

Chapter 1 (excerpt)

– The Red Terror

Sophia is sleeping. Paul is restless. His gaze follows the movement of car headlights reflected on the bedroom ceiling. There is a screech of tires, and the movement stops. Heavy boots hammer on the marble of the apartment block's central stairway. Orders are shouted, a loud banging, two gunshots. The door of the flat below crashes in. A pause, then a desperate woman's howling plea. Again, the sound of boots in the hallway, getting fainter, the slam of car doors, again the screeching tires, then a frightening silence. Sophia now is wide-awake. Both listen. Nothing.

"God, the CheKa! Poor, poor Irma," She shudders, "The secret police have arrested her Igor."

Paul pulls her close. But she hears little Isa crying and pulls away,

"I've got to go!"

She grabs her silk dressing gown from the hook by the door and dashes into the nursery. She finds Isa, nine years, sitting up beside her sister Tamara, twelve years, hugging her favorite fluffy Steif cat crooked tight under her arm. Mademoiselle Voutaz is already there, sitting on the bedside chair, holding both their hands. In earlier times it could have been a peaceful 'good night' scene with the room dark except for the light shining in from Mademoiselle's adjoining room.

To the governess Sophia says, "*Merci, merci*. Thank you for being so quick."

"*Aucn problèm Madame Vaatz*," from Mademoiselle.

"Do let Isa sleep with Tamara, for tonight."

"Of course, Madam."

And from little Isa, "leave the door open!"

"Yes, darling."

Sophia returns slowly and deep in thought to Paul, only now pulling the strings of her dressing-gown tight around her. Both know he could be the next. They had talked of the danger as soon as the Bolshevik Red Army entered the city a week ago, shortly after the departure of the final contingent of French and Greek allied troops from Odesa on the fourth of April 1919. Paul had cursed their cowardly departure.

The CheKa's reputation for cruelty and ruthlessness had arrived ahead of it. Stories of arrest, torture and execution in St Petersburg and Moscow are spoken of in fear. All who hold positions of responsibility, are wealthy or intellectual are at risk. No proof or evidence is necessary to justify arrest and execution.

The CheKa is ruthlessly scouring Odesa for those they deem to be enemies of the State. These they drag to their newly requisitioned headquarters, in the Zhdanov building at Ekaterininskaya Square, 6, for incarceration, interrogation, torture or execution. The Bolshevik gazette, *The Fight*, routinely announces the fate of the victims with the reason for arrest typically and coldly given as *Counter-revolutionary and informer*, or something similar. In their hunt for victims, the CheKa encourage their own informers and are working through the records in City Hall. So, while Paul is not an official of the city, he will be exposed as a wealthy landowner and businessman as soon as the Red commissars uncover his files. The threat is real and close.

Paul accepts that he and Sophia have been in denial, hoping the threat would somehow go away and reluctant to leave their luxury apartment overlooking Alexander Park and the Odesa harbor. They have been stupid. His own and perhaps all their lives are at risk. Somehow they must work out a way to escape the city, and get to the villages outside and become anonymous. So far, they have done nothing. Now they must, and very soon.