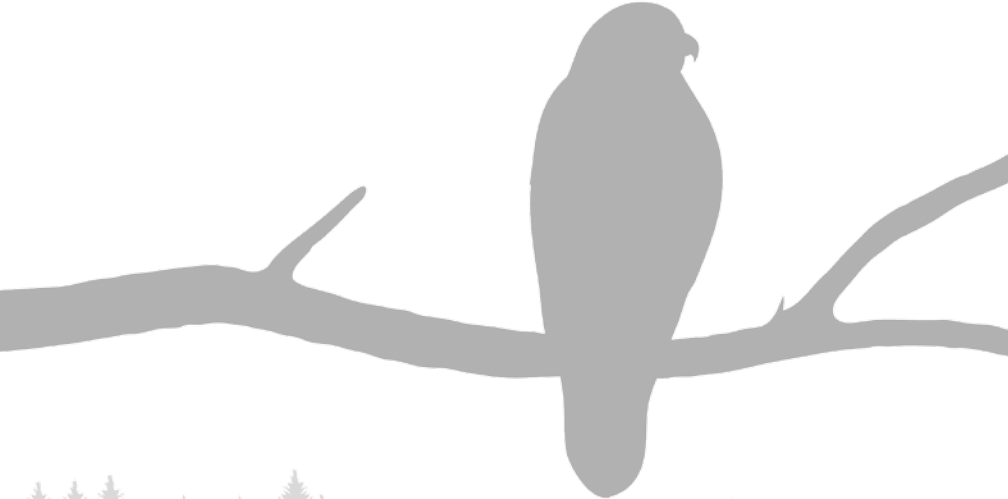


THE FALCON FLIES
ALONE



A FIVE DIRECTIONS PRESS BOOK



THE FALCON FLIES ALONE

A NOVEL

GABRIELLE MATHIEU



FALCON I

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ISBNs to come

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*We all have a beast locked within us,
But in Peppa's case it's more than a figure of speech.*

Switzerland 1957



1. A Precarious Situation

I JERKED AWAKE, COLD AND HURTING. THE FLOOR WAS SO HARD.
And tilted?

Nearby, treetops tossed in the breeze.

This was no floor. This was a roof.

The roof of a three story house.

Panic hit me, and vertigo flared. I squeezed my eyes shut.
My head pounded.

A slight breeze riffled across my bare skin, raising goose
bumps.

Bare skin?

My eyes flew back open and my breath caught.

Where were my clothes? I was stark naked.

My hands scrambled to cover the essentials. What if someone saw me like this? Totally naked.

And now sliding.

I scabbled frantically for a hold, grabbing the first thing I could: a small chimney.

Stable. For now.

I had a more pressing problem than being nude. How would I get down?

I scanned the roof, hoping to find something nearby. A rope. A whistle. Even my clothes. Anything. The green tiles glistened like the scales of a huge dragon. The morning sun was still low in the sky, a sky that seemed so near and blue, oppressively close. When I dared to look down I could make out the rust spores of fern fronds that grew under the pines at the corner of the house.

I blinked, surprised at my acuity.

The glimpse of the garden at least confirmed my location. It was the De Pena's grand house at the edge of the village—I'd just arrived there yesterday. The air had a queer greenish tinge though, and little particles glinted, moving.

I closed my eyes so I could think better. Had I been up here all night?? Panicked questions screamed through my brain, and I panted as the pounding in my temples intensified.

So high up. If I fell...

I was too young to die. I'd only been with a fellow once, and he'd run off on us the next day. I wasn't even twenty.

What had I done to end up on a roof?

And how would I get down?

I wished Da was here to help me. He'd know the answers.

No. Da will never help you again. He is not an angel in heaven, looking down on you. He's worm food.

My eyes got wet. I swallowed my sadness down. He might be dead, but he hadn't raised me to be a sobbing baby.

My head pounded so much I wondered if I'd had a subarachnoid hemorrhage. I might die all alone in this tiny village in the middle of the Alps, and my dog would starve in the shed where I'd locked her up. I should have told someone where I was.

Like who?

My breath ripped through me, ragged gasps. All I could picture was poor Simone, a heap of crumpled dirty-white fur. I'd left her alone.

I had to be calm. Then get down, get dressed, get her out of the shed. And yeah, a doctor, because my head felt odd and something horrible was lurking at the edge of my thoughts.

I was Ivy League material, right? I'd kept the acceptance letter from Radcliffe University with my small store of keepsakes.

I should be able to figure this out.

First, assess.

I turned my head, wincing, to look for the small window of my dormer room. It was hidden below the sharply pitched eaves to my left.

There was just no way I could have gotten from that window to here.

An agonizing flash went off behind my eyes, as a fragment of memory hit me. I was a great bird, flying...

I clamped down on my lips to stop a wail.

I had a horrible, sick feeling. Images skittered. Little farms the size of matchboxes, scattered lights glimmering far below.

I've gone mad. Barking mad.

It must be the pain that's confusing me.

Just a neurological process.

Da would say that after he'd screamed from agony. "It's just a neurological process."

Pain. Fear. They have explanations. My adrenals pumped out epinephrine and norepinephrine in waves. But explaining my fear didn't help enough.

I shut my eyes again. I needed to get my heart rate down. Breathe. In. Breathe out. There. I felt better with my lids jammed shut, my nakedness hidden.

But my peripheral circulation was shutting down. I hung from my right arm like a carcass from a meat hook. I needed to move while I could.

My window was the only one on this side of the roof, and to reach it, I would have to dangle from the jutting eaves with my fingertips. It wasn't an option for reentry. I had to find another way.

I stayed glued tight, afraid to change position.

Poor Simone. She needs you. My dog would be pacing and shivering in the dark shed, tongue hanging out from thirst.

I forced open my eyes. The sun hoisted itself up, rays spilling over the rugged mountains. My gaze was drawn towards the imposing peak of Säntis, still bathed in shadows. Where I had...

No. That's insane.

I studied my position. My right arm was locked onto the smaller chimney, probably the one for the master bedroom. Another wave of vertigo washed over me, and pain bored into my temples. I tried to picture Simone's soft fur, comforting like a down pillow. Disturbing images intruded: blood, feathers, and broken glass. Hoarse screaming.

Had that been last night?

I looked down again. Only a few meters beneath my feet, a horizontal snow-guard railing marched across the roof.

The railing would break when I crashed into it, and I'd plummet down three stories.

I pushed my belly and thighs flat against the tiles, and turned my head to one side so my shoulders were even,

pressed against the roof. Slowly, very slowly, I let go of the chimney. I slipped a bit, and then used my splayed toes to brake. The railing was less than a meter away now.

I looked down again from my new vantage point. The green shimmer still danced in the air, now very faint. I could see the empty milk bottles set out. Which meant the milkman would be coming soon.

I could rest against the railing until he drove up, and then cry out for help.

The ragged edge of black fabric fluttering in the breeze caught my eye.

An umbrella leaned against the door, forgotten.

A image seared through me like fire. I knuckled a fist in my eyes, keening,

The woman's eyes were sane and blue. She was looking at me. Then something changed in her wrinkled face. She bowed her head, and her arm moved up. She fell.

She'd thrust the spiked metal top of her umbrella into her eye socket. Not even a scream to warn me.

I allowed one whimper out before I shut the door on the image. I reminded myself of who I was. A chemist. A rational young woman of good standing.

Now. To move down the remaining meter to the snow guard.

I forced my body to obey: one foot and then the other, like toddler steps, quivering, testing out, the limbs loose without tension, the belly pressed flat against my new best friend, the roof.

I reached the railing and hunched behind it, shivering, trying to distribute my weight. I looked left. I looked right. I looked everywhere except at my naked body, my meager breasts, my bony legs.

I didn't want to wait for the milkman exposed like a scrawny plucked chicken.

But there was no other way down.

Which meant no way up. How the hell did I get up here?

Didn't matter. I looked down again. No trees close enough to reach. Only beds of dahlias and day lilies.

Was there a chance the De Penas hadn't left for Paris yet? They'd said they were leaving at the crack of dawn, but perhaps they'd overslept. Even if I didn't like Mrs. De Pena, it wouldn't be quite as embarrassing as calling out to a strange man.

The place was quiet as a graveyard. I could hear the rattle of my teeth.

Simone. Why couldn't I hear her barking to be let out? She'd been shut up in the shed since yesterday. I swallowed. The family pet was all that was left of my family.

Panic gnawed at me again. I called out a few times, hating the high reedy tone in my voice. I craned my neck to look for Dr. Unruh's shiny black car, in the vain hope he hadn't left as well. Though the unpredictable anthropology professor frightened me, he might have some answers. But looked like the mysterious houseguest from Munich had departed along with his hosts.

The floppy dahlias laughed at me, sunny upturned faces. Soft, but not soft enough. Not from three stories up. I really should worm my way around the periphery of the roof, look for a way down.

And if I were brave and strong, like John Wayne or Humphrey Bogart, I would. But my arms and legs shook hard now, my vision blurred, and I could have killed for a glass of water.

Although that was an unfortunate figure of speech, considering my recent hallucination. In which I did not only witness violence, but committed it.

The stress of the past year had been too much for me. I *was* losing my mind.



Soon I heard the idling of the milkman's jeep.

I cringed. What if he saw I was naked? He might even laugh at me. Clothed, I had dignity and a certain poise. Naked, I was just a homeless girl. My face got hot.

If I let him leave, I'd never get down. I forced myself to shout out to him.

"Please. Help me." I kept calling, until he rounded the corner of the house and came into view.

I could barely see his face, mild puzzlement changing to alarm. Being new to the village, I wouldn't have met him before. I didn't know what kind of a man he might be.

I tried to reassure myself. He was below me. There was a chance he might not be able to tell I was naked.

He stepped back, craned his head up, and got a good look. "My God."

"Get me off the roof!"

"Oh my. We need a special ladder. We'll have to get the carpenter."

No fire department. I reminded myself the hamlet of Gonten was a long way from Boston. Telephones weren't even standard household equipment. There hadn't been one in the house.

"Hurry." Spots floated in front of my eyes.

He looked up at me again, longer now, and then his gaze bolted away. "You just hold on, miss."

The engine fired up, and the jeep jolted down the drive.

I settled down to wait, drawing long, shuddering breaths, my heart jittery-dancing like my schoolmates at the sock-hop, bouncing to "Rock around the Clock." Not that I'd ever been invited to one. But I'd seen it through the gym window.

Gravel crunching under tired announced a new arrival. I twisted my head around, but the vehicle was out of my line of sight. I was weaker; I'd wait and lie still.

When I heard a car door slam, I called out. “Up here.”

An authoritative voice answered. “Yes, hold tight, we’re setting up the ladder.”

I scrambled over the snow-guard to the gutter, precariously close to the edge. I hunched over, trying to make as little of myself visible as possible.

Scraping sounds, two men at least, and then a thud as the ladder swung up and hit the roof close to me, making me startle and almost lose my balance. I screamed.

The second man hollered. “Just a little to your left now. You can move over maybe one or two steps. Your foot should hit it soon.”

I gulped. “I can’t come down...like this.”

The strong first voice again. “Herr Manser here, from Gonten. I can take over on the ladder. Herr Lutz can climb up to help you.”

“No, absolutely not,” I squeaked.

“You’ll be in safe hands, miss. He’s our carpenter.”

“I need Mr. Lutz’s coat if I’m to come down.” Shame made my voice too soft, and I had to repeat myself.

I heard Lutz say, “The milkman mentioned she might be...”

The word trembled in the air, unspoken.

Manser took charge. “Give me your coat, Mr. Lutz.” I took a chance, and peered over the edge. Lutz stood bracing the ladder, feet planted wide, now in his neatly ironed blue shirt. Manser tucked the coat under his arm and nimbly began climbing.

As he drew closer, I pleaded, “Don’t look. Just hand it up.”

“Please. I am a decent Christian man.” He sounded incensed. His arm snaked up, proffering the coat. I uncovered myself long enough to grab it.

“Thank you. You can go down. I’ll follow once you’re on the ground,” I sniffled, totally humiliated. Snot ran out of my

nose with the effort of swallowing my tears. I shrugged the coat on, trembling from the effort of keeping my balance. It smelled of hair pomade and tobacco.

“I’m back down now. We’ll turn away while you descend, so as not to offend your modesty,” Manser called out.

It took a few seconds before I felt brave enough to try the ladder. My foot swung out over the air. There was no sound from below. They couldn’t see me struggling, gritting my teeth, forcing myself to continue.

My flailing foot found the next rung, and I pushed it down hard before I dared to try the other. Then both were balanced, but I was bent over, my torso still on the roof, my rump in the air.

I pushed off gently, holding my breath, and grabbed for the sides of the ladder. After I’d wobbled down a couple of rungs, I gripped the ladder tight, then looked down to make sure they weren’t peeking up my coat.

The big one called Lutz still had his back turned, hands planted in his pockets.

The other one had come close to the ladder again, hands ready should my weight destabilize it. He studied the ground, eyes averted. The tiny white lettering on the tag in the shade of his collar said ‘Hans Manser’.

How could I read that from up here?

Manser’s pants and shirt were smudged with charcoal and dirt. I spotted several flecks of blood on his trousers. And the bulge of a pistol under his unbuttoned jacket.

The village policeman. *He’s been there. He saw.*

I froze as an unwelcome flash of memory hit me: The gaping eye-socket of the old woman. Screams and flames from a kitchen. Glints from broken glass. A man fallen at my feet.

It was real.

I was done for. Buggered. Chingado.

I started back down, dread making me clumsier. Finally, my feet hit the ground and I retied the belt tight around the coat. I took a couple of breaths. My vision was normal now.

“May I look up?” Manser asked.

“Yes. I’m covered.”

The policeman lifted his head. His tie flopped like the tongue of a thirsty dog. He was a nice looking man, probably a devoted wife and daughters with tidy braids at home. Right now he looked exhausted though, and there were dark rings under his eyes. He must have been up for most of the night. Probably got called when the fire started, and found more than he bargained for.

His voice was tight. “What are you doing here, miss? This house belongs to the De Penas.”

I started to reach out and shake hands, but stopped, uncertain. Did Swiss women shake hands? I’d been in Massachusetts too long.

I inclined my head instead, like my idol, Grace Kelly. “I’m their new caretaker, Patrizia Waldvogel. Arrived yesterday.”

“You look like you need to sit down.” There were no chairs outside; the De Penas weren’t the garden party type. He gestured. “The car’s just around the corner. Let’s go.”

I’ve got to get away from him. Then find a way to get Simone out of the shed.

“Could I get some clothes and a hot drink from inside?”

Manser pulled back, a hint of amusement showing in his shrewd face. “I could do with a cup of coffee myself. Been up most of the night. I saw the De Penas at the train station this morning. You’ll have to let us in.”

I cursed under my breath, remembering. The keys were with my purse and my clothes.

If my memory served me correctly, those were still at the inn. I’d been at the local farm inn, a Bäsebeiz, last night when all hell broke loose.

Mr. Lutz joined us, squirming, looking at anything but my bare stick legs marooned in his enormous coat. Manser's eyes bored into me, waiting.

"I misplaced the key," I admitted.

"Accompany me to the car. I want to show you something."

I followed them, and Manser opened the door, reached into the back seat, and took out my scuffed brown handbag. "Perhaps this is yours? There are keys in here."

I was too eager. I stepped towards him, smiling fixedly. "That would be wonderful. I can't believe I lost my purse."

His eyes never left my face. "I found something interesting in there." He took out my Swiss passport, the only identification I had, and flipped it open. There was my photo, black and white, but an unmistakable likeness all the same: big eyes, long nose, wavy short hair. My real name was typed next to it: Peppa Mueller."

"How do you explain this, Miss *Waldvogel*?"

Now I was screwed for sure.