

**THE MAN
IN THE
CORDUROY
SUIT**

James Wolff

**BITTER LEMON PRESS
LONDON**

BITTER LEMON PRESS

First published in the United Kingdom in 2023 by
Bitter Lemon Press, 47 Wilmington Square, London WC1X 0ET

www.bitterlemonpress.com

© James Wolff, 2023

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without written permission of the publisher.

The moral right of James Wolff has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters and events are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is entirely coincidental.

The first extract quoted on page 224 is taken from 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' in Wilfred Owen, *Poems*, Chatto & Windus, 1920.

The second extract quoted on the same page is taken from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, Penguin Classics, 1994.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-913394-84-4

eBook ISBN USC 978-1-913394-85-1

eBook ISBN RoW 978-1-913394-86-8

Typeset by Tetragon, London

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd Croydon, CRO 4YV

*For my children, who remind me every day just how nimble
and funny language can be, with more love than this tongue-
tied father can hope to put into words.*

PROLOGUE

CONFIDENTIAL

FROM: Metropolitan Police
TO: MI5 (Lead Development)
SUBJECT: Incident 287466
DATE: 8 May 2019

1. We are writing to inform you that a 64-year-old woman named Willa KARLSSON was admitted to University College Hospital last night in an unconscious state. KARLSSON presents a number of unusual symptoms. For this reason her doctors have been unable to reach any agreement on a diagnosis, but we have been told that one of the possibilities under serious consideration is that she has been the victim of a poisoning.
2. Paramedics were sent to her south London address at 2135 following a call from a downstairs neighbour who reported hearing a loud noise that sounded like a fall. A uniformed police officer who attended the scene observed no signs of violence or forced entry. The neighbour said that KARLSSON lived alone, and described her as quiet, unremarkable and having the dishevelled and careless appearance of a “bag lady”.

3. In light of the medical assessment, which doctors characterize as “tentative and rapidly evolving”, our officers have discreetly secured the property and moved residents of the building to a nearby location while experts from Porton Down carry out a thorough examination for traces of poison. Early reports suggest that none has been found, and we note that the paramedics and the police officer who attended the scene last night are all in good health (although they remain subject to close monitoring).
4. An out-of-date identity card found in KARLSSON's flat indicates that she was until last year an employee of British intelligence. We would like to arrange a meeting with you as a matter of urgency to discuss the possible relevance of this to our investigation.
5. Regards.

CONFIDENTIAL

CHAPTER ONE

Monday, 0900

1

It might come as a disappointment to learn that the natural habitat of the intelligence officer is not the shooting range or the gym mat, the departure lounge of a hot and dusty airport, the safe house or the interrogation cell. It's not halfway up a ladder aimed at the draughty rear window of a foreign embassy. It's not even the street, the simple street – narrow, damply cobbled, thick with London fog and Russian menace. No, the natural habitat of the intelligence officer is the meeting room. Spies like to talk.

“You will have heard of a section called Gatekeeping,” says Charles Remnant. “In simple terms, we investigate the insider threat – the threat posed by our own members of staff, who may have been recruited by hostile foreign powers. What you will not have heard of, however, unless matters have really got out of hand, is the secret cadre of officers we refer to as Gatekeepers.”

In this case, not just any meeting room, but one at the top of the building, one at the dead end of a corridor otherwise used to store broken filing cabinets and unused

safes. The paint is peeling, the floor stained brown with water from a burst pipe. A sign on the door states ELECTRICAL EQUIPMENT: STRICTLY NO ADMITTANCE. Leonard Flood has worked in the building for seven years and wasn't aware of its existence until this morning. Dark blue carpet, white walls, two office chairs equipped with the usual array of levers, knobs, switches and even a small hand pump to control air pressure across the lumbar region. He recalls watching the skittery fingers of a new recruit on another floor discover by chance an unexpected button under an armrest, and her panic at the thought she had accidentally triggered a silent alarm or hidden recording device rather than made an imperceptible adjustment to the angle of her seat.

Leonard makes people nervous, despite his best intentions. Even when, as on this particular Monday morning, he is the younger of the two officers in the room by at least twenty years, the more junior by several grades, the one who has been summoned to the meeting not by email or phone, as might have been expected, but by a quiet word in his ear from a guard as he came through the security pods to begin his working day.

"I cannot overemphasize the sensitivity of what we are about to discuss," says Charles Remnant. He smiles tightly to show he appreciates that in this building everyone says such things all the time, but then frowns to make clear that on *this* occasion the words must be taken very seriously indeed. Thirty years clear of the military and he wears his tweed jacket and regimental tie as though the whole damn get-up is unforgivably casual.

It is the first time Leonard has been this close to him. The distance Remnant carefully places between himself and his colleagues has created a space where truths and untruths can grow wild: that he has his lunch carried up from the canteen on a silver tray, that he has curated a vast compendium of staff misbehaviour he refers to in private as The Discipline Files, that he lost his left eye in an accident involving shrapnel, a champagne cork, a swan, a bayonet. At this distance, Leonard thinks, judging from the pattern of scars, the truth is probably more prosaic: that someone once screwed a pint glass into his face.

“The concept is simple,” Remnant is saying. “Gatekeepers are officers who carry out covert investigations into fellow members of the intelligence community – into their colleagues and friends, let’s not beat around the bush – to ascertain whether or not they pose a threat to national security. Is that clear?”

“Everyone has heard of Gatekeeping,” says Leonard. “Everyone accepts that the office has to investigate leaks, misconduct, penetration by hostile agencies. Why is the existence of the Gatekeeper cadre so sensitive?”

“You’re in this room because people tell me you’re clever. What do *you* think is the answer?” The unspoken word *soldier* hovers at the end of every question Remnant asks.

Leonard turns his face to the window. It is the beginning of a long, hot English summer. Light hums indistinctly but fiercely through the reinforced glass. “You’re talking about a network of informers who maintain a constant watching brief on those around them,” he says.

“They spy on the spies, in other words. Which means they must be embedded throughout the office, in every department, carrying out their regular duties in addition to their covert work as Gatekeepers. Your own secret army of accountants, investigators, locksmiths, surveillance —”

“You’ll understand I can’t possibly confirm —”

“I don’t know what you expect your Gatekeepers to see,” says Leonard. “Anyone carrying out an act of betrayal wouldn’t do it in plain sight. Unless this is an espionage version of the broken windows theory. The person who goes on to sell secrets to the Chinese will at some point along the way steal an envelope from the stationery cupboard.”

“Don’t be facetious, Leonard. I’m not here to justify the programme – it has already been extremely successful. I’m here to tell you that you are now part of it.”

“I’m not being facetious. How many of us are there?”

Remnant is taken aback by the pronoun, by the speed of the pivot, the military swivel, worthy of a parade ground. The truth is that Leonard has already pinned this appointment to his swelling chest. He is proud to learn he is a Gatekeeper, even if he will never be allowed to wear the honour in public, even if he is not yet entirely sure what it will require of him, or how it will change his life forever in a matter of days. “How many?” Remnant asks. “Well, I don’t know exactly. I’m not sure you need to know either.”

“What do you mean, you don’t know exactly?”

Leonard doesn’t intend to be rude. What does it mean when it’s said that someone is a big character? In this case, it doesn’t mean he is loud or talkative. A person who

changes direction all the time comes across as uncertain. Leonard doesn't change direction; he is undeflectable; he picks an angle and doesn't stop until he reaches the edge of the paper. In truth his character is very much like everyone else's, with all the usual features – it's just this question of scale. And so whenever someone leans forward to take a closer look, as happens in routine social and professional exchanges like this one, what they see is an expanse of tough, impenetrable hide. The delicate eyelashes, the swishing tail, the whole comic outline – it takes time and perspective to understand that they are part of the picture too.

As is his habit, Leonard keeps going. “Are they busy, your Gatekeepers?”

“Only a few people on the top floor are cleared to know the answer to that question.”

“What are the successes you mentioned?”

“That's irrelevant to our conversation. Listen —”

“How long has the programme existed for?”

“Now wait a damn minute,” says Remnant.

He was warned about Leonard. Others are better *soft* interviewers, he was told – they make jokes, they smile and nod, they tack patiently towards the truth. But no one is a better *hard* interviewer than Leonard. That's what people say. Some spies are all about warmth, others are a blast of cold Arctic air. As the pre-eminent rat-catcher of his generation, a term bestowed upon him (behind his back) the day he won a confession from his seventh foreign agent in a year (an administrative assistant in the Passport Office recruited by the Iranians during a visit

to his maternal grandmother in Esfahan), Leonard is squarely in the Arctic camp. Remnant is unsure how to proceed. Like a child he simply blurts out what he wants to be true.

"I'm in charge here. All these questions." He recalls that being a spy is about persuading people to do things, not ordering them. "Curiosity can't be switched off, can it? Like modern cars, the bloody headlights are always on. No doubt that's one of the things that makes you so good at your job, Leonard," he says, smiling foolishly. "Which is what has prompted this invitation. That and your Russian expertise, and of course the fact that you've met her at least once."

"Met who?"

"Willa Karlsson. But let's take a step backwards, get to know each other, shall we? Why don't you tell me about yourself? Does anyone call you Len or Lenny?"

2

At first glance, and most definitely before you get to know him, you might assume Leonard is a collector of something obscurely antiquated, or a young librarian from Hull, or even a clergyman (an impression encouraged by his adoption of a uniform of sorts: buffed brown derby shoes, white Oxford shirt, medium-wale tan corduroy jacket and trousers). Thin, bespectacled, bald on top and with a careless attitude to the stuff at the sides that in some neighbourhoods of East London makes him look

more avant-garde than he intends. When at his most dangerous – poised to offend, to alarm, to intimidate – he stands at the angle of a lamp post hit by a slow-moving car. His fingers are long and delicate like those of a pianist or a surgeon, if there is such a thing as a pianist who only plays in a minor key, a surgeon whose only tool is the scalpel.

What might *explain* Leonard? As a child he was subject to periods of intense bullying at a series of provincial schools across Yorkshire, Lancashire and the Midlands. He idolized his father, who left when he was ten and didn't come back. For a few years after that, Leonard was convinced he could speak to animals. He developed a stutter. His mother struggled financially with four children, and he and his sisters all worked at least two part-time jobs from the age of fifteen onwards. Whatever narrow portion of happiness he claimed during those years was the result of a hard-fought negotiation with himself and the world around him. I'll be like *this* if I don't have to be like *that*. I'll make *this* concession but there's no way I'll give up *that*. The result is an unusual character. He now thinks of his childhood as the finely calibrated barrel of a gun that twisted him, that exerted huge pressure on him, that made him hurtle at breakneck speed not just to get away from *there*, but to get away from the next place as well, and the one after that. He abandoned a promising physics degree at Leeds University to take up a position editing the letters page of a minor literary magazine, before spending six months as an apprentice tailor in Cambridge and three years as a tutor in St Petersburg. In

the gaps he refurbished classic cars, acquired three languages and – most taxing of all – bluffed his way through two summers as a sommelier in a four-rossette restaurant deep in the Suffolk countryside.

Generally speaking, this was how he expected to spend the rest of his life. Drift was as comforting to him as dry land was to others; in a different era he might have signed on as a merchant seaman. He had no interest in the idea that he should be defined by a job, and he had left any notion of social embarrassment in the claustrophobic care of his three deeply conventional sisters. Leonard liked variety, he liked novelty, he liked change. At twenty-one he'd unexpectedly inherited enough from his paternal grandmother to ensure he'd stay afloat as long as he did a spot of paddling from time to time, and it was in this spirit that a few months before his thirtieth birthday, in the autumn of 2010, he completed an online application form for a position with British intelligence.

His plan, insofar as there was a plan, was to stay for a year or two, or until he got bored; he already had one eye on a job planting trees on an island off the East Coast of America. In any case, he had low expectations of getting through the opaque recruitment process. It wasn't a question of lacking confidence in himself and his abilities – that has *never* been Leonard's problem. And he knew that in this day and age a Yorkshire accent and state school education wouldn't be held against him, even in the famously cloistered world of British intelligence. No, the problem he expected to encounter was the security clearance. The problem was the vetting.

It didn't occur to him to lie. The interview had taken so long to arrange that he was already more than halfway through finalizing arrangements for the job in America, and it would have been antithetical to his approach to life, now he felt free, to constrain himself voluntarily within a framework of untruths that would have to be maintained. So when the woman from Vetting pressed on his doorbell, he told her briskly and with one eye on his watch that during periods in his life he had been promiscuous, that she should write down in her notebook that this included a teenage sexual encounter on a cross-channel ferry with a man whose name he didn't know, that he'd once slashed the tyres of a teacher who told his sister she was stupid, that he saw nothing wrong with smoking marijuana but had never much liked the taste, and that over the years he had both won and lost considerable sums of money at the poker table.

"That's very interesting," she said. "Is poker really gambling? I'm told it's more about skill than luck."

"Not if you're blind drunk it's not. Then it's luck all the way."

He was surprised to be offered a job. He put it down to his bracing honesty and the office's interest in recruiting candidates from every conceivable background. In due course it occurred to him that the woman from Vetting might have discerned a quality in him he hadn't been aware of himself, because from the second he joined he loved it. Looking back, he wondered whether his life really had been aimless up to that point, or whether it had merely been the wobble that happens when an arrow

first leaves the bow, because from his first day onwards he felt that he was flying straight and true and unswervingly into the heart of his country's enemies. He wouldn't have been embarrassed by such old-fashioned language. He flourished in an environment in which bad people did evil things – in which assassins murdered defectors, in which hackers stole secrets, in which deluded teenagers stabbed passers-by. He threw himself into the job with a Pauline zeal that was noted by his peers. After an early training exercise in which he left a role player in tears, Leonard's instructors wrote in their feedback that he displayed "an impressive ability to kneel on the bruise" and judged that he was "deployable on operations where the personal qualities required are independence, robustness and sheer bloody-minded persistence". "Thuggish ... despite appearances," they wrote. "Most definitely not a charmer."

It might well have been this quality that made the woman from Vetting overlook his shortcomings. She had introduced herself as Molly. It was only after he joined that he found out her real name was Willa.

3

"From our perspective in Gatekeeping, the last few years have been turbulent," says Charles Remnant. "We're not talking Cambridge Spy Ring turbulence, enough to ground an entire squadron. But we are talking headaches and nosebleeds in the cheap seats and – more importantly – up the road in first class."

The sound of footsteps outside. Remnant waits a full thirty seconds before continuing in a lower voice.

“You’ll be aware that several years ago the father of an analyst called Jonas Worth was kidnapped in Syria. Linked to that was the theft of a large number of sensitive documents. We still don’t know how many were taken or where they are now.” He shoots his cuffs. Scars form a tangled nest around the gleaming blue of his glass eye. “More recent still is the case of August Drummond,” he says. “He started to misbehave – if that’s not too mild a word – almost as soon as he joined, meaning that we endured five years of misconduct, leaks and betrayal before my team caught him. We still don’t understand his motives, or whether a dozen more things he’s responsible for are yet to come to light.”

“The Robin Hood case,” says Leonard.

Remnant struggles to contain his irritation. “I’d prefer it if you didn’t use that term,” he says.

“That’s what people call it, the Robin Hood case. Whether you like it or not. Where is he now?”

“Drummond? He turned up in Istanbul causing all sorts of trouble. Last I heard he’d broken his leg jumping off a rooftop on New Year’s Eve. Drunk, I expect. Bloody fool. I wish it had been his neck.”

“I’d be happy to speak to him for you,” says Leonard. “I might be able to get some answers.”

“I’ve heard about your ability to get answers. That’s another reason you’re sitting here – that whole ‘rat-catcher’ thing. But this is not about August Drummond or Jonas Worth. My point is simply that both cases involved

catastrophic breakdowns in discipline and caused huge damage, internally and externally. The Americans are aware of the Worth case because they were involved in our efforts to contain him. And the very public nature of Drummond's actions, along with that wretched 'Robin Hood' term everyone seems to insist on using, means there's not a pot washer or dinner lady in this building who hasn't heard of him. There are other cases too – not many, single digits, but enough to make us worry that something is shifting under our feet. Cases involving disobedience, minor leaks, a refusal to obey orders.”

Footsteps again, along with laughter. Remnant reacts as though his credibility has been challenged, as though someone has overheard his words and found them ridiculous. His face reddens.

“It's serious, damn serious. Just yesterday I briefed the DG about an archivist who has been behaving suspiciously,” he says. “An archivist, do you hear, someone with access to thousands of our most sensitive files. Can you imagine the damage he could do if he mislaid or sold or heaven forbid *published* them? And yet the DG asks me to proceed with a light touch.”

The laughter slows, settles into conversation. They listen in silence to an account of a night out at the weekend that ended with someone called Penny cheating on her boyfriend, who is called Martin. Although it isn't clear whether Penny or Martin even work in the office, Remnant tilts his head and makes a note in the corner of his pad. Leonard briefly admires him. He admires anyone without an off-switch. He remembers the one

operation he ran alongside August Drummond, against a visiting Russian businessman with links to the Kremlin, and the way August swooped down mid-stride to pick up a rain-soaked business card from the gutter outside the Connaught, only to read it, smile and slip it into his jacket pocket. “You never know when a contact in that line of work might be useful,” August murmured by way of explanation, and in that moment Leonard learned something about professional curiosity that he has never forgotten.

“Private Office has approved two measures in response to this ... crisis,” says Remnant. “The first is to bolster the well-being offer to staff. This means making sure everyone knows they can raise concerns in a safe, sympathetic environment and providing support for those dealing with personal or professional difficulties.”

It’s clear he finds talk of well-being uncomfortable. The ideas behind it are so alien he can’t describe them in his own words. Instead he has swallowed the official language whole and now regurgitates it on demand.

“I saw a notice the other day inviting staff to attend a ‘lethal strike drop-in’,” says Leonard.

“What’s your point?”

“Just that the office can sometimes tie itself in knots trying to be a modern, sympathetic employer. It can forget what it’s here for.” He waves a dismissive hand and leans forward, keen for Remnant to get to the point of all this. “You said Private Office has approved two measures. I assume the second is the Gatekeepers. Another reason to keep us secret.”

“What do you mean?”

“Only that it jars with the first measure,” says Leonard. “We want you to feel loved and looked after. But in case you don’t, we’ve asked the person at the next desk to keep an eye on you.”

“Wait a minute —”

“It’s not a criticism. The only important thing is the work. Nothing must be allowed to get in the way of the work.”

“We’re harnessing an untapped resource, Leonard. Instead of pointing our most talented officers outwards like antennae towards the threat of terrorism and espionage, we remind them that there are threats walking around this very building – in the queue for coffee, lifting weights in the gym. Suspect everyone, we tell them. Then come back and share your darkest and most paranoid thoughts with us.”

“It works, does it?”

“The way we caught August Drummond was by adopting a technique first used by the CIA to catch the Russian spy Aldrich Ames,” says Remnant. “They had over a hundred suspects. To whittle that list down, they gave it to ten highly trusted officers and asked them to pick five individuals they thought might be a traitor, relying on nothing but professional instinct. All ten officers picked Ames. We did the same with Drummond. The results weren’t quite so clear-cut, and in fact another name came top of the list, but the needle certainly flickered in his direction. We put a little pressure on him, he attacked one of my officers and the case fell open.”

“You said this is about Willa. Was her name top of that list?”

“You’re as exhausting as they say, Leonard.” Remnant looks at his watch. “We’ll come to what Willa may or may not have done in a moment. Before that, why don’t you tell me what you thought of her?”

4

It was hard to form an impression during a conversation that was by its very nature one-way. Over the course of five hours, Willa asked Leonard about his current and historical debts, his friends and family, what it took to make him lose his temper, the cities and towns in Russia he had visited, how much he spent on alcohol in an average week, whether he had attended political marches, and much more besides. In her mannerisms Willa was such a distillation of vagueness, uncertainty and absent-mindedness that it had the effect of giving her character a kind of clear intensity. One of her pink woollen socks was pulled up to knee height while the other bunched slackly around her ankle, and her voluminous blue skirt was stained with egg yolk. There was a warm and attractive face beneath her smudged glasses, but it was often obscured by sighs, grimaces and shakes of the head. Life for Molly, as she called herself, was an endless series of small frustrations – with pens that leaked, with tissues that couldn’t be coaxed out of sleeves.

When she went to the toilet Leonard picked up her notebook and read:

Candidate watches pornography on average once a week. Material viewed is heterosexual and mainstream. He does not purchase access to material or have accounts in his or any other name. He has never viewed material featuring real or staged violence, coercion, underage participants or bestiality.

Candidate drinks alcohol on average three times a week and consumes between five and eight units on each occasion.

On another page he saw:

Onions (red)

Chicken stock

Gravy granules

Shoelaces

Pork chop x 2

Folded between the back pages of her notebook was a quick crossword from a tabloid newspaper; the clue to the only answer filled in was “entrance to room (4)”. And the thought that flitted briefly across Leonard’s mind that night, just before he fell asleep, was that Molly herself was a bit too much like a quick crossword, intended by its creator to be understood at a glance and scribbled over with words such as “eccentric” and “crazy” and “harmless” – an observation he put down to spies simply being spies.

“Willa has been in a medically induced coma since being admitted to hospital a month or so ago,” says Remnant. “Her doctors suspect she has been the victim of a poisoning, chiefly because of the suddenness, complexity and severity of her symptoms, but they have been unable to identify any known toxins or chemicals in her system. Repeated examinations of her flat by experts have failed to come up with anything. If she was poisoned, therefore, it is likely to have been by a state actor, given the challenges involved in creating and delivering a poison we cannot detect.”

He surveys his possessions, laid out in front of him on the table, and adjusts their formation, moving his pencil a fraction to one side while on the other flank a plain brown envelope with Leonard’s name written on it advances three inches.

“Thoughts turn to Moscow when state-sponsored assassinations are discussed. But we all agree this is not a plausible theory. Killing a Russian defector is one thing. Killing a British intelligence officer, albeit one who retired a year ago, would be unprecedented. And let’s not forget what Willa was – a vetting officer who had nothing whatsoever to do with Russian work. Vetting is essentially a function of HR. She had access to some staff data, this is true, but not to the wider intelligence work that is our bread and butter.

“By any measure her career was uneventful. When she joined more than thirty years ago she was briefly thought

to be a rising star, but her file shows that she requested the move to the vetting department soon after and stayed there until her retirement last year. She was reasonably diligent, but far from being the most dynamic, curious, intelligent or ambitious member of her team. She never sought promotion, her appraisal markings were mediocre at best. No one remembers her ever asking suspiciously pointed questions.” Remnant shakes his head. He looks tired. “There is simply no conceivable reason why the Russians would try to kill her. This was our position, and we have spent a good deal of time, energy and political capital reassuring the police and the Home Secretary that there was nothing here to concern them.”

This was our position. Leonard hears the change in tense. He leans forward.

“On Friday a GCHQ outpost picked up a fragment of chatter between two Russian SVR officers,” says Remnant, “one of whom referred in cryptic terms to an English oak being chopped down. It made no sense in the broader conversation, only as a code of some kind. Remember the wider context, Leonard – remember Jonas Worth, remember August Drummond. One more scandal will harm our reputation in ways that will take a generation or more to heal. And reputation is *everything* in this game. Reputation is the reason our friends work with us, but it’s also the reason our enemies keep their distance. Without reputation, London will be just another playground for the Russians – another Brussels, another Vienna.

“For this reason we have taken the difficult decision *not* to inform Whitehall about the latest Russian intelligence.

Before we do that we want to get a full assessment of the situation, but in the most discreet way possible. Which is where you come in. You are going to find out for us within the next two weeks whether there's anything at all in Willa Karlsson's life that has even the slightest stink of Russia."

The word "mission" is never used: it is too dramatic, too religious, too *American*. But this is precisely how Leonard feels about the task he is being given. To shine a light into the darkness, to sacrifice himself for a greater cause – he will do whatever it takes. Leonard feels he was created from dust for moments like this.

"You have been chosen because you know the Russian subject well enough to recognize the signs if you see them," says Remnant. "More importantly, you've been chosen because we want answers, not some wishy-washy fudge of an investigation after which we're none the wiser. We want you to stick out those famously pointed elbows and get to the bottom of this, Leonard. If there's something to be found, find it. If there's nothing to be found, convince me you have turned over every conceivable stone. You have two weeks from today. Is that clear?"

"The worst possible scenario is that Willa was a Russian agent, something went wrong and they tried to kill her to cover their tracks," says Leonard. "Is that what you're asking me to do – to find out if she was a Russian agent?"

"Yes."

"She fell ill a month ago. You haven't been sitting on your hands all this time. What have you found?"

"Nothing of any value. Bear in mind that because of the sensitivity of this subject we have been unable to

deploy the traditional battery of resources. No more than six people in this building are aware of this. We've had one analyst looking at data – at Willa's phone records, travel, medical history, known associates. But what are we looking for exactly? She didn't have a mobile phone, she didn't use email, she preferred cash. She hasn't been out of the country in the last ten years. It's like trying to spot a shipwreck hundreds of feet beneath a choppy sea. The only way to get answers is to drop someone down to carry out a fingertip search of the ocean floor, and that someone is you. What are you working on now?"

"Oligarchs."

"Anything that can't be paused for two weeks?"

"No."

"Put in a request for leave. Your manager doesn't know anything about this. The other reason we've chosen you is that you've met Willa, which will come in useful as we've told the police that according to our personnel records you're her long-lost nephew. They'll give you access to her flat. Have a nose around, but don't make too much noise or smash anything up as there's a neighbour downstairs with sensitive ears. Create a suitable legend for yourself: a boring job, family circumstances, a home far away from here. We've allocated a central London property for you to use as a base. Here are the keys and several sets of alias documents, including one with a Karlsson surname, in case that comes in handy. I suggest you start immediately: the clock is —"

Leonard stands up so quickly that his chair rolls back and hits the wall with a loud crash.