

To stay safe, Maria has to risk everything...

FURTHER DOWN THE RIVER

SAMPLE

Jack DUFFY



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TBR Imprint

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For all our friends
– staff and guests –
at *Mar y Sol*, Los Cristianos.

As she climbed the wide stairs at City Hall, balancing the hot coffee on her new case, Maria paused to take in Tower Bridge. Framed through the glass wall and lit in the late autumn sunshine against a pure blue sky, it reminded her of the postcard she had sent her grandmother back home in Warsaw. The same postcard her kid sister Anna had texted that her grandmother had taken to church to show to the priest.

‘Look, it’s from my granddaughter, she is a diplomat in London.’

Some things are hard to explain to grandmothers. The meaning can be changed between languages and again between generations. Now over ninety years old, what would she understand of the job of a Foreign Direct Investment Senior Policy Analyst?

But she knows all about war. In her prayers she remembers her friends, all then in their early twenties, starving, dying behind the barricades or while trying to escape through the sewers. She remembers the wretched anger and despair people had as they fought among the ruins against tanks with only stones, convinced that London was refusing to help them, ignoring their pleading by secret radio every night.

So, Maria Kaminski was a diplomat. An envoy, an angel of peace. A grandmother’s fanciful idea. Britain would never again abandon Poland, and Maria was working in London to help make sure it stayed so.

Her desk was surprisingly cluttered for someone who only started a few days ago. The piles of paper were not unusual, though her habit of printing everything that might one day be useful was already showing itself. More unusual were the plastic forks, sachets of sauce, empty plastic cups and other items which gave her desk a certain landfill quality. The screen beside the desk was no better, though the vaguely semi-circular arrangement of yellow sticky notes could give an impression of a sunrise at a distance. As she took her coat off she noticed someone had left two empty bins beside her desk. She put one inside the other. Pushing the debris to the back, Maria slid her laptop onto the desk.

Maria had been told to get her photograph taken for her security pass, the one she would have to wear on a lanyard while at City Hall. Her temporary pass would run out soon. Leaving her computer to start up, she reached for her bag and went downstairs to a small room behind the reception desk. An older woman took her inside and they sat each side of the computer and camera.

‘Just keep still please love. You can smile if you like ... OK, that’s done. And now, your name?’ she said, half hidden behind the monitor.

‘Maria Kaminski,’ she said, and without pausing she spelt it out.

‘Is it Russian?’

‘No, it is Polish.’

‘Been here long?’

‘Yes I have, all day in fact.’

The woman stopped typing and looked up at Maria.

‘Oh, sorry dear, I didn’t mean to... you know... be like that.’

‘It’s just people ask it so often.’

‘You must get right sick of hearing it?’

Maria remembered a saying her grandmother would tell to her when she was small and making some excuse.

A bad dancer blames the hem of her skirt.

‘No,’ said Maria. ‘It’s my fault. It was very rude of me.’

The woman looked around the monitor, tilted her head and gave Maria a warm smile. Maria sat forward and continued.

‘So... I’ve been in London about nine years now. I grew up in Warsaw with my parents and Anna, my younger sister. She is still there, living with my mother, annoying each other but in a nice way, and my grandmother has a small flat nearby. Here, this is them,’ Maria said, tapping open a picture on her phone and passing it over the desk.

‘Ah, lovely, you keep in touch a lot I bet. Any brothers?’

‘No. My father, he passed in my teens, cancer.’

‘Oh dear, you poor love. You must miss him.’

‘Yes, I do, a lot. He was a lawyer, he helped a lot of Roma people, Gypsies. One time, he refused a bribe from a farmer and his car was set on fire. He said—’ Maria swallowed then raised her head. ‘He said, the extra walking would do him good. After he died, I guess I was quite a handful for my mother. We were probably both glad when I got an offer to study in London. I made some good friends at uni. And so, here I am.’

‘Oh, I’m glad, that’s lovely now. And, do you have a boyfriend? If you don’t mind me asking dear.’

‘It’s OK. No— I did, but that was a few months ago.’

‘Well look dear, there’s plenty more out there, so you just have yourself some fun now, you hear me love?’

Back at her desk with her new pass around her neck, she sipped some water and stared at the screen, or rather,

through the screen as she tried again to make sense of yesterday's meeting. Ian, her manager here, had apologised that it was happening so early in her new job.

'Look, I know it's your first week, but it is ages before the next of these meetings and they are pretty key people. Hey, you could just observe the meeting from the back seats if you want?' he had said.

'No, it's OK, I'd prefer to dive straight in.'

It seemed to her now that she had certainly dived in, and then some. As she waited for her laptop to go through the last of its official security checks, she wondered if she would still be in this job next week. At the end of the meeting yesterday Ian had asked Maria to wait for him in the corridor outside. When he came out he told her to come to his office early this morning, and had walked away briskly. He had not been smiling.

What had she said wrong? They may be key people but someone had to remind them that Czechoslovakia no longer exists, and that in Brazil they speak Portuguese not Spanish, and that Kashmir might not be the most sensible location for a defence trade expo. Then she smiled, remembering that Ian's English phrase, *key people*, had made her think of jailers.

His office was two floors above the open plan room where she had her desk. The higher the floor number, they said, the more power you had at City Hall. As she approached Ian's office the door was open and she could hear him speaking loudly on the phone and swearing. She didn't know whether to wait, to knock or just to go in. Finally, she put her head past the door and he waved her to a seat without looking up.

'What a w*****,' he said as he put the phone down, perhaps more to himself than to her. Then he faced her and pressed his fingertips hard down on the desk.

'So, yesterday, how do you think it went?' he asked.

‘You know, I’m really sorry. It won’t happen again-’

‘Sorry? What won’t happen again?’

Oh hell. He is really going to make a meal out of this.

‘Yesterday. Telling the visiting politicians their facts were wrong. It won’t happen again,’ she said.

‘What? Oh, that,’ he laughed. ‘No, I suppose not, but it was worth it to see their faces. Still, you can only play the “I’m new here card” once,’ he said.

‘Look,’ he continued, ‘I need your help here. We are having some tricky problems with a firm from your neck of the woods, and it needs some careful handling or any number of trade deals will fall apart, with jobs being lost and just before the elections. This business could be dodgy, we just don’t know, and it’s highly confidential. So, you need to go and speak with this bloke in the Treasury. He is expecting you,’ he said.

‘But...’

He had turned away to make another call, the phone in one hand and his arm outstretched holding a note for her to take.

In the corridor she stopped, glanced down at the piece of paper. The name of the firm was unknown to her, with an address in Belgrade. She was about to go back and tell Ian that the firm was thousands of kilometres from ‘her neck of the woods,’ but then she remembered yesterday and decided she better not. A Canadian exchange student once taught her two of their popular phrases, which were ‘awesome’ and ‘suck it up, princess.’ Both seemed to apply now.

Maria liked to walk to meetings in the city, even though she could use taxis on expenses. She had walked down Whitehall before, and she especially liked to walk around the centre of London on a Sunday when the lighter traffic made it easier to see the buildings as grand

architecture rather than as the shops or offices, or government departments within them. It also gave her time away from her two flatmates, who were both nice girls but their whole weekends of drinking and texting just made her feel empty. She wasn't a student any more, and did not want to keep living like one.

She knew there was a large pale stone building on Whitehall with a 'Treasury' brass plate beside a grand entrance. She was going to meet someone called Ahmed Talbi, probably sitting next to one of those big windows with a fine desk and his tea in a china cup and saucer. However, the directions she'd been given were taking her somewhere different, down a little road behind Trafalgar Square to an office block which looked pallid and unimproved since first being built cheaply, probably in the 1970s. It was easy enough to find room 3.28 in the building, but she wondered why there were only room numbers and no department or section titles.

'Oh, it's just their way of saving money, so there is nothing to change when they re-organise us. Typical Treasury, eh?' said Ahmed as he stood up and shook her hand.

He was smaller and younger than she had expected, with a rather pale, round face and short, untidy dark hair. His jacket was tight over the back of his chair, stretching the shoulders out of shape. He wore his shirt open at the top, but a tie was hanging up beside his desk.

'Strictly speaking, my job here is to arrange transport for the junior ministers, which means I get to meet with the police contacts as well as the drivers. Glorified minicab office really,' he said with a shrug.

She wondered if her impatience had shown on her face. She did not mean to be rude, well, not too rude at least. He gave a little cough and talked faster.

'For some reason the local police in Belgrade flagged

this firm to our lot. No-one here can work out why, so it was given to me because the police are busy and I was “under-utilised” as they say. Charming, eh? Then I did some ferreting in HR and your details popped up, so I thought: let’s have a chat.’

‘Look,’ said Maria, ‘I know all of Eastern Europe is the same to most British people, but Belgrade is over a thousand kilometres from where I grew up. I mean, seven hundred miles. It’s a bit further than here to Liverpool.’

She paused, took a deep breath, held up her hand and said, ‘Sorry for that. I’d really like to help, but I don’t see how I can be useful here at all.’

‘Well, it’s your job title that could really help us,’ he replied. ‘Foreign Direct Investment means getting firms like this one to come over, spend some serious money, and set up a base in Britain. OK, normally it is through the local embassy people, but this needs someone like you out there in the field who can dig around without raising eyebrows,’ he said.

Digging in fields? How the English civil service loved to speak in metaphors. She considered telling him he had the wrong person, he needed someone from Agriculture. But, she stopped herself and considered, why not go? It could be fun, and nothing was happening for her in London that could not wait another week.

‘OK,’ she said, ‘give me the details and I’ll visit and write a fieldwork report.’

As she stood up to leave she added, ‘It will probably only be small potatoes,’ and she was pleased that he got the joke. But in his smile there was something of a wince, a regret.

‘The thing is,’ he said, watching her carefully, ‘we do have a file but you cannot take it away, you have to read it here. And no notes.’ His eyes held hers until he knew

she had understood.

They walked down the corridor to another room, empty except for two metal tables and some plastic chairs, with a jug of water and glasses near the window. He left, closing the door, and she poured out a glass and settled down to read the file. When she had finished reading she shivered and gulped down the water. Her hands were suddenly tense and very cold.

Belgrade airport was not what Maria had expected. It was modern with a cold, fresh curtain of daylight reflected up to the ceiling from the polished stone floor of the main hall. She was used to travelling with just a cabin bag. It saved her money on the flights home not to check in extra luggage and she liked the skill, the discipline, of packing just enough essentials. It was also a quicker way to get away after landing, without having to wait for a suitcase to be unloaded and come around the carousel. But, as her untidy desk back in London showed, she knew such compactness was not her natural habit.

The taxi to the hotel was easy enough, as was booking in and collecting her key card. English is the common language now, more thanks to American films than to British efforts, but her London friends could get so prickly when she reminded them of this simple fact. One time over drinks she had even said that maybe Spanish will overtake English across the world soon, but she had backtracked to avoid a proper row. Maybe Grandmother was right, she actually is a diplomat.

The hotel room was like any business hotel around the world, with rolling news on the TV, a trouser press by the door and an ice machine near to the lift. It used to be that the bathroom plumbing told you which country you were in. The main difference she had found now was in the arrangements for hot drinks. The English

loved a kettle, and their luxury was a biscuit wrapped in cellophane. The Americans preferred a big coffee percolator. The French expected you to go to the bar downstairs and be sociable, and in other countries you had to use room service for drinks rather than make your own. Apparently this was a deliver-it-to-your-room country, or at least that kind of hotel.

Maria flicked the TV remote and quickly found the weather channel. Outside it was getting darker, and although it was autumn a bitterly cold night was forecast. She unpacked some extra layers of clothing to wear under her three-quarter length coat, adding a second pair of socks. Having dressed, she slipped quietly out of the hotel lobby, her hands thrust deep into her coat pockets and her handbag strap diagonally across her chest in a no-nonsense manner.

She had details of where to go tomorrow, but tonight she wanted to get a sense of the city, to find some of its secrets and weaknesses that are not in the guide book. She headed for the bus station, knowing that busy places were often favoured by petty criminals. After walking a few blocks along the main road away from the hotel she could feel the neighbourhood getting rougher. A group of five or so young men with shaved heads stood ahead of her, drinking from cans, talking loudly and idly kicking at a tree. She judged them harmless and walked past without staring, but making sure she was nearer the kerb than they were. More of a worry was the smartly dressed older man further ahead, stopping to smoke. He was lighting his cigarette but looking back over his shoulder. She crossed the road and carried on walking on the other side, turning back to see the same man exchanging something small with a teenage boy on a bike.

The bus station was set back a block from the main

road, and she heard the noise of the engines before she saw it. Signposted as a station, it was a town square with metal bus shelters all around, some connected together and others alone. The buildings around the square had seen better times. A few balconies remained, but large billboards covered where others had been. The upper floors looked empty, darkened by years of diesel fumes and some with broken windows. The ground level was mostly fast food kiosks and amusement arcades. There was a dark, oily covering all over the roadway. It was the same as the many bus stations she had known as a child, visiting the many families of cousins with her parents, with its mix of people with large cases and shapeless sacks for the long-distance buses and coaches, and the huddled commuters for the local city routes.

One of the kiosks seemed quieter than the rest, and the prices told her why. She chose a corner bar stool with a sideways view of the square, gave her order for a coffee and pulled out a book from her bag, holding the pages open determinedly to ward off strangers. She was not sure what she was looking for, or who. In the early days of moving pictures, before sound, the bad guys wore black hats and the good guys wore theirs white. All guys were men, the women just screamed and flapped about. She watched as various groups assembled then parted, as people stepped forward to kiss arrivals and carry their bags, as kids messed in the corner near to a vending machine, as drivers shouted sort-of friendly remarks to each other. She could feel the cold more now, and the second coffee was no more than tepid.

‘OK if I sit here?’ said a voice which made her jump.

Maria turned to see a young woman pointing to the seat beside her. She was slightly smaller than Maria and wearing a long coat and gloves.

‘Sorry if I disturbed you,’ the young woman

continued, 'I have some time until my boyfriend arrives, and this is a, er, nicer place.'

'No problem, it is OK,' said Maria.

'Cool. My name is Adrijana,' she added and held out her hand. 'You are an American girl?' she said. She took off one glove and held out her hand.

Maria gave her a quizzical look as she shook her hand.

'Sorry. I think so because of your book,' she said.

Maria took a breath. Where to start on this one?

'No, I am Polish but I work in London,' Maria said.

'You have been here a long time,' the young woman said.

'No, I just got here today.'

'I mean here, this square, your hands are cold,' said the young woman. Maria noted that her tone had changed, a little less friendly.

'Yes,' said Maria, turning back to her book.

'We have to ask ourselves why you are here?' said the young woman, partly to Maria and partly to the man who was now standing behind her. Maria stiffened on her bar stool, holding her bag tighter. He moved even closer to her. F***, she thought. Are they robbing me? Has he got a knife?

'You see, we are police officers. Please, keep your hands in view and pass me your bag,' the female officer said. Maria did as she was told, and then stood up while she was frisked by her. After a nod to her colleague, the male officer stood back and spoke into a radio.

'You must come with us,' the female officer said.

'Why? Am I under arrest? What is this about?'

'You must come with us,' the female officer repeated.

Maria sat in the back of the police car as it travelled what seemed a long way to a police station. Maria turned to the female officer and said, 'Is your name

really Adrijana?’ but she got no reply, not even a turn of the head.

The car slowed and turned through an archway into a cobbled yard. Other cars were parked at the side, but theirs was the only marked police car there. Maria felt her stomach tighten, but tried to keep herself calm. At worst, she thought, she would have to explain herself to the people at the British Embassy after they come here and sort this out. Maybe also from the Polish Embassy? She wondered if she could tell them both at the same time and see which one got her released first. The thought of this silly competition gave her a moment to smile.

When the archway gates had closed again behind them, the male police officer opened the rear door beside his female colleague. Finally Maria was told to get out.

‘Follow me,’ said the female officer as they led her through a door and a green and brown tiled lobby into a small side room.

‘Sit here,’ she said, and closed the door behind her without waiting to hear Maria say, ‘Can I have my bag back?’ Maria realised that she had no choice but to wait – there was no handle on the inside of the door.

At least an hour went by with no-one coming to see her, and the dry heat from the old pipes was becoming uncomfortable. The more she thought about her situation, the more it seemed actually worse for this over-zealous police patrol than for her. A letter from an embassy in their files won’t be good for their careers.

Finally the door opened. Someone new entered, which raised her hopes. He was quite young and tall, clean shaven and wearing a tailored suit slightly pulled in at the waist. At last, Maria thought, they have come to their senses and sent in someone senior to sort things out.

‘I have done nothing wrong, and you must let me go now. I am an official of the British government and I will raise this matter with our ambassador,’ she told him in a clipped and officious tone.

‘Miss Maria Kaminski, don’t pretend with me. You are not a government official, your work is only a municipal desk job, and your business here is, shall we say, irregular. You have family connections in Poland. For months we have been getting close to a criminal gang running a people trafficking network from the Russian fringes through Eastern Europe and Poland into Amsterdam and London. Just as we are closing in to catch the ring leader this evening, you turn up and are seen to signal him a warning, helping him to escape before we could catch him. You must understand this is a very serious charge.’

She slumped back in her chair. He watched her carefully.

‘Now, all is not yet lost,’ he continued. ‘We still want to catch the network leader, and I’m sure you can help us, and then we can help you. Of course, what you have done is very serious, but if you show remorse, if you help us catch your accomplices, and if you give a full and early confession, all of this looks good in the eyes of the judge. But you must do this now. Even tomorrow morning will be too late for you. Already we have all our patrols looking again for this criminal, and as soon as we find him we will not need your help any more.’

She knew what he was doing. First tell her that he knows everything and that her position is hopeless. Then show her a way out. Pile on the pressure, but make it seem like sympathy. She knew this, but still she felt sick. She could understand why people signed confessions for crimes they had never done.

She tried to think what was best, but he was

determined to keep on talking.

‘Now I probably should not tell you this,’ he said, ‘and you must understand that some prison time will have to be given by the judge, but in cases of cooperation we can transfer you back to your country soon afterwards, and frankly what your parole board does with you then is no concern of ours or our newspapers. If I were you—’

‘OK,’ she said.

‘Yes?’

‘OK, I’ll help you, but I need my bag for my notes.’

He looked at her carefully, as if weighing her answer. Having decided, he waved at something in the far corner of the room, looking like a ventilation grill, and the door was opened from the other side. Her bag was passed in without a word being said. He took it over to the table in front of her and emptied all the contents out. Maria noticed that they had kept back her mobile phone and passport. Instantly this table looked a mess. As well as the usual keys and purse and diary, there were also scruffy shampoo sachet samples from magazines, half packets of chewing gum, leaflets with out-of-date coupons, two hair brushes and a comb, some empty nail varnish bottles and a handful of give-away ballpoint pens.

She tore a page out of the back of her diary, wrote down a phone number and some words and passed the sheet to him.

‘Ring this number. It is how I keep in touch with them. Explain that I cannot meet them as arranged, that you saw me being arrested. Tell them that you are my cousin and you need to meet them to complete the handover, and tell them the code words on that sheet,’ she said.

He quickly took the sheet and left.

Even though Maria was still in the hot, airless room again, she now had her bag back and a paper cup of water was brought in by the male police officer. The hotel room key card was still in her purse, she hoped she would use it again soon. She picked out an old leaflet for a special offer on summer shoes and made a few notes in Polish about the evening's events.

Perhaps another hour passed, maybe more, but this time when her smart interrogator entered the room his neck was bright red and his face was furious. As she cowered away from him, another man entered behind him, older and with a tired and weary walk as if it was too much effort.

'Very clever,' shouted the younger man at her. 'If you think you can get out of this by playing games, you are wrong,' he said, picking up the paper cup and throwing it at the wall before storming out and slamming the door behind him.

The older man sighed and took a chair to sit down. As he sat down he turned a little away from Maria. He said nothing at first, just looked at his hands and tilted his head towards her.

'My name is Detective Blazic. You know, you have made him very angry because he is humiliated,' he said, 'and he will have to make a report and explain how a major investigation has gone all wrong and how he then got British military security involved all on the same night,' he said, watching her sideways for her reaction.

Evidently she had not known who she was dealing with back in London.

'You know Maria,' he said, 'I have learnt from many years of police work, there is more than one way to get the information you need from people. So now a car will take you back to your hotel. Not a police car, well, not a marked one anyway. Your people will meet you there

tomorrow, and they ask you not to leave the hotel until they meet with you. We also ask you not to leave.’

The next morning there was a sharp knock on her door. Maria looked through the peep-hole and was surprised to see Ahmed, the man from the Treasury she had met with a few days ago. She opened the door to let him in. She was puzzled at first, why was he here? Then her tears flowed and she fell towards the open door. He reached out to steady her, and she stayed crumpled but upright between him and the door. Her shoulders heaved with her crying and her short, caught breaths stopped her speaking. He took her forearm, closed the door, and guided her to a seat. He pulled a tissue box across to be within her reach. She nodded a thank you, still rocking with the tears.

‘Sorry,’ he said, ‘you’ve had a shock. I should have let you know I was coming but I could only get your voicemail.’

‘They have my phone,’ she said, ‘and my passport.’

‘You should have a sweet drink, it helps you know. Where is the kettle?’

She laughed a little through her tears. ‘Drinks are extra, downstairs in the bar or call room service.’

‘How about, you wash your face and we go for a coffee downstairs?’

‘Yes, but give me a minute.’

The hotel bar was a something-and-nothing kind of place, with only a few chairs and tables between the breakfast buffet, now with its shutters down, some

vending machines for cigarettes and toothpaste and such like, a desk against the wall with a coin-operated internet computer, and a small bar with a mirror wall to try and make it seem bigger. The bar had its shutters down.

They found two seats near the wall and Ahmed told her to wait there. He went round the corner to the reception desk and she could hear him interrupting the assistant. As he returned, he said to Maria, 'They will bring us some coffees and pastries.'

When the tray came, the cups were only small, with no pots for refills, and the pastries were hard at the edges. Ahmed told the waiter to bring another coffee pot, and more milk. He got pursed lips from the waiter, but the top-ups were brought on a second tray.

Ahmed looked like he was about to say something, but he stopped himself, maybe not wanting to make things any worse for her. She took her coffee and stirred in the sugar from both hers and his sachets. She gripped her small cup with both hands, trying to draw its tepid warmth into her, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees.

'Hell,' she said, 'I didn't know what to do, they had me in a room and were talking of gangs and people trafficking and prison. There was no-one I knew to turn to who could help me,' she said, staring ahead.

'No, you did the right thing to get them to call me. And quite a clever deception too, it shows your presence of mind under pressure, keeping a cool head,' he said, and she didn't reject the compliment.

'I liked your choice for the code words, small potatoes, very droll,' he added.

She gathered herself and sat upright, then looked at him carefully. 'In the police station, they said you were British military security,' she said. 'Not a taxi office,'

she added, trying to keep it light.

‘Ah, yes,’ he paused and look at her, ‘I might have hammed it up a bit for effect with the local police folk here.’

‘And I appreciate you coming here to see me, and so quickly, you didn’t have to come,’ she said, ‘but I think you do more than transport coordination. What is going on, Ahmed, and why me?’

‘Listen, finish your coffee and let’s go for a walk.’

As they walked along the main shopping road she was grateful it was in a different direction to last night. The sky was grey, giving a dull flat light to the city which seemed to pick out the blank concrete buildings. It was a pretty ordinary street but she suddenly felt that this freedom, this openness, needed to be cherished.

They had been walking together, a few words exchanged when necessary, but mostly in a companionable silence. They reached a pleasant enough square with a few trees in the middle, and he half-pointed towards a bench and they walked slowly over and sat down. A man opposite was unloading beer kegs from a van onto a mat, the metal ringing as he rolled them into a cafe.

She turned and looked at Ahmed intently. He was about to speak but she held out her hand.

‘When my father was poorly,’ she said, ‘my mother and I would go with him to the hospital to speak with the doctors. It was a long journey to get there, two buses each way. My mother made sandwiches with the sausage he liked best. The doctors would tell us of developments, of possible options, and would order more tests. Then in a few days’ time we did the same again. I was about fourteen then, and I asked my father what was happening. He said to me, “This is what the doctors do, they call it gradual disclosure and it is a

kindness so that you can have some time to accept your future”.’

‘The thing is, for me,’ she said, ‘I knew then that I would always want to know all of it.’

He looked down at his hands, then up to face her.

‘I understand. The thing is, I am obviously working with security people so there is a limit to what I can say. You read the file, you know what we are up against here. What I can say is that I didn’t expect what happened last night. None of us did. And it has us worried, it appears we have under-estimated the people we are dealing with,’ he said. ‘The file you saw, well now it seems to cover only half of what is going on here.’

He moved a little closer to her, and started to speak more quietly.

‘You handled things very well last night. Like I said, you were cool headed. It should not have happened to you, but you have uncovered elements we were not aware of. Police connections, it looks like. The thing is, we need you to stay involved.’

He paused for just a moment, but carried on before she could say anything.

‘I know it isn’t nice work, but you can see how crucially important it is that we stop this network before more harm is done. You saw the photographs in the file. So, yes, you can leave now. But, we really need you to stay on here and continue with the work you came here to do.’

She took a deep breath. ‘And what if I do? Do I get an Aston Martin and a watch radio?’

He ignored her joke. ‘You need to write down everything you can remember from last night, any plain notebook will do. Write full reports as you go, but keep them until I meet with you. No email, no post.’

‘And my phone and passport?’

‘It is better if we don’t interfere here any more. But you can buy a new phone tomorrow with this money, and report your passport as lost at the Polish embassy here.’

“Interfere” he had said. Is that what this is to him, an interference? And she had thought he was helping her. Huh.

‘Sign here please, for the money,’ he said.

So this is British security; notebooks and forms to be signed. With that, Ahmed stood up and walked away.

The rest of the day for Maria was taken in visiting the Polish embassy to get an emergency passport, and finding a replacement phone. The embassy people were fine with her. She was given a temporary passport, one with a white cover. She was told it could only be used once but it would get her home. Her full replacement passport would be ready for collection in London early next week.

What took the rest of the day was sorting out the phone. She bought a basic handset, enough to make calls and text, with a simple camera function. Then she phoned her local shop in London to get the number transferred. Or tried to. Several calls later, the problem had been that she was abroad, that she didn’t have the old phone, that she didn’t have the account number, that the new phone was from a different network provider, and lastly she was getting very low on credit. Eventually someone told her it would be done, but that it would take up to forty-eight hours to finally connect her new phone to her usual number. Compared with how well the embassy helped her, she thought, all the bureaucrats now work for phone companies.

In a small tabac she looked for a notebook, avoiding the larger sizes and instead choosing one with a bright pink cover design of a little princess with her pony and

castle. She bought it. One for you Ahmed, she smiled.

She took a tram back from the main shopping area to the hotel, pleased that her sense of direction had not been knocked off balance. In her room she sat at the narrow desk and wrote down all she could remember since arriving yesterday. She wanted to write it down while the details were still fresh in her mind, though she didn't know when she would next see Ahmed to give him these notes. She filled eight sides by the time she had finished, and she decided she needed a shower.

She wanted to start again, as if nothing had happened yesterday, yet she knew she couldn't ignore what had been done. But what did it mean? She always found something quite soothing and peaceful in taking a shower. Obviously it was cleansing, but there was sometimes something meditative about it, it was somewhere to take her problems. Grandmother had the confessional box, and she had the shower.

But this hotel shower cubicle was too small, too mean, to help her. She used it for a wash, but afterwards she was still no clearer about what she ought to do next. Wearing a thin robe she had found on the back of the door she paced around the room, flicking through the TV channels then switching it off again. She decided she must be hungry and dressed up warm to go out for a quiet meal. She shoved her novel and a guide book into her bag, hoping that this time a book would keep unwelcome strangers away, unlike yesterday at the bus station kiosk.

She had seen a small Italian restaurant a few blocks from the hotel earlier as she passed on the tram, and she headed towards it. It was open and not too busy with just five or six people, two couples and a few stragglers like herself. She held up one finger politely as the waiter approached. He smiled and led her to a quiet corner

where she could see the room without being disturbed. He brought the menu folder, open at the page printed in English. She thanked him and ordered some water and a seafood pizza, handing back the menu. Normally she would have turned the pages first to see if there was a Polish version, and how many mistakes it had. The meal was better than she had expected, and maybe she had been hungrier than she knew. Having cleared her plate she ordered a chocolate drink and looked at her phone. There was a message telling her about all the advantages of upgrading her new contract. But she was thinking rather than reading its details.

She moved her drink to make more room on the tablecloth, and reached into her bag for the Belgrade city guide book she had bought for this trip. It included a section of common phrases, and lots of charts to convert measurements between metric and imperial, including shirt collar sizes. She had bought it at the airport while waiting for the plane and thought then that it was a bit gimmicky. It seemed to her to have been designed to appeal to the gadget side of blokes.

She pulled out the little map from the pocket on the inside back cover and spread it out, looking for the street of the head office of the firm that was considering investing in the UK with all those election-ready jobs. After all, she thought, wasn't that why she had been sent here, originally.

Maria woke early the next morning. At least the alarm function on her new phone worked as it should. The breakfast downstairs was pretty basic, with bread, cheese, slices of slippery wet ham and some yoghurt pots. She decided she could do better in a cafe later. Besides, she wanted to get outdoors early. She liked to walk in a city early in the morning, to see how it gets itself ready for the day. She would tell herself that a city

with its dawn workers was both more ordinary and more honest than later on in the day, when more pretensions would show.

The air was still bitterly cold from the night and she walked briskly, partly to keep warm and partly not to waste the early hours. The head office she wanted was nearly three kilometres away and she wasn't sure which trams or buses would work best, or at all. At a corner kiosk she bought an all-day transit city ticket which should cover all her transport options, 'for anything with wheels,' the woman vendor had said. They both had laughed. Maria was surprised at how young the woman had been. She had what seemed like her daughter with her, head down quietly behind the counter, reading and waiting, ready in her school jacket. Maria had thought street kiosk work was for older people. Are times getting harder, she thought, or is it like policemen looking younger, it says more about you than them?

She found a likely tram stop and inspected the central zone map beside the ticket validation machine. Just like in Warsaw, she knew what to do. She preferred taking a tram rather than a bus if possible, each stop has a name so it is easier to know where to get off. The firm's office was just outside the central zone, and the second tram due should take her close. The trams were quite full even though the traffic was still light. As her tram approached she moved forward with the people around her, getting on through the middle doors and having to stand, which gave her a better view of where they were going.

The tram was emptier as it got nearer the stop she had chosen, though she was not the only passenger still standing. She alighted and paused to let the tram pull away some distance before she crossed the tracks. The street she wanted should be two blocks away. She was

standing in a city square, or rather what used to be a city square. One side was an autoroute raised up on concrete pillars. Underneath it were many rows of cycle racks, already looking half full. The next side was a 1960s style office block with large but blank windows along the pavement. Perhaps some years ago it had been a showroom for fancy cars, but now it was mostly fly posted. She hitched her bag further up her shoulder and set off.

Turning the corner, the street was smaller than she had expected. Quite a few of the shops were empty, others had handwritten window signs saying, “-30%” and more. Not all of the signs above the shops included the number of their building and she had to walk up and down before she found what might be 1127. It surprised her, being a travel agents downstairs and a suntan and massage salon upstairs, she was expecting an international logistics consultancy.

A short way down on the opposite side there was a small shop which sold bread and sandwiches to order. Inside by the window were a couple of small circular metal tables with plastic chairs. Not quite the cafe she had hoped for, but open and warm. She entered, their only customer at the moment, and asked the man behind the counter for a coffee and a toasted cheese sandwich. He shrugged, so she pointed through the glass counter at what she wanted. As he reached over his paunch and into the display for the grated cheese she opened her phrase book to show him the word for toast. He shrugged again, but this time it seemed in an OK-if-you-must kind of way. He leant across to the till and pointed to the total he wanted. She put some coins in the saucer on the counter, using her hand to say keep the change.

She took a seat by the window facing sideways towards the travel agents. She looked in her bag and

pulled out the guide book again, trying to become a tourist who had strayed off the main track. Which is what she was trying to be. Sitting there, she rather thought that someone at City Hall could have saved all this effort by clicking the address on an internet map with photo views. Surely, the 24 hour message sign would be a bit of a clue guys. Taking out her phone, she took a sneaky picture through the window while pretending to text.

As she watched the doors opposite, she saw mostly older men visiting and leaving the agency and younger women, always in groups, coming down and going up the stairs behind their door to the salon. As she saw it, the men downstairs organised the transport and their cargo was the women upstairs, lured by promises of good jobs and flats, constantly chaperoned and sold by the half hour. The international logistics firm was just a respectable front to expand the franchise into London.

Perhaps emboldened by outwitting the police last night, or perhaps affected by Ahmed's praise, she decided to cross the road and find out more. She wondered if she should go upstairs to the salon, maybe she could encourage some of the women to come with her and speak out. But the agency downstairs felt safer with its full-height windows next to the pavement.

She finished her coffee, opened her bag and put back her phone and guide book, plus some sugar sachets from the table. She gave a small goodbye wave to the shopkeeper and he nodded back, in quite a proprietorial manner she felt. Leaving the shop Maria crossed the road and approached the door to the travel agency. She tried to pull it open but it was locked. A young man at a desk inside looked up at her, pressed something, and she heard a buzzer sound and felt the door open. Maybe they handled a lot of currencies.

Walking up to the young man who'd let her in, she asked for the director, Mr Marcovich, who she had been told was planning to invest in opening a new office in London. It was too soon for Maria to have her own business card, so she handed over a City Hall With Compliments slip instead. The young man looked at it for a moment, reached for a rubber stamp which he inked on a pad and brought down quite hard on the slip, handing it back to her. She took it back, now endorsed, but not sure why.

'I am sorry that Mr Marcovich will not be able to see you today, he is in Milan on business. Did you make an appointment?'

'No, sometimes our visits are spot checks,' she replied, hoping to gain the upper hand.

'Well, as I said, he is in Milan today. I will let him know you called. Goodbye,' he said, turning away to face a laptop.

Goodness how he likes a scrap, she thought, as she turned and started towards the door. She turned back and said, 'By the way, I will need to see your tax accounts for our official records.'

It worked. He was suddenly very flustered, but she could not understand why. Had she gone too far, she thought. Something about him felt wrong and she decided to ease back a bit.

'I'm doing another visit nearby and I shall return here this afternoon,' she said, and walked out. She paced briskly past the bread shop and around a corner, then stopped to think what to do next. On the floor she noticed a leaflet with *Job Club* in English including a map with the address, which she picked up and pushed into her pocket.

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This story is set in the public sector, which outside of police procedurals seems to me to have been a neglected area of life in terms of fiction. And humour, it should be said. In the public sector we can get ourselves a little windy when writing anything in case it breaks a secret. But take courage my friends – everything here is fiction, even the words put in the mouths of public figures who necessarily have cameo roles.

I write fiction as Jack Duffy who was my grandfather, much loved and missed. He left school at 13 despite having a school scholarship because the family needed his wages. He was an avid reader and always wanted to write. I was honoured as a boy when I was given his old typewriter. I hope he excuses the swear words – it's not me, Grandad, it's them!