

VENGEANCE PLANNING FOR AMATEURS

REVENGE IS A DISH BEST SERVED BOLD



LEE WINTER

CHAPTER 1

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PLACE ON EARTH

OLIVIA ROBERTS PARKED BEHIND HEAVEN'S own bookstore and turned to her penguin. "What brings you joy?" she asked Trip. If anyone would know, it'd be her feathered companion of a decade who'd seen more sights than most, despite being, well, taxidermied. But his stuffed and not-actually-alive status was neither here nor there. Trip was an *excellent* listener.

However, her penguin chose to stare into the car park, which housed a couple of customers' cars, the rusty old Mazda owned by Kelly, Olivia's sister, and one beautiful black Jaguar.

Three guesses who owned that one.

"Well then, I guess it's up to me to decide." Olivia popped the glove box on her Love Muffins Kombi van and rummaged through a pile of round button pins which all bore sayings that, in theory, spread joy to her clients. She pulled out two for closer consideration.

"It's Tuesday, so we have *Hooked on a Filling* or *Muffin Compares to You*." She held them out for Trip's perusal.

He stared even more intently at the bookstore owner's shiny Jaguar.

Right? It was a bloody showy car. Trip wasn't wrong. How did she afford it on a bookstore boss's salary, anyway?

Olivia made an executive decision and pinned *Muffin Compares to You* to her flannel shirt. It seemed fitting since it was book club day. After baking, reading was a close second to perfection in her mind. "Yes?"

Trip's gaze was definitely approving this time.

Lee Winter

“Thank you. I’ll be back soon. You watch the van.”

* * *

Heaven was not overrated. Mary Bugg’s Bookstore and Coffee House was the most beautiful place on earth, in Olivia’s humble opinion.

The shop had large, gleaming glass windows framed in bronze, beyond which lay an enticing array of Australian crime novels in the front display. An engraved plaque sat next to the door.

MARY ANN BUGG (1834-1905) WAS AUSTRALIA’S MOST PROMINENT FEMALE BUSHRANGER, ALTHOUGH SHE IS LARGELY OVERLOOKED BY HISTORY. THE ABORIGINAL WOMAN USED HER SHARP MIND AND BUSH SKILLS TO OUTSMART POLICE AND KEEP HERSELF FROM CAPTURE, ALONG WITH CAPTAIN THUNDERBOLT, HER INFAMOUS OUTLAW LOVER.

A peacock’s tail feather intricately wound its way around and through the lettering of the bookstore’s name, the shiny blues and greens beautifully contrasting with the bronze framework.

Once you stepped inside Mary Bugg’s double doors, polished boards creaked underfoot, leading past a row of wooden stools lining a long bench in front of a side window.

The smell of roasted coffee beans, pastries, and Olivia’s own homemade artisan muffins swirled around this small cafe area, a divinely scented invitation that reached those passing the bookstore.

Beyond lay shelves on bandits, murderers, detectives, and tales of crime, mystery, and derring-do. Most of all, Mary Bugg’s focused on Australia’s bushrangers—roaming outlaws who rustled livestock and horses, fought, stole, and sometimes killed, lived off the land, and battled furious police.

Thanks to her sister being the full-time barista and occasional book sales assistant, Olivia knew the cafe was the source of most of the bookstore’s profits, not the rollicking tales of crime and punishment.

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Kelly had worked out a deal with the owner on Olivia's behalf, which meant Olivia had a reason to come to this beautiful shop every day at the crack of dawn to drop off her Love Muffins baked goods.

Tuesdays, like today, were extra special because she had an excuse to return at three in the afternoon to run the Women in Crime Book Club meeting.

Her favourite part of the store was at the very back, past the rows and rows of books, just before you reached a short hallway, from which split off the manager's office, staff bathroom, and storerooms.

A ring of deep armchairs in soft, pale-green leather surrounded a small glass coffee table, inviting readers to sample their books before purchase. Olivia loved this peaceful place more than anything in life except baking. It was her escape. And, in fifteen minutes' time, this warm, inviting space also would play host to Olivia's book club.

She slid onto a cafe stool and admired the funky, coloured paved lane-way outside, grateful for a breather. Catching sight of herself in the window, Olivia combed her fingers through her wild collar-length chestnut hair. In the slightest breeze, her fine strands would blow around like a dandelion gone to seed.

"Hey, Liv," came Kelly's voice. A steaming cappuccino slid into view. "Everything okay? Not like you to be perched over here when your book club's about to start."

Olivia took the coffee gratefully and turned, thanking her big sister. They were close, given they shared a house together and were in general agreement on the big issues: their parents sucked, cereal was a soup, and pineapple belonged on pizza.

Kelly wore her usual uniform of black pants and a black, long-sleeved T-shirt, covered by a white apron with the words *Mary Bugg's* embroidered in navy in one corner. With her slim figure, wavy, dark-red hair, and elfin features, Kelly had definitely scored the looks in their family. Whenever Olivia pointed this out, Kelly would always huff and reply she'd rather have Olivia's "mad baking skills".

Sure. Because whipping up a mean muffin was so much better than having beautiful people falling all over themselves to date you.

Kelly leaned in. "Liv? You okay? Why does your face remind me of a sad little puppy?"

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“Aren’t you supposed to be working?” Olivia glanced around hopefully for customers, not ready to confess her latest episode of Olivia Roberts’ Hapless Misadventures in Dating. But there was only a businessman at the end of the counter, reading a newspaper and sipping a midafternoon coffee. She inhaled in disappointment.

“You’re out of luck; stop dodging.” Kelly eyed her gently. “Spill.”

“Tina’s been blowing up my phone.” Olivia’s confusion leaked. “Like, a dozen messages in an hour.”

“Ah.” Kelly offered a sympathetic cluck. “What’s that thieving mole want now?”

“To get back together.” Olivia traced the handle of her mug. “She says she’s really sorry and she’ll do better. And she misses me. A lot.”

Kelly’s face scrunched up in disbelief.

“She’s in therapy now,” Olivia rushed on. “Apparently, her stealing was just a cry for help. She sounds genuine.”

“As a two-bob watch.” Kelly folded her arms. “Liv, I know you like to see the best in everyone, but she was selling your stuff for party drugs. You were her bank.”

“But what if that *is* all behind her now?” Olivia asked.

Kelly shook her head. “Do not allow that woman back into your life. Trust me. Tina’s like all the others.”

“But...” Olivia hesitated. “I think she really misses me.”

“What’s not to miss? You have a good and gentle heart. I really hate how many people take advantage of it.”

“I’m no different to anyone else,” Olivia protested. “I’m not attracting *extra-awful* partners, am I?”

Kelly’s eyes narrowed. “Okay, do *not* make me cite Annalise.”

Annalise. Bile rose at the reminder of the worst of her exes. “I know Annalise was bad,” Olivia said. “Of course I do. But that’s also why I was thinking of giving Tina another chance. She’s actually making an effort to change. She even asked after Trip.”

“She asked after your manky old penguin? But not you?” Kelly scowled. “That woman comes with more red flags than a Chinese military parade. Remember, you dumped her ass for good reason.”

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Actually, Tina had dumped *her*. Pre-emptively. Right before Olivia could throw her out after catching her in mid theft. And also, *manky*?! She glared. Trip couldn't help that he wasn't a spring penguin anymore.

Kelly studied her silence with suspicion. "Okay, we'll table this topic for at home tonight. But speaking of exes, mine's lurking around here somewhere. Sasha's still trying to get into my boss's pants."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Still trying to get into yours, you mean. You get he's trying to make you jealous, right?"

Sasha Volkov was an ex-Russian ballet dancer turned wannabe actor and occasional model. He was square jawed, moved with swoonworthy grace, and had beautiful dark hair and darker eyes. He was an unrepentant flirt who could charm the stripes off a zebra.

"He's welcome to try to make me jealous," Kelly said. "But I'm not interested in anyone who tries to flirt with the waitress between courses when he's on a date with me. He said it was a reflex, that it meant nothing." She snorted. "So I told him *his* charm meant nothing. I wish my boss the best of luck in dealing with him."

Olivia tried to imagine the bookstore's owner, Margaret Blackwood, being propositioned by Sasha, but it was difficult to picture given Olivia had never even met the woman. There had been a few rare glimpses from behind, when Kelly had pointed her out, but the woman was *fast*. She would stride about as if channelling "Anne Lister engaged in Very Important Business", but Olivia would never be able to identify her in a line-up: "Tall and blurred, officer? Uh, female? Drives a fancy Jaguar?"

By all accounts from Kelly, Dr Blackwood was imposing, intellectual, and highly introverted, preferring to hide out in her office doing paperwork than engage with customers. She left all the Mary Bugg's "people duties" to Kelly and Stephanie, the part-time assistant who sold the store's books between college literature classes.

Olivia used to be offended by how much Dr Blackwood actively avoided her, despite how many new customers Olivia's award-winning muffins had brought in. That was until Kelly pointed out that her boss avoided absolutely everyone. All of which made Sasha putting the moves on her extra hilarious.

"How *did* Dr Blackwood take Sasha's seduction attempt?" Olivia asked curiously.

"That's private and confidential," a deep voice from behind said.

Olivia turned to find Sasha grinning at her. He kissed her on each cheek. “Olivia, *dorogusha!* It’s been too long! You look as fabulous as ever.”

“Crash and burn, huh?” Olivia said dryly, noting the swift topic change.

“Alas, this was not my most excellent triumph.” He clutched his heart dramatically. “I would have more success talking to door. Which was what I ended up doing. The fierce Dr Blackwood slammed her office door in my face. So much force! I am greatly deaf now.” He pouted.

Kelly cocked an eyebrow. “I did wonder what that unholy bang was.”

“This is of no matter.” Sasha ran his fingers through his fabulous hair, which caused his sculpted bicep to flex. He held the pose for effect and added with a winning smile: “It frees me up for other opportunities.” He offered Kelly a hopeful look under his long lashes.

“No.” Kelly shook her head adamantly. “Thanks.”

Sasha’s lips curled up. “At least you are polite. Your Dr Blackwood...I’m not sure I’ve ever been told no with so much...what is the word? *Venom*. She’s most blunt—like Russian woman.” He sounded almost impressed now.

“I wouldn’t take it personally. People as a whole top her shit list.”

“It is puzzling.”

“What, someone turning your pretty ass down?” Kelly asked sweetly.

“I would,” Olivia said cheerfully. “Sorry, Sasha. I’ve seen the light: It’s the ladies for me.”

He waved their words away. “Yes, yes, you are both very funny. I meant, why does Dr Blackwood have this business involving people if her nature is to be...” He mimed slamming a door. “Begone, irritating humans!”

Kelly tilted her head, considering that. “Yeah, not a clue. I’ve often wondered that myself.”

A shudder sounded on the window in front of them.

An angelic child’s face had appeared, with splayed, sweaty hands on either side of it. The boy gave Olivia a cheeky grin. “Wiviaaaa!” came a dramatic wail. “I’m staaarving!”

“Wivia” laughed at his little smushed-up face—because since when was Toby Garrity, aged four and three-quarters, ever *not* hungry? Olivia hid her smile when his exhausted mother slipped into view, pulling a threadbare green cardigan closer to her gaunt frame. Samantha Garrity hauled her son from the window, mouthing *sorry* at Olivia.

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Bringing up the rear was a ten-year-old girl sporting a tangled, reddish-brown ponytail and a worried expression. Her eyes brightened briefly at the sight of Olivia, whom she waved to enthusiastically before turning to trudge after her mother and brother.

Oh boy. Olivia slurped the last of her cappuccino and slid off her stool to render assistance.

Kelly chuckled. "I'll tell book club you'll be a little late."

"Thanks." Olivia grinned.

Taking Olivia's empty cup, Kelly said good-naturedly: "Hey, can you try to remember we *also* need food?"

Olivia affected an innocent look. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Sure you don't. Right, I better get back to it. Gotta start clean-up before my area closes."

Sasha took that as his cue to escort Kelly the whole twelve feet back to her coffee station, flirting up a storm as he went, Dr Blackwood's appeal apparently forgotten.

So fickle.

* * *

One look at Samantha Garrity told Olivia the exhausted woman was at the end of her tether. She worked two jobs and had been forced to live in a clapped-out old station wagon with her kids while they were on a waiting list to get into public housing. For all that, Samantha had somehow produced two of the most charming children Olivia had ever met.

Toby was an active little scamp. He'd try to climb any tree, no matter how tall, his strong little arms strangling the trunk, legs propelling him up like a caterpillar. Toby also hoovered up food like an industrial vacuum cleaner.

His reserved, watchful sister Emma, with freckles sprinkled across her pale cheeks, was a voracious reader who loved nothing more than a book discussion with Olivia. Unlike her brother's bright blue eyes, hers were the palest cornflower blue.

If life had handed the Garritys lemons, they were still a whole lot of sugar away from making lemonade.

Olivia had met her first Garrity many months ago when she'd spotted Toby's brown legs and bare feet sticking out of one of Mary Bugg's big skip bins. Two wooden crates had been stacked up wonkily to get him in there. Pulling him out had produced a wild-haired boy with each hand firmly wrapped around a stale muffin and his jaw chewing madly on a third. She'd had to bribe him with fresh muffins to get him drop the binned ones.

While escorting him back to the day care centre three streets away, she heard his entire life story, matter-of-factly told—from his dad dying to losing their home to living in a car that “smelled bad, specially since it died-ed” up to and including how he'd scaled the day care's side gate when no one was looking.

“Olivia,” Samantha said tiredly. “It's good to see you.” The cautiousness that was always in her eyes lifted slightly before her walls shot back up.

“What's wrong?” Olivia asked quietly, leading the trio around to the back of Mary Bugg's into the open-air parking area.

Along the edge of the gravelled area sat a low wooden bench and two green industrial bins filled with stacks of flattened book boxes in one and food scraps and leftovers in the other.

“A lot's wrong.” Samantha answered Olivia's question softly enough that her children couldn't hear, then gave a wan smile. “But that's life, isn't it?”

Olivia handed her the van keys. “Go sit for a moment. Just move Trip. I'll sort out the kids, and then we can talk properly.”

It was a sign of how tired Samantha was that she didn't even argue.

Pulling a notepad and pen out of her backpack, Olivia summoned Toby and Emma over to the bench. She crouched down and gave them instructions for a game: Emma had to describe a rhinoceros to Toby—an animal her brother had never heard of. And Toby had to draw it just from Emma's description. If their mum correctly guessed the animal, they won.

With the kids diverted and Toby giggling about any animal having only one big horn, Olivia headed back to her van, slid into the driver's seat, and faced Samantha. “Right-o, what's going on?”

Samantha sighed. “I'm losing two of my cafe shifts, so things are tighter than normal. I still have the supermarket weekend job, though. I'm making do.” She attempted a smile. “But Toby's been asked not to return to his day care because he's disruptive and too ‘high energy’.”

“Too nimble, you mean.”

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“Right. They’ve never forgiven him for how much the new fence extensions cost them to go above that child-proof gate he managed to scale.”

“Ah.”

“An elderly woman in a nearby building has offered to look after him while I’m at work. It’s a tiny place, but it’s secure. Emma already goes there after school every day. While Toby loves Mrs Clarke and her endless supply of sweets and attention, Emma doesn’t. She’d much prefer to be in a park reading till I finish work, but that’s not safe. I’ve seen drug deals there. I can’t risk it.”

“No,” Olivia agreed.

“And I just found out that Emma’s been eating only half her lunch and bringing the rest back to Toby because her baby brother is always saying he’s hungry. I feel terrible. What kind of a mother can’t feed her own kids enough?” Guilt and shame etched her face. Samantha rubbed her temples. “Even with the Centrelink payments, I’m still short, repaying all the debts Pete racked up on our joint credit card.”

“I think Toby’s a bottomless pit when it comes to food,” Olivia said with an encouraging smile. “Any family would have trouble keeping up with his appetite. But, on that note, I can help. I overordered last week, and now Kelly’s giving me hell for crowding out our kitchen. So the non-perishables are in my van.” She gestured over her shoulder to the back. “Maybe you can take some of them off my hands?”

“Olivia,” Samantha said with a half protest, half sigh, “how many times can one woman overorder? This is the fourth time now. You’re either hopeless at inventory or being very kind.”

“Look, it’s just...I’ve been there.” Olivia closed her eyes for a moment. “Not as bad as you, but I spent a little while living in my van in my early twenties when I got into a bad situation. And unlike you, I had family to get me out of my mess. This isn’t charity, Sam. It’s just...I remember how it feels—like you’re invisible and worthless. But you’re not. I just want to help.”

Samantha exhaled. “I *will* pay you back, you know. When I get back on my feet.”

Olivia waved her comment away, but Samantha shook her head and repeated: “I will.”

Children’s cries of “finished!” came from the bench.

“That reminds me,” Olivia said with a grin as she reached for her door handle, “whatever they show you, you see a rhinoceros.”

“Of course,” Samantha deadpanned. “What else?” Her gaze locked with Olivia’s. “Thank you,” she said sincerely.

“It’s nothing. I mean it.” Olivia climbed outside.

Emma and Toby ran past, holding a drawing of what looked like a cockroach with booted feet, a horse’s nose, and a unicorn horn. The siblings talked all over each other, and then silence fell as they awaited their mother’s verdict.

After much earnest consideration, Samantha suggested: “Erm...a rhinoceros?”

“YES!” came a pair of joyful cries. “You guessed it!”

Olivia laughed to herself as she rummaged around the back of her van for a copy of *Matilda* she’d snagged last week to give to Emma, along with a cheesy muffin for Toby and a small bag of non-perishable essentials. After a moment’s thought, she also pulled forward the bags of fresh fruit she’d just bought and sorted through them.

Well. Maybe Kelly wouldn’t notice if some of them never made it home...

CHAPTER 2

THE BOOK CLUB

OLIVIA SETTLED DEEP INTO HER favourite armchair at Mary Bugg's. It was hard to focus since her thoughts were still on the Garritys. She couldn't help but worry about them. Olivia glanced around the four pairs of eyes watching her.

Breanna was the oldest, a retired public servant with curly, wild, brown hair streaked with grey. She folded her arms over a *Fuck the Patriarchy* T-shirt. Evidently, the patriarchy was resisting because the shirt was faded and decades old.

Next to Breanna sat Tess, a young Aboriginal drama student who was writing a “deadly outback Indigenous sci-fi” novel in her spare time. *Deadly* meant *cool*, apparently. Tess was curious and sweet and had been tucked firmly under Breanna's protective wing.

The most easygoing of the group was a dead heat between volcano-shaped security guard Derek, and Bo, a short and solid butch stagehand. She was working on a *Les Misérables* production for Prahran's community theatre which kept her too busy to actually read most book club selections.

Derek was the opposite: an avid reader ploughing through books on his night shift security desk job at an inner-city apartment building. His forbidding size made for an intimidating first impression, but he was gentle and laconic, and nothing ever seemed to bother him. Except sad endings. And cheese.

“What did you all think of the book?” Olivia asked the group.

“Why *this* book?” Breanna jumped in first, sounding exasperated. “I thought you’d lost the plot!”

Right on cue, the door to the manager’s office snicked behind Olivia’s left shoulder. She twisted to look. The normally closed door was now ajar, as it always was once book club was in session.

Margaret Blackwood was in attendance.

Olivia didn’t remember when it first started. Maybe even two years ago—which was how old the group was. But at some far-back point in time, the reclusive bookstore owner had started “joining” their weekly meetings. That was weird, wasn’t it? Or, maybe not, when you considered a bookseller probably loved reading too.

When Olivia had first realised what was going on, she’d done the polite thing and knocked on the office door before book club one week to invite her to attend in person. Her raps had been ignored. She’d called out her offer through the wood and had been ignored even harder.

“*The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* is a hundred years old!” Breanna raced on and waved her Kindle, which showed the cover of Fergus Hume’s novel.

“Try a hundred and thirty-eight years,” came a faint, feminine murmur from the office.

The voice was barely audible—and, as Olivia’s chair was closest to the corridor and the office door a little way down it, she could *just* make out the words.

She almost fell off her seat in shock. Dr Blackwood, woman of mystery, was speaking? To her? Or, hell, at all?

Olivia scanned the group to see if anyone else had noticed. No one gave any indication. Okay, had she just imagined it? She waited. No other murmurings fell into the silence.

Finally, Olivia replied to Breanna: “Well, I thought it might be interesting, given we’re a crime and mystery group, for us to read Australia’s original international bestselling mystery. To broaden our horizons.”

“My horizons are already broader than the author’s,” Breanna retorted. “Did you notice how every woman in the book except for the heiress is an old, ugly crone? One’s even called Mother Guttersnipe! Then there’s the bitter landlady who screams constantly that *all men are brutes!*”

Well, that was no exaggeration.

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“Heh! That’s *so* funny.” Bo shifted in her chair, banging her Doc Martens together. “I’d have thought that’d be right up your alley, Bree.”

Breanna snorted and pressed on. “And the only decent woman, the heiress, is praised because she’s pretty and a great *support* for her fiancé when he’s accused of murder. She has no agency of her own. Oh, and the insipid creature keeps fainting!”

“Well, to be fair,” Damien said, “one of the blokes fainted too.”

Olivia suppressed a laugh. She liked Damien a lot. “True. The author was equal opportunity regarding fainting.”

Breanna narrowed her eyes for a moment—her way of reluctantly conceding a point—and then started round two. “It was also terribly written. The POV kept shifting midscene; one scene had *no* point of view at all; the protagonist for the first half of the book, the detective, was just *gone* in the last half, no explanation. There were no scene breaks, no paragraph spacing. It was one long screed of text broken up by full-page ads for Bovril.”

“What on earth *is* Bovril?” Tess asked with interest. “That wasn’t in my copy.”

“It’s grotesque,” Breanna replied with a grimace. “A brown, meaty yeast extract that looks and tastes like shoe polish. I had to eat it as a kid.”

“So it’s basically just meat-flavoured Vegemite from the 1800s,” Damien mused.

“The 1800s? Just how old do you think I am?” Breanna demanded, swinging about to look at him.

He grinned and tapped his chin. “Well—”

“Okay!” Olivia jumped in far too brightly. “I think we’re getting off track here!”

“You don’t say,” came that low, goading voice behind her.

Olivia blinked. Trust Dr Blackwood to have heard all that. “Please, can we get back to the plot?” she begged the group.

“The *plot*?” Breanna repeated. “The one *without* a woman protagonist or a woman author, despite us being the Women in Crime book club? Or the plot we know is happening because every character says their thoughts out loud? That plot?”

“Look!” Olivia said, at her wit’s end, “this book isn’t perfect, I know, but it’s a piece of Australian history. It was self-published by an author living in

Melbourne and became a massive hit. But why I chose it is that it inspired Arthur Conan Doyle to write Sherlock Holmes! See? It's Australian literary history! Give it some respect!"

"Literary. *Right*." Dr Blackwood's words were much louder than before. Loud enough that Olivia knew she couldn't have been the only one to hear her.

Everyone froze.

Anger flared in Olivia. She was being heckled! It was as rude as hell. She spun around to glare at the ajar door. "Do you *mind*!?"

"Liv?" Tess asked, brow wrinkling. "Who're you talking to? I mean, who's talking to us?"

"No one," Olivia said and turned back in her seat. "An incredibly annoying flea in my ear."

"Sounded like someone to me," Damien said curiously.

"Arthur Conan Doyle," murmured said annoying flea, "was only inspired to write Sherlock Holmes because your *literary* book was so bad, he thought he could do better."

Olivia gritted her jaw.

Bo wrote on her notepad, then held it up, tapping her scribbled words dramatically with a pen: *Are we just going to ignore The Voice?*

"Please disregard our heckler," Olivia said with a long-suffering sigh. "The bookstore owner—who is supplying commentary—clearly has too much time on her hands. Any other thoughts? About the plot? The murderer?"

That set them off arguing about how the detective hadn't wondered why a supposed impulse killer just happened to have chloroform in his pocket. Still, at least they were finally discussing the right topic.

Olivia exhaled in relief.

"You're far too easily pleased," purred that low voice as the others argued amongst themselves. "You have all of Australia's crime and mystery books at your disposal and the best you could come up with was a sub-par read from 1886 by an English hack; a book that Conan Doyle called 'a slight tale, mostly sold by puffing'. He was being kind."

It was the most Dr Blackwood had ever spoken to date, so it stilled the room to silence.

Bo, eyes wide, waved about a new note: *Garbo talks!*

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It would be funny, except their heckler was derailing book club. The group was chaotic enough as it was. Olivia scowled and flapped a hand for Bo to put the note down.

Bo dropped her notepad and said, "Hey, next week, can we all read *The Marmalade Files*? That's a cool story. Love it."

"You love Anna Torv, you mean," Breanna suggested slyly and glanced around at the blank faces. "Star of *Secret City*, the TV series based on *The Marmalade Files*."

"I cannot deny it," Bo said. "She's my celebrity wife; just doesn't know it."

"You just want to get out of reading the book," Breanna challenged. "Did you even read this one?"

Bo looked sheepish. "I meant to, but Prahran Community Theatre needed me to fix their *Les Mis* barricades because the chairs rammed on the top keep tumbling into the audience. How could I say no to that? I don't want the French Revolution to claim any more victims."

Everyone laughed. Bo being a stagehand made for some entertaining tales. Breanna, looking exasperated, turned to Olivia. "I don't think the hotness of actresses on a TV show is any reason to select a book title," she said with an arched eyebrow, "do you?"

"Dunno about that," Damien said thoughtfully. "Seems valid."

"You would say that," Breanna said with a heavy sigh. "You're such a *man* at times."

Tess inserted helpfully: "I loved Anna Torv in *Fringe*. Do you think we could read a sci-fi novel next?"

And just like that, Olivia's meeting careened into another black hole of Topics Not Even Remotely Related to the Selected Book. Good Lord, she was bad at running a group. Or was her book club just bad at focusing?

"And once again we have chaos," came the soft murmur. "Regular as clockwork."

"All right, that's it!" Olivia shot to her feet.

Everyone stopped in mid discussion to stare.

"Liv?" Bo asked, concern flickering across her broad, tanned face. "You okay, mate?"

"Fine," she muttered, sinking back into her chair, feeling ridiculous.

Why was no one else as annoyed by the maddening intruder as she was? Maybe because they hadn't tried to invite Dr Blackwood to join the group once and been totally snubbed. That still stung. "Look...next week's book should please everyone: It's modern, Australian, has a female lead and author. And," Olivia turned to Bo, "*Crimson Lake* by Candice Fox has also been made into a TV series for any of us not able to read it in time, so that checks everyone's boxes."

"Does a woman die in it?" Tess asked worriedly. "Lately, I'm starting to hate that to enjoy crime books we have to accept so many brutal murders of women."

Olivia felt a headache coming on. "I...have no clue. I haven't read it yet. There are...crocodiles," she added feebly. "That's all I know."

Tess leaned forward. "I'm concerned we're not addressing how many awful murders there are in our chosen books."

"You're in a *crime* group," goaded Dr Blackwood.

No shit, Olivia wanted to snap back. She cleared her throat and repeated the bookstore owner's words to the group. "We are in a crime group."

"Oh, very original," came a reply, louder and mocking.

Grr.

Damien hooted with laughter.

"Well, about that," Tess said, "it seems sexist that all the worst murders always happen to women characters. Maybe we should make a new rule about the books we read."

"Or *don't* read," Breanna said, eyeballing Bo pointedly.

"Shouldn't we be eliminating the books that kill off women for kicks?" Tess argued. "I mean aren't we pro-women?"

"There goes Shakespeare." Dr Blackwood's amusement was clear in her drawl. "As noble as the sentiment is, the reality would leave you with few books to read."

Olivia slumped back into her chair. Dr Blackwood had a point. Then again, so did Tess. There *were* a lot of gratuitous women's deaths in crime fiction.

"Isn't that censorship?" Breanna asked, her brows drawing together. "I don't favour it when governments do it, so I'm definitely not a fan of it in

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my downtime. Like here.” She waved at the group. “All crime titles should be free for discussion.”

“Killing’s just the side stuff anyway,” Damien argued amiably. “I mean, guessing who and how it happened is the point. Using the clues. The spray of blood on the wall; the placement of bullet holes—*that’s* what crime fic is all about.”

“So bloodthirsty!” Bo laughed and slapped Damien’s arm lightly.

He shrugged. “I’m not wrong though.”

From there, the discussion tumbled into how many classic books they’d miss out on versus not giving money to misogynistic authors. Olivia’s headache began to pound.

“Um, can I also put in another request?” Tess interrupted.

Olivia sighed inwardly. “What is it?”

“We really need more Indigenous crime books included. I never see myself reflected in the books I read.”

“Hang on,” Breanna said gently, “do you want to read Indigenous authors or Indigenous characters? They’re not the same.”

“Both!” Tess said with enthusiasm. “And make it a mystery! Why can’t we do that?”

“Because in Australia, at least, that’s a tiny pool of books,” Olivia said with regret.

“I could research it for you,” Breanna offered, “but off the top of my head I can’t think of many titles. Unless we turn to non-fiction. I mean, need I remind us of who this bookstore’s named after?”

They fell silent. Yes, this was still a bit of a sore point for the group when they’d read a biography about Mary Ann Bugg, an amazing woman who rode and dressed like a man and kept her outlaw lover alive with her knowledge of living off the land. Unlike most in her circle, she could read and had brilliantly defended herself in written form over the theft of twelve bolts of fabric, swinging public sentiment to her side and getting the charges dropped.

Outlandish myths also swirled around her, such as the time she allegedly rescued Captain Thunderbolt from jail on Cockatoo Island, swimming there with a metal file between her teeth.

All in all, she was a worthy subject for a bookstore name. A worthy subject for a book in her own right. But historians loved to focus squarely on her famous male companion. Indeed, the one biography dealing with her life was called *Captain Thunderbolt and His Lady*.

“That did suck,” Bo said. “I mean, I didn’t get a chance to actually read the book, but she deserved better than being an afterthought on a book title.”

“No truer words,” came a low murmur.

An actual endorsement from Dr Blackwood? Olivia would die of shock later—once she’d recovered from dying of shock at her engaging in the first place.

“Good book otherwise, though,” Damien conceded. “Top research. Excellent action scenes. Exciting stuff. I mean, right?”

“You *would* focus on the wrong thing,” Breanna huffed. “You *do* get that the only reason Captain Thunderbolt outwitted everyone was because his woman was the brains of the outfit?”

Damien gave a good-natured wave. “He was smart. Like how he had Mary Ann teach him to read and write. That’s top leadership when you think about it—knowing his weaknesses and using the experts around him to overcome them.” He glanced at everyone. “Don’t you think that’s good life advice for everyone?”

“He should have stuck to his own advice, then,” Breanna said dryly. “He broke up with Mary Ann—his smartest resource—and only *then* did the police finally catch up with him. Coincidence? Hardly.” She snorted. “There’s a reason she lived to old bones and he didn’t. Hell, she even had time to pop out fifteen kids before she finally curled up her toes.”

“We’re getting way off track,” Olivia tried.

“I agree,” Tess said earnestly. “The most important point is, can we please stop picking books with so many women getting murdered in them?”

“We’ll discuss your suggestion next week.”

“And not do it,” Tess said sadly.

“We’ll see what Breanna’s research reveals,” Olivia said diplomatically. “Our time’s up. Thanks for coming, everyone. Remember, *Crimson Lake*.”

The group gathered up their notes. Breanna took off first, still arguing with Damien, who didn’t seem to mind in the least. Tess, on her way to her

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college classes, was asking Bo about what else went into making a proper French Revolution barricade.

Olivia, however, was more interested in who hadn't left. She climbed to her feet and rounded on the office behind her. Dr Blackwood's intrusion into book club had to be addressed.

Just as Olivia reached the door, it suddenly closed with a click. "Excuse me, what *is* your problem?" Olivia asked. She tried knocking.

A lock made a *clunk*.

"Oh, very mature," Olivia muttered softly, her natural politeness warring with her mounting agitation. She knocked harder and lifted her volume. "If you want to talk about our books so badly, why not join the club? Like when I asked you last time!"

Silence greeted her.

She sighed. She supposed she could stick around and wait to have it out with the woman once and for all. Except Mary Bugg's was an excellent daily customer of Love Muffins' baked goods. Did Olivia really want to jeopardise that by picking a fight? Or even worse, run the risk of being banned from the most beautiful place on earth just because its owner loved to do a weird, murmured critique of Olivia's book club in real time?

Fine.

Dr Blackwood could do whatever she wanted because it was her store. She might be the most annoying woman Olivia had ever met.

Or, rather, not met.

Diary of Dr Blackwood

Tuesday, March 3

Day 1123 post H

Sunset: 7.57pm

Temp: 14.7C-19.5C

Rain: *Omm*

Noise: Neighbour 1B's air conditioner @ 65dB @ 10pm! To monitor further.

Drink: Trentham Estate Shiraz 2020. Two glasses. Acceptable.

Reading: Non-fiction—*Just arrived, my Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association, Vol 69, issue 1. Article on digital curation bears further examination.*

Fiction—*The Mystery of a Hansom Cab (Fergus Hume). Poorly formed drivel by a hack with delusions of literary talent. Worst book club read in three months.*

General Observations: *The sunset from my apartment balcony tonight is particularly beautiful. Streaks of reds and orange look like an artist's brush daubed across the sky. Its serenity as I sip my wine and scribble my daily thoughts is a counterpoint to the day.*

That persistent Russian danseur attempted to be overfamiliar again, no doubt in a bid to entice his ex-girlfriend back. If my barista wasn't so inexplicably fond of Sasha, I'd ban him from the store. His batted eyelashes and absurd muscle flexing reminded me of a baboon presenting for mating. The only thing more pleasant than slamming the door in his face was the surprise he registered as I did so.

Book club. Chaos as always. Olivia made occasional arguments on book themes that bordered perilously close to substantive; won't hold my breath for the anomaly to repeat itself. Her attempts at herding cats back onto topic with that idiotic group yielded the usual predictable results. Apparently, I should now offer sci-fi books in my crime bookstore! What's

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next? Fifty Shades of Grey?! (H, of course, would call me a snob for that line. Under the circumstances, I wear the title proudly.)

It was too difficult to hold my tongue this week. All this time, all these months, I've muttered my sarcastic rejoinders under my breath. Not today. I've gone from passive observer to vocal critic. The only person more shocked than Olivia—based on her repeated little explosions—was me.

Speaking of Olivia: I was in the storeroom today when the Garritys entered the car park right outside. Olivia's experience at herding cats clearly came in useful. She wrangled those children like a pro. I also observed her hand off what looked like a good proportion of her weekly shop to Samantha Garrity. Does Olivia have no plans to eat too? With a heart that soft, I'm not sure how she survives in this world.

CHAPTER 3

TAKING A TRIP

OLIVIA SETTLED BACK IN HER Kombi, the final drop-off for Wednesday morning complete. She was exhausted and running on fumes since yesterday. Kelly had had some very firm thoughts on the subject of Tina, and they'd talked late into the night.

First thing in the morning, Olivia had politely texted her ex-girlfriend a firm no.

She'd told Tina she wasn't giving her a second chance. Kelly was right. Tina might say she was reformed, but it'd only been a few months. *Why don't I ever see the red flags the way Kelly does?*

Trip was in a contemplative mood, staring out the window. He'd been willed to her by Olivia's late nana. When she was seventy-one, Betty Roberts had acquired him after romancing a taxidermist while on her many travels—which had inspired Trip's name. Betty and her faithful penguin took a lot of trips together.

Trip had a short, orange beak and was slim even by penguin standards. He boasted black-and-white feathers and was roughly the height of a shoe-box on its end. Given he'd gone everywhere with Betty, it wasn't surprising he looked a little worse for wear around the tips of his once sleek feathers.

Olivia didn't care that he was past his prime or that he didn't say much. He was a first-rate companion and never minded her early starts.

"I mean, I could reassess in six months' time," Olivia told Trip, suddenly having second thoughts. Was she being a cold, unforgiving person? If

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Tina was still interested and still putting in the work on herself, of course. Tina really could change. She'd feel terrible if Tina was better and Olivia had never even stopped to find out.

She pursed her lips, gripping the worn steering wheel tighter, glancing at Trip. "Don't look at me like that," she protested, although Trip was still resolutely contemplating life. "You never know. The universe has the capacity to surprise us all."

The traffic lights turned green and Olivia accelerated—although that wasn't exactly the word for it given the state of her ancient yellow Kombi she'd repurposed as a food van. It was the other thing Nana Betty had given her—wheels. It allowed her to ply her artisan muffins all over Melbourne's best coffee hubs.

She pattered slowly through downtown Prahran, a busy, cafe-studded suburb five clicks from Melbourne's city centre, which lured coffee snobs, market lovers, and would-be hipsters. Prahran was a contradictory mix of shabby-chic shops, the fashion mecca of Chapel Street—hanging on to its groovy title by a thread these days—and trendy apartments. The latter were populated by old money, now way out of Olivia's price range. It was the reason she and her sister rented a little house half an hour away, much deeper in suburbia.

Olivia pulled up at a small park that drew office workers on their breaks like seagulls to hot chips. It was later than usual, almost noon. She had finished all her other daily muffin drop-offs to coffee houses, lunch bars, cafes, and, of course, heaven's own bookstore.

Rolling open the heavy door on the side of the van—which had the embarrassing effect of contracting her painted company name to "Love Muff"—Olivia pulled forward a set of shelves containing two trays of muffins.

Her reputation meant she never had to wait more than an hour to be sold out as passers-by snapped up the remainder of her baked goods. It was always a nice end to her day, which started at four-thirty in the morning. And it meant, if she was lucky, she might also see her favourite sight: Book Woman.

She turned in anticipation. There she was. Seated at the bench in the middle of the same park where Olivia plied her unsold muffins, her patrician nose buried in a novel. She often did this: devoured novels on her lunch

break. Actual books too—she was old school, which Olivia found interesting—paperbacks that she flicked through at some pace.

Judging by the rate at which the colours on the covers changed, she read one a day. And given most of the covers were in blacks or reds, her genre was probably crime.

The woman looked like a sinister, short-haired Morticia Addams—all elegant, broody, and aloof, as if she knew how to commit half the murders in her books.

Book Woman's most notable feature was her sharply pronounced cheekbones that set off her pale skin, black hair, and dark-framed glasses. The entire effect, unsoftened by make-up or any hint of colour or expression other than indifference, radiated complete disdain. Indeed, at this moment, she was impersonating a lean, haughty human vulture hunched over its paper prey.

While she might scare away everyone else with her harbinger-of-doom aura, Olivia was utterly mesmerised. She often wondered what Book Woman did for a living. Her clothing was always impeccable but interesting—masculine-cut ebony pantsuits hugging her long, narrow body, paired with polished black ankle boots. One day Olivia might even approach her and ask.

Yeah, right.

“Hey, Love Muff! Been waiting ages!”

Olivia's attention snapped back to her customers. Well, customer. Andy, one of her regulars, gave a dramatic sigh to punctuate his agony. The engineering student always looked half starved. He smiled his big, dopey, boyish grin, and Olivia could almost forgive him for using that appalling nickname.

“Yeah, the Kombi's been acting up again,” she explained. “But I've got your favourite today, if that helps.” Olivia slid her biggest three-cheese-and-herb-crust muffin onto a paper plate. She'd set this one aside just for him.

Practically drooling, Andy slapped down his money...all in spare change. He was already munching happily as he got out: “Mmph. Mnnnks, Livvy. Best. Muffins. Ever!”

Not Livvy. Not Love Muff. Olivia—or Liv in a pinch.

Still, she didn't correct him. He was a good customer, as well as harmless and sweet in a rumpled kind of way. She forgave him again and smiled as he retreated to sit on a low wall, where he slouched over his phone and devoured his lunch.

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An hour flew by relatively smoothly until Olivia had only one muffin left: a sweet-potato-and-heirloom-tomato creation with a crusty Parmesan topping. Maybe the name needed work: Parma Sutra. Damien from book club had come up with it. She didn't want to say no in the face of his delight at his own "genius", so she'd used it.

No one wanted the last Parma Sutra today, though. It seemed a shame to throw it away, and she'd learned years ago not to eat her own leftovers or her bum wouldn't thank her. She was always a little self-conscious about its slightly roundish proportions, thanks to the ex who used to mock it mercilessly.

She'd often wondered why you'd date someone in the first place if you thought them so unattractive? She never did find an answer to that.

As Olivia began packing up, she spotted the muffin she'd failed to sell and glanced around hopefully for one last customer. She noticed Book Woman again.

Olivia paused. She loved to watch the way she'd snap the pages over on her book—crisply, as if to do it slowly was inefficient. But then she'd smooth the new page flat like an act of benediction for a lover. As if apologising for any abruptness.

As Olivia's eyes darted back to the Parma Sutra, an idea occurred. Did she dare?

Okay. Yep. *Okay.* She was doing it. She straightened her button pin: *Done and crusted.*

Scooping the lone muffin onto a small paper plate, Olivia drew in a deep breath and straightened. She would offer the woman her baked goods and not be a total chickenshit.

She was halfway to the other woman when it occurred to Olivia it was time to panic. She, a complete stranger, was about to accost someone and shove home-made muffins at them, even if said home-made muffins had been named "Best Food Truck Baked Goods (Savoury) in Prahran" in last year's esteemed *Good Food Guide*.

What if the woman thought it was some ploy to poison her?

Olivia slowed, fear drying her throat.

The woman glanced up, and their eyes met. A shiver ran through Olivia at the power of that gaze.

An eyebrow sharp enough to draw blood rose in question as she peered at Olivia. Her dark eyes scraped across Olivia's battered sneakers and up her jeans, wide hips and belly before sliding past her flannel shirt and white tee to settle on her face, with its doubtlessly frozen-deer-in-headlights expression.

The woman slowly lifted her chin, as if she had graciously allowed *one precious minute* to Olivia.

"Um, hi." Olivia fidgeted as she came to a stop in front of her. She tried to figure out her opening line. *Idiot*. She should have worked this out before she got here!

Would you like some Parma Sutra? No, that sounded weird as hell.

Would you like to taste my delicious muffin? Jesus! No!

Hi, I'm Love Muffins and... shit!

Had her hands always been this clammy?

Olivia blushed, hating that her fair, freckled complexion would almost certainly accentuate every beetroot-red capillary. She wished she had some witty introduction because this was now awkward as hell.

The woman's lips twitched as if considering expressing amusement, but she faltered as her gaze drifted past Olivia's shoulder.

At the same time, there came a shout from Andy, near the road. "Hey, Livvy! Someone's stealing your..."

What? Olivia spun around.

He squinted at the road and pointed. "Penguin?"

Trip?! Horror flooded her. *No!* A shadowy form was running from her van with Olivia's feathered companion under one arm.

"Oh my God!" She flung the muffin, still on its little paper plate, onto the bench and bolted.

Olivia puffed after the thief, every muscle protesting the unexpected physical activity. She'd curse how out of shape she was later. Right now, the most she could pray for was that she had no witnesses to this indignity.

"You go, Livvy!" Andy called out encouragingly from somewhere in her periphery.

Then there followed a female's soft snort of laughter from behind her. Most definitely not Andy's.

Olivia winced, knowing only too well who that'd be. Just great: witnesses confirmed.

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* * *

Perhaps the thief hadn't actually expected to be noticed in mid thievery because Olivia rounded a corner to find the scoundrel leaning against a wall, catching their breath, holding Trip under one arm like bagpipes.

It was a thief Olivia recognized only too well. "*Tina?*"

"Oh, hey, Livvy. Great seeing you again." Her ex-girlfriend took a gulp of air and flapped her hand in an absent wave.

"What the actual hell?"

Tina supplied a relaxed, genial grin. "Okay, so it's not what it looks like. You *so* need to chill, girl."

"What, you didn't just steal my penguin?" Olivia lunged to snatch Trip.

Tina danced away with ease.

Olivia glared at her annoyingly agile form. With her wiry, gym-honed body and bleached blonde hair, she always gave off a wasted, rich socialite vibe. It wasn't far from the truth. Tina's massive sense of entitlement came from being an only child to wealthy parents who had given her everything she'd ever wanted.

They'd cut off her allowance after she got into party drugs. That apparently had meant that Olivia's possessions became Tina's to pawn. She hadn't even known about Tina's habit until Olivia's worldly goods started vanishing.

"Okay, hear me out." Tina drew in a breath and struck the *you-know-you-want-me* pose that always got her likes on social media. "I got your text this morning, and I was just *so* sad. You know?" She pouted. "I didn't want to end it over a stupid text. I didn't want us to be..." she reached out to stroke Olivia's button pin, "Done and crusted."

If Tina was weaponising her joyful motivational puns, Olivia was going to be very cross in a minute.

"Don't we deserve more?" Tina finished, and now her wide blue eyes pleaded with her. She was so earnest.

"Oh." Olivia blinked in confusion. "But...I mean..." She then pointed at Trip. "Why?"

"I needed to get your attention, that's all. I missed you so much. Weren't we good together? Didn't we click when things were good?" Her smile was soft and cheeky, like it had been in the early days. "So I've been spending all

my time at home reflecting on how I've screwed everything up. That's it." She swayed in. "I truly just wanted to see you again."

She offered Trip to Olivia who snatched him back warily.

"I know how much you loved this little guy," Tina went on, "and I figured, well, you may hate the sight of me right now, but you'd definitely want to look at Trip again. I just wanted to talk to you. Properly. Face to face. Trip was never in any danger. Sorry if I scared you."

Doubt streaked through Olivia. Tina sounded so sincere. And now that she'd handed back Trip, this wasn't exactly a hostage negotiation anymore. Tina's eyes were beseeching as she waited for a reply.

"I don't...hate you," Olivia said, squeezing Trip tighter. "I was really disappointed in you. You stole my things. You broke my trust. That was gutting."

"I know, babe, I know. I'm so, so sorry." She swayed even closer. "Can you ever forgive me? I'm so much better now. My therapist says she's never seen anyone more committed to getting off drugs than me. It's because I'm motivated. I thought about how much I wanted to win you back. Didn't we have a blast together when we weren't hung up on the little stuff?" Her eyes were wide and hopeful.

"It wasn't *little stuff* stealing my mum's bracelet, though," Olivia protested. "That wasn't little stuff at all. That was a family heirloom she'd given me."

"No, you're right." She hung her head. "My therapist was shocked when I told her what I'd done. Stealing the love of my life's precious family heirlooms is the worst. Never again, though." She reached out and grasped Olivia's hand. "Never again."

Tina's hand felt dry and cool against Olivia's own sweat-slicked skin.

"I'm...the love of your life?" she squeaked, deciding not to point out that Tina had in fact already nicked another of her precious heirlooms not five minutes ago. But that had been to get her attention, so it wasn't the same thing, was it?

"Yeah, you are." Tina smiled. "Didn't you know that? You're my girl. You're why I want to get better. You're just so...good. So sweet. You're probably the only person on earth who'd ever give someone like me a second chance." Tina drew in a breath, looking nervous, then kissed Olivia's cheek.

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“So I’m taking a risk and putting myself out there. Asking: one more chance?”

Olivia’s skin lit under the warmth of the sweet kiss. She’d missed that sensation. The simple closeness and affection between two people who shared intimacy.

She’d never realised Tina loved her. She’d always seemed so dismissive of “mushy feelings” before, as if they were an intrusion on good sex. Or... average sex. Because Tina didn’t always *entirely* remember to take care of Olivia’s needs too. But then, she’d had a lot on her mind, hadn’t she? Trying to keep all her secrets? Addiction was difficult. And here Tina was, trying so hard to be better.

Olivia inhaled. Maybe she was crazy, but she couldn’t help wanting Tina to be the woman she claimed she was. She couldn’t help wanting her to keep trying. Wanting her to...want *her*. Because in all the time they’d ever dated, Olivia had never felt truly wanted until this moment.

Come to think of it, in all the time and across all the people Olivia had dated, she’d never felt really wanted. More...convenient. It was a dream to be wanted. “Yes. But, so help me, you’d better not hurt me again,” Olivia said. “Anything but that.”

“Anything but that,” Tina agreed, and this time she captured Olivia’s lips in a kiss that hinted at passion. “It’s Wednesday, right? So Kelly’ll be out bartending tonight? How about I come over and make up for lost time? I’ll even cook.” She laughed.

Cook?! Tina had never cooked even once for Olivia before. And it was nice she remembered her sister’s schedule so as to not inconvenience Kelly. Although that probably had more to do with the fact that the two got on like cats and dogs. “You’ll cook?”

“Yeah, babe. I will. Like I said, I’m making amends. See you tonight. At six? I know you like to have dinner and bed early because you work bakers’ hours.”

Olivia’s heart melted a little more at her consideration. It was true she was usually asleep by nine-thirty. “Six,” she agreed.

With a smile from ear to ear, Tina said: “Can’t wait.” With that, she sauntered off, giving her ass a sexy little sway.

Lee Winter

As Olivia watched her go, she reminded herself not to be too hopeful. Maybe Kelly was right. But still... Tina sounded a hundred times better than she had before. Wasn't she worth a second chance?

Olivia looked down at Trip. Well, now. She'd always said the universe was full of surprises.

Trip made no comment.

Wednesday, March 4
Day 1124 post H

Sunset: 7.55pm

Temp: 13.6C-23.5C

Rain: 0mm

Noise: Neighbour in 1B did not run a/c despite warmer day. Odd behaviour. To monitor further.

Drink: Trentham Estate Shiraz 2020. Two glasses. Still acceptable.

Reading: Non-fiction—JALIA, Vol 69, issue 1. Article on financial management for libraries. Nothing I didn't already know.

Fiction—Land's Edge by Tim Winton. Overly descriptive nostalgia for Australian beach lovers. Well-written wallowing.

General Observations: I witnessed a penguin theft today. Olivia—because of course it was her; she is at the heart of every single one of life's absurdities—was embroiled in the saga. A blonde waif sprinted off after wresting said penguin from the Love Muffins van.

(Note I'm no longer sneering at the name—it's only taken a year, and I've exhausted all my insults. Still, the van name is about what I'd expect from someone who wears buttons each day with another baking pun that's more awful than the last. Some of the puns are so bad, they make me appreciate my former life in academia, where the wit was sharp enough to cause internal bleeding.)

I'd have pointed this penguin heist out to Olivia as she was standing just three feet from me at the time, clutching baked goods to her chest. But a customer called out to her first.

I strongly suspect I was about to be offered a muffin. I wonder how she might have phrased her offer? "Please accept this stale, sad baked good I was unable to sell?" After all, Olivia does come out with the most surreal...blurtings... at times.

I'm most sorry we were interrupted and I did not get to hear her awkward pitch.

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VENGEANCE PLANNING FOR AMATEURS

BY LEE WINTER

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