

## Chapter One

### *Nom de guerre*

#### I

It is, Roy thinks, perfect. Kismet, serendipity, destiny, happenstance; call it what you will. All of these things rolled into one. He is not sure he believes in fate, or whether he believes in anything but the very present. Then again, life has treated him well generally.

He stands and does the walk of his flat, checking that the windows are secure and the appliances are switched off correctly. He pats the chest of his blazer, which hangs on the back of the door: yes, his wallet is there. His keys lie ready on the console table in the hall.

This lady at any rate seems heaven-sent, at least from the résumé he has called up on the screen. At long last. He knows to anticipate the minor alterations, those moments when a slight imperfection is turned by a clever choice of words or a simple ever-so-small fib into a positively positive attribute. This is human nature. He doubts, for example, that her name is truly Estelle, any more than his is Brian. In his view such inconsequential tweaks are to be expected and accepted. They oil the cogs. When they are revealed, he will be suitably tolerant and amused at these minor embellishments. Unlike the rather larger lies you often confront, he thinks as he places the tea bag in the recycling bin, rinses his cup and saucer and places them, upturned, on the draining board.

He takes a breath and powers the computer down, pushing the chair neatly under the desk. He has been here before, hopes held high. With this transitory reflection comes a momentary weariness. Those dreadful meetings in Beefeaters and Tobys around the Home Counties with frumpy old women in whom the bitterness of their long unfulfilled marriages with underachieving and uninspiring husbands

#### I

has in widowhood seemingly become the seed of a sense of licence to lie at will. For them there is no legacy of happy memories or the material benefit of platinum pensions in leafy Surrey mansions. They reside in poky terraces that no doubt smell of fried food, eking out an existence on state handouts, cursing Bert, or Alf, or whoever it may be, and contemplating a stolen life. They are out for what they can get now, by whatever means. And who can blame them really?

Quick inspection. Immaculate white shirt: yes. Creases of grey flannels: perfect. Spit-shined shoes: gleaming. Regimental stripe tie: well knotted. Hair: combed neatly. Blue blazer off hanger, and on. Fits like a glove. Glance in the mirror: he'd pass for seventy, sixty at a pinch. He looks at the time. The cab should be here shortly. The train journey from Paddington will take only thirty minutes or so.

For those desperate women, this is an escape. An adventure. For Roy, this dating lark is something different: a professional enterprise. He does not allow himself to become light entertainment or to let them down gently. He fixes them with his blue eyes before dismantling them forensically. He skewers them. He has done his homework and lets them know.

'I thought you said you were five foot six and slim,' he may say with incredulity, but is delicate enough not to add: rather than a clinically obese dwarf. 'Not much like your photo, are you? Was it taken a few years back, dear?' (He doesn't add the postscript: perhaps of your better-looking sister.) 'You live near Tunbridge Wells, you say. More Dartford really, isn't it?' Or, 'So what you mean by holidaying in Europe is a package trip once a year with your sister to Benidorm?'

If, as planned, he is second to the venue, he will usually conduct a discreet first reconnaissance pass to size things up. When confronted with the familiarly depressing he could simply leave without introducing himself. It is all so predictable. But he never does. He regards it as his duty to shatter their hopeless delusions. They will be the better for it, eventually. Beginning with his usual winning smile and gallant greeting, he will segue rapidly into what has become something of a core script.

'One of the things I dislike intensely,' he says, 'is dishonesty.' Generally they smile and nod meekly.

‘So, with apologies and with the odd unpleasant experience behind me’ – another smile, and this is as gentle as it gets – ‘let’s cut to the chase, shall we?’

Generally another nod, probably no smile, and a shift in the seat that he notices but perhaps others wouldn’t.

He is punctilious in splitting the bill when it is over and unambiguous about the future. No insincere pleasantries. ‘Not what I was expecting at all,’ he will say with a weary shake of the head. ‘Oh no. What a shame. If only you’d been clearer. If only you’d described yourself more . . . accurately, shall we say? We could have both avoided wasting our energy. Which at our time of life’ – here a brief twinkle of the eye and the hint of a smile to show what they will be missing – ‘we can ill afford to do. If only . . .’

He hopes today he will not have to deploy these measures. But if so he will have discharged his duty to himself, to the unfortunate other and to the system that mismatches the hopeless with the delusional and, he believes, is in severe danger of bringing itself into disrepute. All those misspent hours drinking Britvic, all that effort put into stilted conversation over glistening mixed grills and mass-produced microwaved beef and ale pies or vegetable bakes or tikka masalas, all those awkward goodbyes with false promises of future contact. Not for him. Still less, all those doomed couplings in the search for a final day in the sun.

Roy is not a pessimist, though. Brace up, be positive. Each time he starts afresh, hopeful. This time will be different, he tells himself, glossing over the fact that he has said this to himself several times before. But his sense is that it won’t be the same.

The taxi is here. He straightens his back, smiles to himself and locks the door before striding to the waiting car.

## 2

Betty makes her final preparations, careful to keep her excitement in check. Stephen will run her to the pub and wait outside, so she has no practical concerns. No flush of heat as the train runs

## 3

dangerously late. No undue ache in the hips as she rushes inelegantly up the high street. No risk of a post-meeting sense of discomposure affecting her ability to find her way home again. And Stephen will be there should she feel an unexpected need to terminate the meeting early.

They will have to set off in a few minutes, Stephen has told her as a result of his researches of his Google and his satnav gizmo. She can manage the internet but there are so many things about it that bamboozle her. What, for example, is a tweet? How on earth did we survive without all these devices? Or, more to the point, why do young people so depend on them?

She can hear Stephen padding around the lounge. He seems more nervous than she is; how sweet. While she applies her lipstick she looks at herself in the mirror. There will be no last-minute anxieties. The blue floral dress she has selected will serve perfectly well and sets off her fair hair, which is cut in a bob as fashionable as can be carried off at her age. She will not exchange the delicate silver necklace or its partner brooch for something more obvious like pearls. She will not opt for more – or less – sensible shoes. She will not require a final emboldening cup of coffee.

Betty does not consider herself to be a flutterer. She is calm; realistic too, she likes to think. Once justifiably described as beautiful, she accepts with, she hopes, good grace the effects of time. She prefers to think of them as mere effects, not ravages. Though she retains a certain radiance, she is no longer beautiful. She cannot pretend to be despite the glossies' determined attempts to create and capture a new silver market. Perhaps she is something different, nameless and ageless.

She clicks the top back on the tube of lipstick, rolls her lips together to ensure the correct coverage, fingers the necklace, gently touches her hair and gives herself one final look. She is ready. She glances at her watch: five minutes ahead of time. Stephen greets her with a delicate and decorous embrace when she enters the lounge.

'You look fabulous,' he says, and she thinks he means it.