

And what are you here to atone for today?

Ingrid Isaac had been flipping burgers as long as I had but everyone knew she was going places. She was funny. Charming. She would frequently update us about the Kardashians, the Biebers and a rescued crab she followed on TikTok, her brown skin glowing with enthusiasm and the sweaty sheen of working so close to the deepfryer. She was the one who'd suggested to Kenny we give the burgers iconic 90s television names, like Ally McVeal and Dawson's Beef, and decorate the walls like a 90s teenager's room. It worked. All the hipsters wanted to go for burgers at Kenny's.

When I asked her about swapping shifts so I could attend a meeting she teased me about leaving her behind with the burgers. I explained I had to meet with some potential tenants for the old antique store I'd inherited from my nan.

Ingrid urged me to go bowling with her instead. Hoping it was a date, I agreed. When she took my hands at the end of the first game having not-so-narrowly beaten me, my heart started racing. Then she hit me with her business proposal. I was disappointed but intrigued. I thought if Ingrid had an idea, it was worth getting on board. But I wasn't exactly business partner material. With two-thirds of an arts degree, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. I confided in her and she waved away my concerns.

"In business, everyone brings something different to the table," she said. "Sure, I'm the ideas lady right now, but soon you'll soon step up and pull your weight. Plus, you're the one with a commercial property." Then she took my face in my hands and planted a kiss right on my mouth.

When she first explained the idea, I wasn't completely sold. It was to be a store for people seeking forgiveness.

"We'll call it Sorry Store," she said. "Picture this. A confessional, you know one of those booths, like in the old Cathedrals? That's the first stop. They go to the confessional where they confess their sin to one of our...let's call them priestesses. So it's the priestess's job to assess your sins and suggest how they might like to atone. Meanwhile their phone has recorded the confession voice-to-text and pinged it to one of the in-store writers so they can get a head start as they get ready to work with the customer to develop a bespoke apology. Then, they select an appropriate gift to go with their apology from our store. Plants, flowers, chocolates. We'll only stock boutique brands. I know a few people, it'll be a easy-peasy."

I didn't get the part about the priestess but she assured me a bit of theatre was what would get people in. You know, the TikTok crowd.

"We could have a stern, matronly woman say *confess*. We can figure out the details later," she said waving her hands. "The point is, we create an experience that allows people to feel forgiven, or at least that they've done all they can to make amends."

It took a lot of work and a lot of money to turn nan's old shop into Sorry Store. "It's gonna be LIT," Ingrid kept shouting, as I painted everything white. She also wanted it to be literally well-lit so that people could easily document their experience for social media. We had to get a carpenter in to build the confessional. It was really expensive and there was only room for one but I figured we probably couldn't afford to hire more than one priestess so it would do. Ingrid kept erupting into the chorus of Justin Bieber's "Sorry" and doing

what I assume were the latest TikTok dances. I thought she was being too optimistic and told her so.

“There’s a ridiculous amount of businesses that fail, isn’t there?”

“We are going to transform apologies and make a shitload of money doing it,” she insisted. Her optimism was infectious. I was to take care of the admin side of things, and work as an in-store writer composing bespoke apologies, helping out with sales in the gift store. Ingrid knew all these people from working in hospitality so she took care of all the hiring. And of course, she handled the social media side of things.

The whole thing actually took off and we were getting a steady trickle of customers. Everyday, I arrived to find a few hanging around, waiting to whisper their offenses in the giant white cupboard that now sat in my nan’s old store. I still thought of it as nan’s, even though it looked so shiny and different. Everyone wanted to come and confess their sins. The confession part had been important to Ingrid. She’d gone to a Catholic school. “White people make money out of our spiritual practices all the time,” she said. “Ever heard of yoga?”

Everyone wanted to post a picture of themselves standing in front of the confessional, pouting with contrition or holding a gift bag from Sorry Store. The hashtag took off. Most of the apologies were trivial. Sorry for forgetting your birthday. Sorry for breaking your hair straightener. Sorry for blaming you when I farted. Just kids wanting their fifteen seconds of internet fame. The admin of an upwardly trending business was a lot to manage. I told myself it would be worth it once we started making money. Ingrid never seemed to be around when anyone needed to be paid. All of the money spent on the business was coming out of my savings. I kept a record of everything. We’d be able to square everything later, once the business was more profitable.

Ingrid was obsessed with social media. When we worked at the diner, she was always talking about silly little videos or memes. One day she burst in, more chipper than usual because she had another idea. She proposed a Sorrygram service. She was thinking of the TikTok generation. They wanted experiences they could film.

“It’ll be amazing, I know loads of uni students would be happy to make a quick buck. You wouldn’t even have to do anything.” I was hesitant.

“We’ve just started getting some money. You’re not the one who’s sunk all your savings into this business.” She took my face in her hands.

“I know how much you’ve done for the business. But it was my idea, remember? My idea is making you money right now, and you’ll see your profits. You just need to give another one of my brilliant ideas a go. Easy peasy.”

So we tried. It was, as I had predicted, chaotic and not remotely profitable. String quartets and doo-wop groups, even student ones, are very expensive and rather unreliable. So profit margins were minimal and I kept having to sub in for all the people who would pull out at the last minute. We couldn’t have a disappointed customer, after all, our clientele were very verbal online. One time I had to sub in for an acapella group performing Chicago’s *Hard for Me to Say I’m Sorry*. I was grateful for my time as a school choir nerd that day. Another time, I had to dress as the green teletubby and play Brian Adams’ *Please Forgive Me* from a boombox. I took a selfie and sent it to Ingrid, hoping she’d see me all red-faced and sweaty in this ridiculous costume on this forty-degree day and think, maybe the sorrygrams aren’t working. The next day the photo was posted to our Instagram feed with a Valencia filter. *Wronged someone lately? Ask us about our Sorrygram service.*

I was doing all the orders, all the admin. I dropped out of uni. Ingrid was hardly there. I tried not to get mad. I reminded myself that this was her idea and I wouldn't even have a business without her. But after a while, she wasn't even showing up to the stuff she was good at. I started to feel like a nag. I'd remind her about a meeting and she'd say something breezy like *sure thing, shortcake, or easy peasy lemon squeezy*. She'd rock up at the last minute after another text reminder with a convoluted yet entertaining story about the reason she was late. Then she'd always rush off again before I could talk to her about helping out more.

We were shortstaffed and Ingrid seemed to have given up on hiring. I was constantly interviewing potential employees — priestesses, writers, cashiers and now sorrygram performers. The long line snaking outside the store made it seem exclusive. But how long could we sustain this? And how much time do social media posts take anyway? I was fairly sure there were apps Ingrid could use to schedule posts that would free up time for her to help out in the store. And I never saw her donning a silly costume and belting out a tune to keep customers happy. I was burning out.

One day Ingrid texted me saying she'd organised for some Youtubers to come through the store. For once, she was actually there. They interviewed her and she talked about having the idea for Sorry Store. That part was fair enough but then she talked about the logistics of starting the business as if she did it all herself. When she said she spent most of her day here at the store I had to stifle a snort. And when she walked past me, she said *this is Frankie, one of our writers*, I spluttered, gave a tight smile and waved. What else could I do in the moment? On the inside I was fuming. One of our writers? What about business partner? Store manager? Bookkeeper? Have I not provided her with the premises for her business idea, rent-free, because we were supposedly partners?

Later, I confronted her about it.
“Ingrid, I ...” She looked at me and for a moment I almost chickened out. But it needed to be said. “Why did you introduce me as just one of the writers? I... I'm the one doing most of the work here.” She chuckled.
“Frankie, you're being so dramatic. Of course I know how much work you do. It's just that you *were* one of our writers when we were filming,” she said, rolling her eyes.
“It's not just that,” I said, my voice breaking. Why was it so hard to stand up for myself?
“I.I want you to pull more weight around here. Be here at the store. Stop bailing on meetings.”
“I hear you,” she said, patting my arm. She looked me in the eye. “No more bailing.”

When Rhys Watkins contacted us for a meeting I was dying to know why. He was a big name. Back at Kenny's everyone knew of him as he owned a lot of businesses in the area and across the country. I was getting impatient. Where was Ingrid? She'd said no more bailing. My phone pinged. *Something's come up again so I won't make it. Guessing Rhys probably wants to invest in the business. Find out what you can. Need more \$\$\$ for my next big idea xx*

My stomach dropped at the thought of implementing another one of Ingrid's ideas. Why hadn't I just got some tenants into nan's old store and made some easy money?!

Rhys had a warm toothy smile and shook my hand with the perfect amount of pressure. He knew his stuff. He'd anticipated all of the difficulties I was having with staffing. It was a huge relief to talk about the business with someone who understood. Soon, all of my frustrations about Ingrid not pulling her weight came tumbling out of me. Rhys was shocked to find out Ingrid and I had never put anything in writing.

"Well, Frankie. This is your business, kid. What do you want to do?"

I imagine at some point Ingrid went to Sorry Store. Probably after the original Sorry Store social media accounts mysteriously got deleted. Or perhaps when those Youtubers never got back to her. I wonder if she went to the store outside business hours and found her keys didn't work. Or if she went when it was open and had to be escorted out. I wonder if staff threatened to call the police. Rhys has flown me to the other side of the country where I'm overseeing the opening of two shiny new Sorry Stores. I have all the staff and resources I need to achieve this. Next, we'll go global. Sometimes, I think I'd like to send Ingrid a little pot plant, a spiny little succulent with the word *sorry* on one of our signature bags. But I'm not sorry.