

A Sicilian Farewell
A Novel

by
MaryAnn Diorio

Volume 2 of *The Italian Chronicles* Trilogy

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Pisano, Sicily, 1896

Chapter One

Dusk fell in Luca Tonetta's tailor shop as he counted his meager earnings from his past week of work. His revenue had dropped fifty percent in the last week alone. Not good. Especially since he had a wife and three young children to support.

And two months of back rent due to his landlord, Silvestro Lamponi, the man who owned the building in which Luca's shop was located.

At this rate, Luca would soon be bankrupt if he didn't do something fast.

Besides, Silvestro was none too happy and had made it clear that, if Luca did not pay up, he'd be evicted.

Luca's stomach tightened as he returned the few coins to the leather pouch in which he kept his earnings. Prospects for a financial turn-around here in Pisano were few and far between. With Italy's recent devastating defeat at the hands of Ethiopia in the Battle of Adwa, Sicily had felt the blow more than the mainland. No wonder so many were leaving the island for better opportunities elsewhere. The newspaper headlines that very morning had warned of an imminent economic collapse and reported a mass exodus of men from the island.

Luca rubbed his face. What would the mass exodus mean for his business? Already, the clothes racks of his tailor shop, usually full of finished projects by the end of the day, now held only a few items, while the coffers at the end of the workday held one-fourth the revenues compared to this same date a year ago. In recent weeks, the number of customers had dwindled drastically as more and more men left Pisano—and the entire island—for better opportunities abroad. At first, it had been the lure of wealth that drew them. But now, it was the lure of survival.

Luca raked his fingers through his hair. He had to do something fast—something that would allow no option for failure. If he failed in his role as provider and protector, he'd never be able to look at himself in the mirror again. Nothing else mattered more.

As if the economic decline were not bad enough, productivity from *Bella Terra*, his wife's family farm, had dropped drastically. Last spring's drought had nearly destroyed the entire orange and lemon crops, and their vegetable staples of green peppers, zucchini, and string beans had fallen far short of yielding their usual bounty.

Things did not look good.

Luca exhaled a long breath. What could he do that would assure him of financial success and, at the same time, not put his family in difficulty? Should he join those who were leaving the island, or should he make a last-ditch effort to rescue his business from a looming death?

The latter choice seemed pretty bleak. Among the large numbers of the population leaving Sicily—and especially Pisano—were those who would have been potential customers.

He shook his head as the weight of the decision settled in the pit of his stomach.

He placed the leather pouch in the wooden box where he stored his weekly earnings and locked it. The thought of having to close the tailor shop he'd taken over from his late father and built to a thriving business sickened him. Made him feel like a traitor to his father.

And a coward in the face of challenge.

Luca's mouth went dry. Yet, what was worse: Leaving Sicily for work in America or facing the collapse of his business?

He drew in a deep breath. Perhaps the better part of valor would be to join the emigrants. Reports had already trickled back from fellow Sicilians in America that wages there were three times what they were in Sicily. Tripling his wages would mean enough not only to feed his children but to educate them as well.

And to allow his wife Maria to buy a new pair of shoes once in a while. Not that she ever complained, sweetheart that she was.

He rubbed a hand across his forehead and turned to his young son Nico, working at his side. "Meager earnings this week."

Nico looked up from the trousers he was pressing, his thick, dark brows furrowed into a question. "Sorry, Papa. What can I do to help bring in more customers?"

Luca smiled at this wonderful son of his heart, if not of his flesh. "It's not that customers are lacking. People still need their clothing altered or repaired, even if they want to forego a new suit of clothes. The problem is that money is lacking. People don't have the money to spend on having suits made or clothes altered. Sicily's economy is fast collapsing."

Nico placed the iron on its trivet. "What are we going to do, Papa?"

Luca knit his brows together. "Looks as though more and more of our men are leaving Sicily."

"Why?"

"The economy of our island is in fast decline. Between Italy's recent defeat in Ethiopia and our government's mismanagement of funds, it's becoming more and more difficult to support one's family. As a result, our men are leaving for America, England, and other parts north."

"Will we have to leave, too?"

Luca placed his arm around his son's shoulders. At eleven years of age, the boy was fast growing into a man. "I don't know, son. To be honest, I have been thinking about it." He gave Nico's shoulder a squeeze. "Thinking about it quite a bit. I'm concerned that, before long, I won't be able to make enough of a living here to take care of our family."

Nico's eyes widened. "It could be exciting!" His lips broke into a smile.

Luca smiled back. "Yes. Indeed, it could." Nico had a childlike faith that inspired Luca. "I guess it depends on how one looks at the situation. There's a lot at stake. A lot I have to think about as the head of the family."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if Sicily's economy collapses, I will be left without a means of earning a decent living. And that would mean it would be difficult to take care of you, Mama, and your little sisters."

"But God will provide for us. You always tell us to remember that."

"Indeed, He will, son. But sometimes He provides by sending us to where the provision lies."

Luca patted Nico's head. "My honor as a man, a husband, and a father demands that I do all I can to take care of you." Luca's voice caught. "I would no longer respect myself if I did not do everything possible to take care of my precious family."

“I respect you, Papa.”

Luca’s heart warmed. One thing he never wanted to lose was his son’s respect.

Nico grew pensive. “What would happen if we don’t go to America?”

“We would likely go bankrupt.”

“Then we should go to America. That settles it.”

Luca smiled. “Thank you, Nico. But I will seek God’s will in the matter. One does not uproot one’s family simply out of a desire for more. Unless God is in this, I won’t make a move.”

A broad grin crossed Nico’s face. “Moses once said the same thing. I read it in the Bible.”

Indeed. So, Luca would be in good company by waiting on the Lord for a confirmation of His will.

Nico returned to his pressing. “In geography class, I’ve been learning about other countries of the world. The world is so big, and there are so many beautiful places to see. Imagine how wonderful it would be to see them in person instead of only in a book.”

Luca pondered his son’s words. Convincing Nico to leave Sicily would be easy. But convincing Maria? That would take a miracle.

“Yes, my son. God has created many beautiful places on this earth. To be able to see them is a blessing.” Luca cleared the counter in preparation for closing the shop for the day. “But I’m not sure how your Mama would feel about leaving Pisano and, especially, *Bella Terra*. She’s spent her whole life here.”

Nico laughed. “That’s precisely the reason she should leave.” He placed a hand on his father’s arm. “Besides, Mama loves you. She’ll go wherever you go.”

Luca hoped that were true. But when he saw how happy Maria was after five years of marriage and two more children besides Nico, he had his doubts. Even though she’d loved him enough to marry him, she’d had reservations when, before their marriage, he’d told her he was planning to go to America. His simple mention of it had been enough for her to refuse his marriage proposal. Only when he’d decided to remain in Sicily had she agreed to marry him.

But now, what would she do if he told her he thought God was calling him to move his family to America?

A shudder ran through him. He locked the cash drawer and placed the key on the hook hidden underneath the counter. “Your Mama loves Sicily almost as much as she loves me.”

Nico looked up from his work. “*Almost* means she loves you more.”

Luca chuckled. Over the years, the boy’s incessant optimism had brought great joy to his life. “Well, I’ll talk with Mama about it and see what she says. But my hunch is, she’ll think it’s a bad idea.”

“You don’t give her enough credit, Papa. Mama is practical and level-headed. Once you convince her that moving is the best thing for the family, she’ll go along with the idea.”

“I hope you’re right, son.” Luca sighed. “I certainly hope you’re right.”

“I’ll pray, Papa. God will show you the right thing to do.”

Truth was that God *had* been showing Luca what to do for a good while now. But Luca was struggling to obey Him. *Lord, give me a sign. I need a clear and unmistakable sign.*

“Thank you, my son. Praying is always a good thing to do. Especially before making a big decision.”

But would God answer Luca’s prayer in time to avoid a catastrophe?

* * * *

Shortly before closing time, the loud clang of the shop doorbell interrupted Luca's thoughts.

"Buona sera, Signor Luca." Sergio, the postman, entered with a letter in his hand.

"Good evening, Sergio. You're working late, today."

The postman smiled. "My job demands good service for my customers." He handed Luca a letter. "This is for you. From America."

Luca's heart stirred. "From America? I wonder who it could be." Luca took the letter and read the return address. *Giulio Genova*. A chill ran through him. Could this be the sign for which he'd prayed? Luca looked up at Sergio. "A former customer of mine from Trapani. He now lives in America."

"America, eh? I've been thinking of going there myself."

"Have you? I've been thinking the same thing."

"With the way things are going in Sicily, it's a wonder there's anyone left here. Two of my brothers have already left for England, and another will be moving to Milano. The economic situation looks pretty bleak."

Luca nodded. "Indeed, it does. Business has fallen drastically over the past year. I've been praying about what to do."

"You're a good man, Luca." Sergio patted Luca on the back. "Would you throw in a little prayer for me, too?"

Luca chuckled. "Of course, my friend. But you can talk to God yourself, you know."

"Yes, I know. But somehow I think he hears those who are holier. Like you."

"Scripture says that all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Sergio smiled. "Well, I've fallen far shorter than you, my friend. See you later."

"Thank you, Sergio."

"My pleasure. Enjoy your evening." Sergio nodded toward Nico. "A fine young son you have there. Takes after his father."

Luca only nodded. When Nico turned twelve, Luca and Maria would tell him about his birth father. "Thank you, Sergio. Nico is, indeed, a wonderful young man."

Sergio tipped his hat and left, clanging the shop doorbell behind him.

Nico rose and stood beside Luca. "Wow, Papa! A letter all the way from America!"

Luca's hands trembled as he broke the seal and opened the letter. Could this, indeed, be the sign he'd asked of the Lord?

Luca unfolded the onionskin paper and began to read:

Dear Signor Tonetta,

Greetings from America! I hope you remember me. I am Giulio Genova, an old customer of yours. You

altered a suit for me shortly before my departure for America almost six years ago. I trust you are doing well. I also hope you have found a good wife since I last saw you.

Luca smiled as he remembered Giulio's parting words about finding a wife. Wait till he met Maria. If, that is, Maria would be willing to leave her beloved homeland. Luca's pulse raced as he continued to read.

I am now living in Brooklyn. The city is teeming with opportunities, especially for skilled tailors. In fact, my boss, Will Dempsey, a clothing contractor in

Brooklyn, is looking to hire another tailor. I told him about you, and he is willing to give you a job. If you are interested, you would need to begin work on the first of October.

I also know of an empty flat for rent in my own tenement house. The flat is in the same building as Mr. Dempsey's workshop. The landlord is willing to hold the flat for you if you let me know by the first of

August whether or not you would like to rent it. Of course, he would need an advance deposit.

I wanted to let you know all of this in case you are still considering moving to the new Promised Land. Now is the perfect time to do so, my friend. If you do decide to come—and I hope you will—please write to me at the address on the letter. Above all, I want to keep my promise of cooking for you the best Italian meal on this side of the Atlantic.

*Sincere regards,
Giulio Genova*

Luca smiled, clearly remembering Giulio's enthusiastic promise to cook him an Italian meal should Luca ever visit him in America.

Luca slowly folded the letter. His heart was full. Surely Giulio's letter was a sign from God confirming what Luca had been sensing in his heart. The Lord was telling him to go to America. He was making His will clear.

He was preparing every step of the way.

"What did he say, Papa?"

Luca turned to Nico. "He said his boss is looking for skilled tailors and is willing to hire me. Giulio also said he knows of a place where we could live, right in the same building where I would work. I simply need to let him know what I decide."

"That's wonderful, Papa! See. God is working out all the details. It must mean we are to go there."

Luca placed a hand on Nico's shoulder. "I have yet to talk with your mother about this. I'm not so sure she will be as excited as you are." He tousled Nico's hair. "Now go finish the pressing so we can go home."

Still holding Giulio's letter in his hand, Luca approached the front window facing the square to close the wooden shutters. A palpable haze of tropical heat hovered over the square, reluctant to make way for the evening breeze.

Luca gazed over the familiar square before him. The square where he'd spent a good portion of his life plying the tailor trade. Most of the shops had already closed for the day, leaving the square empty and darkened, except for the single gas lamp that illumined the white marble fountain. A lone pigeon, bobbing its smooth, gray head, ambled around the circular base of the fountain in search of a fallen crumb of bread. The village vendors of vegetables, fruit, and fish had already closed down their wooden stalls and left for their hillside farms to rest, gather, and replenish their supplies for the following day. The next morning, they would return at the break of dawn to repeat what they had done today.

Life went on as usual, day after normal day. But things were changing in Pisano. Luca sensed it. And, like it or not, he would have to adapt to the changes in order to survive.

Unless, of course, he left.

He studied the wide expanse before him. Behind the distant mountains, the setting sun wove a delicate thread of yellow, orange, and crimson just above the purple-blue peaks.

Luca gazed at the familiar scene. What lay beyond those mountains? Why did he feel an increasing urgency to find out? To what destiny was God calling him? And his family?

And why?

He drew in a deep breath, closed the shutters, and then turned to his son. "Time to close up for the day. Mama will be wondering where we are. You know how she hates for us to be late for dinner."

Nico nodded. "I'm finished, Papa. I just have to hang up these trousers and then we can leave."

Luca watched proudly as Nico carefully folded the well-pressed trousers, placed them neatly over a hanger, and hung them on the finished-projects rack.

Luca's heart warmed. The boy was learning the tailoring trade well. Plans were for Nico one day to take over the family business, just as Luca had taken it over from his father. But would there be a business to take over? Or would this precious son of his find a better opportunity for success in a new world?

Only time would tell.

Luca shook his head. No. Not only time.

But Maria's reaction as well.

* * * *

"Valeria, please play with your baby sister while Mama finishes cooking. Papa and Nico will be home soon and will want a good meal."

Maria Landro Tonetta stirred the spaghetti sauce with one hand while, with the other, she motioned to four-year-old Valeria to keep two-year-old Anna occupied.

Maria smiled as she glanced at her two beautiful little girls, both the fruit of her deep love for Luca. Marrying him and bearing his children had been the greatest joys of her life. She could not be more content. She had it all. A wonderful husband. Beautiful children. A home she loved in a country she deeply loved. What more could she want?

"Maria, we're home."

The sound of Luca's voice still made her heart flutter, even after five years of marriage.

He strode into the kitchen, took her in his arms, and kissed her soundly on the lips. "How is the love of my life?"

"Happy you're home. Dinner will be on the table in a minute." She removed the cast iron pot of spaghetti from the wood stove and poured off the boiling water into an empty basin to cool. After dinner, she'd empty the basin of water on the ground outside to nourish the roses in her rose garden. Pasta water was full of nutrients.

She placed the cooked spaghetti in a large, brown ceramic bowl, poured the marinara sauce over the spaghetti, sprinkled a handful of grated Parmesan cheese over it, then mixed the pasta well with two forks before bringing it to the table.

Luca and Nico washed their hands then sat down to eat.

Luca patted his stomach and smiled. "This looks delicious! And the aroma drew me all the way from the village."

Maria laughed and gave him a teasing slap on the shoulder. "Don't be silly. There is no way you could have smelled the aroma from the village."

"Oh, but I did!" Luca gave her a mischievous grin.

"And I did, too, Mama." Nico joined in the family fun.

Maria burst into laughter. "Then you two have the sharpest noses in all of Sicily."

"I have a sharp nose, too, Mama." Valeria tapped her nose and giggled.

Maria's heart filled with joy. How blessed she was! There was nothing more she desired.

She smiled at Luca. "I made the pasta just the way you like it. *Al dente*."

"And God made you just the way I like it."

She warmed from head to toe. What a romantic husband she'd married! He always said the right thing at the right time.

Maria placed Anna in her high chair while Valeria climbed up on a chair next to Luca and adjusted herself on the raised cushion.

He reached over and gently pinched her little cheek. "How's my little angel today?"

Valeria wiggled in her seat. "I helped Mama take care of Anna."

Luca smiled broadly. "What a good little girl you are to help your mama like that. I'm sure she was pleased."

Anna clapped her plump little hands in agreement.

Luca grinned at his youngest child. "I see you were pleased, too, Anna."

Luca reached for Maria's hand. "Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You for the food we are about to eat. Sanctify it by Your grace. May it nourish us so that we can continue to do Your will as long as we are on this earth. In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen."

"Amen." Maria's heart warmed every time Luca prayed. How thankful she was for a Godly husband who wanted nothing more than to obey God and to serve Him faithfully! She was, indeed, a blessed woman.

She took Luca's plate and filled it with a generous portion of spaghetti. Next she served Nico and then Valeria and Anna. Finally, she took a portion for herself.

Anna began to pick up the spaghetti with her hands. "Anna, no!" Maria quickly reached over to her youngest. "Mama will cut the pasta for you."

Luca rose from his place. "Here, let me do it, Maria. Relax and enjoy your meal. I'm sure you're tired from running after two little ones all day." He finished cutting Anna's spaghetti then sat down again.

He turned to Maria. "How was your day?"

"The usual. Taking care of the children. Cooking. Doing laundry." Maria swallowed a forkful of spaghetti then turned to Luca. "Oh, by the way, Don Franco said he will be leaving us."

Luca looked up from his plate, his eyes round with surprise. "Really? Why is that?"

"He's been offered a job as headmaster of a private school in Milano. The pay is much better than what we can afford to give him. He doesn't want to leave, but with the economy declining the way it is, he feels he has no choice." Maria rolled another forkful of spaghetti. "I'm sorry we can't pay him more to manage *Bella Terra*. He's been a faithful foreman."

"Indeed, he has. He did a great job of restoring the farm to its former station. Almost an impossible task."

Maria nodded. "I don't know how we're going to replace him."

Luca put down his fork. "We may not have to."

Maria stopped short, her blood turning to ice. "What do you mean? We need a foreman to oversee the workers."

Luca leaned forward. "I received a letter today from Giulio Genova, a former customer of mine who emigrated to Philadelphia in America. He has since moved to Brooklyn, New York, and wrote to tell me that his boss is looking for experienced tailors."

Every muscle in Maria's body tensed. "So? What does that have to do with us? You have a business right here in Pisano, and we have the farm. There's absolutely no reason for us to leave." Her voice was firm and decisive.

"Maria, things are changing rapidly in Sicily. This morning's headlines predicted an economic collapse. My earnings this past month were one-quarter of what they were a year ago

at this time. If the situation does not improve, we will go bankrupt. Business is dropping off as more and more people leave the island for other parts of the world. It's becoming increasingly difficult to make a living here."

Her stomach coiled itself into a burning knot. She knew her husband well enough to know he was setting the stage for something. Something big. Something she would not want to hear. She searched his deep blue eyes for meaning. Eyes that still captivated her heart and made it melt. "So, what exactly are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I myself have been thinking of leaving Sicily."

Like a bullet, Luca's words shot through her heart, reverberating with earthquake force in the depths of her soul. Her head began to spin as she grasped for understanding. "You can't mean that!" Surely she'd misheard her husband. He'd put all notions of going to America behind him when they'd married. They'd been through this before, and she had no intention of going through it again.

He looked at her.

What she saw in his eyes confirmed her worst fear.

"I mean it with all my heart."

Maria's stomach lodged in her throat. "But, Luca, our life is here. Your business is here. Our family is here." She turned her attention to her children. "What about the children? To uproot them would bring great hardship on them. A hardship that could ruin their futures."

Luca jumped in. "Or could *give* them a future."

Nico's face lit up. "Mama, I think it would be fun to move."

Precious Nico! What did he know about life at his tender young age? She still hadn't told him the truth about his birth father, Don Franco. She'd planned to do so the following year when Nico would turn twelve. "But what about your friends? Your school? Your taking over Papa's shop when you grow up?"

"I'll make new friends in a new school. As for taking over Papa's business, I can start my own tailor shop in America when I grow up."

Maria's body shook. "It isn't as easy as that, my son."

Luca intervened. "We can do all things through Christ Who gives us strength."

Bile rose to Maria's throat. "I don't need your quoting the Bible to me, Luca. I know that verse as well as you do."

"Then why don't you take it to heart, dear one?"

Why did Luca always have to be right? "But, Luca. Do you realize what going to America will do to our family? Do you realize what it will cost us?"

Her breath hitched. So much for her wonderful life!

Valeria began to cry, and Anna soon followed suit.

Maria rose from her place at the table to pick up her youngest child. "What's the matter, little one?"

The child buried her head in Maria's shoulder. "I'm scared."

Maria cradled Anna's head. "There's no need to be afraid."

Valeria climbed out of her chair and tugged on Maria's skirt. "I'm scared, too, Mama. Don't fight with Papa."

Stricken with guilt, Maria glanced at Luca. His eyes were riddled with pain. And Nico's troubled gaze cut her very heart.

She sat down and placed Anna on her lap. This was the first time her children had seen their parents argue. No wonder they were afraid.

Luca placed his hand on hers. “Look, Maria. Let’s talk about this after dinner. Now is not the right time.”

Her heart sank to the soles of her feet. As far as she was concerned, no time would ever be the right time.

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Learn more at maryanndiorio.com.

