

Chapter One

As soon as he untied the string on the package and saw the cover of the new *Scandalo italiano*, Mario Leoni knew that the magazine had done it again. Every month, the tabloid used big bold type on its cover to proclaim some terrible new scandal. “The Worst Beaches in Italy!” “*Restorante Ripoffs!*” “Sex Fiends Are Looking for You!”

“I don’t know how they can print this rag,” Mario said as he arranged the magazines on the shelves of his *bottega*. “And I don’t know how people can read this stuff. Still, there’s always a line here when a new one comes out so I guess I have to carry it.”

In its short life, *Scandalo italiano* had quadrupled its circulation with its sensational stories of politicians’ escapades and photo spreads of naked starlets. Not to mention its front-cover “exposés” and its popular Page Three photo of a seminude “Bimbo of the Month.”

Mario paused to take care of a customer. Old Signora Cardineli, accompanied as always by little Pasquale, was buying another cat toy for Alessia.

“*Grazie*, Signor Leoni,” Pasquale, polite as always, said as he dangled the toy on his finger.

“You’re welcome, Pasquale. Have fun with Alessia!”

Smiling to himself, Mario placed a half dozen copies of *Scandalo italiano* between *Panorama* and *Gente Viaggi*, but kept one to look at.

“Well, let’s see what the big exposé is this month. ‘Ten Places to Avoid in Italy!’ That should be interesting. It’s on page fourteen.” He flipped through the pages, pausing only a second to see who this month’s “bimbo” was.

He scanned through the article, discovering that the places were in alphabetical order. “Hmmm. Never heard of some of these. Maybe they made them up. They make everything up. Wait! What the hell?”

He held the magazine closer.

“Good God!” he whispered, hoping that none of his customers could hear or see him. “This is terrible. How could they do this?”

Mario plucked the other copies of *Scandalo italiano* from the shelf, kicked them under the counter and ran across the street to Manconi’s meat market with the single copy under his jacket.

“Anita!” he yelled to his wife. “Look at this!”

“I can’t now, Mario. Wait a minute. I’m almost done with this chicken.”

Anita Manconi sliced off the final wing, set the pieces on the draining board behind the display case and washed her hands. “What’s up?”

“Look!”

“What?”

“The cover of this magazine.”

“Oh, that awful magazine again. Why do you even carry it?”

“Look at the headline.”

“‘Ten Places to Avoid in Italy.’ So? We’re not going anywhere, are we?”

“Anita, turn to page fourteen and look at the list.”

Anita adjusted her glasses and flipped the pages. “OK, ‘Crude oil town in Catania...Fertilizer company in Mantova...Traffic jams in Pieve Fissiraga. Mario, why am I reading this stupid list? What do we care what this magazine says?”

“Read some more. They’re in alphabetical order.”

“Another and another. Oh! Sant’Antonio! Mario, little Sant’Antonio’s on this list! Imagine!”

“Anita, it’s a bad thing. We’re listed as one of the ten places to avoid in this whole country.”

“Oh.”

“Look at the picture.”

“My goodness, it’s the rubber manufacturing plant outside of town.”

“Read the caption.”

“The Amex Rubber Company is only one reason why you should avoid Sant’Antonio. Can you imagine the smells that envelop the village?”

“Mario, that’s not true. It’s not that bad. Anyway, we’re used to it.”

“*Scandalo italiano* does this all the time. They never tell the truth. They just make stuff up to sell their damn magazine. Read the article, Anita.”

Anita found the article next to the picture.

“If you have the misfortune to travel from Lucca to Camaiore you will travel through the pitiful village of Sant’Antonio. It won’t take long, because the village is so small, but do not stop! In fact, we recommend that you close your eyes as you drive through. Don’t worry, you won’t be arrested. As far as we could tell, there are no traffic cops in Sant’Antonio.”

Anita put down the magazine. “Mario, that’s not true either. Fernando has been our policeman for years. OK, he’s a little old now but...”

“Read more, Anita.”

“If you do make the mistake to stop, you won’t find much, if anything. There are a couple of shops, one of them a bottega that sells the usual variety of merchandise, from flour to flowers, but not the most basic brand of cigarette. The owner seemed particularly rude when I was there...”

“Rude! Rude!” Mario shouted. “Now I know who that guy was. He came in three weeks ago. He wanted this brand of cigarettes that I never heard of and he got all huffy when I told him that.”

“I’m sure you were very polite.” Anita continued reading.

“Across the street there is a meat market and for all I know it might carry quality products, but I kept wondering why such a comely young person was in charge of such an important element in any Italian’s dinner menu. Shouldn’t she be at home taking care of her children, if indeed she has any?”

“Mario,” Anita said. “I didn’t tell you this, but that slimy guy made a pass at me when he was in the shop. His hands were all over the place and I slapped him. Now we find out he’s not only stupid but sexist, too. My God, it’s 1985. Women should stay at home?”

Anita’s hands were shaking now, but she forged on.

“Now all cities, towns and villages in Italy should have a piazza, right? Can you think of one that doesn’t? Italy is famous all over the world for its piazzas. We invented them! Well, Sant’Antonio doesn’t have one. Those two shops in the middle seem to be the last remnants of what might have been here centuries ago. But no more. There isn’t even a ristorante or a trattoria or even a bar for coffee in the morning. Can you imagine? There’s an old well in the middle of the space but people say it has been dry for years.”

“I never knew there was a piazza here, Mario.”

“He may be making that up, too. Read some more.”

“And every village in Tuscany is supposed to have a beautiful church, right? Well, I couldn’t even find one in Sant’Antonio until I asked an old crone and she pointed me to an edifice in the fields north of the village. Now some people might find this attractive, but if ever there was a mismatch of architectural styles, this is it. Its façade is vaguely Romanesque, its interior somewhat Gothic. Whatever it is, it’s a mishmash. And the interior badly needs a coat of paint.

“Also, if you’re looking for a distinctive painting by an old master, as in other churches all over Tuscany, well, you’ll have to look a long time here. There’s only one, a ghastly portrait of the beloved Saint Francis shaving the head of Saint Clare. We cannot imagine how such a depiction helps the faithful to pray to their God. Nearby there’s a cemetery, where let’s hope the inhabitants of this godforsaken village can finally find the refuge they must have yearned for in life.”

“How can he say such a thing?” Mario asked. “Read some more.”

Anita did.

“The village itself is composed of a couple of dozen nondescript houses. Oh, the people say there is a little river running through town, but all I could find was a tiny stream with some dead fish. No, Sant’Antonio is not a place where you want to stop. In fact, it’s a place to avoid. It’s not a lovely hilltop town like San Gimignano or Montepulciano or Montecatini, also in Tuscany. People come from all over the world to see those places. But Sant’Antonio is, instead, as flat as your grandmother’s polenta. Note that it is the only place in Tuscany on our list of places to avoid. The only one! There are only two words to describe Sant’Antonio: Dull and boring. Avoid it at all cost.”

Anita put down the magazine. “Oh, my. I don’t know what to say.”

Mario wiped the tears from his wife’s eyes. “Don’t say anything. Here, give me that copy. I’m going back to the *bottega* and destroy all the other copies. I’ll burn them all. People will never know what *Scandalo italiano* had to say about our wonderful village.”

It was too late. When Mario returned to his shop he found that a half dozen customers had found the copies of the magazine he had kicked under the counter.

“Mario,” said Signora Giovanna Alberti, “we found these copies of *Scandalo italiano* on the floor. You must have dropped them. I’ll take my usual copy. Here’s my *lire*.”

“And here’s mine,” said Signora Grazia Paluzzi.

“And mine,” said Signor Enrico Agosta.

Within a half-hour, the news was all over Sant’Antonio.