



Letters

Adapted from the Novel by Bob Cerrano

GIOVANNI'S LONG ROAD

An Immigrant's Path to America A Novel

PART II: THE ROAD THROUGH A VALLEY OF DEATH

High in the Dolomite Mountains of northern Italy, west of Cortina d'Ampezzo, Giovanni sat on the rocky ground of his redoubt overlooking the green pine forest of the Falzarego Pass. A soldier of the 3rd Fenestrelle Alpine Battalion, his mission was

to guard the Italian mine works several hundred feet below the Austro-Hungarian stronghold, which the Italians dubbed the Castelletto.

Smiling, he reached into the pocket of his tunic and pulled out a crumpled letter he had stuffed there when they came under attack from an Austrian patrol.

30 April 1916

Dearest Gianni, My Love

Your daughter and I miss you so. Maria's always asking when her Babo will come home. Everyone in your family and mine are in good spirits. Your brother, Leonardo, has started seeing someone, but I haven't met her yet. He's stingy but will make some lucky woman a fine husband.

Food is an issue. Beef and butter are almost impossible to

find. Carlo bought a cow. Luckily, your father was thinking ahead, so your mamma milks and churns butter for both families. My family is at your house every day to help her. She's such a dear and always cheering people up. My mom bought chickens, and my father built a coop out back for them. We get eggs, and she takes chicks to your house so Carlo can raise them for meat. Your father took a piglet in payment from one of his customers, and we have been fattening it up for Christmas. My father also helps Carlo with his vegetable garden. It's a struggle, but occasionally, there are enough chickens and produce for one of your mamma's fabulous meals.

With my mother's help, I've made a few dresses for Signora Rettori and altered suits for her husband, Alessandro. Both of them are wonderful. They sent customers to me, and Alessandro brought grapes from his vineyards so Carlo could make wine.

He told us Pio was in Monfalcone, near Gorizia, with his cavalry unit. Alessandro is very proud of him and sends you his regards. He hopes you and Pio will be home soon playing billiards again.

Your sister Emma works at the Bulun and got me a part-time job there. However, it's not the old bolt factory you used to know. They're making fuses for artillery bombs now. The yards are full of munitions stacked in neat rows. I hardly recognized the place.

The men aren't happy with us working in the plant. Full-time women have it worse. The men say it's unnatural for us to be in the factory. They think women should be home with the kids. They demonstrated outside the building, and I took a stick to work with me. If anyone had touched me, I would have beaten the sorry bastards bloody. Cowards, they're all worthless

cowards. They stay home from the war and get big fat wages, grumbling about women at work, afraid of losing a few Lira, while my husband is in the trenches fighting.

I'm sorry for complaining to you, but I'm so damned mad. It's hard, but nothing like what you're going through. Stay safe, my dearest, for Maria and me. Both of us can't wait to see you again.

Love you ever so much

Adele

Tears formed, and a lump wedged in his throat, making it hard to swallow. It was like Adele was there talking to him as if he could touch her, kiss her. She was miles away, and it would be months before there would be leave for his platoon. Knowing Adele had penned it, reading the letter was a sweet sorrow that

he wouldn't trade for anything.

Giovanni smiled as he finished. *I feel sorry for the fool who annoys her.* His brow furrowed, and his lips narrowed. *When I get home, I'll have words for any man that bothered her.*

He felt a rap on his shoulder. Domenico stood over him, his tunic bulging over his round stomach. "What are you scowling about, Giovanni?"

"Oh, just thinking about getting home. Life gets complicated when you have too much time to worry about the family you left behind."

Domenico chuckled. "I try not to think much when I have nothing to do. If I do, I might think about something I must do, and then I won't have any time to do nothing."

"What?" Giovanni put his hands over his ears. "You're giving me a headache."

“Well, I mean” Domenico rubbed his chin. “You know what. I can’t repeat what I just said, so we’ll have to leave it at that.”

Giovanni shook his head. “Did you have a good breakfast?”

“It was okay. The food’s always cold when they bring it from the kitchen.”

“If you’d wake sooner, it might still be warm.”

Domenico shrugged. “What can I say? I like my sleep. I think I’ll check on Sebastiano.”

Most of their days were uneventful and consumed with hauling supplies and ammunition up to their mountain camp, but today, Giovanni was anxious to share some news with Adele. Finding a quiet spot along the parapet wall of the redoubt, he reached into his haversack for a pencil and paper. He paused a moment to think of everything to tell her.

14 May 1916

Tofana di Rozes

My Dearest Adele, my love,

Your letter arrived at a fortunate time. It was a joy to read of home and helped dispel war's melancholy. I laughed at the thought of my sisters Emma and Tilde chasing chickens about the courtyard so Mamma could make her Chicken Marengo. I was surprised that the thing I crave the most is my mother's special Bonèt. You know, the one she makes with the chocolate Alessandro brings us from Turin. I can almost taste the cookies, caramel, and rich dark chocolate. It was a joy to smile and laugh once more.

It helps me deal with the sadness of losing our new friend, Enrico, killed by an Austrian bullet. He was a fine young man,

only eighteen, my brother Leonardo's age, with his whole life before him. Poor Sebastiano spent many hours teaching Enrico mountaineering and is taking it very hard. I fear this won't be the last of the losses I will endure. I'm transferring to Mount Sabotino, near Gorizia, on the 20th of this month. My sergeant told me that the fighting there was very bloody, and we'd lost many troops trying to take the summit from the Austrians.

I do have good news. I've been promoted to corporal and will join the Wolf Brigade of Tuscany on the 26th. Before leaving for Udine, I must report to the Citadel in Alessandria for equipment. I pray we have the opportunity to spend a few days together, my love. If you get this letter before I am to arrive, have my father buy you a train ticket. Get a room at the Hotel Alli Due Buoi Rossi on the Via Camillo Cavour. It's a twelve-minute walk from the Alessandria station. I hesitate to get my hopes up, but the

thought of spending a few days with you makes my chest feel like exploding.

Today, we take a prisoner to our Falzarego headquarters. He's an Austrian soldier who wandered into camp from the Castelletto. Luckily, he wasn't shot on sight. The man mumbles to himself and shakes terribly, saying he can no longer hear our air drills that have vibrated the rock under his feet for the last two months. He said they just stopped one day. The man tells us when the drills stop, they will all die, and he has to leave because he wants to live. I think the poor man has lost his mind because our drills are still at work. Even as I write, I hear them rattling away up in the tunnel and smell the exhaust of their benzene engines. In his troubled mind, he thinks we have finished digging and are now ready to load the mine with tons of explosives that will blow the Austrians and their Castelletto off

the mountain.

Well, the boys are here, and it's time to leave. I'll post this at headquarters and hope it has a better chance of getting to you in time.

I love you more than I can find words to describe, my dearest.

Giovanni

Putting his pencil away, he hoisted the rucksack over his shoulders and draped the haversack strap across his chest. Picking up his rifle, Giovanni joined the detail, escorting the prisoner. Anticipating seeing Adele made his stomach tingle with hope. At the same time, he had a nagging dread. There was no way of knowing if she would receive the letter and meet him. His best option was to place the letter in the hand of the regimental clerk he had befriended. He could only dream she

would soon be in his arms. All he could do was wait and hope.