

Chapter 1: *Food*

Archie Gray caught sight of a flash of white as he was waiting in the queue for his school dinner. It was unmistakably a football shirt. White with a red collar and trim. And a word on the back.

L. E. W...

Archie looked closer.

L.E.W.A.N.D.O.W.S.K.I.

Lewandowski! It was definitely a Poland home top. A Lewandowski Poland top! Archie had no doubts about that, as he manoeuvred to get an even better look.

And there he saw a girl. A girl in a Lewandowski top.

The girl was quite tall with shoulder-length dark hair. She was at the counter being served by the dinner ladies. Archie couldn't quite believe the scene he saw before him. The dinner ladies were piling mashed potato onto the girl's plate. Two dollops. You only ever got one at this school. And hang on... hang on... no way... the girl was holding a mobile phone and glancing at it as she spoke. This... AND the girl was being allowed to wear a football top in school.

Extra food? A football top? A mobile phone? In school? How come she was allowed them?

Archie's mind fizzed with outrage as he followed the queue to the counter. When he reached the dinner ladies and was given one dollop of

mashed potato, he felt so cross he thrust his tray out again.

‘Can I have two, please?’ he asked, ‘Like that girl got.’

The dinner lady shook her head. ‘Only one for you, Archie. Move on.’

‘That girl in the football top got two. So I want two,’ he demanded, ‘And I want to know why she’s allowed to use a phone and why she’s allowed to wear a football top. It’s not fair.’

The dinner lady sighed.

‘Come here,’ she said and walked round the back of the counters, where she squatted down in front of him.

Archie felt a slight sense of dread. That he’d stepped out of line, done something wrong.

The dinner lady explained. ‘Were you in the assembly when Mrs Bamford told us about the Ukrainian refugee children who were coming to the school?’

What did that have to do with anything? Archie wondered. But he nodded because he had been.

‘Well, that girl I served with extra mash was Miroslava. She’s the older refugee. In year five. Her brother – Alikhan – is in year three. They arrived from Poland at the weekend with their mum and their grandma, who is very old and frail. They are staying with Betsy Aaronson’s family. And I gave Miroslava extra potato because she went for days with barely any food before she came to the UK.’

‘Oh,’ Archie said, ‘I’m...’ He felt like everyone was staring at him, even though they weren’t. ‘I’m sorry,’ he continued, but he still couldn’t help himself asking another question. ‘So why is she allowed to use a phone? We’re not allowed.’

The dinner lady shook her head. ‘Archie, lad. Just listen to yourself. You don’t know anything about this family, what their needs are. No food. No dad. Why do you think they need phones?’

Archie shrugged. ‘To phone their dad? Where is their dad?’

The dinner lady frowned. ‘Ask your mum about their dad,’ she said. Her face clouded over. ‘Look, Miroslava uses her phone to translate what she wants to say. She speaks into it in Ukrainian and it displays what she wants to say to us in English. So you see, there is a reason for everything. We might not always know what that reason is, but we must always give people the benefit of the doubt. Do you understand?’

Archie nodded, though he still he had questions.

‘So... er... do you know why she was wearing a Lewandowski top?’

The dinner lady smiled. ‘That, I don’t know, but, like I said, I am sure there’s a reason for it.’

* * *

Archie walked home feeling conflicting emotions.

One was shame. That he’d been so quick to get cross about the girl in the Lewandowski top, not knowing that she was a refugee from the war in Ukraine, not knowing anything except that he wanted more mashed potato.

The other emotion Archie felt was fascination. This girl who wore the football top of one of the best footballers in the world. Robert Lewandowski. Someone Archie had read a book about, even. He wanted to know why she wore it. Robert Lewandowski was Polish; the girl was Ukrainian. It was a footballing mystery.

Archie went home fast, shouted hello and raced upstairs to his room, chased by Jim, his dog, who ran alongside, then ahead of him, leaping onto his bed, tail thumping on the duvet.

Archie quickly found his Robert Lewandowski book – from the ‘Ultimate Football Hero’ series by Matt and Tom Oldfield – and leafed through it. An old Match Attax card of the Polish and Bayern Munich striker fell out. Archie wished he had a Poland top too.

But now Archie’s mind was whirling with questions about this girl. He had seen the war in Ukraine on TV. About how the Russians had invaded Ukraine and millions of refugees had been forced to leave their homeland. All of them leaving their houses, their schools, their friends and families. Archie had always thought that Ukraine was so far away that it had barely anything to do with him. That was all it was: a war in a country a long way away.

But now this girl had turned up. A refugee. At his school.

Archie wanted to know who this girl was. How had she got here? Where was her dad? What had happened to her home? And – most of all – why was she wearing a Robert Lewandowski top?

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Chapter 2: Clothes

Archie arrived at school early the next morning. He brought his football and spent the next ten minutes booting it against the outside of the dining hall, so he didn't have to stand around and look like he was just there doing nothing. He had his Lewandowski book and Match Attax card in his pocket.

It wasn't long before Betsy arrived with Miroslava and Alikhan, with Betsy's mum and another woman about the same age. *That must be Miroslava's mum*, Archie thought, as Betsy left the others to go into the school reception, then walked alone into the playground.

Before Miroslava disappeared through reception, Archie noticed something about her. The top. She was wearing the Lewandowski top again. For the second day on the trot.

Now Archie couldn't contain himself. He had to know about the top, so, as she came into the playground, he passed his football to Betsy. Betsy trapped it cleanly, then chipped it back to Archie.

'Can I ask you something?' Archie said.

Betsy smiled. 'About our Ukrainian family?'

'Yeah,' Archie admitted, 'That. Please.'

'Fine. That's all anyone wants to know from me now.' She rolled her eyes. 'I can tell you what I am allowed to tell you.'

Archie stayed quiet and waited to hear what Betsy had to say.

'They're from a town in Ukraine called Kharkiv,' she began, 'It's near the border with Russia and one the Russians are attacking. A lot. When bombs started to fall on some houses nearby, their mum and dad grabbed everything really quickly – got their dog, too – and they hid in a bomb shelter under Miroslava's school. Then, the next morning, they drove in one of their cars to

the Polish border, which took three days, their dad dropped them near the border and they walked into Poland.'

Archie wondered why the dad had dropped them off. Hadn't he come too? But he didn't want to interrupt Betsy as she was telling him things that he couldn't quite imagine happening to him. Hiding in a bomb shelter under the school? The only bomb shelter Archie had ever seen was in a museum. Then driving across the country. For three days. Three days!

Betsy went on. 'Then when they got over the border, just carrying one suitcase or bag each, they were faced by hundreds of Polish people standing there waiting for them.'

'What happened to the dog?' Archie wanted to interrupt now. He needed to know why they didn't have their dog with them.

'They had to leave it. Their dad took it back with him.'

'Why?'

'I don't know,' Betsy said dismissively, then took up her tale, 'Then there were hundreds of Polish people waiting for them at the border. And Miroslava's mum was worried. Until she saw that the Polish people had held up banners saying YOU ARE SAFE HERE and EVERYTHING FOR FREE, and they gave Miroslava's family and all the other families food and water and offered to host them in their homes and there were piles of clothes for them to take.'

Archie wanted to ask about the clothes. He was thinking about the football top. It was hard to take in what Betsy was telling him.

'Then they went to stay with a Polish family for a few weeks before they applied to come and live in the UK,' Betsy continued, 'And then – after lots of hassle – they came...'

Archie couldn't stop himself now. It was mad and there were much more important things like the dog, the dad and the bombs, but he had to know.

‘Why is she wearing a Lewandowski top?’ he asked.

Betsy stopped. ‘A what?’

‘The football top. The one she wore yesterday and she’s still wearing today.’

Betsy paused, looked back to the school door.

‘That’s one of the things I’m not allowed to say, I think. But it’s clean. I can tell you that. My mum washes it every night after Miroslava goes to bed and it dries overnight so she can wear it every morning. It’s all she’ll wear.’

Archie shrugged. ‘But why?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Betsy said. She was looking at Archie like his question was weird.

Archie put his hand on the Lewandowski book in his pocket. He had decided that he would give it to the girl. Because he had suddenly felt overwhelmed by a surge of emotion, his eyes hot, throat tight, thinking about how kind the Polish people had been to the family with their YOU ARE SAFE HERE banners, and he felt that he wanted to be kind too. To do something to help. Something to say welcome.

‘I’ve got this for her,’ he said clumsily. He was feeling so weird now, so he gave Betsy a tight smile, handed the book over, then booted his football across the playground and ran after it.

* * *

After school, Archie’s dad had arranged to come and collect him and take him to grab some food before football training. Archie had shyly avoided Betsy and Miroslava all day, feeling funny about handing the book over.

Coming into the playground – where parents stood waiting – Archie could see that his dad was chatting to Betsy’s mum. And Miroslava’s mum. Betsy, Miroslava and Alikhan were waiting there too.

As he walked over to them, Archie heard one mum asking another why the refugees had to come to the UK at all, and why they couldn’t stay in Poland. But he ignored the remark, overtaken by another disturbing thought, seeing his dad there and knowing that Miroslava’s dad was not. Now he really wanted to know: why not? Why had their dad turned back at the border? It had been on his mind all day. Sometimes, even more than the Lewandowski top.

Miroslava’s mum grinned as Archie approached. As he joined them, they all heard a car backfire, and Archie noticed Miroslava jump and lean into her mum, then, after a few seconds, recover herself and smile again.

‘We have waited to say thank you for the book you have given to Miroslava,’ Miroslava’s mum said after comforting her daughter. She spoke with a strong Ukrainian accent.

‘Thank you,’ Miroslava said, holding the book tight to her chest.

‘It is very kind of you,’ Miroslava’s mum went on, ‘My daughter loves Robert Lewandowski. And Betsy says you have some questions.’

Archie nodded. ‘Is it okay to ask?’

‘Yes. Yes. Please.’ Miroslava’s mum smiled encouragingly.

‘I wanted to know about Miroslava’s dad. Why didn’t he come with you?’

Archie felt his dad’s hand on his shoulder. ‘I think it was questions about the football shirt she meant, Archie. Is that right?’ Dad was now addressing Miroslava’s mum.

Miroslava's mum nodded vigorously. She smiled with her mouth, not with her eyes.

Then she spoke in a quiet voice. 'The shirt was a gift from a kind Polish boy. He was of a family that we stayed with for a few weeks in Poland after we first came away from home. He gave the shirt to Miroslava when all the clothes we had were not clean and some were wet. And now she will wear only this.' The mum was still trying to smile. 'We must wash it every night for her. And now she has this book from you and the card inside, she will take them everywhere she goes, too, I think. You are kind Archie, thank you.'

'Right, Archie,' Dad interrupted, 'Football. We'd better be off.'

Archie was grateful for his dad moving things on. He felt rubbish about asking about Miroslava's dad and the way her mum had reacted.

'Thank you', Miroslava said, the book still tight against her, eyes on Archie.

Her mum added, 'You must come for tea so we can thank you. One day. Maybe?'

Then Archie and his dad left. They walked in silence to the car.

Once inside, dad put his hand on Archie's shoulder. 'You alright, mate?'

Archie shrugged. Again, he felt all weird inside. What was going on?

'Things like that can be tricky,' Dad filled the silence, 'But you did a nice thing. That's what everyone will remember.'

'Shouldn't I have asked about her dad?'

Dad frowned. 'I don't know. It's tricky, like I said. Just remember what you did came from a good place, a kind place. I was proud of you.'

'So, what has happened to their dad?' Archie asked.

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Chapter 3: *Shelter*

That weekend, after Archie had played for his football team and scored twice, he found himself at Betsy Aaronson's house. Somewhere he had never expected to be invited to. But here he was.

It was evening. Betsy's dad was working the barbeque. Archie's own dad was helping. Burgers. Sausages. And a pot of something deep red and bubbling.

'What is it?' Archie asked Betsy's dad. He was staying close to the adults as he felt shy of Betsy and her Ukrainian guests. Also, he noticed Miroslava and Alikhan were watching something on Miroslava's phone.

'Borscht. It's a like a soup. It's a special Ukrainian dish. You want some?'

'Yes please.'

Archie was ravenous, so after enjoying his Borscht, he hung around the barbecue hoping to be offered more, until he felt something nudge his ankle. He looked down, half expecting to see his dog, Jim, at his feet, but then realised they'd not brought Jim. Because Jim never behaved well at barbecues.

No. It was a football that had rolled up against his ankle.

Archie looked up to see Miroslava smiling and wearing, as always, her Lewandowski Poland top.

'We play?' she smiled, glancing back at the long lush green lawn that fell away from the house.

Archie nodded enthusiastically and they played. Short passes on the lawn, further and further apart until they were hoofing it from one end of the long lawn to the other, laughing. Miroslava's passes were pinpoint accurate. Better than Archie's. She was a pleasure to play football with.

The other adults and children were still all chatting near the barbecue when it happened. The ringtone. Loud across the garden.

Archie watched Miroslava stop to stare at her mum, his pass rolling beyond her feet and into the rosebushes. Archie also saw that Alikhan had dropped his plastic cup, spilling the contents on the patio, he was standing still.

Miroslava's mum fumbled frantically at her phone, pressing it to her ear.
'Privit. Privit. Oleksander! Oleksander!'

Silence in the garden. It seemed like even the birds had stopped singing, waiting to hear the voice on the line. But then Miroslava's mum's face dropped and she stared at her screen. 'It is cut off.'

The woman looked broken. Her whole body slumped as if she might fall on the floor.

Archie had no doubt that the call had come from Ukraine. That it was Miroslava's dad. Or someone on her dad's phone if it wasn't the dad himself. And Archie remembered what his dad had told him the night before.

About why Miroslava's dad had stayed in Ukraine.

* * *

'When Miroslava's family left home, his father had to stay in Ukraine,' Dad had told him.

'Why?'

'To fight. All men between 18 and 60 had to stay. They were given weapons and were deployed to fight the Russians. Defend Ukraine.'

'Is he a soldier, then?'

'No. He was a teacher, too. Like Miroslava's mum. They are both teachers.'

‘They give teachers guns?’

Dad had nodded.

‘His name is Oleksander. He is fighting near Kharkiv. It’s very near the border with Russia. He is in the trenches. Like during the First World War.’

Archie couldn’t believe it. He imagined his teachers with guns, crouching in the mud as an unseen enemy fired missiles at them.

‘She has not heard from her husband for days,’ Dad went on, ‘She is worried. He used to phone at least every other day. Since they escaped the war.’

* * *

Two minutes after the call had come in, Miroslava’s mum was still staring at her screen. No-one had spoken since. Betsy’s dad had turned down the barbecue.

And then the same ringtone again. Miroslava’s mum pressed the phone to her ear, turned her back to the rest of the people in the garden and spoke loudly the name of her husband again.

‘Oleksander? Oleksander?’

She listened, squatting on the floor. Turning to summon her children to join her, and smiling now, putting her thumb up to the rest of the people at the barbecue to indicate that he was safe, she pressed speakerphone so her children could hear their father speak.

Archie chose this point to go over and slip his hand into his dad’s hand. He’d not done this for years. Since he was seven or something. But he really, really wanted to hold his dad’s hand.

‘Is it their dad?’ he asked.

Dad nodded, his face rigid. ‘Yes. He’s safe. It’s good news. Such good news.’

* * *

Archie and his dad left the barbecue as soon as they had eaten. As they went, Miroslava had been looking at her phone and Archie wondered again what it was she was watching. Lewandowski goals? Or maybe The Simpsons? He had no idea.

‘Best leave them to it,’ Dad said to Archie as they walked home, ‘Their dad is still in Kharkiv. He is alive, but the war is still at its fiercest. I can’t imagine how they feel.’

Archie frowned. ‘Is he safe?’

‘Not really,’ Dad admitted, ‘The Ukrainians are defending the city. But the Russians are pounding them with shells and they’re under fire all the time.’

They turned a corner, smelling cut grass. Someone was moving a lawn.

‘But he’s a teacher,’ Archie said, ‘He shouldn’t be in a war.’

‘All the men are fighting. Dads. Sons. Grandads even,’ Dad told Archie, ‘Some women too. I think there are a million teachers, shopkeepers, taxi drivers, office workers, all lined up defending their country.’

Archie tried to picture it. He couldn’t.

‘What’s Kharkiv like, Dad?’

‘Huge. Bigger than all the UK cities, apart from London. It’s a very important place.’

‘But what is it like now? Like Miroslava’s house? Is that okay? The school? The shops? The football pitches? What are they like?’

‘When we get home,’ Dad said, ‘I’ll show you some pictures if you like. There are photographers out there who take pictures of war, of the people, what happens to them. We could look at some of their photographs.’

Another question came into Archie’s head. ‘Do people mind?’

‘Mind what?’

‘Being photographed?’

‘I don’t know,’ Dad replied carefully, ‘Maybe we should find that out, too. But listen... I promised Alikhan that he could walk the dog with us tomorrow. He loves dogs and misses his. That is something good we can do.’

‘Where is Alikhan’s dog now?’ Archie asked.

‘They don’t know,’ Dad replied.

Chapter 4: *Family*

They met on the moor, an expanse of fields and rough ground on a hill above the town where Archie and Betsy lived. And now where Miroslava and Alikhan lived, too.

They were here because the night before, at the barbecue, Archie's dad had promised Miroslava's brother that they could all take Archie's dog, Jim, for a walk together.

It was a bright midsummer morning, soft white clouds floating across a lovely blue sky. It felt warm and there was no breeze. Before long, Alikhan and Miroslava were running around with the dog, throwing his ball, Jim tearing through the heather and emerging with dark muddied legs and belly.

Archie and Betsy joined in the game. The sound of Alikhan's laughter was too infectious not to. The Ukrainian boy was normally so quiet and controlled. But, today, with the dog, he was different.

Archie smiled at his dad who was talking with Miroslava's and Betsy's mums. Dad smiled back.

Then – feeling like today was a good day – Archie glanced down from the moor and at the skyline of the town, not much more than a mile away over undulating fields and farmhouses, a road running downhill into the town centre like a river coming off the hills. Archie loved it up here. The feeling of being in the countryside, but still close to the town he had lived all his life in, where his family all lived, where he played football and went to school and...

Thinking about where he lived had shocked Archie's mind back suddenly to the photographs Dad had shown him the night before. They had been taken by a war photographer who posted them on Facebook. Terrible images of Kharkiv, the town where Miroslava and Alikhan had come from.

Now Archie wondered how he could have felt that today was a good day. Seeing his own town from high above had reminded him of those bleak photographs of towns in Ukraine that Dad had found for him. It was hard to get his head round the fact that what he saw now – his town, all quiet and safe, bathed in the morning sun – was not that different from the shattered, smoking, devastated towns of Ukraine that he had seen online. And Archie knew that, a few weeks ago, his life and Miroslava's had been exactly the same: she had had family and football and school like him, a town like his.

But not now.

The images he had seen came back to him.

The block of flats with its side torn away, a picture still hanging on a wall.

A woman standing in front of her house and garage, staring back at whoever was taking a photograph of her, as the house behind her burned.

A group of adults cooking food on a fire in the road outside their homes, their faces dirty and etched with exhaustion.

Two girls – not much older than Betsy and Miroslava – cowering in a doorway, looking out of their unlit home, their eyes fearful.

Was this what Miroslava had seen? Or was this what her parents had saved her from seeing? This was certainly why they had left their home to become refugees. Archie wanted to understand – as much as he could – how it felt to have your town torn into pieces, for it to be burning and smoking, to have no electricity so you had to cook on a fire in the road outside.

And then it occurred to him that that was what they had done the night before: eaten outside at a fire. The barbecue. He almost smiled at the comparison. At least that had been the same for them.

But then he felt a pain in his stomach. An understanding. Three families enjoying sausages and burgers in a back garden was not the same as being

forced to eat in the street, because your house was on fire, or there is no electricity to see inside the house or use your cooker or do anything you normally did or could do safely.

That was why Miroslava and Alikhan's dad and mum had taken them away. That was why Archie had refugees in his school and in Betsy's home.

Archie shook his head. He wished his school could take in some more refugees from Ukraine. From anywhere. Who wouldn't want to offer their home to people who had lived the lives those people in the photographs were living now?

'It is a nice town. Your town.'

Archie turned to see Miroslava beside him, still wearing her Robert Lewandowski top, looking down into the valley. She'd made him jump. He wondered how long he had been staring at it, just thinking.

He had overcome his shyness about how to speak to a refugee now that he knew Miroslava. It hadn't taken him long to realise she was just a girl. A normal girl who loved dogs and football and all the things he liked, that a ten-year-old anywhere in Europe would like. She was just like him. She had a mum and a dad and a house and three cars, but a house that might not be there anymore. She had gone to school and played football for a team, which weren't there anymore. She had a dog. Or she had had a dog. Still no-one knew what had happened to their dog.

But thinking about Miroslava's dog, and seeing the photographs of what was happening to that town, and witnessing the phone call from Miroslava's dad the night before had shocked him.

Now he found it hard to speak to Miroslava again. Because he didn't know what to say. Didn't know if he should say anything. And that felt bad.

That there was this thing between them. Especially as it was just him and her now, the others were way off and he had to say something.

But what do you say to a refugee?

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Chapter 5: *Food*

Archie felt very uneasy standing on the hill above his town in silence with Miroslava. Behind them, Betsy and Alikhan were still playing with the dog.

What do you say to a refugee?

That question again.

It was frightening.

But Archie knew – deep down – that what he was feeling was nowhere near as frightening as what Miroslava had been through for weeks and even not as frightening as how she must feel now on this hill, in a country she had only been in for days, with a boy who didn't know what to say to her, speaking in a language that wasn't her own.

Archie would be straightforward. Like his dad. His dad was always direct, honest, but still remaining kind. Archie would be like that. He would ask about something not to do with the war or her dad. The films she watched on her phone. He would ask about them. Then they could talk about football or cartoons.

'You know those videos you were watching?' Archie asked.

'Yes,' Miroslava smiled.

'Can I ask what they are?'

Miroslava took out her phone and – in silence – chose a film and showed Archie. He was seriously expecting football action or cartoons: not this.

There was a classroom. The camera panned around as the children were doing something with electricity, wires and batteries. A huge circuit of flashing lights.

Then another film. A birthday party. A man smiling as lit candles illuminated his face, then the man standing to hug Miroslava.

Finally, a football game, Miroslava scoring a perfect volley before being mobbed by her celebrating teammates.

‘This was when I felt like a person,’ Miroslava said.

Archie had no idea what to say to that. Where had this come from? What was she telling him, asking him? How should he respond?

They sat in silence. Archie was terrified of saying the wrong thing, but pleased she had shown him the films.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked carefully.

‘I am not a person. I don’t have a football team. My old school is gone. My house. My dad is not here. My toys, my books, my clothes, my dog. Without them I am a thing.’

Another silence.

‘How can we help?’ was all that Archie could say. He felt stupid, clumsy.

‘You gave me book. You play football. You let my brother play with dog. You help me feel like I am not a thing for a little time.’

Archie nodded. He felt good but bad at the same time. Then he remembered what he’d overheard from one of the parents in the playground. Those stupid things said about refugees – that they didn’t need to be in the UK – and how he reckoned those parents would say the same things to their children, children at the school in the same classrooms as Miroslava and Alikhan.

‘Miroslava?’

‘Yes?’

‘Can we show the class at school your films?’

‘Why?’

‘I really think they’d like to see them.’

He wanted to say *So that they can see you are a person not a thing.*

But he didn't.

* * *

The next day, after lunch, the children from years five and six sat in the year six classroom with the blinds down and the windows open. It was a hot day.

Mr Salah was standing at the front of the classroom, just to the side of the smart board.

'Archie has been very lucky to see some short films that Miroslava has of her home,' Mr Salah began, 'He has asked Miroslava if she would share them with us and she has agreed. I think this is a great chance for us to get to know Miroslava a bit more and – as she is learning about us – we can learn about her.'

Now the films came on. One after the other.

Archie watched his classmates, not the films.

First the classroom. The science lesson.

'It's just like ours,' a voice said from the back.

Mr Salah studied the screen. 'It's better than ours.' He looked impressed.

Then the birthday cake. And Miroslava's dad.

Children called out what they had done on their dad's birthdays.

Then the third film. The game of football. The volley hitting the back of the net. Miroslava's teammates mobbing her.

At that point a cheer went up. Like if they'd been watching a goal in a live game. Archie saw Miroslava flinch at the loud noise the class had made, then, after a moment, smile.

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