SOMEONE YOUR OWN AGE

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For Mum, who went to that clairvoyant who kept saying I needed to write a book.

CHAPTER ONE

It happens so slowly it barely registers. Not when you're busy anyway, and I've been busy. Busy building a career, building a beautiful home, building the perfect body to grow the perfect baby for my seemingly perfect husband, and I succeeded (in all but the last). The last one is the *only* thing I have ever failed at.

When you're that preoccupied, that consumed with having it all, that *busy*, you don't notice at first. Then one day, you walk into a room full of men and they don't look up. Sometimes, if you wander into bad lighting, they just look straight through you. Their vague stares lead you to question whether you've died in some freak accident and haven't yet found the courage to pass over and head for the light. Sometimes there is a flicker of recognition if they realise they need something from you, but mostly it's staring straight through you or offering a kindly smile as one might to an elderly aunt or someone who works in the Post Office.

In the beginning, you shrug it off because you do Reformer Pilates. You still fit into your wedding dress. You have just enough tweakments that people from your home town think you're ten years younger, but then you begin to notice arrogant males roaring past at zebra crossings when they used to wave you across patiently and you think: *Huh, so this is forty-two?*

It didn't seem to matter so much when the attention was there. In fact, I hated it. But when your husband is also busy (having affair number four) and you can't give him the one thing that he so desperately wants, your mind starts playing tricks. Filling in the blanks with darker, more sinister thoughts. Muddling up suspicions with reality. Dreaming up nightmare answers to the questions he won't answer and you wonder, can they all sniff out my drying fertility? Should I deliberately, accidentally on purpose, pull out a tampon when reaching into my handbag? Let them all know they should listen to what I say because I'm still menstruating. They didn't listen to me when I was young, and they don't listen to me now when I'm in my forties and seemingly unable to push out four perfect children.

So, then you spiral. Guilty little musings of having an affair of your very own just to get your husband's attention. Maybe then he'll touch you. Kiss you when you get home. Grab you and bend you over the kitchen sink and fuck you like he really means it.

I suppose most people go through this when they hit the big four-oh, but as I say, I've been busy. I'm busy right now actually, interviewing for an intern that I don't really want to look after, but seems to be some sort of punishment thrust upon me because I haven't secured a client in the months since my last promotion. A promotion my husband Alistair was entirely against. He demonstrated this by sending a picture of his cock to a colleague.

So, I'm faced with a morning of interviews, when all I really want to be doing is my daily checks (scrolling through my husband's LinkedIn messages). Having been caught on all other social media platforms, it's here on this business-focused site he is choosing to conduct his

fourth act of adultery. The spying offers a sense of control, surgically removing that feeling of stupidity you're often left with when your partner strays. I allow myself an hour a day to dissect their conversations and ensure there are no major developments. Only then am I able to rub away the ache in my chest and continue with my work.

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'And before that, I worked part-time reception at a private clinic,' says the young girl sitting opposite me as I open a new tab and tap in my husband's login details. 'I also managed the social media complaints for this holistic candle company in Basingstoke.'

Heading straight for the messages, I try to watch both the screen and the nervous applicant sitting opposite me.

I think her name's Zoe but can't be sure. Her dark hair is pulled into a ponytail, her fringe falling heavily into her eyes. Gold hoops hang from her ears, followed by tiny studs and she has a ring on each finger, some fingers stacked with them. Each piece is delicate and looks like it's been carefully chosen to match her outfit. She's very young.

I flick my attention back to the screen.

ALISTAIR
I know, I'm sorry… But your face looked so beautiful this morning. Couldn't take my eyes off your body x

A typical message from my husband to another woman. An apology followed by a doubling down on the compliments. He likes to mention both body and face with

this one, which is concerning. With the others it was all about the tits. Her lack of reply, however, offers some reassurance.

Relieved there have been no pregnancy announcements or declarations of love, I turn to find my potential candidate fidgeting, shimmying around in her seat awkwardly trying to cool herself down.

London, ever confused during the spring months, has decided it's going to be warm today and the air conditioning has broken. I watch as she removes layer after layer, concerned as to whether it's ever going to end and in her nervousness she'll be left going through the finer details of her résumé in her bra.

When she's finally finished, she begins pulling at the skin around her nails anxiously. I decided ten minutes ago I wouldn't be hiring her and *not* because she can't seem to decide on an accent. She experimented with a lisp a moment ago. There's also something off with the 'pah' sound. It's pushed out with almost a pout each time she says a word beginning with P. Packaging, premium, power – they've all been pronounced with a pout. Her teeth are suspiciously perfect, and I decide it's veneers or lip fillers that are causing this effect. The Mary Janes and ankle socks aesthetic doesn't scream lip fillers though. Maybe she's always had a pouty Glaswegian twang and I was just too busy trying to snoop through my husband's conversations to notice.

I offer her a smile and return my focus to the messages. Three little dots bounce like Baoding balls at the bottom of the chat. Someone's typing. My heart rate quickens as I watch the conversation unfold in real time. This is usually my safe hour, neither of them tending to come online until midday.

'I know marketing is very different and the internship is only six months, but I have vast experience.' She's rambling now. I pull myself away from the text and notice she's still digging away at her cuticles, dragging great chunks of flesh.

I'm struggling to see how anyone at the delicate age of twenty-two can describe their experience as vast. This clearly reads in my expression as she is now drawing blood. She rummages in her bag, retrieving a large and almost empty bottle of hand sanitiser.

'Have you spoken to my references yet?'

'No.'

'Oh good.' She is pumping the nozzle manically, dragging up the last drops of anti-bac. The lisp suddenly disappears as she relaxes.

'Why?' I ask, snatching a glimpse of the screen. Still no message.

'Oh, it's just they might say I have an issue with timekeeping. I don't.'

'But then why would they…'

'Sorry, do you have any hand gel?'

'I have hand cream.' I open my drawer, finding another opportunity to check for a reply.

Nothing. What is so important it's taking five minutes to type?

'Are those Roger Vivier pumps?'

'Umm, yes,' I say, still rummaging for the tube and tucking my feet behind the legs of my chair.

'Oh my god, how much do you get paid?'

'I don't think that's…'

'What bags do you have?'

'Umm…' Eyes back on the screen to avoid answering. Nothing. I pass the tube across to her. The balls are still bouncing. Someone is still typing.

Apprehensively she takes it, pulling out her phone and scanning the barcode on an app. 'No, sorry I can't use that,' she says, placing it back on my desk neatly.

That cost me fifty pounds. Why can't she use it? For some reason, probably because I've paid her little attention, I make a note of this: '*Didn't like hand cream…*' I write it slyly, covering my Moleskine notebook with my forearm like children do in school when they assume everyone else is trying to copy them.

'It's got methylene glycol in it,' she explains, tucking her hands neatly under her legs.

I want to press further, eager to distract myself with what hand cream I should be buying because that's the most interesting thing she's said since she walked in. In fairness, I've barely listened to a word she's said. The moment I looked up and noticed she was pretty I decided I shan't be hiring her and made a mental note to reach out to the paunchy and slightly sunburnt man I'd seen half an hour before.

I don't like this feeling. It's unusual for me to feel threatened by other women but recently, I've been noticing the younger girls in the office, with their thigh gaps and seemingly endless supply of natural collagen.

Perhaps it's because tomorrow I turn forty-two. Or perhaps, and this is the most likely explanation, it's because my husband seems to be charging full speed ahead with a woman I'd naively written off as a fling, one that would fizzle quickly and disintegrate like all the others. This one however, happens to be *twenty-three*.

The dots continue to bounce.

Still no message.

I treat his adultery like the distant rumble that signals a migraine. Dealing with it when I have to. Trooping on through the discomfort and delaying reality. It wasn't always like this, of course. The first time I caught him I was devastated. I hadn't suspected a thing. I hadn't even had the urge to check his phone. Nowadays, tapping in his passcode (his date of birth, which I imagine in his mind is arguably the most important date of everyone's calendar year), is a nightly ritual.

After the first affair, friends who have long since tired of the conversation, questioned why I didn't leave, and I could never put my finger on the answer. I suppose if I were to dig deep, I would guess it's because I don't want to become my mother, who, famously a quitter, disappeared for a cigarette during my fifth birthday, only bothering to return via text message fifteen years later.

There have since been three women that I know of. Age-appropriate flings with low self-esteem who have become a little too clingy, but the fourth and *youngest* seems to be a keeper, dipping in and out of his life quite frequently over the past six months. Her name is Savannah and LinkedIn tells me her trade is 'wellness', offering services as both a yoga teacher and sound bath practitioner. I think I'd have been more approving if he'd been a bit original about it all. Perhaps if he found some lonely librarian or a lollipop lady, I could've consoled myself with the fact he'd dropped his signature snobbery and discovered the ability to find comfort with a woman whose sole benefit isn't being as bendable as an overused Barbie.

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The first time he strayed, it began affecting my work. I'd slump into the office, delivering poor pitches and flaky ideas because I'd been up all night tearing myself to pieces as I searched for possible explanations. Promotion seemed to be slipping further out of my grasp so I stayed, keeping up the perfect shop front and attempting to be very French about the whole thing. Sleepwalking through it all until I fell pregnant. Surely, I'll get pregnant eventually and he'll see me as worthy again and we can keep the little life we've both grown accustomed to.

I tell myself he won't leave. He's never left before. He's not so much as packed up a carry-on and moved out for a fortnight. *I'm* the wife. I have the ring, I have the home, I have his mother's approval.

Besides, we've been like this for years, treading water, keeping our tired heads above the surface just long enough to snap at each other. Surely that effort means there's something binding us together – scraps worth rebuilding and fighting for. So, I cling to this decaying marital life raft, ever hopeful his mistresses will be washed away and I'll be the gritty survivor.

I switch tabs to Net-a-Porter, click *add to bag* on an Agent Provocateur balconette bra and remind myself to try and be alluring this evening.

A trill from my laptop signals a new message.

ALISTAIR

I can see you typing xxx Are you mad at me, Chicken? I told you – Bank Holiday weekend xxx

I swallow down the anxiety, pulling it down into my core as sweat forms along my hairline. I can hear the girl talking at me, something about the seasonal trends on dating apps, but I'm focused on the screen, trying to figure out what's happening on the Bank Holiday… *Surely he can't be taking her to Paris again? They've been twice in the past three months… Even I'm bored of their trips to Paris…*

More typing.

SAVANNAH
You said that at Christmas.

It's true, he did promise her another trip at Christmas.

ALISTAIR
I know xxx No kisses for me? xxxx

SAVANNAH
?????????

'Sorry, should I just…? Is it over? Should I just let myself out? Can I just go?' The girl is now asking as if I'm holding her hostage.

I regain composure and pretend to glance over her application again. Watching the screen slyly, I begin to hum. I am not a hummer. It feels very unnatural, so I stop and start whistling instead, something else entirely out of character for me.

'Well, this is all very promising Zoe.'

'Zara.'

'Apologies, sorry it's right there on your application… Zara.' I say her name slowly, pulling out the r as if to try and weigh it with importance. I'm training myself not to blush but can feel my top lip perspiring.

'I was actually going to be called Zoe, but my mum took up watercolour painting at a competitive level during her last trimester and named me after her teacher… I think she might be a lesbian actually, come to think of it.'

'The teacher?'

'No, my mum… She had this thing where she obsessed over the women in her life. One got a restraining order. It was totally harmless, but she couldn't stop painting them nude…'

Another message pings through.

'Okay, well, I think I've got all I need. Unless there's anything you'd like to ask me, Zara?' I ask this purely to prove I am in possession of her name.

She hesitates, tugging at her skirt and then: 'Are you alright?'

'Sorry?'

'No, sorry it's just you seem a bit… Are you grieving or something? Have you lost a parent or, you know… A cat?'

I want to tell her how unprofessional this is. How she should never expect to get hired wafting around, refusing my hand cream and asking questions like that, but just as I'm about to open my mouth, she has a nosebleed.

I register the light trickle of blood first, my horror reflecting back to her, as she begins to crumble into a panic.

I scramble in my bag for some tissues as she apologises and blames it on the stress of the situation. She's flapping, turning in circles, arms outstretched, like a child who

is blindfolded and trying to catch their bearings before pinning the tail on a donkey.

I'm unsuccessful in my search but find a tampon and vaguely remember a friend stuffing one up their offspring's bleeding nose during a barbecue.

'Don't panic, I have a tampon!' I hurry across the room, brandishing it like it's some sort of life-saving adrenaline shot as new messages arrive, the alerts tripping over each other, unable to keep up with the flurry of conversation.

'But I use a Mooncup.'

'It's for your nose!'

Another ping.

'All the same, I think I'd prefer a sanny pad,' she says, holding back the tears and eyeing me suspiciously as if I'm trying to give her toxic shock syndrome via her nasal passage. The blood is streaming thickly now and she's trying to catch it in her hand.

'I don't have any sanitary towels!'

And another. Ding ding ding. They pop through speedily, one right after the other. My careful control of the situation rushing away with every alert.

'Ohhh…' She hesitates, pinching the bridge of her nose, flapping her other hand hysterically, and flicking drops of blood over herself.

'It's organic cotton, they cost six fucking pounds for twelve!' I say, speedily unwrapping it, wanting her out of my office so I can return to my spying.

'Oh god, why are we still expected to pay for these things?'

'I don't know. Because they hate us all!' I have joined Zara in her panic and am now worrying about the carpet. I'm not a fan of the carpet, it's a scratchy standard issue

office grey, but I don't want to have to suffer someone chatting away as they scrub at the floor all afternoon.

'We should all get given those CBD ones on the NHS…' She's spinning in circles again, her voice whiny. 'Is it on my top? Please tell me it's not on my top… I was planning on returning it tomorrow…'

It's on her top.

Placing my hands firmly on her shoulders, I stop the spinning. 'Right, do you want the tampon or not?'

She nods, snatches it from me and up it goes.

The bleeding worsens.

My laptop pings.

I offer her the job.

–

'*Do not pack the nose with tissues or other household items like tampons. This can make the bleeding worse.*' Zara has googled the efficiency of tampons to stop nosebleeds and is reading the results aloud as I walk her through the foyer to the lift, my mind still on those unread messages.

'Yes, well there's no need to shout, Zara. Apologies again, but the bleeding stopped in the end didn't it? And you got the job! You start Monday!' I say, ushering her into the lift. She screws her nose up; Monday clearly doesn't work for her. 'Or Tuesday? If that's a better fit?'

'Tuesday works…'

'Wonderful.' I force a smile, waving her off as the doors close and she begins her descent, presumably whilst googling whether she can sue me for forcing her to put a tampon up her nose, just so she didn't get blood on the carpet.

I lean my forehead against the wall, running my fingers through my hair to check it isn't coming away too easily

like last time. The familiar tightness clamps around my chest. I need to get back to my laptop.

'Was that girl alright?' I pull myself away from the wall to see it's one of the temps. The one I often hear a gaggle of girls discussing by the Nespresso machine – an actor, apparently. He's very tall and holds himself with confidence as he waits for an answer. 'She looked like she had a tampon up her nose?' He pulls his fingers through his dark hair.

'Ha. Yes, just a small nosebleed. The good news is she got the job!' I say, hurrying back towards the office.

'I'm Callum by the way,' he says, stepping into the lift, holding the doors open. I turn on my heel. He leans out slightly, the fabric of his t-shirt stretching over his shoulders.

'Esme.' I offer a short, uncomfortable wave desperate to return to my office.

'I know,' he says with a half-smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes and lingers on sexy. For a moment, as my mouth dries and I'm unable to find the words to form a response, I forget why I need to rush off. He's not even touching me, yet I can feel my skin tingle.

My phone buzzes in my hand.

I tell him I have to go, my walk an uncomfortable wiggle as I hurry back to my desk.

SAVANNAH

I know your wife is mentally unstable, but I've been very fucking patient. She's not our responsibility, Alistair! You promised we'd be together by the end of January. It is now April.

ALISTAIR
We are together, Chicken xxx

SAVANNAH
Not good enough.

ALISTAIR
You know she's difficult xxx

SAVANNAH
Not my problem

ALISTAIR
It's been very hard on me too. I don't understand why you're so upset? We agreed Bank Holiday weekend my angel xxx

SAVANNAH
I'm actually so done.

ALISTAIR
What does that mean? Us? Or are you having a bad day? xxx

ALISTAIR
Answer your phone my love xxx

ALISTAIR
Please answer xxx

SAVANNAH
I'm not some little whore you can keep hidden away Alistair. TELL HER!

SAVANNAH
Tell her NOW!

SAVANNAH
Or I will

ALISTAIR
Please answer xxx

SAVANNAH
It's Exchange Square your wife works, right?

ALISTAIR
Can we be grown-ups about this please, Chicken? xxx

SAVANNAH
Fuck you!

SAVANNAH
Calling your wife

ALISTAIR
I'll do it tonight.

SAVANNAH
Now.

ALISTAIR
Done. Packing some things and I'll be with you in thirty xxx

I feel the beginnings of a panic attack grip me. A hot tightness in my chest. My mouth filling with bile, a buzzing in my ears, warping the sounds around me. I turn over my phone, the screen slicked in palm sweat and there, under five messages from my mother, sits a text from Alistair.

Es, we need to talk.