

# FICTION

---

KEVIN FRAZIER

## The White Bows

ELENA SEES HIM IN THE Arkhangelsk art museum. He's the man she attacked when she was a teenager, back when she worshipped the White Bows.

At first she doesn't recognize him. She sits behind him in the narrow lecture hall where the evening's performance is being held. Tonight a condescending Swedish dancer, visiting Russia for the first time, presents a parable about the persecution of artists in the Soviet era. Through his interpreter he informs the audience—twenty local journalists and poets and painters—that he's trying to help Russians recapture the knowledge they've been denied about their past. Nearly everyone in the room meets the announcement with folded arms and an air of quiet annoyance. The annoyance then grows as the performer plods his way through his pantomime with flat-footed leaps and graceless swoops of his hands.

The man in front of Elena whispers to the woman on his left, the wife of the museum's latest curator. "If any of our own artists were ever like this," he says, "they deserved their persecution."

The curator's wife frowns and starts to sneeze. Giving her his handkerchief, the man turns his head. Then he notices Elena looking at him.

His stern profile is, Elena thinks, familiar: the severe planes of his handsome cheeks, the appealing sharpness of his nose. Elena works as an assistant librarian these days, and she thinks he might be one of the men who sometimes come to her asking for access to the special collections room.

She examines his pale blue eyes: they're so light that they seem to have almost no colour in them. That's when she realizes he must be Roman Shestakov, the former student from the military college in Ulianovsk. He is, of course, more than a decade older

now, but there's no mistaking the small mole above his eyebrow or the half-shy, half-haughty stiffness in the way he holds his head.

After the performance Roman looks over at her again. "Excuse me," he says, "I think I know you."

"Yes," Elena says, "I think so too." Rising from her chair to greet him, she wonders if she should have lied.

When Elena and her friend Zoya were thirteen they were both Attached Girls living in the Ulianovsk region.

The Attached Girls weren't tough. They weren't even an official group. The real gang members were the boys who defended Elena's mega-block. The Attached Girls were just onlookers. They were called Attached Girls because they were allowed to spend time with the boys and because they were sometimes invited to the gang's parties and social events.

Many outsiders couldn't tell the difference between the Attached Girls and the Common Girls. The Common Girls were sex toys: any boy in the gang could fuck them whenever he wanted. In comparison, the Attached Girls were fairly respectable. They weren't required to sleep with a boy unless he took at least a mild interest in them.

Still, Elena wanted more. She wanted to rise through the ranks. She wanted to reach the level of the Fighter Girls or the Prestigious Girls.

"But what would be even better," Zoya would remind her, "is to have a gang of our own. Something like the White Bows."

The White Bows were a legend. They were an all-girl gang. Their name came from the white bows they wore in their hair. Supposedly the bows were meant to match up with the black hats some of the gang-boys used.

But the White Bows didn't exist anymore. The police and the *mafija* and the other gangs had broken them up a couple of years ago. It was too bad. Elena had always dreamed of joining them.

Zoya, who liked to talk big, said she'd met one of the White Bows at a sports centre. But Elena never believed her: the story of the meeting kept getting longer and more elaborate each time Zoya told it.

"We should take over where they left off," Zoya said, rocking restlessly on a footstool in her bedroom. She was tall, with

dyed blond hair and sleek sinewy arms. Most boys thought she was in her late teens or early twenties.

"We can't take over from a gang that isn't around anymore," Elena said. Next to Zoya, Elena looked like a child. She was short, scrawny, shy. She adored Zoya and the other Attached Girls and felt they were far more interesting in every way than her unemployed and perpetually exhausted parents.

"We should bring the White Bows back," Zoya insisted. "We should do all the things they used to do. Just to keep the name alive."

Elena rolled a cigarette, handed it to Zoya. Whenever Elena was rolling cigarettes she always gave the first one to Zoya. "The boys might not like it," Elena said.

"The boys don't need to know about it," Zoya lit the cigarette and exhaled an impressive lipstick-kissed cloud through her heavily painted mouth. All the Attached Girls wore thick lipstick and flashy eye-shadow. That was what the gang-boys liked: as much makeup on their girls as possible. "We won't be starting anything formal. It's just something for us to do when we're alone. Without the boys. It'll be great."

Zoya's plan was to revive the persecution of the students from the military communications college. Most of the so-called normal girls in Ulianovsk wanted to date the military students. But the White Bows had always been famous for their hatred of the college and their contempt for all the boys there. According to legend the girls had once cut off a cadet's leg with a handsaw.

Zoya's passion for the White Bows—for the vision of the White Bows in her mind—quickly became Elena's passion as well. They talked about the gang constantly. It was the closest thing either girl had to a religion.

Then one night when Zoya was drunk she gathered together Elena and a few of the other Attached Girls. She tossed them a handful of white bows she'd stolen from a shop.

"Put these on," she said. "We're going out."

Elena set her bow on the left side of her head. Zoya said this was wrong: the bow should go on the right. Humbled, Elena moved the bow to the other side.

Then the group of them searched the streets. They found a tall blond boy coming out of one of the pubs in the Centre. He walked with a rigid straight-backed gait that made the girls snicker.

"I know him," Zoya said. "I've seen him all over the city. He's this fucking little cadet named Roman. Thinks he's special because he won some sort of military good conduct medal. He's ours."

Zoya ran around the block so she could catch Roman at the next corner. She flirted with him, drank a beer with him at another pub, then asked him to walk her home. Instead of bringing him to her place, however, she brought him to Uncle Volodya's apartment. Uncle Volodya wasn't anyone's uncle: he was an older gang member who had dated Zoya for a couple of weeks and had taken Elena's virginity last month. He wasn't around this evening—he was out supervising a drug deal—but Zoya had his key and she asked Roman to come inside with her.

She guided Roman to the bedroom, kissed him, told him to take his clothes off. As soon as he was naked she pulled one of Uncle Volodya's leaded nightsticks out of the closet and hit Roman over the head with it. Then Zoya let the other girls into the apartment. They surrounded Roman in a circle just as he was starting to lift his face from the floor and look around.

"Kick the little asshole," Zoya said. "Kick the shit out of him." The girls raised the pointed tips of their high-heeled shoes and kicked them at Roman's arms, his legs, his back, his ass. But they didn't kick very hard and Roman, apparently still dazed, didn't try to resist or get up from the floor. The attack went on for less than a minute, and Elena kept holding back a little each time she struck him. She thought the others, even Zoya, were doing the same, were kicking less to injure him than to humiliate him. Then Zoya grabbed him by the hair and pulled him to his feet and chased him around the apartment with the nightstick. Finally, while Zoya followed in hysterical giggles right behind him, Roman rushed out of the apartment and ran naked into the night. When Zoya came back she couldn't stop laughing.

Roman's face fascinates Elena. She stands with him in the museum's lecture hall and studies his well-groomed gold hair, the clean contour of his jaw.

"You're Elena, aren't you?" he asks.

"Yes," she says cautiously.

"Do you remember me?"

She fumbles with the clasp on her purse. "You're Roman. From Ulianovsk."

His pale eyes look at her with unexpected softness. "Would you like to walk down to the shore with me?"

Flustered, she keeps fumbling with the purse. Ever since Zoya's death the slightest reminder of the old Ulianovsk days has devastated Elena.

She wishes she could disappear. She wishes she could go home to her apartment and hide. But she can't leave Roman alone in the museum. Many of her friends and supporters in the Arkhangelsk cultural community are here now. Who knows what Roman might say to them if she leaves? They think of her as a pleasant and self-effacing librarian, a young woman whose most controversial activity has been arguing for funds to update the city's poetry collections. Somehow she has to convince Roman not to tell anyone about her past.

"A walk," she says finally, "might be nice."

They go out into the snow-covered streets. The city centre is quiet, dark.

Roman walks beside her, his hands clasped behind his back. He wears a long overcoat that emphasizes his height. His polished boots crunch calmly over the snow.

He tells her he moved to Arkhangelsk two months ago. He's a communications engineer for one of the city's shipbuilding companies.

"I have a favour to ask," he says. He forces a weak smile to his colourless lips. "I don't want anyone here to know what happened to me in Ulianovsk. I never reported it to the police. I never talked about it to any of my friends or relatives. And I'd like to keep it a secret."

"I understand," Elena says. "As far as other people are concerned, I don't see why either of us has to tell anyone we've even met before."

They cross the street. Elena, relieved, begins to relax. She pretends she needs to steady her balance on the ice and takes hold of Roman's arm. Then she explains that she has lived in Arkhangelsk for the past four years. She has been working as a librarian while she studies for her degree in Russian literature. She is, she says, writing a long research paper on Pushkin's unfinished stories and poems.

Roman interrupts her, gives a gentle squeeze to her hand.

"Have you ever read the notes Pushkin made for his Nevsky Prospect story, the one about the man who talks to the street?" he asks. They're walking down the last long slope of buildings before they reach the shore. Already at the end of the slope they can see the vast sweep of the frozen sea, a dark crystal-blue against the night.

Elena nods. "It's one of the stories he never actually wrote. A man decides to make Nevsky Prospect his friend and tells the street all his troubles."

"He feels like the street takes pity on him. Then he's satisfied." Pausing, Roman crooks his arm so Elena can hold it more comfortably. "After all of you attacked me, that's what I wanted to do. I wanted to talk to the street, because there was no one else I could tell."

Elena slides her palm along the thick fabric of his coat-sleeve. "I'm sorry. We had no right to do that to you."

He shrugs. "It doesn't really matter anymore, does it?"

She glances up at his face, at the contrast between his soft eyes and hard clenched jaw. It's the same contrast she noticed all those years ago in Ulianovsk, when she and the other girls were kicking him on the floor. She remembers how handsome she thought he looked, how desirable the long lines of his body were, how impossible it seemed that someone so beautiful would ever be interested in her. And she remembers how it was precisely at this moment—precisely when she saw how much she wanted him—that she gave him the one truly dangerous blow she tried to deliver. Instead of kicking him, she brought her lacquered black high-heel straight down on his face. And the thing that strikes her now, as she holds his arm in the quiet Arkhangelsk night, is the fury she felt when she missed him, when he moved out of the way and her heel landed on the carpet with an ankle-jarring thump. Over the last decade she has tended to forget the strength of that fury. She has told herself she pulled back on all her kicks and never really tried to hurt him. But even if it was only for an instant, she wanted to smash her heel into his face, and she can't understand it.

She can't explain how she could've felt such rage towards Roman back then and yet feel such tenderness towards him now.

"Are you cold?" he asks. "Do you want to turn around?"

"No," Elena says. "Let's keep going."

It was Zoya's death that destroyed the dream of the White Bows.

The attack on Roman was supposed to be a secret. So were the other things that Zoya organized for the Attached Girls to do. They broke into shops at night. They threw rocks through the windows of the military college's classrooms. They picked up another student and brought him to Uncle Volodya's apartment and took photos of him with a dildo that Zoya forced him to hold in his mouth.

"The White Bows are back," Zoya told the other girls. "They're back and nothing can stop them."

In Elena's eyes Zoya had ascended to the role of a goddess. At Zoya's request Elena would've instantly shaved her own head and thrown out all her best dresses and skirts. If Zoya had told her to set fire to her parents' apartment, her only questions would've been about the best place to steal the gasoline and the most efficient way to fan the flames.

But the gang-boys in Elena's district were upset about the rumours that the White Bows had returned. They warned Elena that this was something she shouldn't be involved with. All the Ulianovsk gangs were now coming under the strict control of the *mafija*. Small informal gangs—especially small informal gangs of girls—didn't have any place in the *mafija* business structure.

Uncle Volodya, who always turned philosophical after he ordered Elena to give him a blowjob, would tell her she should be careful.

"I like you," he said, holding her in his bed. He was only twenty, but he used the grim lecturing tone of an aged bureaucrat. "You've got what it takes to be a Fighter Girl someday. Maybe even a Prestigious Girl. But you have to know your job. A Fighter Girl's job is to assist the men. She can't be out there doing things on her own."

Elena tied a slim rubber tube around Uncle Volodya's arm. He had trained her to go straight from the blowjob to prepping him for his nightly jab of heroin. "The White Bows used to do things on their own," she suggested.

Uncle Volodya smirked, picked at a pimple on his shoulder. "Why do you think the White Bows aren't around anymore? Some

of you little Attached Girls need to start thinking about that. Especially Zoya. You ought to let her know that a cute ass and big tits aren't going to protect her much if she doesn't learn the basics. In a real gang, in the kind of gang a smart person wants to be part of, the girls are here for the men, not for themselves. A girl who's here for herself ends up getting worse than nothing. So if Zoya's part of this new White Bows bullshit, she should get out of it before anyone realizes she's involved."

The next morning Elena told Zoya what Uncle Volodya had said. Zoya, drinking a beer with her breakfast, was unimpressed.

"He's full of shit," she said.

"He knows," Elena insisted. "He knows we've been using his place for our attacks. He's giving us a chance to stop."

"We're not stopping anything," Zoya snorted, then tossed the beer bottle, half full, at Elena's face. The bottle missed Elena's head but some of the beer stained the shoulder of her dress. "All he knows is that we use his place sometimes. He doesn't know what we're using it for. He's so fucking stupid he can barely remember where he keeps his knife."

"He says we have to put the White Bows to rest," Elena said. She dabbed at the beer stains with a napkin. "He says we can't be doing things on our own."

Zoya rolled her eyes. "If we can't be doing things on our own, then what's the point of being in a gang? The White Bows are back. We strike and we disappear. No one's going to catch us, Elena. Not now. Not ever."

Zoya's body, stabbed four times in the chest, was found three weeks later in a trash bin just outside of her mega-block.

The day of the funeral Elena ran away from home. She went with Uncle Volodya, who was also running away. The gang had accused him of selling drugs outside his authorized territory. He took Elena to St. Petersburg. Then he abandoned her. He disappeared on the street one day when they were walking around. It was the oddest thing. One second he was with her, the next second he was gone. She was fourteen and knew absolutely no one in the city.

She was lucky. She found a good place to work, a restaurant where the owners, two middle-aged widows, more or less adopted her as their daughter. She went to school in the day and worked as a waitress at night. One of the widows was the mistress of a prin-



cipal at a good private school, and Elena was allowed to attend the school for free. Then when she turned eighteen she won a scholarship to study literature in Arkhangelsk. She moved there, became a librarian, enjoyed her freedom, loved her research, admired her new friends, and broke into tears at least once a week whenever anything—a shout in a schoolyard, the ritual of rolling a cigarette—reminded her of *Zoya*.

They walk along the frozen shore, beside the crystal sea.

"Do you play chess?" Roman asks.

Looking away from the city and into the night Elena can't tell where the shoreline ends and the bay begins. A dull glaze of snow coats the ice all the way out to the faint stars on the horizon.

"I love chess," she says.

"We should play sometime." Roman is formal, a bit shy. His posture stiffens slightly.

"Yes," she says, "that would be lovely."

She wonders if she should invite him to her place for a game tonight. But she's never been a very skilful flirt and she rakes her fingers anxiously through the side of her hair.

"Did you know I was here when you decided to come to Arkhangelsk?" she asks.

"No." Roman lets go of her arm. "But I'm glad I found you."

"Are you?"

"I used to think you hated me," he says. He stands beside her, joins her in looking out across the sea. Then he glances at her profile. She can sense him trying to catch her eye.

"I never hated you," she says. She thinks again of the moment when she tried to bring her lacquered high-heel down on his face. Surprising herself, she says: "I have a chessboard at home. Would you like to come over for a game?"

"When?"

"Right now."

Roman reaches over and brushes a snowflake from her cheek. She likes the feel of his soft leather glove against her skin. In front of her, in the darkness, she can barely make out the hunched forms of the scattered Arkhangelsk islands. She stares at their clusters of snow-etched evergreens. Then she imagines Roman's arms around her waist. She imagines his colourless lips kissing her. She

imagines a future, as dim as the shapes of the distant trees, where she has a chance to replace all those years in Ulianovsk with something new. The touch of his glove, she thinks, might someday help her brush away the White Bows' sneers and chants as they circled him with their kicking legs, and the swollen bruises on Zoya's face when she was pulled from the trash bin.

"I'll come," Roman says. "But there's something I should tell you first."

He moves away from her, turns towards the old Pur-Navolok Hotel on the street behind them.

"It's something I did in Ulianovsk." He scratches awkwardly at the mole above his eyebrow. "A couple of months after you attacked me, I went back looking for the place where it happened. I found the apartment and then talked to its owner, this man everyone called Uncle Volodya. I told him about the attack. Then he asked me if I knew the girls who did it."

Elena watches him as he puts his hands in his pockets and steps slowly over the snow.

"The only one of you I'd seen before was Zoya," he says. "Everyone at school had noticed her: she used to show up at our parties sometimes. I don't think any of us knew how young she was." He shrugs, shifts his shoulders in his long overcoat. "Anyway, Uncle Volodya wanted me to tell him if Zoya was the leader of the attack. He said that if I expected something to be done about her, I had to tell him whether she was involved. He kept saying he knew it was her. But he needed me to identify her before he could get the approval to punish her. So I did it. I told him Zoya was the leader of the group."

"What did you say about the rest of us?" Elena asks.

"He just wanted to know who you were." The light from the hotel brings out the impressive bone structure of Roman's face. A small tight grimace tugs at the corner of his mouth. "He showed me pictures of some of you: he had this huge chest filled with photos of young girls. And I picked out everyone I could recognize. Including you. Zoya was the only one he seemed to care about, but I told him about you and the others, and I would've identified you even if I'd thought he was going to hurt you." He turns back to face her again. Softly, with a thin-lipped frown, he says: "I'm sorry. I hope you can forgive me."

"Of course I forgive you." She says it blankly, not really listening to herself.

A taxi comes grinding through the snow and pulls up to the front of the hotel. Elena and Roman both stare at the car in silence. Then when the taxi is gone they continue staring at the hotel's driveway as if it deserves their close attention.

"I suppose it's a bit late for a game of chess now," Roman says.

"I think you're right," Elena says. "I'm not much good at chess anyway."

"Neither am I."

They decide to leave. They say goodbye and part without touching. Walking, Elena heads up the slope away from the shore.

She moves along the city's main boulevard, passes the art museum and the rows of imposing government administration buildings. It's nearly one in the morning. There are no cars around, no people.

Alone, she wants to talk to the street. She wants to tell her sadness to the empty kiosks, the icy sidewalks, the long lines of dark offices that stretch above her head. She wants the street to take pity on her. She might be satisfied then.