opening extract from

By Royal Command

written by

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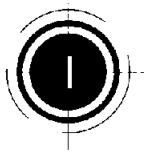
published by

Penguin Books Ltd



What Will Be Will Be

Colonel Irena Sedova of the OGPU hated tractors. She would be happy if she never saw a tractor again as long as she lived. She had built tractors, she had driven tractors, she had unveiled statues of tractors, she had made countless speeches in foreign towns singing the praises of tractors . . . Russian tractors, communist tractors, the greatest tractors in the world!

She had endured the Great War, the revolution and the civil war that followed it. She had lived through the terrible famine of 1921, where, in the frozen, impoverished countryside, people had been reduced to eating anything they could – weeds, grass, rats, leather shoes, even each other. She had survived the purges of the last ten years, and three assassination attempts, but she would gladly have lived through it all again rather than spend another minute with one of these infernal, god-forsaken machines.

But here she was, on a cold March morning, watching a parade of them drive around a square in an ugly industrial quarter of Lisbon for the benefit of a group of bored Portuguese businessmen and local officials.

The twenty tractors, from the Chelyabinsk Tractor Plant, were of varying designs but they shared several things in common. They were noisy, they were dirty and they were ugly.

Colonel Sedova had grown up on a farm in the Ukraine. Back then, at the end of the last century, there had been no tractors. Farm work was done by horse and ox and peasant. It was only after the revolution that they had started to appear in Russia, or the Soviet Union as it was now called. They were the symbol of the new Russia, of a fabulous modern world. They would revolutionize agriculture just as Lenin had revolutionized everything else. When the new tractor arrived in a village there would be celebrations. It would drive slowly into town at the head of a long procession, followed by men and women and children waving flags and singing patriotic songs.

Having fought bravely, and fiercely, in both the war and the revolution, Colonel Sedova had joined the Ministry of Propaganda and one of her first jobs had been to make a series of films in which the hero was a Russian tractor. Later on she had joined the Obedinennoe Gosudarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie, the Russian secret police. Her job then was to run spies and secret agents throughout Europe, with the aim of undermining foreign governments and eliminating anyone who might be working to harm the new communist regime.

At last, she had thought, *I can get away from tractors.*

It wasn't to be, however. A group of Russian secret agents would attract a great deal of attention in a foreign country unless they pretended to be something else. All spies needed a cover. So Colonel Sedova and her team travelled the world pretending to be part of a Soviet trade delegation selling Russian tractors.

She sighed. The life of a spy was not as romantic as it was presented in popular novels. Most of her time was spent being bored to death.

But this morning she had a mission.

She looked around. Nobody would notice if she left now. The Portuguese would want to talk to the engineers about tedious things like engine sizes and power output and haulage capabilities. She would not be missed.

She muttered something to her secretary, Alexa, stepped backwards into the shadow of a warehouse, then slipped away down an alley to where her car was waiting. It was a brand-new black unmarked Citroën Traction Avant. She loved this car. The French might have been enemies of the mother country, but they certainly knew how to build automobiles. Her driver, Anatoly, opened the door for her and she climbed in and settled back in her seat, breathing in the scents of wood and leather. The scents of luxury.

'To the Alfama district,' she grunted and Anatoly set off, driving quickly and efficiently through the streets of Lisbon. He took a few random turns and switchbacks to make sure that they were not being followed, and, once he was sure they were clean, he pressed on towards the old part of town.

Sedova, known by most as Babushka, the grandmother, didn't pay any attention to the passing scenery. She was lost in her thoughts. Concentrating on the mission ahead.

What exactly was Ferreira up to?

A small group of spies working together was called a cell. The members of a cell would only know the identities of their fellow members. This meant that if one was caught and interrogated he would not be able to give away any information about the rest of the spy network. Only the leader of the cell would know the identity of the next person up the chain, and sometimes the identities of other cell leaders, but, once again, if they were ever found out they would be able to betray only a handful of other spies. A cell

structure was a secure structure, but if a cell leader turned bad it could cause problems.

Martinho Ferreira ran the most important communist spy cell in Lisbon from a bookshop that specialized in works on art, music and architecture. Ferreira reported directly to Franco Fortuna, the Soviet officer for southern Europe, who was based in Rome, and Fortuna reported to Moscow.

There was a problem, though, and Colonel Sedova had been forced to break cover and come down personally to deal with this business. A cipher expert at the OGPU headquarters in Moscow had noticed a change in Ferreira's reports, subtle differences that would perhaps not have been noticeable to most people, but to the trained and deeply suspicious eyes of the expert they stood out glaringly. A careful search in the files revealed that the changes went back several months. What had happened? Why was there this change? Had Ferreira's cell been infiltrated? Had he been turned by some foreign power? The Germans, perhaps, or the British?

Babushka would find out. She would find out and she would deal with it.

They came to the walls of the Castelo, swerved round a rattling wooden tram, and started to wind their way down through the labyrinth of narrow cobbled streets and small squares of the medieval Alfama quarter towards the wide grey expanse of the Rio Tejo.

The bookshop was on the northern edge of the district, near the flea market in the Campo de Santa Clara. Anatoly stopped the car by a row of dirty orange houses, applied the handbrake but left the engine running.

'Leave the car here and go to the rear of the building,' said Babushka, climbing out of the Citroën. 'Watch for anyone

going in or out. Follow them if necessary. I will go in the front.'

Anatoly nodded and cut the engine.

Olivia Alves looked up as the bell above the door rattled and chimed. She peered with some curiosity at the woman who came in. She didn't look like the usual customers they got in the shop. In the three months Olivia had been working here the trickle of customers had for the most part been professors and students from the university, or bearded bohemian types. Neither did the woman look like any tourist she had ever seen, though she was certainly not Portuguese. She was from a northern country, Germany perhaps. She was short and stocky and dressed all in grey. Grey woollen stockings. Grey lace-up boots. A skirt and jacket that were too tight for her and strained at the seams. Her hair was grey, too, and her skin. She had a flat peasant's face and small watchful eyes. She made a brief show of looking at the books on the shelves, and then marched over to the desk where Olivia sat reading a book on Tintoretto.

'Is Senhor Ferreira in?' the woman asked in clumsy Portuguese.

Olivia nodded towards the rear of the shop. The woman grunted and walked off. Her back was wide and solid as a lump of rock.

Babushka had to duck her head to get under the low arch that led into a warren of book-lined corridors and tiny rooms that lay behind the main shop. She plodded steadily between the shelves until she eventually spotted a bearded man sitting in an alcove, studying some papers under a desk lamp and eating a sandwich that smelt of garlic.

He looked up as she approached and slipped a pair of glasses down from his forehead on to his nose. He had a long droopy face that had a melancholy look about it.

Sedova studied him for a moment then spoke in her stumbling Portuguese. 'Are you Martinho Ferreira?'

'But of course,' the man replied.

Sedova now slipped into her native Russian. 'Tell the girl to go for her lunch,' she said. 'And close the shop.'

The man smiled vaguely, pretending not to understand.

'I am Sedova.'

The man paled, dropped his sandwich and jumped up from his ancient, rickety chair. He hurried off and Sedova heard low voices, then the opening and closing of the street door.

Sedova walked over to the desk and cast a quick, professional glance over it.

Something caught her eye: a scrap of paper with a name on it. A name from her past. She frowned and quickly slipped it into her jacket pocket as she heard the man returning.

He came through, smiling and wiping his palms on his jacket.

'Babushka,' he said, extending a hand, and went on in fluent Russian, 'I am honoured to meet you. I have heard so much about you.'

Sedova did not shake his hand.

'We need to talk,' she said.

The man fussed about, clearing a space for the colonel to sit. They were in a cave of books and every surface, including the floor, was piled high with dusty volumes.

Sedova remained standing and the man returned to his chair.

'Is there a problem?' he said.

Sedova did not reply. She was quietly studying the man. She had never met him before but she had seen his records and the photographs kept on file at OGPU headquarters.

This man looked similar, but he was clearly not Ferreira. He was a good two inches too short and his nose was the wrong shape.

'You are not Martinho Ferreira,' she said.

The man shrugged. 'I am not,' he said. 'Martinho is not here at present.'

'Then why did you say you were him?'

'You cannot be too careful.' The man laughed and fished a bottle of vodka from his desk.

'Would you care for a drink?' he said.

'I do not drink,' said Sedova.

'If you will allow me.' The man poured himself a hefty measure, the bottle rattling against the rim of the glass.

'You know who I am?' said Sedova.

'But of course. You are Colonel Sedova. Everyone in the network knows who you are. You are famous.'

'What is your name?'

'My name? Cristo Oracabessa. I work with Martinho.' He returned the bottle to his desk drawer.

'When will Martinho return?' said Sedova. 'I would dearly like to speak with him.'

'Alas. He will not be returning,' said Cristo, raising a pistol above the edge of the desk as he did so. 'You are too late.'

Sedova recognized the gun – it was a Soviet design, a Tokarev TT-33 semi-automatic. A very efficient weapon.

She remained calm. She had no doubt that the man would use the gun. He knew her reputation. He would have heard all the stories. They called her the grandmother, but there

was irony in it. She was a hardened killer. She would do anything to survive. Along with many others she had eaten human flesh during the great famine. It was good to keep the story alive. A fearsome reputation was a necessary thing, but it all seemed so long ago now. She couldn't remember what the flesh had tasted like. As far as she was concerned it was the same as all the other boiled grey meat she'd had to endure over the years.

Yes. This man would know the stories.

He would know that there would be no second chances.

There was a film of sweat along his upper lip.

'It seems you thought I might be coming?' said Sedova. 'Me or someone like me.'

'I hope you are not expecting me to explain myself before I kill you,' said the man.

'I do not expect anything,' said Sedova. 'The Portuguese have a saying: *O que será.*'

'What will be will be,' said the man and he pulled the trigger three times, aiming at the largest part of his target, Sedova's torso. Each bullet found its mark and the combined force of the three of them was enough to knock the woman off her feet. She fell into the bookshelves behind her and collapsed to the floor beneath a cascade of books.

So Cristo, if that was his name, was not stupid. One bullet might not have been enough, three was plenty and any more would have been a waste.

The man let out a deep sigh, his lips fluttering, and started to walk cautiously towards the colonel.

You did not live to be fifty in the OGPU without learning a trick or two. Sedova had learnt to be cunning and wary and distrustful. She had been shot once before, during the civil war, and still had a nasty scar in her side where a comrade

had clumsily removed the bullet. It had been enough to teach her that she never wanted to be shot again. Which was why she had taken to wearing a steel-enforced corset with a leather backing. With thick layers of fat and solid muscle underneath, it would take more than a bullet from a TT-33 to reach any of her vital organs.

When she landed she made sure that she kept her arms bent and her hands drawn back, ready to strike. Now she lay perfectly still, holding her breath in and her eyes open. She was careful not to allow them even a tiny flicker but followed the man's movements with her peripheral vision. She would wait. She was used to waiting.

At last the man came near. She could smell garlic and alcohol on his breath, never a pleasant combination. Closer and closer he came, the gun pointing at her head. She would have to act quickly and decisively. He would not make the same mistake twice and a headshot would be fatal.

The man's head blocked out the light. She could hear his breathing.

Now it was time.

She punched both hands forward. One knocked the man's gun to the side, the other powered into his face like a steam-hammer, shattering his lower jaw. The force jerked his head back and to one side, snapping his neck. He was dead before he realized his mistake.

Sedova grunted. She had not meant to kill him. The man was weaker than she had calculated, but when your life is at stake you do not take risks.

She stood up and dusted herself down. Her stomach felt bruised and painful; one of the slugs had penetrated the corset and was pressing into her ribs. She plucked it out with her immensely strong fingers and slipped it into her

pocket. She soon found the other two bullets, then picked up the gun and wrapped it in a handkerchief.

It was a shame. The cell had been compromised and would need to be wound up. She would have liked to interrogate the man. Find out who he really was and what had happened to Ferreira. And what he had meant when he'd said that she was too late.

Too late for what?

She took the slip of paper from her pocket and looked at it again, making sure she hadn't misread the name written on it.

She hadn't. The two words were perfectly clear.

James Bond.

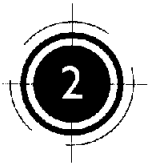
What did it mean?

She would find out, but it would mean a lot of hard work. She would have to search the place from top to bottom, tediously trawl through the man's papers and try to find out what was going on.

She prodded the man with her foot and cursed him.

The life of a spy consisted of long periods of boredom punctuated by brief intense moments of fear and death.

The rest was all just tractors and paperwork.



It is Only When We Are Close to Death That We Feel Fully Alive

Graf von Schlick pressed his foot down and felt the Bugatti Type 55 Supersport surge hungrily forward. These winding Alpine roads really tested her to the limit. Tested him as well – a moment's loss of concentration and they would go spinning out of control and down the side of the mountain. Liesl at his side gave a little shriek as the wheels hit an icy patch and the car slalomed drunkenly across the road surface.

Von Schlick laughed.

'Don't you trust me, my darling?' he yelled as she clasped his arm.

'You are trying to scare me, Otto.'

'On the contrary! I am trying to wake you up. It is only when we are close to death that we feel fully alive.'

Liesl wasn't sure about this. She felt most fully alive eating chocolate in a nice hot bath while her gramophone played something smooth by the latest American jazz crooner.

The car slithered round a hairpin bend and they continued their descent between high banks of clean white snow.

'So what did you make of my little cottage?' von Schlick asked. By cottage he meant his ancestral home – Schloss

Donnerspitze – a monstrous medieval castle built high into the side of the Schwarzkogel above Jochberg. To describe it as a cottage was ridiculous. It was a huge pile of massive grey-black stones, ugly and domineering, like a great bully squatting on the mountainside, sneering at the puny houses below.

Growing up, von Schlick had found the castle cold and dark and oppressive. It was built on a giant's scale and he had never been happy there. He envied the farmers' children in their pretty and cosy-looking wooden chalets, with flowers around the doors in summer and peaked hats of snow in the winter.

He had left the castle at the earliest opportunity, and gone to university in Vienna where he had bought himself an attractive modern house near the Karlsplatz. It was everything the family castle wasn't, light and airy and clean and warm. His mother had stayed on at the Schloss, all alone with a dwindling staff, until she had died four years ago, at which point Otto had had the place closed down and packed in mothballs. He had vowed never to return and had been considering selling the hated pile.

Otto's life was in Vienna now, not here in the backward and boring countryside. He had married Frieda, a minor aristocrat, and they had lived a city life of parties, opera, theatre, nightclubs, eating, drinking and dancing. It was only when he stopped and took a breath after five years of marriage that he realized he had nothing in common with his wife. He was certain he didn't love her and in fact he wasn't sure he even liked her.

He began spending time with a string of younger, more exciting women who had meant little more to him than the contents of a packet of cigarettes. To be smoked and

thrown away, forgotten. Things had changed, though, when he had set eyes on the charming Liesl at the theatre. She was an actress and a dancer, and Otto was utterly captivated by her.

It was soon after they had met that Otto announced to his wife that he was tired of city life and had a yearning to return to his roots in the Tyrol.

'From now on,' he told her, 'I will be spending my summers at the Schloss and I will winter here in Vienna. Apart from the odd weekend's skiing.'

'Then you will be spending your summers alone,' said his wife. 'I have no desire to set foot inside that gloomy carbuncle.'

'So be it,' said Otto.

What his wife didn't need to know was that he had no intention of spending his summers alone. His plan was to install Liesl in the Schloss. She could still act if she wanted, during the winter season in Vienna, but her summers would be spent at Schloss Donnerspitze where she could play at being a Gräfin and mistress of all she surveyed.

They had driven over this morning, taking the road from Vienna at breakneck speeds, their helmets and goggles protecting them from the worst of the icy winds. But when they arrived at the Schloss Liesl had felt more dead than alive and had needed a large brandy to restore her senses.

Her first sight of the castle had not been encouraging and now, on the way back down the mountain, she told Otto that she had grave doubts about moving here.

'But, *Liebste*,' Otto pleaded, slowing down slightly so that he wouldn't have to shout, 'you did not see the dear old place in its best light. When the sun comes out, and the grass is green and the shaggy-haired dairy cows are gambolling

in the flower-filled meadows, their bells tinkling so sweetly, then it will seem like a fairy-tale castle. You *are* my princess, after all,' he added.

'We shall see,' Liesl said, wrinkling her pretty nose.

'Trust me!' said Otto, and he slammed his foot down on the accelerator once more as they hit a straight.

'Please, darling, you have made your point,' Liesl shouted. 'You must be more careful. Slow down.'

Otto was just about to say something clever when they screamed round a blind curve and came upon a car stalled in the road. He applied the brakes with ferocious force and wrestled with the wheel until he had subdued the Bugatti and brought her to a halt less than three feet from the other vehicle.

Liesl was on the verge of tears, but Otto was laughing with relief. The girl was right – he would need to be a little more careful in future – but today he was filled with a wild, careless spirit. He had almost believed the rosy picture he had painted of life at the Schloss. Ah, it wouldn't be so bad. He would drum up some friends, bring them down for parties – all manner of smart types had summer villas in the Alps.

There were two men standing by the car peering at the engine under the open bonnet. They seemed unperturbed by the near accident.

'Are you in trouble?' Otto called out. The road was narrow here and the other car was stopped right in the middle so that there was no way he could go round them.

One of the men lifted his head and looked at Otto. He had the smallest eyes Otto had ever seen on a person: they were almost completely hidden behind thick, fleshy eyelids.

'Do you know about motorcars?' he said in German,

with the hint of a foreign accent. Otto surmised that he was probably Russian.

Did he know about cars? What a question! Otto had driven in the 1932 German Grand Prix, in the racing version of the car he was sitting in now, the Type 51. *Did he know about cars, indeed?* He loved cars – why, he sometimes thought he loved them more than he loved women.

'I know a thing or two,' he said, climbing out. 'What seems to be the problem?'

He strode over, placed his hands on the car and leant in to take a look. He could see no immediate and obvious problem, though there was a strong smell of petrol.

'It is possible you have a leak in your fuel pipe,' he said, and glanced inside the car. A third man was at the wheel, his face completely wrapped in bandages, his eyes hidden behind dark glasses.

He was sitting very still.

Otto looked away quickly, not wanting to stare, but the sight had unnerved him. He felt a chill of fear. He wanted to be away from here.

He studied the engine once more and at last spotted something: a wire to the alternator had come unattached.

'There,' he said. 'I think I see your problem.'

Liesl was checking her lipstick in the side mirror. She looked over at the other car just as the two men stepped away from it. Otto had his head buried inside the engine. Liesl frowned as one of the men stooped down and picked up something that was lying hidden in the snow. It appeared to be a small box attached to a wire that snaked under the car. She was about to say something when the man pressed a switch on the box and a great gout of flame billowed

from the engine, engulfing Otto's head and shoulders. He gave a hideous, high-pitched shriek and fell away, clutching his face.

Liesl knew she was in danger; her first thought was to get out of the car and run. It would take too long to slide over the seat, take the wheel, start the car and put it into reverse gear. But, even as she reached for the door handle, the man with puffy eyes stepped up to the car and swung a knuckle-duster at her chin.

She heard a loud pop and was overcome with a terrible sick feeling. Her brain seemed to be fizzing. Then she was walking through snow, surrounded by a hazy whiteness.

No.

It was snowing inside her head.

So cold.

White-out . . .