

# **Corsican Justice**

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A Hardy Durkin Travel  
Mystery

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**Corsican Justice**  
A Hardy Durkin Travel Mystery

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"To my father, who instilled in me a love  
for travel and mystery, and to Christian,  
who shared Corsica with me."

# CORSICA



- Hardy's Trip to Conca
- - - Kidnap Trip
- Trip with Christian

Map page from Hardy Durkin diary, with hand written notes showing his two trips and kidnap routes

## **PROLOGUE**

*Hardy is visiting Corsica for the first time to explore the possibility of arranging a hiking tour for segments of Corsica's infamous hiking trail, the GR20. He also seeks some closure for the fact that his father was killed in a highway accident on the island several years earlier. When Hardy learns his father was actually murdered his world is shaken; he seeks the truth amid arms smuggling, Russian mobsters, and judicial corruption. Corsican Justice encompasses justice on several levels, with an understanding of the Corsican vendetta as the core of the island's justice system that goes back centuries.*



## CHAPTER 1

*Edward Durkin, Ret CMSgt, age 60, born April 23, 1948 in Parlier, CA. Edward was a linguist in the USAF, then attended Syracuse University for a BA, received an MA from Roosevelt University in computer sciences and was employed as a systems architect for W-Systems in San Antonio.*

*Edward died in a motorcycle accident on the island of Corsica, September 20, 2008. He is survived by his loving wife, Lyvia Plauner Durkin, San Antonio, and three sons, Kristof, Sacramento, CA, Josef, Vienna, VA, and Hartmut, who lives at home. There will be a private service for the family.*

*Obit. San Antonio News, September 29, 2008*

Île de Beauté. Isle of Beauty. Corsica slept beneath wispy-tailed clouds, draped over a patch of the Mediterranean Sea an hour by air from mainland France. It was Hardy Durkin's first trip to the island; his mother's words replayed, again, in his mind when they'd met

for lunch in Frankfurt before he'd left for the airport to catch his plane.

"Corsica, Hardy? What takes you there, after all this time?" She danced around her concerns at his going.

"I'm combining business and pleasure, Mutte. My tour business is all but over for the season and now it's my turn for some R & R. I've been escorting small groups on hiking excursions all over Europe during the summer and I'm peopled out ... I need to decompress someplace near the sea, away from tourist hordes, and Corsica is pretty quiet in October.

"The business part is that I've never hiked the GR20 and thought it might be useful to check it out ... maybe add a hike there starting this spring."

"I've heard the GR 20 is a fairly intense trail, Hardy ... the toughest in Europe. Can your fifty-year olds handle a trek that difficult?"

Hardy's tour company specialized in non-extreme hikes which were more than the casual stroll but definitely avoided anything technical. His clientele were mostly professionals who signed up for his tours to try and restore balance to their stress-filled lives and reconnect with the natural beauty and peace which were the backdrop for their brief sojourns.

"Yeah, it's a real butt kicker in places, but I wanted to check out the southern segment that ends at Conca."



Unspoken between mother and son was Hardy's third, nebulous reason for going to Corsica. Hardy's father, Edward Durkin, retired CMSgt, had died unexpectedly there when his rented motorcycle had plunged off the road into a ravine in the wild Calanches region five years earlier. His untimely death had sucked the life out of Hardy, who was completing his graduate degree in History at Middlebury College in Vermont at the time and the only son still at home. The grieving was long over, but Hardy needed some type of closure with his loss and hoped this trip would provide it.

His mother's eyes probed Hardy's face as she, too, sensed the loss. Then, the spell broken, she grinned at him. "Just make sure your butt doesn't get the kicking."

So, here he was on the approach into Ajaccio, the capital, which lay curled like a somnolent cat around the Golfe D'Ajaccio, the sunlight shining diamonds on water so azure (even that word couldn't do justice to the color) it seemed painted; the Mediterranean was so blue it 'looked too blue to be wet.' They were under the clouds now. The coastline was broken by rocky coves and small, empty beaches; he could feel the lull of the unending waves washing the shore and knew this is what he needed to cleanse his mind and heal his soul.

Hardy stopped by the Europcar counter before leaving the airport to arrange for a rental car the next morning. He handed his passport to

the attendant, who began filling out the necessary forms, and made small talk.

“This is a great time of year to visit Corsica ... I suppose you’re relieved the busy season is over, eh?” He flashed an open, genuine smile.

“Oui, Monsieur. It eez a good time to catch one’s breath, as they say.” The clerk opened Hardy’s passport to copy the passport number and let out a small gasp. Hardy saw him glance sharply in his direction, then quickly look down. It was as though a veil had been dropped between him and the clerk ... the bonhomie was gone, replaced by cool suspicion. ‘What was going on?’ he wondered. Had he committed some offense, a faux pas? The rental process was completed in silence and Hardy was handed the rental documents. He thanked the clerk, though at this point he wasn’t sure why he did so, and turned to be on his way.

“One moment, Monsieur.”

Hardy turned back to the counter. “Yes?”

“Where is Monsieur staying on Corsica? I must add your local address to the application.”

“Hotel Fesch,” Hardy replied, and he turned on his heel and strode off.

During the cab ride into town he tried to shake off the unsettling experience with the Europcar rep. The exchange had left him feeling exposed, somehow. Everything had been fine until the guy looked in his passport and then he had freaked for some reason. His passport photo was harmless enough: intelligent blue eyes (pools of

dark blue) under straight brows, not-too-prominent nose with a slight bump (broken in a swim meet, age twelve), chiseled mouth, strong chin (anything but a weak chin!) set symmetrically in a handsomely proportioned face, topped by thick, chest-nut brown hair, worn short.

His thoughts were smothered out by the scene unfolding before him on the brief trip into town. Ajaccio, Corsica's largest city and its capital, glistens like an exotic jewel on the west coast of Corsica in the afternoon sun. The bustling harbor, designer boutiques, and a truly cosmopolitan array of cafés and restaurants give this town all the pizzazz of the typical French Mediterranean resort, with beaches, palm trees, and snow-capped mountains in the background.

Splashes of color abound in Ajaccio. The harbor bobs with fishing boats sporting awnings and paint jobs in every shade of the rainbow, and the buildings and houses along the port, notably in Place Foch, the oldest area of Ajaccio, please the eye with soothing pastels and terracotta tile roofs. Apartment buildings bloom with countless window boxes spilling over with flowers and terraces planted with blossoming shrubs. Bougainvillea in countless hues embolden walls and gates throughout the city.

The road from Napoleon Bonaparte Airport to the capital followed the half-moon curve of the shoreline, and Hardy basked in the satisfying

feeling of being your own man in an exotic and alluring port city where the resplendent Mediterranean made promises to his soul too indiscreet to repeat.

His cab dropped him at the bottom of Rue du Cardinal Fesch, the pedestrian shopping street named after, obviously, Cardinal Fesch who was Napoleon's uncle, trusted friend, and blesser of both of Napoleon's marriages. He made his way to a bookstore on the corner and sought the map section. Hardy loved a good map; it was usually his first purchase when traveling to a new destination. He deliberated whether to buy Michelin's Corse Sud, Corse Haute, or one of the whole island and decided on the latter.

Back on Rue Fesch, he sauntered past a pharmacy, a boulangerie, several restaurants serving dinner on the sidewalk, shops selling 'Made in Corsica' items, and various boutiques. It was idyllic, really. No one hurried, the sun shine made it all seem friendly, and the aroma of fresh baguettes got to his stomach, which responded with a not-so-subtle rumble.

A pocket knife was next on his list of must-haves. With travel so restrictive and he not one to check his luggage when flying, he was unable to pack a pocket knife, and he went absolutely no where without one. The P-38 can opener his father had given him from military days went everywhere with him on his key chain but a pocket knife it was not.

He opted for a small shop whose window displayed an array of cutlery. The shepherd's knives, made by a local artisan, were exceptional. A simple fixed blade topped by a palm-sized handle, either in bone, hammered brass or silver, wood, or layered cork. Collector's items. Hardy wanted functional. He selected a plain pocket knife with two blades and a cork screw and was good to go.

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## CHAPTER 2

He wheeled his luggage through the door of the Hotel Fesch and presented his passport to the clerk at the check-in desk. Slender, coifed, quite lovely and perfectly French she looked down her straight, Gallic nose at him.

“Bonjour, Monsieur.” She glanced down at the passport he’d placed on the counter. “What eez zees, Monsieur?” A large, male, orange tabby cat was ensconced on a pillow atop the counter lazily bathing himself. The cat paused in his ministrations to give Hardy a condescending look and then resumed his cleaning.

“My passport. I’m Hartmut Durkin ... I have a reservation for a week’s stay at the Fesch.” He read the name on her name tag and added, “Mademoiselle Bruschi.”

For some reason she blushed momentarily at his use of her name but then she demanded, “Why do I need your passport, Monsieur? I am not zee police.”

The French do not need the word sneer in their lexicon. Their sophistication takes them way past sneer. Elegantly haughty, she was. And cool. Very cool. He reached out to give the cat a scratch under the chin and was rewarded with a clawed swat and hiss. He jerked his hand back as a fine red line appearing on his thumb marked where he'd been scratched.

"Damn!" he exclaimed, moving well out of the cat's reach. "Uh, I thought you'd need to see my passport when I checked in. Don't you?" Hardy knew his boyish good looks were tingeing pink with embarrassment, a fact which only embarrassed him more. Normally somewhat cocksure and full of himself, he'd been caught off guard and felt silly under her gaze.

She didn't roll her eyes at this, although Hardy felt the sentiment. Invisibly arrogant, she dismissed his comment with none of her own.

"Will Monsieur be taking petit déjeuner with us? It eez nine Euros; the dining room eez through there (a slight upward nod of her chin in the direction behind Hardy). Yes?"

The mention of food always caught his attention. "Yes, alright. What time does breakfast start?"

"At seven hours, Monsieur. Bon. You are all checked in. Here eez your key; room 228 up the stairs and there eez a lift. 'Ave a good day, Monsieur." Thus, he was dismissed.

For reasons Hardy had never understood, the lift, like so many in Europe, was up the stairs,

on the 1st floor. Why not put the elevator on the ground floor like in the States? He assumed it was somehow tied in to the fact that the old hotels had been built before Otis figured out the elevator invention, but that still didn't explain not putting the contraption on the rez de chaussée, or ground floor. He bump-clumped his luggage up one flight to access the lift to his floor, feeling the curious eyes of Mademoiselle Bruschi on his back.

Room 228 was sparsely furnished but charming, with French doors to a narrow balcony overlooking Rue Fesch. The tub in the bath room was inordinately long ... long enough to accommodate his entire six-foot four-inch frame lengthwise, but his broad shoulders, sporting muscles from years of swimming competitions and training, would make the width a tight fit for sure. A shower-on-a-hose had been added as an upgrade.

Hardy unpacked his basic, functional wardrobe ... jeans, Ex-Officio mesh-lined shorts, cotton polos, several long sleeve shirts treated with sun guard to protect against UV rays, sweater, fleece jacket, rain slicker, quick-dry underwear, and a hat to ward off rain and sun. He arranged his toiletries in the bath room. He really needed to eat but decided to call Christian, an old family friend, first. On the other end the phone was answered on the second ring.

“Allo?”



“Christian, it’s Hardy Durkin. I just checked into my hotel and wanted to give you a call before I went out for a bite to eat. How are you?”

“Fine, Hardy ... I’m fine, merci. You are in Ajaccio, then, yes?”

“Yes. I’ve checked into the Hotel Fesch. You know it?”

“Ah, but of course I know the Fesch. Difficult to get to because of the pylons they have in the street, but a nice place to stay. So, we are going to travel around Corsica together, you and I, eh? But not for three days, Hardy, if that is OK. I’m in the middle of pruning my Proteas and it needs to be done right now, so three days ... on Wednesday?”

“That will work out just fine, Christian. I need to drive to Conca for a few days, so that will be perfect. Can we have breakfast tomorrow, Christian ... here at the Fesch?”

“Yes, I would like that. It will be good to see you again after so much time has passed. How will I know you?”

“Just look for a younger version of my dad, only handsomer. How about 8:00 tomorrow morning then? I’ll wait for you in the lobby.”

“Yes, yes; 8:00 is good for me, too. À bientôt, Hardy.”

“À demain, Christian.” His stomach was growling, again, so he decided food was in

order and headed down to the street to see about dinner.

Corsican food is a blend of two of the world's greatest cuisines: French and Italian. The food is prepared using mainly locally grown ingredients; it is food you will get nowhere else. Terroir is the French word to describe such locally created food. It refers to the climate, land, and region where foods are grown or produced. It also refers to the uniquely subtle, indefinable characteristics of food in a certain region ... food that embodies the soul of the people who live there.

At La Belle Époque, a brasserie opposite the hotel, Hardy ordered an excellent salade niçoise and a side order of frites with a glass of house white. Simple fare, but it hit the spot. Food in France, Hardy reflected, was so much more than filling one's stomach. For example, the French fries had been cut into thin julienne sticks by hand and had started as a real potato, non-GMO, not a bag of frozen chunks from the freezer. And the oil the potato sticks had been fried in was fresh and probably sunflower, not a rancid, over-used, vegetable-based fat.

Eating was a ritual as sacred as communion; it required one to pay homage to one of life's most basic needs and, in return, afforded a dignity everyone deserved. Eating well was part of the French national psyche; one didn't stint when it came to nourishing not only one's body but also, and especially, one's vital force. In short, he had never had a bad meal in France. Period. It removed a layer of stress simply to be able to

rely on this one fact. Thus fortified, Hardy set out to explore Ajaccio.

He gazed up at the statue of Napoleon Bonaparte dominating Place Foch. The favorite son of Ajaccio, Napoleonic reminders were everywhere in street names, statues, Napoleon Bonaparte Airport, hotels, restaurants etc. It wasn't so much that Ajaccians were trying to cash in on the emperor's name. No. The reason behind the hijacking of his name was deeper and far more culturally endemic.

Another favorite son, Pasquale Paoli, had been a sworn enemy to Napoleon. Paoli was a Corsican patriot who believed in the independence of the Corsican state and had written the Constitution for Corsica as a representative democracy with Paoli, surprise, surprise, elected president of this state. Napoleon was pro French. N'eer the twain shall meet. To this very day in Corsica the descendants of these two men are at enmity ... if you are descended from Bonaparte you NEVER frequent a bar, hotel, or any establishment owned by a Paoli and vice versa. Thus, sticking the name 'Napoleon' on a bar, hotel, restaurant, or charcuterie was a clear 'keep out' warning to all Paolis. It was an efficient system and had worked flawlessly for over two centuries.

The sun was melting into the sea with a panoply of colors that strutted across the sky, then muted into velvet tones and finally night arrived. Cooler night air rustled the palm fronds overhead and Hardy was glad for his jeans and cotton sweater. He'd have to

remember to pack some warmer clothes when he headed up into the mountains tomorrow.

Hardy meandered along a street off Place Foch, found a small bar catering to locals, and sauntered in. He took his Cinquante et Un, his favorite pastis, an anise-flavored liqueur, over ice and small pitcher of water along with a saucer of nuts and found an empty table near the back wall where he could enjoy his drink and observe the crowd.

The primary tongue spoken on Corsica is French. That wasn't so a hundred fifty years ago when Corsican, or Corsu, was spoken as the native language alongside Italian. Corsica, at that time, was ruled from Genoa; the Italian influence is prevalent on the island in family names, and names of cities and towns. A Romance language, it was originally only oral and so has many regional variations. It sounds a bit like Italian and, allegedly, Italians and those speaking Corsu can understand one another. When France took over Corsica the French language replaced it as the official language but Corsu is still widely spoken. In fact, about 10% of the population speak Corsu as their first language. French is used as the formal language; Corsu is spoken mainly at home and in social contexts.

Hardy tried to follow various conversations in progress around him in the bar. He was fluent in French but Corsu was another matter. He thought he pretty much got the gist of what was being said but all of a sudden would come

an outburst and loud retorts and he had not a clue as to what was being discussed. Still, he was content to sip his pastis and people watch.

Suddenly a group of four young men standing at the bar broke into song, their voices blending, rising, and falling in the polyphonic singing unique to Corsica and Sardinia. Following its revival in the 1970's, the music became aligned with the nationalist political movement and was an important part of the island's identity. Polyphonic singing is at the heart of expression of Corsican culture and ranges from sacred to secular in subject. All of it is other-worldly and extremely moving.

A cappella, the men stood in a close arc, almost ear to ear, one hand cupped over one ear to block out his neighbor, singing, listening, adjusting, and singing on. The music drew Hardy in. He closed his eyes, relaxed, and floated with the music. It took him to the beginning of the world, its melodic creative force seducing his spirit ... it stirred something within, deep down inside, something he'd never felt before. He let it carry him on its current to places he'd never been. He rejoiced. He mourned. His spirit soared with the sound. Just as suddenly, the miraculous harmony stopped. Its absence was so pronounced, so profound. Life in the bar continued as before, not missing a beat. But Hardy ... Hardy remembered where he had traveled ... the music whispered, still, in his essence, and he was a changed man.

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