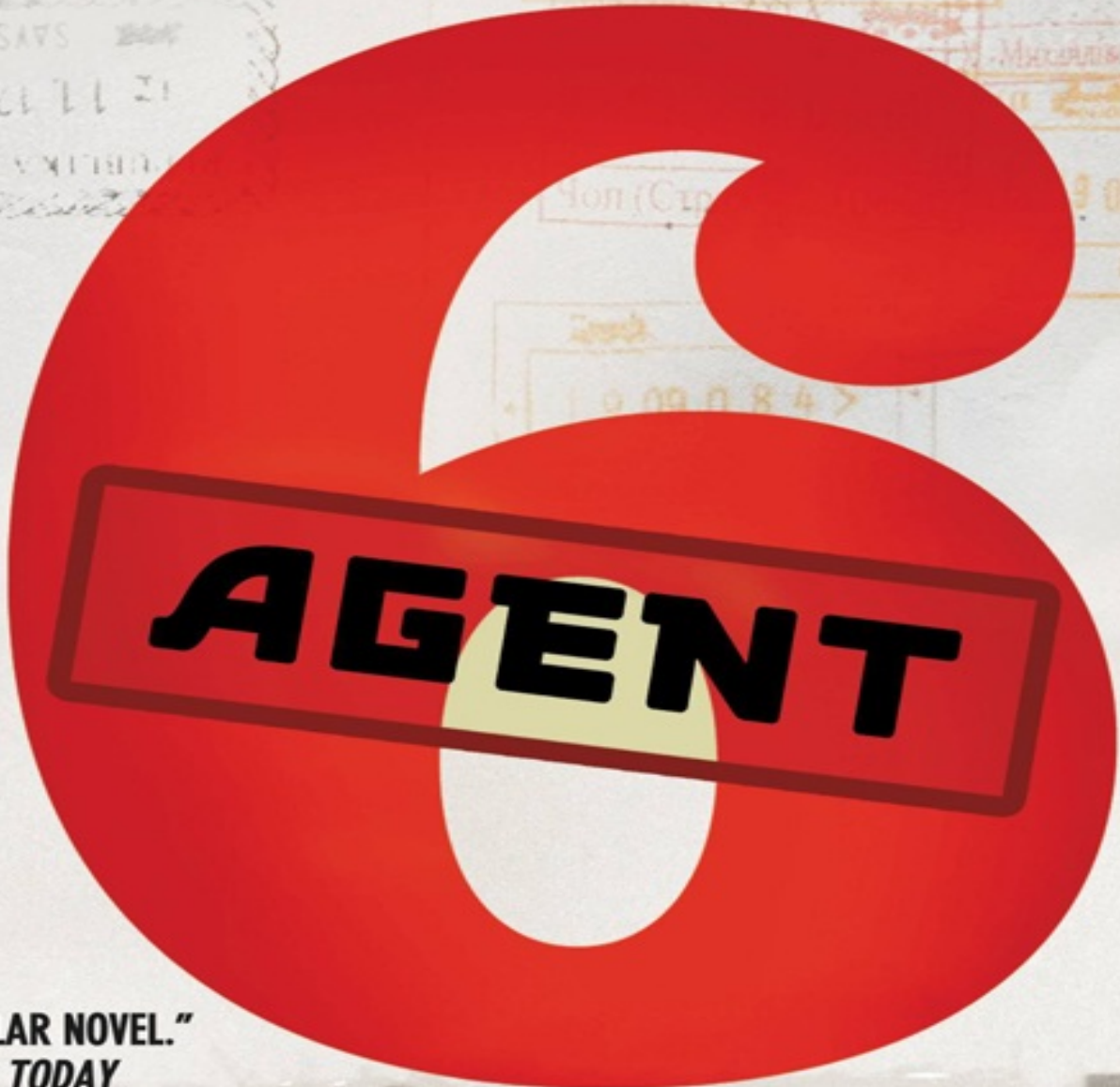


TOM ROB SMITH

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF **CHILD 44**



"A STELLAR NOVEL."
—USA TODAY



AGENT

6

TOM ROB SMITH



GRAND CENTRAL
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LUBYANKA SQUARE

HEADQUARTERS OF THE SECRET POLICE

JANUARY 21, 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 favored 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 the surface of her writing desk had alerted the investigating agent's suspicions and redirected the focus of his search—an exemplary piece of detective work.

From the perspective of the secret police, the act of concealing a diary was a crime regardless of its content. It was an attempt to separate a citizen's public and private lives 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 the apparently innocent observation:

December 6, 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 any 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 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 point. He ran his finger over the back of each page across sentences indented like Braille. He lifted the diary to his nose. It smelled 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 nighttime 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 that he was entirely unsuited for. 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 a diary lacked direct examples of provocation, the things unmentioned in it were just as important as those that were written down. Deciding to offer this wisdom 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 the twenty-third of 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 twenty-third 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 with 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 love 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 MG was 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 had 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 hardly contained the provocative content they might expect from a diary so elaborately hidden near a fire. Yet 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 neighbor 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'd been 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 behavior 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, Grigori's brief attempt at deference broke apart, like a ship smashed against rocks. He 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 candor might explain why she hid the diary so carefully. It was highly improbable that 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 toward 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 sunk 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

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.

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, Fotiev. She claims that Lenin asked his chief of security, Felix Dzerzhinsky, how many counterrevolutionaries he had under arrest. Dzerzhinsky 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. Dzerzhinsky misunderstood and executed a number 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:

—*Dzerzhinsky 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 judgment 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.*

LEO EXHALED ON THE WINDOW, causing it to 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 only the smallest patch of his face was visible. Having made sure no one had witnessed his sketch, Leo 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 center, they rattled around the city like giant boiled sweets. Often Leo had no choice except to force his way on. The trams had seating for fifty, but there were typically twice that number of 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 favorite 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 clear a fresh patch of condensation 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 toward 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 them 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 endeavor. 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 snow falling outside. There was no point 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 meter 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 Leo 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 toward 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's 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, handcrafted 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.*

He 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, which was 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 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 traveling 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 that there was a series of curved fingernail impressions embedded in his palms.

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 gotten up and paced around 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 at the office, he entered and sat at his desk. He was always early, except for when 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, for 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 okay?*

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 stacks 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.

LEO SEARCHED GRIGORI'S EXPRESSION for hatred or disgust. Evidently his trainee didn't know that the file on Polina Peshkova had been moved. He would find out soon enough. Leo should preempt the discovery with an explanation, an excuse—he'd been exhausted, he'd simply glanced at the document then put it back in the wrong pile. On second thought, there was no need to mention it. The evidence against the artist was thin. Her file would be reviewed and the case dismissed. It was going to be reviewed anyway: Leo had merely accelerated the process. At the very worst, she'd be called in for a short interview. She would be free to continue her work. Grigori could meet her again. Leo should put the matter out of his mind and concentrate on the task at hand—their next assignment. Grigori asked

—*Are you okay?*

Leo put a hand on Grigori's arm:

—*It's nothing.*

...

THE LIGHTS WERE TURNED OFF. The projector at the back of the room whirred. Onscreen there appeared footage of an idyllic rural village. The houses were made of timber and their roofs were thatched. Small gardens were lush with summer herbs. Plump chickens picked at grain overflowing from ceramic pots. Everything was in abundance, including sunshine and good humor. Farmers were dressed in traditional outfits, patterned shawls and white shirts. They strode through fields of corn, returning to their village. The sun was bright and the sky clear. The men were strong. The women were strong. Sleeves were rolled up. Soaring music gave way to a formal news commentary:

—*Today these farm workers have a surprise visitor.*

In the center of the village were several men in suits, looking out of place and awkward. With smiles on their plump faces, the suited men guided their guest of honor through the picturesque surroundings. The visitor was a man in his late twenties, tall, well built, and handsome. Either through some trick of editing or some trait of the individual, it seemed as if there was a permanent smile on his face. His hands were on his hips. He was not wearing a jacket and his sleeves were rolled up, just like the farmers. In contrast to the artifice of the rural pantomime playing around him, his excitement seemed genuine. The commentary continued:

—*World-famous Negro singer and dedicated Communist Jesse Austin has come to visit the countryside as part of his tour of this great land. Though a citizen of the United States, Mr. Austin has proved himself to be a most loyal friend of the Soviet Union, singing about our way of life and this country's belief in freedom and fairness.*

The footage changed to a close-up of Mr. Austin. His answers were dubbed in Russian, the English still audible in the gaps in the translation:

—*I have a message to tell the world! This nation loves its citizens! This nation feeds its citizens! There is food here! And plenty of it! The stories of starvation are lies. The stories of hardship and misery are the propaganda of capitalist big business that want you to believe that only they can provide you the things you need. They want you to smile and say "thank you" when you pay a dollar*

for a cent's worth of food! They want the workers to feel gratitude when they're paid a couple of dollars for their labor while big business makes millions of dollars. Not here! Not in this nation! I say to the world—there is another way! I say again—there is another way! And I've seen it with my own eyes.

The men in suits surrounded Austin in a protective circle, laughing and applauding. Leo wondered how many of the farmers were agents of State Security. All of them, he suspected. No real farmer would be trusted to pull off this performance.

The footage ended. From the back of the room, their superior officer, Major Kuzmin, stepped forward. Short and stout, with thick-lensed glasses, to an outsider he might appear comic. To officers in the MGB he did not, for they understood the scope of his power and his readiness to use it. He declared:

—That footage was filmed in 1934 when Mr. Austin was twenty-seven years old. His enthusiasm for our regime has not diminished. How can we be sure he's not an American spy? How can we be certain his Communism isn't a trick of some kind?

Leo knew a little of the singer. He'd heard his songs on the radio. He'd read some articles about him, none of which would have been published unless the authorities considered the American a valuable asset. Sensing Kuzmin's questions were rhetorical, he said nothing, waiting for Kuzmin to continue, reading from a file:

—Mr. Jesse Austin was born in 1907, in Braxton, Mississippi, migrating with his family at the age of ten to New York. Many Negro families moved out of the South, where they experienced persecution. Mr. Austin talks extensively about the experience in the transcripts I've given you. This hatred is a powerful source of discontent among black Americans and an effective tool in recruiting them to Communism, perhaps the most effective tool we have.

Leo glanced up at his superior officer. He spoke of hatred not as a crime—there were no acts of right or wrong, everything was weighed politically. It was not a question of outrage but calculation and analysis. Kuzmin caught Leo's glance:

—You have something you wish to say?

Leo shook his head. Kuzmin finished reading:

—Mr. Austin's family moved in 1917, along with many others, a period of mass migration from South to North. Of all the hatreds Jesse Austin experienced, we speculate that it was the hatred in New York that made him a Communist. Not only was he hated by white families, he also found himself hated by the Negro middle-class families who were already established in the area. They were terrified that the migrants were going to flood the northern cities. It was a pivotal moment in his life, watching people who should have stood in solidarity with the new arrivals turn on them. He witnessed the way class divides even the closest of communities.

Leo flicked through his copy of the file. There was only one photograph of the young Mr. Austin with his parents, mother and father standing straight, as if nervous of the camera, the young Austin standing in between them. Kuzmin continued:

—In New York his father was an elevator man in a run-down hotel called the Skyline, which has since gone bankrupt. The hotel specialized in all the corruptions typical of a capitalist city—drugs, prostitution. As far as we are aware, his father was involved in none of the illegal activity, although he was arrested on numerous occasions, only to be freed without charge. His mother was a domestic. Jesse Austin claims his childhood was untroubled by violence or drink; instead his family was broken by squalor. Their room was cold in the winter and hot in the summer. His father died when Jesse Austin was twelve years old. He contracted pulmonary tuberculosis. Though the United States has

some admirable health facilities, they are not open to all. For example, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company of New York has built one of the most advanced sanatoria for its employees. However, Mr. Austin's father was not an employee of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. He could not afford a stay in a sanatorium. To this day Mr. Austin remains sure that had the facilities been available his father would've survived. Perhaps this is another important event in Mr. Austin's political development: watching his father die, in a country where health care is contingent on your employment circumstances, themselves dependent upon the color of your skin, the accident of your birth.

This time Leo raised his hand. Kuzmin nodded at him:

—If this is the case why don't more Americans become Communists?

—That is a very important question, and one we are puzzling over. If you come up with the answer you can have my job.

Kuzmin laughed, a strange, strangled noise. Once he'd finished, he carried on:

—Though Mr. Austin is full of praise for his mother, she was forced to work many shifts after his father's death. With so much time on his own, he took up singing to keep occupied, and a childhood fancy became a career. His singing and musical compositions have never been separate from his politics. To his mind, they are one and the same. Unlike many Negro singers, Jesse Austin's singing is not rooted in the church, but in Communism. Communism is his church.

Major Kuzmin put on a record and they sat and listened to Mr. Austin. Leo didn't understand the lyrics. But he understood why Kuzmin, the most suspicious of people, had no doubts about Mr. Austin's sincerity. It was the most honest voice Leo had heard, words that seemed to come straight from his heart, not moderated by caution or calculation. Kuzmin turned the music off.

—Mr. Austin has become one of our most important propagandists. In addition to his polemical lyrics and commercial success, he is a brilliant speaker, and known around the world. His music has made him famous, giving his politics an international platform.

Kuzmin gestured at the projectionist.

—Here is footage taken from a speech he gave in Memphis in 1937. Watch carefully. There's no translation, but keep your eyes on the audience's reaction.

The reel was changed. The projector whirred. The new footage showed a concert hall filled with thousands of people.

—Note that the entire audience is white. There were laws in the southern states of America requiring audiences either be all white or all black. There was no integration.

Mr. Austin was onstage, dressed in black tie, addressing the large crowd. Some of the audience members walked out, others heckled. Kuzmin pointed to some of the people leaving:

—Interestingly, many of the people in this white audience will happily sit through his music. They will sit and clap, even give him a standing ovation. However, Mr. Austin is unable to end a concert without also giving a political speech. As soon as he starts to speak about Communism, they stand up and leave, or shout abuse. Yet watch Mr. Austin's expression as they do.

Austin's face showed no dismay at their reaction. He seemed to relish the adversity, his gestures becoming more assertive, his speech continuing.

Kuzmin turned on the lights:

—Your assignment is a crucial one. Mr. Austin is under increasing pressure from the American authorities for his unwavering support of our country. Those files contain articles written by him and published in American socialist newspapers. You can see for yourself how provocative they are to a conservative establishment—calls for change and a demand for a revolution. Our fear is that Austin

might lose his passport. This could be his last visit.

Leo asked:

—*When does he arrive?*

Kuzmin stood at the front, crossing his arms:

—*Tonight. He's in the city for two days. Tomorrow he'll be taken on a tour of the city. In the evening he's giving a concert. Your job is to make sure nothing goes wrong.*

Leo was shocked. They'd been given so little time to prepare. Cautiously, he channeled his concerns into the question:

—*He arrives tonight?*

—*You are not the only team to be given this assignment. It was a late whim of mine to ask you to be involved. I have a good feeling about you, Demidov. It would be understandable for our guest, finding himself under such scrutiny at home, to question his loyalty to our nation. I want my best people working on this.*

Kuzmin gave Leo's shoulder a small squeeze, intended to convey both confidence in his abilities and the gravity of his assignment:

—*His love for our country must be protected at any cost.*

LEO'S WAS ONE OF THREE TEAMS working independently to ensure Austin's itinerary went according to plan. The danger was not to his life, but to his high opinion of the State. To that end, the principle of three overlapping teams, each tasked with the same objective, was to inject a competitive element into the operation as well as factoring in redundancy—should one team fail, another would pick up the slack. The extraordinary precautions underscored the importance of Austin's visit.

They'd been given the use of a car. It was only a short drive from Lubyanka Square, the headquarters of the secret police, to Serafimovich Street and the exclusive residential complex where Austin was staying. It had been expected that he'd take a room in the Moskva Hotel, on the fifteenth floor with a view over Red Square, but he'd declined, stating his desire to stay in one of the communal housing projects, preferably with another family if there was a spare bedroom. He wanted to be

neck deep in reality.

The request had caused great anxiety, since the teams' role was to ensure that Austin was shown a projected vision of Communist society, a representation of its potential, rather than the reality of that society as it stood now. A principled idealist, Leo reconciled the dishonesty by rationalizing that the revolution was still very much a work in progress. The time of plenty was only a few years away. Right now, a spare bedroom was unheard of in a city suffering from a chronic housing shortage. As for the idea of living with a Russian family, it was too much of a risk. Aside from the conditions, which were typically cramped, they might speak out of turn. Creating an idealized family for the benefit of Austin was too difficult to stage-manage at this short notice. Mr. Austin had only requested the change on the way from the airport.

In panicked improvisation they'd put him here, at No. 2 Serafimovich Street. It was an outlandish notion, passing off a housing project designed for the political elite at the cost of over fourteen million rubles as typical of the many communal housing projects being built. In contrast to the layout of most apartment blocks, with small rooms side by side, shared cooking facilities, and outside toilets, this apartment block had only two large apartments on each floor. The living room alone covered one hundred and fifty square meters—a space that would normally have been home to several families. In addition to the extra space, the apartments were furnished to the highest specification, equipped with gas cookers, running hot water, telephones, radios. There were antiques and silver candlesticks. For a guest sensitive to inequality, Leo was troubled by the proximity of an extensive network of servants who provided residents with everything from laundry to cooking and cleaning. He had managed to persuade the other residents to allow the servants time off during Austin's visit. They'd agreed, for no matter how powerful or wealthy a citizen, they feared the secret police as much as the poor did, if no

more. The previous occupants had hardly been ordinary citizens of the Soviet Union, including Communist theoretician Nikolay Bukharin and Stalin's own children, Vasily Stalin and Svetlana Alliluyeva. The life expectancy of the occupants was perhaps even less than those living in the worst kind of deprivation. Luxury was no protection from the MGB. Leo had himself arrested two men from this building.

Having parked the car, Leo and Grigori hurried through the snow toward the grand entrance. Stepping inside, Leo unbuttoned his jacket, showing his identity papers, which were checked against a list of those granted access to the building. They headed downstairs, into the basement, where a cellar housed a team of agents maintaining twenty-four-hour surveillance, technology that had been in place long before Austin arrived. Since these apartments were home to some of the most important people in Soviet society, it was essential that the State knew how they behaved and what they spoke about. Austin was staying five floors above, in an apartment wired with listening devices in every room. Among the surveillance team was a translator—one of three, working eight-hour shifts. In addition, an attractive female agent had been posted to the apartment itself, in a separate bedroom, ostensibly as the occupant. She was pretending to be a widower, prepared with a story about how her husband had died during the Great Patriotic War. According to their profile of Austin, such a story would be particularly endearing to him. He hated Fascism above all else and had many times stated that its defeat was largely a Russian victory, bought with Communist blood.

Leo glanced through the transcripts of all of Austin's conversations since he'd arrived—a chronology of his ten hours in the apartment. He'd spent twenty minutes in the bath, forty-five minutes for dinner. There were exchanges with the female agent about the Patriotic War. Austin spoke excellent Russian, a language he'd sought to learn after his visit in 1934. Leo considered this an additional complication. The agents would not be able to communicate openly. Austin would understand any slips. Flicking through the transcripts, he noticed that it seemed their guest had already questioned the discrepancy between the enormous apartment and the single occupant. The agent had made a reply about it being a reward for her husband's valor in battle. After dinner, Austin had phoned his wife. He'd spoken to her for twenty minutes.

AUSTIN: I really wish you could be here. I wish you could experience the things I'm experiencing and tell me if I'm being blind. I worry I'm seeing things the way I want them to be and not the way they are. Your instincts are what I need right now.

In reply his wife had told him that his instincts had never let him down before and she loved him very much.

Leo handed the transcript to Grigori:

—He's changed. He's not the same man we saw visiting the farm. He's having a crisis of confidence.

Grigori read through the pages. He handed them back to Leo:

—I agree. It doesn't look good.

—That's why he waited until the last minute to change his accommodation arrangements.

The agent posing as the widow entered the surveillance center. Leo turned to her, asking:

—Was he interested in you?

She shook her head:

—I made several suggestive remarks. He either didn't notice or ignored them altogether. I pretended to become upset thinking about the death of my husband. He put an arm around me. But it

was not sexual.

—*You're sure?*

Grigori crossed his arms:

—*What is the point of trying to trap him?*

Leo replied:

—*We're not judging him. We must know our friends in order to protect them. We're not the only ones spying on him.*

In the corner an agent raised his hand:

—*He's awake.*

...

THE PARTY OFFICIALS CONGREGATED in the marble hallway—a clump of middle-ranking, middle-aged men, suits and smiles, just like the group who'd shown Austin around the village. As important as Austin was, it was decided against arranging meetings with high-ranking Soviet personnel in case it played into the FBI's hands, enabling them to portray Austin as a Soviet crony, interested in the elite rather than a man enamored with the system itself.

Austin appeared at the foot of the stairs, dressed in a knee-length coat, snow boots, and a scarf. Leo assessed his tailored clothes. They were not flamboyant yet were no doubt of excellent quality. Jesse Austin was a wealthy man. Reports estimated his annual income to be in excess of seventy thousand dollars. Austin assessed his reception. Leo saw a hint of displeasure in his expression. Perhaps he felt he was being surrounded and crowded, overly managed. He addressed them in Russian:

—*Have you all been waiting long?*

His Russian was excellent, fluent, but it followed American patterns of speech, and despite his accent being good, his words sounded foreign. The foremost official stepped forward, replying in English. Austin cut him short:

—*Let's speak Russian. No one speaks it back home. When else am I going to practice?*

There was laughter. The official smiled, switching from English into Russian:

—*Did you sleep well?*

Austin replied that he had, unaware that everyone already knew the answer.

The group left the House on the Embankment, making their way through the snow, guiding their guest toward the limousine. Leo and Grigori broke off, heading toward their car. They would follow the party, rejoining them at their destination. As Leo opened the door, he looked back to see Austin eyeing the limousine with disdain. He began to petition the officials. Leo couldn't hear what they were saying. There was a disagreement. The officials seemed reluctant. Ignoring their protests, Austin hastened away from the limousine, arriving beside Leo and Grigori:

—*I don't want to be driven around behind tinted windows! How many people in Russia drive cars like that!*

One of the officials caught up:

—*Surely, Mr. Austin, you'd be more comfortable in the diplomatic vehicle? This is just a standard working car, nothing more.*

—*Standard working car sounds great to me!*

The official was flummoxed by this alteration of their carefully laid plans. He hurried back to his group, discussing the matter. He then returned and nodded:

—*Very well, you and I will travel with Officer Demidov. The others will go ahead in the limousine.*

Leo opened the door, offering the front passenger seat to Austin. But once again Austin shook his

head:

—I'll sit in the back. I don't want to take your colleague's seat.

Putting the car in gear, Leo glanced in the rearview mirror at Austin, his tall frame cramped into the ungenerous proportions of the car. The official peered at the rudimentary interior with dissatisfaction:

—These cars are very basic. They were built for work, not for leisure. I imagine they compare badly to many of your American cars. But we have no need for excess here.

That sentiment may have carried more weight had the official not five minutes ago tried to impress his guest with the luxury of a limousine. Austin replied:

—It gets you there, doesn't it?

The official smiled, a smile designed to cover his confusion:

—Gets us where?

—Wherever it is we're going.

—Yes, it will get us there. I hope!

The official laughed. Austin did not. He disliked this man. Already the plans were unraveling.

YELISEYEV'S GROCERY STORE

GROCERY STORE NO. 1

TVERSKAYA 14

SAME DAY

GROCERY STORE NO. 1 was the most exclusive shopping experience the city had to offer, open only to the elite. The walls were ornate, adorned with gold leaf. The pillars were marble, the tops decorative and intricate—flourishes that befitted a palace. It was a regal setting for the tins of food, polished and stacked with labels facing forward, the fresh fruit arranged in patterns, spirals of apples, hills of fat potatoes. Several days had been spent preparing the store. Each aisle overflowed with stock; the storerooms had been pillaged and everything had been brought forward and meticulously displayed. The result was a venue that Leo immediately recognized as an entirely inappropriate choice for their guest, a fundamental misunderstanding of the audience it was intended for. This store didn't represent a model for a new society—it embodied the past, a Tsarist-era snapshot of exuberant wealth. Yet the gaggle of Party officials beamed at Austin as if expecting him to applaud. They had let vanity get in the way of identifying what their guest truly wanted, presenting him with ostentation, abiding by the calculation that the more they showed him, the more impressed he'd be. Their profound fear of being seen as poor and shabby in relation to their American foes had blinded them.

Leo paused beside tins of pea soup stacked in a pyramid formation. He'd never seen food arranged this way and wondered why a person would be impressed by such a display. Austin passed the pyramid, looking at it with disdain, surrounded by a clump of officials keenly pointing toward exotic fruits that Leo couldn't name. In an attempt to integrate this excess with the ideology of Communism, the shoppers, all MGB agents, had been selected from across the age spectrum, dressed in plain clothes and scuffed shoes, as though Grocery Store No. 1 were for everyone—the elderly grandmother and the young working woman alike. The staff meanwhile—men for the meat counter, women for the fruit aisle—had been instructed to smile as Austin passed them by, their faces following him as if he were the sun and they were flowers turning into his light. There were more shoppers outside, offstage, shivering in the snow, entering at apparently random intervals in order to maintain the impression of people coming and going.

Austin's expression grew increasingly sour. He was no longer speaking. His hands were deep in his pockets, his shoulders slumped, while all around him customers behaved like a flock of magpies, swooping from aisle to aisle, picking up anything that caught the light. Leo glanced in one shopping basket to see three red apples, a single beetroot, and a tin of processed ham, an unlikely set of requirements for any shopping excursion.

Austin broke free from the clump of officials, once again approaching Leo. He'd evidently decided that Leo represented the ordinary man. Perhaps it was his coarse uniform and gruff reticence—during the car ride here Leo had said almost nothing, in contrast to the incessant pitter-patter flattery of the

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