

The Gray Fedora

HISTORY, HERITAGE, AND A “HERO”



A NOVEL BY

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The Gray Fedora: History, Heritage and a “Hero”
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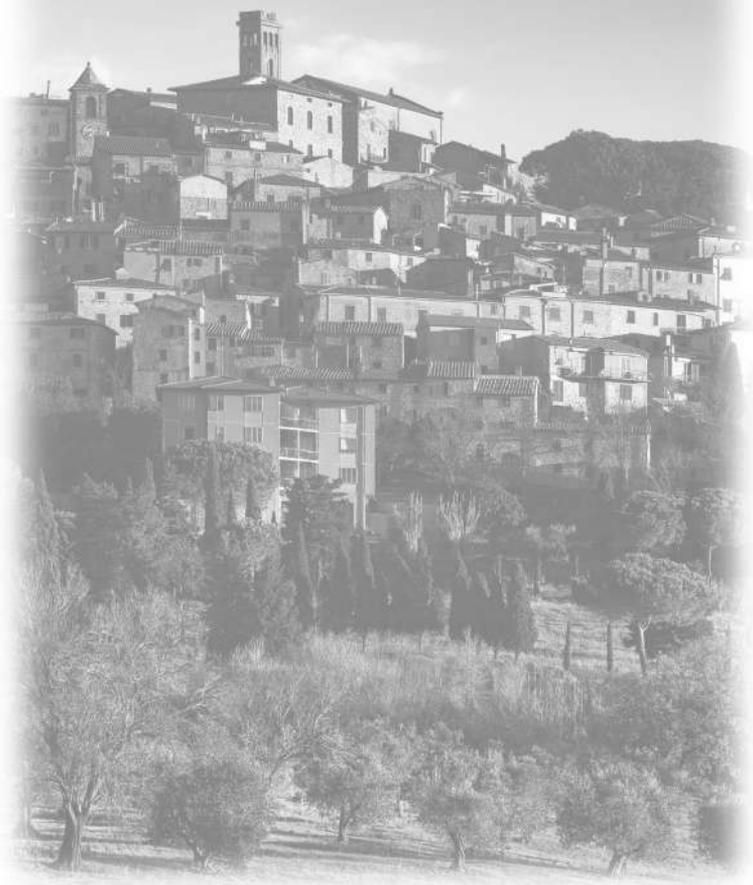
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To my grandparents

FOR REVIEW ONLY

*“Don’t judge each day by the harvest you reap,
but by the seeds that you plant.”*

—ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON



PROLOGUE

ALMOST FORTY YEARS AGO, in 1980, my eighty-four-year-old grandfather and I were sitting in the sunroom of his Plantation, Florida, home, talking about his life. In his early years in Sicily, he rode in a small cart pulled by a burro. There were no cars, no phones, no electricity—and not much else. Over eight decades, he had seen two world wars, the introduction of cars and telephones, and rise of the nuclear age. He'd looked at *la luna* in the nineteenth century and saw a man walk on that same moon in the twentieth. “But there are some things that connect one generation to the next and then to the next,” he said. “Wait here. I want to give you something.” As he walked into the house, I remember thinking that he may be old, but he still has a sturdy build and thick, powerful hands and arms.

So, I sat in my chair drinking lemonade and waited for him to come back. I thought he had a photo or some memento he wanted to give me. Old men think more about their past and their legacy than the future. I know that now, forty years later.

He came back to the room with a hat box, which I thought was rather curious. As he set the box down on a glass-topped table, he said, “This is something I have been wanting to give to you for some time, and this seems like the best time.” He opened the box and lifted out a gray fedora that, although obviously very old, was in remarkably good

condition. “This was my grandfather’s fedora. He gave it to me in 1912. He purchased it in 1861 and wore it for special occasions during his life. I have done the same. I want you to have it.”

“Grandpop,” I said. “I can’t accept this. What about my older cousin and my brothers?”

“It was given to me as the oldest son of his son. It is for you as the same.” He handed the hat to me, and I felt an energy pulse through me when I held it. My head swooned. This hat had been present at almost every momentous family occasion for almost 120 years. Tears formed in the corners of my eyes as I realized what he was giving me. I turned the hat over and saw on the inside of the lining a name. I read it aloud, “Connor Doherty.”

“My grandfather, from Ireland.”

If only a hat could tell a story.

Part One



CHAPTER

1

THE FIRST TIME CONNOR SAW THE FAMOUS GENERAL was when the heralded man with the black beret and tomato-red poncho pulled up on the reins and walked his white stallion into the surgery area. Wounded, bandaged men were sprawled on the ground and lying on cots, moaning and crying for water as doctors attended to them. Sitting ramrod straight on his horse, his regal bearing making him appear larger than life, the general conferred in conversation with a doctor out of Connor's earshot. Then he turned his attention back to the hill, Pinato Romano, several hundred yards away, where the battle was in full swing.

Connor could hear men from the battlefield bellowing and caught the sun's reflection off a bayonet in the thick of the conflagration. General Giuseppe Garibaldi rubbed his face with his left hand and sighed deeply. Connor and several other men gathered around him as he exhorted, "*Qui si fa l'Italia o si muore.*" He spoke as if he were addressing the entire army rather than the handful of men who carried stretchers and attended to the wounded.

"Here we make Italy, or we die," the doctor standing next to Connor translated for him.

The general pulled on the reins of his horse and headed off in the direction of the hill.

The hill had been cut into a series of terraces by the enemy, like a gigantic set of stairs, forcing Garibaldi's troops to ascend each one as their adversaries perched above them. It was an extraordinary military endeavor. The troops had moved halfway up the hill before stalling on the widest of the terraces. Connor thought this flat area might extend ten paces out, and although the men could find protection from pistol fire if they made it to the vertical wall of the next terrace, the no-man's-land in between was a killing zone.

He saw several men hiding behind two ragged rock outcroppings on the terrace surface, but otherwise the battle had become a stalemate. The enemy, the Royalist troops of King Ferdinand II of Naples, were repelling Garibaldi and stopping the revolution before it could go beyond this first battle. Connor knew that this might very well be the end of the revolution for Sicily's independence from Naples.

Connor walked behind the tent to a trench that served as a latrine. As he relieved himself, he glanced at the cedar grove he'd walked through the previous day and caught sight of an old decrepit cedar tree not more than two hundred paces away. He finished and walked toward the tree, slowly realizing that hornets were swarming it. Agitated by the commotion, the sound of gunfire, and the proximity of the camp, they circled the hive like a funnel cloud.

An idea struck him. He sprinted back to the surgery area and grabbed his rucksack. He found Will, sitting on a rock watching the hill. Will was young, a fellow countryman, and always ready to help.

"Will, we're going to knock a tree down and take a hornets' nest. You're going to get stung. Probably many times."

Will froze. His eyebrows hit his hairline. “Can you do it? Can you help me?”

Will nodded, confounded by the bizarre request, and watched as Connor pulled a sweater from his rucksack. He pulled out several other personal items and dropped it on the ground. “Come with me.” They walked past the tent and around the latrine. Connor pointed at the tree. “When I say go, we run to the tree as fast as we can, and there is no turning back. We push the tree down and capture the nest. On the count of three, we go.”

The diminutive teenager nodded again.

Connor counted down the numbers and let out a deep guttural sound, and they ran full speed at the tree. They hit it simultaneously with their shoulders, and in a stroke of good luck the tree toppled. The hornets’ nest buzzed with a sound that was maniacal and mechanical, as if metallic gears were grinding. Connor was immediately stung on the face and one hand. Will was attacked at the ankles, and several hornets climbed up his pants. He screamed in pain and slapped himself on the legs to kill the attackers before they could sting him again. They fought through the agony of multiple stings as Connor managed to surround the nest with his sweater and stuff it into his rucksack. The sack vibrated with angry hornets, and those uncaptured flew at the two men like flaming arrows. They covered their faces and sprinted back to the camp with hornets in full pursuit.

Connor and Will didn’t hesitate at the medical tent to explain to the confounded doctors what they were doing, but ran headlong to the hill. The trail of hornets thinned as they found new targets for their rage. With the wind at their back, some hornets continued to catch them and attack, but the two kept going, fueled by fear and adrenaline. Like a bull,

Connor plowed through soldiers to get up to the first terrace, determined to reach the front of the battle. Will, however, was held back by two of the troops.

Connor leapt over injured men and scrambled up two ladders to the second terrace. The fight had become a stand-off, and Garibaldi's men were stricken with fear, too afraid to move into the space that meant certain death. He sprinted to the rocky crag and, without hesitating, yelled at the three men huddled behind the outcropping.

"I want you to all fire your muskets when I signal. Understand?"

They nodded, unaware of what this apparent lunatic had in mind.

"Now!" he yelled.

The soldiers stepped out from behind the rock and in unison fired their muskets at the terrace above them. Connor took four steps forward and did a three-hundred degree whirling, circling maneuver with his arms extended, as if throwing a discus, and launched his rucksack onto the terrace above him.

He saw a Royalist stab the sack with his bayonet in midair and slice it like a piece of fruit. He heard a derisive laugh as the rucksack was slit open from end to end. It was all so unexpected by both sides that there was instantly a cessation of hostilities. An eerie quiet descended on the front. But seconds later, the laugh turned into a scream followed by a chorus of screams as the angry hornets unleashed their fury on the Royalist troops. It was the medieval equivalent of dropping boiling oil on invading troops from castle walls. The hornets were so ferocious that the Royalists were completely consumed with battling the stinging insects—creating a unique opportunity for Garibaldi's army. Connor

stepped onto the terrace and waved his arm calling for a charge. Garibaldi's men seized the moment and sprinted to the wall. They took the terrace and the remaining terraces over the next two hours as the Royalists retreated to the safety of the city below.



The following day, the Garibaldine, as Garibaldi's army was called, buried thirty-two men; the enemy was allowed to carry away thirty-six men who had been killed. These were the first to die in the Risorgimento, the Sicilian Revolution. Many more on both sides were injured.

The stings on Connor's face were covered with a white salve to help reduce the swelling, but he still spent the morning cleaning and helping the surgeons move men into makeshift beds. A little before noon, he was summoned to Garibaldi's headquarters by an aid to Lieutenant Nino Bixio, Garibaldi's right-hand man. Connor walked to the tent and waited at the entrance for his presence to be acknowledged.

Garibaldi glanced up from a map on a table and looked at Connor. He waved him into the tent, and the officers in attendance stopped their conversation.

"What is your name, young man?" Garibaldi asked.

"Connor Doherty, sir."

"Irish?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, this was a great victory for the Risorgimento, and your bravery and ingenuity were the turning point. We have the deepest gratitude."

Connor was conscious of the attention of the officers around him and bowed his head.

"But sir—" Connor tried to object.

“No, young man. Bravery is bravery, no matter what form it takes. The Risorgimento is in your debt.” He reached down and set a muslin-covered cloth on the table. He unfolded the cloth and handed Connor the remains of his sweater. “I believe this is yours.”

Connor sheepishly accepted the sweater, which was covered in dirt, torn apart, and missing one of the arms. “Thank you, sir,” he replied solemnly.

“I recognize at least a part of the coat of arms on your sweater. I assume you are from a very important family in Ireland.” He studied Connor for several moments. “Are you from nobility, soldier?”

“Oh no, sir. I am the son of an Irish maid and fatherless since early childhood. I left home a month ago with only that sweater. I am no more aristocratic than a barnyard chicken.”

Everyone in the tent laughed. Connor blushed, embarrassed.

“Well, I think it’s time for you to be compensated for your loss,” Garibaldi said. He nodded at one of his officers, who handed him a package wrapped in a scarlet-covered cloth. “This is for you.” Garibaldi set it on the table and unfolded the cloth.

Connor reverently picked up the red poncho worn by regulars in Garibaldi’s army and caught sight of the black sash beneath.

“I cannot accept so valuable a gift, sir. Not for throwing some bees at an enemy like an angry child. I do not deserve this.”

“Oh but you did much more. Men in battle can be like ferocious hornets or as meek and flighty as houseflies.” The general leaned back in his seat, looking around the tent at his assembled officers. “Your actions turned the men into angry hornets and saved the day and maybe the future of a

unified Italy.” The respect in the man’s eyes when he glanced back at Connor made the fabric in his hands feel heavy.

Connor put his head down as if he were being admonished by the priest at his church. The scope of the statement overwhelmed him.

He looked up at Garibaldi, who nodded at another soldier. The soldier turned and picked up a rifle from an adjoining table. He walked to Connor and handed him the well-oiled new gun. Connor took it and smiled, and the room erupted in laughter once more.

“This is an Enfield rifle,” the soldier said. “It’s state of the art and is accurate to almost four hundred yards, further than any other rifle.”

“Now you can fight with the regular men of the *Spedizione dei Mille*, the Expedition of the Thousand,” Garibaldi said. “I promote you to lieutenant and assign you to become a sniper in the front lines of our campaign.”

The men clapped as Garibaldi grabbed a cigar from a box on the table. “There is one more thing. I will write to your family for you. Where is your home?”

Connor said before thinking, “Ballymoran, Ireland, the home of Baron Dugan.” He should have said more accurately that his mother lived in a small cottage with dirt floors and a thatch roof, and was barely able to read. He wanted to explain that his mother was only a seamstress and that he had never lived in the Baron Dugan’s grand manor house, but it was too late.

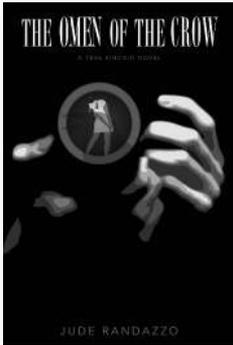
Garibaldi nodded and put the cigar in his mouth. The grandiose man made a gesture with his hand, and one of the officers quickly lit his cigar. “It will be done. I would like to invite you to dine with the officers and me tonight, at sunset.”

And with that, Connor knew he had just been dismissed.

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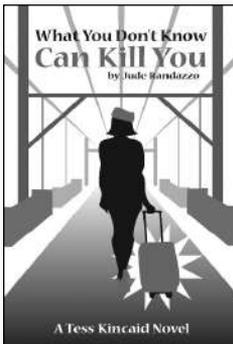
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Click . . . Click . . . CLICK!

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