

Chapter 1

His mind drifting as he walked his Jack Russell dog Plato along the rocky hillside, Paul Burke was thinking it was a perfect autumn morning, warm, sunny, a gentle breeze keeping it from being too hot.

Until the snake slithered across their path.

Seeing it, Plato went into his breed's killer mode, trying to catch the long, speckled serpent. But, his heart pounding, Burke was equally quick, yanking on the leash so his dog wouldn't find itself locked in combat with the creature.

Burke hated snakes, small, big, harmless or venomous. They frightened him and yet, bizarrely, he felt drawn to them, the way someone with a fear of heights will sometimes walk to the edge of a tall building and ponder leaping. Here on Corsica, nicknamed the Isle of Beauty, there weren't supposed to be any venomous reptiles, but Burke wasn't taking any chances with either Plato or himself.

Pulled back from his prey, Plato wasn't pleased, tugging and snarling to get loose, confident he'd win with a quick bite or two of his small but powerful jaws.

To Burke, the snake seemed to slow and sneak a disdainful glance at them. Then it moved into the bushes and disappeared. He shuddered. It had been more than a metre long with a nasty-looking head that probably housed plenty of sharp teeth. If Plato had caught it, he might not have enjoyed the encounter. So, not a bad result. Snake 0, Plato 0.

Catching his breath, Burke waited a few moments to ensure the snake was gone and then he started walking again.

The encounter had certainly changed the mood.

Until then, Burke had been lost in his surroundings. The rugged, jagged scenery along this east coastline of Cap Corse was indeed majestic in almost a primordial way. And while farmhouses dotted the hills behind him and grey, slightly faded buildings in the village of Erbalunga stood in contrast to the turquoise Mediterranean Sea, the rest of the area looked like it hadn't changed since time began.

Starting to relax as he and Plato took the turn toward the village, Burke was glad he and his partner H  l  ne Rappaneau had decided to come a few days early to Corsica to enjoy a little holiday. He had a trade show on bicycles starting in Bastia in two days, but a trip around Cap Corse, which looked like an extended index finger on a map, would make for the perfect break. Burke had visited the rugged island twice before, but had never seen this part.

For Burke, Corsica was part holiday and part work. He had to file several blogs, both static and video, for his newspaper chain based along the French Riviera. His editor wanted the latest information about developments in the industry because, after all, the French remained mad keen about cycling.

For H  l  ne, who was probably still sleeping in their small hotel bed in the village, Corsica was pure vacation. She had taken a much-needed break from running her Caf   de Neptune, located in the old village part of Villeneuve-Loubet on the outskirts of Nice, and had left supervisory tasks to her uncle Claude. For her, Corsica was a new adventure. Despite living all of her life along the French Riviera, she had never visited the island, just a six-hour ferry trip from Nice.

It was almost 8 a.m. and Burke smiled at the thought he might get back in time to share a coffee with H  l  ne on the hotel's terrace which was lush with potted plants and flowers, and which overlooked the small harbour. He had about another kilometre to go and it was all downhill. Barring another snake encounter, he figured he and Plato would be in the village in 10 minutes.

Dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, Burke felt the sweat pour down his face and drip down his back as he kept up the pace. The temperature was already in the mid 20s and was expected to rise into the low 30s, warm for early autumn. But it felt good to Burke who loved the heat and didn't miss the winters of his youth when he had grown up in frigid Montr  al back in Canada.

Burke could see a handful of people moving about the lanes of the small village, not in any rush, just going about their business. Since their arrival, he hadn't witnessed a single individual moving quickly. Even the children took it easy. It was like the notion of being stressed stopped at the village boundaries.

And as he marveled at the sea that was unusually still, he spotted a small group of fishermen gathered by the shoreline of the tiny harbour. They were peering at something on the pebbly beach, maybe three steps from the water.

Figuring he had a few minutes to spare, Burke took a detour toward the harbour, coming in not far from the ruins of the Genoese tower that stood on a rocky promontory. Once on the shoreline and only a few steps from a caf   that was open for breakfast, he saw a couple of fishermen talking into their cellphones. The closer he got, the more urgent they sounded. They were speaking the island's ancient language, Corsu, which Burke thought sounded like a strange dialect of Italian. Although he was capable in Italian, Burke could comprehend only a few words of their rapid-fire conversation, but he knew nothing good had happened.

As Burke approached them, Plato became agitated, bouncing around, eager to go in the opposite direction.

Five metres away, Burke still couldn't see what everyone was looking at.

Then there was a gap in the group and Burke stopped instantly.

Two bodies were stretched out, side by side, on the rocky shore, heads not far from the sea, their throats sliced ear to ear.

Both dead men wore red-white-and-blue Montr  al Canadiens hockey jerseys.