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Agent 6

Written by Tom Rob Smith

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AGENT 6

TOM ROB SMITH



London · New York · Sydney · Toronto

A CBS COMPANY

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To Zoe Trodd

Moscow
Lubyanka Square
The Lubyanka, Headquarters of the Secret Police
21 January 1950

The safest way to write a diary was to imagine Stalin reading every word. Even exercising this degree of caution there was the risk of a slipped phrase, accidental ambiguity – a misunderstood sentence. Praise might be mistaken for mockery, sincere adulation taken as parody. Since even the most vigilant author couldn't guard against every possible interpretation, an alternative was to hide the diary altogether, a method favoured in this instance by the suspect, a young artist called Polina Peshkova. Her notebook had been discovered inside a fireplace, in the chimney no less, wrapped in waxy cloth and squeezed between two loose bricks. To retrieve the diary the author was forced to wait until the fire died down before inserting her hand into the chimney and feeling for the book's spine. Ironically the elaborate nature of this hiding place had been Peshkova's undoing. A single sooty fingerprint on her writing desk had alerted the investigating agent's suspicions and re-directed the focus of his search – an exemplary piece of detective work.

From the perspective of the secret police, concealing a diary was a crime regardless of its content. It was an attempt to separate a citizen's public and private life, when no such gap existed. There was no thought or experience that fell outside the party's authority. For this reason a concealed diary was often the most incriminating evidence an agent could hope for. Since the journal wasn't intended for any reader the author wrote freely, lowering their guard, producing nothing less than an unsolicited confession. From-the-heart honesty made the document suitable for judging not only the author but also their friends and family. A diary could yield as many as fifteen additional suspects, fifteen new leads, often more than the most intense interrogation.

In charge of this investigation was Agent Leo Demidov, twenty-seven years old: a decorated soldier recruited to the ranks of the secret police after the Great Patriotic War. He'd flourished in the MGB through a combination of uncomplicated obedience, a belief in the State he was serving and rigorous attention to detail. His zeal was underpinned not by ambition but by earnest adoration of his homeland, the country that had defeated Fascism. As handsome as he was serious-minded, he had the face and the spirit of a propaganda poster, a square jaw with angular lips, ever ready with a slogan.

In Leo's brief career with the MGB, he'd overseen the examination of many hundreds of journals, pored over thousands of entries in the tireless pursuit of those accused of anti-Soviet agitation. Like a first love, he remembered the first journal he'd ever examined. Given to him by his mentor, Nikolai Borisov, it had been a difficult case. Leo had found nothing incriminating among the pages. His mentor had then read the same journal, highlighting an apparently innocent observation:

December 6th, 1936, Last night Stalin's new constitution was adopted. I feel the same way as the rest of the country, i.e., absolute, infinite delight.

Borisov had been unsatisfied that the sentence conveyed a credible sense of delight. The author was more interested in aligning his feelings with the rest of the country. It was strategic and cynical, an empty declaration intended to hide the author's own doubts. Does a person expressing genuine delight use an abbreviation – i.e. – before describing their emotions? That question was put to the suspect in his subsequent interrogation.

INTERROGATOR BORISOV: How do you feel right now?
SUSPECT: I have done nothing wrong.
INTERROGATOR BORISOV: But my question was: how do you feel?
SUSPECT: I feel apprehensive.
INTERROGATOR BORISOV: Of course you do. That is perfectly natural.
But note that you did not say: 'I feel the same as anyone would in my circumstances, i.e., apprehension.'

The man received fifteen years. And Leo learned a valuable lesson – a detective was not limited to searching for statements of sedition. Far more important was to be ever-vigilant for proclamations of love and loyalty that failed to convince.

Drawing from his experiences over the past three years, Leo flicked through Polina Peshkova's diary, observing that for an artist the suspect had inelegant handwriting. Throughout she'd pressed hard with a blunt pencil, never once sharpening the tip. He ran his finger over the back of each page, across sentences indented like Braille. He lifted the diary to his nose. It smelt of soot. Against the

run of his thumb, the pages made a crackling noise, like dry autumn leaves. He sniffed and peered and weighed the book in his hands – examining it in every way except to actually read it. For a report on the content of the diary he turned to the trainee assigned to him. As part of a recent promotion Leo had been tasked with supervising new agents. He was no longer a pupil but a mentor. These new agents would accompany him on his working day and during his night-time arrests, gaining experience, learning from him until they were ready to run their own cases.

Grigori Semichastny was twenty-three years old and the fifth agent Leo had taught. He was perhaps the most intelligent and without a doubt the least promising. He asked too many questions, queried too many answers. He smiled when he found something amusing and frowned when something annoyed him. To know what he was thinking merely required a glance at his face. He'd been recruited from the University of Moscow, where he'd been an exceptional student, gifted with an academic pedigree in contrast to his mentor. Leo felt no jealousy, readily accepting that he would never have a mind for serious study. Able to dissect his own intellectual shortcomings, he was unable to understand why his trainee had sought a post in a profession for which he was entirely unsuited. So mismatched was Grigori for the job that Leo had even contemplated advising him to seek another career. Such an abrupt departure would place the man under scrutiny and would, in all likelihood, condemn him in the eyes of the State. Grigori's only viable option was to stumble along this path and Leo felt it his duty to help him as best he could.

Grigori leafed through the pages intently, turning backwards and forwards, apparently searching for something in particular. Finally, he looked up and declared:

— The diary says nothing.

Remembering his own experience as a novice, Leo was not entirely surprised by the answer, feeling disappointment at his protégé's failure. He replied:

— Nothing?

Grigori nodded.

— Nothing of any importance.

The notion was improbable. Even if it lacked direct examples of provocation, the things unmentioned in a diary were just as important as the things that were written down. Deciding to offer these wisdoms to his trainee, Leo stood up.

— Let me tell you a story. A young man once remarked in his diary that on this day he felt inexplicably sad. The entry was dated 23 August. The year was 1949. What would you make of that?

Grigori shrugged.

— Not much.

Leo pounced on the claim.

— What was the date of the Non-Aggression Pact between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia?

— August 1939.

— The 23rd of August 1939. Which means this man was feeling inexplicable sadness on the tenth anniversary of that treaty. Taken together with an absence of any praise for the soldiers who defeated Fascism, for Stalin's military prowess, this man's sadness was interpreted as an inappropriate critique of our foreign policy. Why dwell on mistakes and not express feelings of pride? Do you understand?

— Maybe it had nothing to do the treaty. We all have days where we feel sad or lonely or melancholy. We don't check the historical calendar every time we feel such things.

Leo became annoyed.

— Maybe it had nothing to do with the treaty? Maybe there are no enemies? Maybe everyone loves the State? Maybe there are no

people who wish to undermine our work? Our job is to reveal guilt, not naively hope that it doesn't exist.

Grigori considered, noting Leo's anger. With unusual diplomacy, he modulated his response, no longer as confrontational but sticking by his conclusion:

— In Polina's diary there are mundane observations about her daily routine. As far as my abilities allow I can see no case against her. Those are my findings.

The artist, whom Leo noted Grigori was informally referring to by her first name, had been commissioned to design and paint a series of public murals. Since there was a risk that she, or indeed any artist, might produce something subtly subversive, a piece of art with a hidden meaning, the MGB were running a routine check. The logic was simple. If her diary contained no secret subversive meaning, it was unlikely that her art would. The task was a minor one and suitable for a novice. The first day had gone well. Grigori had found the diary while Peshkova was at work in her studio. Completing his search, he'd returned the evidence to the hiding place in the chimney in order not to alert Peshkova that she was under investigation. He'd reported back and briefly Leo had wondered if there was hope for the young man: the use of the sooty fingerprint as a clue had been admirable. During the next four days Grigori maintained a high level of surveillance, putting in many more hours than necessary. Yet despite the extra work he made no more reports and offered no observations of any kind. Now he was claiming the diary was worthless.

Leo took the notebook from him, sensing Grigori's reluctance to let the pages out of his hands. For the first time, he began to read. At a glance he agreed that it was hardly the provocative content they might expect from a diary so elaborately hidden near a fire.

Unwilling to cede to the conclusion that the suspect was innocent, he skipped to the end, scouring the most recent entries, written during the past five days of Grigori's surveillance. The suspect described meeting a neighbour for the first time, a man who lived in an apartment block on the opposite side of the road. She'd never seen him before but he'd approached her and they'd spoken in the street. She remarked that the man was funny and she hoped to see him again sometime, coyly adding that he was handsome.

Did he tell me his name? I don't remember. He must have done. How can I be so forgetful? I was distracted. I wish I could remember his name. Now he'll be insulted when we meet again. If we meet again, which I hope we will.

Leo turned the page. The next day she got her wish, bumping into the man again. She apologized for being forgetful and asked him to remind her of his name. He told her it was Isaac, and they walked together, talking freely as if they'd been friends for many years. By happy coincidence Isaac was heading in the same direction. Arriving at her studio, she was sad to see him go. According to her entry, as soon as he was out of sight she began longing for their next encounter.

Is this love? No, of course not. But perhaps this is how love begins?

How love begins – it was sentimental, consistent with the fanciful temperament of someone who writes an inoffensive diary but hides it as carefully as if it contained treachery and intrigue. What a silly and dangerous thing to do. Leo didn't need a physical description of this friendly young man to know his identity. He looked up at his protégé and said:

— Isaac?

Grigori hesitated. Deciding against a lie, he admitted:

— I thought a conversation might be useful in evaluating her character.

— Your job was to search her apartment and observe her activities. No direct contact. She might have guessed you were MGB. She'd then alter her behaviour in order to fool you.

Grigori shook his head.

— She didn't suspect me.

Leo was frustrated by these elementary mistakes.

— You know that only because of what she wrote in the diary. Yet she could have destroyed the original diary, replacing it with this bland set of observations, aware that she was under surveillance.

Hearing this, his brief attempt at deference broke apart, like a ship smashed against rocks. Grigori scoffed, displaying remarkable insolence:

— The entire diary fabricated to fool us? She doesn't think like that. She doesn't think like us. It's impossible.

Contradicted by a young trainee, an agent deficient in his duties – Leo was a patient man, more tolerant than other officers, but Grigori was testing him.

— The people who seem innocent are often those we should watch the most carefully.

Grigori looked at Leo with something like pity. For once his expression did not match his reply.

— You're right: I shouldn't have spoken to her. But she is a good person. Of that I am certain. I found nothing in her apartment, nothing in her day-to-day activities that suggests she is anything other than a loyal citizen. The diary is inoffensive. Polina Peshkova does not need to be brought in for questioning. She should be allowed to continue her work as an artist, in which she excels. I

can still return the diary before she finishes work. She need know nothing of this investigation.

Leo glanced at her photo, clipped to the front of the file. She was beautiful. Grigori was smitten with her. Had she charmed him in order to escape suspicion? Had she written about love, knowing that he would read those lines and be moved to protect her? Leo needed to scrutinize this proclamation of love. There was no choice but to read the diary line by line. He could no longer trust the word of his protégé. Love had made him fallible.

There were over a hundred pages of entries. Polina Peshkova wrote about her work and life. Her character came through strongly: a whimsical style, punctuated by diversions, sudden thoughts and exclamations. The entries flitted from subject to subject, often abandoning one strand and leaving it unfinished. There were no political statements, concentrating entirely on the day-to-day motions of her life and drawings. Having read the entire diary, Leo couldn't deny that there was something appealing about the woman. She frequently laughed at her mistakes, documented with perceptive honesty. Her candour might explain why she hid the diary so carefully. It was highly improbable it had been forged as a deceit. With this thought in mind, Leo gestured for Grigori to sit down. He had remained standing, as if on guard duty, for the entire time Leo had been reading. He was nervous. Grigori perched on the edge of the chair. Leo asked:

— Tell me, if she's innocent, why did she hide the diary?

Seeming to sense that Leo's attitude towards her was thawing, Grigori became excited. He spoke quickly, rushing through a possible explanation.

— She lives with her mother and two younger brothers. She doesn't want them snooping through it. Perhaps they'd make fun of her. I don't know. She talks of love, maybe such thoughts embarrass

her. It's nothing more than that. We must be able to distinguish when something is not important.

Leo's thoughts wandered. He could imagine Grigori approaching the young woman. Yet he struggled to imagine her responding fondly to a stranger's question. Why didn't she tell him to leave her alone? It seemed wildly imprudent of her to be so open. He leaned forward, lowering his voice, not because he feared being overheard but to signal that he was no longer talking to him formally, as a secret-police officer.

— What happened between the two of you? You walked up to her and started talking? And she . . .

Leo hesitated. He didn't know how to finish the sentence. Finally, stumbling, he asked:

— And she responded . . .?

Grigori seemed unsure whether the question was put to him by a friend or by a superior officer. When he understood that Leo was genuinely curious, he answered:

— How else do you meet someone except to introduce yourself? I spoke about her art. I told her that I'd seen some of her work – which is true. The conversation continued from there. She was easy to talk to, friendly.

Leo found this extraordinary.

— She wasn't suspicious?

— No.

— She should have been.

Briefly they'd been speaking as friends, about matters of the heart, now they were agents again. Grigori sank his head.

— Yes, you're right, she should have been.

He wasn't angry with Leo. He was angry with himself. His connection with the artist was built on a lie: his affection was founded on artifice and deception.

Surprising himself, Leo offered the diary to Grigori.

— Take it.

Grigori didn't move, trying to figure out what was happening. Leo smiled.

— Take it. She is free to continue her work as an artist. There's no need to press the case further.

— You're sure?

— I found nothing in the diary.

Understanding that she was safe, Grigori smiled. He reached out, pulling the diary from Leo's hands. As the pages slipped out of his grip, Leo felt an outline pressed into the paper – it wasn't a letter or a word but some kind of shape, something he hadn't seen.

— Wait.

Taking the diary back, Leo opened the page, examining the top right-hand corner. The space was blank. Yet when he touched the other side he could feel the indented lines. Something had been rubbed out.

He took a pencil, brushing the side of the lead against the paper, revealing the ghost of a small doodle, a sketch not much larger than his thumb. It was a woman standing on a plinth holding a torch, a statue. Leo stared blankly until realizing what it was. It was an American monument. It was the Statue of Liberty. Leo studied Grigori's face.

Grigori stumbled over his words:

— She's an artist. She sketches all the time.

— Why has it been rubbed out?

He had no answer.

— You tampered with evidence?

There was panic in Grigori's reply.

— When I first joined the MGB, on my first day, I was told a

story about Lenin's secretary, Fotievam. She claims that Lenin asked his chief of security, Felix Dzierzynski, how many counter-revolutionaries he had under arrest. Dzierzynski passed him a slip of paper with the number one thousand five hundred written on it. Lenin returned the paper, marking it with a cross. According to his secretary, a cross was used by Lenin to show he had read a document. Dzierzynski misunderstood and executed all of them. That is why I had to rub it out. This sketch could have been misunderstood.

Leo thought it an inappropriate reference. He'd heard enough.

— Dzierzynski was the father of this agency. To compare your predicament with his is ludicrous. We are not permitted the luxury of interpretation. We are not judges. We don't decide what evidence to present and destroy. If she is innocent, as you claim, that will be found out during further questioning. In your misguided attempt to protect her, you've incriminated yourself.

— Leo, she's a good person.

— You're infatuated with her. Your judgement is compromised.

Leo's voice had become harsh and cruel. He heard himself and softened his tone.

— Since the evidence is intact, I see no reason to draw attention to your mistake, a mistake that would certainly end your career. Write up your report, mark the sketch as evidence and let those more experienced than us decide.

He added:

— And Grigori, I cannot protect you again.

Moscow
Moskvoretsky Bridge
KM Tramcar
Same Day

Leo exhaled on the window, causing it steam up. Childlike, he pressed his finger against the condensation and without thinking traced the outline of the Statue of Liberty – a crude version of the sketch he'd seen today. He hastily rubbed it away with the coarse cuff of his jacket and glanced around. The sketch would have been unrecognizable to anyone except himself and the tramcar was almost empty: there was only one other passenger, a man seated at the front, wrapped up against the cold in so many layers that the smallest patch of his face was visible. Having made sure no one had witnessed his sketch he concluded there was no reason to be alarmed. Usually so careful, he found it hard to believe he'd made such a dangerous slip. He was running too many late-night arrests and even when he wasn't working, he was finding it difficult to sleep.

Except for early in the morning and late at night, tramcars were crowded. Painted with a thick stripe in their centre, they rattled around the city like giant boiled sweets. Often Leo had no choice

except to force his way on. With seating for fifty, there were typically twice that number, the aisles filled with commuters jostling for position. Tonight Leo would've preferred the discomfort of a busy carriage, elbows jutting into his side and people pushing past. Instead he had the luxury of an empty seat, heading home to the privilege of an empty apartment – accommodation he was not obliged to share, another perk of his profession. A man's status had become defined by how much empty space surrounded him. Soon he'd be designated his own car, a larger home, perhaps even a dacha, a country house. More and more space, less and less contact with the people he was charged with keeping watch over.

The words dropped into Leo's head:

How Love Begins.

He'd never been in love, not in the way described in the diary – excitement at the prospect of seeing someone again and sadness as soon as they went away. Grigori had risked his life for a woman he barely knew. Surely that was an act of love? Love did seem to be characterized by foolhardiness. Leo had risked his life for his country many times. He'd shown exceptional bravery and dedication. If love was sacrifice then his only true love had been for the State. And the State had loved him back, like a favourite son, rewarding and empowering him. It was ungrateful, disgraceful, that the thought should even cross his mind that this love was not enough.

He slid his hands under his legs, mining the space for any trace of warmth. Finding none, he shivered. The soles of his boots splashed in the shallow puddles of melted snow on the steel carriage floor. There was heaviness in his chest as if he were suffering from the flu with no symptoms except fatigue and dullness of

thought. He wanted to lean against the window, close his eyes and sleep. The glass was too cold. He wiped a fresh patch of condensation clear and peered out. The tram crossed the bridge, passing through streets heaped with snow. More was falling, large flakes against the window.

The tramcar slowed to a stop. The front and back doors clattered open, snow swept in. The driver turned to the open door, calling out into the night:

— Hurry up! What are you waiting for?

A voice replied:

— I'm kicking the snow off my boots!

— You're letting more snow in than you're kicking off. Get in now or I'll shut the doors!

The passenger boarded, a woman carrying a heavy bag, her boots clad in clumps of snow. As the doors shut behind her she remarked to the driver:

— It's not that warm in here anyway.

The driver gestured outside.

— You prefer to walk?

She smiled, defusing the tension. Won over by her charm, the gruff driver smiled too.

The woman turned, surveying the carriage and catching Leo's eye. He recognized her. They lived near each other. Her name was Lena. He saw her often. In fact, she'd caught his eye precisely because she behaved as if she did not wish to be noticed. She would dress in plain clothes, as most women did, but she was far from plain herself. Her desire for anonymity struggled against the pull of her beauty and even if Leo's job hadn't been to observe people he would surely have noticed her.

A week ago he'd chanced across her on a metro. They'd been so close together that it had felt rude not to say hello. Since they'd

seen each other several times, it was polite to at least acknowledge that fact. He'd been so nervous it had taken him several minutes to pluck up the courage to talk to her, delaying for so long that she'd stepped off the carriage and Leo, frustrated, followed her even though it wasn't his stop, an impulsive act quite out of character for him. As she walked towards the exit he'd reached out and touched her on the shoulder. She'd spun around, her large brown eyes alert, ready for danger. He'd asked her name. She'd assessed him in a glance, checking the passengers passing by, before telling him it was Lena and making an excuse about being in a rush. With that, she was gone. There was not the slightest trace of encouragement, nor the slightest trace of impoliteness. Leo hadn't dared follow her. He'd sheepishly backtracked to the platform, waiting for the next train. It had been a costly endeavour. He'd turned up to work late that morning, something he'd never done before. It was some consolation that he had finally found out her name.

Today was the first time he'd seen her since that awkward introduction. He was tense as she moved down the aisle, hoping she'd take the seat beside him. Rocking with the motion of the tramcar she passed him by without a word. Perhaps she hadn't recognized him? Leo glanced back. She took a seat near the rear of the carriage. Her bag was on her lap, her eyes fixed on the snowfall outside. There was no point in lying to himself: of course she remembered him, he could tell from the way she was studiously ignoring him. He was hurt at the distance she'd placed between them; each metre was a measure of her dislike for him. If she wanted to talk she would've sat closer. On consideration, that would have been too assertive. It was up to him to go to her. He knew her name. They were acquaintances. There was nothing improper with striking up a second conversation. The longer he waited the more difficult it would become. If the conversation fell

flat, all he would lose was a little pride. He joked to himself that he could afford such a loss: perhaps he carried around too much pride in any case.

Standing up abruptly, committing himself to a course of action, he strode towards Lena with a false air of confidence. He took the seat in front of her, leaning over the back of the seat:

— My name's Leo. We met the other day.

She took so long to respond that Leo wondered if she was going to ignore him.

— Yes. I remember.

Only now did he realize that he had nothing to talk about. Embarrassed, hastily improvising, he remarked:

— I heard you say just now that it's as cold on this tram as off it. I was thinking the same thing. It is very cold.

He blushed at the inanity of his comments, bitterly regretting not having thought this conversation through. Looking at Leo's coat, she commented:

— Cold? Even though you have such a nice coat?

Leo's status as an agent provided him access to a range of fine jackets, hand-crafted boots, thick fur hats. The coat was tantamount to a declaration of his status. Not wishing to admit he worked for the secret police, he decided on a lie.

— It was a gift from my father. I don't know where he bought it.

Leo changed the topic of conversation.

— I see you around a lot. I wonder if we live close to each other.

— That seems likely.

Leo puzzled over the response. Evidently Lena was reluctant to tell him where she lived. Such caution was not uncommon. He shouldn't take it personally. He understood it better than anyone. In fact, it appealed to him. She was shrewd and that was part of her appeal.

His eyes came to rest on her bag, filled with books, notebooks – school exercise books. Trying to strike a pose of easy familiarity, he reached out, taking one of the books.

— You're a teacher?

Leo glanced at the information on the written on the front. Lena seemed to straighten slightly.

— That's right.

— What do you teach?

Lena's voice had become fragile.

— I teach . . .

She lost her train of thought, touching her forehead.

— I teach politics. Sorry, I'm very tired.

There was no ambiguity. She wanted him to leave her alone. She was straining against her desire to remain polite. He returned the book.

— I apologize. I'm disturbing you.

Leo stood up, feeling unsteady, as if the tramcar were travelling across a stormy ocean. He walked back to his seat grabbing the bar for support. Humiliation had replaced the blood in his veins, the sensation pumped around his body – every part of his skin burning. After several minutes of being seated, jaw locked, staring out the window, her soft rejection ringing through his head, he noticed that his hands were clenched so tight there was a series of curved fingernail impressions embedded in his palms.

Moscow
Lubyanka Square
The Lubyanka, Headquarters of the Secret Police
Next Day

Leo hadn't slept last night, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, waiting for the sting of the humiliation to fade. After several hours he'd got up and paced his empty apartment, moving from room to room like a caged animal, full of hate for the generous space appointed to him. Better to sleep in a barracks, the proper place for a soldier. His apartment was a family home, the envy of many, except it was empty – the kitchen unused, the living space untouched, impersonal, no more than a place to rest after a day's work.

Arriving early, he entered his office and sat at his desk. He was always early except for the day he'd stopped to ask Lena's name. There was no one else in the office, at least not on his floor. There might be people downstairs in the interrogation rooms, where sessions could run for days without interruption. He checked his watch. In an hour or so other staff would start to arrive.

Leo began to work, hoping the distraction would push the

incident with Lena from his mind. Yet he was unable to focus on the documents in front of him. With a sudden swipe of his arm, he knocked the papers to the ground. It was intolerable – how could a stranger have such an effect upon him? She didn't matter. He was an important man. There were other women, plenty of them, many would be thankful to be the subject of his attention. He stood up, pacing the office as he'd paced his apartment, feeling caged. He opened the door, walking down the deserted corridor, finding himself in a nearby office where the reports on suspects were held. He checked that Grigori had filed his report, expecting his trainee to have forgotten or to have neglected the duty for sentimental reasons. The file had been submitted, languishing near the bottom of a low-priority stack of case files, many of which would not be read for weeks, dealing with the most trivial of incidents.

Leo lifted Peshkova's file, feeling the weight of the diary inside. In a snap decision, he moved it to the highest-priority pile, placing it at the very top – the most serious suspects, ensuring the case would be reviewed today, as soon as the staff arrived.

Back at his desk, Leo's eyes began to close as if having completed that piece of bureaucracy he was finally able to sleep.

*

Leo opened his eyes. Grigori was nudging him awake. Leo stood up, embarrassed at being caught asleep at his desk, wondering what time it was.

— Are you OK?

Pulling his thoughts together, he remembered – the file.

Without saying a word, he hastened out of the office. The corridors were busy: everyone arriving for work. Quickening his pace, pushing past his colleagues, Leo reached the room where active

cases were held for review. Ignoring the woman asking if he needed any help, he searched through the stack of files, looking for the documents on the artist Polina Peshkova. The file had been on the top. He'd put it there only sixty minutes ago. Once again the secretary asked if he needed any help.

— There was a file here.

— They've been taken.

Peshkova's case was being processed.