

Chapter 12

Savage National Chaos of France

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

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 scene: the brake is locking the wheel — odd, the train isn't moving. He concludes it's a braking problem. Not speaking a word of French, he waves at the driver, who gives him a weary shrug: "*Yeah, well, must be normal.*" Then turns on his heel and climbs back on board.

Viking translation: *imminent disaster*. But since nobody is panicking, the Viking, worried, on amber alert, follows him... Big mistake!

The train pulls out. Ten minutes later, it stops dead, in the middle of nowhere. Silence. No announcement, no message from the *Stuck National Convoys of France*. 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 three minutes late. So as not to startle the passengers, a cow on the line is treated as 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 worrying thing is that nobody reacts. It's as if he's the only one panicking on Candid Camera. He turns paranoid. He panics from fear and bewilderment. He absolutely must take back control and master the situation.

Meanwhile, already head over heels at the thought of seeing him again soon, 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.

Fifteen calls in fifteen 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* — IS THIS 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, nothing to worry about. 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. Meanwhile, he calls me fifteen 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, I finally reach *Marisola* station. Ready to slap me with a ticket for railway sabotage, he slams the door and yells:

Him — *It's your fault! You left me alone in this chaos. It's shameful, disgraceful! Three days in the dungeon!* (Round three.)

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

I hold him in my arms. His heart is going like the clappers, it feels as if it's about to burst out of his chest. So, 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, in the pitch-black night, that he took me on his lap, out on the balcony. 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 five minutes 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 have no control over what's happening. It's like during the war of the Scorched Lands.

The journalist — What happened?

The Viking — We were trapped underground for several days in a bunker, with gas masks, without knowing what was going on outside, because we couldn't pick up the radio or any 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.

The Viking — It's *Scorched Lands* sickness. When you've suffered a shock, you hide it from the people you love. It's easier to talk about it to a stranger.

The author — So you blame me, but it's unfair! I'm as helpless as a child faced with a grown-up who falls ill. I dealt with the emergency: *"Chill, I'm coming to get you right now."*

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

The author — If I'd known, I'd have packed you an anti-panic kit: water, snacks, music, emergency phone. One single focus: your breathing. But I'm not sure you'd fancy a packed lunch in your school satchel.

The Viking — Depends, is there beer in it?

The author — Did I calm you down a bit, back then?

The Viking — I don't remember. Probably not, you got on my nerves more like! But you really wanted it to work between us. So, I do remember, you really cared about me.

The author — Maybe that was the case... (She turns to the journalist): ever since his family went pear-shaped, the boy's been all at sea. He wanders, wild-eyed, between two countries, heaps of converted vans for his nomadic life and two personalities, Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde.

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 — Back then, I got squeezed like a lemon, acid, juice in the eye! I'll admit I sometimes dreamt of getting off the train and finishing the journey on foot.

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 — And what do you suggest to the reader?

The author — Tell the story of a moment of chaos, and laugh about it*.

The journalist — Do you still dream of adventure?

The author — I don't dream any more, I'm living it. In the comfort of my hammock, facing the turquoise-blue lagoon.

The Viking — After that, we went to the mountains.

The author — Me, who prefers the sea... Surfing on words rather than skidding on black ice and ending up off-piste!

The Hammock and the Hummingbirds

A novel by Karine Baridon



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