

Poppies in the snow

CHAPTER 1

Irina was walking fast along the pier of the admiralty. The half-frozen Neva river seemed to mourn with the cracking of the burst of the ice plates. The whole city of St. Petersburg cried that January morning of 1905.

The girl was walking, dragging her long, grey skirt along the snow that had the same dirty tone and had lost his natural white because of the transit of people and vehicles. Everything that day was grey. The leaden sky released a winter light that crashed against the facades of the buildings, painting them with that sad palette.

Three years ago, her and her brother had left their small village in Siberia to work in one of the textile factories of the imperial capital.

Her brother Mikjail's creativity had awoken when he arrived to St. Petersburg and he combined his work in the factory with painting classes in the Imperial School of Art. He had a bright future ahead, as his art teachers said. His hands soon lost the hardness of farmer hands, to turn into artist hands and painting turned into his reason for living.

She was walking, trying to protect herself from the freezing wind in her coat, as vulgar as the rest of her working clothes, that couldn't keep her warm. Her blue lips trembled slightly. She took off one of her wool mittens to take out a tiny piece of paper she had in her pocket.

Her hands weren't neither the rude hands of a country girl. Fine, with long fingers, they hadn't retained yet the evidence of her work as spinner. Except for the nails, broken and untidy.

She put the piece of paper back into her pocket after she had memorized the adress it had written on with a pencil. She covered her hand again with the mitten, lowered her head to avoid exposing it too much to the cold and continued walking as fast as her numb feet allowed.

Soon she got to the Palace Square. The innocent blood spilled the day before got frozen in the snow. It looked like a sinister poppy field. Those crimson traces were the mark of the horror occured there on that fateful Sunday.

Irina had to lean on the majestic column of Alexander I.

-Why did he have to go that morning?- She asked herself with the suffocation of grief closing her throat.

Her brother had joined a group of young revolutionists. He shared clandestine gatherings with them and even gave out some pamphlets. Of course she understood his desire to change the world and she even felt attracted to these ideas of justice and dignity that circulated among the people. But she suffered so much knowing what her brother was risking every time he was with who he called his

comrades.

Now, on that beautiful square covered by a white winter carpet, she saw in every stain on the ground a drop of her brother's blood.

She recovered and continued walking through the large square, not daring to take a look on that bloodstained snow that didn't want to melt, keeping alive the horror that occurred only a few hours ago.

She reached the large Nevsky Prospect artery. As she arrived to the Fontanka Canal she entered a street with the same name and, in front of the rosy Stroganov Palace, she stopped. She looked up. The four floor building didn't stand out to much from the other downtown buildings. Yet the number 16 of that street wasn't just another building. It were the headquarters of the feared secret police, the Okhrana. There were taken those who were blamed of subversive activities and there had been taken her brother, injured and arrested during the sunday events. Irina entered the building hall. The fear made her tremble and she barely could breath normally. In the atrium, two men argued. One of them was a gendarme with a large mustache, wearing a blue uniform. The other one was a curious character who spoke with a foreign accent and was wildly gesticulating with his hands.

He was wearing a brown coat with a mink fur collar. A nice checked cap with earmuffs, tied on top, covered partially his vermilion hair that seemed to fade on his face, as his cheeks were colored the same shade because of the heat of the discussion. Over his shoulder, he carried a brown leather briefcase and, as it seemed, a camera in a case of the same material and tone.

-I repeat, I am a correspondent of *Die illustrierte Zeitung*. My director telegraphed asking for an interview with colonel Vasasiliev. Look, look.- the man opened his briefcase he had over his shoulder. He looked inside and took out an official sheet of paper(1). He put on his round glasses with the metallic frame. He checked the document and placed it in front of the gendarme's mustache.

-You see? This piece of paper allows me to do my work.

The gendarme moved the document, exhibited in front of him, aside with his hand, without even looking at it.

-I'm sorry, but these are orders of the colonel himself. Since yesterday, no journalist has access to this building and certainly any attempt to do so or to contact any member of the police would mean an immediate arrest, even if it's you...

-German, I'm german! That's inconceivable! You can't avoid the people to know what's going on here.

The gendarme inflated his chest defiantly and with an gesture, half polite, half violent, he raised his arm and pointed with his open hand towards the buildings door.

-Please, don't insist. If you cause any kind of trouble I'll have to arrest you.

Ferdinand snorted, letting out his anger and indignation. He put back the sheet of paper in his briefcase and followed the direction the gendarme kept pointing.

He cursed in German when he ran into Irina at the doorstep. She looked at him and Ferdinand saw the anxiety in her eyes. He realized that something serious took her to such an unpleasant place. He raised his hand to his cap, in a gesture to greet a woman.

-Good luck, Miss.- He said in Russian with his peculiar Prussian accent.

Irina made a gesture with her head, showing gratitude for the greeting and the good luck wished by the stranger with this curious look who kept cursing in his language while he walked towards the Nevsky Prospect.

Irina stared after him for a moment. She sighed, gathered courage and moved towards the same gendarme that got rid of the stranger unceremoniously. The policeman took a seat behind a wooden table. He took a logbook out of a drawer and wrote something with a pencil in it.

Irina approached to the table. The gendarme looked up to her. With certain disdain he kept writing down the incidence with no skill so it took him a while to finish the note. Then he closed the book, put it back in the drawer and, while he stroked his mustache, he leaned back on his chair.

-Tell me. What do you want?

The soldier's rude manners and his poor kindness did not help Irina to ease the task that brought her there. But her love and concern for her brother were stronger than all the fears in the world.

-My name is Irina Andreovna Ananiev. I was told that yesterday my brother, Mikjail Andreovich, got arrested. I would like to talk with somebody about him.

The gendarme looked at her from top to bottom. She got uncomfortable, because of the look but also because of the man's awful silence, and lowered her head to not cross looks with him. He signalled to a much younger colleague who was standing next to a staircase. Beardless, with a narrow face and pale skin, he looked more like a boy playing soldier than a real gendarme. He approached. The man behind the table whispered something into his ear. He nodded and went up the stairs.

-Sit down over there- said the gendarme pointing sharply at a wooden bench with backrest.

The girl obeyed. Her nerves were consuming her and the despair made her heart beat exaggeratedly. She felt the gendarme's gaze and, to lose the discomfort, she took off her mittens slowly and put them in the pockets of her coat.

She also got rid of her wool scarf she wore to protect her head and played nervously with it, tying and untying it, until the young gendarme appeared again coming down the stairs. He approached to the sitting man and told him something quietly.

The gendarme with the mustache opened the table drawer with lack of interest and took out the logbook again.

-What was your name again?- he asked, looking at Irina.

She stood up like pushed by a spring and took a few steps towards the table.

-Irina Andreovna Ananiev.

The gendarme slowly wrote down the name in the book, with a handwriting that denoted his poor education, while Irina followed the pencil's wearily course with her eyes. Even before he finished writing down the name, the gendarme told her the police chief Zubátov would attend her immediately-

-Follow my colleague- told the gendarme as he put a thick full stop at the end of the writing.

The responsible of leading her was not much older as her and, as soon as they got to the landing and got out of sight of the officer at the door, he turned towards the girl while he continued going up the stairs.

-Don't worry, Miss. I'm sure your brother is fine, although...

Irina stopped suddenly. That "although" and the silence that followed seemed a bad omen. She opened her eyes as much as her lids let her and her lips curled into a bitter grimace.

The soldier noticed the anxiety the woman showed in that moment. He also stopped a step above the girl.

-Oh no, no! I didn't want to suggest anything bad. Forgive me. It's just that someone must have thought that your brother's case is important, because Zubátov is the head of the department. Although- he continued, putting a smile into his words- I'm sure it's an identity confusion or a false suspicion because if your brother's like you, a woman so... Well, I'm sure he's a good person.

Irina was grateful for these kind words and smiled at the young man who blushed and lifted the foot again to reach the next step. But he was still looking at the girl's grey eyes and misstepped. He managed to put his hands in front of him and bend the knee before falling completely. The cap of his uniform rolled off three or four steps further.

As he stood up visibly embarrassed, Irina went down and picked up his cap that had remained upside down.

On the inside was a label with the name of the owner: Ivan Viktorenko.

The gendarme descended also and recovered his cap off her hands.

-Thank you

-You're welcome, Ivan.

He looked at her amazed. She smiled again.

-The cap. Your name is written on it.

-Ah! Of course. We all have labels with our names on in each part of the uniform.

-My name is Irina- the woman said, reaching her hand out to the boy.

He, frightened, looked up and down the stairs.

-I'm sorry, we're not allowed to have contact with the civilians while we are on duty. I shouldn't be even talking to you. I could get arrested. We should hurry. The chief is waiting for you.

Baran Zubátov was sitting behind a robust wooden table, that was his desk. He was looking through some papers when they knocked at his office door.

-Yes. Come in.

The young gendarme stepped into the room. He took off his cap, held it under his arm and stood at attention in front of the chief of the Okhrana.

-I bring...

-Yes, yes. I know.- said Zubátov without letting the gendarme finish. -Let her in and wait outside.

The gendarme stood at attention once again, put on the cap and signalled Irina to come in. Their eyes crossed for a second and in those of the uniformed man Irina wanted to see a signal of encourage. She needed that.

-Good morning. I'm... -began to say Irina with a slight tremble in her voice she tried to contain without much success.

The policeman raised his hand, commanding her to be quiet. And in the same way the officer at the door did, he kept her intentionally in that tense silence that devastated even more the girl's, already shattered, nerves while he looked through some papers and smoked a cigarette made with dark, brown paper and a golden tip. He had an open pack of cigarettes on the table. Inside, the luxurious looking cigarettes showed off.

Finally, Zubátov stood up from his table, taking a cardboard with himself, on which were three pictures of a young man. A profile picture looking to the right, a front photo and a full body photo. Under the photographs, after printed headings, were handwritten some notes of affiliation and physical characteristics of the photographed subject. And on the back of the cardboard were other, also manuscript, comments.

She looked at him while he left the half consumed cigarette in an ashtray and placed himself in front of the table, just a few steps away from where she was standing still, with the arms placed ahead of herself and hands one over the other, in a position of humility and respect, with the head slightly raised. The man in his fifties was corpulent, not too tall. His black hair was combed backwards, with grey sideboards and a grey receding hairline. He had a trimmed mustache and wore a dark suit with a waistcoat. From a waistcoat button hung a golden chain that finished in a pocket, where possibly was a clock.

His gesture was serious. Although he had the appearance of a well-mannered gentleman, there was something disturbing in him, something evil that was hidden behind his refined appearance. Something brutal and inhumane made up by his well trimmed mustache and his immaculate haircut, the golden chain and the shiny shoes.

When he started to talk, Irina shivered. His voice wasn't harsh nor unpleasant as the gendarme's voice of the building's entrance, but had a commanding tone. Although well modulated, his rhythm was flat, with no temperamental inflexions, that indicated the coldness and hardness of his character.

-I was told you're asking for...- Despite that he knew the name, he looked on the cardboard he had in his hand - ...Mikjail Andreovich Ananiev.

-Yes, he's my brother. I came to see if... Well, I know he's arrested. But he's not a criminal nor a danger to anybody.- exclaimed Irina, not able to hold any longer the anxiety that walked with her since she knew her brother got arrested.

-Your brother got arrested yesterday for participating in a revolt organized by the enemies of the Tsar and the Empire. We can accuse him of revolutionary activities.

-My brother's just a worker like me. Yes. He's an idealist and sometimes he's with people that don't suit him. But he's an artist. He's not a violent man able or willing to hurt anyone, and certainly not the Tsar.

-He's with people that don't suit him? That's undeniable. I think we can associate him with the *Black Guards*.

It was the first time Irina heard that name. Her brother referred to his co-religionists as patriots, defenders of the people and freedom. But he had never mentioned that name that seemed so sinister to her.

The police chief noticed the girl's surprise.

-Have you ever heard that name?

-No, never. I swear!

-They are a terrorist group.

-My brother's not a terrorist!- she exclaimed again.

The tears that rebellious, began to escape her eyes due to the nerves and the anxiety, soaked her words.

She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her coat.

-I only have him in this city. I need him back.

Her words had now the tone of an urgent appeal that didn't touch the policeman at all, nor made him move a single muscle on his face.

He left the cardboard on the table and approached to the girl who was trying to retain the whining. He grabbed her by her jaw and lifted her face, although Irina's eyes kept looking towards the floor.

-What a demonstration of love. But your brother didn't think of you when he decided to join that group of subversives.

She raised her eyes looking into the policeman's darkened iris'. Hers, grey, beclouded as they were,

showed a pitiful expression.

The policeman kept holding her by the chin.

-You have a pretty face and I'm sure that underneath that poor clothes I would find a delicious body. Irina's eyes reflected fear now. Fear of understanding what those words meant. Fear of not knowing how to react, although she knew how to interpret the lustful look and the suggestive words of that man who now was stroking her blond hair tied in a bun. She shivered as she noticed the policeman's fingers unbuttoning her coat. She shuddered when she felt how his hands lightly touched the prominence of her breasts. Again, the tears ran down her face. Again, she dried them with the sleeve of her coat while he continued bordering the outline of her chest with his fingers.

-So, tell me. What are you willing to do for your brother?

Her fear turned into terror. Irina didn't answer. She continued to beg with her eyes, unable to do it with her mouth, since no sound came out of it except some little sobbings.

-Your brother could end in a *Kátorga* (2). The forced labor would finish him soon and you would never see him again.

Zubátov squeezed the girl's breasts harder now under which her heart beat frenetic.

-Just one signature of mine is required to release him right now as much as to send him to far eastern Russia where he would inevitably rot. Of course I could also arrest you on suspicion of subversive activities. These days a girl like you should have good friends. And I can be one, I assure you.

His mouth drew a lascivious grin.

Irina, instinctively leaned back and, grabbing the lapels of her coat, crossed it tightly over her chest. The police officer's smile and words were sarcastic now.

-Stupid girl. You and your brother would have done better staying in your siberian dump. Although keep in mind that I get anything I want.

-But calm, I'm not going to rape you. I can have sluts like you whenever I want.

Zubátov sat down again behind his desk, ignoring the girl who was pressing her coat hard against herself and sobbing quietly.

-My... my brother.- she stammered.

-Ah, yes. Your brother. You can take him with you. In fact, we have already obtained what we wanted from him.

Zubátov rang a little bell he had on his table.

The young policeman entered the room right away. He looked at his superior and looked at the terrified Irina who continued still.

-Take her to the cells.

He took a paper out of the drawer on which he wrote a note and signed it and gave it to the

gendarme.

-Release the prisoner Ananiev. He and his sister are free to go.

The gendarme stood at attention again and walked to the door with the piece of paper in the hand.

Irina was still motionless, trapped by the quick succession of events that occurred in that office facing that ruthless man.

-Well, don't you want to go? Or have you changed your mind about the benefits of being my friend?

Irina moved her head.

-Thank you, Excellency.- she said with utmost respect.

-Don't thank me yet. I hope we'll meet again.

Irina, disturbed, turned around. She was still holding the lapels of her coat with her stiff hands. She walked out the door. Ivan looked at her with compassion. She looked at him with her still turbid eyes. No one said anything. They walked down in silence the same stairs as before. But when they passed the landing of the entrance they took a sidedoor. After a short hallway, another staircase led them to the cells. Even before they reached these, they already heard the moanings of the locked up prisoners. Thuds, followed by screams of pain echoed through the dark space where the cold from the outside became more intense. The walls dripped dampness. The basement came up with the canal so there were water leaks everywhere. Irina had to hold her nose with the scarf on her head. The thin air made her dizzy. The young man named Ivan realized that.

-Maybe it would be better if you wait outside. This is not a pleasant place and even less for a woman. I'll bring you your brother.

Irina looked at him with grateful eyes and nodded. She went back through the same hallway and, going up the same stairs, she arrived to the building's atrium.

There remained the sullen policeman with the mustache that looked at her with a disdainful gesture. She didn't say anything. She sat on the wooden bench and put her scarf on her head, tying it under her chin. She waited.

Baran Zubátov made the bell ring again. Right away someone knocked on the door. A man entered the office. Zubátov was sitting, looking on the street through the window on his right. Behind him was a large portrait of Nicholas II.

-Is there any free agent?- he asked the man who just arrived.

-One moment, I'm going to check. -he answered, leaving and coming back to the same place.

-Rikov has no tracking assigned.

Baran Zubátov handed Mikjails cardboard to his subordinate.

-He's going to get out in a few moments. He's with his sister. A blond girl dressed like a worker. Tell him to follow them. Above everything the girl. I want to know everything about her.

The subordinate, taking advantage of the fact that his superior had turned around again towards the window, moved his head up and down. He knew about the predilection of his chief for young and pretty women and it was not the first time he made some follow just to seduce her after or, if she was not accessible that way, to invent a false accusation thereby to win the the girls' favour in exchange of "filing away" her case.

-Very good, chief. I'll notify Rikov right away.

-Tell him to come see me. I want to give him a special order.

-Understood.

CHAPTER 2

The girl couldn't contain a scream, half suffocated by her gloved hand she instinctively took to her mouth.

Accompanied by the gendarme, Mikjail appeared in the door that lead to the cells. His sister thought she saw a spectrum in him. The twenty-four hours he passed arrested had soiled him so much he was just a memory of the lively and determined young man he had been. His head was bandaged with a bandage, a filthy rag on which a dark, red stain marked the spot of his skull where a Cossack on horseback had beaten him with the hilt of his sabre.

His appearance like that, bandaged, dirty, with his humble clothes, the coat over his shoulders, was the appearance of a defeated who was letting drag himself, meek, to a fateful destiny.

He had his arms under his coat and his hands hidden underneath. Irina leaped on her brother. She stopped an instant when she almost brushed him. She looked into his eyes. Eyes that seemed dead to her, as if they had lost the will to look. Those eyes as grey as hers, enclosed by a dim shadow.

Finally Irina decided to hug him.

A cry of pain was the man's pitiful response to that embrace.

That moan stabbed Irina's soul like a bayonet of ice had gone through her.

She separated. Looked at him. Not wanting to, she looked at the gendarme next to her. That boy called Ivan, who was struggling between maintaining the composure his uniform and his duty demanded and the compassion he felt that moment for those two beings he didn't know, but unintentionally touched him.

-What did they do to you?- exclaimed the girl.

The brother didn't answer. He tilted his head and slowly took his hands out of his hiding place.

-My hands... I won't be able to paint again.- he said with grim and immensely sad voice.

Irina screamed in horror again as she saw her brother's hands wrapped in filthy and frayed bandages, as the one on his head. Cloths that barely covered his tortured, bloodstained and deformed hands.

Ivan, the young gendarme, couldn't avoid a gesture of disgust, although the repugnance he felt was not caused by the sight of those hands so savagely abused, but by confirming the cruelty of those who had no mercy with that boy who looked so innocent.

The gendarme with the mustache noticed it.

-Viktorenko, get back to your post! And you two, you can go.

-I'm sorry- whispered the young soldier as concealed as he could.

Irina put her brother the coat on, with the utmost care possible to not hurt him and they left the building without speaking.

In front of the Okhrana headquarters. A man is smoking a cigarette as he walks from side to side. His head is covered by a hat he wears so low only the lower third of his face can be seen. He lets the cigarette smoke out of his nose and that smoke merges with the steam of his own breathing. Suddenly he stops moving around with those short and nervous steps. He throws the cigarette away that extinguishes with a short sizzle as it touches the snow.

He lifts the lapels of his brown coat and puts his hands into its pockets, pushing down, like trying to make himself smaller and more invisible. Nothing in him stands out. Neither for being tall nor small, neither for being well nor badly dressed. One more of those who roamed the streets of St. Petersburg, confused in the melting pot of mediocrity. Although for that man that neutral look was required to carry out his work.

The brother and the sister walked slowly. Mikhail's strength was not enough to walk in a hurry. In fact he was letting hold himself by his sister on which he leaned on. The elongated traces his steps were leaving in the snow on the pavement, were a sign that he could not lift his feet too much and he almost dragged them painfully.

Irina's heart sunk as she saw her brother in this condition. She held him wrapping his shoulders with her arm. That way the two bodies, born from the same womb, became one, assimilated also by the grey of their clothes and the grey of their moods.

They didn't say anything. The only sounds they heard from each other were his pitiful groans and her badly concealed sobbings.

Like this they walked through the populous Nevsky Prospect, passing in front of the display windows of the *Gostiny Dvor* stores, from where the ladies of the capital bourgeoisie were coming out, with their fur coats and feathered hats.

The bustle of the big avenue with the tram snapping his trolley pole, the serenade of the cart rattling, the hiss of the sleighs, the stuttering roar of some car and the general sonorous world of the

road artery, people's comings and goings turned them minuscules, confined in their poor wool coats, gathered together, sheltered in themselves.

Suddenly Mikhail stopped. He turned to his sister. He gulped, making the Adam's apple in his throat go up and down like the pendulum of a clock. A clock that marked anxious hours.

-I betrayed my comrades.- he said suddenly, staring into his sister's eyes.

-Betrayed? You've been tortured. Who could call that betrayal?

Irina understood immediately, with no need of further explanations, that they had beaten the little information her brother could have out of him. After all he wasn't a revolutionary leader. Just a young enthusiast of life and freedom who got infected by the fervor that those he claimed to have betrayed hoisted as a flag of their fight.

-I told them where we meet, where we gather the pamphlets,...

While he was talking he showed his sister his bandaged hands, as an excuse for his words, for his denunciation.

Irina looked at them, trying to seem calm in order to transmit him the breath that escaped in every word and that was getting lost in the steam that her mouth exhaled.

-No one can demand you to be a martyr.

She didn't want to reproach him for anything. Throw into his face that he didn't think of her, of their parents, when he decided to get involved in the revolutionary movement. It was not the time for that. She had to cure the wounds of his body and his soul even at the expense of her own relief.

He turned his palms towards his face, observing them almost in disbelief.

-I won't be able to paint again. They have taken everything away from me. They have taken my life. I won't be able to work neither.

Suddenly he dropped his arms. He stared at his sister with an anxious look.

-I'm sorry. Forgive me. What will become of you?

The grey of his iris' seemed to blur in the tears he started to cry.

His sister's eyes got infected with the weeping. She clung to him. She pressed him against herself, almost without thinking that it hurt him.

-Your hands will heal. I'll heal them. I'll work more and we'll look for a good doctor.

Misha, as he was affectionately called, smiled slightly and nodded. His sister wiped the rest of her tears with her sleeve. She smiled. Both tried to hide their pessimism they felt with their smiles. Well, actually Irina was being sincere. She'll ask for double shift in the factory while her brother recovers. And that way, if he has to stay at home, he'll get away from the danger and maybe his revolutionary outburst would pass by. Yes. Sure it would.- she said to herself, trying to convince herself and express her certainty with words that pretended to be cheerful.

-Come on! Let's go! We can pass by the market and I'll buy you a steak. You have to get your

strength back. And a little bit of vodka will suit us well.

They kept walking. A while later Mikhail stopped again.

-But... and them?

-Who?

-I have to warn them.

-Your comrades, how you call them.

-Yes, I put them at risk.

-I'm sure they have foreseen it. And besides, you were not the only one who got arrested, right?

-Of course.

-They have thought about what to do in cases like this. For sure.

-Yes. For sure. You're right.

Soon they arrived close to the Sennaya Square, where the market was.

As they walked, Irina had a strange feeling that made her turn her head a couple of times. She had the impression that someone was following them.

-How silly!- she thought- All this is making me go crazy.

In one of these occasions in which she turned her face towards their lost steps she saw, a few metres behind them, a man with a brown coat and a brown hat. It seemed to her that that stranger was watching her. She saw that, suddenly, he took his hand into his pocket and took out a pack of cigarettes, taking one and lighting it with a match. For an instant, it seemed like a strange attitude to her, as if the man had stopped on purpose just to make her find out.

The market was crowded.

-I'll better wait for you at the pier, next to the bridge.- Mikhail said.

-Alright. It won't take long.

Irina slipped through the market stalls. She took her hand to the pocket of her coat. She took out the coins she had. She counted them. Yes. It was enough to buy the meat, some vegetables for a soup and even a bottle of vodka.

Ferdinand Kuhnning tried to calm his nerves and to forget the frustration that the denial of the access to the Okhrana headquarters had caused him. Therefore he decided to get away from his worries by photographing the scenes the half-frozen Neva river provided him with the barges full of goods. A battleship, the armored *Avrora* was getting supplies before leaving towards the Baltic Sea, in a war mission. The boats moved forward painfully slowly, breaking the ice with the keels, and also with the pricks a sailor, posted at the prow, was inflicting to the ice plates with a large boat

hook.

A large number of people had approached there to see the vessel. The grey day forced Ferdinand to open the lens of his camera a lot and to keep it open for long exposures to capture the low brightness and to impress the film as clearly as possible. Therefore he placed the camera on a folding wooden trestle he had bought in a shop at the Nevsky Prospect. He had been capturing some snapshots for a while when he saw a young worker, with his head bandaged like his hands. He saw him leaning on the stone parapet. The journalist thought he saw in him, with the injuries and the distressed gesture, the image of what had happened these days. An archetype of these times.

-A great photo- he thought. That's why he took it without the portrayed noticing it.

After three shots he wanted to do a fourth one. He prepared the camera and when he was about to release the shutter, a big commotion made him turn and forget his photo.

Both, those who had so far dedicated their attention to the ship and as well the pedestrians that had gathered around an elegant horse Landau, that had stopped a few metres from there, so it's only two occupants, besides the driver, could contemplate the beautiful silhouette of the *Avrora*.

The car was occupied by a gentleman dressed in a fur coat and a, young and very gorgeous woman, that covered her head with an ermine hat and had her hands in a muff made of the same material.

The expectation their appearance had caused caught the attention of curious Ferdinand who, forgetting his camera completely, stopped a middle-aged woman running towards the car with the people crowded around, greeting with lively gestures of sympathy the occupants who responded warmly to these shows of popular devotion. Ferdinand asked the woman about the couple that raised such a fuss, especially the woman to whom ran most of the shows of admiration.

The interpellated replied hastily.

-What? You don't know who she is?

Then she noticed the stranger's looks and accent.

-Oh, of course. It's Ekaterina Gavrilovna Chislova. She's the principal dancer of the Imperial Ballet.

A great artist. People adore her.

-What about him?

-Her lover. The Grand Duke Nicolai. I don't know how they dare to show themselves off like that. Poor Ekaterina. What a nerve!- ended up saying the woman, while she walked away from the stranger and ran towards the crowd.

Ferdinand kept his finger on the shutter of his camera. He released it without noticing before he approached also to see the celebrity.

-So this is the famous *Prima Ballerina* about which half Europe is talking about. That could be a good story for the magazine- he thought. Therefore he got as close as he could to the cart, hoping he'd be able to talk to that famous dancer and ask her for an interview.

Mikhail was still leaning on the parapet of the river bed, unaware of the fuss, focused on his own thoughts. Posing, unknowingly, for the recently shot camera.

Ferdinand finally reached the luxurious vehicle. His looks caught the occupants attention right away. With the utmost politeness he took off his cap, revealing his eye-catching red hair.

He leaned his head towards the man respectfully.

-If you'll excuse me, Excellence.- he said, looking at him.

Now his look went to the woman's almond shaped eyes and her blue iris', that looked at him curiously.

-Mademoiselle Chislova. Please, let me introduce myself. My name is Ferdinand Kuhnning. I'm the special envoy of *Die Illustrierte Zeitung*, a leading german publication.

-The woman extended her hand. The journalist grabbed it softly in a gesture of kissing it. Then she protected that white, fine and delicate hand again in the leather muff.

-I know that magazine.

-Ah! Superb! - Ferdinand said, accompanying his words with a smile. - The fact is that I would like to ask you to grant me the privilege of an interview. A few notes about your work and some photos to illustrate the article.

She looked at her companion, asking for his opinion, more than for his permission.

He nodded.

-Alright. That would be great. The Swan Lake will be played tonight at the Mariinskyi Theatre. I'll leave a ticket for you at the box office. After the show you can come see me in my dressing room. There I'll be pleased to give you the interview.

Ferdinand was amazed by this woman with a perfect oval and whose kind words seemed the singing of an angel.

He almost felt a little bit clumsy because of the impression and the joy when he took the dancer's hand again and, instead of holding it politely, he squeezed and shook it excited. The gesture didn't bother her. It rather amused her. She giggled. Even the man sitting next to her was amused by the journalist's demonstration of enthusiasm.

He was still holding the woman's hand when a scream rose above the other voices of that rejoicing moment.

Everybody instinctively looked to where the scream came from.

Everybody approached to the point at the pier where the ice had opened to pick up in the freezing water of the river the body of a man. Ferdinand feared for the integrity of his camera and rushed towards it before the crowd of people who peeked through the railing could make it fall down and break. While he ran he tripped over a man in a brown coat who looked into his eyes as he dodged him. He was the only one present who moved away from that place, dodging and even pushing

away with certain brutality those who stood in his way. He pushed Ferdinand a little too to move him away. But his only concern was the safety of his camera and not the rudeness of that sinister looking guy.

When he finally held his beloved *Kodak* in his hands, he approached where several onlookers observed the spot in the river where a bloodstained bandage was floating.

He arrived just in time to see a sailor jumping into the freezing water from one of the boats of the *Avrora*.

Everybody's heart paralyzed as they finally saw the heroic sailor appear, carrying the lifeless body of a young man, blond and dressed like a worker. They saw like the blue with cold sailor was hoisted by his crew and how the battleship docked in the nearest pier. They saw them drop the poor boy's body for whom nothing could be done by his rescuer, who shivered compulsively while he was trying to reanimate the body, that already had turned into a corpse, he just had pulled out of the water of the *Neva*.

Someone came with a thick soldier cape and covered the sailor's soaked clothes.

Ekaterina and the Grand Duke had witnessed those terrible moments from their open car, standing in it.

Irina was coming back from the market. In her arms she had a paper bag where she carried the food she had bought. She was walking fast. She was worried about her brother. She would not be calmed until she knew he was at home, off the streets and away from the danger that lurked there these turbulent days. A gust of freezing wind coming from the river made her tremble. But she felt the real thrill when she saw from afar the group of people gathered around where she was going to meet Misha. Suddenly a bad feeling assaulted her. Her heart began to pump blood faster but it seemed to have no strength to get it to her face that had become livid. She started to walk even faster. Halfway to that bridge, next to the driveway, she saw that man again, the one with the brown coat and the brown hat who had given her such a strange impression when she discovered him behind her, after she left the *Okhrana* headquarters. She saw him next to a car. It looked like he was talking to the passenger on the backseat of the vehicle. Just before she arrived there, the car started and, with a backfire, the engine accelerated. The wheels had barely turned a couple of times when she saw, from the inside of the car, a hand throwing a cigarette butt outside. At the same time, the guy with the brown coat crossed the driveway quickly to the other side.

Irina kept walking fast. She could already hear the whispers of the people concentrated where she should meet her brother. Not wanting to, she looked to the ground. On the snow was the cigarette butt that had been thrown out of the car. The paper was dark brown and the tip was golden.

Gasping because of the race and the anxiety she felt, she arrived to the huddle of people. She

pushed through the onlookers.

The glass burst into pieces as the bottle of liquor crashed onto the ground. The vegetables rolled until they fell into the river. Irina paled until she could be confused with the snow that started to fall plentiful that moment from the sky that had turned even darker, like it pretended to dress that fateful morning in mourning.

She had taken her hands to her mouth to suffocate the scream that escaped from the bottom of her soul. Her eyes wide open, in disbelief at the sight so real, so tragic they had before them.

The snow started to cover Mikjail's lifeless body, making a snow-white shroud.

Next to him, the sailor, kneeling and shivering; and standing, that redhead stranger that wished her luck that same morning.

She looked at each one of them, asking them with her gaze if that what was in front of her was true, begging them to wake her from that nightmare. But the answers in the eyes of both of them were just the confirmation of that feeling that imprisoned her heart since she saw the crowd of onlookers from far away, that now, prudent, stepped aside to leave some space for the tragic scene.

Irina moved her head from side to side, denying insistently the certainty of having in front of her her brother's corpse.

Finally, her despair was stronger than her disbelief and she let out a pitched scream that froze up until the last of the hearts of those present. A heartbreaking scream, the sinister sound of her heart bursting into pieces. She bent her knees and fell over her brother's stiff body. She cried. She cried bitterly. Only her crying could be heard. It seemed even the river had dumbstruck just to listen to her mourn. She smacked the snow on Misha's body away. In her eyes and in her nervous gestures one could see the madness brought by the pain.

She hugged him, pressing him tightly against her body.

-Misha, Misha, you're frozen. Warm yourself up. I'll give you heat.

-Misha, Misha, wake up. It's cold. So cold and you are frozen.

She stood up. She took her own coat off and put it over the lying body. She squeezed him again. She got him up and rocked him. She pressed her face against the unfortunate boy's, already blue, face.

She screamed again, cried again, cried in an endless weeping. The crying and moanings of pain were the catharsis that made her understand that her brother was dead.

She kept hugging him, rocking him, caressing his wet hair.

-I knew that man- said the sailor to a disconcerted Irina.

-I tried to save him. But there was nothing I could do. He was already dead when I got him out of the bottom of the river.

Irina whined and sobbed. She wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her coat. She stared in the sailor's eyes, who had put now his hand on her shoulder.

-You... you knew him- said Irina with a, because of the sobbing, faltering voice.

-Yes. We happened to meet in... well, I knew him.

Despite the shock, the woman understood what this strong, non-stop shivering man wanted to say.

-He was a good man and a great artist.

Irina took one of her brother's hands and held it up to the sailor.

He thought he could never paint again.

Irina's voice was almost a whisper.

-Why would they have done that to him?-asked Ferdinand, who was standing beside her and whose Adam's apple didn't stop going up and down because he was constantly swallowing saliva because of the distress of the situation.

-It's easy to know- said the sailor looking up to the stranger and confirming then his intuition in Irina's tearful eyes.

She stroked her brother's livid hands.

-He said he couldn't paint again. That they had taken away his life. But he wouldn't... he would never...

She took Misha's hand to her face. A new torrent of tears suffocated her words. The snow kept falling.