

Mountains of Love

THE ANGLO ARABIAN INFUSED
ADVENTURE CONTINUES...

B O O K T W O

Mountains of Love

*A STORY OF MEMORIES, PAST LOVES
AND NEW ADVENTURES*

BRITT HOLLAND

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To Susi

*For your immediate wholehearted belief in me.
And for the incredible, colourful, and
transformational journey we are on.*

From one Soul Sister to another, xxx

Introduction

Vivika, the high flying, fun loving hospitality professional from *Between the Sheets*, attends *The Grand Reunion* in the Swiss Alps. Here she had lived, loved, and learnt with her fellow students, three decades earlier. Vivika wonders whether Bash, her old flame, will attend.

More than memories are rekindled on the Mountain of Love.

Vivika's adventures take a turn for the worse when she is connected with an illegal network.

Will she continue to believe in Bash, or is it time for her to smell the coffee?

As circumstances unfold, Vivika encounters pain and gain, until she begins to write her own future.

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Nothing ever happens without the love of my family and My Rock DM.

Thank you for being there, always.

Mountain Magic

The mountains always appeared closer when rain was forecast. They somehow became more solid and dramatic than on sunnier, cloudless days. As if a threat was materialising in an otherwise beautiful landscape. Even though the sunset coloured the rockface pink, a downpour was looming. You could smell the rain. It was imminent.

I usually enjoyed going out in the pouring rain. I found it refreshing and invigorating. The cleansing of nature, the touch of the falling raindrops on your skin, the rosy cheeks resulting from being in an oxygen infused outdoor environment all appealed to me. It connected you to your environment. Rather than being a visitor to life, you were immersed and an intrinsic part of it.

On this day, when the rains broke, we were told to stay inside. It was April 26, 1986, a mere month before graduation, the day of the Chernobyl Disaster.

The nuclear reactor in the former USSR had blown, and the radioactivity was penetrating the atmosphere, causing fear and

devastation to the immediate area and the rest of the world. The poisonous clouds of destruction travelled west to Europe, passing over the Swiss Alps in the canton of Valais.

Here we lived on top of the Magnificent Mountain, all 239 of us, from 42 different countries worldwide, in our own mini-world, in a former farming community.

Sick people suffering from tuberculosis and lung diseases used to convalesce in this place. Large sanatoria with impressively grand balconies the size of squash courts, able to accommodate the patients' beds, offered magnificent views of the resplendent *Dents du Midi*. These seven vertiginous summits of the iconic mountain range changed with the weather.

On some days, the tops of *Les Dents* were hidden from view. Like veiled beauties shrouded in mystery, the seven sisters occasionally offered a glimpse of their beautiful faces as the mist curtain lifted, only to be covered up again from prying eyes as the next robust cloud took charge and blocked out their presence.

The splendour and the glory of *Les Dents* became symbolic for the time of our lives when we lived, learnt, and loved on The Mountain, perched on top of the world in our little corner of French-speaking Switzerland, overlooking the Rhône Valley.

When my neighbour popped her head around the frosted glass screen separating our dorm balconies, I was getting some air.

"Bussi, what are you doing outside? We were told to stay in our rooms because of what happened in Ukraine."

"I am out of the rain, sheltered and not getting wet," I replied.

"Not good enough. Go back inside and let me bring the bottle of white from *Aigle Les Murailles*, the vineyard we always pass by when we drive up the mountain. I picked up a bottle from the supermarket. Let's see if it is any good."

"Great idea but bring the glass from your bathroom. I only

have one. Mine is full of toothpaste, so it may be a minty white wine. I ran out of washing up liquid in a failed attempt to get that red wine stain out of my ski suit. I should have chucked a bottle of white at it when it happened, but that seemed like a waste of wine.”

“Pass your glass to me,” Maddie said. “I have washing powder I use to do my undies. Give me a few minutes as they are soaking in the sink. I will rinse my underwear and then wash both our glasses and pop over with the vino.”

I went to get the glass and passed it to Maddie.

“Here you go, my darling neighbour. Promise not to dunk it into your washing. I love you, but I’m not keen on the idea of my glass being swirled around with your smalls. Who knows who else has been there?”

“Buss, what an outrageous insinuation. I am more well behaved than some of our fellow friends here on this mountaintop, I can tell you,” she laughed.

“See you in a minute. No need to knock, just come on in.”

“Will do, Viv. Close the balcony door, though, *chica*, because I am sure it is not just the rain, but also the air that carries the lurgy. And for today at least, we should follow instructions.” Then she added, “Not that we follow the rules normally. See you in a few.”

With that, Maddie disappeared out of sight. I went inside to straighten out the duvet on my single bed and light a few candles which I kept stashed in my bottom drawer. The Dutch tradition of lighting candles, whatever the occasion may be, was deeply embedded in me.

I am a blend of cultures. My mum is British, and my father was born in the Netherlands, where I spent most of my growing years. The Dutch habit is to light candles, not just on wintery nights or when guests call round. It appeals to me. Spreading light and creating a positive atmosphere is so simple. Even if

you are by yourself, the vibe and energy change with a bit of candlelight.

All the rooms in The Annex were identical in layout. A single bed, a small bathroom with a shower, a desk, two wooden chairs, and a compact wardrobe. Once a week, we stripped our beds and bundled our dirty linen into a ball for the Yugoslavian lady to collect. We left the mattress and pillow covers outside our doors on a Saturday morning to exchange them for fresh ones. I was never sure why the housekeeping manager wanted us to deliver our sheets on Saturday morning, of all mornings. After we had all been out on Friday night, you might well be forgiven for not remembering. If you missed your Saturday *pick up slot*, you were stuffed. You had to wait for the following week.

Some of the diehard party students never made the Saturday pick up and ended up in dubious covers that they slept in during the entire term, and they were not always sleeping alone.

During half term, hygiene standards were reset. This was achieved by thoroughly purging, disinfecting, and blitzing all rooms. Many of the accommodations turned into veritable pigsties during term. Crisp packets, condoms - mostly used, empty wine bottles and discarded cotton pads with makeup on them littered the rooms. Sometimes a hidden and forgotten joint was found; always a delight for the cleaners.

A knock, or rather, a kick on the door.

"Come in," I said.

Maddie entered, holding the wine bottle, a corkscrew and both our toothbrush glasses.

"I thought I told you no need to knock, or kick, I should say."

"I know, but I am still half German, Bussi, and it is embedded in me. I may be a bit Italian in other ways, but my Germanic

side surfaces when things must be done a certain manner. Then my Italian half challenges my German side. I end up being a bit mixed up,” she laughed. “And as for my kicking instead of knocking, I have my hands full, so that’s why.”

“Come in, my dear. I know the feeling of being a blend of two cultures. My British mother thinks it is OK to use only her fork when having supper at home. My Dutch dad says that fork and knife are required, except when you are eating chunky fries or *patat*, then it is fine to use fingers, which my mother thinks is unacceptable. My mum puts the salt on the side of the plate, and my father sprinkles it over his food. In Dutch culture, you put both your hands on the table after eating, while in England, you put them in your lap under the table. No wonder we are mixed up. It is also a great thing to use cultural differences to justify your manners, depending on what suits you best at the time. Lucky we are in Switzerland, which has a reputation for being neutral. Besides, with forty-two nationalities, we can lock into whatever cultural rule we like. Mix it up, I say! Now let’s try that white you brought round.”

Maddie is from Berlin. She enlightened me by telling me that a *Berliner* is a doughnut with jam on the inside. By using *ein* before the word *Berliner*, JF Kennedy mistakenly called himself a jelly doughnut during his famous speech delivered on June 26, 1963, against the geopolitical backdrop of the Berlin Wall, when he said, ‘*Ich bin ein Berliner.*’

After the Kennedy Story, Maddie always returned from her holidays with a large box of *Berliners*, which we would chomp through over tea as we caught up with each other’s news. It became a ritual. We called each other a ‘*Berliner*’ or ‘doughnut’ if either of us was behaving like a numpty or if we did something seriously unintelligent or ridiculous.

In terms of education, having our very own ‘United Nations’ on top of one mountain was as important as our hospitality management. Our day to day life included learning about and respecting intercultural habits. Sometimes when we returned from a party just before dawn, Ibrahim and Omar could be found on their individual prayer mats facing the direction of Mecca. No matter what time they made it back from the disco, they were committed to praying Fajr. I was in awe of that level of discipline. No matter how hard you played, as a Muslim, you prayed. We were all different due to our backgrounds, beliefs, and upbringing, though, in the scheme of things, we were incredibly similar. As are all humans.

That was when I learnt about Islam as well as about other faiths.

One day, Lisa refused Maddie and my entry into her room. We were both munching on chocolate-covered biscuits as we arrived at Lisa’s place to complete a team task, brandishing the rest of the roll to share with the team.

“No cookies allowed,” Lisa said. “So sorry, darlings, I can’t let you in.” She added, “No crumbs.”

Maddie and I were confused.

“It’s Passover, my dears. I tried my best to clean my room for the occasion. Trying to make my Jewish mother proud, hundreds of miles away from this mountaintop. She will never believe me when I tell her, so I am not entirely clear as to who I am doing this for.” She laughed. “Though the big guy in the sky will notice, I guess.”

“We know you never let a carb pass your lips, so we will make ourselves and our cookies scarce. Sorry, we didn’t know. Let’s change our plan and meet at mine,” I said.

That’s how I learnt about Passover as well as other traditions and occasions.

Albert, a fellow student, used to have his own habit. While we were having our morning coffee in the bar, he always ordered a whiskey. This was not culturally motivated but rather an unfortunate addiction that we were all worried about. Albert was a lovely chap, but it seemed that whatever his pain was, he could only dull it down with his daily fix of an early morning potent potion. Little did we know that we would lose Albert prematurely, as well as some of our other most colourful and kind friends, for a variety of sad reasons.

That was life as we learnt it the hard, and only, way.

We had regular events that we called National Nights. During those evenings, the students from a particular country or region clubbed together to present their food, dances, delicacies, culture, and traditions. Our fellow students from Asia performed magnificent dances during Asian Night. Some of the students sat in crouched positions and moved massive bamboo poles, between which the other Asian students danced in a most impressive ritualistic performance.

The key dancer, Anis, sparkled and shone.

Anis was my idea of a true creative. He was an old soul with a young artistic heart. He seduced boundaries to create beauty; he was not a hostage to strict tradition. Although his outfit was predominantly of an Asian design, his silk clothes matched with the many deep gold coloured bangles and sequined turban, evoking an Arabian Nights' kind of vibe. Anis moved elegantly between the bamboo poles, graciously yet deliberately controlling his limbs, synchronising his hand and finger movements simultaneously. He could be described as quiet, timid even, until he was dancing and performing to his heart's content, eyes shining as he moved.

After Anis's mesmerising rendition, an impressive Chinese dragon snaked through the canteen. The Chinese Embassy had sponsored the evening and included this beast of bright greens and reds.

The Dragon Dance was typically performed by experienced dancers who manipulated the figure. They would have poles at regular intervals along the length of the dragon. As Dr Google informed me, the dragon dance is believed to bring good luck. The dragon is supposed to symbolise great power, dignity, and wisdom. The dancers are meant to simulate imagined movements of the river spirit in an undulating manner.

Ayla's deliberate movement led the beast's front, but the tail-end had Kim continuously trying to get back into the meandering creature made of cloth. Kim was the last of five students to manipulate the snake movements of the dragon; he was also the largest and least nimble.

We all thought it was hilarious, of course, and encouraged him, "Come on, Kim, catch up with the ass of the Dragon!"

In the end, he gave up, and the tail end of the dragon was dragged limply along the floor. Kim had given up on his responsibility of bringing luck through dance and went to indulge in some Dim Sum instead, along with a bottle of *Tiger Beer* from Singapore. Also sponsored. I must say the Asian Embassies had come up trumps. The event had been a total hit.

The canteen area was usually drab, though, for the event, it was decorated with lanterns of every colour and size and was absolutely transformed. The Asian Night was topped off with a magnificent firework display, thanks again to the Chinese connections. The burst of colours in the dark sky reflected in our eyes as we stood side by side on the oversized balconies, looking up at the exploding colours. It was on this magical mountain in the Swiss Alps that Forever Friendships were forged.

It was strange how I ended up at the Hotel School. I had no interest whatsoever in working in hotels. Operations, logistics, standard operating procedures, rules, and regulations were the very things that stifled me. Just the thought of them made my throat go dry. So boring!

My personal interest was *languages*. I enjoyed French and Spanish, more so than German, which I felt was rigid and controlled. Spanish had flair and appeal. Spanish men sounded as if they had drunk whiskey and been smoking heavy tobacco since early adolescence. Their voices reverberated deeply as they spoke, their words projected with great speed and passion. Then, they'd stop to inhale their cigarettes. And give you *that look*. The one that left you speechless.

The Spanish know how to communicate beyond language. Passionately and eloquently. I was mesmerised by their ability to make you listen and convey what was never said. The way people interpret words or never use them, yet still communicate with dramatic effect, has always fascinated me.

During my time at Hotel Management School, I was also introduced to Arabic. Maybe that new interest had more to do with the Iraqi-Syrian guy who'd caught my fancy. He did teach me a thing or two along the way, though perhaps not precisely related to the spoken language.

Coco, who was one of my friends growing up, was petite. She was 150.5 cm tall, as she often liked to remind us. That half a centimetre made all the difference in her book. Her hallmarks were determination, grit, drive, and perseverance. Coco wanted to study hotel management and went on a mission to find her school. She researched available institutions, shortlisted them, made appointments and then set off to drive herself from

Holland to Switzerland to meet the Directors and student bodies of all the shortlisted establishments. She concluded her choice and signed up. When Coco told me about her selected school and showed me the brochure, I knew. The energy oozed from the pages of the booklet. This was it. Not a university in the Netherlands which spelt ‘same, same,’ to me, but an adventure, a new horizon, a welcome proposition. I spoke to my mother and showed her the pamphlet and the curriculum. As well as the prices, which were as steep as the surrounding mountains.

My mum looked me in the eye and said, “Vivi, darling, I think this is it. There is no way we could agree to this in normal circumstances, but I am working at a well-paid job that will continue for some time. So, if daddy agrees and if you are truly committed to this, we can perhaps find a way to make this work.”

I was over the moon. As if all the pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place. I knew I was privileged to start my further education and change my surroundings and gain new experiences.

My parents drove me to Switzerland. It was a nine-hour journey from where we lived in Amsterdam. My parents naturally sat in the front, and I sat in the back, snoozing, chatting, and looking around. On the motorway in Germany, a massive truck was driving next to us. From his vantage point up high, the lorry driver looked down into our car. He saw me sitting on the back seat with my feet up on the chair in front of me, with my dress hitched up for comfort. Naturally, I was not expecting anyone to observe me. So, when I clocked him leering down at me, I immediately gave him one of my ‘*go and play in the traffic, old pervert*’ glances and at the same time gave him my pronounced middle finger. I was pleased that my father picked up speed though he was not aware of what was going on in the backseat of

the car and the lorry driver beside us. The sad-head behind the wheel seemed to be warming up to this *Motorway Intermezzo*. We managed to move ahead, and I thought the annoyance had passed until the bloke caught up with us again and tried to stay alongside our car. My father and mother noticed the continued presence of the truck and started commenting. In the end, I had to come clean that I had given him the bird. My dad eventually managed to shake him off when he veered off the motorway at the last minute to get petrol, and the truck continued onwards.

I think we didn't really need any petrol; it was a break to reset and for my parents to reinforce that there were going to be 'All-Sorts' out there and keep my cool and pick my fights. That I should think before I act. Spontaneous responses have always been my problem. I am a bit impromptu at times, shall we say.

We snaked our way up the mountain towards where the school was located. As we arrived, many people were coming and going. I saw one girl, smoking, with her arm around a guy, both holding tennis racquets and laughing. That was H el ene.

Many years later, I would become her neighbour in Amsterdam.

Expensive looking cars dropped students off. In retrospect, I think I was one of the few whose family didn't own an island or run a coffee emporium, oil field or a Fortune500 company. I noted there seemed to be a level of wealth, but it didn't threaten or overwhelm me. We were brought up in comfort and with all we needed. We had friends and family who lived at a higher standard, materialistically speaking, and those who had far less. It was never a thing in our family. All people are equal in spirit, soul, creed, background, and heritage. I was not impressed nor phased by wealth nor a lack of it. I was simply grateful for having been allowed to become whoever I was going to be eventually and blossom into being me.

My parents looked around the school. They met some of the other parents and were introduced to some of the teachers. We went for a *good-luck* dinner. Coco joined us. Afterwards, we said our goodbyes which were a bit hard, but Coco took me to settle into the room we would be sharing. My parents set off down the mountain to their hotel. They planned to drive back to Holland in the early morning.

Brand New World

I woke up early and stepped out onto the balcony. The mountains across the valley merged with the apple green grass. It was the colour of well-ripened Granny Smiths and looked artificial, like the grass in a trainset. I imagined this vibrant tone of green only to be possible if it was manmade. That, I realised soon enough, was flawed thinking. As I stepped out into the world, I became increasingly aware of the grandeur of Mother Nature. She combines purples and oranges and puts together green and blue hues and other unlikely pairings that clash in an artificial world. In the majestic natural setting, however, anything Mother Nature puts together makes sense, gives energy and is always in balance. Why do we not learn that from a young age, I wonder?

Appreciating the obvious early on was a joy that should not be postponed or realised too late in life.

Coco and I shared a room. Even though I was keen on my own space, we made it work. One day she sat me down and offered me a cup of coffee brewed in her bright red coffee percolator, that made the sound of a clapped out car with a hole in the exhaust.