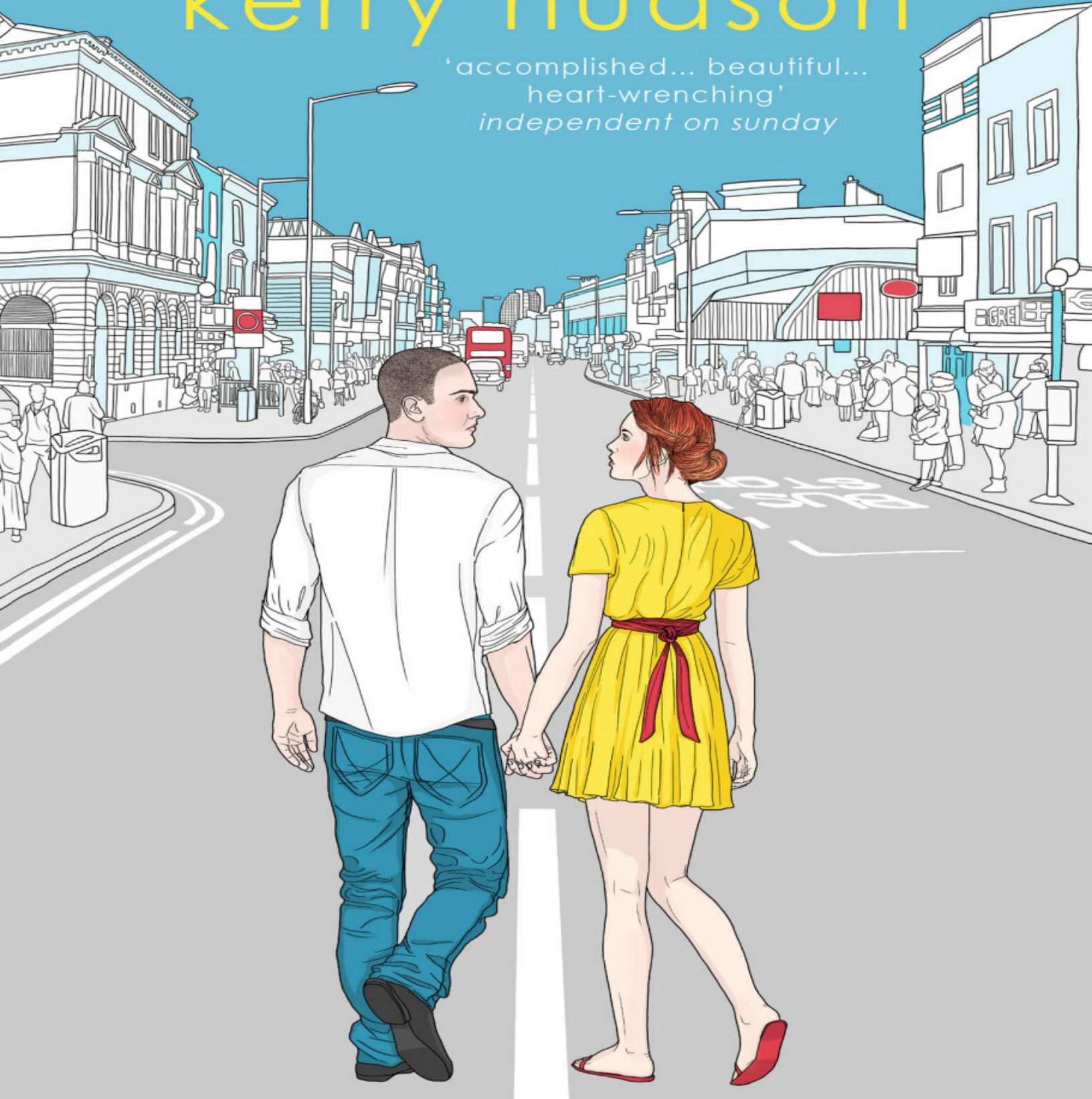


thirst

kerry hudson

'accomplished... beautiful...
heart-wrenching'
independent on sunday



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About the Book

The beginning of a relationship is usually all about getting to know each other, sharing stories far into the night, comparing experiences, triumphs and heartaches, until we know one another inside out.

Not so for Dave and Alena. He's from London, she's from Siberia. They meet in a sleek Bond Street department store in the frayed heat of high summer, where she's up to no good and it's his job to catch her. So begins an unlikely relationship between two people with pasts, with secrets, they've no idea how to live with - or leave behind. But despite everything they don't have in common, all the details they won't and can't reveal, they still find themselves fighting with all they've got for a future together.

Dave and Alena's unconventional love story will take you from London to Siberia, and from hope to heartbreak, and back again.

About the Author

Kerry Hudson was born in Aberdeen. Growing up in a succession of council estates, B&Bs and caravan parks provided her with plenty of material for her first novel, *Tony Hogan Bought Me an Ice-Cream Float Before He Stole My Ma*, which won the Scottish Mortgage Investment Trust First Book Award and was shortlisted for an array of prizes including the Guardian First Book Award and the Sky Arts Awards. *Thirst* is her second novel. She currently lives, works and writes in London.

Also by Kerry Hudson

*Tony Hogan Bought Me an Ice-cream Float Before He Stole
My Ma*

To the people I have loved who helped me tell this story

Thirst

Kerry Hudson

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

1

SHE STOOD ON Bond Street, tourists and shoppers moving on either side of her. A small cluster of young girls left the shop, swinging their handbags, spindly tanned legs wobbling in impossibly high heels, giving the appearance of over-accessorised fawns. Alena ran over the rules; it was good to have rules. Rule 1: always lunchtime, there are less shop girls and the ones who are there aren't looking; they're hungry, resentfully waiting for their sixty minutes of freedom.

Rule 2: the clothes don't matter. Her plain yellow cotton sundress might have been the kind of simple that was very expensive. Apart from the fact that the shoulder straps were very slightly digging into the soft flesh between her armpit and breast, no one would know she'd found the dress in a rag box at a women's shelter. Anyway, she'd seen people in old, awful clothes leave Harrods with glossy bags on each arm and get into Bentleys, as though money excused them of usual standards.

Rule 3: Assume The Face. No matter how nervous she was, The Face was something she could believe in. Something she could conjure and it cost her nothing. Because she was someone without the usual money and entitlement bubbling through her veins like a particularly golden champagne, it confused people; it didn't go with her strangely cut hair, her scrawny, undernourished-looking shoulders. She raised her eyebrows fractionally, along with her sharp chin, set her eyelids to a disinterested half-mast and surveyed the shopfront.

But for all the work The Face was doing she couldn't control her body with its growling stomach, her heart thunk-thunk-thunking enough to displace a rib, her armpits growing sticky; responding instantly to the adrenalin as she pulled the heavy glass door and felt the air conditioning cut through the thick outdoor heat.

There he was; the usual sort of handsome, useless security guard these shops always had. This one, dressed in a smart black suit and tie, looked like he belonged in a whiskey advert, lounging by an open fire, or maybe holding a kitten to his bare, oiled chest like that poster she'd had on her bedroom wall when she was fifteen. She paused just long enough and smiled her best uppity smile, a cold, 'little person' greeting, that she'd once seen a woman in Chelsea use. Rule 4: always draw attention to yourself, never let it seem as though you're sneaking in.

'Afternoon, beautiful.'

Was he calling her beautiful? The Face dropped for a second and the guard made a sound that might have been part of a laugh, rubbed his forehead. Alena thought he might be blushing.

'The afternoon . . . it's beautiful. Sorry, I mean it's a beautiful afternoon.'

She noticed he had a proper London accent, a bit rough. She could tell these things after all this time. Not what she expected from that pretty-boy face. She wouldn't have expected the shyness either, the way he rocked lightly on his heels. Still, she gave him a disdainful stare and swept up to the third floor to commence her long, tense examination of the luxury shoes until she found the ones in the torn-out magazine picture getting soggy in her left bra cup. Rule 5: she must never, ever get caught.

He hated this. Especially hated having to do it at the table in the gloomy basement, the stockroom, where he'd just been about to have lunch; at the same table the girls walked by

on their way back up to the shop floor with stacks of shoeboxes balanced up their fronts and tucked under their chins. They slowed as they passed to give the girl hard, disgusted stares as though she had stolen their own shoes from their feet. She was really pretty, and not in the painted, tired way the girls from the shop were either. He knew that would get their backs up.

Her shoulders were uncovered, and he could just see the shine of sweat glistening in the crooks of her elbows when she stretched her arms across the table. He was nervous. Her pale eyes dropped to the open foil of a sandwich between them, right by the offending shoes.

‘You eat?’

‘No, I was about to -’ A stutter crept in, the very slightest fuzziness at the beginning of words, and he tried to disguise it with a cough.

‘Do you mind? I thank you.’

He couldn’t think what to reply and watched as her bony hands snatched his sandwich from the table – corned beef, lots of pickle, his sandwich that he’d been looking forward to all morning – and took several hungry bites, leaving a red crescent around the ghost of white teeth in the bread.

‘What is your name?’

‘David, Dave really.’ He smiled and then pulled himself up. ‘But that’s not really the point, is it? What is your name? Yeah,’ he nodded, like they were finally on track, ‘that’s the point.’

‘I go tomorrow,’ she said, half-chewed sandwich just visible.

‘What? Go where?’

‘I say, I go tomorrow.’ She exhaled through her nostrils noisily.

He raised his voice a little. ‘And last night where did you sleep?’ He enunciated every syllable, left large pauses in between the words and she lowered the sandwich for a moment, gave him what his mum would’ve called ‘daggers’.

'I speak English for God's sake. Is houstel in Peckham.' She matched his raised voice and left even bigger pauses.

'Hotel? You're on holiday here?' Now he was getting somewhere.

'No, *houstel*. I *live* here. Tomorrow I go find room to live.'

She'd ripped off a piece of tinfoil and was rolling it into a ball. He couldn't stop watching it.

'Where was your *home* before London?' Dave asked.

'Siberia.'

She was using the palm of her hand to roll the ball back and forth across the table now. He felt stupid and he couldn't stop looking at her hand hovering back and forth like that.

'It is Russia.'

'Yeah, I know that.' Though it would have been a guess at best. 'Can you stop please?'

He leaned across and snatched the tinfoil ball; in return, the slightest raise of a mocking eyebrow, a very slow smile.

'Some people do not.'

The girls kept thumping extra hard up the stairs, whispering to each other. Later those same girls would sit at that same table and gossip about the red-headed shoplifter and how she ate poor Davey's sandwich, the cheeky little bitch. The nearly stolen shoes, silver high-heeled brogues made of slippery, soft leather, lay between Dave and Alena, and as she crumpled the last bit of crust into her mouth she fiddled with one of the shoelaces. Her eyes batted up to Dave; he noticed she had a childish smear of pickle at the corner of her mouth and wanted to reach across and wipe it, almost did, then clasped his hands in his lap.

'Right. Well, I can see there's no straight answers here. It's store policy to call the police. So. Is there anything else you want to say before they get here?'

He couldn't say if it was her mouth, eyes or the tilt of her head, but somehow her whole face changed then. She gave him a single word.

‘Please.’

She looked down at her hands and when she looked up her face was softer, one hand brought to her neck.

‘I’m apologise to you. I am confused.’ As she spoke she counted off each point on her fingers. ‘I am new, I try on shoes, I am confusing about taking off.’

The rise and fall of her accent put him in mind of seagulls swooping for scraps. His stomach knotted up. Just his luck to get indigestion from the sandwich she had eaten.

‘You tried to walk out of the shop wearing them.’ He pulled out a curling pair of dusty blue flip-flops, ‘You dropped these because you were going so fast. You set off the alarm and still tried to leave the shop. Honestly, I wish this was my decision but . . .’

She straightened then placed her forearms on the table, looked at him and met his eye for the first time, a jolt, then spoke quietly, so quietly he had to lean forward, and he could smell the curdling sweetness of drying sweat on her skin.

‘I am apologising to you. Please. I say I feel sorry. I make mistake. I am new and it is easy to be confusing. This city it is big and people don’t like friendly talking and it is so much money for toilet even. 30p in Victoria! I’m asking you to understand. Make this just . . . stupid mistake. Shoes are here still and nothing losing. I am asking. Please.’

His body angled closer and he allowed himself to really look: hair the shade of old brick, tap-water irises, thin lipsticked lips bitten redder. He saw her nervous hands; her fingers pressing at the soft dip between her collarbones. Dave knew it was no use pretending, he’d do whatever she asked.

He held on to the metal bar above him, his damp grip gently slipping, as the tightly packed bodies swayed one way, then the other, across with the bus. The day-old breath of the person squeezed to his right, the tinny whine of headphones

playing 'Simply the Best' plugged into a guy who looked like he sold insurance, and the teen next to him, eyes ringed black, a stud through each fleshy cheek, craning her neck away like she might catch his taste in music. He barely noticed any of them; he'd been walking about like an idiot all day, tripping up the stairs and blaming it on not having had his lunch when the girls cooed around him.

He'd let her go. He'd even held the door open for her as she left wearing those blue flip-flops and a guilty, grateful smile.

Yvonne, smelling of two large glasses of Pinot Grigio, John Paul Gaultier perfume and sweaty tights, had taken him into her office when she got back from lunch.

'I mean, Dave, two years and you've never done us wrong but really! You couldn't wait till I'd given her the once-over? I'm the manager in case you've forgotten and it's for your sake too. How do you think it looks? Might as well be giving the bloody stuff away. There's a policy, you know, and word spreads like wildfire around that sort.'

She took out a compact and lipstick with a heave of breath and a roll of her eyes. Dave stared at a brown patch on the carpet, coffee probably, though knowing Yvonne's filthy temper he wouldn't rule anything out. Blood, sweat and tears. Yvonne told every new girl that was the only way to run a business these days, the only way to turn a profit. Dave scratched his tooth against a dry scrap of skin on his lip and nodded.

'She wasn't one of that lot, Yvonne, whatever that means. And I know there's a policy but that's for shoplifters and she was just a confused tourist, maybe a bit daft but not a thief.'

Yvonne paused, partially lipsticked face sour and slitty-eyed. Dave had never been a talker, never mind one to talk back, one of the reasons he'd lasted so long, and so she waited to hear what he had to say. He thought of those thin fingers snatching the sandwich and took a step towards her.

‘But you said it, Yvonne, two years, and I’ve never done you wrong. Now I’m guessing that after that long you expect I can do my job proper. So why don’t you just leave me to it? I know a shoplifter when I catch one. Just like I know a stupid tourist when I see one. And if you’re that bothered about how I do my job, maybe you could not lock up the office in future so I can interview them professionally and not in the stockroom with everyone gawping.’

He was sweating, waiting for her paint-stripping response, but she said nothing, simply gave a shocked wave of her lipstick.

‘Jesus, alright, no need to get your Y-fronts in a twist.’

Dave stood straighter and nodded, fought the sigh of relief welling up in his chest.

‘Right, Yvonne. Right then. I’m glad we got that sorted.’ He knew he’d got off lightly and his quick walk towards the door showed it.

‘Davey boy?’ He turned. There was a small smile on her half-red lips. ‘I quite like you riled up.’

He’d maintained a grim, extra-vigilant face for the rest of the day while he thought about her hands, the way she brought one to her throat, her bites of his sandwich. Now, in the crush of body heat and smells of the number 73 he couldn’t deny it; he’d been woken up from wherever he’d been, gasping, like someone had taken electric paddles to his chest. He’d been given the chance to save her and he had, gladly, even with the risk. He’d found her, saved her and then she’d walked away from him without looking back and he realised he didn’t even know her name.

There was nothing on the telly, just programmes of people doing things; ice-skating, cheffing, ballroom-dancing, learning to be better parents or feel happier through the magic of spray tan and a chin lift. Dave spent all day watching people and he liked it; seeing the way women touched their husbands, a hand laid on a chest or the

unthinking brushing away of a speck of dandruff, the way mums bossed their daughters, the whispered rows and silent upsets; he could always spot the ones who thought it was important to be seen Being Nice To The Shop Girls or the ones who could only afford to look but tried everything on anyway. It wasn't that he wasn't interested, it was just that the TV showed what he saw every day, though without the sequins, saucepans and paper knickers.

He bit down on the cushion of his fingertip, pressing his teeth on the smooth nail, letting the small spark of pain register, considered how hard he would need to bite before he'd end up with a purple-pink bruise, the colour of a summer rain cloud.

'Fuck this.'

His 'flat' was two rooms and a box of a bathroom built onto the roof of the Best Turkish Kebab shop. The building work was so shoddy that the reek of grilling meat clung to the woodchip wallpaper. He'd rented this place just over two years ago, thinking it was only for a bit, before the students and some of the braver bankers, with the trendier clothes, had starting climbing their way up from Shoreditch, or down depending on how you looked at it.

Back then Dalston was still a long line of Turkish and Kurdish cafes, neon-bloomed florists' fronts and bridal shops with their frothy, flammable eyeball-assaulting displays, all crowned by a market that sold polyester mountains of three-for-£2 knickers and all the yam and plantain a man could want. He'd been there to witness the basement clubs pop up, with lines of smoking kids in eighties jumpers swigging Red Stripe. It wasn't home, it wasn't the estate, but it was alright.

Down the crackling static of the brown-carpeted stairs and out into the soupy night, he gave his usual 'alright' nod to the thick-armed lads slicing at the glistening, spinning carcass for a long queue of bobbies. There were the usual sirens - the station was just up the road - and some self-

important, loud chatter from the groups of kids walking past, though he reminded himself they were probably only three or four years younger than him.

Dave walked his usual route, through the puddle of half-melted ice outside the fishmonger's and the chemist crammed with hair pomade and Palmer's Cocoa Butter, the newsagent's with 'NO PORN' in its window. He was just a bloke in his late twenties, by himself, in tracksuit bottoms and T-shirt, hands in pockets, head down, like he had somewhere to go. Dave did have somewhere to go, but it was nowhere special.

He walked in just as a race was finishing, the usual line of slumped shoulders in jumpers in front of the TV screens, the smell of sweat unmasked by the air-freshener that stung the back of his throat. In front of the hunched-over jumpers, a tall tree of a bloke with dreads paced the floor, repeating, 'You're kidding me, man, you're kidding. Man, you are kidding me.'

The jumpers, they just kept their eyes on the screens, the guy with the dreads didn't think they were the ones kidding him, and the spotty boy inside his glass booth stared hard at his computer screen. Dave walked across the confetti of ripped betting slips to the vending machine and paid his pound for a bottle of Coke. The jumpers, faces slack with the accumulated force of gravity, time and disappointment, gave him a slow nod. Man You Are Kidding Me went and squared up to the roulette game in the corner, whacking his fingers at the screen as though to psych out his competitor before entering the ring.

Dave took his bottle to the very back of the room. Enjoying the first cold, sweet rush of the Coke over his teeth and watched the Sandown 19.45. Watched the horses fly, pushing their strong, beautiful bodies over each hedge with a sharp kick from their bowed over jockeys. In the corner the rhythmic thumps of heavy gold coins being fed into the machine were followed by the tinny computerised whizz of a

roulette wheel and that deep, repetitive grumble, 'You're kidding me, man, you're kidding.'

One of the jumpers straightened. There was a winner in the house and he quietly made his way to the window, claimed his money, placed another bet and returned to the line-up. Dave sipped his Coke; he never placed a bet and no one gave a shit. He watched a dog race next, the little scrap of pretend white rabbit a stutter on the screen. He thought about how her hair stuck to the sweat on her neck, the different shape her lips had made when she asked for his help, how a taxi had sped by as she was leaving and the breeze had lifted the hem of her yellow dress. In the corner the roulette wheel kept spinning, the pound coins kept dropping, those dogs kept chasing after something they'd never catch.

The round of her shoulders is what he saw first, recognised it from all the way up the street. He hadn't noticed the bag at her feet though, a bulging, dusty red army bag with a sleeve dangling out of the top. He gave a glance towards the shop, glad that Yvonne made him lock up each night, though he would have kept walking towards her anyway even if Yvonne had been there to see. As he approached he thought he could remember all of her features as though he'd seen them every day, those small, fearless eyes, her thick short hair that today made him think of fox's fur; feral, an urban animal.

Sleep had deserted him in the last few nights as though his mind resented taking a break from conjuring her, and he'd lain baking hot, listening to crap talk radio, feet outside the duvet, the rest twisting around his body. On his break that day he'd eaten five Breakaway biscuits, barely tasting them until he noticed the oily film on his tongue. Now, as he walked towards her, he felt the coat of sugar on his teeth, the sweaty synthetic seam in the crotch of his trousers. He was ashamed, in his cheap suit and thin white shirt, and

that was just the beginning of what was wrong with him. But she was there, she'd come back to him, in the same yellow dress, a pink gouge on her shoulder from the strap of her bag, and she was waiting for him.

He was going to get her to turn round, touch her shoulder maybe, but by the time he'd crossed the road, catching her reflection in a shop window, he didn't trust his arms or his hands. Instead he stood, looking at her in the glass, a watery picture, as though a puff of breath would drift her away.

She turned to him in the end. They stood facing each other, her mouth almost smiling, those fearless eyes staring straight at him. 'I come to ask if you will have a drink with me.'

Her eyes turned hard then and she tilted her chin up, defying him to reject her, to judge the bag at her feet. His hand was half raised, about to smooth the hot skin marked from the strap of her bag with his thumb, until he remembered he had no right touching her.

'OK. A cup of tea somewhere?'

She smiled properly then, a quick flash of those slightly crooked but white, baby shark's teeth. She shrugged and held out her bag for him to carry. 'I don't mind what you drink.'

She led the way towards Oxford Street. He shouldered the bag and watched her walk ahead of him, the tips of his boots just touching the outline of her shadow, as though that was the way to measure a safe distance.

2

AT THE BRIGHT red sign of a bookshop, she turned and motioned him down a side alley with a flick of her hand. Away from the shoppers and tourists, crowds stiff as dominoes ready to topple, he felt he could breathe again. Now it was just the two of them in the shady alley and he rested against the white wall, felt the cold concrete. He'd already taken off his suit jacket, knew he was sweating and clamped his arms to his sides.

She turned round and he gave a weak apologetic smile, straightened up; she frowned and walked towards him and for a moment, from the look on her face, he was sure she was just going to keep going, walk past him and say to the back of his head that there had been a mistake, and he would have to watch her go a second time. Her eyes stayed on his as she approached and he stood completely still, then looked away. Her hand was on his arm, gentler than he imagined it would be, as light as a sweet wrapper blown there by mistake.

'David. Dave? I am sorry. You are feeling tired?'

He wanted to apologise and explain he wasn't really, but his mouth was dry and instead he just looked at her, at those clear, unreadable eyes, the slight creases at the corner of her mouth that made him think she'd smiled a lot once, though he'd seen so little evidence of it.

'Because you have been working! And I make you walk this long way. I am apologising.'

She looked small for a moment, a child frustrated with him or maybe herself, and he was able to find his voice.

'No, no, it's not that. I used to run, you know. I'm fit as anything, or used to be. I used to run thirty miles a week. It's just . . . it's just that I . . .'

His words stopped as her features smoothed again into that lopsided, not-quite-smile, the set of her lips suggesting something but promising nothing. He took a breath, considered that he might run away himself. 'I just don't like crowds.'

She shrugged, then nodded, her face serious.

'Well, they are behind now.'

Then she picked up her bag and started walking; he took two long steps to catch up.

'So you are runner? You look strong.' A flirtatious laugh seemed to throb underneath her question.

'Was, was a runner. I haven't run in years. Work and stuff, you know.'

She shrugged again as though it didn't matter to her whether he ran or not.

'Once you are something you are always it.'

And with those words she started down the steps that would lead them through Soho, taking them two at a time.

At Shaftesbury Avenue she slowed her pace, walked shoulder to shoulder with him, her head down. He could feel the heat radiating from her skin; her smell was soap, not perfumed, just normal soap, but with a bitter smell underneath which made him wonder how long she'd been staring into that window, waiting for him. Her bag jostled between them, like it was nudging him into making some sort of conversation.

'Have you seen any of these shows?'

But a passing rickshaw, with a red fur seat, fake flowers and blaring Ace of Base had stolen the words as soon as he'd spoken them and he was grateful. A stupid thing to ask. She gave a small frown at the lost question and he was forced to move closer. He could smell her hair then too; lemons. She looked at him as though he were a sum she was trying to do, and he felt so helpless that he shook and

said nothing. He just stood there like a dumb animal, with all the traffic and tourists.

He was so near he could kiss her but all he wanted was to put his face to her hair again. Every word he had ever known evaporated from his tongue. Her face changed again then; a strange, frightened look appeared as if she'd done her sum and the number she'd come up with wasn't at all what she'd wanted. Dave felt his heart bump against each rib as it descended to the soles of his feet.

She put a hand on his shoulder and came close enough to whisper. The heat of her breath on the side of his face made him dizzy, but she stepped back again with the same expression on her face and he nodded before he properly heard what she had said.

'It's Alena.'

He ran; his heart thumping in his ears, the cold air burning in his lungs. His feet thumped across the broken paving slabs, skidded on a crisp packet as he concentrated on widening his stride in time to his heartbeat and the sucking in of all that dirty south London air. He was tall, shot up at twelve and just kept going, strong, and if the piss-taking from his mates and the girls on the estate was anything to go by, not bad-looking. When he ran he felt like he owned this place; Roehampton Estate wasn't much of a kingdom but at least it was his, his and his mum's, and he was only twenty-two, he'd a lot more conquering to do - a whole world's worth. If he could get his front foot just a little further ahead it would feel close to flying.

He ran down from his block towards the bus stop, past the Co-op where he'd do his shift later that night, the Greggs with the fatty smell of hot sausage rolls pulling at his belly, towards the burnt-out GTI and the group of kids with rocks in their hands, stomach flab hanging over the waists of their trackie bottoms. They were eleven maybe, should have been in that well-meaning, always empty 'Connectionz'

centre playing on new computers and drinking free fizzy drinks, if it wasn't so uncool to be seen there. He'd known them since they were toddlers, all filthy faces and bare arses. They could have been him and his mates ten years ago, a pack of estate kids who'd end up fighting each other if no one else came along that night.

Dave was the only one left now, except Mickey, and Deano who worked seasons in Greece or Ibiza and so came and went. Most of his mates had graduated the estate one way or another: from fighting and rock throwing, through drugs and thieving, on to prison then usually to different estates up north and back to drugs and thieving. A few had gone to work in banks, shops, the Forces, and got themselves a 100 per cent mortgage and moved further out to new-builds.

The kids lowered the rocks as he ran by. 'Alright, Dave?' The tallest, Sammy, wore a torn Nike anorak on the hottest summer days. Dave'd chased him out of the Co-op a few times until it dawned on Sammy, just beginning his shoplifting career, that you didn't pinch when the security could outrun you any day of the week. Dave could see which way Sammy was headed, and he wasn't going to be the next Deputy Manager of a Barclays branch.

'Where you going?'

Dave didn't stop running, but slowed his pace, turned with a grin on his face. 'What?'

Sammy looked like he might hurl the rock, hardened his face. 'Where you running to, I said.'

'Wherever I want. Right off the estate, through the park and down into Kingston maybe. Feel like I could run a marathon today.'

'Cool.' Sammy nodded, chucked his rock up in the air and caught it again, the same strength of throw that would wreck a windscreen later when a fancy Land Rover drove through, rather than around, the estate. 'Yeah. Fucking cool. Marathon Dave! Marathon Dave!' The others joined in the

chant and Dave held his fist up in salute and kept running, past the tower blocks he'd scrapped outside, the alleys where he'd copped off with Jenni Taylor, the empty, smashed-glass-strewn car park where his mum had taught him to ride his BMX.

He picked up his pace as he reached the metal-shuttered Citizens' Advice Bureau, the Right Plaice fish-and-chip shop with its row of sharp-beaked, dead-eyed crows waiting for scraps. People could say what they wanted. His mum liked a drink, it was true. Dave knew, he fetched the bottle for her each day himself, he even joined her for a drop, sat with her in front of the telly when she said it was lonely drinking on her tod. But she'd do anything for him, had done everything, and all by herself too; he still didn't know where she'd got the money for that BMX.

He turned, ran past the last few tower blocks, in time to watch someone's giant granny pants float down on the breeze from a balcony washing line. That ripe smell of horseshit from the stables on the corner, those nice fancy houses on the edge of the estate, walls the same pink pastel colour as those pants, like crossing into another country; they meant he wasn't far off from the vastness of Richmond Park, the sky behind the rolling scrub turning peach, pinpricked with green parakeets.

He hit the grass, felt his muscles tighten with the change of surface, ignored the burn and increased his speed; a mob of deer moved into his line of vision, then a crow trying to rip apart a Stella can with its beak. Dave ran, he ran like his life depended on it, until the estate was no more than a dirty fingerprint smudge on the horizon. They could say what they liked, but because of his mum Dave was strong, unstoppable and he was running towards the big wide world.

She dropped off her bag at the cloakroom but not before applying a little more lipstick, rubbing a finger under each

eye in case of mascara smears. On the top step she watched him by the revolving doors, his hands clasped in front of him, legs wide apart, just like he would stand at the door of the shop. He really was very handsome, or at least he was when he wasn't taking up as little space as possible like a living, breathing apology. Yes, good broad shoulders, an old-fashioned haircut, but nice thick hair, shiny too. Alena smoothed her dress, took a breath.

A teenager, with brown curls tumbling down to the seat of her denim hot pants, craned her neck to look back at him before her father pushed her along. Maybe it was her nerves that made her walk over and mimic his security-guard pose. For one dizzying moment, when he didn't laugh, she thought she'd made him angry, but then she saw it was the flushed cheeks he was trying to disguise by looking away.

'Sorry, it's habit. The shop, you know.'

She twisted her head to catch his eye. 'No. I think you look very . . . grand.'

He read her face for some sort of piss-take. 'Grand?'

She nodded, placed an arm on his sleeve. 'Yes, you look like . . .' They had started walking up the wide curving steps of the gallery, it was cool, quieter, and finally she was able to hear him properly; she dropped her words like breadcrumbs as they walked. '. . . a proper man. I can tell you were runner.'

He looked away, gave a nod, to no one, about nothing. Alena reminded herself she could leave, say she needed the toilet and not come back, she'd managed these last few months and she'd keep managing. But then he stepped so carefully out of the path of an elderly couple, walking hand in hand and both hunched towards each other as though they might up and over and tumble right down the stairs if they let go of the other. She saw how his gaze lingered on their clasped hands. He wouldn't turn her away, though the idea that he might pulled at her like stitches in a newly healed wound.

‘How come you wanted to come here then?’

Because she always had. Because she’d always been too afraid to come in. Because she’d once seen a couple kiss on the steps outside and thought it was so romantic. Because she’d only just learned it was free. Because she didn’t want him to imagine her a shoplifting idiot.

‘Because.’

Alena had stood outside the gallery so many times watching people spin through the shining revolving doors. One day, a month on the street by then and the bone-gnawing fear getting just a little better, she’d let herself go on a short walk from the shelter she was in for a few nights, picking the busiest places she could find. Dressed in a shell suit from the rag box, she was too ashamed to try and go inside. Unsure what it might cost, if they would even allow her; as though the shelter followed her like a smell or had dyed her skin a particular colour.

She took a few quick steps into one of the rooms off the main lobby, and when she looked back, he’d stopped, hands in pockets, and she had the feeling she was pushing too hard, overstepping whatever they’d silently agreed. She was so out of practice, though, that she couldn’t be sure.

She offered a smile. Keep smiling. She meant to take his hand but instead just touched the sharp bone of his wrist, surprised by how hot it was under her fingertips. The room was filled with pictures of snowy fields and grassy riverbanks, all except for one blazing in the corner. Alena led him by walking just a few steps ahead – it was amazing how often people would follow you if they felt you were just beyond their reach.

In front of them was a painting of a mother brushing her daughter’s hair, the hair so long that the girl, sitting on a wooden chair, had to arch her neck right back and her mother had to extend her arm all the way to get a full stroke in; red, orange, cream and grey. It wasn’t peaceful, though it showed a homely moment.

Alena thought it screamed fierce love through the hushed gallery. The mother looked like she was capable of turning the hairbrush and smacking it against the back of her daughter's head, though the girl's stretched, exposed neck showed only trust.

She stepped back to check his reaction. He nodded. He looked embarrassed by the picture.

'This is . . . well, it's a good painting.' She waited for more. 'Well, I mean, it must be good if it's in here.'

She looked at the painting, relaxed her eyes.

'And that girl looks like she could be you.'

'What?'

'She could be you. When you were younger.' He was looking at the picture differently now. 'And the mum, in the apron? That's how I imagine women in old-fashioned countries still dress.'

She let out a small laugh but her eyes were on the girl, her pale neck. 'Russia's not old-fashioned.'

'Sorry, no, course not. My mum still wore an apron until I was fourteen, even though she was just chucking in a Fray Bentos pie and stirring a boiled kettle into a packet of Smash.' His face was softer, calm; he smiled. 'Is that why you like it? Because it's like you or your mum? It reminds you of something?'

She shook her head, spun her flip-flop on the shiny floor about to walk away and then turned back again. She stumbled for the words, real words, not breadcrumbs made of salt and sugar and hot air.

'I think it is like fire . . . no, I am meaning it is . . . fierce. The mother is fierce, daughter is gentle. Protection and love. You see?'

He met her eyes. 'I see.'

'Call me Alena.'

'What?'

'I like it if you say my name. Alena.'

She stared back at the picture and threaded her fingers through the splayed tips of his. He didn't pull away and relief spread as warmly through her as though the painting was aflame. Even so, she kept her eyes on the hairbrush of the mother.

'I see, Alena.'

Afterwards Alena walked them around a few wintery pictures that she said reminded her of home. When they retreated from the milling crowds to the cafe in the basement they were still holding each other's hands, treading the path of the elderly couple before them, and looking no less likely to topple and hurt themselves badly.

She had a single ten-pound note folded in her pocket, what was left of the £20 she'd been given after the shower she'd had at Waterloo Station and a sandwich, and offered to buy him a tea.

'Or a coffee. I am saying thank you, remember.'

But Dave, maybe bold from the hand-holding, from the tinge of red that hovered in his sight, pressed her shoulders down into her seat and came back carrying a tray with three slices of cake and two pots of tea on it. Alena insisted they both have a forkful of each.

'This one is good and sweet,' she said.

'You've a sweet tooth.'

She brought her hand in front of her crooked teeth, mortified. 'No, it's not sweets, they grow in this way.' She spoke from behind her fingers; her neck was hot. Dave reached across and gently lowered her hand.

'No, no, it's an English saying, it just means you like cakes and sweets and stuff. Me too.' He pushed his fork into a nest of meringue and it shattered across the plate. 'But I'm more of a KitKat man.'

Alena wanted to resist after snatching his sandwich yesterday but the cakes were as lovely as the high-ceilinged room filled with dark furniture. Still, she was nervy and she knew she'd regret not just being able to enjoy sitting with a

nice man who'd bought her tea and cake and wanted nothing in return. Well, of course he wanted *something* – didn't they all? But she felt he'd at least ask, and probably also listen to her answer. He pushed the last bits of cake over to her side of the table.

'Go on. I've already had five Breakaways.'

'Breakaway?'

They talked until the cafe closed. When they came out of the gallery it had been raining; the air was filled with the warm smell of dirt lifted from the pavements and small fish-scale puddles glistened under the darkening sky across Trafalgar Square. Against everything she should have felt, she still thought London was beautiful. But she was so tired.

'Well, I am thanking you. Is . . .'

 she hesitated as she considered whether the disabled public toilet cubicle in Paddington, even with the threat of being caught and arrested, was still the better option over this barely disguised begging, '. . . very late for me to find hotel room now. Do you know good one maybe?'

She watched his calm face for any sign of discomfort, she wouldn't force it, knew it would never work if she did. But his face was completely, strangely, still. He put his hands in his pockets.

'You don't have a place for tonight then?'

She gurgled out what she hoped was a light laugh, though her heart was pounding. She hadn't had a place for the last three months.

'My hotel is full tonight.' She paused, but he didn't fill it, and she felt a sharp stab of something behind her cheeks; disappointment or hurt maybe. She picked up her bag then gave a wide, stiff grin. 'But is London. Hundred of hotels! Thank you, David.'

And then he was back with her, his head snapping towards her as soon as he heard the bag being lifted.

'Hey, listen . . . I mean, I wouldn't be offended if you didn't want to but . . . well, I live by myself and I could sleep on the

sofa. You could have the bed, I mean. Just since it's so late now. I hate to think of you trying to find somewhere and it's my fault for keeping you so long, so . . .'

She exhaled slowly through her nostrils until all the air was pushed from her lungs, the only way she could make it seem like she was weighing it up.

'But I can't, really. Where do you live?'

Her stomach churning all that cake. Please don't say Clapham or anywhere near.

'Hackney, out east. You're really welcome. I mean, it's just a night.' He turned to her now and met her gaze, held his hands in the air. 'All above board. I mean, I'm serious about the sofa.'

Hackney. Out east. Far enough. And then she nodded, tried to smile and held out her bag to him.

This time it was Dave who took her hand, barely a whisper of linked fingers. He took her for fish and chips and both ate quickly out of the paper, saying little as they leaned on the windowsill of the chippy, their arms just touching. Afterwards, she insisted that they walk to the river and though he was shattered from just having her near he agreed, shouldered her bag and was glad when they reached Waterloo Bridge, hand in hand, as the lights shone and the currents of the Thames surged below, somehow spurring them on in whatever this was between them.

He waved away her ten-pound note when she rummaged in her bag to pay for the bus ticket and accepted it as she would accept everything, with a nod and a shrug which might mean anything but in this case, Dave thought, meant she was grateful.

After they had sat, at her request, at the front on the top deck of the 243, she turned quiet.

'You OK?'

'Just sleepy. I don't sleep very good last night.'