

**LAST
BEST
CHANCE**
BROOKE DUNNELL



FREMANTLE PRESS

Rachel

Cycle day 2 (CD2)

It wasn't yet seven-thirty in the morning when Rachel Mather wriggled out of her underpants and kicked them across the exam room floor. Once they'd skidded safely beneath the chair that held her handbag, she turned so her bum brushed the edge of the gurney, then hoisted herself up. Friction made the protective square of white cotton, like a giant sanitary napkin, rumple, and she yanked the corners to straighten it beneath her buttocks.

Her legs pimpled in the cold. She slouched to look at her feet, wiggling her toes to get warmth into them. She'd brought socks but left them in her bag. Staring at socked feet was in some way worse than the artificial chill.

Someone knocked, then turned the door handle. 'Ready?' a female voice called, shoes squeaking. Rachel couldn't remember seeing her before. 'Rachel Mather?' A flat-ironed fringe hung in the nurse's eyes.

'That's me.'

The nurse pulled a clipboard from under her arm and flicked through the papers. ‘You’ve started to bleed?’

‘Yes.’

‘Fresh red blood? Not brown?’

Rachel had been getting her period for thirty years; she knew what it meant to say it had started. ‘Red as jam. Strawberry jam,’ she elaborated. ‘You know. I guess it could be—what, blackberry.’

The nurse eyed her through the curtain of her fringe.

Rachel tried to smile. ‘Sorry. I guess that’s a bad example.’

‘Are you nervous,’ the nurse said, without the upwards inflection of a question. Leaving the clipboard on a bench Rachel recognised from IKEA, she sat heavily on a wheeled stool and scooted it towards Rachel’s feet. ‘You can lie down now. You know the drill?’

‘I do.’

Holding the hem of her skirt between her legs until the final moment, Rachel swung one calf at a time into the stirrups, then lowered herself down until her back met the rustling cover. Some nurses offered a pillow, but not this one. Rachel touched her chin to her chest so she could see.

The nurse scuttled like a crab to one end of the room and withdrew the white wand from its holder. *Excalibur*, Rachel thought, as she always did at this moment. Next, the nurse snapped a cream-coloured sheath over the end, then squeezed clear lubricant onto it. The device prepared, the nurse rolled back to Rachel and used the wrist of her free hand to swipe her hair out of the way.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘Bit of pressure.’

That was Rachel’s cue to drop her head back and close her eyes.

There was the brief sting of resistance, then the rush of warmth as the transducer entered. Rachel had been told many times—by medical professionals, not boyfriends—that her cervix was low, and she sucked in her breath as the probe butted against it.

‘Is that a bit uncomfy?’ the nurse asked. ‘Sorry.’

‘It’s okay,’ Rachel lied.

The nurse reached for a notebook and pen. ‘Secretarial duties.’ Her eyes met Rachel’s and there was the faintest trace of a grin.

Emotion drove up Rachel’s oesophagus and collected at the top of her throat. Just one hint of humanity and she was ready to sob.

She clicked the pen hard to drive away the feelings, letting the notebook fall open. At the top of the page was the letter *E* with a box next to it, and below that two columns headed *L and R*. Gritting her teeth as the probe moved, Rachel wrote her name and date in the space provided.

The nurse had turned to peer at a big screen crowded with black-and-white constellations, tracking a course through the stars. ‘Okay.’ She pressed buttons on a keyboard until there was a beep. ‘Endometrium, three point two.’

Rachel copied the number into the box labelled *E*.

‘Day one today?’ the nurse asked. ‘Or day two?’

‘It started yesterday afternoon, so. Day one and a half, I guess.’

The probe swung to the left. For a moment Rachel held her breath, sure she’d just been gored through the kidney, but almost as soon as it struck, the pain was gone. ‘Bowel, bowel, bowel,’ the nurse murmured. Rachel looked at the screen, unsure how these clouds of particulate were different from the others. ‘Lots of bowel this morning.’

‘I had my All-Bran.’

‘Here we go.’ The keyboard emitted another beep. ‘One, two ...’ Rachel’s hopes rose. ‘No, that’s not—three. Okay. Left, three small.’

Rachel wrote this in the *L* column.

The nurse found the right ovary and scanned its surface. ‘Three as well.’ Rachel put the numeral under *R*, fingers slipping around the thin pen. ‘You’re forty-one?’

‘Forty-two.’

The nurse frowned as if she knew better. Counting follicles wasn’t like reading tea-leaves, Rachel thought, then corrected herself: it was. It was predicting the future.

‘All done.’ The nurse pulled the wand from between Rachel’s legs and held it up, showing the rust-coloured stain at the end. After a long, silent second of contemplation, she pulled the sheath inside-out.

Cheeks flushing, Rachel shut the notebook and held it out. ‘My birthday was a few weeks ago,’ she said. ‘It’s March.’

‘Jeez.’ The nurse looked grim, and for a moment Rachel felt the sharp pain of another person’s doubt. ‘March already? Wasn’t it just Christmas?’

‘Tell me about it.’

The nurse took the notebook. ‘Six follicles isn’t terrible for forty-two. Are you for IVF or embryo transfer?’

‘Transfer.’

She smiled. ‘Oh well, it doesn’t matter then. Just the lining. They put you on HRT?’

All this information was in the clipboard. Freeing her legs from the stirrups, Rachel sat up. ‘I’m doing the ovulation induction injections.’

‘Really?’ The nurse shrugged. ‘I would’ve thought...’ She rolled her stool over to the wall calendar. ‘Well, if all goes to plan, let’s see.’ Her chin bounced as she counted the dates. ‘Two weeks, then three, four, five days—the first likely date for your transfer is the nineteenth, if you want to pencil that into your diary.’

Feeling fluid seep from the tunnel the wand had pressed through her, Rachel reached for the box of scratchy tissues and held a handful between her legs. The screen was frozen on an image of her ovary, mostly white with three black seeds scattered across it.

Three was not her worst number, but it was close.

But, as the nurse had said, the follicles didn't matter. They were the means to an end.

The nurse squinted at the coloured dots that coded each date on the calendar. 'I'm on transfers that week!' she said, and Rachel's heart sank at how genuine she sounded. 'I'll probably see you.'

'I'm not—I won't—' Rachel inhaled to collect her thoughts. 'I'm not doing the transfer here.'

The nurse's face tightened in suspicion. 'What? Where are you having it?'

'Overseas.'

'Oh.' For a beat, they were both silent. 'Right. You're that patient.'

Rachel wanted to tell her that this betrayal was also contained in the file, but instead she just nodded. 'That's me.'

Rachel had first visited this fertility clinic years earlier. Her marriage to Ben had been over for six months, and the devastation left in its wake found a focus: she didn't want to get old without at least trying to have a baby. This was the biggest clinic in Perth, advertised on FM radio and fertility podcasts, and she figured it was worth a consultation. She was thirty-eight then, rosebud young compared to now, with rich ripe eggs going to waste every month.

The doctor who saw her suggested she go straight to IVF instead of insemination. She was older, in her late fifties, with waves of elegant grey hair. As she spoke, the doctor drew perpendicular lines on the back of a prescription pad: the rough axes of a graph. 'The reality is that, at your age, fertility has already begun to decline.' The next line she drew travelled parallel to the horizontal one for a moment, then sank like Rachel's expectations. At the

point where it dropped away, the doctor wrote 35. ‘You could try sperm donation with ovulation stimulation, but it might be a waste of your time.’

As Rachel’s head buzzed from the terminology, the doctor found a different slip of paper in her drawer. ‘I know I’m blunt,’ she said, ‘but I don’t like to get anyone’s hopes up. The truth is, if you want this, you need to give yourself the best chance.’ She marked the paper, then looked up. ‘Do you want a baby now?’

Rachel couldn’t have said no, even if that had been the answer. ‘I want to try.’

The doctor pushed the paper across the desk.

It was a list of fees for treatment, with a sharp tick beside one of the highest amounts. Donor sperm insemination, the procedure Rachel had inquired about, was a few rows above. The price alongside it was much, much lower.

She told the doctor she’d think about it, but never went back. The difference in price was egregious, wasn’t it? The situation couldn’t be *that* dire. Rachel had regular periods, minimal cramping, if that meant anything. Her cervical screens were always clear. Why did the clinic offer low-intervention treatments if they didn’t want to perform them? To get patients in the door, probably.

The boutique clinic where she’d ended up had the more charismatic Dr Leonard, who had agreed with her position: she was only thirty-eight, with reasonable test results; no reason to think a couple of rounds of insemination wouldn’t have the intended outcome. When they hadn’t, and subsequent cycles involved more and more interventions—induced ovulation through pills and injectables, then basic IVF, then hormone replacement therapy and genetic testing and even fertilisation by way of a microscopic needle depositing a single spermatozoon into each egg, a procedure Rachel hadn’t even know was possible until they recommended

it—she was embarrassed to remember the doctor at the big clinic and how her prediction was turning out to be right. Rachel had already spent double the amount that had driven her away, and she felt herself chasing this dream until there was no money left.

She was only back because no other clinic would work with the overseas doctors. They considered it too risky, not knowing exactly how things would proceed. Dr Leonard himself had been grave, like a father warning his daughter off a bad-news boyfriend.

‘These foreign places can be cowboys. It’s never quite clear what you’re getting into.’ He folded his hands together sadly and Rachel despised him, this man who now spoke like she should have known better. ‘If we’d started with IVF earlier, perhaps ...’ He’d given her a weighted look.

Trying to keep her voice from trembling, she said, ‘You thought my chances were good when we started.’

‘Hindsight is difficult,’ he said, as if he hadn’t just indulged in some revisions of his own. ‘There’s a lesson here for everyone.’

Rachel’s was in humility. She went back to the big clinic and the female doctor gave her the grace of pretending they’d never met. Her hair was white now, like a queen in a fantasy novel. They’d do bloods and scans for the first few days of her cycle, before she left the country. At the end of the appointment, the doctor handed over a different slip of paper.

It was a statement indemnifying the clinic if there were any issues overseas. Rachel signed eagerly this time.

The waiting room was full when Rachel emerged, sanitised and dressed, to register for her next scan. You could only book in for a particular date, not a precise time, so a queue of women formed even before the clinic opened. The patients came in waves: shift

workers first, either on their way from work or in a hurry to get there, clutching thermoses and looking bleary; then office workers in slacks and shell tops, thumbing emails as they waited; and last, patients whose jobs were mysterious or non-existent, catching the end of the monitoring window after sleeping late or dropping children at school, dressed in gym gear or loungewear or jeans. Once she'd seen a woman in a cocktail dress sticking on fake eyelashes as she waited.

The transition to the last group had begun during Rachel's ultrasound, and she saw shorts and thongs on lower limbs as she made her way to the desk. In the public parts of the clinic she kept her eyes lowered, trying to maintain a sense of privacy and avoid the wistful, knowing looks that could sometimes be exchanged here, the other patients acting as if they'd seen to the very depths of her soul and been startled by their own reflection.

There were a couple of women ahead of her, so Rachel snagged a copy of the day's newspaper to flick through. A few pages in, below the headline *CASPIE APPEARANCE ALMOST CONFIRMED*, was a large image of a woman hurrying towards an SUV. The shot had been taken on the sly, from beyond the vehicle Cassandra Caspie was approaching. The tech entrepreneur had an irritated expression, which was unflattering. Rachel guessed there were at least a couple more photogenic versions snapped in the seconds before Caspie spotted the paparazzo and that the one with her mouth hanging open and a V creased into her forehead had been chosen deliberately. Rachel felt sorry for her until she reached the caption: *Caspie is rumoured to have delivered triplets in a home birth at her Auckland mansion.*

Sucking her teeth, she folded the paper and dropped it back on the rack. The woman was ten years younger than Rachel, a genius and a billionaire, and now apparently the mother of an instant

family. She didn't need sympathy over a bad photo.

After paying for the appointment and getting a reminder card with Sunday's date, Rachel was able to leave. It was bright outside, and the heat roused every pinprick of lubricant she'd attempted to wet-wipe away. She crossed the road to her car with inner thighs tacking together, humidity releasing the sharp odour of antiseptic.

Without a proper shower, you couldn't be truly clean after a scan. It was like sex in that way, the clammy pressures leaving a latent dampness set off by warmth and movement. When Rachel got to work, she would immediately lock herself in a cubicle and perform a second cleansing, change into a clean pair of knickers, and trade the thick sanitary napkin for a tampon. But the moisture would linger; she knew that from experience. This was not her first date with the wand.

The law firm where she worked was a crawl through peak-hour traffic to the other side of the CBD. At a red light she stopped behind a four-wheel drive with three kids in the back, straw boaters knocking together. Behind the wheel, their father rested his forearm on the edge of the wound-down window and tapped along to a beat Rachel couldn't hear.

Glancing in her rear-view mirror, she tried to imagine a child in the back seat of her own car. A chunky backwards-facing bassinet; a cushioned black booster; a primary-schooler colouring in a book; a teenager with earphones, eyes fixed on a screen. But the space was too empty for the superimposition, the seat crevices too free of crumbs.

Someone beeped to let her know the lights had changed, and she yanked her foot off the brake.

A few years earlier, Rachel had asked her mother if she'd pictured herself with kids before having them. She was thinking about trying to have a baby on her own but felt thrown at never

being able to imagine her future offspring. Some of her friends claimed they'd known their own kids since before conception, like they were hanging out in some other realm, waiting patiently to be born.

Usually, Jean Mather wouldn't have indulged a question like that, would've waved it away like an annoying fly, but they were looking after her brother's twins and she must have been feeling nostalgic.

'I always saw myself with older children,' she commented, rocking the boy on her lap. Rachel was feeding the other, trying to aim the bottle between the dense gums. 'Eight or nine years old. Never with a little baby.' Jean offered a dazed smile. 'But they have to be babies first, don't they?'

Unless you adopt, Rachel thought, but didn't want to interrupt when her mother was being honest. 'But you always knew you'd have kids?'

'Well, that's what you did, in my day.' Realising what she might have admitted to, Jean's neck stiffened. 'Fine with me, of course, because your father and I wanted them. We had Conny right away, didn't we?'

Her brother was a honeymoon baby, born within the first year. Jean had been twenty, their father Michael twenty-three. If she'd followed in her parents' footsteps, Rachel's own eighteen-year-old might have been with them, stacking the dishwasher or watching TV.

'Did you end up liking it best when we were eight and nine?' Rachel asked. 'Was it what you imagined?'

'I don't remember any of you being eight years old, if I'm frank.'

Rachel's father had died in a workplace accident three days before his thirty-second birthday, when Conrad was eight-and-a-half, Rachel five, and Antony three. Jean often referred to the daze

of their childhood; that she'd gone into a fugue after the funeral and blinked out of it fifteen years later at Antony's high school graduation. Rachel found this unnerving, because she remembered a mother who was alert, if highly emotional. It was difficult to think that Jean had no memory of kneeling by Rachel's pillow at bedtime, pausing for a moment, then tipping forward and sobbing a salted patch into the sheet.

But then, Rachel didn't remember her father. There were things Conrad said, and Jean, about what Michael used to like and do, some of the stuff he'd say, and she was sure she'd cobbled these into false memories. Jean told her that, the day of the accident, he'd bent down to give Rachel a butterfly kiss while she ate her toast and called her 'my girl'. This scene played in her head like a film, its hyper-reality making her doubtful, along with the report she had that identified the accident as occurring at around six-thirty in the morning. Surely she wouldn't have been up and eating toast by six, giving Michael the time to get to the site, climb in the cherry picker and tip over.

Rachel intended to be a single parent, but she knew her experience would be nothing like Jean's. For Rachel, there may never be a partner, which meant no-one to share the load with, but also, nothing to lose. Nothing to make up stories about—well, apart from the origin story. She'd do the toast and butterfly kisses herself.

After lunch, Rachel had a meeting with her supervisor to prepare them both for her upcoming leave. She'd be away for three weeks from the following Friday, which she hoped would be enough time to get her through the embryo transfer and home again. Something did feel unnatural about getting on an international flight when

she hoped to be mere days into a pregnancy, but she couldn't stay away forever. If she was going to have a baby, she'd have to rack up her working hours while she could.

Jamie suggested going out for coffee, so they crossed the road to a café that was always being sold to new owners, remodelled and renamed. Since Christmas it had been called Vibes, a name Rachel felt was doomed. The regular café tables had been replaced by high tops, with padded crates on poles in a quirky version of stools. The barista worked alone, his hair in a tight knot, staring into the middle distance as the milk frother screamed. Jamie paid for their drinks and an oversized chocolate chip cookie, breaking it in half inside a serviette so they could share.

The meeting was a formality, but Jamie was the king of formalities. Rachel had worked in half a dozen HR departments since getting her degree, and Jamie was far and away the best boss she'd ever had, as well as the most exemplary. He was like a living human resources textbook. Everything was written down, agreed to and signed off on in the easiest and yet most professional of fashions. He had deep knowledge of employee entitlements and shared them generously, as if from his own pockets. He could almost convince a jaded employee that human resources worked in the best interests of the staff rather than the business.

'So,' he said, typing the last words on the email summarising their meeting, 'looking forward to your time off?'

'I've been so busy, I haven't had time to get excited yet.'

'It's always the way.' Jamie closed his laptop. 'It isn't until you've finished work that you catch your breath and think, *I'm actually doing this!*'

Rachel knew he was fishing for information. Company guidelines said employees were entitled to do whatever they wanted while on annual leave, provided it didn't bring the business into disrepute,

and he'd never come out and ask what hers was booked for. Jamie was extremely skilled at making the vague seem specific.

Taking pity, she decided to give him the version of the trip she'd share with her mother and brothers. Jamie made a good test run, because his training and personality precluded him from asking invasive questions like Jean and Conrad definitely would.

'I got a bit spontaneous,' Rachel explained. She found the website for the hotel she'd be staying at on her phone and showed it to Jamie. 'You can get spa treatments and things dirt cheap because the currency is weak. And the capital's meant to be this hidden gem, the next Prague or Budapest.' She leaned across and swiped through the photo set until the exterior shots came into view: cobbled streets, bridges, ornate public buildings, a castle on a hilltop.

'Wow.' Jamie bent close, keeping his free hand on his coffee so Rachel was the only one touching her device. 'Looks lovely. I have to admit, I've never heard of it.' He offered a self-effacing look. 'But then, I haven't been to Prague or Budapest.'

Rachel had. She shook off memories of standing with Ben at the base of the Astronomical Clock, his hand sliding up the leg of her shorts as tourists pressed eagerly around them. 'They're gorgeous but getting a bit touristy.'

Jamie looked apologetic. 'Can you show me on the map?'

Rachel opened Google Maps and zoomed in to south-central Europe until the long speech-bubble shape of the country filled the screen, with the capital roughly in the centre and a mountain range just inside the eastern border. Jamie's brow furrowed as he tried to make sense of the geography. 'It's quite small, isn't it? I had no idea.'

She scrolled around, showing him neighbouring countries: Serbia, Romania, Hungary. 'There's a lot of good daytrips. The mountain towns are meant to be beautiful.' Not that Rachel would

see them: she was going for one thing, and one thing only.

‘But safe, right?’

‘It’s no more dangerous than anywhere else.’

‘Well,’ he said, ‘good for you. I hope it’s everything you want it to be.’

Sliding her phone back into her bag, Rachel felt a flood of appreciation for Jamie. He would’ve made the perfect husband and father, if only these very attributes didn’t make him appallingly unattractive to Rachel. Plus, he was her boss, and already married, et cetera.

If the procedure worked and she came back pregnant, her story would be that she met a local man in a bar, they’d been together only once, and she had no way of getting in touch. Jamie wouldn’t want to know any of that. He’d treat it like the Immaculate Conception, a hushed thing to be revered, and protect her from any office gossip. And if the treatment didn’t work, he’d just ask if she enjoyed her holiday and never mention it again.

Jess

Friday

Fifteen thousand kilometres away, at the same time Rachel was kicking off her underpants and climbing onto the exam table, the earth was beginning its roll into the new day.

Here, in the northern hemisphere, the sound of keys scratching in the lock woke Jess Neave from a light sleep. She felt warm with anticipation as the door creaked and Viktor's heavy boots met the wooden floor. She could trace his movements through the darkness of the flat: keys and wallet dropped on the tallboy in the entryway; the hiss of urine and rumble of the cistern; taps moaning as he drank water in the kitchen. Finally, he entered the bedroom, smelling of beer and the fruity aftershave he wore unselfconsciously. She rolled towards the doorway and lifted the doona, inviting him in.

His skin was cold from being outside, and on top of his own scents were ozone and pavement. He pressed the icy tip of his nose to her neck, making her squeal. 'Warm me up,' he suggested, unbuckling his belt and wriggling the waistband of his jeans towards his knees. 'I think about you all day, darling.' As proof, he took her palm and pressed it against the radiant heat of his groin.

After they were done, Viktor turned Jess so her spine was rounded into his belly, his top arm looping around to lie between her breasts.

‘All day,’ he repeated, breath moist and sweet against her earlobe. She reached back to find his head, rubbed his thick curls with her fingers, then let her arm slacken back against the pillow.

Like that, they slept.

After eight, Jess woke again. The light through the bedroom window was milky white, like watered-down paint, and the cold shimmered in the glass. Viktor slept facedown, arms and legs bent like a body fallen from a high building. Trying not to disturb him, she rolled her half of the doona into the middle of the bed and scooted to the end. The chill of the floorboards made her gasp as she hurried down the hallway to the kitchen.

When Jess had finally agreed to move here, Viktor promised they’d live somewhere nice. Before that, when she’d visit, his accommodation had ranged from remote to crowded to crumbling. Viktor could make do with a sleeping bag on a cement floor, but he understood Jess’s Western middle-class tastes and stretched their budget to breaking point for a second-storey flat in the Old Town with views from the kitchen and bedroom. The bay window in the kitchen was Jess’s favourite place, and the warmest because it collected the heat from the stove. Viktor found a sturdy chair so she could drink coffee and look out at the mountains. The apartment and the view helped to keep her in the country, but to pay for it they both had to work whatever hours they could find, making times like these, when she could sit still and gaze, both priceless and costly as hell.

The morning sky was pale and cloudless, the sun weak, despite the spring equinox being only a few weeks away. Jess had read somewhere that, instead of the black of night, the real colour of the universe was a kind of middling beige. The sky in the region was

the same, with no ocean reflected in it. It was as if any blueness got caught in the mountaintops as the sun rose, leaving just a thin film to drift westwards.

The water boiled in the coffee maker, and she turned off the burner, then poured coffee and milk into an oversized mug. The custom here was to serve hot drinks in bowls, which were lifted by circling the thumb and second finger of each hand around the rim and tipped towards the mouth. The sensation reminded Jess of drinking the leftover milk from a bowl of cereal, and she was always afraid of spilling. She conformed in public, but in her own home, she wanted a mug.

Smelling the coffee, Viktor came out shirtless, unzipped jeans hanging from his hips. She filled a bowl for him and received his kiss, short but full, his entire body pressing against her for a moment. ‘Today is busy for you?’ he asked, sipping the black brew, then continued as if it were she who’d asked the question. ‘I go to university, then the gym, then work at the buffet. I will see you, my love?’

‘I’ve got my English class, then tutoring in the afternoon and an early shift at the bar.’ She lowered her mug. ‘When do you finish teaching? We could meet up.’

‘Lunchtime,’ he said, then smiled fondly as her face fell. They wouldn’t see one another until Viktor returned from the restaurant, and that would be long past midnight. ‘Don’t worry, darling. It is Friday. The end of the working week.’

Jess rolled her eyes, as he’d wanted her to. They made their living through a patchwork of casual jobs and under-the-table shifts, and these opportunities were easiest to find on the weekends.

Viktor tipped the last of his coffee down his throat. ‘Boris has a speech on Sunday in City Square,’ he said. ‘There are drinks after. You would like to go?’

Jess yawned. ‘What’s he going to talk about?’

‘You have heard of the green energy expo?’ When she shook her head, Viktor elaborated. ‘It is now two weeks away. There are many thoughts about it, many points of view. Is this a turning point for the country, or another dead end?’

‘Dead end?’

‘Some of the proposals ...’ He turned to rinse his bowl in the sink, then dried his hands on the tea towel. ‘It is not yet clear.’

‘What does Boris think?’ Jess would never say, but she thought Boris was the smartest of their friends. Smarter even than Viktor, and that was saying something.

Viktor shrugged loosely. ‘We find out on Sunday.’

‘What time?’

‘Eleven o’clock.’ He ran a finger along her arm.

She tilted her chin so they could kiss, Viktor’s lips tasting of coffee. ‘Sounds good.’

‘A date!’ he shouted, stamping his foot with glee. Jess laughed. ‘I look forward to it so much, darling.’

Viktor went to shower, and Jess poured herself a second coffee, making it lukewarm with the last of the milk. Returning to the window, she saw clouds gathering over the mountains, slowly ascending the peaks like a diver climbing a ladder. In the same way, the clouds would soon leap from the range and cascade down the leeward side in a minorly famous weather event that still thrilled her, seven years after she’d first seen it.

It was motion that made the cloudfall phenomenon so gorgeous; static pictures of a cloud mass against the steep edge of the range always seemed unremarkable. Even video took a while to pay off, since the viewer had to appreciate the arrival of the clouds from the east, their collection at the highest point, and then the moment of pause; the diver taking a breath before the jump. Jess had seen the

northern lights once and found the slowness of the colour change to be maddeningly gorgeous; the realisation that a shimmering crosshatch of green was a completely different shape than it had been moments before. She thought the cloudfall was similar in the near imperceptibility of the shift, how it took sustained attention to truly appreciate.

When Jess showed footage to people back in England, most were bored long before that point. Their questions undermined the beauty she found there: Where was this? Were a few clouds skidding down the side of a mountain really the country's most appealing feature? Who'd leave their home behind and move more than a thousand miles just for that?

Jess's morning language class was held in a library in the centre of the Old Town, a brisk five-minute walk from the flat. She left the warmth of the kitchen reluctantly, dressing in layers and zipping herself into a quilted coat. Her quick stride should have kept her warm, but the air over the plain was icy and relentless from the moment she stepped onto the street.

Despite its name, the Old Town wasn't as picturesque as it might have been. The oldest of the buildings dated from around four hundred years before, but there were few of these left, with the materials being so low quality and the city's various leaders so often in a mood to raze and rebuild, raze and rebuild. The resulting mismatch of styles had its own contradictory beauty: brutalist against mid-century modern, Edwardian extensions on baroque.

There was a lack of green space too, with the squares either bricked or cobblestoned (until Viktor pointed out the 'cobbles' were large, fake tiles installed in the late nineteen-nineties to cover over a particularly bad bitumen job), with the odd spindly

sapling planted in dirt at random points on footpaths. The only point of relief was down by City Square, where Boris would make his speech on Sunday. City Park was an oblong of flattened grass ringed by irregularly spaced fir trees, with a playground for the Old Town's children laid with rich-scented woodchips.

The Old Town was set out on a grid of five avenues by four streets, all pedestrianised and accessible only to emergency and delivery vehicles. The blocky right angles and straight lines diluted the charm, but their regularity came in handy when the frantic building-on-building led to a confusion in addresses. The library was on Street Three, just east of the central avenue, with no number—Jess guessed the town planners thought the four-foot-tall BIBLIOTHECA carved into the base was identity enough—and no space for one, because the hairdresser across the avenue was 86 and the tax accountants in their square brown building next to the library were 88. From there, heading east, were 90 (a union office), 92b (four townhouses), 96-1 (a deli), 96-2 (bicycle repair shop) and, again unnumbered, the main post office on the corner of Avenue Quattro.

The avenues ran north–south and were named using an almost-Italian, the language used for fancy things: Avenue Uno, Avenue Duo, Avenue Centro, Avenue Quattro, Avenue Quincy. Running east–west away from the river were the less imaginative Street One, Street Two, Street Three and Street Four. At first Jess assumed the two different naming styles were to distinguish between the road types, avoiding the confusion of finding yourself at the corner of Street Two and Second Avenue, for example, but she soon realised it wasn't a matter of thinking ahead. Nothing here was.

The library building was pretty, with wide, flat steps cutting through the words BIBLIO and THECA to reach the entrance. The grand revolving door was framed on each side by a pair of massive

pillars with banners for upcoming events strung between them. But there were disappointments here too: the yellowing of the marble like smokers' teeth; the original termite-devoured wood of the doorframe replaced with cheap aluminium; the wilted-lettuce colour of the carpet tiles as you stepped inside.

Jess knew these kinds of complaints were snobby, and she'd never share them with Viktor and his friends. But that meant her feelings could build up to a point like now, when she stumbled over a fraying corner of carpet square, twinged her knee, and experienced a sudden, hot rage completely out of proportion with what had happened. She tripped over so much in this fucking country, both literally and figuratively, that sometimes it was impossible to keep the frustration at bay.

As she paused to take a breath, she was jostled by patrons entering after her and not leaving a wide enough berth, despite the excessive size of the foyer. She crossed her arms and hunched as if bracing against a hard wind. No-one said anything, whether to excuse themselves or admonish her for standing in the middle of a thoroughfare. They passed as if she wasn't there at all.

Jess took a few moments to massage her knee and catch her temper before heading for the side room where her class took place. The space was heated to the point of nausea, and she had to shed the layers she'd put on only minutes before, down to her white button-down shirt and black dress slacks. It was the same uniform she wore for all her teaching and waitressing jobs. Her temperature regulated, Jess found the day's tape in the drawer and clicked it down into the ancient cassette player.

This was her most reliable work, an English language class for older people. The eight-week courses ran several times a year, offering forty-eight hours of instruction in total. Enough to grasp the very basics, she hoped. Most of the teaching was done

through the tapes, whose male and female voices featured mid-Atlantic accents straight out of a post-war newsreel. Jess was the native speaker promised in the promotional materials, available to answer questions and check answers, but chiefly the player, pauser and flipper of the tapes. Usually, the most anyone asked her was ‘Break, yes?’ and ‘Home, yes?’, but to be fair, one of the class rules was that they could only speak in English during lesson time, and they didn’t know English.

Despite being offered every few months, the course was never well attended. It ran on weekday mornings—Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays—to suit older folks, but this was the demographic who cared least about the world’s dominant language. While young people could be dismissive of their native tongue, calling it parochial and pointless, only good for communicating with granny and the government, those aged over sixty were proud of their heritage and suspicious of English, an instrument both too pointed and too blunt.

Viktor’s late grandfather had been one of this generation, a man who’d never lived more than twenty kilometres from the shack where he was born and considered the ninety-minute trip to the capital to be a journey on par with Arctic expeditions.

‘You are a stupid boy,’ he once told Viktor solemnly. Jess had been living there for a year, and they’d just celebrated a third cousin’s baptism, with relatives far and wide gathered; Grandfather saved all his criticism for an audience. ‘If you want to leave so badly, why do you always come back?’ He pointed at Viktor’s brother Feodor. ‘He is the good boy. He still loves the farm.’

Viktor had shrugged, unbothered. ‘I come back because I love my grandpapa, right? He is the smartest man around.’

His grandfather snuffled proudly. ‘Stupid, what did I say?’ He

nodded at Jess, who was only barely keeping up. ‘You are stupid too. Leaving your own home behind.’

Jess licked sweat from her lip. ‘Stupid from love,’ she said in the old man’s language.

There was a pause as the family members turned to the grandfather, waiting for his reaction. After a second he smiled widely, his upper dentures square and numerous.

‘Perhaps it is good you are stupid,’ he assented, beckoning Jess so he could embrace her from his armchair-throne, long fingers cupping her skull. ‘Stupid and stupid, a matching pair.’

The grandfather had not been impressed by English. Along with his own language and two other dialects, he spoke Romanian, Serbian, and a bit of Hungarian and Czech. Besides, only a couple of million people understood his language; the rarity made it valuable. If he could make his grandson’s foreigner girlfriend speak to him in his own tongue, was English really that powerful?

When he died, he’d been buried behind the church where he was baptised, confirmed and married, in a plot beside his late wife, parents and sister. All the townspeople had come, along with family from throughout the region. Not a word of English was spoken, not even at the wake, and when they got back to the flat, Jess felt tired and thickheaded from concentration. Viktor had wanted to look at photographs, but he didn’t need to talk, so she could lie against him in a comforting stupor as he ran his finger down the edge of old polaroids and wept.

Viktor had told her she’d have no trouble finding work as a native English speaker, but it hadn’t turned out quite like that. The younger generations learned it at school, and most adult education venues required teaching and ESL qualifications that Jess didn’t have. She’d got the library classes through a contact of Viktor’s

and ran conversation lessons with a few teenagers from well-off families, but if she wanted to get into better-paid stuff she'd have to take on additional training, and that would eat up too much of her scant time and money.

Besides, speaking English wasn't all Jess wanted to do with her new life. She had other ambitions. She wanted, one day, to move to the eastern mountains, the site of the cloudfall. The government didn't do much to sell the area's natural beauty, and Jess was certain there was potential there, ecotourism or bike-and-hike holidays or something. There was just never enough time or money to figure it out.

She was lucky to have the senior classes at all, because the venture was wholly unprofitable. To pay for Jess, the library needed to enrol ten people in every course, but the most she'd ever had was seven. Once, in a summer term, she'd started with just two, a married couple who went off on a cruise after the third week. Jess had emailed the head librarian, who told her to keep turning up in case the couple came back. They didn't, so Jess got paid to sit.

The low numbers meant nothing in the scheme of things, because this was a place that ran on momentum. She couldn't imagine the effort it had taken to get the class up and running—the conservatism of local council, the lethargy of the library staff, the suspicion of patrons—but once the boulder had been shoved to the top of the mountain, the tumble down was unstoppable. There could be zero enrolments, a total conflagration of the tapes, no native speaker within the country's borders, and still the course would run. Mr and Mrs Mid-Atlantic speaking without sound to an empty room.

The current course had started in the new year and was in its second-last week. There were five students, all women in cable-knit cardigans and long woollen skirts, four with their hair plaited in

crowns around their heads. The nannas, Jess thought of them. They were very sweet. During the break, they poured tea for Jess first and waited until she'd taken a biscuit before selecting their own, then laboured with their unwieldy smartphones to show one another the latest pictures of their grandchildren. This was why most were doing the course—to be able to function, in some small way, when they one day visited their families in Ireland and Canada and Australia. To be able to speak to their grandchildren's friends when they were introduced: *Hello, how are you. I am Alexey's grandmother. I travel by plane. I stay two weeks. Nice to meet you, goodbye.*

The workbook had no lessons dedicated to emotions, no translations for the feelings that came with thinking of loved ones living far away. They learned *I am hungry, I am sleepy, I am cold*, but not *I am sad, I am lonely, I am confused*. They covered *I am lost* in the lesson on geography. No doubt they'd need it, in the bizarre places where their children and grandchildren lived. Perhaps they also used the phrase in their hearts.

But that was patronising the nannas; maybe they took it all in stride. Their grandchildren were stupid for leaving, in a different way than Viktor was stupid for coming back, but that was to be expected: all young people were stupid. You just had to learn enough English to fly to where they were and tell them to their faces.

The nannas arrived by ten minutes to ten, gossiping as they shed their coats. Jess flicked through a workbook and pretended not to listen. From snatches, she figured they were talking about the green energy expo Viktor had mentioned that morning.

The country had many such events; what her communications lecturers at university would have called 'robust performances of the public sphere'. Colloquiums, forums, seminars, summits, town halls, demonstrations—every weekend there was something, new

posters taped over the old ones in layers that could be dug through like geologic time. They spilled out of the convention centre into squares and taverns and hotel ballrooms, the same burly, underemployed youths hired to direct traffic, provide security and run the bar. Cynically, Jess thought of it as a content-creating exercise. Local TV covered everything, and the tabloid newspaper filled the letters page with citizens praising or dismissing the past weekend's offerings, then casting their predictions on the next.

At first Jess had tried to keep up, to develop an interest, to pick a side. So many of the issues discussed were important to Viktor. But even as she learned more about the place where she'd chosen to live, she struggled to understand what was to be supported or derided or ignored. She was never able to capture the logic of what made, for example, the Seventeenth Colloquium on Fairness in Sport a sickening display of corruption, while the Biennial Convention for Discussion of Sports Fairness was a bastion of integrity that brought proud tears to Viktor's eyes.

Occasionally the news footage intrigued her, like the time a defector from one political party sprinted across a stage to pour expired yoghurt on his rival's bald head. In towelling off the foul-smelling goo, an assistant had missed a greenish bit of apricot. After the perpetrator was tackled and the victim resumed his speech, the chunk was dislodged by rivers of anxious sweat to slide down his forehead and off the ski-jump of his nose. Sensitive microphones caught the *plop* of the rotten fruit hitting the floor.

When she mentioned it to Viktor, he'd given a sad frown. 'Political theatre, darling. The two men remain secret allies, and it is good advertising for the rival dairy brand.'

The most interesting thing about the upcoming expo, to Jess, was how it was being talked about so far in advance. The events

planned for the two weekends in between must be real duds.

One of the nannas, the most plaintive, told the others she wouldn't be staying in the city during the expo. Instead, she'd go to her sister's place in the mountains.

'It will rain there,' another said dismissively.

'Better rain from heaven than piss from a politician,' a third mused.

Jess swallowed her laugh so they wouldn't know she was eavesdropping.

'Rain in March?' the fourth nanna scoffed. 'You're kidding. Paula will be fine.'

'I'm going to stay with my son,' the last one announced. She had a warbling voice like drunken morning birds.

The others went quiet, as they always did when Rania mentioned her son. Jess had gathered from other conversations that the son was involved in something dangerous, maybe illegal, that his mother didn't know about. The town where he lived was impoverished, and Viktor had warned Jess not to go there.

'I may go to my brother's,' the fourth woman said. Vera was the only one without a braid, her hair instead cropped into a white cap. She was tall and slender, with deep crevices linking her nostrils to the corners of her mouth. She'd taught at the university before retiring and was the only student who didn't have grandchildren. Instead, she was learning English recreationally, to add to her French and Italian. Vera was almost glamorous.

'Where is he?' Paula asked.

'Budapest.'

The other women breathed in sharply. 'Aren't you being dramatic, Vera?' the second student said. 'Just stay off the street. Get milk and bread in, close the curtains.'

Vera's eyes flashed to Jess, who didn't have time to look away. 'I had enough of that in the lockdowns,' Vera said grimly. 'No, I prefer my brother's than isolation.'

'Aren't we late?' Rania interrupted in her wobbly voice. 'Teacher!' she called in English. 'Yes?'

Jess glanced at the clock. It was three minutes past ten. 'Yes, thank you,' she said. 'Sorry. I was lost in my thoughts.'

'Lost!' cried the third student, beaming brightly as she recalled the word from Monday. 'Lost, yes!' Putting her arms out like a scarecrow's, she mimed doddering around to the amusement of the others. They'd acted this out during class, pairs swapping the roles of lost person and helpful person. *I am lost*, the cassette tape had dictated. *Please help me*.

'I can help you,' the partner was meant to say. 'Let me show you the way.'

Fifty-five minutes later the tape's A-side clicked off and Jess went to boil the urn. As they finished their writing exercises the women joined her, nodding appreciatively as she bit into a supermarket shortbread. Jess returned to her desk to give the women privacy, but was followed by the retired lecturer, Vera.

'Can I help you?' Jess asked.

'Yes, please, teacher.' Though she was the fastest learner, using her French and Italian to reason out the meaning of words, Vera's English was thickly accented and difficult to decipher. 'I ask of ... the assembly?'

'Assembly?' Jess imagined rows of schoolkids with their legs crossed.

Vera tried again: 'Meeting? Energy?'

'Meeting—the expo?'

Vera looked relieved.

Jess lowered her voice. ‘Do you have a question?’ she asked in the local language.

‘You speak well,’ Vera commented. ‘My English is not so good.’
‘English is a hard language to learn.’

It was something Jess said often, mostly when people apologised to her for their English. When she first moved, she’d made the mistake of praising people’s near-perfect usage, unaware of the contempt they felt for the condescension of charmless native speakers, those unworthy winners of the global communication lottery.

‘You know of this event?’ Vera asked. ‘The Russian president will go.’

Jess had heard this line before, but it was only ever representatives from smaller countries who came, places whose capitals she hadn’t known before she came here: Northern Macedonia, Bulgaria, Albania, Moldova. In the last three years the biggest coup was the Polish Minister for Digital Affairs, and he hadn’t even stayed overnight.

Vera smiled with one side of her mouth. ‘It’s true.’ After a moment, she added, ‘And France, and Germany. Italy. Spain. All of them.’

‘What for?’

Vera’s forehead creased, a long deep line. ‘The expo,’ she said, using English for the last word to prove she’d remembered it before returning to her native tongue. ‘It’s about the environment. Technologies to defeat the weather.’ They’d done weather in class: *Sunny. Cloudy. Rain.* ‘There will be many visitors, politicians and businesspeople and journalists. Security to protect them. Protests,

of course.’ She shrugged. ‘This is why I will stay away. Travel will be difficult. Police everywhere.’

‘I’m here legally.’ Jess’s hand went to her backpack, where her papers were.

‘Of course.’ Vera looked at the clock; the break would end soon. The other nannas were dusting crumbs from their hands and rinsing out their cups. ‘But if you go away, you can rent your apartment to a foreign journalist. That’s what I’m doing.’

‘Really?’ Jess couldn’t imagine international reporters caring about anything that happened here.

‘The hotels are full and there’s nowhere to stay, so a journalist will pay a lot of money.’ Vera smiled. ‘Mine’s from Canada.’

‘Okay, well.’ Jess switched back to English as the others moved towards their desks. ‘Thank you very much, Vera. The word for that meeting is *expo*.’

‘Ex-po,’ the students repeated, speaking over one another, at different paces and with different intonations.

As the B-side of the tape ran through the names of farm animals, Jess thought about Vera’s predictions. The Russian president? Western world leaders? She couldn’t believe it. The place was insignificant, its capital city a pinprick. Jess had grown to love it here, or at least feel fond and protective, but it was a hard-scrabble life. Nothing came easy: money, progress, attention. It was a sobering realisation experienced over and over that she was a nobody, doing not much of anything. After three years, things hadn’t improved—if anything, they were harder. At the end of the week, she and Viktor put any money they had left in a dish on the kitchen bench, and there hadn’t been more than a handful of coins in months.

She tapped her teeth and considered Vera’s advice. They could put the flat on the internet and leave for the expo weekend, stay

on the farm with Viktor's brother, maybe. Jess would love a few uninterrupted days in the mountains, but she couldn't imagine anyone paying enough to make it worth giving up their lucrative weekend jobs. It wasn't like they'd get holiday pay. In fact, there'd probably be more work available, if the restaurants and hotels were expecting an influx. They should stay and wring every last crown out of the opportunity.

Jess's sigh turned into a yawn, and she fought the urge to lie with her cheek against the cool desk. She loved Viktor, and she'd made her decision to be here, but she wouldn't mind if things got a little bit easier.