thin cotton dress.

‘I was dealing with it,’ she said, but they could both see she was unnerved.

She hardly dared examine her own feelings about being called a *métisse*, the now unsavoury name for mixed-race children, and smothered the burst of shame. It hadn’t been like that before the Vietminh had taken power, albeit briefly. But now, as far as the French were concerned, being mixed-race and looking Vietnamese meant suspicious glances and whispers. It never happened to Sylvie, who looked almost entirely



French, but it wasn't the first time Nicole had been taunted, and it instantly exposed her own deep-felt insecurities.

The wind got up as Mark wiped the blood from her cheek with his fingers, then cleaned them on a handkerchief.

'Thank you,' she said. So much for looking polished, she thought, while attempting to repin a chignon that had never been right. She smoothed down her dress and paused, remembering who the boy was: Daniel Giraud. His father was the chief of police, a friend of her father's. That wouldn't go down well.

'Come on,' Mark said. 'I think we both need a drink.'

He helped her climb over the craters in the road before they headed towards the Boulevard Henri Rivière, where they walked beneath the shade of tamarind trees. Nearer the hotel, he slowed his pace. 'Are you feeling all right?'

'A bit shaken.'

She stopped to look at him properly. He wore a softly coloured checked shirt with linen trousers and was as clean-shaven as you'd expect an American to be. He looked as good in casual clothes as he had in a smart suit; better perhaps, she thought. She glanced across the street at the French high commissioner's residence, and hoped her father wasn't there, then they went through the large glass doors of the Métropole Hotel.

Mark ran his hand over the front of his hair, smoothing it back, then indicated the tea tables. 'Tea or something stronger?'

She smiled and gestured to the French windows at the back of the hotel.

Mark glanced out at the wide porticos surrounding the hotel gardens.

'Tea, out there in the shade,' she said. From the verandah they'd be able to listen to the band rehearsing old-fashioned dance music interspersed with the songs of Nat King Cole.

Once outside he pulled out her chair and she smelt something bitter-sweet, like anise and lemon, and felt his warm breath on the back of her neck.

They settled at a table next to three French army officers, one of whom laughed, raised a cigar in the air and waved it in Nicole's direction. She sniffed the smoke as it curled towards her and smiled at him.

'What about Hanoi? Do you like it here?' she asked Mark.

'It's a fantastic place for silk.'

'Is that what you do?'

'Indeed. I'm on a silk-finding mission.'

'We do have wonderful silk, though I'd love to go to China and India too. Have you been?'

As they drank their tea, Nicole examined him from beneath her heavy fringe. His face was not completely even. Head on, he was good-looking, but sideways you could tell his chin was slightly too angular. He had a straight nose and she had already noticed the faint lines fanning his eyes that deepened when he smiled. He seemed to be figuring things out as he surveyed the verandah. She knew all about that. Desperate to appear as French as her sister, she'd learnt to look for the little give-aways: the toss of a head, a certain aloofness, though she had never really been able to pull that off; above all, to be properly French, you needed to ooze an absolute sense of entitlement.

When his eyes focused on her face, she noticed the dark shadows beneath them making him seem older. He was a man, not a boy, and the first Nicole had been drawn to.

'So what about you?' he asked.

'Well, we used to live by the river in Hué and only came to Hanoi for Christmas, but we've lived here for five years now. You're lucky. All I ever wanted was to see the world and buy silk.' She shook her head and laughed at herself. 'I just don't want to stay in Hanoi all my life.'

At that moment a man came over with an unlit cigarette in his mouth. He spoke in a foreign language that Mark understood. He drew out his lighter, snapped it open and offered the flame to the other man before replying. A stream of what sounded like Russian then followed as Mark took control. Though Mark remained cool, the other man seemed to argue – or at least his voice was raised – but eventually he shrugged and walked away. Whatever it had been about, it looked like Mark had won the argument.

‘Well,’ Nicole said when the man was out of earshot, ‘you speak Russian? What was that about?’

‘It wasn’t important.’ Mark paused. ‘My mother was Russian. White Russian. Her father was a university professor and when he and his wife were killed during the revolution, my mother fled the Bolsheviks for America.’

‘But your father is American?’

‘Yes. She married him soon after arriving in America and they had me straight away.’

Something about his tone prevented her from asking more. ‘So how long are you here for?’ she said, and twisted a lock of her hair round a finger.

‘As long as it takes.’

The waiter appeared carrying a silver tray with a white pot of jasmine-scented tea and matching cups and saucers. She narrowed her eyes and glanced at Mark’s hands as he thanked the man. They were not elegant office hands, but big hands accustomed to physical work.

It went quiet between them and once they’d finished their tea he sighed, checked his watch, then gazed at her, the skin around his eyes crinkling. ‘I’ve really enjoyed seeing you, Nicole Duval. You’re like a burst of fresh air.’

She pushed herself back in her seat and found she couldn’t meet his eyes. They seemed to see right into her, and she didn’t

want to give herself away. Would a man like him ever be interested in her? When she did glance up she saw him straightening his tie and running a hand over his hair.

‘Leaving already?’

He nodded. ‘Sorry. I have a business engagement and I’m already late. It was great to see you again. If you’re sure you’re fully recovered I’ll call you a taxi.’

She laughed. ‘Do you know, I’d forgotten all about those boys.’

‘If you like we could meet again, for coffee?’

‘I like.’

‘Morning coffee in three days’ time? Shall we say nine thirty? Let’s meet at the fountain outside the hotel.’