

Abruzzo Intrigue

A Hardy Durkin Travel
Mystery

By: Bluette Matthey

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Dedicated in loving memory to:
Emerson, a Prince among Cats



Hikes:

- Day 1 Santo Stefano
- Day 2 Hermitage of San Bartolomeo
- Day 3 Scanno
- Day 4 Villetta Barrea
- Day 5 Pescara
- Day 6 Navelli Plain
- Day 7 Carpinarico
- Day 8 Castrovalva

A page from
Hardy Durkin's
Diary

PROLOGUE

Hardy Durkin leads a hiking tour into Italy's Abruzzo region where they experience the area's culture, food, and history. There is a good deal of exposure to the region's religious and spiritual past, and one of the members of the tour group struggles with an odyssey of the soul that ends in redemption. Some of the cast of characters are who they seem to be, but most aren't. A member of the group, a grieving widower, plans to steal one of the Vatican's most precious religious relics, The First Eucharistic Miracle, from the Church of San Francesco in Lanciano. The book is a collision of values and traditions while hiking through the oft-overlooked beauty of ancient Abruzzo.

CHAPTER 1

“I figure the time is right for a real Italian restaurant in Winston-Salem. Nuthin’ chi-chi or over-the-top-expensive; just good, rustic peasant food. Which, considering the state of food in the States right now, is almost exotic. Know what I mean? Food that tastes real. Not the stuff that looks and tastes like plastic cuisine.”

Hal Lambeth was waxing large on his favorite topic: food. And, more specifically, his passion at his current stage in life: bringing good food to the public table. ‘Hale Hal,’ so called due to his hearty, hale-fellow-well-met persona, had been in the food and beverage business for thirty years. Someone else’s food and beverage business. Now, at age fifty five, Hal had decided it was his turn, so he was going to open his own establishment, a themed restaurant. Since Hal’s mother was originally from the Abruzzo region of south/central Italy, it seemed only natural that Abruzzo and its foods would be the starting point for Hal’s endeavor. His mother, may God rest her soul, had died recently and

left Hal a nice-sized nest egg for his inheritance. What better way to honor his mother, and carry out what he saw as his destiny, than to open an Italian restaurant in the true spirit of presenting his best and most cherished?

“So, the way I see it ...” he droned on.

The recipient of his discourse, Winifred Bradford, had mentally drifted away from Hal’s conversation three minutes ago. Winifred, who really answered to Winnie, felt her brain dying as she stood under the deluge of Hal’s self-validation. She wasn’t above just walking away, but since this was, after all, the let’s-get-acquainted dinner for their walking tour through Abruzzo she was disinclined to stiff a fellow wayfarer their first night out. She continued to nod and purse her lips, normally signs of attentive listening.

“Winnie, darling,” her twin sister, Tillie, sang out, as she waltzed up to where she and Hal were standing on the terrace looking out toward Gran Sasso, which means ‘Great Stone,’ the glacier-clad mountain that is the centerpiece of the Gran Sasso National Park in central Italy. Clad in a muted-print, jersey jumpsuit, her lanky, five-foot six-inch frame had the litheness of a dancer. “I really must show you the view from the other side of the terrace,” she said. “Hal, you won’t mind if I steal her away for several minutes before the sun goes down, will you?” Tillie had seen the very slight arching of her sister’s eyebrows from across the room. A movement

that would have gone totally unnoticed by anyone else, to Tillie the gesture was akin to rolling one's eyes: Winnie was bored and needed bailed out of her present social dilemma. As the twins glided away, their silver-maned heads, both worn in short bobs, joined conspiratorially, Tillie gently pinched Winnie, "You owe me one, kiddo."

A Japanese-American couple, Dennis and Teresa Fujimoto, hung somewhat shyly on the edge of the group. "I hate these get-to-know-you affairs," Teddy hissed to her husband. "It's always the worst part of any group tour. I didn't come on this trip to mingle with people I hope never to see again and could care nothing about." Teddy was a fairly successful but painfully shy fabric designer. She and Dennis, both forty two, lived in Philadelphia, where Dennis had set up his dental practice after graduating and interning at Penn. Both were originally from the West Coast. Dennis' maternal grandfather had been in the legendary WWII 442nd all Japanese-American combat unit and had served in southern Italy. This was their main reason for their trip to Abruzzo. That, and the fact that Abruzzo wasn't Philadelphia.

"Just relax, baby," Dennis reassured her. "Your apprehension hangs over you like a cloud."

'That's encouraging,' Teddy thought. Aloud, all she said was, "Great."

"Have another drink. Can I get you one more sherry, or would you like to try one of the local wines? The Cerasuolo from this region is

supposed to have a subtle grape flavor with a highlight of cherry.”

“Yes,” Teddy agreed, “I’d like to try the local wine.” Dennis went off to get her wine, leaving her feeling vulnerable. She sighed. He was such a people person and could talk to anyone. He’d never known a stranger, a quality that had drawn her to him when they’d first met. His outgoing personality became her armor, and allowed her to pretend an ease among strangers which dissipated instantly when he wasn’t with her. She started to turn her back to the group, a defense mechanism, when she heard a voice at her side.

“You look like you don’t enjoy these first night meet-ups, either.”

She turned back and found a young woman with prominent cheekbones and dark complexion at her side. Dark, thick hair; large, brown eyes. ‘Native-American,’ Teddy thought. ‘About my age.’

With a somewhat embarrassed smile and downcast eyes, Teddy nodded. “I never get used to them,” she admitted.

“I’m Lucy Quickstreet. Are you the couple from Philadelphia?”

Teddy’s face registered brief surprise.

“I always read the information sent out about my fellow travelers,” Lucy explained. “You two seem to be the only couple on the trip, aside from the twins,” she added, nodding toward the

silver-haired duo. "I didn't mean to intrude, but you looked a bit lost."

Teddy realized she'd been thrown a life-line of sorts and, gratefully, she grabbed it. "Not at all, Lucy. My name is Teresa ... Teresa Fujimoto. Please, call me Teddy." They shook hands. It was a solid handshake, and it broke the ice between them. "So, where are you from, Lucy?"

"Originally, Maine. But I manage at the Foxwoods Resort Casino in Mashantucket, Connecticut. My daughter attends Middlebury College in Middlebury, Vermont, where our tour leader graduated from. Which, I guess, is why I chose this particular tour company."

Dennis returned with drinks in hand and a welcoming smile on his face as he rejoined his wife and her new acquaintance. "Hi! I'm Teddy's husband, Dennis."

"Lucy Quickstreet, Dennis. Nice to meet you."

Dennis turned to his wife. "I've asked Peter Fynch, another member of our group, to join us."

Lucy spoke, "Well, I'll see you two later ..."

"No, please stay, Lucy," Dennis urged. "I just thought he looked a bit forlorn is all. Don't run off."

Teddy spoke up, "Oh, do stay, Lucy. That's just Dennis for you. He positively collects people." She nodded soundly to emphasize what she'd said. At that moment a good-looking man, handsome in a non-descript, plain sort of way,

ambled up to their group. He looked prematurely gray compared to his unlined, smooth complexion. There was a stoic, proper air about him.

“Ah,” Dennis said, “here he is now. Everyone, this is Peter Fynch, from Nashua, New Hampshire. Peter, this is my wife, Teddy, and this is Lucy Quickstreet, another member of our group.” Lucy’s interest-ometer registered a jolt as she eyed Peter’s clean-cut good looks. He pretended not to notice

“Lucy was just telling me that our tour leader went to the same school as her daughter, in Middlebury, Vermont,” Teddy announced.

“That’s right,” Lucy said. “He was quite the BMOC, from what I heard. He was the school’s star pentathlon athlete and an excellent marksman. When he graduated from Middlebury he went into the army and was stationed in Germany with military intelligence. SIGINT. Signals intelligence, I think. Plus, he kept up with the military’s version of the pentathlon and placed near the top internationally. Speaks at least four languages. Quite an amazing guy for a tour leader.”

Dennis whistled appreciatively. “Sounds like a warrior. This should be an interesting trip.”

“And you know this how?” Peter asked. There was a slight edge to his voice. For an instant Lucy felt as though she were being challenged and bristled. “Hardy Durkin is a legend at Middlebury College. They’ve even named a track field after him, informally.”

Just then their larger-than-life tanned tour leader, Hardy Durkin, strode into view. His lanky, muscular six-foot-four physique commanded their attention with his air of assurance. The dark blue, intelligent eyes, set in a handsomely proportioned face, topped by thick, chestnut-brown hair, assessed, in an instant, the atmosphere surrounding his tour group members. Turning his head slightly, like he wore giant, invisible, antennae, he picked up the 'weak link' in the party and headed over to strike up a conversation.

The object of Hardy's attentions was a lone, odd-looking man, fiftyish, who leaned against the stone wall of the terrace, drink in hand. His face was rather like an axe, with wide-set gray eyes. Intelligence set his features. Something like an aura shone from his façade, giving him the appearance of a worldly-looking ascetic. He manifested aloofness, but his eyes were constantly watching, assessing.

"Father Gossett?" Hardy questioned, his hand outstretched.

"Please, just Kelvin," the man responded, meeting Hardy's handshake. "I gave up the Father bit when I left the priesthood," he explained.

"Got it," Hardy responded. "So, is this your first trip to Italy?"

"Heavens, no," the ex-priest replied. "I've been to Rome many times, but this is my first visit to Abruzzo."

“Have you done walking tours before?”

“If pilgrimages count, yes, I’ve done several. The longest was from Santiago de Compostela, in northwestern Spain, to Rome. Seven, no, eight years ago. It was done in total silence. Took me three months. It changed my life, profoundly.”

Hardy whistled. “Well, I won’t have to worry about you keeping up on our walks, will I?” he grinned. ‘Aha,’ Hardy thought, ‘I begin to understand why you opted to pay for a single supplement to have your own room on the tour.’ “I visited the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela two years ago ... very impressive. Although not a pilgrim, I attended the weekly service for the pilgrims. The incense burner they swing back and forth through the transept is really something. It takes eight men to pull the rope on it. They call it a ... um ...”

“A botafumerio,” helped Kelvin. “It means ‘smoke expeller.’ That particular incense burner weighs close to one hundred and eighty pounds. Historically, the swinging incensory at Santiago de Compostela was put in use during the 11th century when many of the pilgrims, tired and unwashed, arrived at their destination smelling pretty badly. Also, it was believed that the smoke from the incense had a purifying and protective effect during times of plague. And, of course, the burning of incense is itself an important part of the liturgy, being a form of prayer to God.” He paused. “Which is, I’m sure, more than you ever wanted to know

about the incense burner,” he laughed apologetically.

“Not at all,” Hardy replied. “I found the cathedral and its place in the Church’s history fascinating. I also was very moved by the people who go on pilgrimage. A ritual of simple faith that has stood the test of time and, in fact, still offers hope and comfort in a world that seems to have gone off kilter.”

Kelvin threw a somewhat suspicious look at Hardy, wondering if he was having his leg pulled. He saw, however, that his group leader was sincere in his speech, and adjusted his opinion of Hardy accordingly.

“Mr. Durkin?” someone spoke from behind.

Hardy turned and recognized Amy Snoddard, a Special Education teacher from Silver Spring, Maryland.

“Hi, Amy!” he returned. “And please, it’s just Hardy.”

“O.K., Hardy. I apologize for being late, but ...”

“Hey, not a problem, Amy. Tonight is low key and very informal. Totally off the clock, except we do need to start dinner on time or Antonio, the owner, won’t let me bring any more groups to his fabulous family-style feast. Oh, excuse me. Amy, this is Kelvin Gossett, one of ours. Kelvin, Amy Snoddard.”

Amy’s blue-gray watchful eyes gave Kelvin a detached once-over. ‘A decent sort,’ she thought, approvingly. Athletic and almost

mannish-looking, Amy had never married and harbored a suspicion of people in general and men in particular. Her best friends were two Blue-Russian cats, Ivan and Emma, who were being looked after by a highly trusted cousin in Gaithersburg. "Pleased to meet you, Kelvin," she said, giving him a nod.

"Can I get you something to drink, Amy?" Kelvin offered.

"Um, no ... I think I'll wait until dinner. Thanks."

Almost on cue Antonio and a young girl, probably his teen-aged daughter, entered the terrace, each bearing a large platter of salumi, cured meats from locally raised and slaughtered free-roaming pigs. Antonio's family had been preparing their own salumi for many generations, a tradition he upheld seriously and sacredly. The smoked, peppery aroma from the salumi drew everyone, en masse, to the three tables which had been pulled together into one long buffet. Carafes of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo and Cerasuolo, the famous wines of Abruzzo, had been placed on each table, both excellent accompaniments to the salumi. Talking subsided for several minutes while the company of hikers delved into the food. Antonio stood back, pleased at the appreciative response to his charcuterie platters. The next course was the typical Abruzzese maccheroni alla chitarra in a spicy tomato sauce. The pasta is so-called because it is rolled out flat onto a square box with strings, shaped like a crude guitar, or

chitarra and the strings of the 'guitar' cut the slab of egg dough into pasta noodles.

Next came an assortment of crepes filled with savories, cheese, or vegetables, some of which were baked and others which had been stewed in a meat broth. A polenta in a spicy sausage ragu. And lamb, locally raised, in a creamy cheese and egg sauce, served with roasted potatoes. The wine was continually replenished. The combination of good, glorious food and wine worked their inevitable magic. Conversation flowed, burbled, and surged on a tide of good will all round. No one was excluded; no one held back. A group that had been strangers two hours ago had transformed into a brotherhood.

As coffee was being served, an overweight Italian in his early forties appeared at Hardy's side. Dressed in somewhat wrinkled chinos and a short-sleeve Oxford shirt, left untucked, he stood smiling deferentially. Lightly rapping the side of his water glass with his spoon, Hardy called the group to attention.

"Let me introduce you all to one more member of our band of travelers. This is Giuseppe, our driver for the duration of our trip and a native of Sulmona." Hardy then went round the assembled diners making brief introductions. Giuseppe nodded and bobbed at each name, beaming an engaging smile.

Kelvin the ex-priest, always taking everyone's measure, thought, 'Shifty-eyed bugger; over-solicitous.'

Amy Snoddard's private reaction to the driver was, 'Looks like he's always on the take.'

Peter Fynch figured Giuseppe was probably connected to the Mob.

All three were correct in their assessments.

After the diners were sated and somewhat tipsy, Antonio reappeared and was met with a round of applause and hearty 'bravos' from his audience. When the acclamation had subsided Hardy spoke, "Antonio, you've really outdone yourself, my friend. What a feast!"

Antonio demurred. "This was only a meal, really. A feast is what we in Abruzzo call *la panarda*. It is a meal prepared to honor Saint Anthony and consists of thirty five to fifty different dishes. The whole village turns out and eats all night long. That is a feast. But I am honored that you enjoyed your meal and hope you will visit us again."

CHAPTER 2

Hardy Durkin, owner of Durkin Tours, had brought his latest group of middle-aged-plus hikers to the region of Abruzzo in Italy for a ten-day tour. His clientele were usually upper management and professional kinds of people who loved to decompress by hiking through spectacular natural scenery and living simply but well while doing so. They were folks who didn't mind a healthy trek during the day, but expected good food and their creature comforts at day's end.

Hardy, who had started out as a computer geek in a cubicle working for a company specializing in GPS applications in New Hampshire after active duty with the Army's SIGINT brigade in Germany, had decided there was far more to life than working in a rabbit warren. As a result of this realization, during his last year of Reserve duty he had created a nice niche business of catering to the adventurous spirit who craved quiet solitude with nature while hiking, but at night wanted a hot shower, soft bed, and the kiss of civilization nearby. He'd

started Durkin Tours, and never looked back. Now, at the age of twenty eight years, Hardy could safely say that his business was a success and so was his life, if one measured success by happiness and self-satisfaction.

Italy's Abruzzo region is considered the 'Green Heart' of Europe and is one of the wildest and most beautiful areas in Italy. Bordered by the Apennines on the west and the Adriatic Sea on the east, one third of the region is preserved as national or regional parks which are home to woodlands, an endless variety of wildflowers, birds, and butterflies, and a haven for bear, chamois, wolves, eagles, large cats, and other vanishing species. These natural riches are preserved in the national parks of Maiella, Gran Sasso, and Abruzzo, the regional park of Sirente-Velino, and numerous smaller reserves.

Although the region of Abruzzo is considered to be in southern Italy, it is really where the north and south of Italy meet. Historically an empty, sparsely populated region, Abruzzo became even less dense after World War II when people quit the land and the practice of sheep farming, with much of the population immigrating to America. Medieval villages in the mountains located in the national parks lost much of their citizenry, but recent efforts to carefully and authentically restore the villages have resulted in a modest increase of population and growth in the tourism industry. Scattered throughout the region are abandoned castles, remote

hermitages, hilltop villages, old farmsteads, and some truly remarkable abbeys and churches. Two thirds of the region of Abruzzo is mountainous, and the highest peaks in Italy, outside the Italian Alps, are here. The mountains give way to hills planted in vines, olives, and orchards, and then come the plains of the coastal areas which meet the Adriatic in Blue Flag Beaches, beaches which set the standard for being environmentally friendly and clean.

Although far from the madding crowd, Abruzzo does attract ardent tourists in small numbers. It has become a special haven for those who love mountain tourism and skiing, a mecca for beachgoers since the beaches along the Adriatic are some of the best in Italy, and Abruzzo also beckons those who appreciate art, history, and religion.

In early history, Abruzzo was comprised of several different Italic tribes which lived apart from each other until they unified to resist the encroaching Roman Empire. They finally succumbed to conquest and became citizens of Rome.

After the fall of the Roman Empire Abruzzo changed hands many times, but it was under Charlemagne's rule that Christianity grew and the abbeys, cathedrals, and monastic retreats were built. Charlemagne was followed by Norman rule, several other Houses and Kingdoms, and then the Spanish took over, followed by the House of Bourbon and, finally,

the unification of Italy. The various regions, however, still retain their identity and importance in the lives and minds of the people who live there. When asked where you are from, the most important part of the answer is your town or village. You are not Italian first, but Abruzzese from Scanno, for example.

Abruzzo is the rustic heart of Italy ... it is Italy the old way ... it hasn't changed for centuries. The foods are simple but sublime; their preparations are artisanal and unforgettably succulent and fragrant, and very, very fresh. Abruzzese cuisine is an undiscovered treasure among Italian cooking. The inspired ways, in which the freshest ingredients are combined to create unforgettable dishes that startle and delight the palate, boggle the taste buds. There is an ancient gastronomy based on what they grow, raise, and catch ... uncontaminated and unpolluted.
