

Chapter One

“Signor Maffini! Signor Maffini!

At first, only the boys were chanting, but now the girls joined in.

“Signor Maffini! Signor Maffini!”

He knew what was going on, but he thought he’d play along with his pupils for a while.

“Signor Maffini!” Rocco shouted. “Look behind you! Look behind you!”

He suppressed a smile and pretended to ignore the clamor by looking down at the papers on his desk.

“Signor Maffini!” Now it was Franco. “It’s huge, Signor Maffini, it’s huge! It’s gonna get you!”

Ezio Maffini had taught the fifth grade long enough to know that the last day of school always brought these pranks. He looked across the desks of the classroom, now in disarray as his pupils jumped up and down, shouting and pointing. Everyone here? No. One vacant desk. Bruno. Of course. Somehow that stocky kid with the chubby cheeks and wild red hair was hiding behind him. He could hear the kid making strange popping noises. How did he get there without my seeing him?

“Signor Maffini!” little Benedetta squeaked. “You better look or it’s going to be too late!” The other girls giggled.

Well, he might as well let them go on. The kids were having fun. No harm done.

He put his papers down and looked around the room. The windows, partly open to let in the sultry June air, needed cleaning again. He could barely see the stone houses across from the fields in the back. Beams of sunlight filtering through the dirt cast odd patterns on the wooden floor, making the clumps of dust on the planks even more visible. The faded plaster walls could be brighter, and the soot around the coal stove in the corner needed cleaning. The stain in the corner should be covered up, but unless the tile roof was patched, the rain would still come in and stain all over again.

Last November he had taken down the mandatory crucifix, but the *direttore* stormed in and ordered it put back. Ezio countered by posting a photo of the Italian Communist Party head, Palmiro Togliatti, and a declaration from the party ten years ago during the war, in 1945: “Long live the insurrectionary general strike! Long live the national popular insurrection! Chase out of Italy the hated German! Let the base Fascists and the profiteering plutocrats die the deaths of traitors!”

Even ten-year-olds, Ezio told the *direttore*, should know what happened. In his section on the history of Italy, Ezio skipped over the Etruscans and condensed the Renaissance so that he could talk about the war, about Italy’s ambivalent role and about the work of the Resistance. The children sat wide-eyed when he told of his own experiences fighting the Nazis, but he knew that they weren’t even born when the war ended and their parents were fast forgetting about it.

He also cut short the hour for mathematics and let the children draw pictures or write little stories and poems. But he didn’t dare display their work on the walls, even though some of it was quite good, especially Little Dino’s. The stories weren’t bad, either, especially Teresa’s about her cat and Domenica’s about her grandmother.

“Signor Maffini!”

Ezio stifled a yawn. Another sleepless night, another damn headache that left him exhausted and listless all day.

“Signor Maffini!”

He knew the noise was bothering Giorgio Pilozi in his classroom next door. Too bad. Let the old Fascist suffer.

Maybe he could freshen up the room over the summer. For one thing, he needed to get a new map of Italy. There was a hole where he had cut out Mussolini's picture. Next to it, where *il Duce's* portrait once hung, he needed to get something larger than the photo of the horse race in Siena.

It was hard to believe that he'd been teaching fifth grade in the little brick schoolhouse in Reboli for eight years. Sometimes he thought he should look for a better job, maybe in nearby Lucca or even Florence. His father was always urging him to come back to Florence.

But Ezio liked it here in Reboli. He didn't care that there was little nightlife, few concerts and no theater. He simply needed quiet. A place where he could try to forget, although that was still impossible. And over the bridge, in the tiny village of Sant'Antonio, he could visit friends and especially Maria, his only link to the greatest love of his life.

"Signor Maffini!"

Ezio ran his hand over his thick curly hair and straightened his tie. It was late and time to bring some order to the room. As he was about to call for silence, he saw Little Dino out of the corner of his eye. The smallest and shyest student Ezio ever had, the boy was bouncing in his seat, mouthing the cries of the other students but too bashful to say anything out loud.

Shout it out, Little Dino, Ezio wanted to say. Don't be afraid. Let loose!

But Little Dino was happy enough just to feel a small part of what was going on. It was the same on the playground. He always stood at the back, one foot against the wall, and watched while all the other boys played soccer. And in the reading class he spoke so softly that Ezio had to tell the other pupils to stop snickering.

Only when they were drawing pictures did Little Dino come into his own. Quickly and fervently, he would lean over his desk, not looking up until fantastic creatures in bright yellows and reds almost flew off his paper. The other pupils were amazed.

"How do you do that?" they'd ask. Little Dino's face would turn red, making his freckles even brighter, and he'd smile an awkward little smile and swing his feet, which didn't quite reach the floor. There was one thing Ezio noticed, too. When Little Dino made up his mind to do something, there was no stopping him.

"All right," Ezio said. "Time's up. That's enough for now."

"But Signor Maffini," Rocco shouted. "Aren't you going to look behind you? It's gonna get you if you don't!"

"Look behind you, look behind you!" All of the children were chanting now, except Little Dino, who barely managed a whisper.

Slowly, purposely pausing a couple of times while the children held their breath, Ezio stood up and turned around.

And then laughed so hard he had to sit down again.

Bruno had somehow climbed into the net for the soccer balls that hung from the ceiling and was sitting there proudly. His legs hung over the side and he held two balls against his chest.

"Look at me!" he shouted. "Look at me, Signor Maffini! I'm Nonna Alfonsi!"

Ezio knew he was talking about the oldest, and fattest, woman in Reboli. He also knew that breasts fascinated ten-year-old boys.

The other children hooted as Ezio pulled on Bruno's legs.

"All right, Bruno. That was funny, but now it's time to get down. We have to end the day and get you all home. Your mamas will have your lunch ready."

Bruno tried to stand in the netting and when he suddenly fell forward, his left foot caught in the strands of rope. Now, head almost touching the floor, he swayed back and forth.

“Hey look,” he tried to shout, though blood was rushing to his face. “Now I’m Topo the acrobat!”

The room in an uproar, Ezio untangled Bruno’s foot and lifted him to the floor.

“Good joke, Bruno.” He smoothed the boy’s hair and turned to the rest of the class.

“What a way to end the school year, right? Now you’ve got something to remember all summer.”

Ezio felt he had to give a little speech.

“Well,” he said as the room quieted down, “we’re at the end of the school year. In October you’ll be going to school in Lucca, and I don’t know if I’ll see many of you again. But I want you to know that I’m proud of you. Some of you didn’t do quite as well as others.” Here he looked at Bruno and Rocco. “But you all tried hard. You’re a credit to your families. Mostly, though, I want you to remember what we talked about through the year, that you must always try to do the right thing, that you must always fight against bad things that are happening. Now do you know what that means?”

All the boys suddenly found something to look at on the top of their desks. Two girls frantically waved their hands.

“Elsa?”

“I think if someone does something bad to you,” she said breathlessly, “you shouldn’t do something bad against them.”

“Good! Pina?”

“I think we should look for good things to do for other people.” She smiled triumphantly and sat down.

“*Brava!* Now just remember what you learned all of this next year, and the year after that, and all through your lives.”

The children were getting restless, so Ezio brought it to a quick ending. “All right, there’s one last thing...”

“Signor Maffini!” the children shouted. “Your book! Your book!”

It had become a tradition each year that Ezio would give a copy of his memoir of the war, *A Time to Remember*, to a pupil he thought had shown the most progress.

“Thanks. I almost forgot.” Ezio reached into the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a slim volume bound in blue.

“Little Dino,” he announced, “I want you to have this.”

While the other children cheered, Little Dino edged to the front of the room, grabbed the book and hurried back to his desk before Ezio could shake his hand.

“All right, everyone, this is really the last thing,” Ezio said. “Come up and return your *sussidiario*. The pupils next year will need them.”

The children came up one by one and handed over the heavy books containing all their lessons. He shook their hands and patted them on the shoulder. A few of the girls seemed close to tears. Ezio himself had moist eyes.

“Goodbye, Signor Maffini!”

“Have a good summer!”

“Maybe we’ll see you at the soccer field!”

Little Dino was last.

“Little Dino,” Ezio said. “And what are you going to do this summer? Big plans?”

“I dunno. Just play, I think.” The boy didn’t raise his eyes from the floor.

“Well, enjoy the time. Just think, in the fall you’ll be going all the way to Lucca for school.”

Ezio saw the boy’s lower lip quiver.

“You’ll like it, I know you will.” He tried to sound convincing.

“Signor Maffini?” The boy’s voice faltered. “Mama wants to know if you could come for dinner on Sunday?”

“Well, of course, Dino. Tell your mother I would like that very much. You go home now, and I’ll see you again on Sunday.”

The boy didn’t move.

“Aren’t you going home?”

“I’m going to Papa’s shop.”

“All right then. I’ll see you on Sunday.”

Ezio shook his head as Little Dino went out the door and shuffled down the path.

Turning back to his desk, Ezio stretched his arms. He looked around the room and slowly packed a box of books to take home. He took his time, looking at each of them and remembering his students as they learned about Dante and Michelangelo and Garibaldi. He didn’t care so much if they didn’t remember the metric system or how Italian politics worked. Just so they were proud of their heritage and their history and that they were good people.

He realized that he didn’t want to leave. The end of the school year meant the start of another long summer in which there would be nothing to do but think. “Grieve over my guilt,” he called it. He dreaded that, and knew that he was already longing for another school year to begin.

Then he pulled down the windows, careful that the cracked one didn’t slam too hard. Closing his classroom door, he almost bumped into Giorgio Pilozi. The old teacher thrust his arm out and made an obscene gesture. Ezio returned it in kind.