

Chapter 12

Savage National Chaos of France

A suspicious little red light, still on.
Viking translation: disaster is imminent.

In his country, everything is clean. Everything is tidy. Runs like clockwork. But that day, on his way back from *the land of clicking heels*, he lands at *Marisola* and his world falls apart when he meets the French railways... *the Society of National Carriage Fiascos*.

The moment he boards the train, he spots a suspicious little red light, still on. He gets off to inspect the surroundings: the brake is locking the wheel — odd, the train isn't moving. He concludes there's a braking problem. He waves at the driver, but since he doesn't speak a word of French, the driver gives him a weary shrug: Yeah, well... must be normal. Then he turns on his heel and climbs back on board.

Viking translation: disaster is imminent.

Since nobody is panicking, the Viking, worried, on amber alert, follows him... Big mistake!

The train of the *Stuck National Convoys of France* pulls out. 10 minutes later, it stops dead, in the middle of nowhere. Silence. No announcement, no message. Nothing. Not even a "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen".

The Viking starts to fume. Literally.

Him — This is unacceptable! In my country, trains run on time... and apologise when they're 3 minutes late, so as not to startle the passengers! A cow on the line is a national emergency!

Instantly, his old *berserker* reflexes come roaring back. Antennae fully out. Warning lights flash in his head: survival first, always.

He scans every detail around him, looking for a way out. Nothing. The most surprising and most worrying thing is that nobody reacts. He really wonders what's going on here. It's as if he's the only one panicking on Candid Camera. He turns paranoid. He panics from fear and bewilderment. He must take back control. Master the situation.

Meanwhile... I can't stop thinking about him, already head over heels at the thought of seeing him again. I picture myself throwing my arms around his neck and kissing him passionately on the platform at *Palmeria* station. And... the magic of synchronicity! My love's beautiful angel face lights up my phone screen...

15 calls in 15 minutes. So I'll find out. So he gets news. So he knows what the papers, the radio, the telly, Interpol are saying...

DRIIIIING — WHERE ARE YOU? *DRIIIIING* — WHAT IS THIS COUNTRY OF SAVAGES? *DRIIIIING* — IS THERE NO INFORMATION SYSTEM? *DRIIIIING* — AM I IN THE THIRD WORLD? *DRIIIIING*...

Clearly, he's flabbergasted. My incompetence deserves the dungeon. (Round one.)

An hour later, the loudspeaker of the *Service of National Connection Failures* finally announces a problem on the line.

You don't say! Who'd have thought! For me, business as usual.

And yet, it seems to take him by surprise. He's free to speculate to his heart's content, which sends his stress level even higher. His cortisol goes through the roof. The waiting, in the dark, lasts for hours.

Me, of course, I'm miles from imagining what he's going through!

Meanwhile, he calls me 15 more times, furious with everyone, but above all with me, of course. And like a good little private, I get a dressing-down from the stressed-out general:

Him — You should have come to fetch me instead of leaving me alone in this shambles. Your incompetence deserves the dungeon! (Round two.)

In the end, his train turns back. Back to square one.

After four hours of waiting, him stuck on the train, me glued to the phone, an hour and a half of it on the road, I finally reach *Marisola* station. He opens the car door, ready to slap me with a ticket for railway sabotage. Not a word of thanks. Nothing. He slams the door and yells:

Him — It's your fault! This country is the third world. You left me alone in this chaos. It's shameful! You're a disgrace! 3 days in the dungeon! (Round three.)

Me — ... Forget the French kiss, *alors*?

He yells. I hold him in my arms, press myself against his heart, which is going like the clappers. It feels as if it's about to burst out of his chest. To calm him down, I slide my hand to the nape of his neck, stroke his sweat-soaked curls, whispering softly, *it's all right, it's over, I'm here*. He curls up in my arms and sobs his heart out, explaining

why I deserve the firing squad. I kiss him gently to dry his tears. I'm soaked. He's soothed.

There. That's the thing, sometimes you just have to go with it. If you're wondering why I stayed and let myself get shouted at, look no further. Because I was stuck fast in his curly angel hair. Cupid laughs: game, set and match!

Except in real life, it didn't happen like that at all, not one bit! Well, it did, but running late. He shouted the whole way home. His cortisol took ages to come back down. It was only that evening, on the balcony, in the pitch-black night, that he took me on his lap. We laughed. He was himself again, all cuddly.

Since that day, he no longer says *the Society of National Carriage Fiascos*. He says: *Savage National Chaos of France*. And yet... he comes back every year, with a suitcase of beer and a faint hope of timetables. But never again by train.

Sunday Is Showtime!

The journalist — So... explain to me, why the panic?

The Viking — Are you joking? The red light comes on... that sets off the nuclear alert: I picture every disaster scenario going. We're all going to die stuck on this train, no water, no exit, no wifi! So, to survive, I call every minute to find out what's going on.

The journalist — And you're his anti-panic hotline?

The author — That's it. He took me for his 24/7 crisis centre.

The Viking — You don't understand... When I'm shut in an enclosed space, with no news, I relive a mortal danger. I have no control over what's happening.

The journalist — You mean an old trauma?

The Viking — Yes. It was during the war of the Scorched Lands. We were trapped underground for several days in a bunker, with gas masks. We knew nothing of what was going on outside. We couldn't pick up the radio, we had no news... When we were finally able to come out... there was absolute silence. Nobody was breathing any more: children, adults, animals. The sea monsters had blown out their killer gases. The whole village was dead. Since then, I listen to the radio all the time.

The author — I didn't know, you never told me. Why are you telling it now?

The Viking — It's easier to say to a stranger. When you've suffered a shock, you hide it from the people you love.

The author — Yes, I know, it has a name: *Scorched Lands sickness*.

The journalist — And you, how do you cope?

The author — Apart from coming to fetch him, there's nothing else I can do. I understand he panics, so I reassure him, but it's still unfair that he blames me. I'm helpless, a bit like a child watching a grown-up fall ill. So I cope. No justifying myself, I speak to him gently, in short sentences: "I'm coming to get you, you're safe. Breathe."

The Viking — That set me straight at once. Firm, but safe.

The author — If I'd known, I'd have packed him a Viking anti-panic kit: water, snacks, music, one single focus, his breathing. But I'm not sure he'd fancy a packed lunch in his school satchel.

The Viking — Is there beer in it?

The journalist — Do you hold it against him, turning on you?

The author — It's not very pleasant, but I understand him. His family went pear-shaped. He wanders, wild-eyed, between two countries, two personalities — Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde — and heaps of converted vans for his nomadic life. The boy's all at sea!

The Viking — That's exactly why I met you, mind! Normally, our paths would never have crossed.

The journalist — Was this doomsday train character-building?

The author — Depends who for! I laugh about it now, but back then, I got squeezed like a lemon. Lemon juice in the eye: it stings! I didn't understand a thing. I'll admit I sometimes dreamt of getting off the train and finishing the journey by bike.

The Viking — I can lend you my e-bike, if you like. It'll still be less of a drag than the conversation!

The journalist — Do you still dream of adventure?

The author — I'm living it, in the comfort of my hammock, facing the turquoise-blue lagoon. I prefer the sea to the mountains, and surfing on words to skidding on black ice and ending up off-piste.



The Hammock and the Hummingbirds

A novel by Karine Baridon



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