

Chapter 13

"The Mountain" Saga — Episode 1

I hate the mountains!
Just the word “mountain” and I freeze!

Before the mountains...

A woman settles onto my massage table.

Her — I'm a medium. I have a message for you.

(She's caught me off guard, my hands are already covered in oil, no way out.)

Me — ...

I'm listening.

Her — You are twin flames... He's madly in love with you.

Me —

If you say so...

Her — You know each other...

You're here to reveal each other.

Me — ... hmm...

Knowing each other, revealing each other... we'd need to understand each other first!

Her — You don't believe it.

Me — We had a spat last night. He panicked on a train. I thought it was sorted, apparently not, he came back for round two.

Her — But I'm being told... He's madly in love with you...

Me — ...

(I'd love to believe it! But I'm not convinced, not one bit, not one bit!)

Her — Ask and you shall receive!

(She's got a nerve!)

Her — Beware!

(There we go! The truly creepy thing about mediums is that tiny little word. And then they're surprised nobody wants to hear a thing!)

Her — You give... to everyone... But think of yourself too... ...

Me — ...

???

Thank you.

Her — My pleasure. The message had to be passed on.

So. She arrived with a bad back. She left unknotted, relieved of a weight she'd just palmed off on me. But I didn't ask for anything! Well, actually, I did: the night before, as I was falling asleep, I'd asked for some light. Not from her, thank goodness! From higher up.

That evening, I tell the Viking the story.

Him — A what?

Me — A medium.

Him — Who told you what?

Me — That we were twin flames.

Him — Twin what?

Me — That you were madly in love with me.

He puts down his beer. He says nothing for 3 seconds, which, for him, counts as a geological event.

Him — Pfff! Rubbish, we don't need her to know what we feel! Mind you, she's not wrong!

And for one second, I'm the happiest woman in the world.

Two days later.

Him — What medium?

Me — The one from the massage. You said she was right.

Him — I never said that. Now that, you're making up! I don't believe in mediums, they're charlatans! She doesn't know what I think! I'll drag her before the *Thing*.

So. It drives me mad! He can say one thing and its opposite without batting an eyelid. Same gusto, same certainty. And me? Same doubt! I don't know what to think any more! One certainty: he looks convinced.

Sometimes he gets the wrong end of the stick, we don't understand each other. It saddens and worries me. Other times, he reads me like an open book, as if we'd melted into one, which draws me in, of course! This duality is mad! He's taken me for an elastic band! He pulls, he lets go... and it's my fingers that get snapped!

It took me 47 chapters to sort the wheat from the chaff.

I told myself: Watch out!!!! Too late! Should have done it before, when summer was in full swing and I was working for myself.

Him — Drop your coaching, just do massages!

Me — I smile... Thanks, but no! Advice is cheap when you're not the one paying! I've been preparing all this for months...

A month later, after kindly handing me a thousand and one tips I never asked for, a little tired of arguing endlessly, I let myself be convinced. I give in, so he'll stop piling on the pressure. He's like my mother, a dog with a bone. So, as my sister says, better to be free than right. But I'm not my sister, who says yes-yes and does as she pleases. Me, I do what he wants, but with big doubts all the same!

Me — You think so?...

Rookie mistake.

Goodbye coaching, I focus on massages. Summer slips by like a long warm breath, I work non-stop. Then autumn tiptoes out, taking the clients with it. Winter is here, heavy and silent, work dries up and my days drag on...

The Viking, true to form, worries about his plans and blames me for not coming to see him more often. But I can't afford to move countries to soothe his impatience. Maybe I could have worked remotely, if I'd built up my second business as planned. But I followed his good advice instead of listening to myself. And look where that got me!

Him — You haven't got enough work, come and join me.

Me — With pleasure! As soon as I find a job. But apparently my hands don't speak your language well enough to get hired.

While I job-hunt, I've been working at a thalassotherapy spa for five years. The manager offers me a permanent contract. Badly paid, admittedly. But a salaried job by the sea, 10 minutes from home, where I know everyone, lovely colleagues, easy-going clients, could be worse.

Him — Get out of there! You've got 20 years' experience, 3 master's degrees! You're senior! And they pay you minimum wage! I won't let my woman be exploited!

He's right, it's badly paid, but they have a pay scale, you start on minimum wage or nothing! And I stay self-employed. He goes straight for the sore spot, but deliberately ignores the perks for me, which carry no weight on his scales. With unanswerable arguments, at three in the morning, in my second language!

Him — Take a seasonal job in France. You'll get holidays and come and see me more often. We can make plans.

I find a better-paid seasonal job in the mountains.

Me — OK, done and dusted!

Him — Ask for a pitch for the *drak-car*, I'll come and join you, we'll go skiing.

I turn down the seaside, negotiate, get the pitch, let my flat, hire a concierge service, block out my diary, warn my clients, pack my boxes, all on my own, the lot in three weeks.

But the spa drags its feet over my wages. I call, call back, go in person, end up face to face with HR, a slip of a girl just hired, who looks down her nose at me and tries to pull a fast one. First time in five years I lose my temper, I

hate that! Almost as much as being taken for a fool! Too late: five years of goodwill torched in a quarter of an hour.

Final score: permanent contract turned down, fallen out with HR, seasonal job, no guarantee of getting my post back when I return. But small victory, I leave with my wages, not in my account, as a cheque to pay in, which won't clear for a week. I don't have a week. I'm leaving right now. (Brilliant! Thanks for yet another piece of advice!)

On the road, I picture us in the mountains. By day, he hurtles down the slopes against a white backdrop sparkling with a thousand sequins, while I work. We meet up in the evening by the fire. Soft music, happy laughter, warm cuddles under the duvet. Bliss!...

But as so often in life... reality doesn't stick to the plan.

Dead of winter. He drives a whole day to join me. Meanwhile, I massage until evening. After eight hours on the road, plus a satnav that sent him round in circles in the snow for an extra half-hour, he finally rolls in, expecting a royal welcome committee. But nobody tells me he's there. I don't have a second to myself, the massages keep coming...

He finds an overzealous receptionist, whom he takes for the boss.

The receptionist — Good evening, sir, how can I help you?

The Viking — Is this a joke? Where are the champagne and the confetti? She should be here waiting for me! I'm her guest!

The receptionist — One moment, I'll check... What name is it, sir?

The Viking — Sverre af Haldorholm.

The receptionist — I don't see anyone by that name, sir.

The receptionist has no idea “who” this foreigner is on about. In gleaming *boots* and a crease-proof shirt, the tall blond man looks thoroughly ruffled, but that's the least of his worries. He couldn't give two hoots.

His boss hasn't finished the work on the hotel. And for a month, all the staff have been roped in to clean up after the builders. As a result, he, for one, is racking up unpaid overtime and chasing a pace nobody can keep up with. He didn't sign up for this. Tonight, after his shift, he's handing in his notice!

So he shoves a vague piste map at the Viking, turns on his heel and goes back to work without a glance.

The Viking, humiliated by this rude welcome, worn out by his journey, starts to boil. Fed up with waiting for me, the dragon loses patience. Barely arrived, he already wants to leave. I catch him just before he goes. Get an earful from the weary road warrior. And realise that this winter will be a far cry from the calm I'd imagined...

No desire to hear him grumble. The magnet pulls me against him, we stay stuck together, I'm done for.

The chaos begins... I work, he grumbles. I do overtime, he smokes. The rota changes, he fumes. I come home knackered, he drinks beers. Lots!

I hate the mountains! Just the word “mountain” and I freeze!

Sunday Is Showtime!

The journalist — So you're an advice vending machine?

The Viking — Good advice. She's the one who sells herself short. Instead of telling them where to stick it and walking out.

The author — *The king of business* starts sawing at my foundations so I'll come and join him. I was up for it. But with a job, and covering my back. He pulled it off, I ended up with no work.

The Viking — She found a better-paid job, that was the point.

My sister — He really believes it, you know.

The author — Yes, it looked good on paper. But in practice, it's the domino effect. Each piece of his advice creates a new problem. Which the next piece of advice claims to solve.

The Viking — That's because you don't know how to apply it, that's all. You've never known how to fight.

The author — Oh, I have: against the cold, the black ice and the snow. I hate the mountains. No point dragging it out.

The journalist — Let's move on.

The author — Are you sure?

The Hammock and the Hummingbirds

A novel by Karine Baridon



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