

CHAPTER 7

FLY ME TO THE MOON

May 20, 2019
Mont Dauphin

The wind caresses my body and whispers in my ear like a lover as I stand at the edge of the rocky promontory. Here, near the roof of the world, peaks brush against an endless expanse of sky the color of faded blue jeans. While far below on the valley floor, the broken road follows the river, swollen and raging with the spring thaw. Arms spread wide, I sway in time to the rhythm of the winds. Before me the void beckons, and for a second, I'm tempted.

Would I fall gently, buffeted like a leaf on the streams of air that flow across the skies? Or, will I ride the thermal winds for a time, soaring so high that I graze the ribbons of clouds that sail overhead before hurtling back towards earth like a hawk dropping down on its prey in the valley?

The first step into the unknown is always the hardest. Nevertheless, I know what waits for me if I stay here: loneliness and the grinding desperation of a hand to mouth existence—the village's food supplies won't last forever.

No one can leave by car. The series of massive earthquakes that have rocked the French Alps these past months have caused impassable landslides. The scouting parties describe roads buried

under mountains of rubble for a hundred kilometers between here and the coast.

I'm desperate to leave. It feels like time is running out, but trying to leave on foot isn't a viable option. Since the last scouting party is still missing—it's been ten days now—no one is willing to leave the safety of Mont Dauphin. They are frightened of what roams outside the walls of their fortified mountain redoubt.

I don't know the trails, and if I make the attempt alone I'd get lost in a maze of forgotten footpaths. Lost, I would be easy prey for the bands of sociopaths and cannibals that have been terrorizing these mountains since the spring thaw.

I've had enough intimate encounters with monsters this past year to last me a lifetime. Of course, my lifetime may be shorter than I think! Remembering Slava, that psychopathic Russian oligarch last seen turning the Principality of Monaco into his own private torture chamber, summons an icy finger of fear to caress the nape of my neck. Remembering the fanged and tattooed assailant I shot in Limone brings on a cold sweat and the impulse to hide.

It's never a good idea to get mixed up with sociopaths. If we ever return to the Riviera, I can count on Slava's enmity. Not only had I helped his mistress, my old frenemy Anjuli del Solaire, escape his sadistic control, but I'd introduced her to his rivals, the Emiratis supporting and protecting the House of Monaco and their gold-plated principality. Perhaps worse, Anjuli's departure meant the termination of the money stream that she and her Sun Center cult were diverting to Slava's use from the many rich and spiritually fragile residents of Monaco.

Ah...those absurd, unhappy, decadent, confusing months prior to my flight and Julian's return. Just *how* had I gotten mixed up in the political intrigue that fractured the principality? Boredom, perhaps? Curiosity, certainly. Nosiness, regrettably. But mostly, I think it was romance, with an admixture of lust and desperation. At a time when I lost hope that Julian would—or could—return to me, and even feared him dead, I'd fallen for a beautiful, powerful

and dangerous man: Abdul, by name; an American-educated businessman who was Sheik Sakr bin Zayed's senior advisor. What else was I supposed to do when I saw my old "friend" Lucy—pardon me, she now insists on "Anjuli"—at the mercy of Slava, but connect her to the only friends I knew who could help her? And I hated and feared Slava for good reason, so I was only too glad to relay her offer of information about his intended palace coup to Abdul. And, really, I don't begrudge Anjuli her place in what used to be my side of Abdul's bed. It was an inevitable outcome of his masterminding her escape.

Ah, Abdul. How should I properly describe thee? Sexy, dangerous, and enigmatic don't even come close to doing you justice!

Abdul offered me his protection the first night we met. He'd dangled the promise of a new life of luxury and safety, far from the disintegrating world of Monaco, in the Emirati fortress on the Arabian Gulf. All I had to do was become his mistress, and ignore the existence of his wife and two young sons.

For a time, I did accept Abdul's protection and lost myself in his charisma and power. When Julian seemed lost forever, Abdul was the only thing standing between me and despair.

As my world was spinning faster and faster out of control, Abdul was the only person with the money and connections to help me reunite with my family in the US. Led by my elder sister, Leah, our clan has retreated to a fortified and well-supplied compound in the redwood forests of the Pacific Northwest. For all I know, there they remain, half a bad world away and, I pray, better prepared than I to ride out this shit storm of planet-wide meltdown that threatens the human race.

At the last minute I had spurned Abdul's protection, to stay behind during the assault on Nice, awaiting Julian's improbable return, isolated and alone except for Buddy, my loyal companion.

But, getting back to Abdul, if I am honest with myself I feel guilty pleasure thinking about him. Even though I'd chosen Julian and a life of uncertainty, sometimes when I close my eyes, I can

feel Abdul's hands, alternately sensuous and cruel, demanding my surrender, and initiating me into a world of unanticipated delight. I feel his thick straight hair under my hands, feel his lips on mine, and re-experience the sensation of drowning in those long-lashed, smoldering dark eyes.

I know I sound like the heroine in a steamy chick-lit-slash-porn-flick, *Maya Does the Apocalypse—Hard*. However, that doesn't stop a flicker of heat, igniting about eight inches below my belly-button when I revisit the nights spent in Abdul's arms.

I give myself a mental shake. This is no time to be reminiscing about a former lover, no matter how sizzling the sex had been. My life these days—as the French would say—is “*compliqué*,” a euphemism for extremely fucked up and precarious. I'm trapped in a remote mountain village while Julian and Buddy are lost somewhere in the rubble. They could be dead or injured or captured by any of the marauding gangs that roam the countryside. I don't know where they are but I have to find them or die trying.

To make matters worse, somewhere out there is my own personal nightmare: the fanged assailant. I sense this sociopath still hunting me. Sometimes, I turn around and expect to find him, flicking his tongue at me like a snake, ready to strike. He stalks me in my dreams, through a landscape of ruined buildings and smoking slag heaps, a setting eerily backlit by fires that burn out of control.

As a general rule, predators tend to get all pissed off and pouty when intended victims don't play along with their games of perversion and rape, burning and skinning alive. I thought I had neutralized his threat, once and for all, when I gunned him down in Limone, but evidence indicates—though severely wounded—he survived. And, if he survived, his hatred can only have grown.

As I look out over the mountains and into the network of valleys below, I realize they're all waiting beyond the horizon—lovers, friends, foes—down there in the smoking ruins of the Côte d'Azur.

I step back from the mountain's edge, dislodging a cascade of small stones. The echo of stone striking stone rings out as pebbles

hit outcroppings of granite below, before tumbling hundreds and hundreds of meters towards the valley floor.

But now, back in the moment, I stride up the sloping meadow to where my new friends and hired guides, Stephan and Laurent, wait. Our equipment and supplies packed in rucksacks at their feet. My heart feels as if it's going to jump out of my chest. Instead, I hide my fear, smile and give them the thumbs up sign. I'm ready. It's time to go.



The yellow and purple paragliding wing ripples like a Chinese dragon in the wind as it rises over Laurent's head. In place of scales, the lightweight nylon canopy is comprised of interconnecting and baffled fabric cells, with vents along the leading edge to channel the flow of air pressure and keep the wing inflated while in flight.

Laurent's back is to the wind as he skillfully plays out the web of suspension lines, coaxing the wing to rise in an undulating wall of multi-colored fabric in preparation for a reverse launch. I'm up next; I pray I can remember which lines to use and when to release the brakes.

I've had less than two weeks to learn the intricacies of flight. Stephen and Laurent are skilled instructors and they've done well to teach me the basics, but my ten-day crash course in paragliding and trial flights haven't entirely prepared me for what lies ahead.

Now, Laurent is facing into the wind and running down slope. He flashes by, helmeted head low, arms close to his body to reduce any resistance on the lines. The multi-hued canopy's rectangular silhouette billows over his head. Thirty meters from the end of the meadow, his feet leave the ground. Freed from gravity, he soars over the mountain's edge into the air.

The yellow and purple wing is brilliant against the washed-out blue of the alpine sky. Comfortably seated in his harness, Laurent

uses the lines and brakes to turn in lazy spirals while he waits for Stephan and me to launch.

I slip on my harness and am adjusting my helmet as I hear Laurent's voice crackle over the radio, "*Vas y, ma petite. Bouge ton cul! It's a perfect day to fly!*"

My legs feel like rubber as I walk to where Stephan has the orange and blue nylon of my wing spread on the ground. For a second I think, "this is crazy—I can't do this." Nevertheless, these high-performance toys popular among extreme sport enthusiasts are our only means of travel and escape from our inaccessible mountain redoubt.

Stephan and Laurent were the only ones in Mont Dauphin willing to accept my offer of gold in exchange for assistance in my search. Now that I have gotten to know them better, I suspect that gold isn't their only motivation. Stephan and Laurent are adrenaline junkies. They are not the kind to cower within the walls of Mont Dauphin and meekly wait for death to present itself. They thrive on adventure and challenge, and life in this alpine village—the occasional firefight with the odd outlaw gang aside—is a bit too bucolic for their tastes. They've been in Mont Dauphin this past month, visiting Laurent's aunt, but they're more than ready to return to the world of conflict and opportunity.

Their confidence is contagious, despite the vast challenge of a hundred square kilometers of shattered rock and landslides we intend to search. If Julian and Buddy are trapped down there, we'll find them; I have to believe that. There's no other choice for me. I can't live without either of them. Without Julian and Buddy, I might as well lie down and die.

"You ready?" Stephan's hooded gray eyes bore into mine as he checks my harness and tightens one of the straps. The enormity of what I'm about to undertake threatens to overwhelm me.

"I...d-d-don't know if I can do this, Stephan," I say, feeling light-headed. The meadow, encircled by wind-stunted pines and the up-thrust crowns of granite, begins to spin like a carousel careening out of control. I can't breathe and the sensation of dizziness

increases, blurring my vision into a kaleidoscope of light flashing off the morning dew. Stephan puts out his hand to steady me. His voice seems as though it's coming from the end of a dark tunnel.

"It's not too late to change your mind, Maya. You can wait here. Lolo and I can search a thirty-kilometer radius surrounding Mont Dauphin. If they're down there, we'll find them. We'll be back in a couple of weeks."

For a second, all I feel is relief. Someone else can do this. I must have been crazy to think I could fly with them: two elite and decorated paratroopers from the French military. Stephan, tall and rangy, his dark hair threaded lightly about the temples with silver, still sports a military buzz cut, even though he'd last seen action, a decade ago, in the war zones of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mali.

His sidekick, Laurent, or Lolo as he prefers to be called, has been by his side in numerous campaigns. Lolo wears his copper hair in a thick braid, and has a scar that puckers his freckled face from his left eye to the corner of his mouth.

The world steadies. The flashing lights wink off. Reprieve. I can wait here in safety, while they search for sign of Julian and Buddy. I open my mouth to acquiesce to this more sensible plan, when Stephan cuts me off.

"Of course, Lolo or I will be in communication with you by radio at all times, to talk you through any difficulties and tell you when to make any adjustments to your wing," he assures me. His drawl and the physical contact of his steady hand on my shoulder have a soothing effect on me.

"*À mon avis, je pense que tu pourras le faire, poulette.* The winds are pretty steady—there are no crosswinds—perfect conditions for takeoff this morning. Just like we practiced." I can see the sly grin that Stephan isn't trying very hard to hide. "Don't you want to see the world from a hawk's point of view? Or would you rather spend the rest of your life scratching on the ground like a hen?"

Yeah, right! He's not letting me off the hook. Stephan's an old hand at steadying green troops before battle. And funnily enough,

as I take in the meadow, all shades of gray and mauve, the morning dew sparkling like diamonds on the blades of grass and the sky a soaring vault of palest blue, I realize I do want to see the world from a hawk's point of view.

I can't help but grin at Stephan; the manipulative bastard knows exactly which buttons to push. Seeing the smile light up his face, I have to admit that Stephan's pretty easy on the eyes, too. I can feel the high spirits coming off him in waves, in anticipation of the soon-to-be-had-adrenaline-rush. It must be infectious because I feel a tingle of anticipation, too.

"*Allons-y*, let's do this. If I chicken out today, I'll never get off this damn hill," I decide. I attach the two sets of risers on each side of my harness with a carabineer. The orange and blue nylon ripples along its length as though restless for flight. I put on my gloves and pick up the lines and, with a steadier hand than I thought possible, coax the wall of fabric to rise.

Head down, my arms to my side and back, checking that there is no pressure on the lines or brake that I hold in my gloved hands, I run down the meadow. I feel a sharp spike of pain in my right ankle as I stumble over a rock, but I keep going.

Stephan and Lolo whoop and holler encouragement over the radio headset: "Go for it, Maya! You can do it!"

I feel the drag of the wing for the first thirty meters and then a gust of wind inflates the orange and blue canopy sending it climbing overhead. My feet leave the ground and I'm soaring over the promontory, out into the wild blue yonder. I spiral towards where Lolo is waiting, a huge grin splitting his face from ear to ear.

"I told you, *poulette*, you're a natural," Stephan's voice reassures me through my headset.

"Hell, yeah! I can do this! Screw being a chicken!" I yell into the microphone as I test my wing. Intoxicated by the rush of freedom, I feel adrenaline fizzing like a potent cocktail in my veins.

While Stephan prepares his red and green wing for launch, I sit comfortably in my harness. Lolo's voice is in my ear,

coaching me through minute corrections that need to be made to my lines.

A mound of darkening thunderheads piles up behind the peaks to the north—a reminder that even in the midst of a seemingly perfect spring morning, danger and darkness, monstrous storms and furious winds lurk, waiting to wreak destruction.

Below, I see the remnants of the road snaking through the valley floor before being bisected by an enormous wall of earth, uprooted trees and columns of cracked stone: a favorite ambush point for the scavengers and outlaws who have claimed this valley as their private fiefdom. To the south, the Alpes de Haute Provence, their peaks reaching to the clouds, remind me of soldiers on their long march to the sea.

The only sounds are the static in my headset and the wind rushing through the wing's vents, making the canopy crack like a whip. I follow Lolo's lead, Stephan bringing up the rear as we soar above the danger along the abandoned road. The sky is dotted with puffs of clouds, but to the south, a pall of sickly yellow and eggplant-brown, bruised with streaks of carmine, shrouds the horizon.

In that direction, hidden by the ochre and blood-tinged haze, waits death. The pillaging continues as warring factions strip the last sweet meat from the bones of a dying corpse. I shiver, despite my insulated flight suit and gloves designed for high-altitude flight, remembering the waning months of last year. I think of the long nights alone on the peak of the Astrarama, with only the stars and Buddy for company, keeping vigil and waiting for Julian to find me. I remember the silence rent by staccato gunfire, the explosions of incendiary bombs and the pounding of war drums heralding the approach of killers.

I flash back to All Hallows Eve, watching the insurgents overrun Nice. Hidden among a jumble of boulders on a ridge overlooking the old port in Nice, Buddy and I witnessed the unfolding slaughter and conflagration. I'll never forget that night when so much blood was shed and the beautiful city of Nice was transformed

into a gargantuan bonfire. For the rest of my life, those images of savagery—demons cavorting amidst the flames and the screams of the dying—will be seared into my brain.

I shake off the memories. It's bad enough that they haunted my dreams; I can't let them shadow my days.

As we leave the valley behind and wind our way through a narrow mountain pass, I can feel my right ankle throbbing as my leg dangles from the harness.

"Damn ankle," I mutter to myself. "It's still not healed completely." I must have twisted it worse than I realized when I stumbled during takeoff. *Merde!* I wouldn't be separated from Julian and Buddy if I hadn't fractured the damn thing jumping from a wall when we rescued Sylvie.

The hardest part about leaving Mont Dauphin had been saying good bye to Sylvie this morning. We'd grown close these last weeks, living together in the stone clinic, while I waited for my fracture to heal. We'd helped our neighbors repair the damage from the earthquake, and reopened the clinic to treat the wounded. I hate leaving her behind, but she seems to have an instinctive ability to nurse and is finding acceptance among the habitants of Mont Dauphin. I console myself that Sylvie is a survivor and, perhaps, we'll meet again. I can't stay. My destiny is with Julian and Buddy.

I've left a letter with Sylvie for Julian, in case he comes back to the clinic. In it I explain how I've left with Stephan and Laurent in order to find him. It's been too long without word. The letter is a long shot. However, I'm covering all my bets.

I grit my teeth and decide not to tell Stephan or Lolo that I have re-injured my ankle. I'll just wrap it extra tight for support when we make camp. If they know I'm not a hundred percent fit, they might abort the mission. I've already waited more than six weeks for my ankle to heal. I can't wait any longer to begin my search for the two beings that I love and need the most in this dying world.

CHAPTER 8

I LOVE THE SMELL

OF NAPALM IN THE MORNING

May 20, 2019

Haute Alpes

Every muscle in my body aches from the long hours of flying today. Stephan and Lolo assure me it will get easier. But now, the adrenaline rush from setting off on my search mission has worn off. My eyes feel like glass-dust has been ground into them after long hours squinting into the sun and scouring the broken countryside for signs of Julian and Buddy.

Now, it's dusk, and I help Lolo gather wood for our campfire. My back protests each time I bend to pick up a branch. Happily, we've found an ideal campsite, nestled amidst boulders on a craggy mountaintop. Sheer rock walls protect us on three sides and an eagle's view commands the lower flanks. There's a sloping meadow about two hundred meters lower that Stephan says will be perfect for takeoff come morning. I guess this will be our plan—fly each day and nest for the night on mountain peaks.

We've agreed to a rotation of three-hour watches throughout the night, so I can expect to be bone-weary *and* sleep deprived. No one said the apocalypse would be a spa vacation!