

Forever Connected

THE ANGLO ARABIAN INFUSED ADVENTURE CONTINUES...

BOOK THREE

Forever Connected

*A STORY ABOUT GOOD ENERGY
AND FOREVER FRIENDSHIPS*

BRITT HOLLAND

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Contents

INTRODUCTION	9
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	11
HOUSE ON THE BLUFF	13
MADDIE'S ARRIVAL	27
PLUNGING IN	32
CRISTINA	39
JIGGED JOURNEY	42
RUDE AWAKENING	51
CRATE IDEAS	58
UNEASE LOOMING	63
HOLLYWOOD HUMPHREY	68
POOLSIDE PARADISE	72
HARSH HOMECOMING	78
CRISTINA CRISIS	86
SLITHERING SNAKE	94
DAFFODIL DAPHNE	101
FLOWING FEELING	111
DAISY ORACLE	116
MIDNIGHT MERLIN	121
CLARITY IN DARKNESS	130
OPERATION OBSERVATION	138
EVIL DEATH	149
ONE FUNERAL AND A MARRIAGE	156
WEDDING WITNESS	166
BUSY BRAIN	173
WRITE IT FORWARD	182

BEEN WITH BEN	191
EL PADRE	200
PORTUGAL POTENTIAL	208
PARTING WORDS	215
EUROPE BOUND	219
VILLA VISTA	223
LIFE'S A BEACH	229
FOREVER CONNECTED	241
INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR	249
ALSO BY BRITT HOLLAND	251

To Sarah

*Girls with Curls
Loud and Lovely
Funny and Fearless
Peas in a Pod
Forever Connected*

Introduction

Vivika, the hospitality professional from *Between the Sheets* who attended The Grand Reunion in *Mountains of Love*, travels to Costa Rica. Vivika finds herself co-owning a coffee plantation and meets handsome Humphrey. Against the vibrant back-drop of resplendent nature, Vivi embraces every *Pura Vida* day and her forever friendships. When Vivika attends the bi-annual Pussy Posse reunion in Portugal, old flame Bash, revs the powerful engine of his olive golden Aston Martin. Ready to go full throttle.

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From the bottom of my heart, thank you Charlotte.

House on the Bluff

The view from The House on the Bluff was the same, though the circumstances were not.

As I looked across the Pacific Ocean, I watched the sun sinking over the horizon. The sky was streaked with raspberry, tangerine and blueberry swirls, like ripples of ice cream as the day melted into the night.

Twenty-five years ago, I first came to Costa Rica with my Pussy Posse pals, Annie, and H el ene, to see Amilcar and Theo. I had met both boys when we attended hotelschool together, in the Swiss Alps.

During our visit, we were invited to see Amilcar at *La Hacienda*. This property had belonged to Amilcar's late father, *El Comandante*, the King of illegal trade in pre-Columbian art.

The coffee plantation was about half an hour's drive inland. The spectacular footprint of *La Hacienda* and its land encompassed green hill after rolling green hill until the land rose into a steep cliff and subsequently plunged into the ocean. The final bluff marked the natural border of the estate as it disappeared into the Pacific and the endless horizon beyond.

Theo was my Dutch friend, a *Token Tico*, living in Costa Rica since he was a pre-teenager. He was like a brother to me, and my hero. He always knew what to do in a time of crisis, or so I thought. Theo didn't take instructions from anyone. Though he responded to the nods and the nudges from Amilcar, who was not the type of person to command others. Very unlike his feared and ferocious father, *El Comandante*.

As well as Theo and Amilcar, I'd met Bash, the son of yet another art smuggler, at the hospitality management school in Switzerland.

Recently, I'd seen Theo and Bash again at a Grand Reunion in the Swiss Alps. Unfortunately, Amilcar had been unable to attend due to his rapidly deteriorating health.

Following the reunion, Theo asked me to come to Costa Rica after a trip to Spain, where I'd experienced some unresolved adventures. Amilcar had also especially requested for me to come to visit him.

To Say Goodbye.

When I arrived, Amilcar was laid up in his bed, placed in the middle of *La Hacienda Sueño en el Cielo's* lobby. He was unplugged from all his support devices. Without words, he made it clear that he wanted to see the jade man, an amulet that Theo had given to me twenty-five years ago, in that very same spot where Amilcar now lay. My little man of wisdom was nestled between my bosoms, as usual. Here, he absorbed the temperature of my skin, and his vibe was in synch with my heart.

I placed the precious piece in Amilcar's upturned palm. He lifted it to his lips with all the energy he could muster.

Without saying a word, Amilcar gently kissed the little man, then put him into my palm and whispered, '*Vaya con Dios*', May God be with you.

Theo and I held Amilcar's hands and each other's.

Rain clouds darkened the sky, and the downpour started, pounding on the roof above and soaking all the vegetation around us.

After some time, Amilcar closed his eyes and drew his last breath as the sound of thunder rocked *La Hacienda*.

The three of us were now reduced to two. In earthly terms, at least.

Theo sobbed like a boy as the rain subsided and the sun came out.

As I looked out over the plantation, a perfect double rainbow appeared and framed the House on the Bluff in the distance. It was then that Theo gave me the letter that Amilcar had wanted to give me himself but had not been able to. Part of the letter read:

I won't keep talking about the past, especially since I have now left you for a new future. But to make sure that Hacienda Sueño en el Cielo remains loved and cared for, I am leaving the estate to you and Theo. The accumulated riches of art my father stashed here, I give to Theo. It cannot be traded to the network, but it can be sold for good, and to support sound business under the Loving Little Lids Social Enterprise work.

When Theo gave you the little Mayan Man all those years ago, it was by my instruction. I told Theo I wanted him to hang the magical amulet around the neck of the person he trusted and would always. Theo chose you. He has known for all this time that the shared ownership would be with someone he cares for.'

From then on, it was up to Theo and me to continue what Amilcar had started all those years ago. After *El Comandante* had died, Amilcar had gained the freedom to do what his heart desired.

To do good.

Some days after the ashes' ceremony and our final farewell to Amilcar, I stood in The House on the Bluff, gazing into the unknown.

The topmost house was more regal than the other three dwellings dotted around below. The dominant structure stood like a mother eagle watching over her three chicks. Perched on stilts, with dark wooden tropical floors, *Casa Curtis* occupied the most elevated position on top of the Bluff, off the beaten track and hidden by dense rainforest.

Howler monkeys, the largest New World monkeys, voiced their loud calls as they passed by. The spider monkeys, with their disproportionately long limbs, flew like agile and oversized, furry, long-legged arachnids through the sky. Sloths moved as if they were in reversed slow motion and dazzling frogs sat in the sunshine, billowing their cheeks. A host of other creatures, including *serpientes venenosas*, the dreaded poisonous snakes, occupied the dense rainforest as well as an infinite number of insects, including mosquitoes, responsible for the killer dengue fever.

Winston Curtis had lived in The House on the Bluff with his son Arturo, or in *Casa Curtis*, as the house was affectionately known by locals. Father and son had moved from Nicaragua when the boy was in his teens. Arturo had started his early adult life as a coffee picker on Amilcar's estate where he fell in love with the wonders of nature. Amilcar supported the young chap to pursue his dreams to become a conservationist.

Twenty years after Winston and Arturo had moved into the House on the Bluff, Arturo was found face down, at the bottom of the cliff, his satchel and notebook by his side. His binoculars were still around his neck, and there were two clear puncture marks where the snake's venom had penetrated his tanned skin.

It would never be clear whether Arturo's death was due to falling down the cliff due to the snakebite or the subsequent effect of the poison penetrating his blood.

It didn't matter; Arturo was dead.

The only consolation to his grieving father was that Arturo died doing what he loved, and that gave him a sense of peace. The rest of Curtis's family had suffered a torturous and unimaginable death all those years ago in Nicaragua.

One day, Amilcar had recounted to Theo and me the story of how he had first met with Winston and Arturo Curtis.

Amilcar had arrived back home from a trip when the family driver gave him a letter from his father. Amilcar had been stunned to hear from *El Comandante*, who never knew the whereabouts of Amilcar and was rarely in contact.

His father never paid any attention to Amilcar. Clearly, he did not care about his only son.

In the letter, *El Comandante* wrote that he needed someone to be employed as plantation manager *urgentamente*. The coffee trade was a decoy for *El Comandante's* Pre-Columbian art smuggling and a Central American base for the underground drug network that spanned continents. Amilcar was told to find a manager for the plantation to strengthen the illusion that there was a legitimate coffee business at *La Hacienda* and avoid prying eyes and investigations.

El Comandante ordered Amilcar to find someone urgently, saying, "Anyone will do. But get it done. I need a Coffee Plantation Manager. There is no time to waste."

For the most part, Amilcar was left entirely to his own devices. If any smuggled art needed shifting for his dad, Theo would take care of it, rather than Amilcar, who suffered terrible health. Theo was both capable and willing to support his friend

Amilcar, whom he deeply loved and respected, ever since they had got to know each other well in Switzerland.

Amilcar was the brains and the heart; Theo had the guts and the energy.

As his driver turned into the driveway of *La Hacienda*, Amilcar noticed a commotion at the wrought-iron entrance gates, which were elaborately decorated with monkeys and birds.

Like the gateway to paradise, he mused, though that would be a debatable suggestion.

The guards were shouting at two men.

Perhaps they were looking for work.

It was a frequent occurrence, as coffee pickers were fired at one farm and sought work at the next. Amilcar ordered the driver to stop and told the guards to back off. Amilcar looked at the two men, or rather, an older man and what looked like a teenage boy. They had an air of desperation about them. He saw the haunted look on the older man's face, though he could not see the boy's expression as he was looking down at the ground.

The young chap stood with his shoulders slumped. His head bowed like a flower that had no water, slowly dying, parched and limp, without the vibrance associated with young life.

Amilcar got out of the car and opened the door, inviting the man and the boy to join him for some food and coffee. With a respectful nod, the older man silently agreed and ushered the boy into the car. Amilcar noticed their lack of belongings. They were dirty, their eyes dull, and their faces grief-stricken. He had seen men like them before, who'd been fired by a slave-driving coffee landowner, desperate for jobs.

But these men were somehow different.

The strong scent of sharp, rank sweat pervaded the car. Amilcar opened the window to let in some oxygen. It

quickly became unbearable to breathe in the stale stench that cut like an acid knife in his throat.

Amilcar's heart lifted at the thought that he might be able to do something for the teenage boy and the man, who may well have been close to the age of his father. Or perhaps considerably less. After all, a harsh existence drains a person.

El Comandante needed a manager. And God had presented him with one.

The car snaked its way up the driveway through the hills of green, finally coming to a standstill. Amilcar got out and introduced himself properly. Winston Curtis put his large hand, the texture of sandpaper, into Amilcar's, soft as silk. Amilcar summoned the butler to prepare some food and drink. He stepped away to discretely utter some other instructions that the man and the boy could not hear.

Amilcar's frame was frail, so his clothes would fit the teenage boy but not the older man. He was encouraged by the thought that the man would fit into the clothes of *El Comandante*.

Winston Curtis told Amilcar they were looking to secure work at the *La Pantación de Café* as coffee pickers. On probing more profoundly, it appeared that they had worked in a different plantation further north, just south of the Nicaraguan border. Both Winston and Arturo had failed to pick the daily required amount of coffee. Compared to the other more experienced workers, their work fell short of expectations. After three days, they were ordered to leave.

La Hacienda had never been run as a coffee plantation. Amilcar had sometimes wondered what it would be like to have a successful coffee business. He wished he could help those in need and offer them jobs that would generate an adequate income. Amilcar mused how different this would be to the dirty business that his father *El Comandante* ran, in which greed set

the standard.

Amilcar understood that coffee pickers led tough lives. He empathised with the workers, whose sweat soaked into their shirts, leaving their clothes feeling damp, heavy, and cold against their perspiring skin.

Theirs was a relentless and unforgiving existence.

Only the mature, bright red coffee cherries could be picked, and those had to be selected one by one. The ripe red cherries were twisted to the left, then carefully pulled off the branch to ensure the green bud stayed on the tree. That bud would be the next coffee cherry.

Most pickers managed to fill seven to eight baskets a day, equating to eight pounds of coffee, earning the worker around eight dollars a day.

This paltry sum was less than one dollar per hour or one dollar per basket.

Winston explained in Spanish to Amilcar that both he and his son had only been able to pick three or four baskets in their recent workplace. Three days was simply insufficient time to learn the skill and speed of coffee picking, and so they got told to leave. They had walked for days to get to *La Hacienda Sueño en el Cielo*. They were confronted by hostile guards who wanted to turn them away before they even got through the gates. They were only saved by Amilcar's timely arrival.

Amilcar asked Curtis where his wife and the rest of his children were living. It was inconceivable in the Catholic Latin American culture to only have one son, although Amilcar himself was the exception personified. As an only child, he was the object of stigma. Especially as he was not outwardly strong and considered a failure by his father, that bully of a man.

As Amilcar asked about the family, Curtis, and Arturo both looked up. The boy then glanced back at the ground. It was the

first time Amilcar saw Arturo's pupils, which seemed to dilate before dying again.

Curtis said, "We have no family anymore, except for each other. In the recent mudslide in Nicaragua, we lost my wife, Arturo's mother, and our three girls. They were swallowed up before our eyes as our house collapsed and were carried down that river of black hell. As the only two men in our family, we were unable to save them. We were coming back from cutting wood, and we saw the nightmare unfold. The rains at the beginning of the season were sudden and torrential. We heard them scream as we saw their bodies engulfed, and they were sucked under into the thick mud, which took everything in its wake. Nobody was saved. We failed them. May God keep them in his eternal peace."

Curtis bowed his head.

Sitting across the table from Amilcar, both father and son looked like ghosts.

They were mere shadows of humans, thought Amilcar. So frail and small. Desperate and sad.

Amilcar felt sick. He lived in the lap of luxury. He may not have his health, and he did not have a family, but Amilcar could only count his blessings compared to Winston and Arturo. These men had lost loved ones, all in one go. Mother Nature had relentlessly taken them. Without warning, discernible reason, or apology.

"How could Nature be referred to as Mother?" Amilcar once asked me. "Father Nature maybe would be more appropriate. At least in times of cruelty, nature should change gender."

I remember feeling horrified when he told me that. My own parents were caring and loving. Different in their individual ways, yet the same in terms of unconditional and expressive love. Not everyone was that blessed, I realised. Amilcar's father

was a sadistic bully, greedy, opportunistic, relentless and, in a word, evil. As for his mother, she had been Amilcar's everything. He had loved her deeply, but she had passed.

Amilcar offered Curtis and Arturo jobs, starting the next day. He advised them they could live in The House on the Bluff. Amilcar explained that the house was a long way up but that Winston and Arturo could live there rent-free if they were up to scaling the steps. Amilcar pointed from their spot in the lobby to their new home across the hills of green. It stood majestically against the setting sun, illuminated by a halo of gold.

Winston broke down and wept. Then he kissed Amilcar's hand. Arturo did not respond. He was still frozen by recent events, buried alive in grief.

By the time Curtis and Arturo arrived at their new home, the place was spotless and stocked with food. Clothes had been placed in the cupboard, laundered and clean, straight from *El Comandante's* wardrobe and from Amilcar's previous closet.

Winston and Arturo worked on the coffee plantation, taking their time to learn the ropes. Amilcar enjoyed having them around. He could see that Winston really embraced the job. He was always trying to improve the coffee, strengthen the shrubs, and condition the soil. Arturo spent most of his time with his nose in books about animals and plants. Amilcar could see the healing in the boy as he engaged with nature. Every day after picking coffee cherries, Arturo explored the rainforest beyond the estate.

One day Amilcar spoke to Winston and asked whether it would be okay for Arturo to spend part of his time mapping the animals and plants on and around the estate. Amilcar said he had wanted to have the logging of species done for some

time and would pay Arturo to document his findings. Winston knew Amilcar had spotted his son's passion and was grateful to Amilcar. They had developed a close bond. Amilcar gave Arturo a pair of high-quality binoculars, as well as writing pads, pens, a camera, and a satchel, to keep his work in as he roamed around the estate.

El Comandante came to *La Hacienda* some months after Winston and Arturo had started work. Arturo was in the rain-forest tracking animals. Curtis Senior was called to present himself to *El Comandante*. There was no need for it, as the plantation was starting to show signs of progress under Winston's care. Still, Amilcar's father took pleasure in abusing people and putting them down. When *El Comandante* had finally finished his tirade and insults, Amilcar found Winston in a corner. He looked once more like the shadow of a man he had seen when the two men first met arrived at *La Hacienda*.

Amilcar's heart bled for him.

Both Winston and Arturo were now like true family to Amilcar. His father never was. Amilcar vowed he would end the endless torture Winston and Arturo had endured. Amilcar swore he would put a lid on his own relentless suffering at the hands of his father, too.

Within days Amilcar booked a trip to Switzerland, asking Winston and Arturo to take care of the estate in his absence, with the help of Theo, if needed.

It was not long after Amilcar's departure that *El Comandante* was reported missing. Years later, his body was found sealed in a Mayan grave, which *El Comandante* had once pillaged himself.

Karma, Amilcar simply said to anyone who asked.

Amilcar's first 'clean-up' had been accomplished on his

journey to creating a better world. Starting at home.

Amilcar knew he did not have a long life ahead of him. However, he intended to make a positive difference while on earth and set up a structure where he could continue what he'd started once he was gone.

With his father out of the way, Amilcar put his mind to developing the *Loving Little Lids Social Enterprise*. An organisation aimed to help people and the planet, using the lids of cans and other bottle tops to make exclusive designer bags, curtains, artwork, and fabric from waste materials. Amilcar's friends, Wai and Usnavy, Nab for short, started working with Amilcar back in 2002.

Amilcar's mission was to provide a means of support to those less fortunate to survive and thrive.

The House on the Bluff was reached by climbing the one hundred and two steps. A small rickety lift chugged into action at the press of a button the size and colour of a ripe tomato. This contraption was only used for luggage or bags of groceries. Unsafe for humans, yet helpful in elevating supplies to the house, the lift had a one-square meter metal surface, allowing for one large suitcase or a few bags. It reminded me of the cogwheel train that used to take us up the mountain from the Rhône Valley during our time at school in Switzerland. Here we had met up recently after thirty years.

Within mere months of the hospitality school Grand Reunion, I had ended up in Costa Rica. On the top of yet another mountain, in a different continent altogether.

The grizzly silver jagged light dazzled in the dark black sky, sending waves of shock through the atmosphere. The deep voice of thunder followed, almost immediately, after the flash had lit

up the world, as the gods collided in the pitch dark heavens. Angry skies were particularly prevalent during the green season, from late April to early December. Storms and power cuts were near-daily events. *Casa Curtis* regularly got hit by lightning, and the electricity often failed.

On sunnier days, the elevated and west facing position of *Casa Curtis* allowed for breath-taking views over the Pacific Ocean. At sunset, the perfect golden sun sank like a glowing ball into the vast expanse of water, painting the sky in purples and pinks. Sometimes bold and pronounced, like an artistic, abstract painting. Other times, watered down and diluted like impressionist scribbles across a canvas of sky.

During the morning, the sun rose behind the house through Curtis' east-facing bedroom window. When Curtis used to stand on the balcony, he would look back over the plantation that he considered home, in a place he had grown to love. Both *La Hacienda* and The House on the Bluff had become his sanctuaries.

In addition to finding a home, Winston Curtis felt he had gained a son in Amilcar. Arturo, too, had gained an older brother, who looked out for him and had only his very best interests at heart. Their bond was profound and a blessing to both. And Amilcar, as he told me, got to know what it was like to have a person who loved him like a father.

When Arturo was found dead, Amilcar built a chapel on the grounds of La Hacienda to allow for Winston and himself to pay their respects and for Arturo to rest in peace at home.

Curtis Coffee, as the locals started to call him, continued to develop the plantation and lead an ever-growing team of workers. Some came to *La Hacienda* as skilled labourers. They heard that people who worked there would receive a fair wage and

would be treated with respect. Word got out, and coffee pickers from other plantations sought employment in this good place. Those who were inexperienced pickers, just like Winston and Arturo had been, would be given a chance to gain the skill of harvesting coffee cherries without fearing the loss of their jobs.

Winston groomed a second in command, Merlin, who appeared to be both meticulous and reliable. Merlin had been convicted of murder, but Winston was quite convinced that Merlin had been used as a scapegoat, just like so many others he knew. Curtis wanted to give Merlin a chance, just like Amilcar had given to him.

After listening to Curtis' plea, Amilcar agreed without hesitation for Merlin to join the growing Coffee Family.

A few months later, Winston died.

Curtis went to sleep in his home and never woke up. He died from natural causes, the doctor said.

Winston was buried next to his son in the particular spot, from where you could see the sun sink into the sea. Every day.

Forever. Or until the sun no longer sets in the west.