

POLES APART

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CHAPTER 1

‘It’s not as if I’m going into space,’ joked Marta, trying to lighten the mood. ‘London’s only a short flight away.’

Her parents smiled and glanced at one another. The smiles didn’t quite reach their eyes. What Marta had neglected to mention, and what they were all thinking, was that short flights cost money. She wouldn’t be popping back for a weekend any time soon.

Marta glanced sideways towards where her best friend Anka stood. Marta could tell she was about to cry. On the other side of her parents, Marta’s brother and sister looked small and dejected.

‘Stop being so morbid, all of you!’ cried Marta. ‘We all have phones, don’t we? And the internet? Well, sort of,’ she added, remembering the last time she had tried streaming video in Łomianki library.

Marta glanced up at the departures board, prompting everyone else to do the same. Her flight was boarding. ‘I’d better go through,’ she said, suddenly feeling uneasy. This was it. She was about to leave her country. This was the last time she would see Mama, Tata, Anka, Tomek and Ewa for at least a year.

They were close – sometimes too close – in their little house. She couldn’t imagine them not being around her. Mama running up the stairs to chase her brother out of bed in the mornings, Tata chiding her sister for not taking long enough over her homework, the five of them sitting down to *pierogi* (dumplings) or *goląbki* (cabbage rolls) at night and her brother whinging that he wanted to watch TV... this was her life. It had been her life for the last twenty-two years.

Anka stepped forward and finally dared to look Marta in the eye. Hers were filling up with tears.

‘Będe za tobą tęsknić, Marta.’ (I’ll miss you.) Anka looked away, dabbing at her eyes and then bending down, rummaging in her bag. She had dressed up for the occasion, Marta noted. Anka always looked stylish, but today she had on long drainpipe jeans and a tight, sparkly black top beneath the old brown coat she always wore. The glittery eye shadow had gone to waste, thought Marta, watching the streaks of brown liquid run down her cheeks.

‘Open this when you get there, OK?’ Anka passed over a sizeable parcel wrapped in what looked like magazines and brown tape. ‘Sorry about the paper.’

Marta hugged her. She could feel Anka’s body heaving and jerking against her own, but she was determined not to cry. They had been friends for nearly fifteen years, ever since Marta had inadvertently rescued Anka – then a plump, goofy-toothed eight-year-old – from a bunch of older girls at the back of the playground. These days, Anka was one of the skinniest girls in town and perfectly capable of fending for herself, but looking back, that first encounter had been a strangely accurate reflection of their relationship over time.

They were both vivacious and smart, always competing for the top marks in class, but Marta had always been the brave one. When it came to trying new things, taking risks and letting go, it was always Marta. Upon leaving school, Marta applied to universities and got a place to study marketing at the prestigious Szkoła Główna Handlowa in Warsaw; one of the best in the country. Anka wasn’t sure about leaving Łomianki, so she stayed and got a job at the bakery. She still worked there now.

It was fair to say that Marta was braver than most people

in Łomianki. With a population of only nine thousand, it was one of those places where people reacted badly to change. When Poland had joined the EU in 2004, national newspapers had been brimming with stories of young men and women starting new lives in new countries, of couples fleeing the drab, grey streets in search of adventures abroad... but not the local papers. Deserters were frowned upon in Łomianki. Doing anything different was seen as a sin in Łomianki. The old folk – of whom there were many – looked critically upon those whose son or daughter had moved away. It was that, as much as anything else, that had made Marta desperate to leave. She had to get out of this place. There was so much of the world that she hadn't seen, so much that she was finally being *allowed* to see, and she wanted to explore.

To Marta's dismay, she felt her eyes welling up as she disentangled herself from her best friend's arms.

'You'll miss your flight,' Mama warned, with a note of what sounded like hope in her voice.

Marta turned to her parents. The churning in her stomach was getting worse. She couldn't believe she was actually leaving them. It was hard to articulate why exactly she felt so uneasy, but something definitely didn't feel right. What if things changed in her absence? What if Tata lost his job at Polkomtel? Would Mama get more classes at the university? What if they had to move house? The routine would change and she wouldn't be there to see things through. All her life, Marta's parents had been there, strong and reliable, to support her. But seeing their faces so pale with concern and lack of sleep, it was as though... they looked fragile. They looked *old*. Marta shivered. She had never really considered the possibility that her parents weren't immortal.

She braced herself and switched on a smile through the tears. As she did so, something brushed her hand. Tata was holding out a parcel. It was smaller than Anka's and the wrapping was neater; it was almost like a wrapped-up envelope, thought Marta. She took it, just managing to hold the smile.

'And this,' Mama added, producing what looked like a sack of medium-sized potatoes, bound in reams of plastic tape.

'That's not going to fit in my hand luggage!' exclaimed Marta, already guessing the parcel's contents.

'It fits,' mama urged. 'I tried it this morning. You just have to leave half of it sticking out... ' Mama demonstrated, stuffing the end of the enormous package into Marta's rucksack. 'There!'

Marta pocketed Tata's package and went to hug her brother and sister. Even Tomek was wearing a forlorn expression on top of his moody, teenager look. Ewa was frowning. Marta felt bad. She was only twelve; she would miss her big sister.

'Right, I'm off to London!' Marta announced purposefully. She balanced the precarious load on her back, hugging Anka's parcel close to her chest, and set off towards security.

'Don't forget the magazines!' yelled Anka. 'Remember – lots of pictures and not too many words! I want to practise my English style!'

Marta grinned through the tears. She had tried so many times to persuade Anka to follow her passion and do a course in fashion or retail at college, but to no avail. She turned, taking one last look at the five people she cared for most in the world.

'I'll send you some for your birthday!'

CHAPTER 2

Marta followed the line of passengers across the damp tarmac and up the steps onto the plane. The wind ripped through her flimsy jacket, chilling her flesh instantly. It was cold, even for Warsaw. She paused as she entered the aircraft and breathed her last breath of Polish air.

‘Welcome aboard,’ chirped the air hostess.

Marta smiled nervously, holding out her passport, which the woman ignored. It was an odd sensation, stepping along the narrow, carpeted gangway between irritable, preoccupied passengers. It felt familiar and alien at the same time. The Hollywood movies had made it all seem so real, but the details – the noisy hum, the smell of bread rolls, the irritable passengers bending and stretching at peculiar angles – brought home to Marta that she was a novice. Her parents had grown up in a time when travelling out of Poland had been all but impossible and, subconsciously, that sense of restriction had been passed onto her. Only ten years ago, flights had been so expensive that the only option for crossing Europe had been a twenty-hour coach trip through Germany and Holland. Now there were dozens of flights from Warsaw to London every day.

The butterflies were getting worse and Marta could feel her hands shaking. She couldn’t tell what was making her nervous. Was it the safety instructions that informed her that in the unlikely event of an emergency, oxygen masks would drop from above? Was it the fact that the wings of the plane seemed to be made from flaps of metal that didn’t look very securely fastened? Was it the fact that Mama and Tata weren’t here? Or was it simply a fear of the unknown?

Marta had prepared herself as well as she could for her new life, reading books and magazines about London that Mama had borrowed from the university, downloading information packs and immersing herself in endless blog posts by Poles who had made the transition. There was a book called *A-Z* that had maps of every street in London, including the one she was going to live on, and websites that listed all the concerts and shows happening in every part of the city. There was so much going on.

It wasn't just the organised fun you got in Warsaw, like opera, theatre and music concerts; it was real, spontaneous entertainment: open-air comedy shows, festivals on the banks of the Thames and things called 'flash mobs' and 'pop-up restaurants'. There was something about the place that Marta couldn't quite describe... a sense of freedom? Opportunity? Whatever it was, Marta wanted to breathe it in. She wanted to taste it. She wanted to dive into this crazy world and feel it swirl and flow around her.

Excitement ran through Marta's veins alongside the nerves. She was determined not to be daunted. She wasn't the first Pole to move to England and – as she had to keep reminding herself – she had a better chance than many who moved over. Even Mama had assured her of that, despite her misgivings about Marta's plans.

An air stewardess strutted down the plane, clicking a tiny machine with her thumb, once for every passenger. There was a general rustling as people squirmed in the confines of their seats and the crew busied themselves behind a yellow curtain at the front. Marta didn't want to think about the "unlikely event of an emergency". She had once read that the chance of survival in a plane crash was close to zero; they just put in safety procedures to make passengers feel at ease. She didn't feel at ease.

Marta wondered how many of the people on the plane were travelling with a one-way ticket. Unofficial statistics claimed that more than a million Poles had fled to England during the last three years, although the authorities would claim that the figure was lower than that. If the passengers on this plane were a representative sample, thought Marta, then there were a hell of a lot of twenty-something-year-old Poles in London.

It made her angry that the government was trying to stop young people leaving. What did Poland have to offer them? There were no well-paid jobs, that was for sure. Marta thought back to the grey buildings that lined her old town; the old faces with their blank, disparaging eyes. She loved its familiarity, but at the same time she loathed it. The place was depressing. Most people of her age had moved away; either to other parts of Poland or, more commonly, to Europe. The only ones left were those with no fire left inside them.

It was a risk, she knew that. A girl from her class had moved to London with her boyfriend after graduating. They couldn't even afford to pay for a room in a hostel, so she had taken a job as an escort. Falling for the dream of a better life, she had run off with one of her clients: an older man with a violent streak. Word had it he had taken her passport and held her captive, like a slave with no rights and no official identity. Nobody really knew what happened to Beatrycze, she just disappeared.

Marta was determined that she wouldn't fall into any of the traps. She knew it wouldn't be easy in London. She was prepared to work hard for her money and she was hugely grateful for the generosity of Penelope and Henry, Mama's friends, who were letting her stay in their house with their daughter. She was prepared for the worst, but she knew,

deep down, that it wouldn't come to that. Marta was enterprising. She would make things work.

The plane wheeled around on the runway and quickly started picking up speed. Marta watched the metal panels on the wing, wondering whether they were supposed to flap up and down like that. There was a tremendous roaring noise and everything started to shake. Just as the noise became disconcertingly loud, Marta felt herself tipping backwards. She twisted round in time to see the ground tilt and then drop away, very quickly. For the first time in her life, Marta was airborne.

She watched the ugly buildings shrink beneath her until they looked like a satellite image on Google Maps. The nerves were just flying nerves, she told herself. Once she landed, she would be fine. The websites had taught her everything she needed to know about London: how to use the buses, where to live, how to ask for a second helping. She didn't know how long she would stay. Maybe a year, maybe more. There was no need to decide yet. Her plan was to make money, send some back to her parents each month and keep a little aside for herself.

Marta sank into her seat and shoved her cold hands into her pockets. Her fingers curled around something soft and papery. She turned it around, poking carefully at the flimsy wrapping. In the end, her curiosity won her over and she whipped it out, scratching away at the paper.

She could hardly believe it. Marta put the notes back in their little pouch, then brought them out again and counted a second time, discreetly. Tata had given her *one hundred English pounds*. That was nearly six hundred zloty! How could he possibly afford that? Marta felt a lump in her throat. There he was, nodding confidently as she proclaimed that she would make a good living over in

London, yet all the while he was squirrelling away his wages to give her something to start her off. Marta took a deep breath, determined to stave off the tears.

The little seatbelt light above her head went off and passengers all over the plane immediately sprang into action: standing, stretching, queuing for the toilet and randomly colliding in the aisles. Marta thought about the parcels stowed away above her head. The air hostess had laughed as Marta had stowed her patchwork lump in the overhead locker above her seat. Marta smiled, picturing Anka surrounded by fashion magazines, wrangling over which pages she would least mind turning into wrapping paper. She unfastened her seatbelt and reached up.

It wasn't even necessary to open Mama's present, Marta knew what it was. She peered through the tear she had made in the paper and caught a glimpse of the *drożdżówka* label. It was her favourite cake. This wasn't the first food parcel Mama had ever made her, but it was certainly the largest. Mama had a knack of cramming in more food per cubic inch than any food retailer had ever achieved.

'Anything to drink for you, madam? Anything to drink?' asked the perfectly proportioned air hostess, whose makeup appeared to have been applied with a spatula and a felt-tip pen.

Marta carefully noted the other passengers' reactions. *Was it free?* Someone behind her was noisily rifling through change in his pocket. *No*, she decided, smiling sweetly and declining the offer.

Anka's present sat bulkily in her lap, a picture of catwalk perfection and brown sticky tape. She was supposed to wait until she arrived. Marta hesitated, then tore at the glossy paper.

She nearly screamed. It was a Malina Q jacket! A

gorgeous, turquoise puffy jacket with a faux fur hood lining; –the type she and Anka had been drooling over for months! *All* the rich girls in Warsaw had these. Neither Anka nor Marta had ever been serious about owning one. They cost nearly three hundred zloty! Marta hugged it against her face, breathing in the smell of new fabric mixed with Anka’s perfume. Exhaling slowly, she lowered the garment onto her lap, aware of the strange looks she was getting from the woman in the next seat along. Marta didn’t care. She had a Malina Q jacket. *Oh, Anka*, she thought as a tear rolled down her cheek and soaked into the bright blue fabric. *I miss you already.*

CHAPTER 3

‘I sit?’ said a faltering voice above Marta’s head.

She glanced up to find a young man about her own age, nervously eyeing the seat next to her and pointing at her luggage.

Marta smiled at his improvised sign language and moved her bags, feeling faintly relieved. The coach was filling up and there were some very dubious-looking passengers squeezing down the aisle: rowdy, unshaven men with beer guts, many of them already drunk from the flight over. This guy seemed sober, at least.

‘Did you just fly in?’ she asked, in Polish.

He looked at her, startled, and then his features melted into a smile. ‘Yes.’ He removed his baseball cap and ran a hand through his hair. ‘How did you know I was Polish?’

Marta shrugged. She wasn’t going to embarrass the guy by running through the list of telltale signs: the T-shirt, the awkward stance, the poor English accent, the furtive looks he had been trying to hide beneath his frayed cap. Having spent the last hour watching and observing passengers as they trooped through corridors and queued for security checks, Marta reckoned she could spot a Pole from a Brit without hearing them speak. It wasn’t any one particular thing, it was just... a look.

‘I’m Marta,’ she said, smiling.

‘Lukasz.’ He offered her a limp handshake. The coach pulled away from its bay, manoeuvring through the sluggish airport traffic.

‘You here for good?’ she asked.

‘Who knows.’ It was Lukasz’s turn to shrug. ‘I’ve never been to England before.’

‘Me neither.’ Marta shook her head, feeling an immediate affinity for the guy. ‘It’s weird, isn’t it? Finally being here...’

Lukasz nodded, looking past her and out of the window. Marta did the same. They were on a main road now, rolling steadily through the flat English countryside, sliced up by grey motorways. It felt strange to be on this side of the road. Everything felt strange. The roads were too smooth, the lampposts were different and there were neat green hedges between all the fields. *This was it*, she thought. *This was England, at last.*

‘Do you speak any English?’ asked Lukasz.

‘Yes, although not perfectly,’ Marta replied, the worms in her stomach suddenly returning. Her teacher at school had been a firm believer in listening and comprehension, but not such an advocate of proactive speech. This meant that Marta could translate almost anything from English to Polish, but less so the other way round. Her mother had helped, of course, but she still didn’t feel comfortable holding a proper conversation in English.

‘I don’t,’ Lukasz confessed. ‘But it doesn’t matter, apparently. I’m staying with a friend who’s been here two years. He says that the language is no problem. He’s promised to find me a job.’

‘You don’t know *any* English?’ she clarified, assuming she was mistaken. Surely nobody would consider migrating without speaking a word of the language.

He shook his head. ‘It’s fine. Gabrjel says he got work the first week he arrived. He didn’t know any English then – still doesn’t.’

Marta frowned. ‘What sort of work? Something involving not speaking, presumably?’

‘Construction. Odd jobs. Maintenance, gardening... He’s good with his hands.’

Marta nodded. She wasn't coming to England to use her hands. She wanted to use her brain. She had a marketing degree from one of the top universities in Poland. Perhaps Lukasz and his friend hadn't been to university, she considered.

'Gabrjel was a qualified doctor,' he told her, as though reading her mind. 'He had a job lined up at the hospital in Wrocław for three thousand zloty a month. Here, he gets nearly two thousand *pounds* a month – that's twelve thousand zloty! For lugging bricks around. Crazy, eh!'

Marta nodded, feeling something sink inside her. She was used to hearing about qualified graduates moving to England to do unskilled work for five times the salary. The problem was, she didn't *want* to do unskilled work. She had skills. She wanted to use them and be rewarded for them.

'What are you planning to do?' Lukasz looked at her.

Marta hesitated. She was dying to tell him her plans. She wanted to tell him and all the other Polish graduates like him that she was coming over to *use her degree*. But she didn't want to aggravate the young man.

'Not sure yet. I'll find something.'

Lukasz nodded. 'You're lucky, being a girl. You can always get au pair work. The money's OK and they give you a place to live.'

'Yeah,' Marta nodded. The chances of her becoming an au pair were no higher than the chances of her getting work on a construction site. There was no *way* she would stoop to becoming an English family's slave.

'Or you could work in a Polish bakery. Apparently they're springing up all over London.'

Marta gritted her teeth and nodded again. She would rather move back to Łomianki than spend her days smearing cream cheese on bagels. Extracting her phone,

Marta brought the conversation to a halt by jamming her headphones into her ears and closing her eyes. For some reason, she felt irritable. It wasn't that she had lost faith in herself or her qualifications; she just didn't like to hear people make assumptions about what she – or, in fact, any other graduate like her – would be doing for a career in the UK. Lukasz was a fool, obviously. He was working towards a different goal. There was no point in listening to him. He hadn't even bothered to learn English.

The crisp dialogue of the podcast reverberated around her head, focusing Marta's mind. It was something she had downloaded from the BBC website before she left. It was a debate about a book she had never read, but that didn't matter. She needed to hear the words, to remind herself that she understood, to convince herself that she had the ability to make something of her time in England. Marta sank down in the seat and leant against the juddering window.

The podcast was just coming to an end when the coach finally pulled up. They were inside a massive, fume-filled bus depot the size of a football pitch. Suitcases and screaming children filled the concrete walkways, colliding like atoms under a microscope. Deafening announcements echoed off every surface. Around her, people rose in their seats, hitting others in the face as they hoisted rucksacks onto their backs.

'Well, good luck,' said Lukasz, looking warier than ever. 'Maybe keep in touch?'

Marta smiled politely. 'Maybe.'

'Here's Gabrijel's number – that's where I'll be staying.' He ripped off part of his cigarette packet and scrawled a string of digits on the back.

'Thanks,' said Marta, doubting that she would ever call

the number. 'Good luck, Lukasz.'

He smiled and gave a mock salute. 'Enjoy England.'

CHAPTER 4

The question was, *which exit?* If you wanted to visit a science museum, or in fact any number of museums, there were signs saying where to go. But Marta wanted to go to Egerton Square. Her phone had died and all she had now was an address. She was beginning to wish she had kept hold of that *A-Z* book.

‘Are you OK?’ asked a soft female voice that seemed to come straight out of an English listening test. A well-dressed young lady of a similar age to Marta was peering down at her, exuding an expensive-smelling perfume. ‘You look *lorst*.’

Marta instinctively straightened up, trying to obscure her giant food parcel with her new jacket. This was her first opportunity to try out her English. She knew how to respond, she had done this a hundred times in school. But to her shame, Marta found herself wordlessly offering up the scrap of paper on which the address was scribbled.

‘Ah, OK.’ The woman nodded slowly, giving Marta the chance to study her flawless exterior: glossy, chestnut hair, a natural tan, leggings sprayed onto exceedingly skinny thighs with a pair of high-heeled boots over the top. Marta glanced down at her beloved Malina Q jacket. It shone back at her, brilliant and turquoise and, for the first time since she had landed, Marta wondered whether she might have made a mistake in assuming that fashion crossed geographic boundaries.

‘You need Exit 1,’ the woman explained, brushing a lock of hair away from her face with the utmost elegance. ‘With your back to South Ken, head east along Brompton Road until you reach Egerton Terrace. The square should be a

stone's throw from there.'

Marta quickly expressed her gratitude and watched as the figure sashayed up the steps of the station. *A stone's throw*. How far was that? Marta reached down for her leather suitcase, still clutching the parcel, and headed for Exit 1.

'Egerton Square,' Marta read, proud of herself for following the instructions correctly and learning a new phrase in the process. Then she stopped dead. She had known that this was a nice part of London and the five-minute journey had taken her past some fairly impressive residences already. But this was another league again; this was incredible.

Every house on the square had its own set of pillared steps leading up to a double front door, like the White House or a place of worship. Each was unique, too: there was one with exposed bricks and covered in ivy, the next was clad in stone, and another... Marta nearly dropped her case as she caught sight of number fourteen.

It had *flames* outside the front door. Two enormous, flickering torches were placed either side of the Grecian columns and lit up the front of the house like something from a film set. *She was going to live in a house with flames outside the door*. Marta nearly laughed out loud. She couldn't wait to tell Anka.

As she approached, the worms suddenly returned to her stomach. *Was it an embassy building or something? Would she be expected to behave like English royalty? Or worse still...* A horrible thought flashed through her mind. Was she being invited to live here on the premise that she would look after the place? Would she be expected to cook and clean for Penelope and Henry's daughter? Marta took a deep breath and headed up the steps.

Within seconds of ringing the chiming bell, Marta found

herself inside a vast, marble-floored atrium being smothered in kisses and deafened by a cacophony of shrieks.

‘Hi, hiiiiiii!’ wailed the blonde who had opened the door, her face contorted with exaggerated smiles. ‘You must be Marta! I’m Tash!’

‘Here! Let me take your jacket,’ offered a smaller girl with a face like a horse. ‘My name’s Plum.’ She drew closer. ‘As in, Victoria Plum?’ She let out a deafening hoot of laughter and whipped the Malina Q jacket out of Marta’s hands.

‘Come *in*,’ urged a young man, taking Marta by surprise as he slipped a hand round her waist and guided her away from the door. Marta stole a glance at his face. He was gorgeous: lean but toned, with an angular jawline and dark eyes that melted into an easy smile.

Marta stood still, trying to take it all in. It took a lot of restraint not to just stare, open-mouthed, at the tall girl who had introduced herself as Tash: her new housemate. It wouldn’t be accurate to say that she was beautiful, but she was striking. Her face was exceedingly pale, like a china doll’s, and framed by waves of perfectly curled blonde hair. Little pearl droplets hung from each of her ears and she wore a soft, blue cashmere V-neck and knee-high boots that were not dissimilar to those worn by the woman at the station.

‘Let’s go through to the kitchen!’ suggested the horse-faced girl. Marta made a mental note to look up the word “plum” in her dictionary; she was sure it was a type of fruit.

‘I think a drink is in order.’ The good-looking guy caught her eye and winked.

‘Sorry – how rude of me!’ Tash rounded on Marta as they trooped through the echoing hallway. ‘This is Jack,’

she announced. 'My boyfriend.'

Marta's spirits fell, just a little.

'And this is Jeremy,' she added, motioning towards the back of the group.

Marta nodded politely. Jeremy was a strange-looking young man. It was as though his head was too large for his body and his nose too large for his face. He nodded in her direction, all the time looking down his huge snout as though he found the whole situation rather distasteful. 'Ve'y nice to meet you,' he said.

Marta smiled uncertainly and gave a little wave. They entered an airy room with high ceilings, vast, polished surfaces and many matching sets of kitchen implements in chrome and black.

'So! What will you drink?' asked Jack. 'Vodka?'

There were screams and whoops of laughter. Marta opted for a gin and tonic, like everybody else, and wondered what was so funny. On Tash's suggestion, they moved to yet another room (there were so many to choose from!), this one described as a "drawing room", although it didn't actually have any drawings in it; only a large, dark oil painting at one end of a man who looked constipated. Tentatively, Marta sank into one of the armchairs.

'So, what's it like, being Polish?' asked Plum, excitably.

'What an absurd question!' Jack exclaimed, before Marta could open her mouth.

'Well, I just meant –'

'How is she supposed to answer that?'

For a second, Marta felt a rush of compassion for Tash's boyfriend. Then he went on.

'She's been Polish all her life, for God's sake! It's not as though she suddenly woke up one day liking dumplings and wearing big furry coats, is it?'

‘Don’t be racist!’ cried one of the girls.

‘I wasn’t,’ Jack replied quickly. ‘Polish isn’t a race; it’s a nationality.’

Marta felt like a child. Everyone was talking about her as though she wasn’t there.

Tash pulled a nasty face at her boyfriend, then switched on a smile. ‘So Marta, whereabouts in Poland are you from?’

Marta opened her mouth, but suddenly her breath was coming too quickly and she couldn’t get any words out. They were all staring at her, waiting for an answer, but the more they stared, the more she felt panicked inside, as though someone was crushing her vocal cords.

‘Łomianki,’ she said finally, knowing she should follow it with something, but she wasn’t sure what.

‘Is that near Warsaw?’ asked Tash after an awkward pause, speaking noticeably louder and more slowly.

‘Yes.’ She wanted to elaborate, but for some reason she couldn’t think of anything to say, even in Polish.

‘It’s nice,’ she added after a long pause, wracking her brain for something – anything – more. Nothing came.

‘So - where - are - you - planning - to - work - in - London?’ asked Tash.

Marta hesitated. She wanted to explain that she had graduated from one of the top Polish universities and wanted to join the marketing department of a large UK firm, but she couldn’t. It wasn’t just that her vocabulary seemed to have escaped her; it was that she knew how ridiculous it would sound, declaring such an ambitious plan when she could barely introduce herself.

‘I...’

‘Will you get an au pair job?’ Tash asked brightly.

A surge of anger mingled with Marta’s frustration. She

resented the assumption that she could only hope to get work as a nanny for English children. And furthermore, she felt insulted by the implication that she should find somewhere else to live after just five minutes in the house.

‘No,’ replied Marta, looking her host in the eye. ‘I have a degree in marketing from Poland and I hope for using that. I will get a job in the office.’

She was surprised by the eloquence with which she delivered her reply, but not as surprised as those around her. There was a good ten seconds of silence before anyone spoke.

‘Wow... Marketing!’ gushed Plum, clearly feeling the need to say something.

‘It’s a novel idea, actually *using* your degree in your job,’ mused Jeremy, speaking for the first time. He was swilling his gin and tonic around in ever-increasing circles, watching the vortex deepen.

‘I don’t know, replied Jack. ‘I may not have done any philosophising or economising since I graduated, but I’ve experienced plenty of office politics.’

‘Jack did PPE at Oxford,’ explained Tash. ‘That’s politics, philosophy and economics,’ she said, expressing each syllable slowly as though Marta were lip-reading. ‘He works at Goldman Sachs now. He’s an investment banker.’

Marta nodded. There was something about these people that made her feel silly. They were the same age as her, but somehow they seemed... superior. It was as though they felt sorry for her, and not just because she was new to this city. Marta found herself thinking of Anka, her trusty, humble best friend. These people were a different species.

‘So...’ Jack looked over with a handsome smile. ‘D’you know anyone here? D’you have any contacts to get you into marketing?’ He raised an eyebrow.

‘I...’ She trailed off. *Contacts?* She had planned to do all the usual things that people did when looking for a job: trawl the newspaper advertisements, call up companies, look at the job sites online. That was how it worked back home. Wasn’t that how it worked over here? The truth was, she *did* know some people who had come over to England, it was just that she either hadn’t kept in touch with them or they had returned to Poland. None of them worked in marketing, anyway. Marta had nobody to help her over here.

She would manage, though, thought Marta as she sipped her drink. She would have to. A week was what she had set herself as job hunting time, and that was all it would take. That was all she had.

‘If you need any help...’ Jack fixed her with a look that lasted longer than Marta thought necessary.

‘Thank you,’ she replied quietly, wondering what he meant.

CHAPTER 5

Marta leant against the cold stone wall, listening to the rhythmic slosh of the Thames beneath her. The speedboat zipped off into the distance, heading towards the huge tower with the pointy roof: Canary Wharf. It was the office block where Tash's boyfriend worked. The mirrored sides gave a warped reflection of the wispy clouds that were blowing across the sky.

To her left was the big wheel. If you watched really carefully and aligned one of the bubbles with a fixed spot in the distance, you could just about make out its movement: twenty degrees every minute, she calculated.

Marta was in the shade of Tower Bridge and the stone wall was making her cold, but she didn't care. She was in London, filled with a boisterous optimism she could barely contain. There was something about this city; a vibe that made her feel free. The place had history, but it wasn't oppressive history. People were proud of it, but they didn't cling to it. They got on with life, went about their business and made things happen. Marta smiled. She was ready to make things happen.

She had allowed herself one day to explore London. She had taken ten pounds from Tata's stash, although so far she hadn't spent anything. Tourist exhibits were out of the question and she was avoiding public transport. It wasn't just because of the money; it was because Marta wanted to see London properly. She wanted to go at her own pace, see the streets from ground level, look up, look down and discover the back alleys that not even Londoners knew about.

Marta could only guess how many miles she had walked

today. Setting off at eight this morning, she had breathed in the misty morning air of Hyde Park, discovered the eerie, shaded streets of Mayfair and carved a path through the mayhem on Oxford Street. She had slipped through the ghost town of Holborn, shadowed a Japanese tour around St Paul's Cathedral and wandered through a bleak part of town where every shop sold expensive suits or sandwiches. Eventually, she had crossed London Bridge and followed the river to this unexpectedly quiet, cobbled street at the water's edge.

It was good to have a chance to think. The last few days had flown by in a blur of noise and excitement, and it was only when Marta lay in bed at night that the sounds and shapes stopped whirring round her head... but by that point she was so tired she just fell asleep. This was quite literally the first time she had felt calm enough to reflect, and doing so was bringing about an unexpected revelation.

Marta missed her home town. She missed the place itself, not just the people. Her mind kept whipping up images: ugly buildings, fur coats, brusque shopkeepers... Even the memory of things she disliked – sleet and crumbling roads – would send a shiver running through her when she thought about the distance she had put between herself and these things.

Tash had done her best to welcome Marta into her palatial family home and for that, Marta was grateful. She was all too aware of the kindness bestowed upon her by Penelope and Henry for opening their doors to her at such an absurdly low rate. She was grateful, she really was... but that didn't stop her from missing her old life.

Tash was so different from every girl Marta had ever met. She was rich, of course, but that wasn't the only thing. It was hard to describe how she differed. In some ways she

seemed more confident; she was certainly more flamboyant. But at the same time, she seemed *less* confident. She was needy. She had to be the centre of attention all the time; especially Jack's attention, which seemed prone to wandering.

The water was lapping more gently now and, as the sound of the boat receded into the distance, Marta became aware of a presence behind her. She turned quickly. A young man in a fluorescent yellow jacket was parking a dirt cart up against the wall. She watched out of the corner of her eye as he set about sweeping the area and emptying his load into the cart.

A pleasure boat chugged along the river, blasting out unintelligible commentary to its windswept passengers. She smiled. The street cleaner crept into her field of vision, hoisting himself onto the wall further down and bending over something in his lap. Sandwiches. It was lunchtime. Marta half watched as he unwrapped the tin foil and wolfed it down in record time. He screwed the tin foil into a ball and lobbed it into his cart, where it made a satisfying thud against the bottom.

Marta prised herself away from the wall, contemplating getting some food for herself. As she did, something caught her eye. A blur of red and white. She took a proper look in the workman's direction. He was reading a magazine, and across the top of the cover page was the distinctive red and white flag. *Polski Express*, read the title.

'*Cześć!*' she said, impulsively. It was still a novelty meeting fellow Poles, even though there were more than a million of them over here.

The guy met her eye, expressing no surprise at hearing his own language. '*Cześć,*' he replied, checking out Marta's legs.

‘Er, are you done with that?’ Marta asked, at exactly the moment he hopped off the wall and tossed the magazine into his cart.

He chuckled, taking another look at Marta’s legs. ‘Looks like it, doesn’t it?’ He bent down and fished out the supplement, wiping some mayonnaise from the cover with his sleeve. ‘Want it?’

Deciding it would be rude to decline, Marta nodded. ‘Thanks.’

‘You new around here?’ asked the man, addressing her breasts this time. Marta was beginning to wish she hadn’t started this conversation.

‘I arrived yesterday. I’m not... not based here. I’m staying...’ Marta hesitated, not wishing to divulge the location of her accommodation for more reasons than one. ‘Somewhere else,’ she concluded, lamely.

‘Huh. Aren’t we all?’ The guy rolled his eyes. ‘Enjoy,’ he said, nodding at the soggy magazine in her hands and taking one last look at her legs.

Marta forced her mouth into a smile. ‘Bye.’

There was only one reason Marta had asked for the magazine. It was something she had seen on the back cover; an advert. Spreading the supplement out on the wall, Marta carefully extracted the staples and pulled off the cover, reading the text as she did so. She folded it into eight, shoved the page in her pocket, and set off in search of food. Perhaps today wouldn’t be entirely unproductive after all.