Lovereading.co.uk

Under a Blood Red Sky

Kate Furnivall

Published by Sphere

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

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

SPHERE

First published in 2008 by Sphere

Copyright © 2008 by Kate Furnivall

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

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

ISBN 978-0-7515-4044-4

Typeset in Baskerville by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Sphere
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette Livre UK Company
www.hachettelivre.co.uk

www.littlebrown.co.uk

1

Davinsky Labour Camp, Siberia
February 1933

The Zone. That's what the compound was called.

A double barrier of dense barbed wire encircled it, backed by a high fence and watchtowers that never slept. In Sofia Morozova's mind it merged with all the other hated lice-ridden camps she'd been in. Transit camps were the worst. They ate up your soul, then spat you out into cattle trucks to move you on to the next one. *Etap*, it was called, this shifting of prisoners from one camp to another until no friends, no possessions and no self remained. You became nothing. That's what they wanted.

Work is an Act of Honour, Courage and Heroism. Those words were emblazoned in iron letters a metre high over the gates of Davinsky prison labour camp. Every time Sofia was marched in and out to work in the depths of the taiga forest she read Stalin's words above her head. Twice a day for the ten years that were her sentence. That would add up to over seven thousand times – that is, if she lived that long, which was unlikely. Would she come to believe that hard labour was an 'Act of Heroism' after reading those words seven thousand times? Would she care any more whether she believed it or not?

As she trudged out into the snow in the five o'clock darkness of an Arctic morning with six hundred other prisoners, two abreast in a long silent shuffling crocodile, she spat as she passed under Stalin's words. The spittle froze before it hit the ground.

*

‘There’s going to be a white-out,’ Sofia said.

She had an uncanny knack for smelling out the weather half a day before it arrived. It wasn’t something she’d been aware of in the days when she lived near Petrograd, but there the skies were nowhere near as high, nor so alarmingly empty. Out here, where the forests swallowed you whole, it came easily to her. She turned to the young woman sitting at her side.

‘Go on, Anna, you’d better go over and tell the guards to get the ropes out.’

‘A good excuse for me to warm my hands on their fire, anyway.’ Anna smiled. She was a fragile figure, always quick to find a smile, but the shadows under her blue eyes had grown so dark they looked bruised, as though she’d been in a fight.

Sofia was more worried about her friend than she was willing to admit, even to herself. Just watching Anna stamping her feet to keep the blood flowing made her anxious.

‘Make sure the brainless bastards take note of it,’ grimaced Nina, a wide-hipped Ukrainian who knew how to swing a sledgehammer better than any of them. ‘I don’t want our brigade to lose any of you in the white-out. We need every single pair of hands if we’re ever going to get this blasted road built.’

When visibility dropped to absolute zero in blizzard conditions, the prisoners were roped together on the long trek back to camp. Not to stop them escaping, but to prevent them blundering out of line and freezing to death in the snow.

‘Fuck the ropes,’ snorted Tasha, the woman on the other side of Sofia. Tasha tucked her greasy dark hair back under her headscarf. She had small narrow features and a prim mouth that was surprisingly adept at swearing. ‘If they’ve got any bloody sense, we’ll finish early today and get back to the stinking huts ahead of it.’

‘That would be better for you, Anna,’ Sofia nodded. ‘A shorter day. You could rest.’

'Don't worry about me.'

'But I do worry.'

'No, I'm doing well today. I'll soon be catching up with your work rate, Nina. You'd better watch out.'

Anna gave a mischievous smile to the three other women and they laughed outright, but Sofia noticed that her friend didn't miss the quick glance that passed between them. Anna struggled against another spasm of coughing and sipped her midday *chai* to soothe her raw throat. Not that the drink deserved to be called tea. It was a bitter brew made from pine needles and moss that was said to fight scurvy. Whether that was true or just a rumour spread around to make them drink the brown muck was uncertain, but it fooled the stomach into thinking it was being fed and that was all they cared about.

The four women were seated on a felled pine tree, huddled together for warmth, kicking bald patches in the snow with their *lapti*, boots shaped from soft birch bark. They were making the most of their half-hour midday break from perpetual labour. Sofia tipped her head back to ease the ache in her shoulders and stared up at the blank white sky – today lying like a lid over them, shutting them in, pressing them down, stealing their freedom away. She felt a familiar ball of anger burn in her chest. This was no life. Not even fit for an animal. But anger was not the answer, because all it did was drain the few pathetic scraps of energy she possessed from her veins. She knew that. She'd struggled to rid herself of it but it wouldn't go away. It trailed in her footsteps like a sick dog.

All around, as far as the eye could see and the mind could imagine, stretched dense forests of pine trees, great seas of them that swept in endless waves across the whole of northern Russia, packed tight under snow – and through it all they were attempting to carve a road. It was like trying to dig a coal mine with a teaspoon. Dear God, but road-building was wretched. Brutal at the best of times, but with inadequate tools and temperatures of twenty or even thirty degrees below freezing it became a living

nightmare. Your shovels cracked, your hands turned black, your breath froze in your lungs.

'*Davay!* Hurry! Back to work!'

The guards crowded round the brazier and shouted orders, but they didn't leave their circle of precious warmth. Along the length of the arrow-straight scar that sliced through the trees to make space for the new road, hunched bodies pulled their padded coats and ragged gloves over any patch of exposed skin. A collective sigh of resignation rose like smoke in the air as the brigades of women took up their hammers and spades once more.

Anna was the first on her feet, eager to prove she could meet the required norm, the work quota for each day. 'Come on, you lazy . . .' she muttered to herself.

But she didn't finish the sentence. She swayed, her blue eyes glazed, and she would have fallen if she hadn't been clutching her shovel. Sofia reached her first and held her safe, the frail body starting to shake as coughs raked her lungs. She jammed a rag over Anna's mouth.

'She won't last,' Tasha whispered. 'Her fucking lungs are—'

'Ssh.' Sofia frowned at her.

Nina patted Anna's shoulder and said nothing. Sofia walked Anna back to her patch of the road, helped her scramble up on to its raised surface and gently placed the shovel in her hand. Not once had Anna come even close to meeting the norm in the last month and that meant less food each day in her ration. Sofia shifted a few shovels of rock for her.

'Thanks,' Anna said and wiped her mouth. 'Get on with your own work.' She managed a convincing smile. 'We'll be home early today. Before the white-out hits.'

Sofia stared at her with amazement. *Home.* How could she bear to call that place home?

'I'll be fine now,' Anna assured her.

You're not fine, Sofia wanted to shout, *and you're not going to be fine.*

Instead she gazed hard into her friend's sunken eyes and what

she saw there made her chest tighten. Oh, Anna. A frail wisp of a thing, just twenty-eight years old. Too soon to die, much too soon. And that moment, on an ice-bound patch of rock in an empty Siberian wilderness, was when Sofia made the decision. *I swear to God, Anna, I'll get you out of here. If it kills me.*

2

The white-out came just as Sofia said it would. But this time the guards paid heed to her warning, and before it hit they roped together the grey crocodile of ragged figures and set off on the long mindless trudge back to camp.

The track threaded its way through unremitting taiga forest, so dark it was like night, the slender columns of pine trees standing like Stalin's sentinels overseeing the march. The breath of hundreds of women created a strange, disturbing sound in the silence, while their feet shuffled and stumbled over snow-caked ruts.

Sofia hated the forest. It was odd because she had spent most of her life on a farm and was used to rural living, whereas Anna, who loved the forest and declared it magical, had been brought up in cities. But maybe that was why. Sofia knew too well what a forest was capable of, she could feel it breathing down her neck like a huge unwelcome presence, so that when sudden soft sounds escaped from the trees as layers of snow slid from the branches to the forest floor, it made her shiver. It was as though the forest were sighing.

The wind picked up, stealing the last remnants of heat from their bodies. As the prisoners made their way through the trees, Sofia and Anna ducked their faces out of the icy blast, pulling their scarves tighter round their heads. They pushed one exhausted foot in front of the other and huddled their bodies

close to each other. This was an attempt to share their remaining wisps of warmth, but it was also something else, something more important to both of them. More important even than heat.

They talked to each other. Not just the usual moans about aching backs or broken spades or which brigade was falling behind on its norm, but real words that wove real pictures. The harsh scenes that made up the daily, brutal existence of Davinsky Camp were difficult to escape, even in your head they clamoured at you. Their grip on the mind, as well as on the body, was so intractable that no other thoughts could squeeze their way in.

Early on, Sofia had worked out that in a labour camp you exist from minute to minute, from mouthful to mouthful. You divide every piece of time into tiny portions and you tell yourself you can survive just this small portion. That's how you get through a day. No past, no future, just this moment. Sofia had been certain that it was the only way to survive here, a slow and painful starvation of the soul.

But Anna had other ideas. She had broken all Sofia's self-imposed rules and made each day bearable. With words. Each morning on the two-hour trek out to the Work Zone and each evening on the weary trudge back to the camp, they put their heads close and created pictures, each word a colourful stitch in the tapestry, until the delicately crafted scenes were all their eyes could see. The guards, the rifles, the dank forest and the unrelenting savagery of the place faded, like dreams fade, so that they were left with no more than faint snatches of something dimly remembered.

Anna was best at it. She could make the words dance. She would tell her stories and then laugh with pure pleasure. And the sound of it was so rare and so unfettered that other heads would turn and whimper with envy. The stories were all about Anna's childhood in Petrograd before the Revolution, and day by day, month by month, year by year, Sofia felt the words and the stories build up inside her own bones. They packed tight and dense

in there where the marrow was long gone, and kept her limbs firm and solid as she swung an axe or dug a ditch.

But now things had changed. As the snow began to fall and whiten the shoulders of the prisoners in front, Sofia turned away from them and faced Anna. It had taken her a long time to get used to the howling of a Siberian wind but now she could switch it off in her ears, along with the growls of the guard dogs and the sobs of the girl behind.

'Anna,' she urged, holding on to the rope that bound them together, 'tell me about Vasily again.'

Anna smiled, she couldn't help it. Just the mention of the name Vasily turned a light on inside her, however wet or tired or sick she was. Vasily Dyuzheyev – he was Anna's childhood friend in Petrograd, two years older but her companion in every waking thought and in many of her night-time dreams. He was the son of Svetlana and Grigori Dyuzheyev, aristocratic friends of Anna's father, and right now Sofia needed to know everything about him. *Everything.* And not just for pleasure this time – though she didn't like to admit, even to herself, how much pleasure Anna's talking of Vasily gave her – for now it was serious.

Sofia had made the decision to get Anna out of this hell-hole before it was too late. Her only hope of succeeding was with help, and Vasily was the only one she could turn to. But would he help? And could she find him?

A quiet and thoughtful smile had crept on to Anna's face. Her scarf was wrapped round her head and the lower part of her face, so that only her eyes showed, narrowed against the wind. But the smile was there, deep inside them, as she started to talk.

'The day was as colourless as today. It was winter and the new year of 1917 had just begun. All around me the white sky and the white ground merged to become one crisp shell, frozen in a silent world. There was no wind, only the sound of a swan stamping on the ice of the lake with its big flat feet. Vasily and I had come out for a walk together, just the two of us, wrapped up

well against the cold. Our fur boots crunched satisfyingly in the snow as we ran across the lawn to keep warm.

'"Vasily, I can see the dome of St Isaac's Cathedral from here. It looks like a big shiny snowball!" I shouted from high up in the sycamore tree. I'd always loved to climb trees and this was a particularly tempting one, down by the lake on his father's estate.

'"I'll build you a snow sleigh fit for a Snow Queen," he promised.

'You should have seen him, Sofia. His eyes bright and sparkling like the icicle-fingers that trailed from the tree's branches, he watched me climb high up among its huge naked limbs that spread out over the lawn like a skeleton. He didn't once say, "Be careful" or "It's not ladylike", like my governess Maria would have.

'"You'll keep dry up there," he laughed, "and it'll stop you leaping over the sleigh with your big feet before it's finished."

'I threw a snowball at him, then took pleasure in studying the way he carefully carved runners out of the deep snow, starting to create the body of a sleigh with long, sweeping sides. At first I sang "Gaida Troika" to him, swinging my feet in rhythm, but eventually I couldn't hold back the question that was burning a hole in my tongue.

'"Will you tell me what you've been doing, Vasily? You're hardly ever here any more. I . . . hear things."

'"What kind of things?"

'"The servants are saying it's getting dangerous on the streets."

'"You should always listen to the servants, Annochka," he laughed. "They know everything."

'But I wasn't going to be put off so easily. "Tell me, Vasily."

'He looked up at me, his gaze suddenly solemn, his soft brown hair falling off his face so that the bones of his forehead and his cheeks stood out sharply. It occurred to me that he was thinner, and my stomach swooped when I realised why. He was giving away his food.

'"Do you really want to know?"

‘“Yes, I’m twelve now, old enough to hear what’s going on. Tell me, Vasily. Please.”

‘He nodded pensively, and then proceeded to tell me about the crowds that had gathered noisily in the Winter Palace Square the previous day and how a shot had been fired. The cavalry had come charging in on their horses and flashed their sabres to keep order.

‘“But it won’t be long, Anna. It’s like a firework. The taper is lit. It’s just a question of when it will explode.”

‘“Explosions cause damage.” I was frightened for him.

‘From my high perch I dropped a snowball at his feet and watched it vanish in a puff of white.

‘“Exactly. That’s why I’m telling you, Anna, to warn you. My parents refuse to listen to me but if they don’t change their way of living right now, it’ll be . . .” he paused.

‘“It’ll be what, Vasily?”

‘“It’ll be too late.”

‘I wasn’t cold in my beaver hat and cape but nevertheless a shiver skittered up my spine. I could see the sorrow in his upturned face. Quickly I started to climb down, swinging easily between branches, and when I neared the bottom Vasily held out his arms and I jumped down into them. He caught me safely and I inhaled the scent of his hair, all crisp and cool and masculine, a foreign territory that I loved to explore. I kissed his cheek and he held me close, then swung me in an arc through the air and gently dropped me inside the snow sleigh on the seat he’d carved. He bowed to me.

‘“Your carriage, Princess Anna.”

‘My heart wasn’t in it now, but to please him I picked up the imaginary reins with a flourish. Flick, flick. A click of my tongue to the make-believe horse and I was flying along a forest track in my silver sleigh, the trees leaning in on me, whispering. But then I looked about suddenly, swivelling round on the cold seat. Where was Vasily? I spotted him leaning against the dark trunk of the sycamore, smoking a cigarette and wearing his sad face.

‘“Vasily,” I called.

'He dropped the cigarette in the snow where it hissed.

'"What is it, Princess?"

'He came over but he didn't smile. His grey eyes were staring at his father's house, three storeys high with elegant windows and tall chimneys.

'"Do you know," he asked, "how many families could live in a house like ours?"

'"One. Yours."

'"No. Twelve families. Probably more, with children sharing rooms. Things are going to change, Anna. The Tsarina's evil old sorcerer, Rasputin, was murdered last month and that's just the start. You must be prepared."

'I tapped a glove on his cheek and playfully lifted one corner of his mouth. "I like change."

'"I know you do. But there are people out there, millions of them, who will demand change, not because they like it but because they need it."

'"Are they the ones on strike?"

'"Yes. They're desperately poor, Anna, with their rights stolen from them. You don't realise what it's like because you've lived all your life in a golden cage. You don't know what it is to be cold and hungry."

'We'd had arguments before about this and I knew better now than to mention Vasily's own golden cage. "They can have my other coat," I offered. "It's in the car."

'The smile he gave me made my heart lurch. It was worth the loss of my coat. "Come on, let's go and get it," I laughed.

'He set off in long galloping strides across the lawn, leaving a trail of deep black holes in the snow behind him. I followed, stretching my legs as wide as I could to place my fur boots directly in each of his footsteps, and all the way I could still hear the wind tinkling in the frozen trees. It sounded like a warning.'

Sofia sat cross-legged on the dirty floorboards without moving. The night was dark and bitterly cold as the temperature continued

to plummet, but her muscles had learned control. She had taught herself patience, so that when the inquisitive grey mouse pushed its nose through the rotten planks of the hut wall, its eyes bright and whiskers twitching, she was ready for it.

She didn't breathe. She saw it sense danger, but the lure of the crumb of bread placed on the floor was too great in the food-less world of the labour camp, and the little creature made its final, fatal mistake. It scurried towards the crumb. Sofia's hand shot out. One squeak and it was over. She added the miniature body to the three already in her lap and carefully broke the tiny crumb of bread in two, popping one half of it into her own mouth and placing the other back on the floor. She settled down again in the silence.

'You're very good at that,' Anna's quiet voice said.

Sofia looked up, surprised. In the dim light she could just make out the restless blonde head and delicate pale face on one of the bunks.

'Can't you sleep, Anna?' Sofia asked softly.

'I like watching you. I don't know how you move so fast. Besides, it takes my mind off . . .' she gestured about her with a loose flick of her hand, '. . . off this.'

Sofia glanced around. The darkness was cut into slices by a bright shaft of moonlight, slipping in through the narrow gaps between the planking of the walls. The long wooden hut was crammed with a hundred and fifty undernourished women on hard communal bunks, all dreaming of food, their snores and coughs and moans filling the chill air. But only one was sitting with a precious pile of food in her lap. Though only twenty-six, Sofia had spent enough years in a labour camp to know the secrets of survival.

'Hungry?' Sofia asked Anna with a crooked smile.

'Not really.'

'Don't fancy roast rodent?'

'*Nyet.* No, not tonight. You eat them all.'

Sofia jumped up and bent over Anna's bunk, breathing in the

stale smell of the five unwashed bodies and unfilled bellies that lay on the bed board.

She said fiercely, 'Don't, Anna. Don't give up.' She took hold of her friend's arm and squeezed it hard. 'You're just a bundle of bird bones under this coat. Listen to me, you've come too far to give up now. You've got to eat whatever I catch for you, even if it tastes foul. You hear me? If you don't eat, how are you going to work tomorrow?'

Anna closed her eyes and turned her face away into the darkness.

'Don't you dare shut me out, Anna Fedorina. Don't do that. Talk to me.'

Only silence, save for Anna's quick shallow breathing. Outside the wind rattled the wooden planks of the roof and Sofia heard the faint screech of something metal moving. One of the guard dogs at the perimeter fence barked a challenge.

'Anna,' Sofia said angrily, 'what would Vasily say?'

She held her breath. Never before had she spoken those words or used Vasily's name as a lever. Slowly Anna's tousled blonde head rolled back and a smile curved the corners of her pale lips. The movement was barely there, a faint smudge in the darkness, but Sofia didn't miss the fresh spark of energy that flickered in the blue eyes.

'Go and cook your wretched mice then,' Anna muttered.

'You promise to eat them?'

'Yes.'

'I'll catch one more first.'

'You should be sleeping.' Anna's hand gripped Sofia's. 'Why are you doing this for me?'

'Because you saved my life.'

Sofia felt rather than saw Anna's shrug.

'That's forgotten,' Anna whispered.

'Not by me. Whatever it takes, Anna, I won't let you die.' She stroked the mittened fingers, then pulled her own coat tighter and returned to her spot by the hole and the crumb of bread.

She leaned her back against the wall, letting the trembling in her limbs subside until she was absolutely still once more.

'Sofia,' Anna whispered, 'you have the persistence of the Devil.'

Sofia smiled. 'He and I are well acquainted.'