Chapter 13

The Mountain SagaPart 1

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

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Down south, at work, a woman lies down on my massage table.

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

Me — ... (No way out. My hands are already covered in oil.) ... I'm listening.

Her — You are twin flames...

Me — ??? (If you say so...)

Her — You know each other... You're here to reveal each other.

Me — ... hmm... (We'd have to understand each other first!)

Her — You don't believe it.

Me — ... (I'd love to believe it! But I'm not convinced, not one bit, not one bit!) 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 — I'm being told... that he's not easy, but he's madly in love with you...

Me — ...

Her — Ask and you shall receive! (She's got a nerve!)

Her — Beware! (There we go! There's always something creepy about mediums. And then they're surprised nobody wants to hear a thing!)

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

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Me — ... (And she falls silent.) ??? ... Thank you.

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

So. She arrived with a bad back. She left freed. She just handed me the baby. 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're madly in love with me.

He puts down his beer, 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! (I'm the happiest woman in the world, but only for one second.)

Two days later.

Him — What medium?

Me — The one I massaged. You said she was right.

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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 nerve. And me, I don't know what to think any more! One certainty: he looks convinced. He's taken me for an elastic band! He pulls, he lets go and it snaps on my fingers! I tell myself: *watch it!!!*

Too late! Should have done it when summer was in full swing and I was working for myself, when he told me: “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, I give in so he'll stop piling on the pressure. He's like my mother, a dog with a bone. I think of my sister. Better to be free than right. The problem is, I'm not my sister. She says yes-yes, but does as she pleases. Me, I do what he wants, but with big doubts all the same!

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 slips away without a sound, and the clients with it. Winter is here, heavy and silent, work dries up and my days drag on...

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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. If I'd built up my second business as planned, maybe I could have worked remotely.

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

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

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

Him — Don't accept! They pay you minimum wage! I won't let my woman be exploited! You've got 3 master's degrees, 20 years' experience, you're senior!

He's right, it's badly paid. But that's their pay scale. Everyone starts on minimum wage, or nothing! I can stay self-employed on the side. It's his thing: going straight for the sore spot and deliberately ignoring 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.

Me — OK, done and dusted! I find a seasonal job, better paid, in the mountains.

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

Upshot: 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, and in three weeks, it's all wrapped up.

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 looks down her nose at me and tries to pull a fast one. First time I lose my temper in five years, I hate that, almost as much as being taken for a fool! Too late: five years of loyal service and goodwill torched in a quarter of an hour.

Final score: I turn down the permanent contract, fall out with HR, take a seasonal job with no guarantee of getting my post back when I return. Luckily, small victory, I leave with my wages, but 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, this umpteenth piece of advice! Thanks!)

On the road, I picture us in the mountains, him hurtling down the slopes against a white backdrop sparkling with a thousand sequins, while I work, then meeting 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 all day to join me, while I massage until evening. After eight hours on the road, and his satnav sending him round in circles in the snow for an extra half-hour, he finally rolls in and expects a royal

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welcome committee. Of course, nobody tells me he's there. I don't have a second to myself, the massages keep coming, phone left in the locker.

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 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.

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.

For a month, all the seasonal staff have been roped in to finish the work on the hotel, racking up unpaid overtime. He didn't sign up for this. So, after his shift, he's handing in his notice! So he turns on his heel and goes back to work without a glance, shoving a vague piste map at the Viking.

Humiliated by this rude welcome, worn out by his journey, the Viking 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

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the weary road warrior. And realise that this winter will be a far cry from the calm I'd imagined... But he holds me tight against him, and 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!

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Sunday Is Showtime!

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

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

The author — Except each piece of his advice creates a new problem that the next piece of advice claims to solve.

The Viking — That's because you sell yourself short. Instead of telling them where to stick it and walking out. 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 Viking — Is that why you turned it into a saga?

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

The author — To write their own chain of “good advice”, all the way to the absurd*.

The journalist — Let's move on.

The author — Are you sure?

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