INTRODUCTION

In 1969, the year men landed on the moon, I spent an unforgettable summer in Italy. I was thirteen. Our family rented a villa on the Tuscan coast, perched on a limestone promontory above the Mediterranean. My two brothers and I spent the summer hanging around an archaeological dig and swimming at a little beach in the shadow of a fifteenth-century castle called Puccini's Tower, where the composer wrote *Turandot*. We cooked octopus on the beach, snorkeled among the reefs, and collected ancient Roman tesserae from the eroding shoreline. In a nearby chicken coop I found the rim of a Roman amphora, two thousand years old, stamped with an "SES" and a picture of a trident, which the archaeologists told me had been manufactured by the Sestius family, one of the richest mercantile families of the early Roman republic. In a stinking bar, to the flickering glow of an old black-and-white television set, we watched Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon while the place erupted in pandemonium, the longshoremen and fishermen hugging and kissing each other, tears streaming down their rough faces, crying, "*Viva l'America*! *Viva l'America*!"

From that summer on, I knew that I wanted to live in Italy.

I grew up to become a journalist and writer of murder mysteries.

In 1999, I returned to Italy on assignment for *The New Yorker* magazine, writing an article about the mysterious artist Masaccio, who launched the Renaissance with his commanding frescoes in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence and then died at twenty-six, allegedly poisoned. One cold February night, in my hotel room in Florence overlooking the Arno River, I called my wife, Christine, and asked her what she thought of the idea of moving to Florence. She said yes. The next morning I called a real estate agency and began looking at apartments, and in two days I had rented the top floor of a fifteenth-century palazzo and put down a deposit. As a writer, I could live anywhere—why not Florence?

As I wandered around Florence that cold week in February, I started to plot the murder mystery I would write when we moved there. It would be set in Florence and involve a lost painting of Masaccio.

We moved to Italy. We arrived on August 1, 2000, Christine and I, with our two children, Isaac and Aletheia, aged five and six. We first lived in the apartment I had rented overlooking Piazza Santo Spirito and then we moved into the country, to a tiny town called Giogoli in the hills just south of Florence. There we rented a stone farmhouse tucked into the side of a hill at the end of a dirt lane, surrounded by olive groves.

I began researching my novel. Since it was to be a murder mystery, I had to learn all I could about Italian police procedure and murder investigation. An Italian friend gave me the name of a legendary Tuscan crime reporter named Mario Spezi, who for more than twenty years had worked the *cronaca nera* desk ("black story," or crime beat) at *La Nazione*, the daily paper of Tuscany and central Italy. "He knows more about the police than the police themselves," I was told.

And so it was that I found myself in the windowless back room of Caffè Ricchi, on Piazza Santo Spirito, sitting across from Mario Spezi himself.

Spezi was a journalist of the old school, dry, witty, and cynical, with a highly developed sense of the absurd. There was absolutely nothing a human being could do, no matter how depraved, that would surprise him. A shock of thick gray hair surmounted a wry, fine-looking leathery face, with a pair of canny brown eyes lurking behind gold-rimmed

spectacles. He went about in a trench coat and a Bogart fedora, like a character out of Raymond Chandler, and he was a great fan of American blues, film noir, and Philip Marlowe.

The waitress brought in a tray with two black espressos and two glasses of mineral water. Spezi exhaled a stream of smoke, held his cigarette to one side, downed the espresso with one sharp movement, ordered another, and placed the cigarette back on his lip.

We began chatting, Spezi speaking slowly for the benefit of my execrable Italian. I described to him the plot of my book. One of the main characters was to be a carabinieri officer, and I asked him to tell me how the carabinieri operated. Spezi described the structure of the carabinieri, how they differed from the police, and how they conducted investigations, while I took notes. He promised to introduce me to a colonel in the carabinieri who was an old friend. Finally we fell to chatting about Italy and he asked me where I lived.

"A tiny town called Giogoli."

Spezi's eyebrows shot up. "Giogoli? I know it well. Where?"

I gave him the address.

"Giogoli . . . a lovely, historic town. It has three famous landmarks. Perhaps you already know of them?"

I did not.

With a faint smile of amusement, he began. The first was Villa Sfacciata, where one of his very own ancestors, Amerigo Vespucci, had lived. Vespucci was the Florentine navigator, mapmaker, and explorer who was the first to realize that his friend Christopher Columbus had discovered a brand-new continent, not some unknown shore of India, and who lent his name Amerigo (Americus in Latin) to this New World. The second landmark, Spezi went on, was another villa, called I Collazzi, with a façade said to be designed by Michelangelo, where Prince Charles stayed with Diana and where the prince painted many of his famous watercolors of the Tuscan landscape.

"And the third landmark?"

Spezi's smile widened. "The most interesting of all. It's just outside your door."

"There's nothing outside our door but an olive grove."

"Precisely. And in that grove one of the most horrific murders in Italian history took place. A double homicide committed by our very own Jack the Ripper."

As a writer of murder mysteries, I was more intrigued than dismayed.

"I named him," Spezi said. "I christened him *il Mostro di Firenze*, the Monster of Florence. I covered the case from the beginning. At *La Nazione* the other reporters called me the paper's 'Monstrologer.'" He laughed, a sudden irreverent cackle, hissing smoke out from between his teeth.

"Tell me about this Monster of Florence."

"You've never heard of him?"

"Never."

"Isn't the story famous in America?"

"It's completely unknown."

"That surprises me. It seems . . . an almost *American* story. And your own FBI was involved—that group Thomas Harris made so famous, the Behavioral Science Unit. I saw Thomas Harris at one of the trials, taking notes on a yellow legal pad. They say he based Hannibal Lecter on the Monster of Florence."

Now I was really interested. "Tell me the story."

Spezi downed his second espresso, lit another Gauloise, and began to talk through the smoke. As his story gathered steam, he slipped a notebook and a well-worn gold pencil from his pocket and began to diagram the narrative. The pencil cut and darted across the paper, making arrows and circles and boxes and dotted lines, illustrating the intricate connections among the suspects, the killings, the arrests, the trials, and the many failed lines of investigation. It was a long story, and he spoke quietly, the blank page of his notebook gradually filling.

I listened, amazed at first, then astonished. As a crime novelist, I fancied myself a connoisseur of dark stories. I had certainly heard a lot of them. But as the story of the Monster of Florence unfolded, I realized it was something special. A story in a category all its own. I do not exaggerate when I say the case of the Monster of Florence may

be—just *may* be—the most extraordinary story of crime and investigation the world has ever heard.

Between 1974 and 1985, seven couples—fourteen people in all—were murdered while making love in parked cars in the beautiful hills surrounding Florence. The case had become the longest and most expensive criminal investigation in Italian history. Close to a hundred thousand men were investigated and more than a dozen arrested, many of whom had to be released when the Monster struck again. Scores of lives were ruined by rumor and false accusations. The generation of Florentines who came of age during the killings say that it changed the city and their lives. There have been suicides, exhumations, alleged poisonings, body parts sent by post, séances in graveyards, lawsuits, planting of false evidence, and vicious prosecutorial vendettas. The investigation has been like a malignancy, spreading backward in time and outward in space, metastasizing to different cities and swelling into new investigations, with new judges, police, and prosecutors, more suspects, more arrests, and many more lives ruined.

Despite the longest manhunt in modern Italian history, the Monster of Florence has never been found. When I arrived in Italy in the year 2000 the case was still unsolved, the Monster presumably still on the loose.

Spezi and I became fast friends after that first meeting, and I soon shared his fascination with the case. In the spring of 2001, Spezi and I set out to find the truth and track down the real killer. This book is the story of that search and our eventual meeting with the man we believe may be the Monster of Florence.

Along the way, Spezi and I fell into the story. I was accused of being an accessory to murder, planting false evidence, perjury and obstruction of justice, and threatened with arrest if I ever set foot on Italian soil again. Spezi fared worse: he was accused of being the Monster of Florence himself.

This is the story that Spezi told.