Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Eighty Days Red

Written by Vina Jackson

Published by Orion Books Ltd

Please note that this extract contains scenes of an adult nature.

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Eighty Days Red

Vina Jackson



An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain in 2012
by Orion Books Ltd,
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Vina Jackson 2012

The right of Vina Jackson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

All the characters in this book are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN (Paperback) 978 1 4091 2779 6
ISBN (Ebook) 978 1 4091 2778 9

Typeset at The Spartan Press Ltd,
Lymington, Hants

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

www.orionbooks.co.uk

I

Running

My feet beat time with my heart.

Central Park was sheathed in white. Despite the relative calm within the park, I was constantly aware of the sprawling city that spread out around me on every side, like a huge open hand with a patch of countryside clutched in the middle, buildings pointing upwards like dirty grey fingers surrounding the pristine blankets of snow rolling out across the lawn.

The snow was still fresh, powdery, and I could feel it crunch lightly beneath my footsteps, cushioning my landing. The absence of colour in the park amplified all of my other senses, so that I could feel the dry, freezing cold air brushing my skin like the touch of some icy supernatural being. My breath steamed out in front of my face like wisps of smoke and the cold air burned my throat.

I had run every day for a month since discovering Dominik's book in Shakespeare & Co., on lower Broadway. I'd read it hurriedly, in the rare, snatched moments when I found myself alone in the house, wary of Simón's watchful gaze.

It had been a strange feeling reading Dominik's work. The heroine was so much like me. He'd included some of the conversations that we'd had in his dialogue, described

scenes from my childhood that I had related to him, about the smothering nature of life growing up in a small town and my desire to get away from it. He'd even given her red hair.

And I recognised Dominik's voice throughout the text as clear as a bell. His particular turns of phrase, references to books I knew he'd read and music he liked.

Two years had gone by since we'd broken up. We'd had a terrible misunderstanding and I had allowed my pride to get the better of me and walked out on him, something I still regretted to this day. When I'd gone back to his apartment to try to clear the air he was gone. I had peered under the crack in the door and seen an empty room and mail piled up on the floor. I hadn't heard from or of him since.

Until that day when I'd been shopping for running shoes in Manhattan and discovered his novel in a bookshop window. Curious, I'd flipped it open, and been shocked to find that despite our tempestuous relationship and the sour nature of our parting he'd dedicated it to me: 'To S. Yours, always.'

I hadn't been able to think of anything else since.

Running was my way of beating the feelings out of my body. Particularly in winter, when the ground was covered in white and the streets were quieter than usual. In winter, Central Park was like a snowy desert, the one place that I could escape the cacophony of the city for an hour.

It was also a chance to give myself some thinking space away from Simón.

He was still leading the Gramercy Symphonia, the orchestra where we'd first met.

I'd joined the string section three years ago, playing the Bailly violin that Dominik had gifted me. Simón was the conductor, and under his tutelage my playing had improved immensely. He'd encouraged me to go solo and introduced me to an agent, and I was at the point now where I'd had a few tours and released a couple of records.

Our relationship had been professional, though admittedly flirtatious at times. I knew Simón was in love with me, and I did little to discourage his feelings, but nothing had happened between us until my row with Dominik. I had been touring at the time and hadn't had anywhere of my own to go. Simón's apartment near the Lincoln Centre with the built-in rehearsal space had seemed an obvious option, easier and more practical than a hotel.

But then Dominik disappeared, and a couple of nights with Simón had quickly turned into a couple of years.

I'd drifted into it happily enough. Simón was an easy person to be with and I was fond of him, loved him even. Our friends greeted the idea of us being an item with immediate enthusiasm. It made so much sense, the young virtuoso conductor and his up-and-coming violinist. After spending years either determinedly single or with someone that my friends and family suspected wasn't the right man for me, I suddenly fitted in.

I felt accepted. Normal.

Life slipped by in an ongoing sequence of rehearsals and performances, recording studios, the excitement of having my first album released, and then another. Cosy parties, Christmases and Thanksgiving dinners spent with friends and relatives. We even appeared in a couple of magazine articles listed as New York's musical golden couple. We'd

been photographed in Carnegie Hall after a concert, standing hand in hand, me resting my head on Simón's shoulder, my curly red hair mingled with his thick dark locks. I was wearing a long black velvet dress with a low back.

It was the dress that I had worn for Dominik the first time that I had played for him, Vivaldi, *The Four Seasons,* at the bandstand on Hampstead Heath.

Dominik and I had struck a deal. He would buy me a new violin – my one at the time having been wrecked in a fight in Tottenham Court Road tube station – in exchange for a performance on the heath, and another more private performance where I had played for him entirely nude. It was a brazen request from a stranger, but the idea of it thrilled me in a way I couldn't explain at the time. Dominik saw in me something I had yet to see in myself. A wantonness and desire that I hadn't even begun to explore. A side of myself that had since brought me both pleasure and pain.

And true to his word, Dominik had replaced my old, battered violin with the Bailly, the instrument that I'd had ever since and still played at all of my gigs, though I had other spares for rehearsing.

Simón had wanted to buy me a new one. He favoured modern instruments with a cleaner tone and thought that I should try for a change, something crisper. I suspected that he just wanted me to be rid of all the parts of Dominik that still flavoured my life. Certainly I'd had enough offers from musical patrons and instrument manufacturers that I could have replaced the Bailly ten times over.

But Dominik's gift felt like home to me. No other instrument had the same tone, the same ideal weight that rested in my hand, the perfect fit beneath my chin. Playing

the Bailly inevitably brought Dominik to mind, and thinking of Dominik made me go into that place that I went where I played at my finest; a mental disappearance act, my body taking over from my brain and my mind retreating into a waking dream where the music came alive and I didn't need to play any more, just experience my dream while my bow hand moved across the strings for me.

A woman stared at me in surprise. She was dressed in a heavy jacket with the hood pulled tightly around her face to ward off the cold and was pushing a bright blue pram with a heavily bundled child inside. A fellow jogger kitted out head to toe in bright yellow thermal gear with reflective stripes gave me a knowing glance as he passed.

Simón had bought me running clothes for Christmas, amongst his other gifts. Perhaps as a sign that he planned to stop nagging me to join a gym instead. Simón hated my jogging in Central Park, especially in the early mornings or late evenings. He quoted statistics about female joggers in Central Park and how likely they were to be attacked. Apparently, most likely when blonde, wearing a ponytail and running around 6 a.m. on a Monday. That almost entirely ruled me out, I'd told him, as I'm a redhead and never out of bed at 6 a.m., ever, but he still nagged me.

He'd given me a pair of designer thermal gloves and matching long trousers, shirt and jacket, and the most expensive pair of running shoes on the market although I'd just bought myself a pair.

'You're running on ice, you'll slip,' he'd said.

I wore the shoes to keep him happy, though I replaced the white laces with red ones for a splash of colour. And I wore the gloves. But most days I left the thermal jacket at

home. Even in winter I preferred to run wearing just a singlet. It was viciously cold at first. The wind bit into my skin like a bed of nails but I soon warmed up, and I liked the feeling of the fresh air, and the cold wind which encouraged me to run faster.

By the time I reached home again my skin would inevitably be bright red and sometimes my fingers swollen despite the gloves, as if I'd been burned by the cold.

Simón would take me into his arms and kiss me to warm me up, rubbing my bare arms and shoulders until my skin hurt.

He was warm in every way, from his coffee-coloured skin, courtesy of his Venezuelan heritage, his big brown eyes, his thick curly hair and his big body. He was nearly six foot two and had been very gradually putting on weight since we moved in together. He was by no means fat, but eating dinners together and sharing bottles of wine on the couch over a DVD had taken him from lean to burly and the slight padding on his body gave him an additional sense of softness. His chest was covered with a thick mass of dark hair which I loved to run my hands through as we lay in bed together, after making love.

He was overtly masculine in his appearance and deeply affectionate in his manner. Our two years together had been like relaxing in a bubble bath. Falling into a relationship with him was like coming home after a long day at work and slipping into flannelette pyjamas and old socks. There's nothing like the company of a man who loves you utterly and without question. With Simón I was cared for, protected, soothed.

But I was also bored.

I'd managed to quell the undercurrent of dissatisfaction in our relationship with a barrage of hobbies. Working like a demon. Playing the violin as though each performance was my last. Running the New York marathon. Running, running, running, all the time running away but always going back home again.

Until I had read Dominik's book.

Since then I'd heard Dominik's voice in my mind almost constantly.

First in the words of his novel, as if instead of reading it I was listening to an audio book.

Then memories had risen up like a tide.

Our relationship had been coloured by sex, but not the frequent, affectionate sex that I had with Simón.

Dominik was a man with darker desires than your average, and being with him had been like having a light go on in my life. With Dominik I'd taken great pleasure in the realisation of fantasies that I previously hadn't dreamed of. He had asked me to do things for him that other people had not even whispered. It was not so much the adventurousness of it but his insistence that I allow him to use my body for his pleasure, submit to him in a strange game that was more mental than it was physical and in which we were both complicit, though it would seem to any outsider as though I was allowing him to rule me.

Sexually, Simón was virtually the reverse of Dominik. He liked me to be on top, and I spent most of our evenings together grinding against him from above, trying to prevent my mind from drifting away into daydreams of work and shopping lists, or staring at the glossy white wall behind the headboard.

My phone buzzed in my trouser pocket and I jumped in surprise, almost slipping on an icy patch. Few people had the number, and I didn't often receive calls. When I did they were from Simón or my agent Susan, and Simón knew that I was running, so was unlikely to call unless he wanted me to pick something up for breakfast, one of the sugary doughnuts that he loved to dip in his coffee from the deli on the corner of Lexington and 56th.

I hurriedly tugged off one of my gloves. My fingers were so frozen from the cold that I could barely grip the handset. It was a New Zealand number, though not one I had programmed onto the phone already.

I pressed the call answer button with some trepidation. I very rarely spoke to my family on the phone. We just weren't the type for frequent communication and preferred to email or use Skype. And it would be late in the evening over there.

'Hello?'

'Heya, Sum, how's tricks?'

'Fran?'

'Don't tell me it's been so long you don't recognise my voice, sis?'

'Of course I do, I just didn't expect to hear from you. What time is it over there?'

'Couldn't sleep. I've been thinking.'

'Don't make a habit of it.'

'I want to come and visit you.'

'In New York?'

'I'd prefer London to be honest, but any port in a storm. I'm getting bored of Te Aroha.'

Those were words that I had never expected to hear

coming out of my older sister's mouth. She stuck out like a sore thumb in our home town, Te Aroha, and didn't strike me as a small town person at all, but despite that she had lived there her whole life, nearly thirty years. She'd been working at the local bank since she left high school. Twelve years or so in practically the same job. She'd started as teller and moved up to team leader and then financial advisor, though she hadn't had any formal training besides that which was offered in-house. I was the only one in my family who had gone to university, though I'd dropped out after the first year.

I could picture her easily. It was a Saturday morning for me so would be late Saturday night for her. She'd be sitting in her cottage, dressed in denim shorts and a bright neon ripped T-shirt, eighties punk style, and fidgeting as she always did, running her hand through her short, cropped bottle-blond hair or wrapping a lock of her fringe around her finger. It was mid-summer there so probably hot, although her old house was draughty and Te Aroha always seemed to have a chill in the air, as if the entire town lived in the shadow of the mountain.

'What's brought all this on?' I asked her. 'I thought you'd be there for ever.'

'Nothing lasts for ever, does it?'

'Well no, but it's a bit of a change of heart for you. Has something happened?'

'I'm not sure if I should tell you. Mum told me not to.'

'Oh for God's sake, you're going to have to now. You can't leave me hanging.'

I had slowed down to a quick walk and without the momentum of a run pushing me along the ice I was slipping

with each footstep, and freezing cold without the heat of the heavy exertion to warm me. The fingers of my ungloved hand were bright red from the cold and beginning to throb.

'Fran, I'm in the middle of Central Park and the temperature is sub-zero. I need to start running again and I can't run and talk so spit it out and I'll call you back when I get home.'

'Mr van der Vliet died.'

She said the words softly, as though she was gently releasing a weapon.

'Your violin teacher . . .' she added, filling the silence between us.

'I know who he is!'

I stopped completely and let the ice in the air wrap itself around me like a steel blanket.

Fran was silent at the other end of the phone.

'When? What happened?' I finally managed.

'They don't know. They found his body in the river, where his wife died.'

Mr van der Vliet's wife had died the day that I was born. She had been driving through the Karangahake Gorge on her way home from Tauranga when her car's wheels had slipped in the rain and she'd misjudged one of the tight corners and collided with a truck coming the other way. The driver of the other vehicle had been fine, not even a scratch, but Mrs van der Vliet's car had flipped and plunged over the side of the treacherous road and into the river. She had drowned before anyone had been able to reach her.

'When?' The word stuck in my throat like a mouthful of cotton wool.

'Nearly two months ago,' Fran whispered. 'We didn't

want to tell you. Thought it might upset you, affect your performances. Mum and Dad didn't want you to drop everything to come home for the funeral.'

'I would have come back.'

'I know. But what difference does it make? He'd still be dead, whether you were here or not.'

Fran, like most of the other New Zealanders I knew, was practical and pragmatic. But her hard logic didn't stop the vice-like sensation that was gripping my heart.

Mr van der Vliet would have been in his eighties now, and I didn't think he'd ever got over the death of his wife. But quiet and unassuming as he was, he'd been like a rock in my childhood. His voice, still thick with a Dutch accent despite having lived in New Zealand for most of his adult life, would be gentle but firm as he corrected my grip on the bow or praised me for a successful performance.

I'd learned most of the craft of violin playing by watching him. The way that his tall and painfully thin body became so alive and graceful when he took up an instrument. He played as if he had stepped through a door into another place, becoming a different man altogether, with none of his usual awkwardness. I'd tried to mimic the way he seemed to live the music and soon found that by closing my eyes and absorbing the melody with my body I could play far better than I could just by reading from a sheet.

Mr van der Vliet was not the reason why I had begun to play in the first place. My father and his vinyl records had to bear responsibility for that. But Hendrik van der Vliet was certainly the reason why I kept at it. He had seemed such a stern man on the outside, yet had a streak of softness that came out occasionally and I'd spent most of my childhood

and teenage years doing everything that I could to elicit his rare praise by practising and practising until my fingers were raw.

'Summer? Are you still there? Are you OK?'

Her words were like an echo.

'Fran, I'll call you back, OK?'

I pressed the end call button and zipped the phone back into my trouser pocket without waiting for her to respond.

I put my earphones into my ears and turned the music up loud. Emilie Autumn's 'Fight Like a Girl', something that Mr van der Vliet would have hated. He had always pushed me in the direction of classical music and was disappointed when I had dropped out of my music degree and moved to London.

My mind filled with images of his face underwater. Had he had an accident? A heart attack, coincidentally in the same place as his wife died? I doubted it. I had never known Mr van der Vliet to have so much as a cold, I couldn't imagine him being ill. It must have been deliberate, but he didn't seem to me like the type to jump. That seemed too spontaneous. He'd choose to go in a manner that was definite, with every moment of his passing firmly within his control. He would have walked in.

I could see it like a film unfolding in front of me. He'd have worn his Sunday best. Perhaps the suit that he wore to the concert I played in the Te Aroha secondary school assembly hall, when I'd visited a couple of years ago on my Antipodean solo tour. A white shirt with a dark olive-green waistcoat, trousers and jacket. He'd looked like a grasshopper, his limbs folded up uncomfortably to fit within the confines of the small wooden chairs that had been laid out

in the hall. His skin as thin as paper, as if he might rustle in the breeze like a leaf.

He would have just walked in, and relaxed. He must have done it late at night or early in the morning, before the river filled with holidaymakers, bushwalkers and children with their inflated tyre tubes intent on riding the current that ran all the way to Paeroa where the Ohinemuri River met the Waihou.

Mr van der Vliet must have been one of the only people in New Zealand who couldn't swim. He said that he had never wanted to learn, always preferring the comfort of dry land even in hot weather. With his total absence of fat tissue he would have sunk to the bottom of the river like a stone.

By the time I reached home tears were running gently down my cheeks. I was saddened by the news of Mr van der Vliet's death, but more so by the fact I hadn't known about the funeral, hadn't had a chance to say goodbye and thank him for everything he had done for me.

Simón was sitting on one of the stools at the breakfast counter reading the paper, his long, thick hair framing his face like a curtain. He was wearing a pair of old ripped jeans and an Iron Maiden T-shirt, revelling as ever in an opportunity to dress informally, out of the confines of his conductor's formal suit and tailcoat which I thought he looked great in – like a cross between a werewolf and a vampire – but which he hated, thinking it as constricting as a straitjacket.

He turned as I entered the room and was on his feet, wrapping me in his arms immediately.

'Fran rang,' he said. 'I'm so sorry, baby.'

I leaned against him and buried my head on his shoulder. He smelled the way he always did, like nutmeg and cinnamon, the fragrances that perfumed the cologne he'd been wearing for as long as I had known him. It was a rich, woody odour, a smell that I had begun to associate with comfort along with the feeling of his tight embrace.

'I didn't think she had our home number,' I said, dully.

'I gave it to her at Christmas.'

Simón was much more family oriented than me. He fought with his siblings like cats and dogs, and his parents too on occasion, but he spoke to them all at least once a week. My family and I had a happy enough relationship but I could easily go six months without hearing from them.

l looked up and kissed him. He had full lips, and most days a smattering of stubble on his jaw. Simón responded to the touch of my lips, kissing me firmly and pulling me gently towards the bedroom, running his hands up under my running shirt as he did so and tugging at the thick clips on my sports bra.

He had learned one of my peculiarities, there was nothing that I wanted more when I was upset – providing it wasn't with him – than sex. I knew this was a strange form of comfort specific to me and perhaps only a small minority of the female population. Sex grounded me in the same way that nothing else did, and it was the one thing on earth, second perhaps only to playing my violin, that made me feel at peace.

Now, he pulled my running trousers down and slid his finger inside me. A familiar bolt of pleasure ran up my spine in response to his touch.

'I should have a shower,' I protested. 'I'm all sweaty.'

'No you shouldn't,' he said firmly, pushing me onto the bed. 'You know I like you like this.'

It was true, and he tried to make a point of it, often. Simón liked me the way that I was, however that was, a fact that he reiterated often by waking me up with his head between my legs or by pouncing on me when I returned from the gym.

He was a passionate man who loved making love and he did everything that he could to please me, but we had different tastes in the bedroom. Each of us preferred not to be in charge.

Simón wasn't a dominant man and I missed that hint of ice, the firmness of Dominik's touch, and other men like him. I wanted to be tied to the bed and have someone have their wicked way with me. Simón had tried, but he had never been able to reconcile himself with the idea that he might genuinely hurt me. Even in jest, he said, he couldn't hit or restrain a woman, and that ruled out spanking, one of the things that I most enjoyed.

He was a good man. I knew that pulling me on top of him was much more his style than the reverse, but that he was doing it this way because he knew I preferred it. The fact that I had spent our entire relationship with a nagging feeling of unfulfilment was a constant source of guilt, like a wound that wouldn't heal, an itch that I couldn't scratch.

I wanted more than anything to be the kind of woman who would be happy with all of the usual things. I had even more than the usual things. Not just a good man but a wonderful man, both of us with good friends, good health and successful careers to boot. But still, a voice whispered in

my ear that the life I was living wasn't the life that I wanted, or the life that suited me.

Simón wanted to get married and have children, and I didn't. It was the only thing that we had truly disagreed on and never been able to resolve, and I felt a stabbing sensation of horror each time I saw him glancing into a jewellery store window at the engagement rings, or smiling at a toddler that he bumped into on the street. All of the things that would make him happy and contented for ever were the things that terrified me, and in the dead of night when I wasn't distracted by work or social occasions or running in cold weather, I felt as though someone had attached an iron weight around my neck, or had hung a halo above me that was so heavy I couldn't keep it in the air. I sometimes felt as though I would be crushed under the weight of my own life.

Two weeks passed, and my dreams were filled with crashing water and the sound of Dominik's voice.

I woke up in the mornings with a start, as if I'd been dragged from sleep by a lion.

Despite my fears and worries, time passed, as it always would. I ran every day, rehearsed, attended soirées with other couples, mostly on the musical scene. But I felt purposeless, like a ship without a rudder, as though my life was gradually dissolving into nothing one moment at a time.

Fran continued to call at odd times of the day and night. She was checking up on me I thought, in her own way. We'd always been close but neither of us was overtly emotional and most of our conversations only lasted a few minutes. She was still set on leaving Te Aroha. Had handed

her notice in, she said, to her work, and she was applying for her UK visa.

We had UK ancestry so were lucky in that respect. My grandparents on one side were Ukrainian, and on the other, English. We were pioneers, travellers on both sides. It ran strong in our blood, the desire to be on the move to places unknown.

'You're not coming to New York then?' I asked her one night, after she'd told me that she had booked her flights to the UK.

'I think London is in my blood. Anyway, I can't get a US visa.'

'You can live with me, you don't need to go searching for work. Come as a tourist.'

'Don't be ridiculous. You know as well as I do that I wouldn't last a minute if I wasn't earning my own keep, any more than you would.'

'Fine. Come and visit me though?'

'Of course. Come and see me in London?'

'Sure. I'm due a visit.'

The more I thought about it, the more I missed it. Cold weather, the gloom of old buildings, streets leading here, there and everywhere, pathways running like tentacles throughout the city, not the square blocks lining avenues rigidly like they did in New York.

I'd been back once since I'd been dating Simón but only for a flying visit, as we were both working. I kept in touch with Chris, my best friend who I'd met when I first moved to London. His band, Groucho Nights, were just beginning to make it. He and his cousin Ted, the band's guitarist, had come across Viggo Franck, the lead singer of The Holy

Criminals, at a party one night and they'd hit it off. Subsequently, they'd been offered a spot opening for the famous rock band at the Brixton Academy, the sort of gig that bands like Chris's spent their lives dreaming about.

Chris and I had actually met in the front row of a Black Keys gig at the same venue. I'd gone on my own as I didn't know anyone, and we'd bumped into each other as we both leaped to catch the lead singer's guitar pick. Ever the gentleman, he'd let me have it, and I'd bought him a drink after the show to thank him. We'd bonded over the fact that we were both new in London, and we were both string musicians. I played violin and he played viola, though he'd switched to guitar as his main instrument to appeal to the rock crowd. I had played the odd gig with his band, when the vibe was right to include a violinist.

I decided to give him a call. It would be late in London, but Chris was a musician, he'd be up.

His voice was bleary.

'Don't tell me you're asleep. Not very rock star of you.'

'Summer?'

'The very one. What's new?'

I could hear the rustling of blankets as he sat up, presumably still in bed.

'We got the gig.'

'With The Holy Criminals? Amazing. Did you have to sleep with Viggo Franck to get it?'

'Don't be stupid.'

'So what's he like?' I probed.

'Viggo?'

'Of course Viggo. I don't fancy the drummer, that's for sure.'

'Oh you'd like him. All the girls seem to. I don't really get it. But hey, that's the trouble with being the nice guy, isn't it – always the friend, never the boyfriend. It's the bastards who get it all.'

'Simón's a nice guy,' I said, teasingly.

'Yes, he is.' His tone became suddenly serious. 'But are you happy with him?'

I paused, unsure of how to phrase it. How could I possibly admit to anyone that I was considering breaking up with the nicest guy in the world because he was too nice?

'What's up, Summer? You never call just for a chat.'

'I don't know. I've been out of sorts. My violin teacher died. Mr van der Vliet. I don't know if I ever told you about him.'

'Yeah, you did. He was getting on a bit though, wasn't he? He had a good innings. And he was proud of you.'

'I think he might have killed himself.' The words came out in an awkward rush.

'Oh. God. I'm so sorry . . . Are you OK?'

'Not really . . . I . . . I don't know what I am. I just wanted to hear the sound of your voice.'

'Well, I'll be here for you whenever you need me, you know that.'

'Yeah. I know. Good luck with your gig then – is it soon?'

'Next month. We'll miss you though. It's never been quite the same without you there.'

'Oh, rubbish.'

'No, it's true. You added something. Hey, maybe we'd all be already famous if you hadn't left.'

*

When I got home that night, it was late, and Simón was up, waiting for me, sitting at the breakfast bar, his long legs crossed at the ankles. He was hunched over and staring at the bench, though he didn't have a newspaper in front of him. Something was sitting on the counter. A book, but it wasn't open. Dominik's book I realised, with a prickle of horror, as I got closer.

He didn't leap out of his chair to greet me, as he usually did. He looked as though he was cloaked in a heavy veil of exhaustion.

'Hello,' I said, breaking the ice.

He looked up and smiled at me wanly. His eyes were warm but he had the look of a sick horse that sees its owner approaching with a shot gun.

'Hey, baby,' he said. 'Give me a hug.'

He opened his arms wide and I stepped into his embrace. He was crying. I could feel the shuddering of his chest against his shoulder and my neck was damp with his tears.

'What is it?' I asked him gently.

'You're still in love with Dominik.' It was a statement of fact, not a question.

'We haven't seen each other for two years,' I replied.

'But you don't deny that you're in love with him.'

'I . . .'

He gestured to the book on the table.

'It's about you. Another place, another time, but it's still you.'

'You read it?'

'Enough. I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't have been looking in your things, but you haven't been yourself. I was worried.'

'It's OK. I shouldn't have kept the book.'

I'd tried to throw it away, knowing that there was always a possibility Simón would find it. It wasn't that I didn't trust him. But he had this way of clutching after me as though he knew that I didn't belong to him somehow, as if he was always trying to find proof that I didn't really love him. I did love him, but it was more of a deep affection than a romantic love.

He took my chin in his hand and brushed a lock of hair from my face.

'This is never going to work,' he said.

'What do you mean?'

A dull ache began to spread through my chest.

'We want different things, Summer. I love you, but you'll never be happy with me. And I'll spend the rest of my life trying to catch hold of something that I never had.'

'Don't be silly,' I protested, a hint of panic finding its way into my voice. 'It's just a book, it doesn't mean anything. We can talk it through, find a way—'

'I want to have children, a family. And you don't. You know what they say: a bird and a fish might fall in love, but where will they build their nest?'

I sputtered, trying to find a reason to disagree with him, but there was none.

'I spoke to Susan,' he continued.

'You told my agent you're going to break up with me before you told me?'

I could feel my face turning red, anger bubbling up inside in the absence of tears. I balled my hands into fists and pressed them against his chest. He took hold of my wrists and held me against him.

'Of course not. I was just suggesting that you need a break. I can see you're getting bored, frustrated. Even the best musicians need a holiday, a change.'

I couldn't argue with that either. I'd been playing the same tunes over and over for years now, even wearing the same dresses to my concerts. It was becoming old. I was getting tired, jaded. Even the album we'd just recorded of South American tunes hadn't had my heart in it. That was his homeland, not mine, and though I could imagine the country that Simón told me so much about in the melodies that I played, I didn't have the passion for it that I had for the New Zealand composers, or even the rock songs that I used to play with Chris when I jammed with his band in bars and pubs in Camden. I suppose that's the problem when you begin making money from something that you love. Music had become my career, and gradually, my job, and I was beginning to tire of it.

'You want me to move out?'

'No, I want to keep you by my side for ever. But that's not going to work for either of us,' he said prosaically. 'I'm taking a break myself. Going back to Venezuela for a fortnight to see my family. My flight leaves in the morning. I'll let you decide what you want to do.'

We made love again that night, and then again, in the middle of the night after he woke me up with a savage kiss at three in the morning and fucked me with a ferocity he had never shown before. We spent the few hours before his flight tangled in each other's arms, talking and laughing like old friends.

'If only it could always be like this,' I said, as he

untangled himself from my limbs to begin getting ready for his departure.

'I don't think we've ever been right for each other,' he said. 'I just didn't want to admit it. We like things the same way . . .'

I watched him dress, pulling his ripped jeans straight on without bothering with underwear. His thick brown hair covered his face as he fastened his belt and adjusted the silver skull that adorned the buckle. His muscles flexed as he pulled a tight white T-shirt on over his chest, hiding his thick swatch of chest hair from view. He added a silver feather pendant on a chain, one that I had bought him for Christmas the previous year, and fastened it around his neck. He loved clothes, and consequently was the easiest man to buy gifts for that I had ever known.

I wrapped my thighs around his waist as he sat down on the edge of the bed to pull on his snakeskin ankle boots with the red soles.

'You can't hold on for ever, you know,' he said, 'I'll never get my shoes on.'

He gave me another long kiss outside the taxi he'd ordered to take him to the airport, embracing me until the driver began to look impatient.

'Don't be a stranger. Keep in touch.'

'I will,' I said.

Then watched as the car pulled away and took Simón out of my life.

I trudged back into the apartment and sat back down at the breakfast counter. Dominik's book was still resting in the middle of the bench. I picked it up and flicked through it again, skimmed through lines about the red-haired

heroine who had evidently experienced no shortage of lovers in Paris. Dominik and I hadn't managed to stay living together. Domestically, we were wildly unsuited. But sexually we were a perfect match. And whilst that seemed a ridiculous and terrible thing to build a relationship on, maybe that's just who I was. You can try to escape your nature, but it catches up with you in the end.

'To S.

'Yours, always.'

I wondered if he still thought about me. If he'd just been too unimaginative to pull a story from the ether and been forced to rely on a thinly fictionalised biography in order to get the feminine voice right, or if he just couldn't get me out of his head, as I couldn't banish him from mine.

Oh, Dominik, how is it that you managed to still have a hold on my life, two years and a million miles away?

I rested my head in my arms and began to cry, tears falling onto the pages and rapidly soaking in until they began to shrivel.

Thirty minutes later I picked up my phone and dialled.

Somewhere in Camden Town, a phone rang.

Chris answered.

'Jeezus, Summer, we don't speak for ages and then you call twice in a week?'

'I'm coming to London. I'll be on the next flight.'

'Great,' he said, audibly perking up. 'You'll be just in time for our gig. Maybe I can even talk you on stage again.'

'Just like the good old days?'

'Better,' he replied. 'Much better.'