Chapter 3

Code Rose

I’ve always regarded humour
as a weapon of mass seduction.

— Hello, Code Rose?
This is Midnight Rose.
Rose in the crosshairs. Target locked.
Emotionally guided missile engaged.
...
BOOM!

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That day, I'm massaging a terminally ill man.
100 per cent immersion. Attention. Affection. Care. Compassion...

— Breathe! ... Live in the moment.

I get into my car, check the time: Oh blimey, I'm late!
A 180-degree turn. First date with a stranger. I need to refocus!

— Breathe! ... Live in the moment.

I race off like Fangio, quickly snapping up a leftover loaf at the bakery just before closing time. Pop—into the bottom of my bag. I skid to a halt in a controlled drift by the sea. Late, hair a mess, not dolled up, the scent of massage oil wafting ahead of me...

He's waiting for me by the beach, next to his bike, in crocodile-print boots. Tall, smiling, charming, polite... he smells so good... it's to die for.

I see him. And I know.

I don't know what it is I know. But I know it.

I've known him all my life, from another life, perhaps. We were meant to meet; it's obvious, it's written somewhere... I just have to go with it. He's everything I've ever dreamt of: the open sea, travel, adventure, his arms. This is exactly the moment to run!...

The first time he sees me, in a red dress, with a genuine smile, a pure gaze, full of love.
He thinks to himself: Wow!... Let's go and pick the rose from the garden!

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He’s planned everything, just in case… a wicker basket, a chequered tablecloth, homemade aperitifs, flutes, champagne… he’s gone big.

‘Big’ is certainly the word for it… Then again, it’s only to be expected. He’s from Haldorholm, in Soumerland. Over there, everything’s flat: not a single hill, not a single mound, not a single rise – nothing. So they’ve got to make up for it somehow. The taller you are, the further you can see. As a result, the men grow like giant bamboo shoots and look like mutant asparagus. We’ve got the mountains; they’ve got the giants. He’s 2 metres tall: 200 cm of charm, 95 to 110 kilos of power… Gulp!

Angel-like curls, the smile of an innocent child, a gap in his teeth – I’d give him an ice cream straight away! With that little gap between his teeth, just big enough to park a bike in, this bloke is luck personified!

He’s gorgeous! He looks like an XXL version of Jeff Bridges. As tall as Magnum in his day. A broken tooth running diagonally, as cute as Tom Sawyer. Absolutely charming.

(Yes, I know, my references are a bit dated, but in my defence, I haven’t switched on the telly since the 90s… must be my advancing age.)

A bit of a rebel rocker look: crocodile boots, a sky-blue shirt, sand-coloured trousers. He blends into the scenery so well that, from a certain angle, he’s completely incognito. He’s The Invisible Man. Only his blue eyes give him away. Mel Gibson in *Braveheart*. In short, when I see him, I’m smitten.

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His angelic gaze won't let me go... It does worry me a bit, though. I've got a slight niggling doubt. I don't know if he fancies me or if he's some weirdo on the lookout for prey? His automatic tracking system follows me everywhere. It's as if his infrared radar has detected a target! His turret has fired its missile:

— Rose in the crosshairs, target locked.

DRRIIING. My parents!
They must have picked up on something...
Oops, not now! Sorry. I'll play it cool, keep a low profile. This isn't the time to shoot myself in the foot! Above all, stay focused.

After ten minutes, I relax... Actually, he looks more like a kid on a sandy beach, staring at me with his water pistol and saying:

— You're mine! Splash!

I can't resist – I'm instantly taken with him! And behind that mischievous gaze, I sense... something very human that touches me deeply... And it's not what you think, you dirty-minded so-and-so!

Him — Champagne! Let's raise a glass! To love!

Me — Cheers! Happiness!

Mel's eyes are fixed on me (alert: predator's trap).

— You're as beautiful as a rose!...

And then, without warning, against my will, a little tear betrays me!

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I reply straight away — Thank you, it's mad how much this champagne moves me! I'm very sensitive; I can't help it—as soon as I hear the word "thorn", I cry. (Thanks, *The Birdcage*!)

In my head, the comments are flying thick and fast, having a field day. It's as if all the planets in my birth chart have gathered urgently for a summit meeting:

My Aries Venus — Oh my! He draws me in like a magnet! I'm falling in love!

My Libra ascendant — Ah, love! It's like champagne — it goes straight to your head!

My Capricorn Saturn — And then... you've got a splitting headache!

My Scorpio — A rose that pricks, with thorns as long as your arm.

My pragmatic Virgo — A flower that's allergic to alcohol — stop your rambling!

My Sun in Taurus — Me, I ruminate; it's in my nature — it's not the same thing.

DRRRRIIIIINNNNG! My parents. Here we go again.

I interrupt the giant, feeling embarrassed — 'Skooze me, I'll be a minute!

My parents are pieds-noirs, French people born in Algeria. They ring me every evening to keep in touch. Come rain, wind or snow... proper lighthouse keepers!

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Officially, my dad's retired. In reality, he's set up a special branch of MI5: MI-Fam, Family Intelligence. James Bond on a mission to spy on my private life.

He's roped my mum in. It's her cover that lets him pull the strings on the sly. And it's good for domestic harmony, apparently. He sends her on intelligence missions, because her speciality is getting the truth out of you. She's a true Libra, an extrovert who loves making connections – and since I'm the same, we've forged a bond as strong as Kevlar!

They want to know everything.

My mum — Good evening, darling, where are you?

Me — Still in your heart, dear Mum.

My mum — Are you all on your own, my love?

Me — No (I've never been any good at lying), I'll ring you back later.

My parents — Speak up! We can't make out what you're saying... Your phone isn't working! Why can't you talk to us?

Me — What do you think? Your calls are killing my chances. My cover's blown! At this rate, I'll end up just like Miss Havisham!

My parents — Oh, you always have to exaggerate; here we go again, it's a disaster...

Me — I'm with a Viking, as tall as a basketball player and as muscular as a rugby player. I'm not worried about a thing! Todo va bene!

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My dad is a radar system on high alert.

My dad — Who's that bloke? How do you know him? Where's he from? What's his name?

My mum — You shouldn't be meeting up with a stranger; it's dangerous!

Me — Thanks, I'll file that away somewhere between 'Don't go out alone at night at 54' and 'Don't iron my clothes whilst I'm wearing them'. Calm down! Let's take a deep breath!

They're making a big deal out of it:

My mum — But it could end very badly!

Me — I've got a life jacket, in case the evening ends up like *Titanic*.

My mum — Above all, be careful!

They want to plan everything:

My mum — And what time will you be back?

Me — Just after the live concert. Early, like the hens, when the sun goes down.

My dad, aged 83 — Give me a call as soon as you get there, send me a text.

Me — Do you want my itinerary as well, for the 'adults monitored 24 hours a day' club?

My mum — We just want to make sure everything's alright.

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Me — Yeah, I know, five times a day at 10 euros a ring, I'd be a millionaire by now...

My dad — And we'd be ruined... so do think about the royalties.

Me — OK, switch off your parental GPS. Give me a bit of space, or I'll switch to aeroplane mode.

They laugh, in on the joke... but worried:

My dad — Take a raincoat, you never know.

My mum — Jean! Don't go putting ideas in her head!

My dad — Don't worry! It's not in his head that he's got ideas! I'm just warning her, that's all.

Me — Thanks. Have a lovely evening! Click!

I turn round... Phew! He's still there!

A few hours later...

I've had a marvellous evening! I'm flying home; he's cycling home. We each drift off to sleep in our own homes, on the same pink cloud. With a smile on our lips, lulled by a sensual wave... Oh no, I've forgotten. I switch it back on, cancel my other dates and delete my account. Phew, relieved, I switch it off.

DRRRRIIINNG. Mum.

It's late – maybe it's urgent? Just in case, I pick up.

Me — Good evening, Mum.

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My mum — Darling! So, how did your evening go with that Viking?

Me — Brilliant! We'll definitely see each other again tomorrow.

My dad — Where's he from? What's his name? What does he do for a living?

Me — Sverre af Haldorholm, he's from Soumerland. He defends Vikings who've fallen victim to sea monsters, but that's all I know. You'll probably meet him!

My dad — Right, goodnight, darling!

My mum — Quick, switch to Channel 2! 'The Agency' is on.

Me — I don't like police dramas...

My mum — No, it's a property programme about luxury lofts in Dubai!

Me — I'm not interested.

My mum — Well then, switch to Channel One – there are children singing! You'll love it!

Me — Mum, I'm sleepy. I was just about to fall asleep!

My mum — Why? Are you ill?

My dad — What's the matter with her? Is she not feeling well?

Me — No, I'm fine. But you know I don't watch the telly!

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My mum — That's all your dad's fault! He told me not to ring you. But you know me – just to be contrary, I rang you straight away. So there!

Me — Thanks, but I'm tired. How about we move our evening chat to 10 o'clock in the morning?

My dad — Why, are we bothering you? You're not doing anything in the evening anyway, are you?

Me — Yes, I do, incidentally: live my life... I don't want to end up like Bridget Jones.

They don't say anything. But I can imagine... wrongly, no doubt.

My dad — It's too late, you're past fifty now.

My mum — It wouldn't have happened if you'd followed our advice and married a nice son of pieds-noirs, like us.

My dad — But you prefer the exotic! And what's so special about them compared to us, eh? Can you tell me? Nothing at all! The proof: they fall out with their parents and their whole family! I told your mum straight away – there's definitely something not quite right with them!

But no... I'm just imagining things! ... I've only just met the Viking. I'm on cloud nine.

Me — Goodnight. I love you both! Click.

Pfff... Too late... I'm wide awake now...

Right, I'll have a read... But I can't concentrate at all. I've been rereading the same page for five minutes. I'm thinking about the Viking... No, actually, if I'm honest, I'm

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thinking of nothing but the Viking. It’s as if my brain can’t switch off… To tell the truth, there’s nothing else but… the Viking, my joy and the relief that comes with it.

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Sunday Is Showtime!

The reporter — How did it all start?

The author — Well, the year before, I had an operation. Twice, in quick succession. I went back to work too soon: I ended up back on the operating table. A long recovery. I used the time to paint pictures and do a distance-learning course on relationships. In the end, I was told to sign up to a dating site. I wasn't keen on the idea. I went back to working for myself to catch up on lost time.

Then, after a while, I got a bit bored, and I finally decided to give it a go.

The reporter — What attracted you to his profile?

The author — Apart from his photo, you have to understand that ever since I was a child, I've been lulled by dreams of faraway places. So perhaps it's linked to the fact that I often have a soft spot for foreigners.

The reporter — And did you trust him straight away?

The author — No, at first I was wary. I didn't want to let him into my hammock until he'd proven himself. Then he suggests I visit him in his drak-car. And we quite quickly become this slightly odd couple, with this big kid running wild and me, who just longs to share my hammock with my sweetheart.

The reporter — Let's get back to your *Gallery of Imperfect Gems*. (He projects an image of Coraline's profile from the dating site onto a big screen.) Is self-deprecation your armour?

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The author — Well, I was born into a family of pieds-noirs, who laugh at everything and everyone, themselves included. So I learnt very early on to be the first to laugh at myself, to beat the mockers to the punchline!

The Viking — Or out of fear that someone might point out your flaws.

The author — Nobody's perfect… or are you?

The Viking — I'm a demigod, only half-human; it's different.

The reporter — And what do you suggest to the reader?

The author — To write their own dating ad with a dash of self-deprecation, and put their three finest flaws in the shop window, in their very own *Gallery of Imperfect Gems*[*]!

The reporter — So what was your experience of dating sites like?

The author — Oh, it's a bit like visiting a graveyard of good intentions, full of zombies who pounce on anything that moves. Better to scroll than to sink!

The reporter — Why did you look at a profile in a language you didn't understand?

The author — I followed my intuition. I have to say, his photo broke down all my defences. So I satisfied my curiosity. I had to find out who this writer from another world was. I really couldn't leave him languishing on that site, empty of all substance! He's not the kind of man you kick out of bed.

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The Viking — Or you were just too lazy to look it up in a dictionary.

The author — At the time, I had no way of knowing you spoke Troll.

The reporter — That little tear of yours came out of nowhere – what was it hiding?

The author — Something I quickly pushed aside. When you're sensitive, you protect yourself... you don't show your vulnerability on the first date. I thanked my parents for interrupting me, for stopping me from putting my foot in it, whilst accusing them of doing just that.

The Viking — Typical female logic! It's easier than admitting how you really feel.

The reporter — Your parents call you in the middle of a date... is that a habit?

The author — A sacred habit! MI-Fam never takes a day off.

The Viking — Personally, I found it touching, knowing her family could identify her body if she disappeared at sea.

The author — Don't worry, they can track my location, they invented GPS.

The Viking — Anyway, when the beeper of my heart started racing, I knew straight away I'd hit the jackpot. Target locked... boom!

The author — Hit the jackpot is right! I thought so too, nobody told me it was a scratch card...

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The reporter — Good thing I've got coins: shall we scratch it together after the break?

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