

CHAPTER 45

The morning of February 22, I headed out of the apartment into the streets of Florence to fetch espressos and pastries to carry back for breakfast. As I was crossing the street to a little café, my cell phone rang. A man speaking Italian informed me he was a police detective and wanted to see me—immediately.

“Come on,” I said, laughing. “Who is this really?” I was impressed by the flawless, officious-sounding Italian, and I racked my brains as to who it might be.

“This is not a joke, Mr. Preston.”

There was a long silence as it sank in that this was real.

“Excuse me—what’s this about?”

“I cannot tell you. You must see us. It is *obbligatorio*.”

“I’m very busy,” I said, in a rising panic. “I don’t have time. So sorry.”

“You must *make* time, Mr. Preston,” came the reply. “Where are you right now?”

“Florence.”

“Where?”

Should I refuse to tell him or lie? That didn’t seem a wise thing to do. “Via Ghibellina.”

“Don’t go anywhere—we’re coming to you.”

I looked around. It was a part of town I didn’t know well, with narrow side streets and few tourists. This would not do. I wanted witnesses—American witnesses.

“Let’s meet in the Piazza della Signoria,” I countered, naming the most public square in Florence.

“Where? It’s a big place.”

“At the spot where Savonarola was burned. There’s a plaque.”

A silence. “I’m not familiar with that place. Let’s meet instead at the entrance to the Palazzo Vecchio.”

I called Christine. “I’m afraid I can’t bring you coffee this morning.”

I arrived early and walked around the piazza, thinking furiously. As an American, an author and journalist, I had always enjoyed a smug feeling of invulnerability. What could they possibly do to me? Now I wasn’t feeling so untouchable.

At the appointed time I saw two men wending their way through the tourist masses, dressed casually in jeans, black shoes, and blue jackets, shades pushed up on their crew-cut heads. They were *in borghese*, in plainclothes, but even from a hundred yards away I could tell they were cops.

I went over. “I am Douglas Preston.”

“Come this way.”

The two detectives took me into the Palazzo Vecchio, where, in the magnificent Renaissance courtyard surrounded by Vasari’s frescoes, they presented me with a legal summons to appear for an interrogation before the public minister of Perugia, Judge Giuliano Mignini. The detective politely explained that a no-show would be a serious crime; it would put them in the regrettable position of having to come and get me.

“Sign here to indicate you have received this piece of paper and understood what it says and what you must do.”

“You still haven’t told me what it’s about.”

“You’ll find out in Perugia tomorrow.”

“At least tell me this: is it about the Monster of Florence?” I asked.

“Bravo,” said the detective. “Now sign.”

I signed.

I called Spezi, and he was deeply shocked and concerned. “I never thought they’d act against you,” he said. “Go to Perugia and answer the questions. Tell them just what they ask and no more—and for God’s sake, don’t lie.”