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Eighty Days Amber

Written by Vina Jackson

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Eighty Days Amber

Vina Jackson



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Dancing with the Bad Boys

I'd always been attracted to bad boys.

And, as I grew older, they became bad men.

It was six months after I'd left Chey and I found myself in New Orleans. December was coming to an end and my mind was whirling like a dervish as I tried to imagine what resolutions I could possibly make when the clock struck twelve on New Year's Eve. One minute I was bereft of ideas and the following moment I had a fast-moving jumble of thoughts and emotions flitting like birds through my head, yet I was unable to catch any of them in flight. I couldn't focus, couldn't concentrate.

I was bored. Life had become a repetitive succession of dance, eat, drink, sleep, sometimes fuck, travel, dance again, eat, drink, sleep, and so on.

I missed Chey.

I missed the bad men and the bad boys.

Even though it was winter, heat still lingered in the air, humid, fragrant. Ticking the hours off walking through the narrow but beautiful streets of the French Quarter, my bare arms were caressed by the soft breeze rising from the nearby Mississippi. It felt unreal, as though I had become a feature in someone else's dream. Less than a week ago, I'd spent Christmas with Madame Denoux and we'd eaten on the terrace of her house on the other side of the lake, with some

of her family friends. One of the men present, a far-flung cousin of hers, had driven me back to the city, his car gliding over the low bridge that spanned the immense Pontchartrain, and it felt as if we were driving on water and I could almost skim the wet surface of the lake with my fingers if I extended my arm just that little bit further through the car's open window. Like a mirage, with the horizon of lights from the Vieux Carré in the distance, flickering on and off, and the seasonal lights draped in celebration across the houses on the shore. I ended up sleeping with him and he was a disappointing lay. A clumsy and ungenerous lover. I didn't stay for breakfast at his apartment on Magazine. I walked back the half-mile to Canal, through the deserted Financial District with a hunger in my belly. And it wasn't for food.

New Orleans was such a strange place. So unlike Donetsk where I was born and where every building was straight lines and eminently functional, and the only horizon we had was a broken line of factory chimneys belching dark smoke through night and day.

Madame Denoux's club had been closed for five days over Christmas, but tonight reality would return and I would be dancing again.

As I walked into the dressing room I attempted to remember Christmas and New Year in the Ukraine, but none of the memories stood out; it was all an unremarkable blur. There were three other women there already, in various stages of undress, adjusting their make-up in the large mirrors, fiddling with their outfits, tightening straps, spraying perfume across their bodies, dabbing powders, juggling cheap jewellery. I'd arrived from California, and prior to that New York, and they'd always resented my presence

and my big city experience, the fact that Madame Denoux had preferred me to them as her star attraction. They thought I was beautiful and aloof, which was a bad combination when it came to making friends. But then I was beautiful – people had been saying so since I was barely a few years old and I'd taken it for granted. I'd always lived life by my own standards with no need for female friends. I had little in common with them. They knew it, I knew it.

I turned my back on the women and undressed, feeling their eyes on me, like daggers. They were all watching, their attention focused on the cleft of my arse, the slight bump of my tailbone when I bent over to loosen the straps of my sandals. Let them. I was used to being watched. A lot.

There was a buzz and through the loudspeakers in the dressing-room wall we heard the music: Duke Ellington's 'Minnie the Moocher'. It was Pinnie's signal to step on stage. She was short, curvy, mixed race and beautiful. She had dark, lustrous hair falling halfway down her back, which she liked to drape around her body while she danced, titillating the customers with it as it partly concealed her brown-tipped breasts in a curtain of tease. Her other unique selling point was the fact that her pubic hair was totally unkempt, luxuriant, spreading far and wide, wild like a jungle creature's. She also had a brown mole right at the centre of her forehead and, rather than hide it away or divert from its presence, she drew attention to this unusual feature by cutting her hair at the front in a fringe, straight and geometrical as if drawn by a knife. She was the only dancer who was polite to me, and attempted the occasional conversation between sets, while the others steadfastly ignored me. As I did them.

It would be at least another hour until it was time for my own set. I came last.

I pulled the book I was reading from my wicker basket and settled into my chair, temporarily blanking out my immediate surroundings. Reading novels had recently become my biggest addiction. This one was about a travelling circus. It was baroque and colourful. I had never been a great fan of realism. I'd had too much of that in the books we were assigned back at school in the Ukraine and, later, St Petersburg – worthy but endless tomes about the travails of humanity which I had never connected with.

I looked up as I heard music fade to the end of a song – Van Morrison's 'Into the Mystic' – and Sofia stormed back into the dressing room, swearing under her breath because of a minor costume malfunction during her set. The look she gave me as she sat at her own table and began cleaning her stage make-up away was pure evil, as if I was the one to blame for the trivial incident, because the dress I wore for my own act was so simple and didn't bother with Velcro snaps, belts, quick-release devices, buttons or zips.

I had five whole minutes before the stage was mine and I closed my eyes. Getting into the zone. There was nothing sexy about stripping. Just a job; but when I managed to ignore the environment, banish it to another dimension altogether, I could float through my whole set as if transported on invisible wings. For the past year, I'd been using Debussy's 'La Mer' as my soundtrack, and I knew every wave of that imaginary sea, every sensuous curve of the melody. It had been Chey's favourite piece of music. He had always liked the ocean. The first time I had danced to it, it had been for him. In private.

The dancing, the undressing, the exposure, it became like

a secret ceremony in which I was both the sacrificial lamb and the high priestess handling the fatal blade, a fantasy in which I retreated, another world I inhabited for the duration.

I switched off.

As I always did.

I heard my cue from miles away as Madame Denoux placed my tape in the machine and the initial breath of silence filled the loudspeakers. I tiptoed silently to the almost inaudible hum and made my way to the stage in total darkness and settled into my position.

I switched on.

Then they gasped.

Each night the response was the same and I knew that a short distance away, hidden by the backstage curtain, Madam Denoux would be smiling.

First, just the most infinitesimal movements. As if I was gathering my energy, retreating to that place inside where there was nothing but stillness and an ever-humming core, an invisible power waiting to be collected, sent into every part of my body and then used. I was the puppet master, moving my own strings.

For the first minute, mimicking the feel of the breeze brushing over the surface of the waves, the almost invisible droplets of water and mist that hung in the air on a day that promised a storm, the constant pull of the tide, just a soft movement of my arm here, a flick of my wrist there, a sway of my hips in time with the gentle rise of the music, the sweet, sad sound of the piccolo joining the gentle thrum of the harp and the percussion beat, like the softest rain beginning to fall, the first signs of the storm gathering.

Then the second movement began, the darker notes of

the clarinet and the oboe, a muted drum the first sign of thunder brewing, energy coiling in the water and in me, the waves growing and my movements becoming correspondingly fiercer, quicker, more athletic.

Now I owned the almost invisible audience, and the beat. I could relax, look around, think. I knew every step; every sway to the rhythm was tattooed beneath my skin. It matched the beat of my heart and the pumping of my blood and carried me, unthinking, to the end of my set, not as though I was being tumbled through the waves, pushed here and there by the ceaseless dialogue between the wind and the sea, but as though I was the rider of the storm, the conductor of the orchestra, responsible for the rise and fall of the ocean.

Sometimes it was not so romantic. Just a matter of training. Chey had said that about almost everything.

It was always a matter of training, or plain old blood, sweat and tears. But it appeared to be instinctive from the outside, I knew. I could see it in the way that the silent onlookers stared at me, their faces agog, as though they were revellers come to see the strange woman or the illusionist in the book that I was reading, oblivious to all of the other cogs in the machine, each step from the entrance, through to the ticket hall, to the particular smells and tastes of each refreshment, the quality of the air, the attire of the hostess, Madame Denoux's elaborate but always tasteful costumes, her white mask, the peculiar way that she held herself, a practised and perfected languor that made her seem like a mystic when she was just an ordinary woman like the rest of us, albeit one who made her living from selling the bodies of other women.

Tonight was not as busy as I had expected. It was the

night before New Year's Eve, and New Orleans had already become a party town. The air was ripe with expectation, heavy with the promise of an ending colliding with a beginning, and all the residents of the city were out to watch one year flee and another born. It was the one time when everyone on the streets became equal, the crooks, the tourists, the whores and the shoe-shine kids, all united in the feeling that their lives were slipping away into the night, fading with the passing of the year like the firecrackers that flowered over the Vieux Carré, lighting the sky for a brief bright moment and then disappearing again, leaving little behind besides a flash of beauty, the memory of a good time and, in most cases, a hangover.

I wondered what I would leave behind. Being a dancer wasn't like being a musician. No one would record my contribution to this night and play it back. I'd be forgotten, each step hung in time for a fraction of a second, reflected in the faces of those who watched, perhaps burned into their memories if they liked it enough, but never to be repeated in quite the same way.

There were two here tonight who caught my attention. One of only a handful of couples. Different from the rest. The other women with their husbands or lovers looked bored, they'd seen it all before and more, or they looked discomfited, jealous, fearful of what their man might want them to do at home after they had seen me on stage, self-conscious of the way that their bodies moved when they undressed, the way their breasts hung, affected by the inevitable weight of time and gravity, the softness of their thighs.

But the redhead with the black dress had eyes like fire, full of heat. Her body was taut and her arm outstretched,

gripping her man's thigh like a vice as she followed every studied movement of my limbs. And he wasn't watching me, he was watching her watching me, his gaze fixed, focused, like a lion that has just spotted a gazelle alone on an open plain. He had thick dark hair, broad shoulders, a compact, neat torso and a confident air about him, self-assured but not cocky. Like Chey.

I pirouetted a little to face them, though still appearing to be unaware of my audience. That was always Madame Denoux' advice, though few of the girls followed it. Dance like no one's watching. The audience, they want to feel like voyeurs, like they're intruding on a private moment, as though they're taking something intimate and forbidden from the dancer. Otherwise, you're just a girl taking her clothes off for money, nothing special.

There was something about her, the girl that watched with her handsome man. She reminded me of me. The way she appreciated my body. The way she devoured the theatricality of it all. She was seeing herself on the stage, wondering what it would be like to have all of these people watching her instead of me. And Madame Denoux hadn't missed it. I'd seen her circling, could imagine her thoughts adding together, ever calculating, never missing an opportunity to wring a man's pockets or find a new girl for her collection, like she'd found me.

Was it the redhead's facial expression, or the man who reminded me of Chey, or the way a note led the melody into a subtle variation, even though I knew the music inside out? There was no telling.

Sometimes, memories rushed back, unbidden, unwelcome. Shards of my past unfolding against a backlit screen, images racing by like a drug trip. Vivid. Painful.

The faces of my parents the last time I saw them alive. Waving to me as their car faded into the distance down the dirt road that led away from the agricultural institute where they lived and worked. I was five years old. My father ran the institute and my mother worked in the laboratories and experimental gardens as a researcher. That was how they had initially met and fallen in love. Or at least that was what I was told later by relatives.

He had been an engineer from St Petersburg, she was a local girl from the Donbass region. He had been posted to Donetsk on a temporary secondment, which became permanent once he married and they had their first child. Their only child. Me.

I know I was wanted and loved, and now it hurts like hell that my memories of my early years and of my parents are fading to oblivion as the past recedes. I think I remember a vegetable garden, some of the toys I played with, but what escapes me is the sound of their voices, the soothing lullabies my mother would sing to help me fall asleep. *Lubachka*, I think she called me. But now those memories, those songs, are buried far and deep and I can no longer retrieve them, nor can I picture the smile on her face or the severe, professorial demeanour of my father.

I don't even know the colours of my parents' eyes. And the false memories created by the few photographs I retain of them are all in black and white.

I was told that the driver of the lorry who hit their car on the Moscow Highway was drunk. The articulated lorry he lost control of was carrying a cargo of building materials. It was no consolation to hear he also died in the collision, crushed in his cockpit by massive blocks of concrete that

had cut loose from the back of his vehicle. All three died instantly. It was the middle of the night.

I was taken in by my aunt, my mother's sister. She was divorced and childless, and also lived close to Donetsk. Once she had wanted to be a ballet dancer and she made it her life's work to see that I followed in that path, encouraging my dancing and sacrificing much in the way of money and leisure time so that I might realise her ambition and be successful where she hadn't been.

I was enrolled in the local dance academy, and attended classes after school three times a week and then again at the weekend. In order to pay for my lessons, my aunt was obliged to give piano lessons every Saturday in our apartment, which meant on those days I had to make my own way on foot to the academy buildings over three miles from where we lived, through heavy snow, sunshine or under the rain, whatever the weather. I had to make this journey increasingly regularly, after school, as her old used car was beginning to fall apart and she was unable to pick me up.

It afforded me much time for daydreaming.

Of course, like most little girls in the USSR, let alone the Ukraine, I dreamed of making it as a prima ballerina and I was repeatedly told that I had the necessary natural talent. But did I have the discipline, the ambition?

The answer to that was less evident.

I was lazy and unwilling to learn the classical steps, hated their rigour, preferred to lose myself in the music and improvise movements that just came naturally and were not part of any of the choreography our stern teachers were trying to drum into our small skulls.

'Lubov Shevshenko,' they would shout at me time and

time again, 'you are incorrigible. What are we going to make of you?'

I think I was eleven by then, and I managed to pass the final set of exams and was invited to move to St Petersburg, my father's place of birth, to attend the prestigious School of Art and Dance. I had no known relatives living there any longer and, as an orphan, was granted a menial bursary to cover my living expenses, although I had no choice in the matter and would have to live in a dormitory for other provincials similarly adrift in the city – an old secret police building that had been converted into a school for the disadvantaged.

The prospect of living on my own wasn't daunting, as life with my aunt had over the years become a series of silences and misunderstandings. She had, since the day she took me in, treated me as an adult, when I still wanted to be a child.

Being thrown in at the deep end and having to share in close proximity an eight-bed dormitory with other kids, most of whom were a few years older than me, was something of a traumatic experience. They hailed from Siberia, Tajikistan, a couple were also from the Ukraine and others from the Baltic States, with their perfect complexions, high cheekbones and rotten teeth. I quickly realised I had little in common with most of them. Only two of us attended the same school, while the others were scattered across a variety of different institutes, none of which had artistic aspirations, so we stood out like a pair of sore thumbs, Zosia and I.

I couldn't even pretend we became close friends. At best, from the advantage of her sixteen months seniority and the fact her breasts were already growing, she tolerated

me, found my presence convenient as a messenger, factotum and facilitator. Luba, junior assistant when it came to anything illegal or forbidden, like smuggling cigarettes into the dormitory or concealing other's banned make-up under her mattress – that was me. My early training in criminality . . .

A few years into my time in St Petersburg, Zosia fell pregnant. She was seeing a boy from the physics institute, and I would, of course, cover for her absence on the occasion of her forbidden assignments. She was only sixteen at the time. When she was found out, the process was decisive. One day she was here, and the next day she wasn't. Thrown out of the school and shipped back like a dirty parcel to her family near Vilnius. We were told that there had been a grave illness in her family necessitating her return home, but we knew better, we knew the truth.

Almost two years later, in my final year at the School of Art and Dance, just as I was thinking that when I graduated I would take up a place in the corps de ballet in one of the city's lesser dancing troupes, I received a brief letter from Zosia out of the blue. She'd had a little boy, named Ivan, and was now also married to an older man who worked in the local state council. She said she was happy and enclosed a photograph of her family. It had been taken in a garden where the trees looked like skeletons and even the grass was sickly green. Zosia by then was approaching nineteen, but to me she already looked like an older woman, at least years older than she actually was, eyes sunk, hair dull, the sparkle of her youth gone for ever.

That was the day I swore to myself that I would neither marry nor have children.

*

During those years, we had our normal classes in the morning: Russian grammar, Russian literature (my favourite), arithmetic and later mathematics and geometry, history, geography, civic duties and others I daydreamed through with arduous distraction. Our afternoons saw us learning, rehearsing, practising and dancing at the school. We each had three dancing outfits, one to be used only for actual performances, when the ballet piece we had been working on for months was finally allowed to see the light of day at a gala performance. I was never given a solo and it looked as though I would always be a baby swan in the fluttering ensemble of the corps de ballet. Though I felt more like a flouncing duck. Oh, how I hated Tchaikovsky!

Ballet classes extended to the Saturday, so the only free day we were granted was the Sunday, but then most Sunday mornings were occupied cleaning our clothes, ironing, darning and bringing the dormitory back to tidiness, which left only Sunday afternoon as truly our own. Mostly we attended the local cinema house and the nearby ice-cream parlour. And had the opportunity to meet boys, before our curfew: 8 p.m. for the under fifteens, 9.30 for the older girls. The curfew was strictly enforced, and any defiance or breaking of the rules was always punished by a loss of weekend privileges.

Boys . . .

How could I not become interested in them, living for years on end – and teenage years do feel as if they last for ever – with seven women, a world of sly confidences, tall stories, raging hormones and peer envy? We monitored each other with the fierceness of hawks, purring with curiosity, brewing jealousy as if there was no tomorrow. Who was the prettiest, the tallest, the one whose breasts developed faster?

Some concealed the onset of their first periods, while others proclaimed them loudly to all and sundry. I was no ugly duckling in their midst, the orphan from the Ukraine. I was not the tallest, the most opulent, or the first or last to bleed, but in my head I always knew I was special. Realised that, unlike my fellow students, I had ambitions to see the world while all they could think of was the immediate future, some form of academic success and the prospects of a good match. Everything in my surroundings whispered to me that there was more to life than this.

Sex . . .

Another popular topic of conversation during the dark nights in a girls' dormitory. An endless chatter that extended to dressing rooms, rehearsal rooms, shower areas and the red-brick wall at the back of the building, which we knew none of the staff ever bothered patrolling in earnest and where all of us would take turns to smoke when, by hook or by crook, we got our hands on American cigarettes.

Being one of the youngest, I became a voyeur in the house of lust. During those years, all my dormitory companions flowered but, despite all the ballet classes and arduous exercises I was prescribed, I initially found it difficult to shed the puppy fat of my childhood. They would all say that I had a lovely face, but my body was slow in emerging from its cocoon. And so, in the communal showers, I stood like a spy, the water dripping down my body, endlessly watching, envying the other girls and the way their hips curved, their breasts hung, their arses spread, while I was still just a pack of bones surrounded by flabby skin, lacking definition and grace.

Oh, they talked a lot after the lights were out, about the boys they had met and the ones they would meet, and the

things they would do. Silently, I listened, trying to distinguish the truth from the lies, sometimes shocked to my core, at other times burning inside with every bit of taboo knowledge that filtered my way. Always confident that one day I would join their ranks. Become an adult, become a woman.

The ice-cream parlour on Lugansk Avenue was the place where we hung out, an old-fashioned relic from the Stalinist years. On nine visits out of ten, all they could offer was vanilla flavour, and even then it wasn't natural and left a bitter chemical aftertaste in the mouth, but the two old babushkas who ran it, on behalf of the State of course, did not mind us girls lingering there for hours on end, exchanging scurrilous gossip, swapping make-up tips, meeting the guys from out of town who traded in nylons and often pressured the older girls into stolen kisses, not in lieu of payment – as that was always inescapable – but almost as a tip that guaranteed they would return another time and consent to sell us stockings that were unavailable outside the black market.

And then, as we got older, some of the girls began to boast of the fact they had granted the men more than just a kiss.

I couldn't afford nylons anyway so the whole subject was academic, but from the time of my first period, every time I visited the ice-cream parlour on Lugansk, I think I blushed as a curious buzz raced through my lower stomach and my imagination ran wild. It also made the taste of the ersatz vanilla palatable.

The year after Zosia's sudden departure, the girl occupying the nearest bed to mine was a girl from Georgia called Valentina.

Valya was a wild one, always getting into trouble, not so much out of any inherent sense of evil but mostly out of mischief and provocation. She was the one who instructed me in the art of giving blow jobs, which she insisted men liked and provided us girls with a direct path to their hearts or, as I discovered later, their loins. She kept on joking that I would never be a true Russian woman until I knew how to suck a man's cock. She even stole bananas from the kitchens on the rare occasions our esteemed Cuban friends shipped boatfuls of bananas over to the motherland in exchange for the moral support we were providing them with, according to the newspapers and the Central Committee.

Initially I was more interested in the blissful taste and consistency of the bananas than in their shape, but Valya insisted I practice for evenings on end until she pronounced I was ready to do the deed.

His name was either Boris or Serguey. I still can't recall his features in much detail, or his name. Because after Boris (or Serguey) came Serguey (or Boris) a few days later, as I quickly became a recidivist. He studied – well, they both did – at the nearby Technical Institute. I was sixteen and I guess he was just a year or two older. Valya had engineered our meeting, advertising the fact I was willing and, no doubt, pocketing a few roubles for the service. We met at the ice-cream parlour. I remember it was a day when they had additional flavours, and I chose to sample the wild strawberry alongside the classic chemical vanilla. He paid. Later, we walked hand in hand to the red wall behind my school and Valya acted as a lookout. He undid the belt circling his thin waist and pulled his frayed corduroy trousers down to his knees. His underwear was halfway between white and grey. He looked me in the eyes. He seemed even more

terrified than I was. I gingerly extended my hand down to his crotch and took hold of his penis through the cheap cotton. It felt soft, limp like a piece of cheap meat. He froze. For a moment, I suddenly didn't know what to do next, however much Valya had rehearsed me in preparation for this moment.

Then I remembered. I got down on my knees. The ground was cold. I pushed the material aside and saw a man's cock for the first time. The spectacle was both frightening and fascinating. It was not what I'd expected. Smaller, maybe. I took a deep breath. A musty smell reached my nostrils, the smell of man.

I now took Boris's (or was it Serguey's?) cock in my hand. It jerked. I could feel his pulse through it.

I opened my mouth, steadied it, and presented his cock to my lips.

I extended my tongue and first licked his stem, and then traced the vein downwards to his balls sack, something Valya had recommended should he not be hard at first sight.

Again, a tremor coursed through his penis.

Finally, I took a deep breath and placed the mushroom-like head of the cock inside my mouth.

Within seconds, before I could suck, lick, grip or anything, I felt it growing, filling me.

It was a revelation.

As my lips took a firmer hold on the quickly hardening cock, I felt its smooth solidity, its sponge-like, resilient texture.

He was moaning, even when I did nothing.

My mind was geared to overdrive, storing the experience,

noting the sensations, dissecting the conflicting emotions. It was like entering a whole new world.

But the moment barely lasted for more than a minute before Boris (or was it Serguey?) brutally withdrew from my mouth and spurted a white stream of ejaculate across my chin and the top half of my dress. He looked at me quickly, mumbled an apology and pulled up his trousers. He turned and fled, leaving me on my knees like a supplicant, my mouth still open, my mind still abuzz.

'So how was it?' Valya asked. 'Exciting?'

'I don't know,' I told her truthfully. 'It was interesting, but it all happened too fast. I'd like to try again.'

'Really?' Valya said.

'I don't think I was doing it wrong,' I added. 'Maybe it was him.'

The next morning when I was brushing my teeth, I took a long hard look at myself in the mirror and I saw a new person. The child had gone. I finally looked into the eyes of a woman. Now, I know the transformation does not take place overnight, but it was as if a metaphorical bridge had been reached and crossed, triumphantly conquered.

I realised that I had achieved a distinct sort of power over the young man's cock and I was the one who had enjoyed the sensation most, contrary to expectations and tradition.

The second one, who could have been Serguey, was already hard when I pulled him from his trousers, and his penis was even more beautiful, straight like a ruler, a beautiful pink hue, unmarked by veins and with heavy balls hanging low beneath it.

He even tasted different.

Over the next year or so, led by insatiable curiosity and a deep attraction to the world of sex, I would come across a

whole variety of cocks. I had no interest whatsoever in the men they belonged to. They were typically local, so often uncouth, inarticulate, clumsy, heavy drinkers for the most part, quite uninteresting to me. But they were the only sort around.

In my dreams, I imagined bad boys with more sophistication, elegant men with a sense of the wicked who would seduce me in all impunity and weave their evil ways around my deflowered innocence. I wanted the big league players, the men whose voices could make your knees tremble and electrify the senses. I knew that somewhere they existed and were waiting for me, ready to plunder and excite me. But until they came my way, I had to satisfy myself with the provincial boys who just weren't bad enough but nonetheless gave me a taste of the forbidden.

Once the rumour spread in our limited circle that I was willing and available – at any rate for blow jobs – they came running. Few were satisfied with just that, though, and invariably sought more, but I made the rules very clear. My body would retain its mystery and any attempt to breach my limits would result in immediate dismissal from my favours. Of course they tried it on, but my will was implacable. I would suck cocks but nothing more. And, of course, none of them were ever allowed to touch me, either.

The young Russian men I had the opportunity to meet seemed cut from the same unattractive pattern, but the rumour was that foreign men were another species altogether. Nina, one of our seniors, who had once had the privilege of travelling abroad as a replacement in the corps de ballet of a minor touring company had informed us girls in the dormitory that foreign men not only had bigger cocks but also were poets.

In my own naive way, it was a quest. How mistaken I was! And to compound my unease, my willingness to entertain the boys gave me a bad reputation and I found it difficult to make friends. On one hand they were jealous of me, while on the other they feared I might one day steal their men. The minds of young women do work in mysterious ways.

But even though now I no longer remember the faces of any of my Russian bad boys, I still recall with a smile on my face – call me mischievous, if you will – the cocks I serviced in the interest of my worldly education. Ah, my bad boys! But quickly I tired of them and their lack of originality and vocabulary and their clumsiness, and longed to meet bad men.

I resolved that I would move overseas at the first possible opportunity.

But without Valya to line up men for me as she had boys outside the school wall, my sexual discovery came to an abrupt end when I left St Petersburg.

Until Chey.

My first real lover. The first man who had entered me, owned me.

And he was a man, not a boy like the ones from the ice-cream parlour. He had known exactly what to do with his cock and, better still, what to do with me. Life with him made me selfish in bed, bored with other, inferior men.

My relationship with Chey had marked me, with lines as permanent as the ones I later had etched onto my flesh in the form of a tiny smoking gun, only an inch or two from my inner thigh, a place that most women kept secret, for only the most intimate friends and lovers to see. But by then

I had become a nude dancer, and Chey's gun was displayed to a roomful of people night after night. I saw when their eyes alighted on it. The initial curiosity, as they wondered what it was, perhaps a flower in bloom, and then the shock when they realised that I had a weapon burned onto my skin, pointing directly at the most powerful weapon of them all, my cunt. And then the hunger from men and sometimes women who saw it as a sign that I was wanton, dangerous in bed or looking for pain. A bad girl.

But I wasn't a bad girl. I was Chey's girl.

I remembered the day that we met. I was nineteen, and I'd just arrived in New York.

Encouraged by a well-meaning older tutor, I'd auditioned the previous year by videotape for a scholarship with the American School of Ballet, in the Lincoln Center.

My application was declined.

Another girl in my year got in, but she had wealthy parents, a father who had made quick money buying up steel and fertiliser plants for next to nothing in the economic collapse of the eighties while the rest of the population starved.

She was blank faced with limbs as thin as a bag of matchsticks, but she had grace and an obvious pliability, a uniformity to her movements that must have appealed to the scrutineers.

I took her address, and used her as a contact for my visa application after I graduated. Through my aunt, who had distant relatives living in America, I managed to get sponsorship. I was granted a three-month post-graduate stay, long enough to find my way around and build up a little local work experience as a waitress, and when my permission to remain expired, I melted into the back

streets of Ridgewood, Queens, a neighbourhood that was full of Eastern Europeans. Slavs, Albanians, Ukrainians, Romanians, they had all come looking for a new life in America and ended up living virtually the same existence on new soil under the shadow of a different set of buildings.

I found a dingy apartment on a quiet street that was fairly cheap and close to a subway line that could deliver me quickly into Manhattan where I had found a job in a patisserie and coffee shop on Bleecker Street. The cafe was run by a Frenchman named Jean-Michel who had just broken up with his wife and didn't care that I was illegal, so long as I was beautiful and applied only the most delicate touch to his pastries. The croissants and petits pains au chocolat he baked were the best in the Village, light, fluffy, their smell a siren call to delicate stomachs, and the mille-feuilles were to kill for, so it was no hardship selling them. I'd always been a patient person, perhaps as a result of having no particular ambition, no maternal clock ticking, no one to hurry me along, no one to report to, so I never rushed the dough, always let the uncooked croissant mixture sit for as long as it needed to before gently rolling it out and over a butter square, turning the dough and rolling it again and again, folding it into towers with each turn, and eventually adding the bittersweet chocolate mixture and baking it in the oven until the shop was filled with the rich scent of two dozen pains au chocolat ready to be stacked on a glass dish in the window. And Jean-Michel's frequently wandering hands across my rump as he repeatedly instructed me in the art of baking according to his style were just a minor inconvenience, as long as I made it quite clear that was as far as I would allow him to venture.

Fall was just beginning to turn into winter. The days

were still bright and the sky blue. Local New Yorkers had started to carry scarves and gloves in their handbags in preparation for frosty evenings, but I was accustomed to much colder weather and I liked the chill that settled on my bare arms as I walked down West Broadway. It was the first Sunday in November, and I was alone in the shop. Jean-Michel was out running the New York marathon, pounding the sidewalk in a desperate effort to stave away the pounds that had inevitably gathered when he'd succumbed to middle age and American servings and his belly had grown in accord with the size of his croissants.

The bell on the door had tinkled, making me jump and nearly drop the tray of pretty pastel macaroons that I had spent all morning making, mixing egg whites with ground almonds and sugar, and piping the sweet nutty paste onto a sheet of paper, ever so careful to make each piped circle perfectly round, smooth and all exactly the same size so that they could be filled once they'd cooled and then packed into boxes with ribbons and sold to city girls who came in looking for a treat, or guilty husbands who couldn't find a florist on their way to the subway.

I'd burned the tips of my fingers and a line across my palm in my rush to right the tray before my sweets tumbled onto the floor, and I was annoyed and impatient when I hurried from the kitchen to the counter to serve my next customer.

Chey.

'You should put some ice on that,' he said, nodding towards the vivid red welt on my hand where I'd been scalded by the hot tray. I'd flinched when he set the coins onto the counter instead of on my waiting palm, in exchange for a chocolate croissant and a cappuccino.

'Yes,' I replied, because I couldn't think of anything else to say.

He was dressed casually, in a university athletics sweatshirt and a pair of jeans and non-descript trainers, and his tousled blond hair glinted like hay in the sun that flooded through the windows, as though he'd just been out for a walk in Central Park, or on one of the streets that wasn't cut off for the marathon runners.

An all-American look, apart from his eyes, which were evidently sharp, but also cold. He met mine when he looked up from my hand. His were blue-grey, the colour of the sea on a cloudy day, and somehow didn't blend with the rest of his attire, or the sound of his voice. He didn't have a New York accent. It was something else, something I couldn't put my finger on.

He looked out of place in his casual clothes, like someone who had woken up in the wrong house, alongside someone else's wardrobe.

I shivered when I handed him his change. A quarter.

He sat inside on one of the stools along the bench that faced the window, flicking through the pages of a book so quickly that it seemed as though he wasn't really reading it, while I stood hidden between the kitchen and the counter and stared at him, watching as he held his croissant in his left hand and dipped it into the milky foam and ground chocolate that decorated his coffee, leaving behind bits of feathery pastry that floated away and stuck to the sides of the cup.

It was hot in the small shop, warm from the ovens, and soon he pulled his sweatshirt over his head, bringing his T-shirt up with it for a few moments before he shimmied it down again, revealing a tanned, muscled back and a glimpse

of a tattoo that wound around his right side. His T-shirt was short sleeved and just tight enough to display taut arms with sinews that rippled as he lifted his cup to his mouth.

He suddenly turned to face me.

And I realised that I was holding my breath.