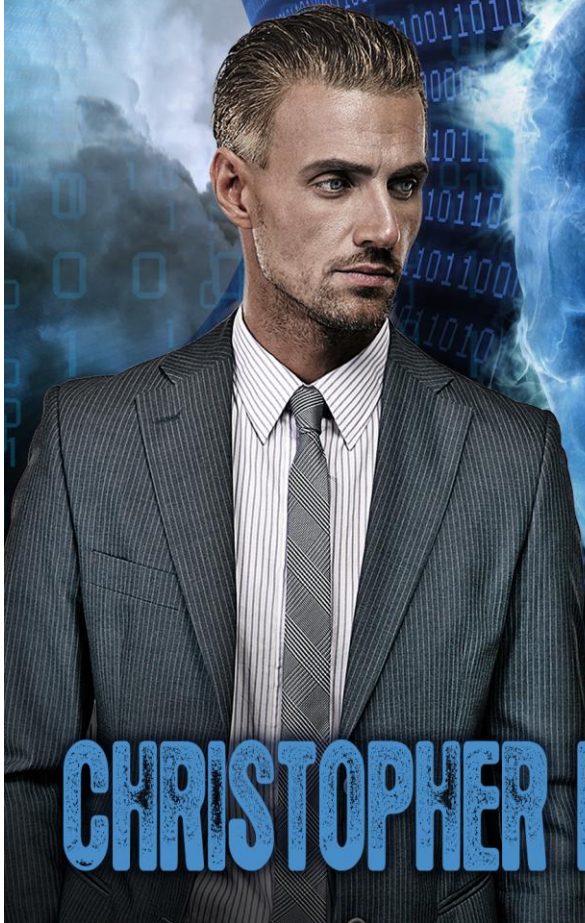


THE WULFF AGENDA



CHRISTOPHER HEPWORTH

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Prologue

September 1970

The possibility of discovery was ever-present for Leo, but the bravado of youth led the young schoolboy to downplay the risk. He knew he was unpopular with the other boys in his school, so he gained some solace by writing an extensive secret journal that documented their cruel taunts and tricks. Leo had found that written self-analysis was not enough to curb the dark thoughts that filled his mind, so he turned his attention to those he held responsible for his unhappiness. He began to catalogue the behaviours of fellow classmates and teachers in meticulous detail. Each night, Leo would record who the most popular boys were, whom they mixed with, and which teachers were conducting illicit liaisons with their pupils, or with each other. He recorded how much money boys spent at the little tuckshop in the playground and listed their hobbies and interests. He paid particular attention to conversations, such as when they talked about the girls in the neighbouring school, and noted any emerging religious or political opinions. No aspect of his peers' and teachers' lives was excluded from his journal.

Within six months, Leo's diary was a trove of explosive information he knew would be a source of great power within the school. He also knew it could do untold harm if it ever fell into the wrong hands.

Leo lived in a rundown house in a poor neighbourhood. His father had died in an industrial accident five years earlier and his profligate mother had wasted the meagre payout on a wardrobe of fur coats, gaudy jewellery and liquor. She lived her lonely life in a cocoon of bitterness and blamed her eccentric thirteen-year-old son for her misery. Leo went to extraordinary lengths to hide his journal from his domineering mother but in recent weeks, he had become careless and merely hid it under his mattress.

Leo could sense the aura of hostility hanging over the house even before he pushed open the front door. He felt his heart race and his stomach churn as he entered the tiny hallway. He hung up his school jacket on a wall hook and placed his satchel on the little stool by the cupboard. He composed himself for five seconds before he entered the

kitchen to greet his mother.

‘What the hell is this?’ screeched the skinny, prematurely grey-haired woman thrusting the thick diary inches from Leo’s face. In her other hand was a half-empty bottle of cheap wine.

‘It’s private. You shouldn’t be reading it.’ Leo tried to snatch it from his mother’s hands.

‘I read what you said about me!’ she shrieked, ‘I am not a drunk!’

Leo had been tempted to write down the complete litany of his mother’s abusive behaviour; at this moment, he was relieved he merely catalogued her excessive drinking habit.

‘Give it back. It’s not yours,’ he pleaded.

A triumphant look flashed in Leo’s mother’s eyes as she inched towards the fireplace. She tossed the diary into the middle of the blazing fire, and then picked up a poker to stoke the flames even higher, warding off attempts by her son to rescue his treasured journal.

‘How many times have I told you that everything you write down will come back to haunt you?’ she said, her eyes flashing with anger. ‘Don’t blame me if the Night Hag returns tonight to punish you.’

Leo felt a sense of terror at the mention of the Night Hag, who had been violating his dreams with increasing frequency for the last three years.

‘The doctor says she is not a real person,’ argued Leo, looking in distress as the fire took possession of his precious journal. ‘He says it’s a medical condition and I will grow out of it. You were there when he said that, Mother.’

‘The doctor is a liar. The Night Hag comes to punish your evil thoughts and deeds. Now go to your room and don’t expect me to wake you up when she comes to smother you with a pillow.’

* * *

It was late into the night when he smelled the familiar, fetid odour of soiled

underwear and damp grass permeate his bedroom. He knew the Night Hag came when he entered the zone between wakefulness and sleep, but his fear kept him alert. The temperature dropped to the point where his breath billowed out in front of him. Leo heard the ancient creature shuffling her way across the room towards his bed. He tried to grasp the broken broom handle lying next to him in his bed but her paralysing powers had already immobilised him. Trying to move his head to stare at the creature that was about to climb on his chest, he found he was unable to move a muscle. Leo did not attempt to scream; he knew no sound would emerge from his mouth.

Leo's bed rocked as the Night Hag climbed onto his chest and he felt unable to breathe. The pressure of her bony knees dug into his rib cage as she settled herself down and waited several minutes for the terror to build up inside Leo's head. The odour of her putrid body was overpowering but he sensed she was agitated and not entirely in control of the situation. Leo felt her probing his mind to discover evil thoughts that had summoned her to his bedroom and to determine the appropriate punishment he should receive.

But this time, Leo was awake. The anger he felt at his mother burning his diary made him determined to resist the Night Hag. He filled his head with positive energy, making it hard for her to overpower him. Leo imagined himself a leader; a man whom people looked up to and respected. He imagined a glorious future where for once, he was in command and people shook in fear at his name.

The Hag hissed angrily through the gaps in her teeth as she failed to penetrate the wall of defensive energy Leo put up to thwart her. He felt the effects of her paralysis wane throughout his body and he managed to turn his head so he could stare deep into the dark pits of her eyes. The hideous creature that knelt on his chest shimmered in and out of focus and then whimpered with distress.

'Your three years of terror and control are over, old woman,' Leo said so clearly that he surprised even himself.

From deep inside his head he heard the Night Hag sneer, 'You may think you have conquered your terrors, but I will remain a shadow in your consciousness, never to disappear entirely.'

‘That may be so but from now on, you will do *my* bidding,’ Leo replied. As the pressure on his chest abated, the Night Hag faded from view.

CHAPTER 1

March 2014. Pushkin Centre, Donetsk

The English negotiator realised he had made a serious miscalculation in coming to Donetsk. Indeed, he would be lucky to escape the city alive. He had defied travel warnings and advice from his work colleagues, insisting the recent Ukrainian demonstrations were just a storm in a teacup. In fact, he had dodged no fewer than three separate armed gangs on his way to the Pushkin Centre that morning while they were in the act of storming the strategic administrative buildings in the centre of the city.

He looked at the large, broad-shouldered Cossack sitting across the desk from him and watched as his expression changed from mild annoyance to outright hostility. He silently acknowledged he had almost certainly overplayed his hand and prepared himself for a violent reaction.

‘You dare insult me with derisory offer? You get best software engineer in world for your pitiful English pound.’

The bottom of the nearby Kalmius River in Donetsk was littered with the bodies of those who had dared to cross software oligarch, Sergei Kaledin. Sam Jardine looked around the luxurious office, considering his reply. Framed ancestral portraits of moustachioed Cossack warriors on horseback glared down at him from every angle. ‘Sergei, I’m giving you twenty million pounds a year for the exclusive use of two hundred of your best software engineers and unlimited storage space on your data servers for the next two years. There can be no conditions or favours as part of the contract.’

‘We build brand new extension to Kyivskiy data centre. It be most advanced in world and you not get better price, even in India. No matter, I give it to Russia.’ Kaledin made a show of packing away his paperwork and swivelled in his seat, turning his broad back on Sam.

Sam’s employer, Smart Lifestyle had just become a major force in the social media industry but it was burning through mountains of cash at an alarming rate. In the last eighteen months, the company had experienced a thousand-fold increase in high net-

worth clients. But the company could no longer contain its costs, nor could it provide sufficient storage space to cope with the tsunami of personal data flooding into the company's servers. Smart Lifestyle was weeks away from bankruptcy and if he returned from Donetsk empty-handed, it was the end of the road for Smart Lifestyle.

'Don't mistake me. I spent months researching your company,' Sam countered, 'that's why I am offering you a long-term deal with a top British company that has created a whole new niche in the social media industry. We have eighty per cent of Western Europe's top business elite and forty per cent of America's top earning celebrities as our customers. We have just broken into the Russian political and business market. In the last three months, Smart Lifestyle has become the social media company of choice for Russia's power brokers. There has been nothing like it in the history of social media. But if you don't want to share in our East European success story, Sergei, just say the word.'

At that moment, Sam knew he had him. Try as he might, Kaledin could not disguise his enthusiasm for the deal. Sam had done his homework and knew how badly Kaledin craved to be accepted by mainstream Russian business and the political elite. They had shunned him for the last twenty years and considered him an ill-educated, provincial bumpkin.

'I understand. If you are not interested, well ...' Sam shrugged, as if he had a line of alternative suppliers banging down his door.

'Twenty million is fair price,' Sergei admitted reluctantly. He held out his hand to Sam, who shook it with gusto. 'Together, we create biggest company in Ukraine. No?' He pulled out a magnificent silver fountain pen from his jacket pocket and signed the contract with a flourish before pushing it across the desk to Sam. The big Cossack pushed himself up from his leather-backed chair and walked across to his liquor cabinet. He pulled out a bottle of vodka and poured two generous measures into separate glasses. He handed one to Sam and drained his own in one swallow. Sam refused to be intimidated and followed Kaledin's lead before slamming the vodka glass onto the desk. He blinked back the tears and stifled the cough erupting in his throat.

'*Na Zdorovie,*' Sam said – 'To your health.' It was the only Russian phrase he knew.

‘Now you do me small favour,’ Kaledin said enthusiastically.

Sam exhaled in exasperation. Nothing was ever simple in Donetsk. ‘What is it, Sergei?’

Kaledin pulled a photo out of his jacket pocket and handed it to Sam, who stared at the image of a raven-haired beauty. ‘You make my niece, Xenia, director of Smart Lifestyle in London.’

‘Sergei, there are at least a dozen European Union rules preventing her from working in the UK – and that’s without taking into account my own personal integrity.’

‘She not pretty enough? Is that it?’ Kaledin scoffed. He placed the photo of his niece back in his top pocket, reached across the desk and snatched the multi-million pound contract out of Sam’s hands. His face was black as thunder and Sam realised how volatile the Cossack could be.

‘Look, it’s nothing to do with her looks, Sergei. London is a dangerous place for such a young woman. Why would you want to send her there?’

‘She wild and a bit ...’ Sergei tapped the side of his head as he searched for the appropriate English word.

‘Crazy?’

‘... stubborn. But she work hard. You turn her into smart woman with elegant English manner.’

‘Sergei, I can’t give her a senior management position in a British company without completing a tonne of paperwork. It’s just not done. Ukraine is not even a member of the European Union yet. Look, send me her CV and I will give it to the appropriate people.’

Sam reached across the desk and snatched the contract back out of Kaledin’s hands. The Cossack seemed mollified by Sam’s response. ‘Now we go celebrate in gentlemen’s club.’

Sam sighed again. ‘I can assure you, Sergei, that is not necessary. A quiet restaurant would be more than sufficient.’ The ominous atmosphere of Donetsk unnerved him and Sam had to admit he was something of a prude when it came to visiting ‘gentlemen’s clubs’. He had plans to catch an early plane to London the next morning.

‘You not like girl?’ Kaledin asked, eyeing Sam’s lean, six-foot frame. ‘You young

and handsome. Beautiful Donetsk girls throw themselves at you.'

Sam was as partial to ladies as the next man, and his rugged northern English features made him a popular catch, although he was bemused by his sexual magnetism. 'Of course I do,' Sam answered hastily, 'but I have a girlfriend in London.' It was a lie. Sam's neurotic girlfriend, Sally had walked out on him the previous week, lamenting his lack of class and ambition.

'Okay. Alexis take you to "quiet restaurant". I join later when I finish paperwork.' Kaledin stood and slapped Sam on the back. Two minutes later, Kaledin Corporation's sales manager, Alexis Martynov walked into the office. Unlike his boss, he was urbane and spoke perfect English. Sam resigned himself to Kaledin's hospitality and suspected it would be a long night.

* * *

'You take me to London,' the tall stripper who had sat herself in Alexis' lap said to Sam. 'They have many good clubs in Soho. I earn thousand pounds a night.'

'I have already told you, Svetlana, I can't take you to London. There are rules.'

'Go to hell, Englishman.' Svetlana pouted and glared at Sam as she stood and stormed off to the other side of the room.

Sam shrugged his shoulders. He had protested when Alexis took him to the nearest gentleman's club, but eventually decided that diplomacy was best served by going with the flow. He did not want to antagonise his hosts any further.

'You have done well, Sam.' Alexis sipped his vodka rather than gulp it down. 'Sergei likes you. He says you are an astute businessman and will be a good mentor for his niece, Xenia.'

'Actually, I won't be mentoring his niece,' Sam replied as he raised his beer glass to Alexis, 'but Sergei is an incredible entrepreneur. I believe our two companies will forge an enduring partnership.'

'There are not many international companies willing to invest in Ukraine while we are experiencing civil unrest. But I suppose you knew that when you drove such a hard

bargain.'

'Will the Russians move in?' Sam asked, taking a sip of his Obolon beer.

Alexis shrugged his shoulders. 'Who knows? Russia is nervous about the politicians in Kiev talking about joining the European Union and NATO.'

'Why did the armed gangs take over the buildings this morning? I thought Donetsk was safe and all the trouble was in Kiev.'

'Most of the people here are ethnic Russians and do not trust the new government in Kiev.' He swallowed another shot of vodka and scanned the room, looking for trouble. 'They believe the revolution has been hijacked by extreme right-wing ultra-nationalists in Kiev. The politicians have proposed repressive legislation against Russian speakers, and have purged the parliament of pro-Russians. That's virtually all the politicians from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Most of us wish to remain part of Ukraine, but we fear we are being persecuted by the new government.'

Alexis stared at an outburst of activity at the other side of the club. Six large men in army jackets descended upon a table of businessmen. The three strippers at the table scattered as wooden clubs and fists flew in all directions. Alexis relaxed once he decided the fracas had nothing to do with him.

'Shouldn't we call the police?' Sam asked nervously, as a man in a dark grey suit was beaten across the head with a large wooden stick. Chairs were upturned and plates fell to the floor.

'Sometimes I weep for Ukraine,' Alexis commented, ignoring Sam's question, unconcerned by the violence taking place across the room. 'The vast majority of Ukrainians just want to live their lives in peace.'

Two army-jacketed brutes pulled an Asiatic looking man from his chair and pinned him against the wall. They took it in turns to pummel him in the stomach. A bottle of vodka crashed to the floor before the violence ended abruptly. The patrons of the gentlemen's club relaxed and resumed their conversations.

'Is the Asian man all right?' Sam asked. He jumped as a shot was fired at another table. The room went silent until it was evident no-one had actually been killed or maimed.

‘Unfortunately, Donetsk has been ruined by separatist paramilitary thugs who take things too far. We have become a magnet for every Russian lunatic with a spare AK-47 and an army surplus jacket who fancies himself as a bit of a Rambo.’

‘I think the Russian lunatics are headed our way,’ said Sam in alarm.

‘The unrest brings unwelcome attention on Donetsk and it’s bad for business,’ Alexis continued, ‘We’re losing market share to the Indians and the Filipinos. But of course, you knew that when you low-balled Sergei with your twenty-million-pound offer.’

‘Alexis, I really think we should get out of here. They are heading straight for our table.’

Four thugs had now surrounded their table. A stocky man with a military haircut and a tattoo on his neck drew a handgun from beneath his jacket.

‘Don’t worry about them, Sam, they won’t open fire. It’s how business is done here. They probably want Sergei to increase his offer for the new office in Mariupol. I’ll deal with it.’

Sam nudged Alexis hard. ‘Alexis, for God’s sake. That old guy has just drawn a bloody great rifle from his bag.’

The rifleman was much more purposeful than the other hoodlums. He had a round face with a receding hairline and a thick moustache. Sam could not recall seeing such a menacing expression since his encounter with hired killer Jacques on board the *Iroquois* a couple of years earlier.

At last, Alexis focused on the gunman, and paled. ‘My God, it’s you! Anton Zhirkov – the Kalashnikov!’ exclaimed Alexis in English. His eyes widened with fear as he tried to rise from his chair. ‘So you finally emerged from your lair. May God have mercy upon the poor people of Donetsk.’

The gun erupted with an ear-splitting roar and Alexis collapsed to the floor. Before Sam could take in this horrific spectacle, the Kalashnikov had swivelled his rifle and pointed it at him.

* * *

It wasn't long before the Kalashnikov vanished from the club, along with the remaining patrons. One of his goons stood guarding the doorway. The stocky man with the neck tattoo set up a video camera on a tripod opposite Sam's table. The only sound in the nearly deserted club was the incessant whining of an industrial vacuum cleaner being manoeuvred around the tables by a tall woman in ill-fitting jeans, a dirty apron and an unattractive hairnet. Every so often, she tut-tutted at the spilt drinks and upturned tables from the recent fracas. A second cleaning lady wheeled a trolley around the room, collecting empty bottles, glasses and rubbish from the tables. She found a half-smoked cigarette in an overflowing ashtray and gleefully placed it between her lips. She paused as she lit up and then continued to push the trolley around the room, puffing on the cigarette as she went. Both women ignored preparations for Sam's presumed execution in the far corner of the club.

Meanwhile, another man known to Ukrainian authorities as 'the Ticket Collector', or just 'the Collector' to his associates, laid his instruments of death on the table in front of Sam with a bored expression on his face. Sam watched with increasing concern as a roll of electrical tape, a balaclava, a stick of RDX explosives and a timing device were placed on the table next to the dirty glasses.

The Collector connected the stick of explosive to a thin copper wire and then completed the circuit by wiring the whole contraption to the timing device. He checked his watch and set the timer so the device would explode in ten minutes. When he had completed his preparations, he placed the explosive stick in Sam's jacket and buttoned it up. There was enough nitroglycerine in the cigar-shaped device to send Sam and half the building into the next dimension.

Suddenly, three strippers appeared from a side door and walked nonchalantly across the dance floor towards the exit without glancing in Sam's direction. Sam noticed they had changed out of their skimpy club attire and were dressed in jeans and long, thick coats to protect themselves against the blast of Siberian air that would hit them as they exited onto the street. He saw one of the women write something, presumably her phone number, on a piece of paper and slip it into the shirt pocket of the thug guarding the door.

The man behind the camera raised a thumb to signal he was ready and the Collector

slipped the balaclava over his head, picked up the thick roll of black electrical tape and signalled to Sam to put his hands behind his back. Sam glanced around the room in desperation, knowing it was his last chance to make a break for it. The cameraman anticipated Sam's reaction and grunted a warning, fingering an AK-47 slung over his shoulder.

The whine of the vacuum cleaner intensified in pitch as the cleaning woman headed towards Sam's table. She gestured to him to raise his feet as she ran the machine backwards and forwards under the table. The woman recoiled in horror when she discovered Alexis' corpse slumped against the wall, turned to face the Collector and glared at him. Sam watched on as she berated him and the cameraman in Russian. From her mannerisms, he guessed she was complaining about the mess and how long it would take her to clean the blood spatter off the wall. Sam was astonished at the woman's bravado, as the verbal exchange escalated into a full-blown argument. The lady who was collecting empty glasses purposefully stubbed out her cigarette and wheeled her fully laden trolley towards the ruckus.

The Collector finally lost his patience. '*Otvali dam!*' he swore rudely at the two female cleaners in Russian and signalled with his thumb for them to leave the club immediately.

The tall woman sighed loudly, leaned down and switched off her noisy vacuum cleaner. When she straightened up, she was brandishing an MP-443 Grach pistol in her right hand and rammed it hard against the Collector's temple. At the same moment, the second cleaner pulled out a Makarov pistol from under a pile of vodka-soaked cleaning cloths on her trolley. She whipped the pistol butt hard against the side of the cameraman's head before he could react. The cameraman fell unconscious at her feet and his AK-47 clattered noisily to the floor.

'Actually, it be you who need to fuck off,' she said in broken English, pulling the Collector's balaclava off his head. 'Gregor Dimitriov! I knew it was you, you piece of shit,' she said, recognising the would-be assassin. She pulled off her hairnet and shook out a mane of lustrous, raven-black hair.

'You!' the Collector was shocked as he recognised his assailant, his eyes glistening

with fear and beads of sweat popped onto his forehead.

Sam glanced at the doorway and saw that the guard had also been disarmed and forced to lie on the ground by the three strippers in long coats. One of them was holding a pistol against the back of his head.

‘Sit!’ commanded the raven-haired woman as she pushed the Grach pistol barrel hard against the Collector’s temple. The man complied and began babbling for his life in Russian.

‘You want cigar?’ she asked the Collector. Sam watched as she sauntered over, winked at him cheekily and pulled the stick of high explosive RDX out of his jacket pocket. She walked back to the seated assassin.

‘*Otkroy rot,*’ she said to the squirming assassin – ‘Open your mouth’. She removed the timing device and stuffed the lethal cigar-shaped explosive package in his open mouth.

The second woman now focused the camera on the shaking Collector as the raven-haired woman walked behind the Collector and put her arms around the whimpering man’s shoulders. He jumped at her touch, as if a deadly viper had slithered down his collar.

‘Good evening, Anton Zhirkov,’ she purred for the benefit of the camera, ‘You send this filth to Sergei Kaledin’s club.’ She patted the assassin on the cheek. ‘Next time he come to club, he get proper Donetsk blow job.’ The woman produced a disposable Bic lighter and flicked it perilously close to the stick of high-grade RDX explosive quivering like a jelly in the Collector’s lips. Having made her point to the camera, she walked over to the unconscious cameraman and picked up his AK-47 from the floor. She then walked over to a speechless Sam, took his hand and pulled him up from his chair. His legs were still shaking and he felt unsteady on his feet. Threading her arm through his, she walked him to the door of the club, stepping over the prone guard as they made their way out.

‘Uncle Sergei say you look at my résumé?’ Xenia said cheerfully, as she pulled out a flimsy, folded single sheet of paper from the back pocket of her jeans and placed it neatly into Sam’s inside jacket pocket.

CHAPTER 2

As the black taxicab pulled into the factory gates of Smart Lifestyle's head office in South-East London, Sam knew something was wrong. A stream of office workers were heading to their vehicles carrying personal effects in an assortment of cardboard boxes. A group of employees were huddled outside the reception area under the Smart Lifestyle logo. Sam recognised his colleagues from the procurement team. The three women in the group were in tears and giving each other hugs while the men muttered mutinously. Sam stepped out of the taxi with his wheeled cabin bag and headed towards his second-in-command, Juliette Woodgate.

'Juliette, what's happening?'

Juliette tried to smile, but could only sniffle into her tissue. 'Sam, we thought you wouldn't be coming back. Haven't you heard?'

'Heard what?' he replied in alarm.

'The executives have sold Smart Lifestyle to the American company, Wulff Communications. They thought your Ukraine negotiation was just a pipedream and would never work. As part of the sale, they're making two hundred administration staff redundant. They have sacked the entire procurement team, including you, most of finance and half of human resources. They gave us two hours' notice to clear our desks.'

'Here, let me help you.' Sam handed Juliette the handle of his cabin bag, took her box and walked with her to her bright red Mini Cooper. 'Juliette, I have to get into the building to find out what's going on. Please round up the team and tell them not to go home. I'll see if I can get their jobs back by lunchtime.'

The petite blonde forced a smile. Sam placed the box on the bonnet of her car and she handed him back his wheeled cabin bag. She extracted a fresh tissue from her handbag and blew her button nose, shifting her silver-framed glasses to wipe her eyes. As a single mother with an eight-year-old son, losing her job was devastating. Pushing back her pixie-cut hair over her ears she said, 'Leo Wulff himself is in the building. He's holding a conference in the boardroom with the executive team. Andrew has been told to clear his desk by midday.'

‘Thanks Juliette. I’ll let you know how I go.’

Sam strolled back to the building, his mind in a whirl. Wulff Communications was a multinational media company based in New York. It owned a string of publications, TV stations and advertising agencies. It was typical of the predatory American company to swoop on a growing business suffering severe cashflow problems. Sam’s Ukraine strategy had come twenty-four hours too late.

The reception area was crowded with redundant employees making their way out of the building with their personal possessions. Adding to the crush of people was a group of sharp-suited American executives, who were busy signing in on the visitors’ register. Many had come straight from the airport and like Sam, were pulling wheeled baggage. Sam assumed they were headed to the board conference room on the second floor. Two burly security guards stood near the reception desk and watched for potential troublemakers. Sam bypassed the reception desk. A security guard looked at Sam and checked his clipboard with a frown on his face, but he was encircled by a party of Americans asking for directions. Sam entered one of the lifts while the security guard was distracted. He held his identity badge to the card reader and pushed the button for the second floor. The lift refused to move. The gaggle of Americans walked in behind Sam and as one of them held their visitor pass to the card reader, the lift sprang into action.

‘Have you just flown in from New York?’ asked a tall, well-dressed American looking down at Sam’s luggage. At fifty-eight years old and with movie star good looks, Leo Wulff exuded confidence. Only his greying temples betrayed his age. ‘I don’t think we’ve met.’ The other men in the lift turned to look at Sam, envious he had managed to monopolise the great man’s attention.

‘I just arrived from Donetsk,’ replied Sam casually.

‘You don’t say? I have been meaning to go there. Did you check out any companies worth buying? There should be some great opportunities for those of us with balls of steel.’

There were murmurs of assent from those in the lift as if they had all been thinking the same thing.

‘No, sir. That wasn’t the purpose of my visit. But I did manage to secure the services

of two hundred of the best software programmers in the world and enough data storage space to last two years.’

‘How much did that cost?’

‘Twenty million a year.’

‘Good Lord! That’s incredible.’ The big American was impressed. The suits that surrounded him all nodded in unison while one of their number echoed, ‘That’s incredible.’ The man held out his hand to Sam as the lift doors opened on the second floor. ‘Leonard Wulff. Catch me after the boardroom conference.’

Sam grasped Wulff’s hand and shook it. ‘Sam Jardine.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Sam. Now let’s show these workshy Limey bastards how a company should be run.’

* * *

Leo Wulff was both charming and intimidating as he made a well-executed presentation to Smart Lifestyle’s executive team on how things were going to be different from here on. Wulff expected total dedication to the job and loyalty to the company. Anyone looking for an easy life was free to walk out the door with a redundancy cheque in his or her pocket.

‘Any takers? There’s a hundred grand for anyone who can’t take the heat. I only want men and women with fire in their bellies and loyalty in their hearts. Smart Lifestyle will be a household name around the world within twelve months.’

Sam watched chief operations officer, Doug Firth step forward. He was an honest, hard-working man in his early sixties. ‘To be honest, Mr Wulff, I don’t need this crap. I hate your TV stations and their right-wing agenda. They’re nothing but mouthpieces for religious extremists and Republican Party hawks. Your so-called newspapers are an insult to the intelligence. You can count me out.’

‘You have the right to your opinions, misguided as they may be,’ Wulff replied evenly. With a flourish, he wrote out a cheque for a hundred thousand pounds. Doug Firth took the cheque and with his grey-haired head held high, walked out of the

boardroom. ‘Anyone else?’

There was silence in the room, but Sam could sense the discontent and negativity building among the remaining senior executives. Two more managers came forward to collect their cheques. Both were in the twilight of their careers and had been doing the maths in their heads.

Wulff resumed his presentation and pointed to a number of charts displayed on the screen behind him. They projected spectacular growth in specialised social media products. Smart Lifestyle’s revolutionary ‘LifeSmart’ communication device would become the must-have accessory of the decade among the world’s elite.

While Wulff spoke, Sam studied the American executives who shadowed their enigmatic boss like adoring puppies. They were mostly in their mid-thirties he guessed, and good-looking with perfect white teeth.

‘My change management people you see here will help make the transition as easy as possible for you,’ said Wulff, indicating his team of suits. He paused to take a drink of water. As he did so, he looked around the room and caught Sam’s eye. ‘As an example of my commitment to you, I have flown in Wulff Communication’s special negotiator all the way from Ukraine to be with us this morning. Mr Sam Jardine is one of my brightest managers and I have asked him to be at your service during the entire transition period. This talented young man has just procured the services of two hundred of the world’s best software engineers. Our leadership in the field of artificial intelligence in the social media industry is assured by his actions.’ Wulff let the significance of Sam’s achievement sink in for a moment. ‘Not only that, he has secured enough data storage space to accommodate the company’s growth for the next two years. All this for the incredibly low sum of twenty million dollars a year.’

Wulff looked at Sam and smiled. Sam wondered whether he should correct Wulff’s misinterpretation of his role or the fact he’d mixed up his currencies, but somehow the moment passed. Besides, it would have been unthinkable to interrupt the great man while he was in full flow. ‘Sam is one of Wulff Communication’s brilliant new leaders, destined for great things. Sam, would you introduce yourself to the executive team and say a few words about yourself?’

Sam hesitantly stood. He could see the consternation on the faces of Smart Lifestyle's executives. Sure, he was a great negotiator and head of the procurement team but in their eyes, he barely deserved to be in the same room. He could see them struggling to understand the connection between Wulff Communications' takeover of their firm and Sam's sudden elevation in status. But like Sam, they did not feel brave enough to question Wulff's summary of the situation.

'Good morning, gentlemen,' Sam began, trying to avoid direct eye contact with his former bosses, 'We are fortunate today to be in the company of one of the world's great businessmen. Mr Leonard Wulff has shown us a vision of what will be achieved under his dynamic leadership. My recent negotiations in Donetsk may have secured a bright future for this factory,' Sam paused for effect, 'but I can assure you there will be bigger and better deals to come. The eight dynamic men and women of the Penge procurement team have pledged their loyalty to Wulff Communications and are looking for more opportunities to make Mr Wulff's vision a reality.'

Sam glanced across at Wulff, who was nodding his head. The American management team all nodded in vigorous agreement. The British finance director, Jim Blyth looked like he was about to speak but Sam stared him down. The two had never seen eye to eye.

'Thank you, Mr Jardine. That was most impressive,' said Wulff as Sam sat down. Jim Blyth put up his hand, but Wulff ignored him. 'I will be keeping the name of Smart Lifestyle for the time being and London will be the headquarters of our new social media division. This company has been badly run and needs decisive management. My first decision is to appoint Sam Jardine as acting general manager of the new division during the three-month transition. He will report to me all instances of negativity or lack of commitment. He has my complete authority to dismiss anyone whose loyalty to Wulff Communications is questionable.' He pointed to Jim Blyth. 'You had a question, sir?'

Blyth shifted in his seat. 'I – I was just going to say we all agree with Mr Jardine, Mr Wulff.'

'Excellent. I am glad we see eye to eye.'

* * *

Leo Wulff and Sam waited in silence as the outgoing CEO of Smart Lifestyle cleared the remaining items from his desk. Andrew Sinclair was a proud man and a brilliant engineer who had built the company from scratch. The company had grown bigger than he ever imagined possible but he had not been able to lead the company through the resulting cashflow crisis. As an engineer, he was much happier bringing innovative new products and services to market. He felt the crushing responsibility for the two hundred staff who had been made redundant that day. He put the last memento into his box, walked over to Wulff and shook him by the hand. As he walked past Sam on the way to the door, he tucked his box under one arm and grasped Sam's shoulder.

'Mr Jardine, living proof of how the meek shall inherit the earth! I must congratulate you on your unexpected rise to the top.'

'Thank you, Mr Sinclair.'

'I hand over to you the welfare of the fine men and women of this company. Use your responsibility wisely and ensure your actions are guided by the highest ethical principles. Carry your successes with humility and bear your failures with grace, young man.'

'Thank you for your advice, Mr Sinclair. It means a lot to me.'

The gifted electronic engineer walked out of the door without looking back.

'You know Mr Sinclair?' Wulff asked, impressed.

'We go back a long way,' replied Sam, 'You have done well to acquire his company just as it is on the threshold of success.'

Wulff and Sam negotiated long and hard about the future direction of Smart Lifestyle under the ownership and direction of Wulff Communications Corporation. Sam was firm on the need to reinstate the procurement team under the leadership of his protégé, Juliette Woodgate. As the meeting ended, Wulff called in the HR Director and dictated the terms of Sam's contract as the acting general manager of the new social media division. With a flourish of his large silver pen, he put his signature to Sam's contract.

Wulff leaned back in the chair that had only recently belonged to Andrew Sinclair. 'I can tell a good man when I meet one, Sam. I see you as an investment in the future of my communications empire. If you can keep my new social media division on an even keel

for the next three months, the job is yours on a permanent basis.'

'I won't let you down, Mr Wulff. This new division means everything to me.'

'I can tell that, Sam. We have common values. In fact, I am going to ask you a question and if you answer it correctly, I'm going to raise your salary by fifty per cent.'

'Really?' Sam felt his heartrate quicken. A fifty per cent pay rise would make a massive difference to his cashflow. He had been left with a hefty credit card debt after his ex-girlfriend Sally went on a West End shopping spree just before she walked out on him.

'No-one has ever responded correctly to this question, Sam, yet the answer is obvious. It pains me that people are so shallow.'

'And the question?'

Wulff leaned back in his leather chair and his eyes narrowed, his expression as fanatical as a TV evangelist. 'Tell me, Sam. What is the most precious commodity on the planet?'

Sam racked his brains. His mind ran through the list of precious metals but he rejected that particular line of thinking as being too obvious. Wulff was a well-known religious zealot, but Wulff was comfortable with that aspect of his life so Sam reasoned religion would not be the answer. Then he remembered how Doug Firth's outburst in the boardroom criticising his right-wing agenda had unsettled Wulff.

'Democracy,' Sam replied with absolute conviction.

'I knew it the moment I saw you in the lift. You're a kindred spirit.' Wulff picked up Sam's contract, wrote in the new inflated salary in spidery writing and initialled his changes.

'Thank you, sir,' replied Sam, although he was appalled at the thought of having his personal values likened to those of the arch-conservative Wulff.

'Sam, I need to ask you if the decision to negotiate with the Ukrainians was yours alone.'

'It was, sir.'

'I have to say that was a masterstroke. I understand Ukraine is intending to join the EU and NATO. The Ukrainians are America's newest allies and are located on Russia's doorstep. How delicious is that irony?'

‘I think the people of Donetsk have a different perspective from those in Kiev.’

‘Nonsense. The values of democracy and freedom are universal. It will be just like the fall of the Berlin Wall all over again.’

Sam looked at Wulff doubtfully. The ‘Kalashnikov’ had not seemed too concerned about the values of democracy and freedom when he blew Alexis’ brains out at the gentlemen’s club.

Wulff continued. ‘We need to commence the campaign for the democratisation of Ukraine right here in London, Sam. We should appoint a high-profile citizen of Donetsk to the executive ranks of our social media division and plant the seeds of democracy where they can be harvested for generations to come.’ Sam was surprised how Wulff’s demeanour suddenly became almost fanatical. ‘If I have judged you correctly, Sam, then I assume you already have a high-calibre Ukrainian national in mind? Someone well connected, energetic and full of potential. Someone who would do our bidding once they return to Donetsk?’

For a moment, Sam was lost for words. The thought had not even entered his mind. Then he reached into his inside pocket and pulled out the flimsy one page résumé of Kaledin’s niece, which Xenia had slipped to him the previous night. He handed it to Wulff.

‘I am assured she has all the qualities you mention and she is the niece of one of Ukraine’s richest oligarchs.’

Wulff skimmed through the flimsy, badly written résumé and raised an eyebrow at Sam.

‘It’s an unusual choice to say the least, Sam, but I’m going to trust your judgement.’ Wulff leant back once more in the executive leather chair. He gazed out of the window at the dreary London skyline. It was threatening to snow.

‘Have you considered what we can do with this company?’ Wulff asked Sam. ‘Big data is the new source of power in the twenty-first century. With Smart Lifestyle’s technology and its global access to personal information, we can change the way humans behave. No-one will be able to resist the lure of our Smart Lifestyle products once my marketing team in New York gets to work. Just think, Sam, we have the ability to

identify those with a wholesome lifestyle and a strong work ethic and give them a helping hand. We can thwart the immoral and the scroungers. We can write intelligent software that will identify society's depraved individuals and punish them for their misdeeds. We can harvest the innermost secrets of the rich and powerful for the greater good of society. Sam, thanks to the deal you struck in Donetsk, our data will be safe from the prying eyes of liberal Western regulators. It's social engineering on a massive scale and we hold the keys.'

But Sam had stopped listening minutes ago. The combined effects of his near-death experience in Donetsk and chronic jetlag were taking their toll. Forcing himself to be polite, he excused himself and left the office with his new contract in his hand.

* * *

Wulff had half an hour to spare before his limousine was due to spirit him away to Heathrow. He used the time to open his Smart Lifestyle account on his laptop. He looked in wonder at the marvellous website that promised wealth, fame and connections with the rich and famous. Sinclair had a natural gift for creating a world of enticing possibilities for his customers. Wulff inserted a USB into his Lenovo computer and downloaded the program that had been specially written for him in New York. It was an algorithm that sorted the vast numbers of personal profiles on the Smart Lifestyle database into different personality types. He had spent the last three months working with a team of eminent psychologists in New York to define which human characteristics and personality traits most closely conformed to his own conservative view of the 'American way'. Wulff leaned back in satisfaction as his algorithm searched every tweet, email and photo of every customer in the Smart Lifestyle database and ranked them in order based on his own sense of conservative values.

When the algorithm had completed its work, he entered the name 'Andrew Sinclair' into the search engine and retrieved a full profile of the prolific inventor and software engineer. He was disappointed to see that the previous owner of Smart Lifestyle was considered by the algorithm to be a model citizen, even if he did not fit Wulff's ideal of

the ‘American Way’. Sinclair and his cohort of senior directors epitomised the haughty, overbearing teachers of his childhood who had belittled him and destroyed his self-esteem. Forty-five years on, Wulff had finally made his mark on the world. Now, Sinclair and many others like him would feel the full force of his retribution.

He looked at the various tabs that ran down the left-hand side of Sinclair’s personal profile. Ignoring the tabs labelled ‘Political Affiliations’ and ‘Sexual Preferences’, Wulff clicked on the ‘Financial Transactions’ tab. He saw the four hundred and fifty million-dollar deposit that had been credited to Sinclair’s account by Wulff Communications the previous day. Wulff then opened the tab labelled ‘Emails’ and reviewed Sinclair’s personal email history. Wulff sorted Sinclair’s emails by sender and searched for the name ‘Doug Firth’. Wulff still felt humiliated by the insults the outgoing chief operations officer had heaped on him at the executive meeting a few hours earlier.

Sinclair had received over seventy emails from Firth in the last ten days. As Wulff suspected, Sinclair had been plotting with Firth to start up a new social media company that would be in direct competition with Smart Lifestyle. The emails provided a list of a dozen of the company’s best salesmen and software engineers who would be willing to jump ship.

Wulff sighed at the perfidious nature of humanity. Left with no choice, he picked up his phone and sent a coded instruction to his two operatives who were tailing Andrew Sinclair on the M25 just past the Waltham Abbey junction.

* * *

‘Hey Geoff, are you still in visual contact with grey Volvo AK54 UHB?’

‘Affirmative,’ came the response from the van driver.

‘Okay. I have just received a message from the Keeper. He says it’s time to unleash the Night Hag.’

‘Roger that.’

Geoff looked in the rear-view mirror at the bearded East European man seated in the back of the van among an array of technical equipment. A faint smile appeared on the

bearded man's face as his fingers flashed across a computer keyboard. The white van's cameras zoomed in on the grey Volvo and he received a crystal-clear image on his computer display. His fingers clattered once more and he stared at the image of the Volvo's tail-lights. At first, nothing happened. But as the M25 motorway twisted away to the left, the Volvo continued to travel in a straight direction. An angry driver in a BMW blared its horn as the Volvo in the neighbouring lane sideswiped his car. The grey car crossed into the busy right-hand lane and continued on its straight arrow trajectory. The Volvo's tail-lights illuminated repeatedly as the Volvo driver pumped his brakes to no apparent effect. The Volvo continued ever faster towards the edge of the motorway as if pulled by an unseen magnet. The wheels of the stricken vehicle left the bitumen surface of the motorway just as a concrete bridge spanning the M25 came into view. The Volvo headed serenely towards the massive concrete pillar like a ghost embracing its lover. Andrew Sinclair slammed headlong into the bridge's enormous pre-cast concrete column at a speed in excess of one hundred miles per hour. One of the great entrepreneurs of British industry was vaporised in a fireball of concrete and metal.

END OF THIS SAMPLE

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