

I

She has no idea what she's doing here. Why she had thought this might be a good idea. She'd lain awake half of last night, wondering whether or not she could go through with it, kicking the covers aside because she had broken out in an uncomfortable sticky sweat, and then shivering as the cool air hit her damp skin. Restless. Anxious. No, scrub that. Absofuckinglutely terrified.

It's only a date. What's the worst that could happen? Actually, Joni doesn't want to answer that. She can think of plenty of examples: making a list of them wouldn't help. He has let her dictate all the terms: daytime, outside, a busy location, a café of her choice. She got there early, scouting out the seating arrangements, choosing an outdoor table up against the window where she could have a view of the whole terrace and be seen by the staff inside at the same time. She doesn't want to be taken by surprise when he arrives. If he arrives.

She takes out her phone and looks through her photos. As if his face isn't imprinted on her brain already. 'Always add at least ten pounds and ten years,' Imo had said when she'd persuaded her to sign up to the dating app in the first place. It had been a condition of her daughter's agreeing to leave home. 'Then subtract hair.

And maybe teeth. No one looks like their pictures, that's a given. Just don't be naive.'

'I don't know why you're so keen on me doing it if everyone on there's a liar,' Joni had said. It was the weekend before Imogen moved away to start a new life in Manchester, and she was clearly feeling guilty. Joni, if she were being honest, was feeling devastated, but she hoped she'd protected Imo from that knowledge. She wanted her to be able to throw herself into her training at a TV production company without worrying about whether her mother was lonely or not. She is, by the way. Heartachingly. Painfully. But that's another story.

A waiter is hovering, so she orders a coffee, cursing herself for choosing such an up-itself venue when he points to a list of about thirty versions of the same hot drink and asks her what kind. She'd wanted to impress Ant. To have him think she was the kind of woman who was at home in the smugster cafés of Kensington, when actually she'd just picked it because it was easy to get to from both her home in north London and his in Notting Hill, and it had tables outside.

'Just a latte,' she says, closing the menu and trying to ignore the waiter's dismissive expression. She feels as if she's let him down.

'Milk?' he says.

'Yes please.' She realizes her mistake immediately. Feels her face colour. Why is she so nervous?

The waiter puffs out his cheeks as if he's trying to suppress a sigh. 'I mean, what kind? Cow's, goat's, soy, almond, oat, pea, cashew, hemp or coconut?'

‘Oh. Um . . . actually oat sounds nice.’ She tries a smile on him. Hates herself for resorting to her harmless middle-aged-lady default position. Look, I’m old enough to be your mum, the smile says. Indulge a silly old woman. It doesn’t work. Either he hates his mother, or he thinks oat is a terrible choice. The missionary position of the plant-milk world. When did coffee become such a thing? Didn’t everyone already have enough decisions to make in life without adding caffeinated beverages into the mix?

‘Chia, matcha or turmeric powder?’ She looks at him, wonders for a second if he’s taking the piss but his expression is deadly serious. She thinks about saying ‘Chocolate sprinkles’ just to get a reaction, but she fears he might throw her out in disgust. ‘Just an oat latte,’ she says. ‘Oat milk, coffee and water. Nothing else.’

He finally leaves, oozing disappointment, and she checks the time. Five minutes to go.

If he turns up.

She has been talking to Ant for nearly two months. At first via the app, then text and finally on the phone. The first time it had shocked her how perfectly his voice had matched his face. She’d wondered if he felt the same. That sudden rush of relief. She knew she had a nice voice. Her ex-husband Ian had always told her she sounded as if she was purring when she spoke. Smooth. Soft. Obviously, that was before he decided he preferred the noises Holly made. Loud, confident, strident noises as if she was so secure of her place in the world that she

didn't care who heard her. The Screecher, Meg had christened her. 'Imagine what she sounds like when they have sex,' she'd said. This, to be honest, had been the last thing Joni had wanted to imagine but she'd smiled anyway. 'It must be like shagging a goose.' Meg had always been able to make Joni laugh. But then Meg wasn't here any more.

She scours the other tables just to make sure she hasn't missed Ant. There's only one man sitting on his own. God, she hopes that slightly seedy-looking bloke with a greasy mullet isn't the person she had phone sex with last night. She feels a wave of both arousal and embarrassment. She doesn't know how they ended up there on their third phone call, how discussing the arrangements for meeting for the first time segued into uncensored lust, but it was both shocking and thrilling. What had she been thinking? She's a forty-nine-year-old divorcee who hasn't had actual sex for over four years, let alone simulated it over the phone. Ever. Certainly not with a virtual stranger. Except that was the thing about Ant. He didn't feel like a stranger. Not at all.

She watches as Mullet Man is greeted by a smiling woman. 'There's someone for everyone,' Imo had said to her as part of her online-dating sales pitch. 'That one perfect person.' Imo had always been a romantic despite also being wise beyond her years. And maybe it was true, although it seemed a bit random. What if you never came across that someone? And, even if you did, how would you ever know that in a world of seven billion people the bloke you said hello to every week in your local Tesco was the One? It made no sense. Joni had

always been much more pragmatic. There were probably thousands of people around the globe you could comfortably match with – tens of thousands even – it was just a question of settling for one who was reasonably local. And nice. She knows that ‘nice’ is a damning word. Too vanilla. Too beige. But, the truth is, it’s what she wants. She’s done with arseholes.

The waiter delivers her coffee in a bowl. Joni wants to ask him if they have any mugs she could decant it into but she’s too intimidated, so now she’ll have to wait until it’s cold before she can drink it. She’s furious with herself for letting it go. Is she getting old? Is that why everything suddenly seems so overwhelming? She feels her forehead. Is it the menopause? She’s heard of women being consumed by rage as they sweat from places they didn’t even know had sweat glands. Or is it just that serving boiling-hot coffee in a handleless vessel is a stupid fucking idea in the first place?

She checks the time again. Still a couple of minutes to go. A movement at the edge of the terrace gets her attention. A man. She feels her pulse quicken. It’s unmistakably him. Ant. He’s here. And not only that but he looks exactly like his pictures. No extra poundage, no surplus years. He scours the terrace; she assumes trying to spot her. She catches his eye.

She can see him scrutinizing her. She’s the only single woman there after all. She almost smiles. Almost raises a hand to wave.

But she doesn’t.

She looks away.

Joni buries her face in her phone, trying to catch her breath. Ant has decided she's not who he was looking for and settled at a table at the front of the terrace. She watches as he greets the waiter with a smile. She can't hear exactly what he's saying but she can tell it's friendly, polite. The imperious server even cracks a smile himself. You can tell a lot about someone's character from the way they treat waiters or shop assistants or bus drivers when they think no one is watching. It's so strange to see Ant animated. A mythical figure brought to life. He had suggested, on the second phone call, that they use FaceTime, but she had resisted. She didn't want the first time they saw each other to be made even more awkward by bad angles and unnatural lighting, she told him. She should have known for certain then that he was genuine.

'You can't be sure, though,' Imo had said when she'd filled her in. 'You could make all the arrangements and then on the day he'd claim he didn't have a strong enough signal and you'd have to settle for a voice call instead. But he'd know you now trusted him just because he'd suggested it in the first place.'

'When did it all get to be so complicated?' Joni had said. The last person she had dated had been Imo's dad, and they had been married for nearly twenty years.

They'd met in a pub through mutual friends. There simply hadn't been any possibility that either of them wasn't who they said they were. Unfortunately.

Ant looks up and down the street. Joni studies his profile. The straight nose, chin covered by neat stubble. His dark hair is cropped close, possibly to hide the fact that it's thinning, but it suits him. He's tanned – it's been a hit-and-miss summer so far, but he looks as if he has the kind of skin that tans easily. She can see the smile lines around his eyes that attracted her to his photos in the first place. Shit. Why does he have to be so perfect? So . . . him? She thinks about going over anyway. Introducing herself. Trying to explain. But what would be the point? They've talked endlessly about how much they value honesty, how there's no way you can build a relationship on deception. She should have come clean then.

She sips her now cool coffee. She can tell Ant is getting anxious. He looks at his phone. She reaches for her own and turns off the sound just in case. He makes a call, and she glances down and sees his name light up her screen. Looks on as he leaves a message. She can hear concern in his voice.

She can't watch any more. It's too painful imagining how it might have been. How she could have sat in the empty chair next to him and picked up where they last left off. (Well, maybe not with the orgasms. That might be a little inappropriate.) There's no point in her staying. She'll just have to learn from her mistake. Move on. She's thankful at least that she hadn't told Imo she and

Ant were planning to meet today. She couldn't face the inquisition.

She leaves a ten-pound note on the table, wishing she had the guts to wait and ask for change because there's no way the snotty waiter deserves the tip. She's always been an over-tipper. As if asking for her own money back might be seen as an affront. He picks it up and looks dismissively from the bill to the note and back. She ignores him. Ant is calling again. She hears him leave another message as she gets up, sounding slightly more irritated this time.

'I don't know how long to wait . . .' he's saying as she moves closer, towards the little gate out on to the street. 'Because it's already been nearly twenty minutes . . . did I get the day wrong?' She's just coming up beside him as he ends the call.

'You been stood up too?' It's out of her mouth before she can stop herself. She doesn't know what makes her say it, she just feels as if she wants to make a connection with him. He glances up at her. She holds her breath, waiting to see if he recognizes anything familiar in her. It's not out of the question. But his expression is blank.

'Looks like it. Date?' It takes her a second to realize he's asking about her.

She smiles ruefully. 'Friend. You?'

He sighs. 'Date.'

'Well, I hope they turn up . . .' she says. She wonders for a second if he might recognize her voice; she's made no attempt to disguise it, she realizes with a nervous jolt. But he just gives her a faint smile.

‘I don’t think so now.’

If this were a film now would be the moment where he would suddenly notice her, be struck by a lightning bolt of lust and ask her to join him. They’d bemoan their situation, but then find they had lots in common. Pass a long morning laughing and chatting and it would roll into lunch and then maybe a walk in the park. An arrangement to meet again. But this is real life, so Ant just turns back to his phone and Joni walks away with a cursory ‘Bye, then.’ He doesn’t even watch her go.

She hadn’t joined Keepers to deceive. Far from it. Well, only in so much as everyone else apparently did. Her conversations with Imo had left her feeling a little insecure. If everyone was presenting a carefully curated version of themselves using old pictures and editing out their flaws, wouldn’t she be at a disadvantage if she didn’t do the same? Wouldn’t every other forty-nine-year-old woman on there look younger and firmer than she did? So she had trawled through old photos trying to find ones where she looked like the self she remembered in her head before life caught up with her. It was odd how few there were to choose from. Even with everyone maniacally snapping images of everything these days, from their breakfast to their bedtime-scrubbed faces, she had almost none. She had never been one for selfies and Ian had long since lost any interest in capturing her face on film. Meg would have had a selection, of course. They had often snapped each other on a night out, after a few drinks. But who knew where those were now? She

should ask Meg's mum if she still had Meg's phone. They could go through the photos together, have a cup of tea and reminisce about all the fun times before Meg got into the car that would claim her life. She knew she should make more of an effort to keep in touch with her friend's mother but it was too painful, too raw. She pushed away the realization that she hadn't contacted her in months. Hadn't answered her messages.

She'd scrolled back and back, getting more and more frustrated. Surely there must be one decent snap of her somewhere in the world. She flicked past her sister, Lucy, laughing at a barbecue. Flicked back. She and Lucy weren't unalike – both with heart-shaped faces, deep brown eyes, a bottom lip much fuller than the top – but Lucy was the Hollywood version of Joni's B-movie looks. She was five years younger, with their mother's aquiline nose, abundant auburn hair and thick brows. Joni had their dad's neat snub, over-plucked brows that would never grow back, and her dark brown hair was barely shoulder length. If you put them side by side you would know, but apart – well, you probably wouldn't make the connection. Their smiles were the same. Wide. Straight white teeth. As deceptions went it wouldn't be the worst. She could probably convince most people that in five years Lucy had morphed into Joni with some hair dye and maybe a bit of rhinoplasty. It wasn't the same as finding a total stranger's image on Facebook and claiming to be them. Thankful that she had told Imo she couldn't create a profile with her breathing over her

shoulder, she'd added the picture. Pressed save before she could talk herself out of it.

She'd known, deep down, that it would backfire, of course. Maybe subconsciously it had been self-sabotage. She could say she'd tried but online dating wasn't for her. But how was she to know that the first man she gelled with would turn out to be so real? So strikingly, handsomely, honestly real? She had assumed that he would have presented an unrealistic picture of himself too. A throwback to when he was in his prime. She wouldn't have agreed to meet him otherwise. They would have laughed when they realized.

She's an idiot, she knows that now. She's blown it with Ant. She walks home through Hyde Park, stopping at a bench to send him a message.

I'm so sorry, it says. I wanted to come. I got cold feet. I hope you'll forgive me.

A couple of long minutes later she gets a reply. *These things happen. It's been nice getting to know you. Good luck in the future.*

Maybe I could explain more on the phone, she writes. She waits for the 'delivered' notification to tell her her message has been received. It never comes. She checks on the dating app. He's already blocked her there too.

There's not even anyone she can share her story with. Imo is the only person who knows she's been online dating and she would disapprove wholeheartedly of Joni using Lucy's pictures. Meg would have found it hilarious. Teased her mercilessly. God, she misses her. That uncomplicated ease they had. None of the passive-aggressive resentments that lurk in families or the jealousy and point-scoring of relationships – in her experience at least. They had been friends since the first few weeks of secondary school, been through boyfriends and hangovers, recreational drugs, childbirth and divorce (hers). Death (Meg's). People talk about their fear of losing a partner but rarely a best friend. But they're a precious commodity. Irreplaceable. She has friends, of course she does – former colleagues, other mums from when Imo was little, one from uni – but mostly these days they're a duty. A once-a-year obligatory catch-up that both of them probably secretly hope the other cancels, where they talk about the facts, not the feelings. They could probably cover the exact same ground by sending out one of those awful Christmas-card letters, but for some reason they persist in meeting face to face. They're a box to tick, nothing more.

She lets herself into her flat, narrowly avoiding her

upstairs neighbour Flick. She freezes like a statue behind her closed front door when she hears Flick's heavy footsteps come to a stop in the hall. There's a knock, a shout of her name. It's not unknown for Flick to poke open the letterbox and peer through, but Joni can't move in case she makes a noise, so she presses back against the wall and hopes for the best. She loves her spacious, airy flat, but she sometimes thinks she lives like she's under siege avoiding her neighbour's well-meaning advances. That's the problem with living in converted houses instead of large blocks. There's some kind of tacit agreement that all the residents involve themselves in each other's lives. Gregarious – for that read nosy – Flick lurks on the first floor like a trap-door spider, sandwiched between Joni and the young couple on the top floor (she forgets their names. Jordan and Jaden or Megan and Morgan, something like that), waiting to pounce at the slightest sign of life. And Flick loves to talk. It doesn't seem to matter to who or about what, words just pour out of her mouth like an overflowing bath. There's never a beginning or an end to what she has to say. It's all middle. All the continuation of one big flow of consciousness. It's exhausting. Joni knows that if she opened the door now Flick would launch in with some non sequitur like 'He really shouldn't do that' or 'It turned out to be tomorrow after all' and expect Joni to somehow hop on board for the ride.

Eventually Flick gives up and retreats. Joni tiptoes into the living room, still wary of making a noise. She feels a rush of guilt, as she always does. Flick is

harmless. She lives alone and she craves company. She has a son who she only sees when he wants money and a daughter she never seems to see at all. Really, they should bond, two single women living alone, but Joni would have to be hung from a bridge by her toes over a river full of hungry crocodiles to acknowledge she's part of the lonely-middle-aged-ladies pity club just yet.

She flops down on the sofa, fighting off the advances of Jasper, her ancient, scrawny black cat. Another tick in the cliché box. Kill me now, she thinks. I'm past all hope. She might as well give up, buy a kaftan and some oversized artisanal jewellery and start easing into old age, sitting upstairs with Flick comparing ailments over a cup of herbal tea or ten. She curses herself for fucking it up so spectacularly with Ant. What are the chances she'll meet another genuine bloke she's actually attracted to and who likes her back (well, her personality anyway, and surely that's half the battle?).

The rest of the weekend looms ahead. She has a list of things she needs to do. Chores. But she finds she can't be bothered to move. What's the point of hoovering if no one except her is ever going to notice? If a crumb falls on a carpet and no one is around to see it, does it make a mess? She shuffles along the sofa to find the spot where the sun hits as it streams through the front bay window. Jasper follows. When did her life become this small? Work, chores, workout. And repeat. All that changes are the clothes she wears, according to the seasons. And even then not much, if she's being honest.

She looks round at her flat, her haven. The living

room flows into a kitchen that stretches across the back of the house. She has both the ground and the lower-ground floors. Three bedrooms, two and a half baths, a study. It's not what most people think of when they hear the word 'flat'. Someone once said to her that if a home looked too perfect it meant the person living there either had a full-time cleaner or no life. Joni only has a cleaner for three hours every Friday morning. When Imo was home it was different, of course. There was mess and noise and colour. She thinks about phoning her but then she remembers she's working. She's a runner on a new Saturday-morning live show for kids. Training on the job as part of a scheme to nurture new talent. She's earning next to nothing, living in an overcrowded house with five others from the same initiative, having the time of her life. Joni smiles. At least something's going right.

She allows herself to think about Ant again. Plays through the whole scenario in her mind. The thing is that she wouldn't have cared if his pictures had been old or filtered to within an inch of their lives. She'd actively hoped for it. Counted on it. They could have bonded over their well-intentioned deceptions. Except that her photos hadn't just been out of date and digitally enhanced. Her photos hadn't even been of her.

She's getting up to put the kettle on, her weekend ruined, when it hits her. What's to stop her bumping into Ant in real life? Her, Joni, with Joni's actual face and body? Striking up a proper conversation with him this time. He didn't exactly notice her when she spoke to him outside the café but then he was preoccupied. She knows

so much about him from their two months of exchanges that she must be able to contrive a way.

She grabs a pen from the jar on the kitchen table and the notebook where she makes her to-do lists (tomorrow: 'Dry cleaning in, post Mum's card, buy tomatoes'. Another scintillating day on the horizon. She's not sure she can take the excitement) and makes a note of everything she knows about him: Anthony Simons, fifty-two, two children, divorced, owner of his own small chain of wellness centres – ultra-posh spas really – much beloved by West London's wealthy inhabitants who think nothing of paying four hundred pounds a pop to have a caviar facial, lives in Notting Hill near his ex-wife who is still in the palatial family home. She decides to go back to the beginning, trawling first through their exchanges on the app and then their texts in search of clues. She feels better when she sees the trail of breadcrumbs they have left for each other along the way. Ant, like her, loves the gym.

Where do you go? she'd asked. *I'm a Power Fit woman myself.*

Me too! was the reply. *Well, not the woman bit.*

Which one? was her next question, and he'd told her Notting Hill. She notes it down. There's a selfie of him with part of a street sign visible but she can only make out the word 'Avenue'. She tries not to look at the photos of Lucy she sent when he suggested they swap more snaps. He had added a picture of him with his dog Vinnie, a huge brown and white scruffy thing with a face like a snooty colonel. He likes Wagamama and *Line of Duty* and making bread. He has two brothers and his mum

lives in Brighton. She's not sure any of this is helping much.

In their messages he mentions going to the cinema, the pub with his friend Pete and playing five-a-side football with one of his brothers. She likes that he's so down to earth, despite his successes. He talks about finding the perfect house when his divorce comes through. She has never even asked him what his company is called. God, she's been on her own so long she's clearly forgotten the art of polite conversation.

She remembers his Facebook profile – she has looked him up before, obviously. She's seen *Catfish*. She knows you don't let yourself get caught out panting into someone's ear on the phone if you haven't first checked they are who they say they are. There's precious little to see though. Just his cover photo – him, shirtless on a beach somewhere. They have no mutual friends. She has never sent him a friend request, obviously. Even if she was who she was supposed to be (she is in all ways other than looks, she reminds herself. Their conversations have always been completely honest. He knows the real her – so long as he keeps his eyes shut) she didn't really see the point. She's never on there herself; she'd stopped seeing the allure early on of everyone you ever knew and their fifth cousin being able to find you so you can exchange a few painfully awkward words. (*Hi! Remember me? We were at primary school together! I was Janine Mason then. What are you up to?*) Joni would rack her brain and come up with a vague recollection of a ruddy-faced girl with stringy blonde hair or a lanky redhead with glasses. At first, she'd replied

enthusiastically, despite not recalling ever having been friends with the person in the first place. *Yes! I remember you! How are you?* And then she'd be stuck in a seemingly interminable exchange of information about children and jobs and husbands and divorces that felt like homework every time she logged on.) She'd long since stopped checking her page. Left it to die a slow death. Imo had told her that Facebook was only for boomers anyway, which sounded like an insult. Instagram was the place to be. So, she had a page there too, with the same photo of Jasper as the header and her privacy settings turned up to the max so that she only had to interact with people she truly wanted to hear from. If Ant had ever checked on her in either place there would have been nothing that would have given her away.

This is hopeless.

She googles him. Again, she's done this before, just so she could tell Imo she had. Not that she'd found anything interesting. But she hadn't really tried. There was an actor with the same name in an American network show about lawyers and he took up the first six pages on his own. She'd given up in the end. She'd only been idly browsing anyway. Now she tries to be more forensic, searching for combinations of Anthony Simons, wellness and Notting Hill, but it turns out the actor had one line in the Richard Curtis classic and has also been on a voyage of self-discovery that involved several gurus and a variety of wacky-sounding holistic treatments. She changes tack and looks for spas in the general area but it's overwhelming. All she manages to glean is that the

people of West London love to be pampered. With the more random ingredients the better.

Before she realizes it, she's gone down a wormhole of high-end treatments on offer at exclusive beauty salons, each one more outrageous than the last: exfoliation with diamond dust, vampire facials (where they take some of your own blood and inject it into your own face. The ultimate in recycling. Also, she figures, cheap. No outgoings), bee venom face masks; she even finds a guano treatment (for which read bird poop) to prevent ageing. It seems the more painful or disgusting the experience, the more expensive. Jasper paws at her arm in search of comfort or, more likely, lunch. She bats him away, moves her search to images. Again, the actor dominates the results, so she quickly scrolls through page after page, barely looking, to get to the less popular results. Why has she never asked Ant what his company is called? She keeps her finger on the down button as faces and film posters fly by in a blur. She goes past the photo without even noticing it, but something in her subconscious must take in more than she realizes. She stops. Scrolls back.

There's a picture of about fifteen coolly dressed, beautiful people smiling at the camera, a fairly even mix of men and women. Second from the right is a man who looks exactly like Ant. She clicks on the image and then through to the website it's from. Evoke Wellness. The caption reads *The whole team. Left to right . . .* and the fourteenth name on the list is Anthony Simons.

Bingo.

Now she just has to get her courage up.

4

It takes three attempts to set the alarm. Probably because Ant is fuming about the state of the place. The idea that the higher the prices they charged the worse the destruction left behind never ceased to irritate him. The greater the privilege the bigger the mess. Evoke had started to offer private group bookings in the evenings at the Kensington Church Street branch, in order to try and recoup some of the money lost from the months they were forced to close during the pandemic. You could charge a fortune for exclusive access to the hot tubs, sauna and steam room, but all they were really doing was catering to wealthy hen parties, it seemed. Gangs of women who sneaked in bottles of Ruinart and Cristal (they had a strict no-alcohol policy; they couldn't risk a lawsuit following a drowning in the Jacuzzi. Fancy booze-free cocktails were offered instead) and insulted the staff. People so entitled they couldn't even be bothered to hide the evidence. To be fair, most of them were fine, but every now and then the cleaners would report varying levels of carnage. Tonight – the twenty-first-birthday early-evening pre-party for the daughter of a music-business mogul and eleven of her friends – was possibly the worst he'd seen. A broken seat in the steam room. A smashed mirror. The birthday girl had apparently been

put in an Uber in tears. One of the therapists had threatened to quit, claiming she'd been verbally assaulted. The branch manager only worked Monday to Friday, and the evenings and weekends were generally overseen by the head therapist, who was herself in tears in the back room, and seemingly incapable of making any decisions. Ant had been on his way home from a gym session when he'd got the call. Only a few minutes away, so it wasn't really a big deal, but it was certainly a waste of time. And he'd wasted enough time already today.

He wasn't angry that Joni hadn't shown up. He understood the last-minute nerves. It was a big step taking something into the real world. She was probably hiding something, that was the problem. An imperfection. Something she thought he wouldn't find attractive In Real Life. People never believed him when he said looks weren't important, but he honestly believed that. Well, up to a point anyway. They weren't the most important thing. Far from it. The person was what mattered. The connection they could make. And he had definitely felt a connection with Joni. She had sworn blind to him on the phone that she was genuine – as he had to her. It was a big deal to him, knowing that any woman he was talking to was who she said she was. He'd waited for nearly thirty-five minutes in the end, just in case Joni was stuck on a tube somewhere with no reception, but then he'd got her message and realized she wasn't going to show at all. He'd been disappointed – he wasn't going to lie. He'd thought they had something. When he'd got her text he'd thought about trying to set

up another date, telling her that he understood, but he'd made a rule for himself when he signed on to the dating site that he wouldn't allow himself to be messed around. It was too easy to be seduced by the idea of someone only to find you'd been played.

He wanders towards Notting Hill. The flagship branch of Evoke Wellness sits proudly among the brightly coloured terraced houses, between a small Italian deli selling fresh fat artichokes and mouthwatering olives at staggering prices and a home-furnishings store that often features in the pages of *House & Garden*. It's a beautiful area. Hemmed in on two sides by run-down estates that allow the rich home-owners to maintain they are both in touch with real life and compassionately inclusive, while at the same time to turn only east or south whenever they leave their front doors and minimize the risk of having to actually rub shoulders with the locals.

It's quiet on a Saturday. Still too early for night-time revellers. Many of the houses are empty, their residents having fled to Suffolk or the Cotswolds the evening before. And it's been a beautiful day, not yet that over-ripe part of summer when everything starts to get a bit oppressive and overblown. He pushes open the door into the air-conditioned coolness.

'You weren't exaggerating,' he says to Amir, the receptionist. Amir had called him with the bad news because he knew that Ant always liked to assess any damage himself as soon as possible. Kensington Church Street had to be up and running – and looking beautiful – by the

time it was due to open again tomorrow morning. The cleaners would do a faultless job overnight as usual, but the bench needed repairing, the mirror replacing. You couldn't have workmen clomping about in there while it was open, gawking at the half-naked clientele, singing along to Absolute 80s on their ever-present radios, ruining people's vibe. Evoke was big on energies, ambience, an all-round, holistic experience.

'I think these private bookings are more trouble than they're worth,' Ant says, heading for the back.

'Animals,' Amir says, leaning back in his chair. 'Absolute fucking animals.'

Ant feels a chunk of broken glass crunch under his foot. He kicks it out of the way. He'll get back on to the Keepers app tomorrow, he decides. He isn't going to let one disappointment put him off.

She can't just walk into a branch of Evoke Wellness and demand to see Anthony Simons. It needs to look coincidental, otherwise he'll think she's some kind of weird stalker. Which – in this instance only – she actually is. Joni needs to contrive to bump into him, start up a conversation ('Oh, it's you! Been stood up lately?' Might as well see if he can take a joke. He's funny on the phone but then they've never been laughing about his own misfortune). The company's three London branches are within easy walking distance of each other. She always tries to double her steps on her days off anyway, to make up for the fact that when she's at work she sits at her desk all day in a variety of back-crunching positions, so strolling back and forth between upper-crust areas of west London is as good a way to pass a Monday as any. It's not exactly a plan but, let's face it, it's something to do. She only works three days a week, job-sharing with Lucas in the accounts department at the head office of a chain of department stores. As the person who does 60 per cent of the work, Joni likes to think she has the slight edge in superiority, but she knows that Lucas would disagree. Although since Lucas seems to disagree with pretty much everything she says, on principle, there's no surprise there. They communicate via an occasional

series of passive-aggressive Post-it notes attached to piles of work they have failed to complete by the end of their day. Sometimes the same documents will be batted back and forth for more than a week before one of them gives in and finishes whatever the job is. Usually her.

Joni tries not to think what Imo would say if she knew her mother was pacing around London hoping to bump into a man she barely knows in order to secure a date with him. The logistics of it wouldn't even seem like the most ridiculous part, probably. She heads for the main branch first. She's dressed in what she hopes is a cute-looking but practical outfit of loose-fitting jeans, rolled up a couple of times at the ankle, with pale pink trainers and a soft red cap-sleeve T-shirt. She doesn't go to the gym four times a week not to show off her toned arms. Maybe he'll turn out to have a tricep fetish and that'll distract him from her eye bags.

She stops short in the street. She can't do this. She should just go back on the app, change her photos for the real thing and write Ant off as a learning experience. But she knows it's an itch she needs to scratch. A 'what if?' that needs to be answered.

She'll just pretend she's spending a beautiful summer's day pottering. No agenda. No big deal. One day out of her life.

She turns into the pretty street, almost immediately stumbles across the Evoke Wellness window. She walks past without even looking in but then makes herself turn back. She's allowed to browse the list of treatments, isn't she? Nothing suspicious about that. She pulls her

sunglasses down and tilts her head as if she's looking at the display while actually peering over the top at the people inside. The interior is decorated in browns and golds against mostly white walls. There's a waterfall cascading behind a reception desk, running over glittering mosaic tiles in matching shades. A large fridge with neatly lined-up bottles of water. No Perrier or Evian here. The bottles are clear green glass. No logo. Bespoke, she assumes.

A man is sitting behind the rustic wooden desk formed, it looks like, from a piece of driftwood. It's not Ant. Well, she hardly expected him to be the first person she saw. Or to be working behind reception, let's face it. It suddenly strikes her that as the owner of the company he might not even come in every day. If at all. Although he's often mentioned having been at work so, hopefully, he's the kind of boss who believes you have to lead by example. She gets the impression he built the company from next to nothing through sheer hard work. That he's very hands on. Two women stand talking to one side, one showing the other something on her phone, pointing out a detail with a long perfectly manicured fingernail. Dressed in almost identical slouchy soft trousers and thong sandals. Slightly cropped tops that show off a sliver of perfectly toned, tanned stomachs. Warm blonde hair in carefully messy beach waves. She watches as another woman in a brown, fitted T-shirt with Evoke written in discreet italics across the chest, and wide yoga pants in the same shade, collects them both and takes them through to the back. She's tempted to stay and see if they emerge later looking years younger.

She flicks her gaze back down to the featured treatments in the window. Basically variations on facials and massages with complicated add-ons: hydraglifting and microbiomes, ultratherapy and lipolysis. None of it sounds very relaxing, although it claims to be. There are no prices attached. If you need to ask you can't afford to buy, she assumes.

Evoke, she knows, also do global business in eponymous products. Scrubs and body creams with unlikely-sounding ingredients like gold leaf, saffron and white truffles. There are jewelled vibrators (what if one of those diamonds came off mid you-know-what? was Joni's first thought when she saw them on the website. How would you ever explain that in A and E?) and dodgy-looking vaginal eggs made from smoothed crystals. It's a menu to rival Goop and, she knows, a very lucrative one. The spas, Ant has told her, are really a loss leader to advertise the brand.

Evoke is fronted by model/actress Bliss, who is actually neither of those things to any great effect, but she is the daughter of a grizzled old rock star and his It girl ex-wife, and has therefore lived a life of getting herself in the papers and thinking she's too special to have a real job. She has now fashioned herself as a holistic guru and is happy to disclose anything from the frequency and intensity of her orgasms to the frequency and consistency of her bowel movements to garner attention. Nothing personal is off limits: the more intimate and the greater volume of bodily fluids involved the better. Ant has told Joni she's a nightmare: rude, entitled, lazy. But

all she has to do is put her name to products and procedures, and for the right amount of cash she's more than happy to do that.

There's a tiny café opposite with two tables outside. She's tempted to take up residence, but she decides to do a loop first, just in case Ant is in one of the other branches, a sitting duck waiting to be spotted. She wanders down Kensington Church Street, distracted by the shops. Evoke Wellness is about a third of the way down, a much smaller but equally high-end-looking shopfront. This one in shades of green. She does her 'looking at the treatments, but not really' trick again. There is only one woman visible inside. No Ant. She checks the map on her phone and swings back in the direction of Holland Park Avenue, repeats the whole process and sees only two women. Notting Hill is the only one of the three with a conveniently placed lookout opposite and she assumes that Ant is most likely to work out of the main hub, so she wanders back in that direction. This is a stupid idea. Ridiculous. She actually laughs out loud. But she's gripped by how well they connected, their long conversations. The way he listened to her.

She's hungry anyway so the empty table outside the café seems like a good option. She chooses a chair looking across the quiet road and orders an acai bowl and some kind of kefir water, settles in like a spectator at a cricket match. It suddenly occurs to her that she could have saved herself a lot of time and effort. The Evoke Wellness phone number is etched on to their window. She dials it on her mobile, gazing casually in any

direction other than the building opposite. She worries for a brief second that one of the two people deep in conversation at the next table might be connected to the company, but as they've been talking about stock prices for the last five minutes she thinks it's unlikely. Still, she keeps her voice low when her call is answered.

'Evoke Wellness,' a man says, and Joni has to stop herself looking up in case he catches her eye through the window.

'Oh, hello. I . . . um . . . could I just check that Anthony Simons works out of this branch?' Is that an OK question? Does she sound odd?

'He does,' the man says breezily. 'He's not here at the moment, though. Can I give him a message?'

'No!' Joni jumps in far too quickly. 'Do you know when he'll be back? I have something that he needs to sign.' She likes that detail. No receptionist in their right mind would dare to ask what.

'He usually pops in at lunchtime. One-ish. But I can't guarantee it . . .'

'That's perfect,' Joni says. 'Thank you.' She jabs the button to end the call but then keeps the phone to her ear for a moment as if she's still talking. Just in case. In case of what she's not quite sure but she does it anyway. Her phone says it's eleven fourteen. She can potter down to Kensington High Street, maybe sit in the park for a bit, return to the scene of the crime just before one, hang around till two fifteen max and then slope back home to rethink her whole life. It's a plan.

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Of course both tables outside the café are taken when she returns at nearly ten past one. She was aiming for five to, but she underestimated how far she'd walked in the other direction. Now she's sweating, and pink with effort. For all she knows she's missed him and now he'll be holed up in an office at the back of the building till home time at six or even seven. Later, maybe. The spa is open till ten.

She paces up and down looking in random shop windows. She could never be a private detective, she thinks, hired to follow some poor woman's cheating husband. The boredom would engulf her. All those hours of waiting. Hoping against hope to witness something that would ruin someone's life. She would probably end up falling asleep and then having to make stuff up to keep the client happy. Patience has never been a virtue of hers. Maybe she should cut this tragic mission short and go home before her self-esteem plummets so low she'll never be able to lift it up again. She decides to do one more pass of the street and then give it up as a one-off, never to be spoken of again, out of character . . .

It's him.

Her heart quickens. Now what? She's a hundred metres away, but she's sure. He's walking away from her,

about to turn the corner at the far end. Dressed in . . . is that gym gear? Yes, and he has a bag over his shoulder. He's going to the gym. She even knows which one. They've talked about this – he said he goes most days, but it hadn't occurred to her it might be at lunchtime. There's no point following him, she thinks thankfully, picturing her sunny living room, the sofa, Jasper on her lap. She always goes to the gym on her days off. She joined years ago, when she needed somewhere to go that was just hers. Somewhere to channel all her angst about Ian and what he was up to. And now it's as much a part of her life as her job. More, probably, because the job is just something to fill her days, to distract her from the fact that Meg is gone. But Mondays, Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays she has an appointment with herself at four o'clock. An hour and a half. She listens to a playlist she has made on Spotify. Works her way round the equipment in an anticlockwise circle. Focuses more on legs on Mondays and Saturdays and arms on Wednesdays and Sundays. Half an hour's cardio on the running machine. She walks there and back to warm her body both up and down. She nods hello to the other regulars but no more. It's a serious gym – the members come here to work out, not to flop about in a steam room for half the session and chat just to tick it off their to-do list. It has no frills and that's its charm. It's sweat and power and hard work. It's the anti-David Lloyd. And twice as expensive. It's her second home. If she was struck down with amnesia she thinks muscle memory would still lead her there bang on schedule every time.

Her membership gets her entry into the chain's four other branches. She'll start heading for the Notting Hill Branch rather than her own in Swiss Cottage. One of these days she's bound to bump into Ant and, apart from moving her session to lunchtimes and travelling an extra twenty minutes for her workout, she won't be going out of the way of her usual routine so much that she feels like a psycho.

She turns and walks towards the main road, already looking for a cab.

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Two days later she arrives at the gym at a quarter to one, stashes her bag in a locker and takes up residence on a running machine overlooking the main door. She's made an extra effort. Usually she hits the gym in whatever vaguely clean sweats she can find and no make-up. Posing in Power Fit means flexing, stacking up the weights, cinching in a powerlifting belt, not wearing an eye-catching outfit. Today, though, she's in her black Bo+Tee ribbed leggings that she knows are super flattering, an Under Armour coral racer-back vest and her hair is freshly blow-dried. She looks around. The layout is actually comfortingly familiar. Cardio machines along one wall, serious stacks of weights along the opposite, and state-of-the-art machines filling the space between. She jogs at a stately pace to avoid getting out of breath and sweaty. Waits.

Last night she had called Imo, prepared to leave a message. Imo had answered after three rings, a question in her voice.

'It's Mum,' Joni had said. 'I've got a new number.'

'What? Why?'

'I treated myself to a new phone.'

Imo had sighed. 'Why didn't you keep the old number? You'll have to transfer all your contacts . . .'

‘Oh, I didn’t realize you could,’ Joni said, remembering full well the conversation with the woman in the shop who’d told her her life would be much easier if she kept her details the same.

‘They didn’t tell you? You should complain.’ Imo had inherited her father’s bolshiness when it came to consumer rights, one of his better qualities.

‘It’s all done now. Never mind . . .’ Joni had wanted to distance herself from the woman who had phone sex and then stood a man up. Just in case she managed to bump into Ant again and, miracle of miracles, impress him enough that he asked for her number, she needed to have one to give him that didn’t already pop up on his phone. She’d been due an upgrade for months, she told herself. Years probably. And it wasn’t as if there were many people she would need to give her new number to anyway.

To steer the conversation into safer waters Joni had asked her how things were going and Imo, freshly home from the studios, and buzzing with her new life, had filled her in. Joni had been itching to tell her what she was up to – as if she needed another person to confirm she was acting like a crazy person and it was all going to end in tears. She didn’t, of course, and Imo being eighteen and in love with the new world she had found herself in didn’t ask. Instead, Joni had regaled her with a story about her day at work. She’d had to phone Lucas because of a mix-up over a contract that seemed to have gone astray.

‘He actually said the words “I’m on my day off. Can this wait until tomorrow?”’