

Chapter 1

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. Absolutely 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 naïve.'

‘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 to ask 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 cafes 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 realises 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 lightning bolt 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 anymore.

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. 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 that 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 assholes.

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 handle-less 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; trying to spot her, she assumes. She catches his eye.

She can see him scrutinising 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.