

*sunday reilly is all out of
f*cks to give*

MEAGHAN WILSON ANASTASIOS

*more by meaghan
wilson anastasios*

The Water Diviner

The Honourable Thief

The Emerald Tablet

The Pacific in the Footsteps of Captain Cook

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CANBERRA WEEKLY

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HERALD SUN

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GOODREADS

'Meaghan Wilson Anastasios has given the world a stellar debut.'

GOODREADS

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*Dedicated to women who are all out off*cks to give.*

*And to the people who love them despite,
or perhaps because of, it.*

one

I 'm at that point in life where my internal organs are likely to come slithering out of my vagina at any moment. That's how feeble my pelvic floor muscles are. And before you start in on me like my judgy GP, yes, I did my Kegels. At least I did what I thought were my Kegels. Turns out I've been doing them all wrong. There's five minutes a day for the last thirty years I won't be getting back. When I was in my twenties, a friend warned me that I'd end up peeing my pants before the decade was out if I didn't start flexing my muscles down there. At the time I knew all about the bicep curls I did at the gym to ward off lunch-lady arms but didn't want to ask what kind of a barbell I needed to keep my rude bits in shape.

So, I just clenched away like I was faking an orgasm. Way too much experience at that, I've got to tell you. But it wasn't enough. Time, declining oestrogen levels, and two unfeasibly large-headed babies have done their work—trust me, head circumference is the one baby percentile marker you don't want your offspring to exceed at. Also, gravity's a bitch.

That's what's landed me at Lady Parts physio in a tree-lined street in one of the city's nicer neighbourhoods. Yes, you read that correctly. Gynaecological physiotherapists are a thing.

The only other time I've been to a physio was when I was pregnant with my son and had a brief but incandescent bout of sciatica. In a room lit by fluorescent tubes and heavily scented with liniment, an intimidatingly muscular man named Hans pummelled my lower back until I wept. Though, in fairness, that could have been the liniment.

The only thing that Lady Parts physio has in common with Hans' practice is the word, "physio." It shares a building with a sound healer, an acupuncturist, and a café called Good Harvest that sells ethically sourced espressos, cold-press green juice, and gluten-free energy balls that look, and turns out, taste like desiccated chihuahua turds. I know that because I skipped breakfast and grabbed one on the way to my appointment. Big mistake.

As for the physio, it's more expensive day spa than medical practice, with a list of fees to match. I don't even want to think about what this experience is going to set me back.

Sunday Reilly? says my therapist Amber, her face illuminated with the all-knowing half-smile that's in the job description of every person working in the world of alternative therapies. Amber's skin is annoyingly dewy, and her hair is cut in a razor-sharp peroxide bob. She can't be much older than my daughter, Ruby. After all, tertiary courses in women's physiotherapy can't have been around for more than a hot minute or two.

Inside the practice, it's dim lights, ambient rainforest soundtrack, and an illuminated essential oil diffuser wafting a scent into the air that lands somewhere between old-lady handbag and pesto pasta.

Interesting oil blend, I say. Lavender for relaxation, Amber says, and basil to soothe anxiety.

Which explains the pesto.

There's not enough lavender and pesto in the world as Amber kneels and instructs me to strip off my pants.

Just relax Sunday, she says, and stand with your legs slightly apart, do I have consent to touch you?

Sure, I say because this is not the time to play hard to get.

Then, without so much as a cheeky little glass of bubbles as a preamble, there's a pump of lube and she's got two fingers right up inside my fun palace. Takes me back to the year ten school dance and Nathan's awkward fumblings in my knickers outside the school hall. Except unlike Nathan, Amber knows her way round female genitalia.

Now what's going on here, Amber says, is that you've been working on the basement level of your pelvic floor, and I'm going to show you how to get up to the penthouse.

I don't want to think too hard about the connection between apartment architecture and my nether regions, because that would make my vagina and collapsing uterus the elevator shaft — a shaft she's abseiling up, all James Bond-like, with her rubber-gloved digits. Why start confusing an already confronting situation with real-estate metaphors? Just give me one of those plastic anatomical models you pull apart in layers like a fleshy pink onion to show me why my bladder's as loose as Snoop Dog on his third bucket bong.

Now Amber's pressing on things I'd forgotten existed. It's rather unsettling and making me think that this was a terrible idea, and it would have been better to leave my disintegrating innards fall apart in peace. But there's no backing out now, figuratively or literally.

OK, Amber says, now let's try that again, picture squeezing your clitoris back towards your anus. Which is something I have no desire whatsoever to picture. It just reminds me of that awful joke about why the female body was designed with the kitchen so close to the toilet. Still, I do what I'm told because that's the kind of person I am. Compliant. Not that my ex would agree.

And, great, that's it, Amber says, relax your abdominals, now keep that up, flex... and relax... flex... and relax... now hold...

Bet you wish you'd had kids so you could share this splendid experience with me, I call out to my best friend Mimi, who's in for her own treatment in a space separated from mine by a gauzy curtain.

Serves you right for failing your Kegels, Mimi says, that's on you!

Unless you know Mimi, the “no kids” jab might sound like a low blow for a woman whose womb is now fit only for growing dust bunnies. But my best friend never wanted kids. Regrets? Not a word in her vocabulary.

How’d you mess up your shoulder? I say, because that’s what’s brought Mimi here. Granted, a frozen shoulder isn’t peculiar to the female of the species, unlike the muscles I’m working on. But an inability to lift one’s arm above one’s clavicle ranks high in the shopping list of horrors endured by women of a certain age. That’s who Lady Parts physio caters to. Women of a certain age like Mimi and me.

Did you have a fall? says Willow, the gratingly perky therapist working on my friend.

Take that back! Mimi says, “a fall”...? no I most certainly did not have “a fall.” I’m still at an age where to fall is a verb... I “fall over,” or I “fell”... it’s not a noun until you hit your seventies. Right, Sunday?

Absolutely right, I say. Because I totally agree with her. But also, because I rarely disagree with Mimi. She can be fairly terrifying. She’s also usually right about most things. It’s like arguing with a thesaurus, Wikipedia and Google all bundled up in human form.

Anyway, Mimi says, I didn’t fall over, just woke up and couldn’t scratch my ear, which would be annoying at the best of times but looks like that’s yet another stupid symptom my body’s come up with as it decides to check out, did you know that was a thing, Sunday? itchy ears for fuck’s sake!

Haven’t had that one yet, I say, but the aches and pains are pretty woeful and my GP’s next-to useless, told me I just needed to wait it out, and that if I drank less and exercised more, I’d add ten years to my life.

Great to hear, Mimi says, so will that be my thirties I’ll be getting back? or does it mean dribbling into my soup for another decade in my nineties? because if that’s the case, count me out and pass me another negroni.

I can't wait for my thirties, Amber says and confirms that it's not that long since she slipped out of a birth canal much like the one she's ferreting around in between my legs. Being in your thirties is so cool, she says, plus I can't wait to have kids.

Well, don't forget your Kegels, or you'll land back here, I say as I flex one two and hold for the count of five.

Me forget? Amber says, never! then laughs with the blithe confidence of someone too young to understand how quickly life gets in the way of the best of intentions.

Look at you! she says, brilliant! you're doing so well! you've picked it up so quickly!

I suppose I should be proud of myself. But last time I checked, pelvic floor exercises aren't an Olympic event. And these days I'm so accustomed to the sharp-tongued hellion who's taken up residence in my head critiquing every move I make—or don't, as is usually the case—that I won't hold my breath for a self-motivational pat on the back.



So, that's done, whatever good it did.

My vagina doesn't feel any more toned and fabulous than it did before. And there aren't enough moistened towelettes and flannels in the world to get rid of all the lube between my legs. Even though I've got my pants back on, it's like a snail has been slithering all over my labia. I know from experience the slimy, slippery feeling will stick around for a good couple of hours. Lube has a way of doing that. Guess it's in the job description.

Which is probably a good thing because now it's bill-paying time. I'm going to need all the lubrication I can get as I lean over and prepare to be reamed at the marble-topped counter that serves as the Lady Parts reception desk.

That'll be three-hundred and twenty-five dollars each, ladies,

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Amber says and beams with cosmetically enhanced teeth large and white enough to lay down as a splash-back behind my aging stove.

Medicare will refund you fifty-six dollars, she says.

Which still leaves me out of pocket two-hundred and fifty or so to pay for the privilege of having a stranger rustle around in my underpants. It does seem a bit steep for something men once lined up to do for free.

Worst of all, I don't know how the only credit card I've got loaded onto my phone is going to cope with the pressure.

As I tap the card reader, I bare my teeth in something resembling a smile, and clamp my jaw together so tightly it makes my ears hurt. The whirling pizza of doom spins on the screen. It's wheel of fortune... will it come up green? Or red?

Ba-bom. Red. Declined. With an exclamation mark just to hammer the point home.

Amber's lips narrow and her eyes widen as we begin a dance I know all too fucking well these days.

Ohnothatmakesnosensethereshouldbeplentytherel'llhaveto-callthebankthisisoutrageous! I say. That's a lie, in case you didn't pick it.

No problem at all, she says, I'll try again, the machine sometimes plays up. And Amber grants me the dignity of letting me tap the machine again even though we both know nothing's going to change.

Yep. Everything's coming up red these days. I'm in a state of terminal decline.

My shout, Mimi says as she pushes past me.

No, don't! I say, I'll do a bank transfer.

Don't be ridiculous! she says.

Thank you, I say, owe you one.

You'd do the same for me, she says, come on, you can buy me a coffee, or whatever it is that passes for one out there in the gluten-free, vegan co-op from the seventh circle of hell.

SUNDAY REILLY IS ALL OUT OF F*CKS TO GIVE

They do a great turmeric latté, Amber pipes up, it's great for arthritis and joint pain.

That's enough from you, Amber, Mimi says, come on Sunday, let's go.

two

Mimi and I walk out of Lady Parts into a marble-tiled atrium thronging with a lunchtime crowd of leggy lycra-clad new mums pushing Bugaboo prams worth more than my clapped-out car. Their skin glows, their clear eyes gleam, and their hair bounces and shimmers. I could kill every one of them.

Did you drive in? Mimi says.

Took the train, I say.

You... on public transport? she says, are you feeling OK?

The car needed some me-time, I say, so it demanded an oil change and new tyres. It's at the mechanics.

Über's down, is it? she says.

No, I say, I felt like a walk to the station.

I don't want to tell Mimi that my finances are so stretched it was worth braving sticky seats and a trip that took three times as long as it should have to save fifteen dollars. She would never judge me for it. But the excess of pride that goeth before every one of the falls I've had in my life means I don't want to air my dirty financial laundry in public.

I'll give you a lift home, she says.

You don't have to do that, I say.

I know, she says, but I'll do it anyway, meantimes, I need a loo break. Order me a latté and I'll be back in five.

Done, I say.

The bell above the door into the Good Harvest café tinkles as I enter. Everything about the place makes me feel inadequate. It oozes earnestness.

The pink-haired, tattooed barista doesn't even glance up as I approach the counter. She's as pierced as a colander and is deep in conversation on the phone as she fiddles with the coffee machine. I'm too intimidated to interrupt.

Yeah I think it's important to, like, record the moment, she says, you know, my skin is, you know, like, my journal, and even if she says we're done, it's a life event, and I want to remember her, so I was thinking, should I, like, do her Chinese zodiac animal, except she's a tiger, and it's a bit triggering to put a carnivore onto my flesh, right?

Judging by the bewildering array of tattoos that stretch from her fingertips to lap at her jawline, she's going to run out of journal pages before she's done with the life events.

The bell on the door tinkles again as another customer walks in. It's the dewy skin and peroxide bob I won't be forgetting in a hurry. Amber. Hope she's washed her hands.

I'll call you back, the barista says, hey Amber, your usual?

Yeah, cool, thanks Charity, Amber says.

I was waiting, I say.

Oh, sorry, Amber says, hey, Sunday, I didn't see you there.

The café's not much bigger than an ice-cream van, so that seems unlikely. But maybe I blended into the hessian sacks pinned to the walls. Invisibility is my superpower these days. Espionage the world over should be put in the hands of middle-aged women. We'd be in and out with the nuclear codes before they were any the wiser.

It's fine, I say, you go ahead.

Oh, do you mind? she says, that'd be sweet, I've only got five minutes before my next client.

Sure, I say.

You're the best, she says.
You're not, I want to say but don't.



Amber did the job on me, and the social jeopardy of ordering from a passive-aggressive barista who looked like she wanted to rearrange my chakras meant Mimi got her oat-milk coffee, but I caved and ordered myself a turmeric latté.

You'll love it! Amber said.

I'm sure I will! I said even though I was sure I wouldn't. So now I'm sitting on a milk-crate seat with a poisonous yellow drink in a mason jar on the tiny round table in front of me.

Why did you get that? Mimi says, looks vile.

No idea, I say, Amber suggested it, and I couldn't say no.

Story of my life these days. Was a time when I knew what I wanted and wasn't afraid to stand up for myself. But decades of bending to accommodate others has left me with as much spine as one of those floppy inflatable figures they park outside car yards.

Maybe it's not as bad as it looks, I say and take a sip.

Yeah, nah, that's truly awful, I say and spoon more honey into the yellow brew, tastes like a cup of hot, curry-flavoured dirt, want some?

Fuck, no, she says, speaking about vile things, how did your meeting with Timothy go?

It's "Timothée" now, I say, the old name didn't cut it in Ubud, so he's rebranded.

Of course he has... wanker, Mimi says, find me a red-hot poker and I'll give him a hand with the branding.

Mimi and my ex never got along. At first, I thought it was because she was jealous of the time with me Timothy took away from her. But she saw through his smooth-as-a-baby's-bum act and had him pegged as a complete tosser from day one. And she was right. As I said, she usually is. She was with me at the beer garden

across the road from our college the night he sidled up and offered to buy me a drink. Sure, a beer'd be great, I said. It's not attractive for women to drink beer, he said, and bought me a chardonnay instead. That about sums up our relationship. It never got any better. When he took off to Bali with a much younger lover, leaving me to raise two kids under five on my own, that sealed his fate in Mimi's eyes.

But there's no avoiding him because we're bound for life by our mingled DNA in the form of the two human beings who are my reason for living, even if at the ages of nineteen and twenty-two, Ruby and Harry regard me as a comfortable armchair in the corner; nice to settle into every now and then, but surplus to needs. With them both still at home, child support is still a thing, even if, as Timothy is at pains to point out, it's at his pleasure.

He paid me out when we divorced—far too generously, if you ask him—but still contributes to their upkeep. And that's what's kept my household going for the past fifteen years or so. That, and the mortgage I took out against the house, supplemented by my patchy employment as a freelance journalist and depleted book royalties which shrink every year.

It means I have to play nice. For years, that wasn't difficult. I blamed myself for the break-up and wanted to model a dignified and adult separation. What was it Gwyneth called it? "Conscious Uncoupling." But those days are gone. If I'm going into bat against the world, Timothy is opposition captain of the starting eleven.

I still need his money, though. Hence the meeting. He was in town to check in with the global investment firm he runs remotely, so we met at a raw-food restaurant in the city. Every time I see him, he's conformed to yet another trope in the obscenely-wealthy-expat-living-in-a-third-world-country playbook. Today, it's giving up cooked food, and a sad attempt at a hairstyle that's more rat- than pony-tail, plus a designer hippie outfit worth more than most Balinese people will earn in a lifetime.

We need to talk about child support, he said, the kids aren't at school anymore.

Weirdly, I said, they still wear clothes and eat, plus there's the cars and phones.

OK, he said, but I'm bleeding money, and Angel's art therapy business hasn't taken off yet.

Who'd have thought? I said rather uncharitably.

What's up your nose? he said, you're being weird, this isn't like you.

Maybe it is now, I said.

Whatever, he said between bites of an ancient grain bagel and chewing while he talked, but supporting two families is killing me.

Maybe you should have stopped at just the one, then, I said as I watched the ancient grains swirl around inside his mouth like a front-loading washing machine. How about you let one of your army of housemaids go?

That's ridiculous, he said, Gede, Kadek and Ketut are family.

Are you collecting families like Pokemon? I said.

Timothy shot me a look that would kill if it wasn't defused by a piece of carrot hanging off his soul patch.

Fine, he said, we'll save that for another day, but I need an answer on Clementine's baptism, the kids really want you to come.

She's their half-sister, I said, all she is to me is a reminder of our failed marriage.

The news Timothy was having a child with Angel hit me harder than I thought it would.

Don't be like that, he said, our marriage didn't fail, Angel just gave me something I never knew I needed.

What's that? I said, a cock?

Did I mention that Angel is a man?

And then I kept going, because I often do these days. My ability to bite my tongue is declining at the same rate as my oestrogen levels.

What's with the baptism? I said, thought you were an atheist.

Well, Angel's a God-fearing man, he said.

Which god is that? I said, the same one who's sending you both to the fiery pits of Hell?

See what I mean? No off button. Timothy was right. It wasn't like me at all.

Anyway, I said, I can't come.

If it's money, he said, I'll pay.

That was the moment the mania struck me. I could have just said no. Instead, what I said was, it's not that, I'm taking dad to Greece.

We'll change the date then, he said.

It's going to be two months, I said, working holiday, I've got the next draft of my novel to finish.

The kids didn't mention anything, he said.

That's because they don't know yet, I said.

Neither did I till that moment.

So, I'm telling Mimi all this, and she's as surprised as I had been to find the words coming out of my mouth. You're going away? she says, since when?

Since right then, I say.

Seems a bit dramatic, she says.

Want to come with? I say.

I'd love to, she says, but work's insane at the moment, and mum's on the decline. I can't really be away.

Mimi's an executive director at a global accounting firm with lots of initials in its name. I've never pretended to understand what she does but do know it involves shuffling a lot of money around the world for people whose names you would recognise. She's also juggling the care of an elderly mum with dementia. Because that's also what happens for women of a certain age. At a time when we can barely tend ourselves, our parents start falling to pieces as well.

Why Greece? Mimi says, it's Andreas, isn't it?

Shut up, I say, it's not that.

It is a bit, though.

Mimi and I took a gap year after we finished school and stormed Europe. We partied like mad things between gigs bartending and

waitressing. It was before the whole EU thing kicked in. So, despite being illegal Australian migrants without working visas, we were paid in cash under the counter. Those were the days, kids.

Mostly unforgettable encounters with a United Nations of men followed as we crossed the continent. To be honest, most of those were notches on Mimi's belt. But I kissed a fair few. Just didn't get to the bumping uglies stage with them. I was too self-conscious and always envied Mimi's fearlessness. It's one of the very many reasons I love her.

But there was one man who made me drop my guard. An Olympian god by the name of Andreas. We met over cosmopolitans at a rooftop bar as the sun set in a tangerine explosion over the island of Santorini. The days we spent together treading black volcanic sands, swimming in the bottomless caldera at the centre of the island, and slamming each other silly between cool, white sheets at the tiny stone house Mimi and I sprung for as a treat at the end of our holiday have stuck with me.

It's not Andreas specifically, I say, just the Andreas vibe of the thing. It feels so long ago, and I was so happy.

You did always blossom when we went away, she says.

I want that feeling of escape, I say, I mean, dickhead and I travelled together a bit before he took off, but you know him, it was always so fucking organised, and in such a bubble of privilege. I need a break from my train-wreck of a life before I'm locked into its final season.

Yeah, I get that, Mimi says. How's your dad feeling about being dragged along on your mid-life crisis, then?

He'll do as he's told, I say. Besides, he'll love it. Didn't he ever bore you with a walk-through of his 'ruins of the ancient world' stamp collection when you had sleepovers at ours?

No, she says, should I be insulted?

You should be relieved, I say.

There weren't many visitors who escaped our home without a blow-by-blow description of the three orders of Ancient Greek archi-

ture as depicted in stamp-form, and an introduction to the hottest hits of ancient philosophy by my father, Graham. His experience of many of the places that fascinated him was limited to small adhesive paper squares.

He's always wanted to see Greece. I say. Never got there with mum before the divorce. She's always been more of a Celebrity Cruise in the Bahamas type.

But there's another thing that's bothering Mimi. And it's bothering me as well. If "Timothée" pulls the pin on child support, she says, where does that leave you financially?

Totally fucked, I say, but I do have some royalty checks coming in. Plus, I'm meeting with Charlotte tomorrow about the advance on the novel. So that'll clean things up a bit.



Mimi pulls up at my front gate. The burst of warm weather and summer rain has sent the grass into overdrive, meaning my yard is less garden than it is habitat for endangered jungle creatures.

I climb out of Mimi's Tesla, a car she bought before the company's founder went postal; a fact she points out via a homemade sticker on her bumper: "I bought this car before Elon was a wanker."

As I step out onto the footpath, the postman pulls up on his bike carrying a Santa sack full of nausea-inducing plastic-windowed letters for me emblazoned with shouty cap notifications printed in red. Not good news.

Want to come in for a coffee? I say to Mimi and really wish she would because it will mean I can postpone the inevitable.

I would, she says, only I don't think I'd find my way out. Do you hand out machetes to visitors? You should call the Survivor team; heard they're scouting for new locations.

Hilarious, I say.

I should get back to work, she says.

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Yeah, me too, I say even though the only work I have is to try and juggle my finances to support a stupid two-month overseas trip.

Good luck with your meeting, she says. You nervous?

Nothing to be nervous about, I say, boozy lunch at Borlotti's on the agency's dollar, money in the bank.

If only.

three

Borlotti's is an institution, with all the things you expect of a dining establishment that charges as much for bread as a three-course meal at most other restaurants. Concierge to welcome you at the brass-trimmed front door? Naturally. Topiary hedges trimmed in the shape of some kind of animal that looks like a manatee but is probably meant to be a pig? Absolutely. Thirty-something maître d' who could have stepped straight out of a Burberry ad? You betcha.

Bienvenue, madame, aforementioned maître d' says, may I take your coat?

I preen a bit as I wait for him to check the reservation, even though this mare ain't what she used to be. It's a reflex, what can I say? Women are taught that beauty is currency. Even though mine might have halved in value in recent years, I haven't come to terms with the declining exchange rate. I still act like I've got a handful of gold doubloons rattling round in my pocket. So, I've dressed to suit the occasion. White linen pants and silk shirt—probably unbuttoned a little too much to be respectable, but my cleavage isn't too crepey yet and one of my better features. May as well enjoy it while it lasts, right?

I'm afraid there's no booking under that name, madam, the maître d' says.

Maybe try mine then, I say, Sunday Reilly?

He runs a well-manicured finger down the page. Unfortunately, there's nothing under that name, either, he says.

You're absolutely certain? I say and gaze up at him from under my lashes.

He looks at me with as much interest in me as he would a potted fern. This is not someone who makes mistakes.

Charlotte's got a new PA, I say, she probably got her wires crossed, table for two, then?

Even though the restaurant is half empty, Mr Burberry flaps and fusses and makes it clear he's doing me a huge favour when he squeezes me in at a tiny table at the back, right next to the swinging door into the kitchen which means I'll be dodging waiters carrying soup tureens and charcuterie platters all afternoon. That makes my mood turn, and now all I want to do is yank the stupid hairs out of his pathetic little cappuccino stain of a moustache and make him cry.

I order a glass of champagne while I wait because that's what Charlotte and I always drink together, and that soothes me a bit, because it's real champagne of the DOP, French variety. The agency's paying, after all.

I'm sitting on the green velvet banquette, reading the menu and enjoying the bubbles tickling my top lip while I try to decide between duck rillettes and a crab soufflé. I'm also wondering what a *cipollini di tropea* is. It sounds like something you go to a dermatologist to have removed. Charlotte will know. As one of the most powerful people in publishing—and, yes, she probably has that printed on her business card—she's here multiple times a week.

That's when my phone rings.

Charlotte! I say, I've ordered bubbles, because it's cocktail hour somewhere in the world, right?

Oh no, Charlotte says, didn't you get my message? honestly this

girl isn't working out, utterly useless, I asked her to call, we can't do Borlotti's today, do you know Fountain Springs?



T've never been to Fountain Springs until today. As I sit in the shopping centre food court with a lukewarm filter coffee in a Styrofoam cup and a sad slice of chocolate brownie on a plastic plate, I don't plan to take that turn-off again any time soon.

It's suburban purgatory. Mums with prams the size of SUVs with kids hanging off them like bunches of grapes sip mocca frappuccinos while teens on scooters rip through the courtyard, leaving a slick of spilled bubble tea in their wake.

My agent, Charlotte Werner, always seems out of place regardless of venue. She certainly has no place being in a food court. She's all chiffon, and silk and powdery things and could have wafted out of a Regency romance novel. Even though she nominated the venue, I still feel like apologising to her.

She beats me to it.

I'm terribly sorry, darling, Charlotte says, but the agency made me put the brakes on this time round because, well, what can I say? sales on your last novel were a little, how can I put it...?

Shit? I say.

Charlotte winces. Well, she says, not the word I would have chosen.

No surprises there. The closest Charlotte gets to cursing is 'heck,' 'freaking,' and 'sugar.'

I was going to say 'underwhelming,' she says.

Same thing, I say, time to turn over a new leaf then, so, my new manuscript, thoughts?

Well, I've finished reading, she says. Her expression is inscrutable because it always is. That may be thanks to the intervention of some extremely good cosmetic surgeons, or because she is utterly bereft of emotions. I've never been able to work it out.

Great, I say and try to project keen and not at all nervous even though the one bit of brownie I've swallowed has just gurgled back into my mouth in a wash of vomity bile.

So, I say, what did you think?

There's no easy way to put this, she says which isn't a good start. But I'm afraid I just didn't connect with the characters. Or the story. Or the setting.

OK, I say, so the binding was good?

It was, actually, she says.

That was a joke, I say because humour is usually my default position when the walls are caving in on me. How can I fix it, then?

I'm afraid, she says, I'm not going to be able to champion it in what is such a crowded marketplace.

So, we hold out until the crowd thins? I say.

I'm so sorry Sunday, she says, but I'm going to have to pass on it.

My heart is skippity skipping in my chest and there's an awful buzzing in my ears.

Pass, I say, what does that mean? My eyes are burning, and my head is on fire, and I definitely left too many buttons undone because one of those damned hot flashes has arrived so sweat is running down my neck and sticking my very lovely silk shirt to my very lovely cleavage.

But you're my agent, I say, isn't this your job?

There's something like pity in Charlotte's eyes. I need to believe in a novel, she says, if I'm to spark interest from a publisher, and if my heart isn't truly in it, well...

I want to cry but refuse to.

What do I do now, then? I say.

Which is Charlotte's cue to move on. Oh, bravo, she says, you are a marvel! as it happens, I come bearing gifts. There's an A-list actor, big name, really charming, you'll love him, and he wants to be a novelist, without any of the actual writing part of it, he's thinking rural noir, and your name came up, there's big money in it, and fifty-percent fee on signing! how do you feel about ghost-writing?

How do I feel about it? Like I'd rather staple my genitals to my forehead. But I don't say that. Because, of course I don't. Instead I say, actually, I'm heading overseas for a bit.

Time to lick your wounds, Charlotte says, bravo, you! you are a marvel, Sunday Reilly, if only all my clients were as bulletproof as you.



Bulletproof? Well, twenty minutes later I'm still sitting in the basement carpark of Fountain Springs Shopping Centre mopping my tears with receipts out of my wallet because the only tissues I had in the car are now balled up into soggy clumps on the passenger's seat. So, you tell me.

I want to die. I really do.

Writing a book is a weird thing.

It's not something you get into to make money. All power to J.K. Rowling, but this isn't the career to choose if you want to retire to the Amalfi Coast.

I write because it's a compulsion. There are worlds in my head pleading to get out. And the people I bring to life in the pages of my books are like family. They are composites of me and mine. For those things to be rejected by Charlotte fucking Werner in as grim a spot as the Fountain Springs shopping centre is a lot more than a blow to my pride. It's a rejection of me and people I love. It's banishing my papery family to a dark place where nobody will meet them and come to love them as I do. That wound to my soul won't heal in a hurry.

Mercifully, I can weep in peace because I parked in a dark corner by the elevator that must be a dormitory for rough sleepers. Judging by the tang of ammonia when I got out of the car, it serves as their ensuite as well. But I'm grateful for the privacy because the alternative would have been to park in full view of the escalator that's spitting blank-faced shoppers into the carpark.

Wallowing in self-pity doesn't work too well with an audience, especially when you're raised to believe in the importance of keeping a stiff upper lip. Third-degree burn? Merely a flesh wound. Car stolen? Planning to trade up anyway. Husband leaves you for another man? It's all good, he's living his best life.

My solitude is broken when the elevator doors slide open. A woman pushing a pram sagging at its seams with a bawling baby in its seat and what must be a month's worth of groceries hanging from its handles steps out, dragging along a toddler chomping on the mortal remains of an ice cream.

Of course, it's the chocolatey child who sees me first. There's no hiding anything from a toddler. They're beagles trained to seek out disaster or anything that will maim or kill them. Breaking away from its mother's grip, the child slams against my car door and plants a sticky hand on the window.

Mummy, he says, why's that lady crying? I know how she feels, the woman says, averting her eyes as she yanks her child away from the car, come on Jaiden, don't stare.

Whatever. That's my cue to hide my puffy eyes behind my sunglasses and get the hell out of here.

I pull up at the boom gate. I'm old enough to remember the days of human beings packaged in glass cubicles waiting to take your cash and toss you a handful of change as you exited car parks like these.

Oh, but it's far easier this way, isn't it? I say to myself, as I scrabble around in my wallet to find my parking ticket. Fortunately, it's escaped repurposing as a snot-rag, so I open my window to feed it into the card reader. But I'm parked too far from the flashing box ordering me to insert your ticket here.

Because of course I am.

I open the door, get out, jam the ticket into the machine and wave my credit card at the card reader.

Nothing.

I try again. Nada.

Some brave soul in one of the cars banking up behind me beeps a

horn. They clearly have no idea that they're dealing with a woman on the edge of derangement whose level of tolerance for, well, pretty much anything, is at an all-time low. I wave in apology, resisting the urge to raise my middle finger as well, and smile through teeth gritted together so tightly they crackle.

There's a help button with a smiley face on it so I stab at that and, how can I help you, ma'am, a voice says, so either there's a camera on me and they can see I'm a "ma'am" and not a "sir," or else it's generally "ma'ams" who struggle with these fucking automated gates.

But I just want to get out of this fucking place, so I say, hi there, the gate's not opening.

Are you sure, the man says, you're using the same credit card you used to enter?

That's dangerously close to mansplaining, but I let it go, because I'm not going to pick any fights today.

Yes, I say, of course I am. And I tap the reader again, see? I say, nothing. I'm less gritting my teeth now than I am grinding them so hard I may as well be chewing on popping candy.

Would you mind checking the card, ma'am? the voice says.

And maybe I do want to pick a fight after all because, I'm not fucking checking anything! I say. Except it's not so much saying as it is shouting, just open the fucking gate!

The boom-gate ain't going anywhere and I'm wondering how much damage it would do to my bonnet to just drive right through it. It'd probably take out the windscreen and decapitate me, and that seems like a better life choice for me than standing here arguing with a voice coming out of a teensy grille on a metal box while I sweat in my stained linen pants and dripping silk shirt because I'm basically a walking hot flash right now.

But the voice hasn't got the memo and he's still talking, do you have a card ending 0461? he says.

I know what my fucking credit card number is, I yell as another

driver in one of the cars behind me who must have a death wish beeps their horn.

There are no smiles from me now, gritted or otherwise, as I spin round and shriek, shut the fuck up, motherfucker! and I am quite a spectacle given how many people have gathered at the bottom of the escalator to stare at the sweaty woman having a meltdown at the boom-gate. So, I give them a serve as well, what the fuck are you all staring at? I scream even though it's a rhetorical question haven't you heard of those?

But I'm not done with that damned pernickety voice in the grille so, this is outrageous, I shout, I demand to speak to your manager!

Only there's the card I've been waving at the reader and because I didn't get my reading glasses out of my bag because I get so sick of never being able to read things on signs and things like these tickets these days because I swear to god, they're printing things in a font you need a microscope to read even at the supermarket. But I don't need glasses to see that the card I've been using is green. And my credit card isn't green. It's black. The only card in my wallet that's this shade of apple green is my Medicare card. And although the federal government is very generous in its support of universal health care, it tends to leave the payment of carpark fees up to me.

I wave the correct card at the reader. Oh, god, I say as the boom-gate opens. I'm so sorry, this isn't like me, but the day I'm having... I can't apologise enough, I'm an idiot.

The speaker clicks off. Whoever was at the other end of that exchange clearly agrees with me. And I don't blame him one little bit.