

Engadine Aerie

A Hardy Durkin Travel Mystery

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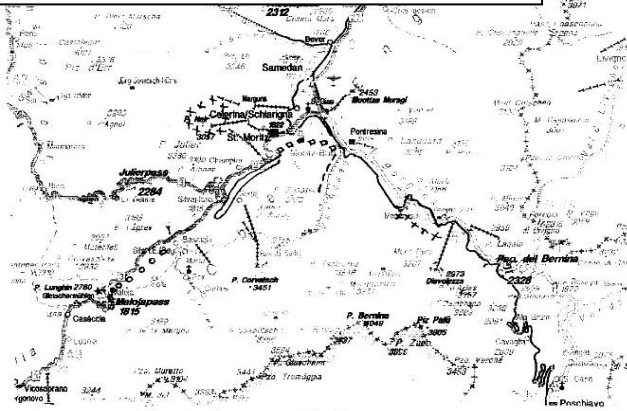
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Dedication to Bear: More than a decade his smile lit up my life, his sturdy stride gave confidence to my timidity. The sure sweetness of his noble soul radiated outward, touching passersby with his sparkle. He just made life better, his gift given freely, honestly.

A page from Hardy Durkin's Diary



Engadine Valley

- Day 1 Roseg Valley ---
- Day 2 Celerina xxx
- Day 3 Maloja - Lake Sils ooo
- Day 4 Alp Bondo - Diavolezza +++
- Day 5 Kempinski Grand Hotel → Pontresina □□□
- Day 7 S-chanf into forest w/ bomb ***
- Day 10 Kempinski → Lake Sils and back —

PROLOGUE

Hardy Durkin heads to the pristine Engadine Valley in Switzerland with the Skimarathon in mind, but is detoured by a body in the snow and an exotic beauty. While assisting TIGRIS in the hunt for a terrorist arms buyer he narrowly escapes two attempts on his life and meets a new and very deadly nemesis in Engadine Aerie.

CHAPTER 1

He was being hunted, targeted for assassination. Making headway on the packed, icy snow was difficult. At lower elevations the snow had been less compressed and his boots were able to provide better footing. He floundered, exhausted, but forced himself to get back up and continue.

Night was closing in on the mountain, the temperature falling. The down in his hooded jacket, light as air, was infused with a permanent water-repellant technology that maintained the down's loft and insulating performance even when wet. His electric-blue Columbia Mountain Hardwear Jacket, along with his Absolute Zero mitts and down-insulated pants, would keep him warm in almost any weather the Southeastern Alps in Switzerland could send his way. It wouldn't be the wind chill that killed him.

From Austria, at Feldkirch, he had taken route 191, passing through a corner of Lichtenstein on his way to Pontresina, Switzerland. He made good time in the rented Mercedes GLC-class all-wheel-drive SUV, arriving in Pontresina two and half hours after leaving Feldkirch.

He was being followed, he knew, so he opted for valet parking at the Grand Hotel Kronenhof and entered the luxurious hotel by the front entrance. Once inside he passed the reception desk and turned left, heading down the long hall. He took the elevator down to level B1 and headed for the glass doors at the far end of the hall that let out on the hotel's terrace. The hotel was embraced in late Sunday-night slumber and his footsteps, muted by the thick blue-and-gold-patterned carpet, disturbed no one.

Outside, he headed up the narrow gravel path rising toward a side road, then veered sharply down hill on the other side of the Kronenhof's pool, now frozen as an ice rink. He descended the steps leading to a small bridge that crossed the river, threaded his way past the businesses opposite the hotel, and set out along the cross-country ski trail that followed Val Roseg.

In the winter there were few roads leading to the luxurious chalets that dotted the mountains beyond the ski lift. Supplies were sometimes brought in by helicopter. He found the ski trail he knew would take him to his master, snaking its way up the mountain through the larch pines, and set off in earnest, hoping to reach his destination within the hour. The snow off the side of the trail was almost knee-deep, and without snow shoes he was forced to stay on the ski tracks even though it meant he was in the open and exposed. Further on, he kept near the tree line, which oriented him to his destination: Chesa Falcun.

Najib had been traveling for the past two weeks, after leaving Chalet Falcon on an errand for his employer, Prince Mansour bin Rashid al Nuinai, second prince in line to an influential tribe in Abu

Dhabi. Najib's task was a fact-finding mission which had turned dangerous after his arrival in Girona, Spain, where he'd gone to track down a lead on an illegal falcon smuggling operation he'd heard about in Catalonia.

The sport of falconry is a passion for the wealthy and royalty in the Middle East, especially in the United Arab Emirates. Historically, Bedouin tribesmen would train wild falcons to use for hunting prey as a source of food in the desert to supplement a limited diet, but today's sport is more the challenge of training a bird of prey and the esteem of owning a highly-prized raptor.

A major part of falconry culture is attending the hunting camps in Afghanistan or Pakistan. Wealthy sheiks fly to the camps in large military cargo planes loaded with huge amounts of cash, SUV's, weapons, and supplies. There they meet with members of various terrorist organizations, notably al Qaeda, to discuss unity and Muslim obligation. One of the pillars of Islam is the requirement to give to a charity, and many wealthy Muslims consider terrorist groups a form of charity and give willingly to their cause.

The hunting camps allow enormous transfers of funds and supplies totally off the radar screen of detection. Beyond the reach of border controls and passport requirements these camps, in effect, become month-long, de-facto boardroom venues for funding sources and the evil agents of organized terror. When the Sheiks and their entourages leave the camp, they also leave behind the cash, SUV's, weapons, and supplies, which the terrorists take as donations.

Najib's assignment, at Prince Mansour's request, had been to follow the suspected money trail

between someone in their prominent family and the terrorist group al-Nusrah. The official position of the ruling elite is opposition to any and all recognized terrorist groups. To fund one would be a flagrant violation of law laid down by the governing families, punishable by being stripped of his title and position within the ruling elite and forfeiture of his significant personal wealth. Aside from that, the revelation that a member of an important Abu Dhabi family was contributing to terrorist organizations would have far-reaching repercussions for the power structure of the entire UAE. There was a lot at stake.

From Spain, the falconry trail had taken Najib to the Russian republic of Georgia, which borders Chechnya, a hotbed for jihad and a major recruiting camp for ISIS. Here Najib found the proof Mansour sought, plus a whole lot more. His discovery was shocking in its implications. He realized his life was in danger after narrowly escaping an attempt on it while crossing from Chechnya into Georgia for his flight to Munich.

He'd flown into Germany instead of Switzerland hoping to waylay his pursuers, and the ploy had worked, for a while. He'd driven from Munich with no sign of being followed, but they'd picked him up shortly after his entry into Switzerland and been on his tail until his dodge at Pontresina. Persistent. Ruthless. The fallout from the information he carried would be devastating.

The night sky was clear, cloudless, and full of twinkling stars that Najib wanted to reach out and touch. He imagined them playing music, much like a bell choir, and enjoyed the company they offered him as he trekked onward. He listened, but didn't hear his pursuers and was assured that

he'd managed to lose them after leaving the Kronenhof.

The black velvet Swiss night covered Najib like a plush cloak embroidered with silver ornaments. He lifted his face to its immenseness, scanning the realm of eternity. His attention was caught by a distant sound, a whirring, and he suspected it was a peregrine falcon on migration. The thought soothed him. Magnificent birds. The sound drew nearer and Najib searched the sky overhead. One of the stars appeared to be moving, darting toward him in a zig-zag. Too late Najib saw it for what it was. The bullet shattered his skull, and the drone hovered briefly over his ruined body as his blood drained into the snow, tinting it a red-turned-to-pinkish.

“Good morning, everyone!” Hardy called as he breezed into the dining room at Hotel Engadinerhof on Monday morning. It was a large, welcoming room with carved wooden walls and matching wooden light fixtures. Two large buffets dominated the center of the room, laden with what the Engadinerhof modestly called a ‘mountain breakfast.’

Abby Gellert, the ski tour organizer and former client from Hardy’s Black Forest hiking tour, invited him over with a wave and a smile.

“You made it!” Abby said, making room for him across from her at the table. She was a striking petite blonde whose startling green eyes missed nothing. This ski tour, Abby’s first, was her

attempt at a major career change, and Hardy had agreed to help launch it.

“Got in late last night,” he replied.

“Everyone,” Abby called, standing, “this is Hardy Durkin.” To Abby, who was acquainted with Hardy’s sleuthing exploits from a hiking tour he’d led in the Black Forest the previous summer, Hardy was larger than life.

“He will be helping me get all of you out on the trails and back to the hotel during our stay in Pontresina. Hardy is an inveterate hiker who owns his own trek outfitter company. He also skis and agreed to help me on my maiden trip as ski tour operator. I had the good fortune to be on his Black Forest trek last summer when he solved a serial murder and saved the lives of several young women. Plus, it was just damn good hiking and eating. I know you’ll make him feel welcome, and if you have any questions or concerns, he is a super resource.”

Some people would feel ill at ease being spotlighted, but Hardy gave everyone a slow, easy smile, said, “I’m starved!”, and headed for the breakfast buffet. Five minutes later he sauntered back to the table with a plate laden with eggs, bacon, sausage, several cheeses, dried meats, homemade black bread, two croissants, and juice. The waitress had left steaming pots of coffee and milk for him at his table.

“Great buffet,” Abby commented when he sat down.

“Never disappoints,” Hardy replied. “They do perfect scrambled eggs, every time. And the bacon is phenomenal.”

“I’m impressed by the selection of jams,” Abby said, referring to the sixteen squat glass pots, each containing a different flavor of confiture. “Their red raspberry is amazing.”

“I’ve always thought the Engadinerhof is under rated, but it’s a perfect hotel for skiers, especially those into racing. The hotel has a prep ski room for storing and waxing skis, so you don’t have to worry about making a mess in your room. I’m sure that’s the main reason they do it. Keeps the melted wax off the bedspreads and pine flooring.”

He snarfed up some eggs and bacon. “What time we heading out today?”

“In about an hour,” Abby replied. “I checked everyone’s gear last night after we arrived, so the housekeeping business is done.” She recalled how Hardy loathed that part of taking a group on tour. The ‘hand-holding’, he called it. “Oh, and we have one additional person joining us for our morning ski. Her name’s Maryam. She and her husband are renting a chalet for the winter. He doesn’t ski and doesn’t want her skiing alone, so she tags along with groups from time to time. The hotel manager assured me she is a very good skier and will be no problem. And she signed off on any liability.”

Hardy nodded his approval. “I can keep an eye on her,” he offered. “You’ll have your hands full with the rest of the group,” he added.

“Did I mention she’s married?” Abby kidded.

“You did,” he replied. “Twice.” There was a short, embarrassed silence.

“I’m sorry, Hardy,” Abby apologized. “I don’t know why I even said that.” Which prolonged the embarrassment.

Hardy gave his easy smile. “Hey, not a problem, Abby,” he said. And hoped it wouldn’t be.

One hour later found Hardy joining Abby and her group of skiers in front of their hotel. It was a superb morning for skiing, and the group as a whole buzzed with excitement in anticipation of the skiing to come. Abby’s group was staying in Pontresina in preparation for the Engadine Skimarathon, one of the annual cross-country ski events held each year in the Alps on the second Sunday of March. Forty-two kilometers long, the race course follows the Engadine Valley, crossing over several frozen lakes and skiing through a handful of villages, with a descent into the village of Pontresina that invariably entails lots of falls and crashes by participating skiers, to the entertainment of the race’s spectators.

Anywhere from eleven to thirteen thousand skiers show up for the race, usually arriving several days before the event. The population of the small villages in the Engadine swells, and the buoyant attitude of the guests and their hosts gives the valley a festive air. Hardy had skied the marathon at least a half dozen times, which was one of the reasons Abby had asked him along on her first tour. That, and the fact that he was a natural at handling people and unexpected situations: life.

The Engadine Valley, in the southeastern Swiss canton of Graubünden, or Grisons, follows the Inn River from where it starts as glacial meltwater near the Maloja Pass and runs through the high Alps for one hundred kilometers, passing through numerous Alpine villages. There are two parts to the Engadine Valley: the Upper and Lower Engadine, as defined by the topography of the two areas.

The Upper Engadine includes lakes Sils, Silvaplana, and St. Moritz, which in the winter are frozen and used for skiing, ice polo, and hiking. This part of the Engadine, which stretches along the valley floor from Maloja to the town of S-chanf, has a cosmopolitan feel because of the influence of tourism in the area. German, Swiss-German, and Italian are the languages heard most here.

The Lower Engadine extends from below S-chanf to the Austrian border, still following the Inn River. Here, the Inn is wild and rugged, rushing through deep gorges with steep mountain walls. The Romansch language, Switzerland's fourth national language, is more commonly spoken in the Lower Engadine.

Never under a thousand meters in elevation, the Engadine Valley is surrounded by lofty, snow-covered peaks towering three or four thousand meters high, with the tallest mountains in the Bernina Range. Skiing in the Engadine is big business, and there are cross-country trails and Alpine ski lifts everywhere throughout the region. Ski lifts dot the mountain sides of the Upper Engadine, as do the side-winder trails snaking down the snow-covered playground, evidence of ski touring at its free-est.

Life in the Engadine is meant to be lived out-of-doors, no matter the season. The air is pure, crisp, and dry, and the days filled with sunshine. Who wants to sit in a hotel or chalet when the endless, jaw-dropping views outside are everywhere you turn?

CHAPTER 2

A black Mercedes GL SUV with darkly tinted windows swung into the parking lot of the hotel and stopped about twenty feet away. The driver ran around and opened the passenger door, bowing slightly as he did so. A young woman in her mid-twenties hopped out, tucking the remaining tendrils of long, dark hair under her ski hat. The driver closed her door and ran around to the back of the SUV. He opened the rear compartment, extracted a pair of skis, and made as if to carry them to where the group stood.

“I’ll take those, please, Yaz,” the young woman said, a bit sharply. The driver gave another slight bow and handed them to his passenger. She thanked him, mumbled something else, and turned, walking in the direction of Hardy and the waiting skiers. The driver hastened back to the driver’s side of the SUV, hopped in, and left.

The young woman advanced on Hardy with her gloved hand outstretched. “My name is Maryam,” she told him. “I’m joining your ski group this morning.”

He was smitten at once. Everything about her seemed perfect. Her lovely skin was flawless. Her dark, almond-shaped eyes were intelligent and fiery. Her voice was slightly throaty and dusky, yet fluid. She wore an air of self-assurance like a cocoon, and the deeply sensual scent of oud, even in the cold Alpine air, enveloped her like a luxurious manteau.

“I’m Hardy Durkin,” he managed. And almost added, “It’s my job to watch over you,” but didn’t.

Abby approached. “You must be Maryam,” she said. “I’m Abby Gellert. We’re delighted to have you join us for our ski.”

‘Delighted is a bit strong,’ Hardy thought.

Turning to the group Abby announced, “This is Maryam. She will be skiing with us today.” One by one the members of the group nodded, waved, or in some minor way acknowledged Maryam’s presence. She seemed not to notice, or care.

They loaded into the van, which transported them to the groomed ski trails on the other side of the village. The skiers made last minute adjustments to their hats, hand wear and sunglasses, checked their buddy packs for a snack and bottled water, shouldered their skis, and set off on foot for the beginning of the Gletscher Trail.

It had snowed the night before, adding six inches of newly fallen snow on top of the packed surface. The groomers had been through once on this portion of the trail and the skiing was superb. The skiers used the classic style on the grooved tracks, gliding along with little effort on the flat terrain of the Roseg Valley. No one raced. It was leisurely, each skier finding an easy stride, skimming the trail's surface.

Gradually, the group began to disperse as the speeds adjusted up or down. They had started out in single file, but two lines of skiers developed as they passed one another, calling out in fun and jest, challenging one another to a contest of speed. Some broke out of the tracks and skated on the wider track. Hardy brought up the rear of the group, behind Maryam. She skied beautifully, with strong, powerful strokes. Her form was excellent and her balance sure.

They had been skiing about fifteen minutes; the ski lift for downhill had just come into view. Suddenly, Maryam veered off the trail slightly, into the snow. She lost her balance, as though she'd hit something and, try as she might to keep upright, her outstretched arms pin-wheeling for equilibrium, she lost the battle and fell on her derrière.

Hardy skied to where she had landed, a look of puckish humor on his handsome face. His gold aviator sunglasses hid his eyes, which were also smiling. "You OK? Need some help?" he asked.

Maryam was embarrassed. She never fell. "Of course, I'm OK!" she snapped. "I ran over something."

"A rock?" Hardy queried.

She glanced up to see if he was making a fool of her. "No," she said thoughtfully. "It was something softer." She began brushing away the snow at the spot where she'd run aground. Something vivid blue appeared. She brushed more, and an arm appeared.

"Hold on, Maryam," Hardy said, releasing his boots from his skis. He stepped around where she knelt and brushed the snow off a man's face, the snow stained a rusty pink near his head. His sightless eyes were a very dark brown, as were his hair and eyebrows. The once youthful face was ageless in death, and pale.

When Maryam caught sight of the face she let out a scream. Then another. “Najib! Najib!” she shrieked and broke down into sobs.

Hardy bundled Maryam up in his arms and moved her away from the body. He suspected they were, logistically, in the middle of a crime scene and didn’t want to disturb it any more than they already had. Phil Hostelbrink had skied back to where they were after hearing Maryam’s shrieks. His steely, blue-gray eyes and lawyer’s mind assessed the situation in an instant.

“That’s a hell of a discovery, Mr. Durkin,” he began.

“Please, call me Hardy,” Hardy replied.

“Hardy,” he said, extending a gloved hand. “Phil Hostelbrink. New York. I’m an attorney, and for what it’s worth, I suspect you’ve just skied into one hell of a mess.”

Hardy grimaced and hoped to hell Phil Hostelbrink wasn’t also a prophet.