

Chapter 2 – In the CheKa

Paul and Sophia are again awakened in the darkness of a very early morning, by a loud banging. This time on their own door. Is it the CheKa for Paul? They get up, go to the door, shuffling in slippers and tightening their dressing gown strings. They stand, terrified and undecided whether to open up or to try and escape by the back entrance. The door will be broken down if they delay.

But Sophia holds up a finger, turns her head, puts her hand to her ear to hear better and whispers, "Listen!"

They both realize it is a woman's voice shouting and crying. Paul eases open the door to find a sobbing, hysterical Cornelia, Paul's sister, and wife of Albert Linke. She tells them that Albert has been dragged away without any explanation other than murmurings of "bourgeois collaborator." Sophia worries that Cornelia has walked right across town in the dark.

She holds her close and looks her in the eyes, "You could have been kidnapped, murdered or raped."

"Don't be silly Sophie." Interjects Paul, "All that matters now, is how to get Albert out," and to Cornelia, "Come sit down. Put this rug round your shoulders."

Sophia apologizes and she and Paul try to reassure Cornelia that a way will be found to obtain Albert's release. This, even though neither knows how.

Paul's older brother Carl arrives, having been given the awful news, he had first taken Cornelia's children, who had been left in charge of a very frightened governess, to his wife, Julia.

They discuss intently and urgently what to do. It is urgent because many have been abducted one day and routinely shot the next. Others, they know, could spend months and potentially years under interrogation and torture. Carl and Sophie agree with Paul that it would be dangerous to try and approach *Severny Yuzefovich*, the head of the Odessa CheKa. He had the reputation of being a particularly cruel and a dedicated exterminator of the bourgeoisie. Bringing Albert's name to his attention was likely to have terrible consequences. Then Carl remembers a potential contact who might be persuaded to help.

"We should approach Herr Finkel. You remember, the Jewish *makler*, who has acted over many years as a broker for all the Vaatz estates, selling our wool, and corn. Why he has joined the Bolsheviks I can't understand, but he has reached a high position in the local Party. He's always been honest and straight in his dealings. It must be worth trying to contact him, to see whether he will help.

Cornelia agrees and is firm that she, herself, must go and persuade Finkel to use his influence to free her Albert.

By the time they arrive at this decision, it is almost five in the morning and getting light. Carl accompanies Cornelia on her return walk across town. His apartment, in *Ulitsa Petra Velikovo* (Peter the Great Street) is close to hers in *Sophievszkaya*. He reassures her that he and Julia will look after the children.

Back home Cornelia makes a strong coffee, sorts her valuables trying to decide how much a life might be worth, and what she should take. It's too late to try and sleep, so she sits slumped in an easy chair, staring into space. One minute she is firm and determined as to how she will manage the discussion and the next in quiet tears, imagining what Albert must be suffering and trying to dispel

the thought that she might fail. At half-past eight, she stands at her door, takes a deep breath, and sets off, planning to arrive before nine when she assumes the CheKa will be 'open.'

Do they have office hours just like a shop? She wonders and thinks it perverse.

The walk to the CheKa headquarters is much shorter than to Paul's apartment by Alexander Park. From Sophievskaya she goes towards the harbor, first left, right, right, then left again, into the curve of Sabanyev Bridge. The once smart shops she passes are now shattered, windows smashed and looted out. All signs or fixtures incorporating the double-headed eagle have been torn down, defaced, or painted red.

As she enters Ekaterininskaya Square she already sees the Red Guards stationed in front of the CheKa building. She turns sharply right to avoid them. It is too early and needs to settle herself. At the Ekaterininskaya Street exit from the square she passes Paul's Mercedes showroom, situated in one of the most prestigious locations in town. It has received the same treatment as the others. The three cars on display have been vandalized and stripped. Cornelia assumes they have not been stolen, because there is no petrol left to run them. She leans against the wall of the show room and puts a hand on her heart. It is beating fast. She adjusts her hat, smoothens her skirt and looks at her watch. In exactly five minute she will go.

The famous statue of Catherine the Great still stands there but it has been hidden under dirty white ragging by the Reds. Only Catherine's bronze hand pokes out, pointing defiantly towards the West and to civilization. Beyond Catherine is the Zhdanov building, now the CheKa headquarters, and known as the House of Torture.

She passes the top of the Potemkin Stairs on her right, and stares down briefly dreaming of the fun she had had racing down its 192 steps to the harbor and up again in competition with her childhood friends. She determinedly controls her shivering. Her detour round the square is complete and she can no longer avoid facing the Red Guards. She will do anything and everything she needs to achieve Albert's release.

Three black-leather uniformed figures stand casually at the CheKa entrance archway. Two, to the left of the entrance arch, are talking to each other. They have rifles, a holstered pistol and a sabre each. The other, on the right and with only a gun at his belt, is leaning against the wall smoking and has a clipboard dangling from his left hand. All look menacingly relaxed. Tentatively, she approaches the one with the clipboard. At first, he ignores her, doesn't listen or look until he hears the name 'Comrade Commissar Finkel.' She must control herself to be as humble and polite as possible. He examines the tattered bundle of sheets attached to his clipboard, silently points her to the first door on the left inside the archway and gruffly tells her room number 410. She gives him an enquiring look, hoping he will give her some indication as to where to find the room. He pointedly ignores her and returns to his cigarette, blows rings into the air and stares out into the square.

She was in this same building with other members of the family when invited to the unveiling of Catherine the Great's monument nineteen years ago. It is very different now. Before it was grand, brilliant and bright. Now it has become dirty, dark and threatening. It even smells different. Does fear have a smell? She wonders, as she climbs the once-grand stairways and searches the long corridors, feeling exposed and vulnerable. She does not belong. Those she passes give her questioning, hostile stares, the women even more threatening than the men, but luckily no one stops her. She finally finds room 410 with 'Comrade Commissar Finkel', handwritten on a piece of card roughly inserted into a holder on the door. The holder covers an earlier name and Cornelia pessimistically wonders whether the previous occupier is still alive. She knocks as resolutely as she can and enters when invited.

She recognizes Herr Finkel immediately and he, her. She had spoken to him frequently on the estate. This was not on business, that was Albert's or the estate manager's role, but informally and politely when meeting him on his way to his overnight lodgings or perhaps going to a meal arranged for the many traders that visited in the season. Despite the tension, Cornelia can't help thinking that at a different time, she would have been able to have a very civilized conversation with Finkel. He stands up as he recognizes her, and both realize that this is not how a commissar is expected to greet a bourgeois plaintive. He quickly sits down and waves her to the chair by his desk. He is dressed as a

worker; in that he has a collarless shirt. But he is not scruffy, and evidently sees himself as a man of status in the new regime. There is a little red badge in his left lapel. Before the Revolution he had not been one of those Orthodox Jewish maklers, wearing long black coats with tall hats and *payots* hanging either side of their faces, but had dressed as a western businessman. Like her, he speaks both fluent German and Russian and in the ensuing discussion, each uses the language that best suits the meaning. She wonders whether he can also understand French but then gets cross with herself for wasting time on such unimportant thoughts. He does not need to ask why she has come.

She has brought with her a small but weighty bag holding a dozen large solid silver dessert spoons to use as barter. They are part of her dowry and engraved with the initials of her maiden name, CK. She had assumed that Finkel would not want cash, as this was becoming more devalued each day. He examines the spoons and agrees they are valuable but then asks her politely to remove the pale grey glove on her right hand. He is interested to see the large ring that it covers. It has a prominent central aquamarine surrounded by small diamonds.

"I will arrange to have your husband released in return for this ring."

"But it is a wedding anniversary ring from my husband."

"That makes it a particularly appropriate exchange."

"Will you not be shot if you are found with my ring?"

"I will cut it and sell it in pieces. But you are right I will be arrested and shot if I am exposed for, as you obviously know, it is illegal to speculate. I am careful and deal only with those I can trust. I will manage."

"But it does not come off in any case."

"So many 'buts' Mrs Linke? Come, come, you wish to save your husband?"

Herr Finkel takes her hand as politely as he can to check the fit of the ring. She submits without objecting to this intimate action.

"Not a problem. We will cut it off. As I said, I will need to break up the ring in any case. I am doing you a kind of favor. If you do not want to be arrested, like your husband, you must never wear a ring like this again. You should not even wear gloves unless it is freezing and then wear practical gloves, not fancy, fashionable ones like these. You need to take off that big expensive hat now. Throw it in the corner there. I'll get rid of it for you. Best wear a headscarf or simple cap. Please wait a minute."

Do I have a choice? She thinks as he leaves the room. She gets up and pulls a nearby chair along the wall to the corner he has indicated, removes two large hatpins, and arranges her hat and gloves tidily on the chair, then sits down again with naked hands on her knees. He returns with a pair of small but sturdy clippers, probably intended for cutting tough toenails, and comes round the desk.

He glances at the chair in the corner. "I'm sorry, but it is for your own good. I would not like to see you in the CheKa."

Removing the ring is tricky because of its tight fit but, although he nips the skin, he manages without drawing any blood. He then notices the plain but wide gold wedding ring.

"I am prepared to return your aquamarine stone for that ring. The stone is really worth much more, but gold is more easily traded. What do you think?"

She tries to think clearly. Here she is bargaining for Albert's life. She doesn't care. Stone or gold, just save him, and agrees. The wedding ring slips easily from her finger, and she half rises from her chair, stretches forward and places it on the desk. Finkel uses the points of the clippers to prize the aquamarine from its mounting and reaches across to hand it over.

"We have a counter-revolutionary tribunal at three this afternoon. I am chairman, and we do not have many prisoners to consider." He wraps the two rings in a wrinkled, spotted red kerchief and leans back on the legs of his chair to place it in the center drawer of the desk.

"I'm reasonably sure I can arrange to have your husband released. I will make the case that he treats his workers fairly and has shown an understanding and sympathy for the Party's cause. He also has skills that can help the Party in its vital food production program. Further, I will argue that we can keep an eye on him here in Odessa and that he should not be allowed to leave the city without permission."

He guides her by the elbow to the window. “Stand over there on the other side of the square,” and he points to the corner holding Paul’s, now shattered, Mercedes showroom. He notices her start. “Yes, it is difficult, but times are changing, and you must learn to adapt if you are to survive.”

While she has noticed the showroom, another realization has come to her; that she and her Albert had stood close together at a window somewhere on this same floor when they had watched the formal unveiling of the Catherine statue in 1900. “God, how I need him,” she thinks.

Finkel continues, “Wait there this afternoon so you can see the archway below, soon after 3:30. If he does not come out by 4:30, or 5:30 at the very latest, you will know that I have failed. I then guarantee to return your rings. You will know from the past that I am an honest makler.”



Paul's Mercedes showroom at 4 Ekaterininskaya.

It is a perverse bargain, but she does believe him. She returns to her lodgings and spends the many miserable hours both worrying and at the same time trying to be as positive and optimistic as possible. That Sophia and Paul are not around is a blessing as she does not want their comforting at this time and would rather see no one until Albert is free. She warms some borscht but can hardly swallow. ‘Why bother?’ Time drags and then, in the end, seems to rush. She dresses down, as instructed and, in a headscarf, hurries to the allocated spot only just in time. Then this terrible, terrible waiting. 3:30 passes. It would have been a miracle had he emerged so soon. Then 4:00, then 4:30. Then 5:00! Tears start to come to her eyes. ‘Have I really lost him – forever?’

At five past five a bedraggled, hunched figure emerges, tentatively as if lost. Cornelia sees him humbly present a document with two hands to the guard, who laboriously extracts a pencil from an upper pocket, scribbles something on his clipboard and then returns the paper.

“Keep this on you all the time to prove you are legit,” he warns.

Albert creeps uncertainly away, looking nervously around. Cornelia rushes straight across the square, past the shrouded Catherine, and pulls him away, far from the entrance. They hug and cry together. Slowly they go home. This terrible experience is more proof that things are getting very dangerous for them all. Somehow, they must leave Odessa.

Albert does not tell Cornelia how terrifying his experience in the CheKa has been.