

MOLLY'S MOON

by
RON PARHAM

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PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

When the speedometer hit two hundred kilometers per hour, Ethan Paxton closed his eyes, opening them just long enough to look at the terrified man sitting next to him in the backseat of the Mercedes. Rob Jamison's knuckles were white when he clutched the back of the driver's seat, the German countryside a blur as the white sedan hummed along the autobahn, like a glider in the air, the only sound the whirl of the tires as they barely touched the banked pavement.

"God almighty!" yelled Rob. "Last time I ever tell a German we're going be late for our flight!"

"Relax, Robert," the driver said over his shoulder in his heavy accent. "And please do not rip my seat apart!" The big German seemed to be enjoying his American guest's discomfort. "What is your speed limit in America? Sixty five miles per hour? We back out of our driveway at that speed!" He laughed heartily at his joke, his big belly jiggling.

Ethan stifled a laugh in spite of his terror. He opened one eye to glance at his boss, Henrik van Rijk, a Dutchman used to the high speeds on the German autobahn. He was sitting calmly in the front passenger seat, his arm draped across the back of the driver's seat as though they were out for a Sunday drive.

"We have about twenty minutes, Jost," Henrik said calmly as he looked straight ahead. "Maybe even you can't make it in time."

Suddenly the Mercedes slowed down as it made a sharp right turn, throwing the two Americans in the backseat to the left, then back upright when the car straightened out. Ethan opened his eyes wide as he was tossed about. He saw a sign — *Frankfurt Main Airport*. A few seconds later they were screaming to a stop in front of the departure terminal.

"I'm sorry, Henrik, what were you saying?" Jost Heilemann said, laughing as he got out of the car, opening the left rear door. "Plenty of time, even for Americans!"

Ethan scrambled out the right rear door, grabbing his briefcase. "Someone pry Rob's fingers from the backseat!" he said over his shoulder, glancing at his white-haired friend, noticing the color just returning to Rob's face.

Rob laughed loudly as he got out of the car, slapping the big German on the back. "Damn, Jost!" He bent down and kissed the sidewalk, not once but twice.

"Let's go!" Henrik said, looking at his watch. "We can just about make it if we hurry."

The Dutchman and the two Americans turned and waved to the huge German, who was already speeding away from the departure terminal, still laughing. They began running down the wide sidewalk, dodging other passengers, finally entering the departure terminal with minutes to spare. Boarding passes in hand, they headed directly for the gate. They had started the day in Amsterdam with a seven a.m. flight to Frankfurt. It would end back in Amsterdam at four o'clock in the afternoon. The date was Tuesday, September 11, 2001.

Making it to the gate just as the airline attendants were closing the door, Henrik yelled, "Hold the door!"

The three men, breathing hard, handed their boarding passes to the female flight attendant. Hustling down the jet way, they ducked into the doorway of the commuter jet, eliciting frowns from other passengers.

"Please take your seats and buckle up," the blond female attendant said, not smiling.

After stowing their briefcases in the overhead bin, Ethan and Henrik fell into their first-class seats. Rob took the seat on the aisle across from them.

Ethan's chest was still heaving when he noticed the deep frown on Henrik's face. "What's wrong, boss?"

"What? Oh, nothing," Henrik said, forcing a smile. "I don't like having to rush."

"You sure it wasn't because the Dutch soccer team lost again?" Rob said from across the aisle.

"Ha. No, and it's called football over here, as I've told you many times. Real football, not that sissy game you play in America."

"Sissy game?" Rob looked at Ethan. "Are you going to let him get away with that?"

Ethan smiled and shrugged. "You'll never change his mind, Rob. You know that."

The flight attendant came by and checked their seat belts and within two minutes the jet was taxiing out to the runway for takeoff. The three men sank back in their seats, their breathing starting to return to normal.

"Holy crap! Can you believe how fast that damn German was going!" Rob exclaimed as the jet raced down the runway.

"Well, you got him back, Rob," Henrik said, chuckling. "He has ten small gashes in his seat where your fingernails used to be."

The three men enjoyed the back and forth banter while the airplane slowly rose into the afternoon sky. Ethan looked across the aisle at Rob, who was, as always, very animated. He had a naturally ruddy complexion which turned beet red when he was excited. Rob was forty-two years old, the same age as Ethan, but looked older. He owned his own trucking company in California and was usually the life of the party whenever they were together. Ethan smiled and closed his eyes as he thought about the day's events. It was a good day, a successful day, and now they could sit back and relax.

Ethan opened his eyes and glanced at Henrik, noticing the frown again. His boss was a serious man, very intense, always thinking. Ethan knew something was on his mind.

"Everything okay, Henrik?" Ethan said.

The Dutchman turned and looked at Ethan, nodding his head. "Just something I heard in the terminal. Nothing to worry about."

"Well, you seem worried about something," Ethan said. "But, okay. It was a good day, boss."

Henrik smiled weakly. "Yes, it was a good day. I think we need to order some wine."

After the airplane reached its cruising altitude and the seatbelt sign blinked off, the blond flight attendant, smiling now, took their drink orders. The three men ordered white wine and settled back in their seats. After a few minutes of small talk, the wine worked its magic and all three dozed off. Thirty minutes later they were landing at Amsterdam Schiphol airport. They sat in silence as the commuter jet taxied to the arrival gate.

They were tired and quiet as they walked up the jet-way and into the Amsterdam Schiphol arrival terminal. As Ethan opened the door into the arrival terminal he was stunned at what he saw. Everyone had their heads cocked upwards, staring at something. A collective gasp suddenly went up from the crowd, sending a chill down Ethan's spine.

"What the hell?" Rob said, walking behind Ethan and hearing the loud gasp.

They skirted around the edge of the mass of people, unnoticed by anyone. When they were behind the crowd, they craned their necks backwards and saw a television hanging from the ceiling. It was too far

away to make out the images, so Ethan began pushing his way to the front, with Rob right behind him. He heard a voice behind him.

"Ethan, what are you doing?"

Ethan turned and saw Henrik standing behind the wall of people. Ethan pointed to the television set, then turned back and looked up at the images on the screen. What he saw didn't register at first.

"What the hell?" Rob said again.

Ethan stared at the television set. "Lots of smoke coming out of a building," Ethan whispered. "Looks familiar but don't know where it is. They're talking in Dutch so I don't know what the hell they're saying."

Many in the crowd were now looking at the two Americans instead of the television, whispering to each other. A few people pointed to them, then to the television set. Ethan jumped when he felt someone grab him.

"Come, let's go," Henrik said sternly, his hand firmly on Ethan's shoulder.

"What are they saying?" Ethan said. "Why is everyone staring at us?"

"I'll explain when we get to the car. Let's go. Now." Henrik began pushing his way back through the crowd.

The two Americans watched the big bearded Dutchman plow through the crowd and head down the long hallway. They hurried after him, glancing back at the television and the crowd of people who were staring back at them. Once free of the mass of people, they began running to catch up with Henrik.

"Whatever it is, it sure spooked Henrik," Rob grunted as he ran.

"It was freaking me out," Ethan said, gasping for air.

The two Americans saw the same scenario play out at each gate they passed, people staring up at the television in silence. Fear began to grip Ethan as they caught up with Henrik in the main Schiphol Airport terminal.

"Henrik, what the hell is going on?" Ethan said, panting.

Henrik didn't reply. He just kept walking.

Ethan looked at Rob, whose face and nearly bald head were turning a deep shade of pink. Rob shrugged his shoulders at Ethan and continued walking briskly, trying to keep up.

As they rushed out of the main terminal, crossing the busy airport thoroughfare to the short-term parking lot, Ethan's mind began racing. *What could make those people so frightened? The looks on their faces . . .*

Once they reached the black Audi, Henrik finally stopped and turned to his two American friends. His face was ashen.

"Henrik, Goddamn it! What the hell is going on?" Ethan said, out of breath and out of patience.

"Get in the car," Henrik said as he opened the driver-side door.

They climbed into the car, Ethan in the front passenger seat and Rob in the rear seat. Henrik had his hands on the steering wheel, staring straight ahead, silent.

"Boss?" Ethan said, pleading for information.

Henrik cleared his throat. "The World Trade Center in New York has been attacked."

"What do you mean attacked?" Rob said, leaning forward from the backseat.

"Two airplanes have flown into both towers."

Ethan stared at his boss, not comprehending what he was saying.

"It was a terrorist attack," Henrik continued. "Commercial airplanes with passengers on board flew into the buildings about an hour or so ago." He glanced at the two men quickly. "Just about the time we were running through the Frankfurt terminal. I'll turn on BBC so you can hear for yourselves."

Henrik quickly scanned the dial on his radio until he heard an English-speaking voice.

". . . and at 9:37 a.m., eastern standard time, American Airlines flight 77 flew into the west side of the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. The South Tower of the World Trade Center collapsed at 9:59 a.m."

Ethan sat motionless, staring at the radio, the full impact of what was happening beginning to hit him like a blow to the head. *The smoke billowing out of the skyscrapers! The Pentagon! Jesus, America was being attacked!* His mind began to race. He had just left California three days before on a regular business trip to Europe, one he had made many times before. He remembered being upset because he hadn't been able to say goodbye to his two children . . .

He jerked his head upright. *My children!*