

Chapter One June 1962

Years later, Dino wondered if his life would have been different if it were not for that disastrous incident with Saint Anthony.

Actually, it was the statue of Saint Anthony, and the incident occurred during the celebration of his feast day in the village named for him.

Everyone in Sant'Antonio had gathered in the little piazza in front of Leoni's bottega and Manconi's butcher shop for the annual *Festa di Sant'Antonio* on that blistering hot June 13 in 1962. Dino stood in the back, wondering why the procession to the church hadn't begun.

The women, even the widows who normally were entirely in black, wore colorful dresses and scarves. The men had brought out their ill-fitting suits, and the children were in their Sunday best. Everyone was very hot.

"Let's get going!" a man in the back yelled. "My collar is choking me!"

But first, the statue of Saint Anthony, brought from its honored place on the side altar, had to be placed firmly in an opening on the *portantina*, the platform that would be carried solemnly back to the church. Two men, Dino's Papa, Paolo, and Ezio, the schoolteacher, were having trouble.

"Lean it a little to the left," Ezio cried. "No, to the right!" Paolo said.

"No, to the left!"

They didn't know why it didn't fit. It fit perfectly last year. Maybe all that rain in the last two months had warped the wood and changed the size of the opening.

Dino looked on silently, biting his lip and standing on one foot, then the other. Why can't they get it in?

"Maybe if we pushed a little harder," Ezio said. His father, Antonio, joined the effort.

"Let me help."

With Antonio and Paolo at his side, Ezio firmly took hold of the statue and tried to force it into the opening. Nothing.

"Oh, please," Dino thought, "what's taking them so long? This is stupid."

In the village of Sant'Antonio, Saint Anthony's feast day was celebrated more than Christmas or Easter. No one knew why the village was named after the saint, but he was popular all over northern Italy, and especially in this region of Tuscany. People believed that the church, which was dedicated in 1736, probably predated the village, which back then consisted of only a few scattered farmhouses.

Over the years, the village grew to almost a hundred people. Now, most lived a half mile from the church, which lay peacefully in a grove of cypresses.

"Don't push so hard, Ezio," Antonio said.

"If I don't push, Papa, it will never get in." Ezio stopped to wipe the sweat from his eyes. Dino came closer. "Can't you hurry?"

More people gathered around the three men struggling to embed the statue into the *portantina*. Nothing so amusing had happened in the village since that stupid kid Bruno tried to climb to the top of the water tower and hung upside down by his belt for an hour until he could be rescued.

Ezio and Paolo took the jibes of their friends cheerfully, and at one point Paolo made an obscene gesture and mouthed a crude word. The women feigned horror and giggled.

Antonio had made the platform only three years ago, shortly after he moved from Florence to stay with his son and his wife, Donna, in their hilltop farmhouse, the Cielo. Having owned a carpenter shop in Florence, he was the likely person to build the new platform when the old one disintegrated.

He had taken a three-by-five foot piece of plywood and attached six-foot poles on either side. Then he took the five-foot statue of Saint Anthony down from the altar, measured the base and cut out a hole in the center of the *portantina* exactly to fit. And the saint had obliged. Until now.

Dino shielded his eyes and tried to look at the blazing sun, which was still high overhead.

The new pimples on his face hurt. “Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

“Push, Paolo, push,” shouted the burly Rocco Mancetti, who owned the *gelateria* next to Paolo’s *pasticceria* in nearby Reboli. “Show a little muscle!”

Paolo was laughing too hard to make any headway.

“You can do it!” Rocco yelled.

“How about you come and help me?” Paolo called back.

“No, no. You’re strong enough.”

“Shhh,” Ezio said, “the priest is coming.”

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” Dino thought.

Carrying the monstrance with the Holy Host inside, Father Sangretto slowly got out of his shiny black Fiat at the edge of the piazza and made his way to what was turning into a most unceremonious ceremony. Dino hurried up to him, bent his knee slightly and made the sign of the cross.

“I’m sorry, Father,” he whispered. “There seems to be a little trouble. But I think they’ll be ready very soon.” He made his way back to the struggling trio. “Hurry. Father Sangretto looks very angry.”

“Well, let him try to do this,” Paolo said under his breath. “What does he know?”

“Papa,” Dino said, “please...”

“Don’t worry, Little Dino,” Paolo said. “We’ve almost got it.”

“Papa, please don’t call me Little Dino anymore. I’m sixteen years old.”

With renewed energy, Ezio, Paolo and Antonio each took hold of the marble statue, Ezio at the base, Antonio pushing down on the saint’s tonsured head, and Paolo in the middle, putting his arms around the Baby Jesus that the saint held in his arms.

“One, two, three,” Ezio said.

They pushed.

C-r-a-c-k!!!!

The sound of the splintering wood could be heard not only in the piazza but inside Leoni’s as well. Nino Leoni ran from behind the counter to the window to watch.

The villagers gasped. Father Sangretto’s face grew red.

Dino rolled his eyes.

Slowly, Saint Anthony eased down into the opening, stopping at mid-thigh. Ezio turned around to reassure the onlookers. “It’s OK. He won’t go anywhere. Let’s go.”

He and Antonio grabbed the poles at one end of the *portantina*, put them on their shoulders and prepared to move. Dino joined his Papa at the other end.

For the last three years, the honor of carrying Saint Anthony along the winding gravel road from the village to the church had been given to these four: Ezio Maffini, because he was very popular as a schoolteacher; Antonio Maffini, because he was Ezio’s father and the maker of the platform; Paolo Ricci, simply because everyone liked him so much, and Paolo’s stepson, Dino Sporenza.

Antonio and Ezio were paired because they were tall and of the same height. Paolo and Dino were shorter and until this year of the same height as well. But something had happened since last June 13. Dino had spurted skyward, and was now a good four inches taller than Paolo.

The result was a lopsided arrangement, and Saint Anthony leaned very decidedly to the west.

“Crouch down, Little Dino,” Paolo said.

“I am crouching. And stop calling me Little Dino!” Dino bent his back and his knees.

“Can we go now?” Ezio asked.

“Move!” Father Sangretto shouted from the rear.

In their haste, the four platform bearers grabbed the wrong ends, and although Saint Anthony was supposed to face forward, toward the church, this time he looked at the villagers who trailed behind.

Maybe fifty or sixty villagers followed the statue on the gravel road. First came six children, five girls in their First Communion dresses and a little chubby boy in a white

shirt, brown pants and black tie. They tried as best they could to look solemn. Behind them, Rosa Tomaselli held the arm of Dino's mother, Lucia Sporenza.

"Am I going too fast?" Lucia asked.

"No, no. I'm fine." Rosa refused to let a little arthritis in her knees stop her from doing whatever she had been doing for more than seven decades.

Annabella Sabbatini, limping because of her own arthritis, walked along with Fausta Sanfilippo, who more than twenty years later was still something of an outcast because of her Fascist activities during the war. Then came the others, neighbors and, with only a few exceptions, friends, loudly singing the "Ave Maria."

At the rear, Father Sangretto held the monstrance, covered with a white cloth, up high for a while but then his arms tired and he lowered it to his chest. The priest considered himself one of the finest singers in the region, and his baritone echoed off the stone houses and then, when they emerged from the village, off the olive and cypress trees amid the fields of grain.

*Ave Maria, piena di grazia,
il Signore è con te.
Tu sei benedetta fra le donne
e benedetto è il frutto del tuo seno, Gesù.
Santa Maria, Madre di Dio,
prega per noi peccatori,
adesso e nell'ora della nostra morte.*

After the awkward beginning, the procession seemed to be going well, solemn and yet festive. The villagers smiled at each other and at the children who were now scuffling along and no longer hand-in-hand.

C-r-a-c-k!!!!

"Oh, no," Dino whispered as he and Paolo, holding the poles in the rear, saw the opening in the *portantina* splinter even more. Slowly, Saint Anthony began to fall through, inch by noisy inch.

The children screamed and pointed, the women gasped and the men laughed. Father Sangretto was so engrossed in singing that he didn't even notice.

C-r-a-c-k!!!!

The saint was now in danger of falling right through to the gravel path. But the Baby Jesus stopped the descent. That part of the statue was wider than the rest, and so the statue came to rest with Saint Anthony looking down on the child's head and outstretched hands in beatific adoration.

For years, people had smiled when they saw the Baby Jesus in the church. With eyes that seemed a little crossed and its mouth open, it seemed to be crying out for help.

"Help me!"

The voice was high and shrill, and the villagers stopped short. "Did you hear that?" Rosa clutched Lucia's arm tighter. "Did you hear that? Did Baby Jesus say something?"

"No, Rosa, of course not," Lucia said. "It's only Paolo acting silly. Stop that, Paolo!" she shouted.

A stream of giggles ran through the procession.

"Help me!"

Ezio looked over his shoulder and laughed. "Paolo, how can you make your voice so high?"

Paolo wouldn't stop. *"I'm falling!"*

Dino was mortified. "Papa, please stop that."

"Help me!"

"Papa! Please!" If he hadn't had the platform on his shoulder, Dino would have run from the scene.

Paolo knew it was time to stop the joke, and the procession moved along without further

incident. Barely suppressing their laughter, the villagers finally made it to the church, up the stairs and into the dark interior, lit only by red votive lights and a bank of yellow candles. Ezio, Paolo and Antonio quickly rescued the statue from the *portantina* and returned it to the side altar across from the centuries-old painting of Saint Francis shaving the head of Saint Claire. Except for a few scratches on his brown tunic, Saint Anthony had survived the ordeal.

Dino, limping because his back and legs ached, hurried into the sacristy and donned a black cassock and white surplice. Reluctantly, he would be the altar boy for the Mass because there weren't any other teenage boys in the village. Dino once suggested to Father Sangretto that a girl be enlisted as an acolyte, but the priest's fleshy jowls began to quiver.

"A girl! A girl!" he shouted. "We can't have a girl up at the altar. Holy Mother Church would never allow that. And I won't either!"

His voice softened. "The reason boys serve as acolytes, Dino, is so that they can appreciate being near the sacred altar and think about becoming a priest, as I hope you are."

Dino fervently wished the priest would stop bringing up that subject. He did not want to be a priest.

The women took their places in pews at the front, and the men stood in the back. Father Sangretto was known for his quick masses, and it was over in little more than a half hour. Dino tore off his cassock and surplice and fled the church so he could avoid seeing the priest. And he didn't even look back at the scarred statue of Saint Anthony.