

**HOMICIDE**

**HÉRAULT**

**A HARDY DURKIN TRAVEL MYSTERY**

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By Blurette Matthey

Blue Shutter Publishing

# HOMICIDE HÉRAULT

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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also,

**Two Murders Too Many**



## **Dedication**

My honest-to-goodness thanks to my husband and helpmate, who somehow manages to navigate and organize all the craziness I manufacture with the magic wand of imagination.



⊗ - where the bodies were discovered

Page from  
Hoody Durkin's  
Diary

## Prologue

Veteran trekker Hardy Durkin leads his first bike tour group to Béziers in the South of France, during its annual grand Feria, for what is expected to be relaxing, uneventful bicycling in the Hérault region. This notion is kicked to the curb when a double cold-case with present-day repercussions is discovered on one of the group's outings. Hardy becomes embroiled in another homicide when he is present at a murder that takes place during an innocent flamenco performance that is anything but.

The bottom line: murder and intrigue follow Hardy Durkin like a shadow, even in the sunny, laid-back South of France, but this time his wheel of fortune veers uncomfortably off the rails in **Homicide Hérault**.





## CHAPTER ONE

Two men glided through the Languedoc darkness following the Canal du Midi in southern France. They had come ashore in Sète where the canal flows into the Étang du Thau and snaked their way along its bank heading north. Now they were in Béziers, at midnight, where they would pick up the River Orb to their final destination, an old mas in the countryside near the ancient village of Cessenon-sur-Orb.

At the Pont-Canal-de-l'Orb, where the Canal du Midi runs atop a bridge crossing the river, the men found the stone steps leading down to the Orb and headed upstream. They skirted a night club on the river's bank, staying out of the light from a gaudy neon sign. A blowsy sax rendered a melancholy Coleman Hawkins tune out over the mild May night, and the sound of laughter tinkled when the night club's door opened and stopped abruptly when it shut again. Then all was silent except for the sound of the men slapping at the ever-present mosquitos.

Kase Devine moved effortlessly in a constant dog trot along the foot path of the Orb. His compact five-foot-nine frame carried a body taut with muscles and highly trained in self-defense and evasion tactics. Dark hair, dark eyes, Kase was an American ninja who had been employed as an American journalist in Algiers until two days ago. In reality, he was a CIA operative sent, at the behest of his government, to gauge firsthand the dynamics at play in Algeria's war for independence from their French colonial masters. It was a war that would ultimately claim a million and a half Algerian lives and ten thousand French soldiers, see tens of thousands tortured, and cause the collapse of the French government.

Foreign journalists were not welcome in Algeria in 1962. The FLN, National Liberation Front, the nationalist military and political organization spearheading the revolution, had a habit of slitting the throats of anybody they did not trust or like. Journalists were at the top of both lists. As for the OAS (Organisation Armée Secrète), the renegade group of disaffected paramilitary and Pied-Noirs (European Algerians) fighting tooth and claw to keep Algeria French, killing a foreign correspondent made big waves.

The OAS didn't care how they got international attention. Their seemingly indiscriminate bombing of libraries, hospitals, police stations, and places of business made headlines and struck terror into the hearts of all Algerians. Hardly a night passed without a fête plastique, a gala of detonations with

the bombs timed and placed to unhinge the populace with their random destruction. It was hell on earth.

Kase managed to survive two weeks in Algeria, and it hadn't been by soaking up rays at the beach or whiling away time in the many cafés. The FLN had attacked Pied-Noir families vacationing in Oran, leaving the beach littered with body parts and pretty much discouraging sun-bathing-as-usual. As for the cafés ... well, they were prime targets for either warring side to toss in a grenade, Molotov cocktail, or bomb, and most now remained empty and boarded up.

Sgt. Thierry DuBlanc, Kase's traveling companion, was a contact from time spent in Indo-Chine. DuBlanc had abandoned his post in Algiers to join the OAS when the Évian Accords were signed in mid-March of 1962, giving Algeria full independence from France. DuBlanc, an Algerian by birth but French to the core, felt betrayed by his country and the army and held special enmity for De Gaulle who, DuBlanc believed, had lied outright to the military stationed in Algeria about securing the country as a part of France.

After France's humiliating defeat in Indo-Chine, the army had dug into Algeria, determined to win at all costs and restore its honor. De Gaulle had taken advantage of the army's collective sensitivity and played it in his favor until he decided to give Algeria its independence. Suddenly, the army felt betrayed; it had no clothes. Many officers as well as rank and file, feeling deceived by the turn of events and embittered that they had, once again, been sold down the river, joined the radical paramilitary OAS, the Secret Army Organization which saw itself as the only salvation for a French Algeria.

Sickened by the incessant human carnage as a result of the OAS' bombing agenda, DuBlanc had done a bunk and fled Algeria, taking with him a vital piece of information. DuBlanc had been present at Rue d'Isly on 26 March, 1962, and witnessed firsthand the massacre of his fellow French citizens. Several hundred had been shot down in the street like dogs by the army as they protested the army's blockade of Bab El Oued, a mostly European quarter of Algiers, in retaliation for killings by the OAS.

The official story was that shots had first been fired at the soldiers and their response, mowing down men, women, and children with machine guns, was a justifiable action. The black truth was that De Gaulle supporters in the army had arranged for untrained Muslim troops to replace regular French army soldiers at the blockades. French soldiers, DuBlanc knew, would never have opened fire on French citizens, but Muslim Algerians had no such affinity.

Concerned, DuBlanc had mingled among the Muslim troops at the onset of the protest listening to their whispered conversations.

"They said we can open fire if we feel threatened."

"I was told we were going to kill some Christians."

"We were transferred in from the Medea to do a job."

The firing, when it began, was butchery. The civilian procession had been led by the youth of Algiers, carrying tri-color flags, followed by men, women, and children ... whole families

participated. And then came the elderly, with their slow, almost-stumbling steps. All to show their pride of being a French citizen in their beloved Algeria.

Colonel Goubard was commanding officer of the 4<sup>th</sup> RT, made up mostly of Muslim riflemen, skirmishers who were illiterate and scruffy, albeit excellent fighters. The 4<sup>th</sup> had been placed to act as a dam in Rue d'Isly, against Goubard's express wishes to his superior in command, General Ailleret. Goubard knew full well how out of hand things could become with his rough troops pitted against Europeans.

Ailleret had promised Goubard the 4<sup>th</sup> RT would not be used in that capacity. But Ailleret had bypassed Goubard and instructed Battalion Chief Poupat to deploy the 4<sup>th</sup> RT to secure the downtown areas to be engaged in the demonstration.

DuBlanc needed proof of the origin of the order to deploy the 4<sup>th</sup> RT to Rue d'Isly. He stole into Poupat's office at dark thirty in the hopes that he could find the dispatch cutting Goubard out of the command loop. His efforts had been well rewarded. Not only had he found a hastily scrawled, hand-written missive instructing Poupat's strategy, but the order also clearly pointed out that French troops were not to be used in the exercise.

"Signed by Ailleret, the bastard," DuBlanc muttered under his breath, as he made multiple photographs of the order.

The French government made no effort to investigate how the massacre had come about. It stopped just short of pretending it had never happened while an outraged French Republic clamored to know how something so horrendous could take place against its own. Still, the government said nothing, and the dead were secreted away and buried without any religious ceremony, denying friends and family the solace of a dignified burial. It was an egregious affront to the people of France.

But why? What would be the point of sacrificing French men, women, and children in such a public and heinous fashion? To whose advantage? When Thierry DuBlanc looked at this question from all sides the sick truth was that French President Charles De Gaulle's government needed an excuse for an expeditious exit from the Algerian situation with or without honor, and the pictures of an Algerian street littered with the bodies of innocent, unarmed French citizens fit the bill.

For three days DuBlanc mentally played and replayed the bloodbath he'd witnessed at the post office on Rue d'Isly. The Muslim soldiers had machine-gunned people as innocent as lambs. But the grenades hadn't come from the troops, nor the rifles fired from balconies overlooking the scene. These, DuBlanc knew, had been the OAS, exterminating the populace that supported them to make a few points in the arena of international opinion.

He was done with the insurgent group, but he doubted the OAS was done with him. He knew that the OAS didn't just let soldiers desert their cause. He had known comrades who had done the same as he was doing and they'd been hunted down and killed, their desertion seen as an act of betrayal. The OAS even sent death squads onto mainland France in pursuit of deserters.

Well, let them come after him. He'd take his chances, damn them! The madness needed to end with the nefarious duplicities exposed, and he had a piece of information that could do both. The

government had deceived and abandoned the French citizens in Algeria and left the military out on a limb, once again. DuBlanc knew who had given the sanction to these state-sponsored assassinations in Algiers.

He just needed to get his information to one man: Jean-Pierre. If anyone in France could expose to the world how the French government had misled, deceived, and sacrificed the French citizenry it was Capitan Osty. He would splash it on the front cover of Paris Match. DuBlanc had a name and where it led; it could bring down De Gaulle's government. And he didn't give a damn about that, either.

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Sometime around 2:00 AM a spotlight from a rowboat midstream in the Orb cut through the night, centering on the two men floundering with fatigue on the riverbank. Even ninjas can't melt away in headlights. The first shot severed DuBlanc's spinal cord and he collapsed in an unceremonious heap. Kase took a torso shot and was bleeding out when the death squad waded ashore and put a bullet in his head and then one in DuBlanc's.

"Put them in the ground and let's get outta here," the squad leader barked. "This place gives me the creeps, and these damn mosquitoes are a bitch."

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## CHAPTER TWO

The first week of August in the Hérault department of Southern France that included the town of Béziers had been unseasonably wet in 2019. It rained steadily for three consecutive days and warnings had been sounded for possible flooding. The Aude River ran through the small town of Trèbes and parts of the village had been closed due to the river overflowing its banks.

In the direction of Béziers the Orb River had risen ominously and several villages along its course suffered flood damage, with some residents being evacuated as the turbulent, muddy waters threatened houses on its banks. So much rain this close to grape harvest made the area's vast number of viticulture farmers nervous. Too much water at the wrong time could ruin the grapes.

Hardy Durkin and his travel group arrived in Béziers a week after the deluge on a Sunday, ready for some biking in the lovely Languedoc countryside. The cycling group was staying at the Hotel XIX on Place Jean Jaurès, right in the middle of the newly renovated historic city center. The Hotel XIX billed itself as retro chic, with a range of rooms catering to various comfort requirements.

Hardy had arranged for the hotel to provide more than a coffee-and-croissant breakfast for the cyclists. In addition to piping hot carafes of French press and steaming milk the morning fare also included an assortment of charcuterie, cheeses, hard-boiled eggs, juices, yogurt, toast, and fresh fruits in season from the greengrocer selling his produce on the nearby promenade.

With the gorgeous South-of-France weather back after the tempest the group breakfasted in the hotel's outdoor café, facing the plaza with its park and fountains. It was the authentic atmosphere of Southern France, also called le Midi, that everyone visiting France longed to experience and rarely did.

The first breakfast on Monday morning served as a get-acquainted session, since some members of the group had arrived late the night before. The Flomeys, Geraldine and Harold, were enjoying their breakfast at a table nearest the sidewalk when Hardy appeared on the terrasse, dressed in cargo shorts and a 'Durkin Tours' tee-shirt, his sunglasses suspended from a neoprene cord around his neck. Delia Delice had just joined them with a modest breakfast and Hardy felt their gaze swivel to him as he entered.

“Mornin’ all,” he called out as he headed for the Jura coffee machine set up on the small bar. ‘Only the best,’ he thought as he imagined Roger Federer, ambassador for Jura, smilingly handing him a perfect latte. He took note of a lynx-like cat partially hidden behind the wall of asparagus fern in a large planter just inside the wall separating the terrasse from the sidewalk. He paused to say ‘hello’ and the cat’s tail drummed a warning. He stacked his plate with lots of protein and several croissants before joining the others.

“Not a lot of food for a day of bicycling,” he commented to Delia as he dug into his assorted cured meats and eggs.

She looked from her plate to his. “I guess you’re right about that,” she said. “What are all those meats you’ve got?”

“Just the standard charcuterie medley. Ham, smoked salami, mortadella,” he said, pointing to the meats as he named them.

“Morta what? Doesn’t ‘mort’ mean dead? Is the meat something like roadkill?”

The Flomey’s looked somewhat horrified at the thought, but Hardy just laughed. “Not at all, Delia. In this case the morta refers to finely ground pork ---think mortar, like mortar and pestle---- and it has pistachio added to it. Very tasty, actually.”

“Oh, well, in that case I’ll try some.” She paused to do a wide-eyed look, then headed over to the buffet table.

Pealing laughter announced the arrival of Lilith Parasold, the newly divorced, just-turned-forty editor of an online newspaper in Woodstock, Vermont. Hardy thought she looked like a man eater.

“You think I’m kidding, but I’m not,” Fred Wannemaker was saying, looking a bit red-faced and flustered as he entered behind Lilith. His face grew even redder when he noticed he was the center of attention.

There was an awkward pause, then Lilith explained, “Fred was just telling me about the adult coloring books he designs. I’d never heard of adult coloring books, and I asked him if they were soft porn.” She said this last in an off-hand manner and Geraldine jumped to Fred’s defense.

“Why ever would you assume that?” she asked Lilith. “Fred is a very successful coloring book artist. His designs are extraordinarily intricate and beautiful.” To Fred she said, “I especially love your collection of Old-World cathedrals and the stained-glass windows they feature.”

The look on Fred’s face turned from embarrassment to one of pleasant surprise. He looked older than his late 40’s, due mainly to his graying brown hair, wispy matching mustache and a thin, old-man’s physique with a slight stoop made by spending hours at a time bent over his drafting table.

“Yes,” agreed her husband. “Your eye for detail is amazing!”

“You know his work?” Lilith asked, surprised. She just couldn’t get over the concept of coloring books for adults.

“My dear,” replied Geraldine, “what else can one do on those long winter nights in the Northeast Kingdom?”

“Coloring books and jigsaw puzzles,” agreed her husband, nodding.

“Huh,” was all Lilith could say.

“Did I hear someone mention the Northeast Kingdom?” Clive Beanstreet asked as he sidled up to the buffet table. Clive ‘Call me Beany’ Beanstreet owned a small group of wine and cheese shops in New England. In his early 50’s, he was very proper looking, fit, and looked a bit dandy-ish in his expensively styled play clothes. No one called him Beany.

“That’d be us,” Harold Flomey said, by way of introduction. “We’re Geraldine and Harold Flomey.” He was a warm, jolly headmaster of a small private school in St. Johnsbury, Vermont which he ruled benevolently. His wife, the vice principal, not so much. She always assumed the role of bad cop when it came to school discipline.

“Northeast Kingdom?” Delia said. “Sounds like something out of Tolkien.”

“Almost as many moose as people,” Geraldine said.

“I know it well,” Clive said. “How did you end up on a bike tour in the South of France?”

“We were run out of Vermont by a cold, rainy early summer which resulted in a late black-fly season,” Harold explained. “Nasty buggers!”

“Eat you alive,” Clive agreed.

The entrance of Fania Drapeau cut the conversation short. All eyes fixed on the flamenco dancer’s lithe, elegant body, her Modigliani-esque long, slender neck with her luscious black hair fastened in a knot at the nape. Her dark, flashing eyes missed nothing as they swept the terrasse, making sure she commanded everyone’s attention.

Suddenly, she gave a large, open smile and glissando-ed over to the coffee bar, moving gracefully and rhythmically. Everything Fania did was dramatic. She wasn’t part of Hardy’s group but was staying at the hotel in preparation for the Feria, due to start the following week.

The Feria, an annual festival, attracted about a million people to Béziers for its bullfights, street concerts, and flamenco performances. Although the fête itself ran for four or five days the out-of-town street vendors moved in en masse, taking over the entire promenade of Allées Paul Riquet with their food booths and souvenir hawkers. It was one big street party the local businesses counted on to flood their coffers with tourist euros.

Instinctively, she singled Hardy out. “You are the American bicycle group, yes?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s right,” Hardy replied, rising from his seat and extending his hand. “Hardy Durkin,” he said, introducing himself.

Eyeing his ‘Durkin Tours’ tee-shirt she said, “Ah, you must be the leader. Will you be in Béziers for the Feria?”

“We will,” he said, “although we’ll be biking around the countryside most days.”

“Well, in any case, you must come to see me dance in the Parc des Poètes on Monday night, a week from today.” Her voice rose perceptibly as she swiveled her graceful neck to include the entire group in her invitation. “Have you seen flamenco before?”

“Once, in Barcelona, at The Palau de la Música,” Hardy said. “Impressive.”

“A lovely venue,” Fania said, “but formal. I think you will enjoy the amphitheater in the park. At night, under the stars ... it is magical.”

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Their first morning, after breakfast, Hardy had done his customary housekeeping session before heading out for their day’s excursion. Everyone in the group had received a checklist of things to bring weeks before the trip, but experience had taught Hardy not to assume everybody had what they needed for the tour.

“The bikes were all checked again, last night, to make sure the tires were properly inflated. I’ll be carrying a basic kit for repairs but anything major, like a busted wheel, is beyond my ken so just try to miss all the potholes and small children.”

“Do lots of kids get hit by bikes here, Hardy?” someone asked. It was Lane Batey, the x-ray technician from New Hampshire. No sense of humor. No imagination.

Hardy refrained from a glib reply; it would only confuse Lane. “No, Lane,” he said. “It was just my lame attempt at humor. Too early in the day, I expect.”

Delia Delice, the forty-something red head from upstate New York did one of her wide-eyed looks with her brilliant green eyes, then went back to her normally vacuous state. She noted the gray hair tufting from Lane’s ears and grimaced. ‘Gross,’ she thought and involuntarily moved her arm away from where it rested on the table near his cup of coffee.

“You’re all pretty fit,” Hardy began, “but the sun beating down on you, especially when the humidity is up, can take a toll. Just pack several bottles of water in your panniers and stay well hydrated. Oh, and grab an extra pain chocolate and a banana to keep your energy levels stable.”

“Is there someplace nearby I can buy a pair of sunglasses, Hardy?”

“You’re in luck, Lilith,” Hardy replied. “Just up Allées Paul Riquet there are at least three optometrists, and they all sell sunglasses.”

“Where’s this?” Lilith asked.

Hardy pointed, “Head for that statue, hang a left, and the stores will be up on your left when you get to the theater.” His look asked if she understood and she nodded. “They won’t be cheap,” he added as a caution.

“Hey, not a problem,” she said off-handedly. Lilith’s designer clothes and accessories confirmed this.



'High maintenance,' Hardy thought.

"What's the statue, Hardy?" Geraldine Flomey asked.

"Pierre-Paul Riquet. He's the local who imagined, designed, paid for, and built the Canal du Midi. The canal's purpose was to connect the Atlantic, near Bordeaux, with the Mediterranean so France wouldn't have to ship goods around Gibraltar and pay Spain taxes to do so. Also, the canal did not have pirates, as in Barbary. It was much faster to use the 'Canal des Deux Mers', the Canal of Two Seas. Riquet is a native son and national hero," he added.

He addressed the group, "If anyone needs to buy anything else there are stores on the promenade as well as the requisite cafés and restaurants, and an amazing boulangerie just around the corner past Le Crystal restaurant. If you take this little street that runs in front of the post office, it leads to a warren of narrow walking streets filled with boutiques and specialty shops."

"What's that guy's deal?" Harold Flomey asked, pointing to one of the benches in front of the post office.

Seven heads swiveled in the direction Harold was pointing. Sitting on a bench was an elderly, heavysset man with an empty box balanced on his closely shaved head. He was engaged in conversation with two other men who seemed oblivious of the box.

Seven heads swiveled back, waiting for an explanation from Hardy. He just smiled and shook his head. "Absolutely no idea. I think you'll find that Béziers has its requisite number of unusual characters."

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### CHAPTER THREE

Bike paths on the Canal du Midi had provided entertainment for several days, but the canal was crowded and some bikers riding the canal were reckless and shouldn't have been rented anything with wheels, so Hardy had decided to bike further afield.

Hardy's group was composed of veteran travelers, and he frequently had repeat customers for Durkin Tours. Hardy's trek company catered mostly to successful businesspeople and mid-level management types who wanted to get away from their daily grind, enjoy a challenge in the wild, eat well, and sleep in a clean, comfy bed at night.

Normally, Hardy did treks to off-the-beaten path places in Europe. Last winter he had helped a friend launch her cross-country ski business in the Engadine Valley in Switzerland, rubbing shoulders with the posh St. Moritz crowd. This bike tour was a first for Hardy, and he had a few qualms about how things would turn out. More things could go wrong with a bicycle and its many parts than with human feet.

This Friday morning Hardy was taking his group through the countryside north of Béziers, with a planned stop to swim in the Orb River at a spot called Réals, located about 3.5 kilometers due west of Murviel-les-Béziers where an old, one-lane bridge crossed the Orb.

"How much further, Hardy?" puffed Lane Batey, the 53-year-old x-ray technician from Dartmouth. Lane was a bit overweight and not really in shape to do the bike tour, but he'd insisted he could keep up. Hardy had made him take a special physical administered by Lane's physician to make sure he was in good health, and he had relented when Lane passed the test.

"Not far, Lane," he replied. "The bridge is just ahead. Across the bridge and to the left."

Mentally, Lane heaved a sigh of relief. His balding pate glistened with sweat and the fringe of graying hair was moist from his exertion.

Once over the bridge Hardy hung a left and about fifty yards down a narrow, poorly paved road he pulled off to the left side under the shade of trees over-hanging the river's bank. He parked his

aluminum-framed Giant Touring bike well off the road and locked it before turning his attention to his group.

Lilith Parasold, the new divorcée from Woodstock, Vermont gaped. ‘Look at him,’ she drooled to herself. ‘What a hunk! I mean, he’s gorgeous!’

Hardy Durkin was a hunk. All 6’4” of him, from his thick chestnut-brown hair to his long, tanned, muscular legs. His strong chin, chiseled mouth, not too-prominent nose (broken in a swim meet at age twelve), and intelligent, assessing deep-blue eyes were arresting in their honesty. It was a handsomely proportioned face that exuded the strength of command; he was a born leader.

Hardy 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. Early on he decided there was far more to life than working in a rabbit-warren office environment. During his last year of Reserve Duty, at the age of 28, 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. Now 30, Hardy had made a success of Durkin Tours and his life, if one measured success by happiness and self-satisfaction.

More than just a pretty face, Hardy was a crack marksman and fluent in four languages. He also excelled in the pentathlon and had placed in the top five for marksmanship and swimming at the International Military Pentathlon, Military World Games, and had been a natural at signal’s intelligence with the 66<sup>th</sup> Military Intelligence Brigade stationed in Wiesbaden, Germany.

He picked up on the vibe from Lilith and groaned, inwardly. The last thing he needed on one of his tours was a middle-aged single woman with her hormones out of control making passes at him. His eyes shielded by sunglasses, he glanced over his group to make sure everyone was present and accounted for.

Lane was leaning against a boulder trying to look like he wasn’t on the verge of collapse. Everybody else had removed the lunch and bottled water the hotel had packed for them from their panniers and looked to Hardy to tell them where to go.

The Orb River murmured close by as it made its way to the Mediterranean Sea by way of Béziers. The river had cleared of sediment after the recent flooding and the cyclists looked forward to its refreshing water after a hot bike ride. Several paths wended the short distance to the water’s edge. Hardy led his group through the trees and sparse brush as the rocky path dipped down to the gurgling river.

“No changing room?” Delia Delice pouted.

Clive Beanstreet, the wine and cheese purveyor from New England, barely stifled a snort of derision.

Hardy nodded in the direction of a cluster of trees nearby. “You’ll have to make do with that one,” he said. “We promise not to peek.” He gave her a wink and she smiled in return.

Lilith had draped herself over a large boulder protruding into the flow, while Fred waded into the river, placing his feet securely on the rocky bottom.

“Geez, this water is cold!” he said through chattering teeth.

“It comes out of the mountains,” Hardy explained. “The clarity of the water means it’s probably a spring-fed river so, yes, it will be a bit nip ...”

A piercing scream cut Hardy short. All eyes turned to the copse of trees where Delia had gone to change. Suddenly, she burst out of the trees trying to run but slipping and losing her balance as she floundered toward them. The terror in her contorted face sent Hardy running to her side.

Delia latched onto him with grasping claws, her mouth moving but no sound coming out.

“Delia,” Hardy said, taking her by the arms and giving her a shake. “What the hell’s going on? Did you see a snake?”

She shook her head. “Nooo ... no snake. Dead men,” she stammered.

“What! Where?” Hardy demanded.

Delia was shivering. Geraldine Flomey arrived to see what was wrong and Hardy pushed Delia at her. “I think she’s going into shock,” he said.

He headed into the stand of trees. The dappled sunlight cast shadows under the boughs, but there was no mistaking what lay in somewhat of a heap in the exposed roots of the trees partially covered by river detritus brought on by the flood.

Not one, but two skeletons, one minus the skull and somewhat the worse for wear. The remaining skull’s mandible was partially detached and there was what looked like a bullet hole from the forehead through to the occipital area. ‘An execution,’ he thought.

Hardy was not panicked by what he saw. He’d seen far worse. The past several years had introduced Hardy to death in different venues, including a grisly family murder featuring horrendous torture in Corsica.

Methodically, he studied the jumble of bones before him. Bits of tattered, rotted fabric clung to the clavicle and ribs. The frayed cuff from a sleeve bizarrely circled the bones of one wrist.

‘Not much here,’ he thought. Just then he caught sight of a few links from a chain that disappeared into a cluster of mud, leaves and whatever rubble the river had thrown into the mix. He gently tugged at the chain and the end came free, though it was entangled around several ribs. What he held in his hands startled him: dog tags. He was poking the remains of a murdered soldier!

He rubbed the metal tags between his thumb and forefinger to remove the mud, but the result was still unreadable. He fetched his water bottle and washed the tags so he could read them.

“DEVINE, KASE S, 0526933, T-57 A P’ ... which translated to: US Army soldier Kase S Devine, last tetanus shot 1957, Blood Type A, Protestant.

“What the hell,” Hardy said, half to himself, “is a US soldier’s remains doing washed up on a riverbank in the South of France?”

By this time his cycling group had moved in to see what had upset Delia.

“Did I hear you say it’s a dead American soldier, Hardy?” Harold Flomey asked.

“Looks like it, Harold.”

“Good Lord!” Clive huffed.

“What about the other one?” Lilith asked, pointing to the other tangle of bones nearby.

Hardy turned his attention to the skeleton’s travelling companion. A small oval-shaped disc with a serrated line through the middle was attached to a silver chain entangled in the rib cage. Hardy recognized it as a French dog tag. And there was something else: a small, narrow cylinder ---brass, it looked like---the size of a pencil stub, was also on the chain.

“This one was in the French army,” Hardy informed them. He untangled the chain from the ribs and lifted it from the neck bone. He washed the brass container in water and dried it on the bandana he wore tied around his neck. The brass was only starting to dezincify.

When he tried to unscrew the container, it slipped in his fingers. He used his bandana to get a better grip and tried again. Aside from a slight grittiness as he turned the top, the lid came off easily. Hardy turned the cannister upside down, but nothing came out. Odd that someone would go to such lengths for nothing. He dried his index finger on the bandana, reached in the cylinder, and extracted a small length of film.

“What the ...” Fred started.

The group pressed in closer, now a single unit holding its breath. Hardy unfurled the film strip. Holding it toward the light, Hardy could make out pictures of documents of some sort but he couldn’t read their contents.

“Well, what is it?” Delia demanded.

“Looks like film of some sort,” Harold said.

“Film?” Geraldine quizzed. “Film of what?”

“Whatever is on that film you’re holding, Hardy,” Lane said, “must be pretty darn important if two men died for it.”

“Were killed for it,” Clive corrected.

Hardy sat back on his heels and nodded. “I agree, Lane, if in fact this is why they were murdered.”

“What are you going to do, Hardy?” Clive asked.

He thought a moment, then pulled out his cell phone and checked to see if he had coverage. He speed-dialed a number.

“Clotiers,” the person on the other end of the conversation snapped.

“Alain, it’s Hardy.”

“Hardy, mon ami!” The smile in his greeting was unmistakable. “How are you? Where are you?”

“I’m on a riverbank just over fifteen kilometers from Béziers, France, Alain. And I’m standing over the remains of two dead soldiers, one American and one, French. Both murdered in the late fifties, early sixties, if you can go by the date on the dog tags. The French soldier was wearing a small brass cannister around his neck that contains a short strip of film. Looks like pictures of documents of some sort.”

There was a brief pause while Alain Clotiers processed the information. Then, “Buvain is visiting his ex-wife in Carcassonne, Hardy. Give me your GPS coordinates and he’ll be there in a little over an hour.”

“The police, Alain? Shouldn’t they be notified?”

“Not yet, mon ami. Do nothing until Buvain gets there. Go swimming, lay in the sun, but wait for Buvain. Got it?”

“Yes, Alain.”

“Depending on what Buvain reports, I’ll be in Béziers tomorrow morning. It’s the soonest I can get free. Say nothing to no one.”

“What about my bike group?”

Alain moaned. “You’ve got a tour group with you?”

“Correct.”

“Can you keep them quiet about this?”

“I can try.” Hardy paused. “What’s going on, Alain? Do you know something about all this?”

“Just a theory, Hardy,” he answered. “I’ll know more after talking to Buvain. Until tomorrow,” and he rang off.”

Hardy took a moment to collect his thoughts, then rose and turned to face his group.

“Who was that?” Fred wanted to know. “The police?”

“No, not the police,” Hardy replied, shaking his head.

“Who, then?” Clive asked.

“A friend, Alain Clotiers.”

“A friend,” Geraldine repeated. “Why would you call a friend for something like this? Two people have been murdered; this is a matter for the police,” she insisted.

Heads started to nod in agreement.

“Alain Clotiers is a special kind of friend,” Hardy explained. “He’s Lieutenant-Colonel Alain Clotiers, regimental commander of the French Foreign Legion 2<sup>nd</sup> Foreign Parachute Regiment stationed in Corsica. He’s also the head of a Mediterranean Task Force for organized crime.”

‘And one of the finest men I know,’ Hardy thought. His history with Alain Clotiers flashed briefly through his thoughts, beginning when they’d first met while Hardy was exploring Corsica, and at the same time trying to find out why his father had died there almost seven years ago.

Alain had enlisted Ed Durkin, Hardy’s father and an old friend, to assist him on his task force tracking crime in the Mediterranean. Ed’s untimely death in a car accident in Corsica had sent Clotiers into a depression of guilt for his friend’s death, and when Hardy showed up on the island five years later looking for reasons for his dad’s death Alain and Hardy had connected.

Hardy had solved the mystery of his father’s death, discovering that he had, in fact, been murdered by a local corrupt official. In the brief course of a week on his Corsican holiday, Hardy had been kidnapped and escaped, saved Clotiers from a Russian gangster’s bullet, brought his father’s killer to justice, and narrowly survived an attempt on his life. The result was that in Clotiers he had a friend for life and a man who was like a second father to him.

“OK,” Fred said. “So, what does the Lieutenant-Colonel think we should do?”

“He said do nothing until Captain Buvain arrives from Carcassonne.”

“Who the hell is Captain Buvain?” Clive asked, exasperation starting to surface.

“Buvain is Clotiers’ right-hand man,” Hardy explained.

“Do you know this Buvain?” Harold pressed.

“Yes, I know him well.” An image of Hardy and Clotiers storming a monk’s cell in a remote Montenegrin monastery to rescue Buvain from his Roma thug captors flashed before him. Yes, he knew Captain Luc Buvain. The captain owed Hardy his life.

There was a brief lull in the questions, then Delia asked what everyone else was thinking. “Who are you, Hardy Durkin? You’ve got this Clotiers guy on speed dial. You’re not in the least bit flustered about finding two dead soldiers on a god-forsaken riverbank in the South of France, you seem to be evading the police about it... Just who the hell are you?”

A shocked silence was interrupted by Clive. “I can answer that,” he said. He turned to Hardy almost apologetically. “My cousin was on your trek in the Black Forest.” To his fellow cyclists he explained, “Hardy is exactly who he seems to be. He has a trek business for points in Europe.” He paused, then added, “He also has an unusual skill set from his military training and for reasons unknown to anyone has a knack for wading into mysteries, stumbling upon dead bodies, and bringing criminals to justice.”

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