

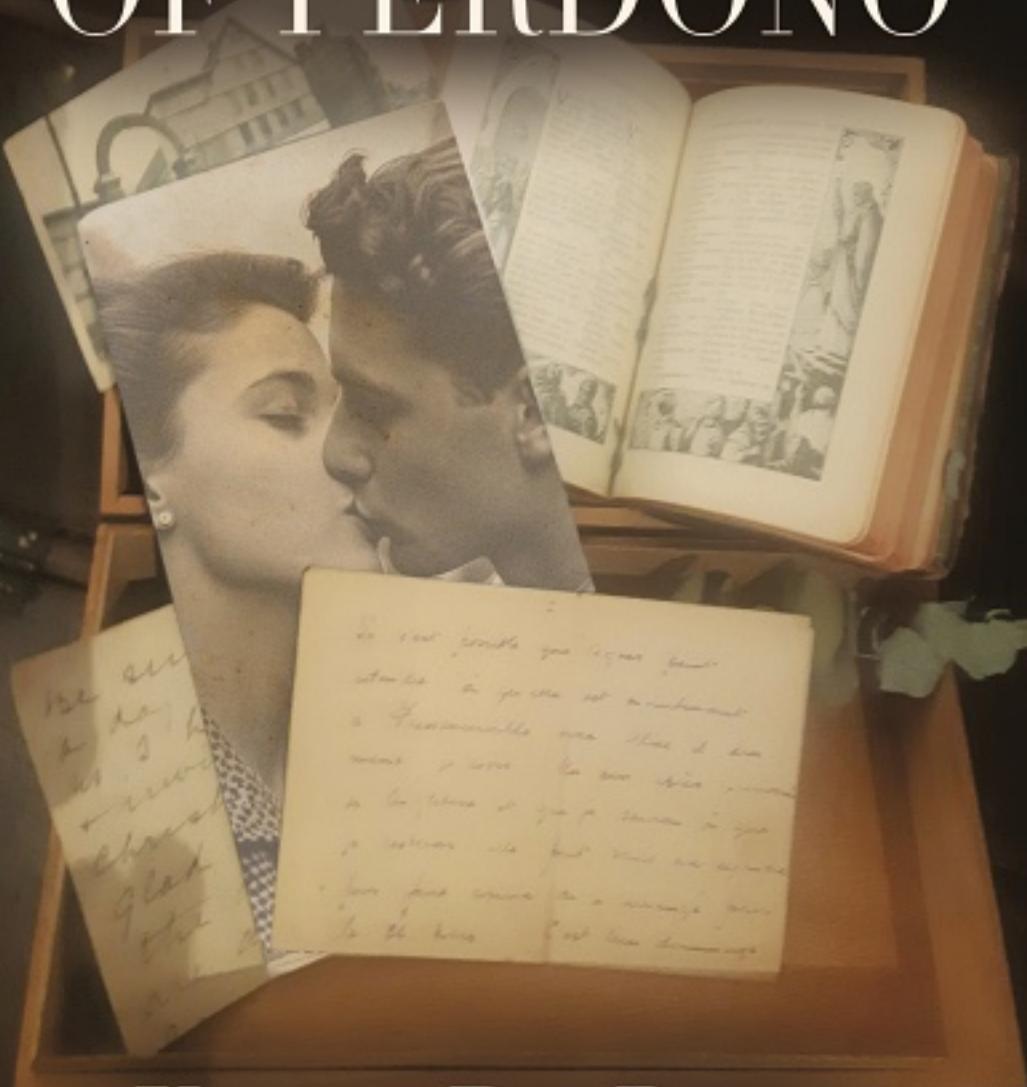
Rosa has never told anyone about her WW2 affair with a Canadian soldier and his suspected involvement in the theft of an icon from a church in Perdono, Italy. She can't fully forgive him until a young woman's arrival changes everything.

The Hills of Perdono

By Karen De Pauw

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THE HILLS OF PERDONO



Karen De Pauw

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The hem of her summer dress lifted gently in the wind as Rosa rode over the bridge on her way back from Avellino. Hearing someone whistle, she looked down and saw Matteo looking up at her, his fishing pole extended over the edge of the creek. He was standing in the shallow water, his patched pants rolled up to the knee. Rosa smiled. Matteo was seventeen, but with his beardless face and short, skinny body, he looked more like fourteen.

“You look at the fish, not at me. You’d better catch one. Don’t come asking again for flour from my aunt today because you have nothing on the table,” Rosa yelled down, feistily placing one hand on her hip.

Matteo tilted his head backwards and let out a hearty laugh. “There are no fish! Even the fish are swimming away from the Germans.”

Rosa stopped, straddled the bike and leaned over the bridge. “Be quiet, Matteo. Someone might hear you,” she said in a low voice.

“Ehi, Rosa. What do you think? That the Germans have a boat in the creek and that those round stones over there are helmets? I wish they were. This is what

I would do to them,” he said, picking up a rock at his feet. “Pow Pow Pow!” he yelled, taking aim at the stones.

“Enough Matteo,” Rosa said as she got back on the bike and pushed off. Matteo was a good boy, at least that’s what her Zia Eme thought, but he was just a boy, not a man like Enzo. The thought of her young man almost made her crash into the bushes on the side of the gravel road. She took one hand off the handlebars to make a sign of the cross, partly in thanks for avoiding the near accident and partly in expiation for her sinful thoughts.

Rosa stopped in front of her aunt’s house and got off the bike. Her annoyance quickly dissipated as she remembered what day it was. Today was her eighteenth birthday. Had she been at home in Florence, it would have been a grand celebration. There would have been cannoli, torte, biscotti and zuccotti, but better yet, there would have been gelato, Rosa’s favorite. She hadn’t had gelato since her arrival two months ago, and most probably wouldn’t have any for many months more, the way the war was going. Her mother had written her that there were no more gelato carts on the streets in Florence. Luckily, her parents had a small grocery store in the city and could sell sugar and tobacco to the Germans in exchange for perishable foods like milk, bread and meat, while the

neighbours looked at her family with envy. At the beginning of the war her mother had said that it was a good thing that Fascist Italy was on the side of the Germans or there would be nothing at all on the table. Rosa and her brother Fernando were of the same opinion as their father, who went about in a stormy silence whenever there was mention of either the Fascists or the Germans. The only good thing about being sent to the country, thought Rosa, was that villagers were not in constant surveillance. As for Fernando, who was three years older than Rosa, leaving Florence meant a reprieve from military duty. At least that was one thing the whole family could agree upon, for as much as her mother admired Mussolini, she didn't want her only son to be sent to northern Africa, a death sentence for the ill-prepared and ill-equipped Italian soldier.

Tonight, Rosa wouldn't think about that. She would celebrate. Maybe Zio Ettore would even bring up a bottle of *spumoso* from the cantina. He was an excellent accordion player, and they would all dance, even Matteo with his two left feet. How anyone agile enough to climb mountains could be so awkward puzzled Rosa, but there it was. Not that it mattered. Her boyfriend Enzo was the best athlete on the rowing club, and best tango dancer on the dance floor. Not that Rosa had ever danced with him, since her parents

thought that such dancing was most unsuitable for a young woman. Well, at least I won't have to worry about anyone here asking me to dance Rosa thought, doubtful that anyone in Perdono even knew what tango was.

However, tonight Rosa would not think about anything but her party. She would enjoy herself. She would put on her lovely white dress, delicately sprinkled with the little blue forget-me-not flowers. As it was her eighteenth birthday, Rosa would probably be allowed to drink a glass of wine and dance in the square with the other villagers. There would be cake and a few treasures that the villagers had managed to keep safe from the Fascist raids. Her aunt had invited the whole village to join them in the *piazza*. As it coincided with the end of the month of the Virgin, it would be a grand celebration. And Zia Eme had told her niece that she had a surprise planned for her. What could it be? Just as long as it's not another bicycle, I'll be fine, thought Rosa.

The surprise was probably a bribe in exchange for good behavior, since Zia Eme had made Rosa promise not to get into any trouble with Alfredo, who had apparently invited himself to the celebration. While Rosa vowed that nothing Alfredo said or did would ruin her birthday party, she had a bad feeling that the evening would not go exactly as her aunt intended. Bah,

nonsense. What could possibly go wrong? she asked herself.

Rosa's only regret was that Enzo wouldn't be there. She thought about him every day but was dismayed to realize that she was thinking of him less and less. The two of them had once talked about how they would celebrate her eighteenth birthday. Now those were just words in the wind. Was Enzo being true to her? It had been four long months since their furtive encounter in her bedroom in Florence. Remembering the thrill of his touch, Rosa almost wished that she hadn't stopped his hands from touching her bare thighs. She would touch herself there at night afterwards and relight the electric current in her middle that Enzo had awoken in her, but it wasn't the same. It lacked the magic that had enveloped them that night, as she watched Enzo's high forehead and aquiline nose bathed by the light of the moon and felt the hardness between his thighs...

Rosa's intuition had been right. Her birthday party ended in disaster, and it all started with a dress.

Rosa couldn't wait for the moment when she would put on her lovely white dress. Her mother had bought it

for her months ago in Florence, in anticipation of her eighteenth birthday. The dress was made of a soft material which embraced her form, fluttering just below the knee when she walked. Rosa intended to add a touch of elegance by gathering her hair over one shoulder.

Zia Eme was upstairs waiting for Rosa when she went up to her room to put on the white dress. Rosa stared at the bed. A long skirt with a ruffle, a white blouse and a brocaded red bodice had been neatly placed there. Her heart sank. Surely her aunt didn't expect her to wear these clothes to her party. She would look like a music box figurine! Her face burned with shame. The image of herself in the white dress vanished in a puff of smoke.

“This is the dress of Campania,” Rosa’s aunt said proudly, “which I made for you with my own hands. As you’ll be dancing the Tarantella tonight, you need to have the proper dress.”

Dance what? Rosa wanted to tell her aunt about the white dress, but one look at her aunt’s beaming face told her that she couldn’t. Rosa, who had been eagerly awaiting this evening for two months, just wanted to cry. To make matters worse, Zio Ettore suddenly appeared at the door, wearing the male version of the costume on the bed, white cotton trousers with a sky-

blue shirt rolled up at the elbows, a wool vest and a wide leather belt. “What? Not dressed yet?” he exclaimed.

Fernando could hardly hold his laughter when he saw Rosa coming down the stairs. “Well, what do you think of your sister?” Zio Ettore asked his nephew.

Fernando whistled. “I think that I have never seen her looking more beautiful,” Fernando said, rocking on his heels merrily. Rosa wanted to punch him.

“Now it’s my turn to have a good laugh,” Rosa said to her brother as he stood grudgingly beside her in the dancer’s circle. It was the women’s turn to dance. Rosa took four steps forwards then four steps back, everyone vigorously snapping their fingers as they danced to the mandolin, the tambourine and Zio Ettore’s accordion.

Well, at least her aunt had allowed her to change back into her chosen dress after the dance, Rosa thought in consolation. Coming back to the main square, Rosa saw four stencilled words on the facade of the abandoned house next to the cemetery. Someone had scrawled *Mussolini is always right* on the dilapidated wall. Seeing the words made Rosa’s blood boil. Stupid Alfredo, for this was his work, no doubt about it. What rubbish. The Fascists tried to make everyone swallow

the idea that Mussolini was infallible. “And he had to pick the day of my birthday to do that,” she hissed through her teeth to her brother.

“Forget it, just dance,” he told her.

Everyone applauded loudly and the music started again. Rosa pushed her brother away angrily. It was her birthday, and she was the only one without a partner. What a disastrous birthday. Looking around to see that no one was looking, she downed a glass of wine someone had left behind on the table. She wandered along that table to the next one, emptying yet another glass. The more she drank, the more her indignation rose.

In an unsteady gait, Rosa walked over to the wall to take a closer look at the words written there. Before she could reach it, Fernando grabbed her hand and pulled her back to the dance floor. “You be careful,” her brother said, his eyes sweeping the piazza to see if anyone had noticed them. “He’s just trying to pick a fight,” Fernando said, referring to Alfredo. Rosa felt dizzy. She tripped, and Fernando pulled her closer. “Ehi! Have you been drinking wine?” Fernando asked, looking shocked. “Watch how you behave. I’m not just talking about the words on the wall,” said Fernando, as he spun her around, catching her when she lost her balance. “Drinking wine in front of everyone? And

swaying your hips? Just look at the way Matteo is looking at you, and that swine Alfredo too.”

“Alfredo? Where is the bastard?” Rosa said, struggling to free herself.

“You stay right here,” Fernando ordered, holding his sister more firmly.

“Bah. Let them all look. After all, I’m eighteen now. Alfredo? As if I care about that little Fascist. As for Matteo, do you really think that I would let him try anything? Are you forgetting that I’m in love with Enzo?” Rosa leaned closer to her brother and sniffed his shirt. “Well, well. A clean shirt, brother? That must mean you are trying to impress someone. Could it be the lovely Constanza?” Rosa asked teasingly.

Fernando scowled. “Mind your own business. And back to Enzo. He’s no good. It’s a good thing you left Florence.”

“What are you saying, you idiot? He’s the most handsome, most intelligent man on the whole planet,” she said, closing her eyes to stop the room from spinning.

“Intelligent? Then I’m Saint Nicolas,” said Fernando. “You should forget about Enzo. He has a bad

reputation with girls. I've told you this before. He's trouble and a Fascist."

"Bah. You see a Fascist behind every bush. Besides, he's a socialist, not a Fascist."

"Of course, he is. That's what Mussolini used to call himself too," Fernando said, mockingly. "You don't even know what a socialist is."

"I do know. It means equality for everyone and sharing the wealth." Rosa threw her arm up in the air in a sweeping movement, making her lose her balance. Fernando had to tighten his grip on her waist to keep her from falling.

"I think you should stop drinking wine, little sister. Equality. Ha! You make me laugh. Those are just big words. It's easy to share when you don't have a centesimo in your pocket."

"I thought you were a socialist, big brother?"

"Shows what you know. For your information, I'm a communist, not a socialist, but who would expect a girl like you to understand any of it. Anyways, speaking of sharing, I'm certain Enzo wants you to share something with him, just like Matteo, but just be careful. A woman's virtue is everything."

“Oh ho! Now who’s got the big words! I’m sure you will be thinking about Constanza’s virtue when you walk her home tonight.”

“That’s different. I’m older than you and a man. Besides, I respect Constanza, and we have an understanding. And anyways, her parents will be walking three steps behind us. I won’t even be able to hold her hand.”

For all her bravado about trusting Enzo, Rosa wondered if he hadn’t forgotten her. After all, he had only been her boyfriend for three months, and they had already been apart for four, and he was, after all, the most popular boy in the school. She was dismayed that she hadn’t received a single letter since she’d arrived here.

And what was this ‘I’m a man and you’re a woman’ business? Fernando was talking like an old man. It was 1943, not 1900. When she married Enzo, he would not be like the other men, and Rosa would not be like her mother. She would not hide herself in black, and she would let her daughters study. Were there not women doctors now? She had even been told that there were women driving cars and tractors now that so many men had gone off to war.

“Well, you may be a man, but your little sister knows what you’re up to.”

“What do you mean?” Fernando said frowning.

“You? Studying the Bible? *Pff*. You didn’t think that I’d believe that, did you? The next thing you tell me is that you are going to become a priest. That won’t happen in a million years!” Rosa’s face suddenly clouded over. This was no laughing matter. Her brother was worried about her, but she worried even more about him. Just yesterday, Rosa had seen Fernando climb back into his room at daybreak, before anyone was awake. At first, Rosa had thought that he’d gone to see Constanza, but she had the distinct feeling that Fernando had been up to something other than lovemaking. So, after Fernando left the room later that morning, Rosa had gone into his room, trying to find a clue as to what he’d been up to. Lifting the mattress, Rosa found an identity card. Why had Fernando hidden it under the mattress? Then Rosa noticed an identical card on Fernando’s night table. When Rosa compared the two, they looked identical, but then she noticed one difference. The card hidden under the mattress showed that Fernando had been born in 1925, and the one on the night table indicated 1927. Why did Fernando have two identity cards?

Rosa whispered in her brother's ear, "I know what you're up to."

He scowled at his sister. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you coming back to the house just before the rooster crows. And I'm talking about the identity card I found under your mattress."

"Keep your voice down, Rosa," Fernando said, gripping Rosa's arm so tightly that she winced. "Anyways, what were you doing snooping in my room?" he asked her angrily.

"I will tell you if you tell me what you were doing sneaking in through your window at dawn." Rosa threw back at him, crossing her arms defiantly.

"Stop!" Fernando said sharply. "People are looking at us. Keep dancing," he said under his breath.

"I'll stop if you tell me what you're up to."

Fernando pulled his sister towards him, forcing her to dance. "I can't tell you," he hissed through clenched teeth.

"If you can't tell me, then I'll just let you explain all of this to Zia Eme," she said, loosening herself from his grip and turning to leave.

Fernando grabbed her wrist hard. “You wouldn’t. You can’t.” Looking around, Fernando became aware that the other dancers were looking at them. He let go of Rosa’s wrist. “Oh, come with me. We can’t talk here.” He led her to the stone wall that led away from the piazza, and they sat down on the uneven edge.

“Look, Rosa. It’s not something a girl should know about.”

“Oh really? First of all, for your information, today is my eighteenth birthday, so I’m not a girl, I’m a woman. Secondly, women can do more than just sew and wash uniforms,” Rosa said contemptuously. The look on her brother’s face told her that she’d better try another approach if she wanted him to tell her the truth. “You can trust me, Fernando.”

“It’s not about trust, Rosa. It’s about my keeping my word to Father Salvati not to tell. Not to mention our parents. They would kill me if they knew what I was doing.”

“Oh so, it’s Father now, is it? What’s brought about this sudden change of attitude? I thought you said that priests were puppets of the old order who cater only to the bourgeoisie, and blah blah blah. Isn’t that what you said? Or did I get it wrong, feeble-brained girl that I am?”

“I never said that. I just said I didn’t believe in religious oppression.”

“Oh. That’s all. So, you still haven’t answered. Why the sudden change of attitude?”

“Let’s just say, we see things more eye to eye now. The priest is actually a good man. Look Rosa, there are things about me that you don’t know, and that I can’t tell you about.”

“Like your double identity? Maybe I should ask your friend Father Salvati about it, ehi? I bet you he knows.”

“Father Salvati is helping me. I can’t tell you more but trust me. Don’t tell anyone about the identity cards.”

“Are you in trouble, Fernando? What crooked business have you gotten yourself into now? What could you possibly be doing here in this goat-herder village?”

“Honestly Rosa, you are such a horrible nuisance sometimes. I’m not talking about here. Did you think that we left Florence just because of the bombing?”

Rosa shrugged. “If not, why did we leave?”

Fernando kicked at the ground with the heel of his boots. “Ok. But you have to promise not to tell anyone.”

Rosa put her elbow on her thigh and rested her chin on the palm of her hand. She was starting to feel unwell.

“Remember Samuel who lived down the street?”

“Sure.” Rosa shrugged, wondering what Samuel had to do with anything. An art dealer, Samuel had been a good friend and neighbour for twenty years. Then one day, he had suddenly disappeared. Rosa remembered the pallor of her mother’s face the day she’d found out that the Germans had taken him away and confiscated his paintings. When Rosa had asked her mother why, she’d told Rosa about the new law that prohibited Jews from owning anything. “And conveniently enough, the Jews just happen to own a lot of valuable artworks,” Rosa’s father had added from behind his newspaper.

Up to then, Rosa hadn’t even known that Samuel was a Jew. In fact, she didn’t know what a Jew was. To her, he was just someone who wasn’t Catholic. Why would anyone hate Samuel? He was the kindest man.

Rosa brought her attention back to what her brother was saying. “And remember my friend Dario?”

“Yes, the butcher’s son.”

Fernando nodded. “Well, Dario’s father, Don Endrizzi, was Samuel’s friend.”

“Yes, so what?”

“So, Don Endrizzi was helping Samuel’s family hide in his house upstairs after the father got arrested. To make a long story short, the Germans raided the house, found the family, and took Don Endrizzi and Dario away. Do you know the penalty for hiding Jews, Rosa? Death. Mamma and Papà were afraid the Germans would come for me too.”

“Why. Please tell me you didn’t do anything stupid, Fernando.”

“I didn’t think I was doing anything wrong,” Fernando said earnestly. “I thought it was all a big mistake, the business about Samuel, so when Dario asked me to bring food to Samuel’s family, I didn’t think anything of it.”

“Oh, Fernando how could you? Risking everyone’s life! Well, it certainly makes more sense now, I mean, the big hurry for us to leave Florence. Thanks a lot, big brother. But there’s one thing I don’t understand. Since it was your problem, why did they have to send me here with you?”

Fernando grimaced. “I don’t think that you’re going to like this,” Fernando said after a moment of silence.

“I already don’t like anything about being here. How much worse can it be?”

“It’s about Enzo.”

“What about Enzo?” she said, sitting upright.

“I think Enzo reported Don Endrizzi.”

“That’s ridiculous! You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I do know. I saw with my own eyes Enzo spying on me twice when I came out of Don Endrizzi’s house. He probably also saw me going in with a bag and leaving without it. He must have put two and two together.”

Rosa put her hand to her stomach to calm the roiling feeling inside her. “That means nothing. It doesn’t mean he told the Fascists. He would never do that. I know him, you don’t. When exactly did they take your friend Dario away?”

“Two weeks before we left.”

Rosa sat up straighter, willing her stomach to quiet down, so that she could defend her boyfriend

convincingly. “There then. It couldn’t have been Enzo. He was hunting up north at his cousin’s house.”

“Hunting, in the middle of the war?” Fernando exclaimed incredulously. “If you want to be stupid, be stupid, but I’m telling you what I know, and our parents believed me too. Enzo is the reason our parents sent you away with me. Believe me, your boyfriend is a snake, but you don’t believe it because your eyes are so full of stars,” Fernando said. “Ooh, Enzo,” Fernando said, mimicking her. “Take me with you into the woods.”

So, her brother had heard about that too. “Shut up, Fernando.”

They sat in silence. Fernando’s voice softened as he said, “Sorry, Rosa. I was hoping that you’d never hear about all this. I know how you felt about Enzo.”

Rosa screamed at her brother, “You mean how I feel, not how I felt!” It was a good thing they were playing music in the piazza, or the whole village would have heard her. What she had said to her brother wasn’t true. Enzo had been in Florence two weeks prior to their departure. She’d lied to her brother because she knew that Enzo would never betray a neighbour or hurt anyone related to her. She was sure of this. Rosa took a deep breath. “I don’t care what you say, I’ll

never believe that Enzo would ever hurt me, or anyone else.”

Fernando crossed his long legs at the ankle and waited for her to finish. He knew his sister. She hated being told she was wrong.

Rosa tried to calm the nausea in her gut which the conversation was exacerbating. She tossed back a rebel lock and said, “Anyways, what does all this have to do with the identification cards?”

“Let me ask you something first. Haven’t you noticed anything odd about Father Salvati, Nicolo and Matteo?”

Rosa shook her head. “Why should I? What they do is none of my business,” she answered, knowing fully well that if she had been oblivious, it was only because Enzo occupied her thoughts every waking moment.

“Well, I noticed something. The whole Bible study thing seemed very suspicious to me. I mean, think about it. Nicolo and Matteo? Do they look like altar boys or novices to you?

“Not quite,” Rosa admitted, raising her eyebrows. “So, you spied on them?”

“Look who’s talking! I just wondered what they were up to, so I started to watch them. And one other thing

intrigued me. That Don Pasqualino seemed very interested in why we'd left Florence.

"You told him?" Rosa asked, appalled.

"I spoke to him as a confessor, not as a man."

"I thought you didn't believe in religion?"

"I don't, but who cares? Our dear Father Salvati does, and that's the important thing. I knew he wouldn't betray something told in confession, so I confessed. Anyways, Rosa, I needed to talk to someone about the whole thing. I couldn't sleep at night thinking I'd betrayed Dario. I didn't even try to find him. I just ran away. It was a cowardly thing to do."

Rosa was amazed. She'd never heard her brother confess to a wrongdoing in his entire life. "Well, I don't think it was cowardly. I know you. You are the bravest person I know...pig-headed at times, but certainly not a coward."

"Look who's talking, *ehi*," Fernando told her with a wry smile. "Anyways, I trusted Father Salvati, and he trusted me in return by telling me his own personal views. I may have underestimated the priest. There's more about him than meets the eye. He told me that some priests are helping others in trouble, and there are many other men throughout Italy who think like

me and have sworn to bring down Mussolini and his thugs. He says that the Pope doesn't approve of the Germans, and neither does he."

"Father Salvati, a fighter? Hard to believe," Rosa commented sceptically.

"No. He's not a red priest. He's what they call a collaborating priest."

"Spare me the details," Rosa said, getting up shakily from the low stone wall. "Just tell me this. Why do you care? And please don't tell me you've gotten yourself into trouble. We promised our parents that we'd stay out of this, remember Fernando? If you're in some kind of trouble, I want to know what kind of stinking cow pie you've stepped into."

"Watch your mouth. That is not a proper thing for a girl to say," Fernando warned her. "I can't tell you anything else. I've sworn not to tell."

"Uhh!" Rosa gave him an exasperated look, but Fernando spoke before she could voice her thoughts. "If I've told you anything at all, it's because I'm afraid you'll blab to our aunt and uncle and make a mess of things. I'm sure I'm already in trouble for telling you what I just did. Now it's up to Father Salvati to decide if you should know more. Give me until tomorrow to

explain to him what happened. What he does after that is his decision.”

They heard a voice calling their names. Matteo came running down the path, bending over to catch his breath. “So here you are! We’ve been looking for you everywhere. What is a birthday cake without the guest of honour, I ask you? And for you Fernando, get your lazy ass up off of there,” Matteo said, giving Fernando a shove that almost sent him tumbling. “Father Salvati wants to see us.”

Fernando turned to his sister and noticed how her face was drained of colour. “Ehi. Are you okay?” Fernando asked her.

“What’s wrong with her?” Matteo asked solicitously.

“She just had a bit too much wine. She’s not used to it,” Fernando replied.

Rosa gestured for them to move on. “Just need to sit. Go,” she mumbled.

Matteo hesitated, but Fernando took him by the arm. He didn’t want his sister sharing any of the information he’d just told her. Reluctantly, Matteo allowed Fernando to lead him away.

Rosa had never felt so miserable in her whole life. Her body had turned to ice. She was in shock. It couldn’t

be, she told herself. Enzo loved her. He had told her that he would marry her. Was that only so that he could get information out of her? He'd made love to her. She'd been willing to be entirely his, and would have been, had her parents not sent her here to this God forsaken village. Fernando was wrong. She would not allow her brother's suspicions to shake her faith in Enzo.

Rosa had so looked forward to this evening, but now she knew that the cake would taste like ashes in her mouth. No, she couldn't go back to the party now, not when her last hope for happiness had been taken away so brutally.

The sound of distant shouting made Rosa jump. She had a bad feeling that something was terribly wrong. Holding her stomach, she started running back to the piazza. When she got there, a group of villagers had gathered around the church door looking at Alfredo, who was tacking a poster onto the door.

Rosa was so indignant she momentarily overcame her nausea. "What are you doing?" Rosa yelled accusingly, clumsily breaking through the group. "This is a celebration. You have no business putting up stupid posters." Her extreme indignation had a sobering effect on her.

“I was ordered to put up posters here,” Alfredo yelled back, hammering another nail into the door.

“Tonight? And on the church door?” Rosa said incredulously. “Have you asked Father Salvati?”

“I don’t need his permission. I have orders.”

“God is the only one allowed to give orders here,” Rosa replied angrily. She looked at the poster. It showed a dark-skinned man attacking a blond, blue-eyed woman. Underneath was the caption *‘Protect her. She could be your mother, your sister, your daughter’*. Not my mother or sister, she thought. There are no Germans in my family. “Now I know why you wear a black shirt,” she told Alfredo bitingly. “It’s because you need to hide the dirt that you’re spreading around all day long.”

“And I know why you dress like that?” Albert yelled back furiously pointing his finger at Rosa’s beloved dress. “My mother made me this dress,” she said furiously.

“Well then she’s a whore the same as you.”

The crowd of villagers gathered round gave a collective gasp. You never combined the words mother and whore. Alfredo’s insult left Rosa speechless. The effect on Fernando was quite the opposite. Coming out of the

presbytery with the priest, the words had a galvanizing effect on him. He leapt forward, clearly intent on beating Alfredo to a pulp. Father Salvati just barely managed to hold Fernando back by grabbing onto his shirt.

“Boy! You shame your family,” the priest said to Alfredo, who stood legs in a V in front of the poster. “You will apologize immediately to Rosa and remove that from the door of my church.”

Alfredo held his ground in haughty silence. “Let me help you with that, you little bastard,” Fernando said, loosening himself from the priest’s grip. Before he could get there, Rosa ran forward and gave Alfredo a good solid kick in the leg, an action which Alfredo repaid with a hard sideways slap to her face that knocked her to the ground. What followed was mayhem, as Fernando jumped on Alfredo and a punching match ensued, with the priest incapable of separating the two until two burly village men came along and pulled the two young men apart.

It was hard to tell who got the worst of it, Fernando or Alfredo, for though both were still standing, Fernando was bleeding from the nose, and Alfredo was doubled over from a hard punch in the stomach. “You will go home now, Alfredo,” the priest said sharply. “I will contact your teacher in Avellino tomorrow, and we will

see what he thinks of your actions.” The teacher Father Salvati was referring to belonged to the voluntary militia, the Fascist group responsible for the *Avanguardista*, the youth group that Alfredo belonged to.

“Ha. Don’t waste your time. I will say that she stopped me from carrying out an order and that she kicked me. You know the punishment for interference.”

Fernando spat out, “You bastard. I heard what you said to her. No one insults my sister, but I expect this is the way Fascists treat honorable women.”

Two townsmen prevented Alfredo from stepping forward, and Alfredo picked up his hammer, viciously striking the church door with it. Then he said, “You can’t fool me. I know there is something going on here. Just wait until I join the militia next month. Then you’ll see what happens to traitors like you.”

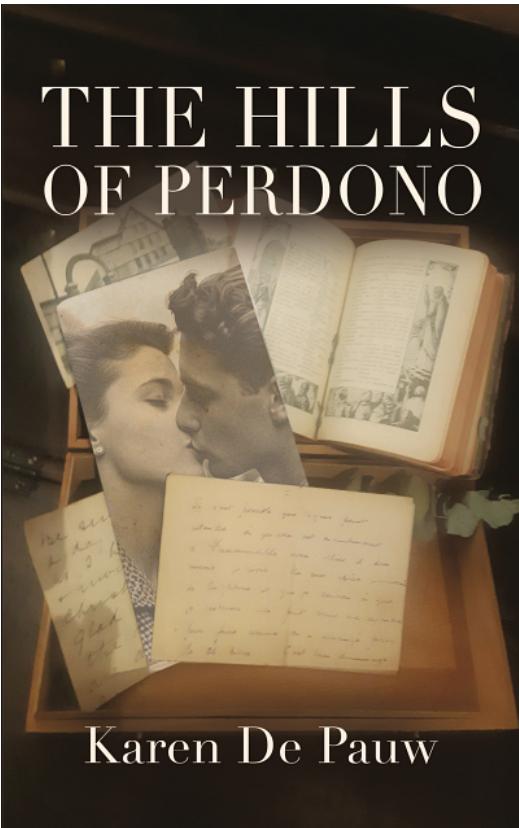
Watching Alfredo swagger away, the priest muttered under his breath, “Dear Lord, this will end badly.”

Inside the church, Father Salvati examined Rosa’s face and put a cold cloth on Fernando’s nose to stop the bleeding. He looked worried. “He has it in for us now.”

“What was I supposed to do, accept insults from that little bag of shit?”

“That little bag of shit, as you rightfully call him, can have us all shot. I’m not so concerned about myself as for you and my entire congregation. I’m responsible before God for what happens to everyone in this village, so I suggest you calm down. Don’t worry. Alfredo will get what he deserves...in time, but for now, don’t aggravate him any further. He can do us considerable harm, believe me.”

Rosa’s stomach heaved. She ran out the door and was able to get to the low wall just in time to lean over it and spew the contents of her birthday supper all over her beautiful white dress.



Rosa has never told anyone about her WW2 affair with a Canadian soldier and his suspected involvement in the theft of an icon from a church in Perdono, Italy. She can't fully forgive him until a young woman's arrival changes everything.

Karen De Pauw

The Hills of Perdono

By Karen De Pauw

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