

EVEN THOUGH their weekend excursion wasn't until August, Dino and Sofia started making plans in May. It had been three years, not since 1988, since they'd been able to get away together for even a few days. Something had always come up, and they didn't want anything to prevent it this time.

Dino told his uncles, who also worked at *Gli Angeli della Casa*, that he wanted five days off over a weekend in August.

"We can't plan that far in advance," Roberto said. "There may be people who need a house repair right away."

"Wait until July and we'll know better," Adolfo said.

"Well," Dino said, "I'm putting it on the calendar. Just so you know I won't be here."

Sofia had no easier time scheduling time off at the hospital. "We don't know if there will be emergencies." "Maybe another nurse will get sick and we'll have to call you in." "Just wait until July so we can know better."

"Well," Sofia said, "I'm putting it on the calendar so you know I won't be here."

After frequent reminders, their co-workers finally agreed that it would be all right for them to have the Saturday to Wednesday off. Sofia looked at the scale and decided she'd better lose five pounds if she was going to fit into her bathing suit. Dino bought a big new straw hat to replace the one that blew away the last time they were at the beach.

Sofia collected a half dozen travel books.

"Dino, some day I want to go to Sicily. And Paris. And London."

Dino chose some about the Medici and the history of Florence. They bought suntan oil and insect spray.

"You'd think we were going for a month," Dino said as he inspected the pile of things on their dining room table ready to be packed.

"I can't wait," Sofia said. "Solento was so beautiful the last time we were there. The white beaches, the beautiful caves."

"And remember the water? I've never seen water so clean and warm."

They had been told about the Solento region by friends fifteen years earlier and had fallen in love with the region the first time they visited. It was a long drive from Florence, down the eastern coast of Italy to the very foot of the boot, going past Ancona, Pescara and Bari before getting to their destination.

"People are discovering it, though," Sofia warned. "I hope we get there before crowds come."

For many in Italy, August, the hottest month, was a time to escape to the sea. Dino and Sofia knew they were taking a chance that there would be a heavy influx of tourists, but they also knew that Solento in August was especially beautiful.

Friday, August 9, finally arrived, and they packed and were ready to go. Dino washed the breakfast dishes and Sofia straightened up the living room, keeping the television on in the background. She was singing softly to herself until she caught sight of something on the television screen.

"Oh my God," she cried. "Dino, come here, come here quick!"

Wiping his hands on a towel, Dino rushed in. "What happened? Are you OK?"

"It's not me. Look at the TV."

They could hardly believe their eyes. A cargo ship was so laden down with people that the ship itself could barely be seen. Passengers filled the deck and hung from the masts and

derricks. They were everywhere. The ship looked like an anthill. And the people were yelling something.

“Who are these people and what are they crying?” Dino wondered.

The sounds became clearer. “*Italia! Italia!*”

“Shhh. Listen,” Sofia said. They settled back on the couch.

“These are live pictures,” the announcer said. “You are seeing the ship Vlora at the port of Bari. A few days ago it returned from Cuba with ten thousand tons of sugar and arrived at the port of Durres in Albania. Yesterday, it was being unloaded when hundreds of men, women and children began storming aboard. They said they wanted to get out of Albania. More than ten thousand people, maybe as many as twenty thousand, are on board. They ordered the captain to take them to Italy, and so the ship was forced to head due west through the Strait of Otranto. It tried to stop at Brindisi but the officials there refused, so it sailed up the coast and now it has come to Bari.”

“Bari!” Sofia said. “That’s where we’re going.”

“Oh, my God!”

The television cameras continued to focus on the ship and the refugees. Many, mostly young men, began diving into the Adriatic Sea and swimming to the dock.

“Oh no! They’re going to drown,” Sofia whispered.

Soon there seemed to be hundreds in the swirling waters. Rescue ships marked *Guardia Finanza* picked up some of them.

“This is incredible,” Dino said. “Those poor people.”

Then the television switched to an office where a man with flowing white hair and wearing a dark suit was seated at a desk. He held papers in his hand and looked over rimless glasses. A scroll at the bottom of the screen identified him as Professor Franco Mantini.

“This is part of what we now call the Albanian exodus to Italy,” he said into the camera. “The economic situation in that country has been so bad for years that many Albanians have been trying to leave. Since last year many have gone to Greece and now they are attempting to come to Italy. Remember in March of this year? More than twenty-four thousand of them docked in Apulia at that time. They started in small groups, in fishing boats. Then the boats got bigger and bigger and more people came.

“What did Italy do? Italy welcomed them. In fact, Prime Minister Giulio Andreotti suggested that families ‘adopt’ Albanians. The Italian politicians claimed that Italy and Albania were part of a common Adriatic culture, and so we had special bonds and obligations to them. The government started a program designed to integrate these people into Italian life, and they even got work permits. They had to get a job in four months or go back home. Many, many of them found jobs. Will this happen again with this group of people? I’m afraid things have gotten even worse in Albania, but attitudes have changed in Italy in just a few months. There is now a lot of suspicion and resentment towards Albanians. And there are so many on this ship! No, I don’t believe these people will be welcomed.”

Now the cameras, obviously from a helicopter, showed the ship being tied to the dock and a flood of people pouring out. Some of them jumped into the water to get there faster.

Soon hundreds, even thousands, of people milled around or stretched out on the concrete, exhausted.

The announcer came on again. “Police officers don’t seem to know what to do. They are giving out a few bottles of water but there isn’t nearly enough. These people left Albania last night and haven’t had anything to eat or drink since then.”

The refugees held up their arms to the cameras in victory signs.

“They think they’re safe now,” Dino said. “I wonder. Look, there’s a man in a suit watching. Must be the mayor or somebody. That doesn’t look good.”

“Oh, and over there,” Sofia said, “there’s a young man limping. Something’s wrong with his foot. How on earth did he get on the ship and then get off?”

“But there are so many still on the ship. Look, some guys are sliding down a rope to get to the water.”

“Now even more are climbing up on the dock. Oh, my God, Dino. It’s filled. There’s not room for another human being there. And I don’t see anyone helping them. Some of them look sick. They’re carrying that boy. He’s practically naked. And there’s another boy stretched out. Who’s helping them?”

“Nobody. There aren’t any medical people. The heat must be terrible. Most of the guys don’t have shirts on. Oh now, finally, somebody is bringing bottles of water.”

Sofia turned the volume up. “There’s another man carrying a young boy.”

“Finally, here comes an ambulance. It says *Mater Dei* on the side. They’re putting the boy inside.”

“The dock looks so dirty, Dino. It looks like there are piles of coal dust.”

“I can’t believe we’re watching this as it happens. The television crews must be all over.”

“There are more people stretched out. Looks like they’re passed out. That man won’t even take water. Oh my God, these people need help!”

“Sofia, what do you think?”

“Dino, we have to go. Now.”