**DON’T LOOK NOW 35**

‘Don’t look now,’ said Lucy. ‘But that man over there is following us.’

I was fiddling with a tester tube of moisturiser, squeezing a blob of pearlescent pink onto the tip of my finger.

*Age-defying Skin Solution for Tired Eyes* said the blurb on the side of the tube.

‘Which man?’ I said, leaning towards the mirror and dabbing the cream onto my skin. My eyes did look a bit tired. I used tiny taps, like I’d seen women do on TV adverts, imagining the pinkness sinking in through the epidermis, contracting and tightening, miraculously dissolving the bags under my eyes.

‘The one in the black coat,’ she said. ‘Over by the handbags. Don’t make it obvious that you’re looking.’

I put the tube back on the shelf and turned around slowly, pretending to inspect the rows of beauty products on nearby counters.

There was a man in a black coat, but he had his back to us and was talking to the woman behind a handbag display, who was demonstrating the swing on a burgundy shoulder bag..

‘He’s not even looking at us,’ I said. ‘Come on, Clarins next.’

‘He was,’ said Lucy. ‘Just now. He was hiding behind those scarves, staring at us.’

We walked past Clinique and Decleor, stopping briefly to inspect the Yves St Laurent lipsticks.

A woman was having her make-up done at Estee Lauder. She was perched on a high chair, her shoes dangling off her toes, inches above the floor. She looked terrified.

‘He’s following us!’ Lucy whispered in my ear. ‘Don’t turn round.’

We stopped a few feet away from Estee Lauder, pretending to watch the customer transformation. The beautician was so heavily made up that her skin shone like plastic. She was slapping foundation onto the woman’s forehead with a miniature trowel.

Lucy peered back over her shoulder.

‘He’s stopped too,’ she said. ‘He’s pretending to look at some eye shadow. He is definitely following us.’

I started to turn around, but she dug her fingers into my arm.

‘Don’t look!’ she hissed.

The face of the terrified woman was now covered in dollops of foundation and the girl was spreading it out across her skin. She was clearly used to working at speed: I was impressed.

‘He may be a cross dresser?’ I whispered back. ‘Men are allowed to wear eye shadow nowadays, Lucy.’

She shook her head.

‘No way,’ she said. ‘It’s not his colour. Come on, we need to keep going.’

We walked past the terrified woman, whose eyes followed us as we moved away. I wondered if she was regretting asking for this makeover. It was just as well she couldn’t see herself in a mirror: her skin was now smooth and flawless. But it was also orange.

‘I think we should get out of here,’ said Lucy.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ I said. ‘We’re not going anywhere yet. We haven’t done Clarins.’

‘Bugger Clarins,’ whispered Lucy. ‘This is freaking me out.’

‘Lucy,’ I said. ‘Calm down. We have every right to be here. We are just browsing – like everyone else.’

‘We’re not though, are we?’ she was glancing back over her shoulder, pulling her coat more tightly around her. ‘That is precisely what we’re not doing.’

Her panic was making me jumpy too. I stopped to run my fingers along a row of mascara wands and looked behind me as I did so.

She was right. The man in the black coat was following us.

‘See?’ she whispered. ‘I told you so.’

There was nothing about him that was particularly memorable; he was middle aged, his dark sideburns flecked with grey, his face nondescript. What made him stand out was that he was the only man in this powerfully scented cornucopia of beauty merchandise. That, plus the fact that he was now staring at the two of us, without trying to hide it.

‘He’s probably buying a birthday present for his wife,’ I said, not convincing myself. ‘Or maybe he’s one of those retail spies, who compare prices in different department stores.’

‘Or he’s following us,’ said Lucy.

He had taken a step in our direction.

‘You may be right,’ I conceded. ‘But keep calm. I’m not leaving here without doing Clarins.’

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘But let’s make it quick.’

This was our favourite concession: the brand we loved above all others and invariably saved until last, as a special treat to wind up our visit. In this particular department store the Clarins counter was down at the far end, near the doors. We were there in seconds, and knew what we were after.

‘This is divine,’ I said to the girl behind the counter, popping the lid off a pot of night cream. ‘So thick and lush!’

‘Are these new?’ asked Lucy, picking up a lip gloss. ‘What an amazing colour!’

‘I must have this,’ I said, passing the jar across for Lucy to smell.

‘I’ve got to have one of these,’ she said, drawing a delicate pink line across the back of her hand. ‘It’s just my colour.’

‘I already use the day cream and the anti-pollutant treatment with SPF15,’ I said to the girl. ‘I’m such a fan of Clarins. But I really need something more intense for using at night. Would you recommend this?’

The girl smiled and simpered, sensing a substantial sale and copious commission.

‘Oh, I know just the thing for you!’ she said, her hands smoothing down the front of her white tunic. ‘Let me show you some samples from our Daily Energiser range.’

She turned to open a cupboard behind her and Lucy winked at me. We had her.

By the time she turned around again, her fingers clutching tubes, pots and packets, we were backing away.

‘Do you know, I think I’ll wait?’ Lucy was saying.

‘Me too, maybe we’ll pop back at the weekend!’ I smiled at the girl, almost feeling guilty as dismay etched itself across her perfectly sculpted features.

The man in the black coat had been lurking near Givenchy, where a woman was squirting something aromatic onto the inside of his wrist. He turned as he saw us head for the exit, but we had the edge on him.

We flew through the revolving doors, the chill of the March day smacking into our faces, and we ran. At the corner, Lucy went left and I went right, dodging through the crowds: leaping, twisting, ducking.

I didn’t look back, and I knew Lucy wouldn’t either. We had done this too many times. We realised the importance of getting a good head start. We were all too aware that a moment’s hesitation could bring us down.

As I ran, I didn’t allow myself to wonder whether the man in the black coat had chosen to go left or right. It didn’t matter whether he had come after me, or had gone after Lucy. Just having to make that choice would hold him up for long enough.

Half an hour later, I was standing by the bus stop, as planned. I’d got my breath back by then but, as Lucy came along the pavement towards me, her cheeks were still pink, tiny pinpricks of sweat shining on her forehead.

‘He was a tricky one,’ she said, as the door swished open and we climbed on board the bus. ‘Took me ages to shake him off. In the end I had to go in through the back of TK Maxx and out the other side. Never had to do that before.’

We stumbled up the aisle as the bus pulled away, and fell into a double seat towards the back, beginning to empty our pockets.

There were several lipsticks and tubes of mascara, a couple of pots of moisturiser and some shower gel. I had a cleansing face mask and Lucy had a trio of nail varnishes. We piled it all up in our laps, exclaiming with delight at each other’s trophies. When I thought I was done, I put my hand into the inside pocket of my jacket and discovered a tube of the *Age-defying Skin Solution for Tired Eyes*.

‘Fantastic!’ I said, unscrewing the top and dabbing a blob of pearlescent pink onto the tip of my finger. ‘I’d forgotten all about this one.’

I applied it gently to the skin under my eyes, feeling a satisfying tingling, as I turned to my partner in crime.

‘How do I look?’

(1406 words)