

GUIDO SENTINI ENTERED the downstairs drawing room. His mother glanced up and smiled. "That was very nice, taking up your father's breakfast."

"Ernesto did much of the serving. He knows how Papa likes it. I'm sure he thinks I must want something." The young playboy laughed. It was true, he did want something from his father. But he knew it would take more than a few breakfasts to make the stern judge part with the 60 million lire young Guido needed to pay off his debts.

The usual Vivaldi concerto poured down the stairs from the judge's second-floor office. "He's working," Yolanda Sentini sighed. Every day was like this, taking care of the estate and the servants while her husband, almost a stranger to her, was either off in the law courts of Naples or here at home, playing the same morning music and reviewing upcoming cases in his office. It was like being a widow, only without the freedom.

Down in the garden, Ernesto and the doctor both heard the Vivaldi. Reflexively, they looked up at Judge Sentini's curtained window and saw his seated silhouette at the desk. "A man of habits is easier to protect," Ernesto mumbled. He was the judge's bodyguard although he often felt like a maid. The government had hired him right after Judge Sentini sent a Mafia don to jail and received his first barrage of death threats.

Ernesto didn't consider his job a difficult one. They were in the Gulf of Naples, on an island with only a few private homes and no town to speak of. Unlike some of Ernesto's previous clients, the jurist followed his instructions to the letter. At night, Judge Sentini and his wife locked themselves into their suite with Ernesto's room right next door. On days when the judge worked at home, he locked himself into his office, as much for privacy as for safety. The alarm was always activated.

The gunshots came during a quiet stretch in the music—three bangs, one right after another, followed by a man's muffled cry of pain or alarm. Dr. Sentini, the judge's brother, glanced from the window to Ernesto, who was already running across the garden, through the hedge maze and toward the house.

It was less than 30 seconds later that Guido Sentini popped his head out of a second-story window. "The office door's locked," he shouted. Ernesto stopped running and was now fumbling for his own key. Guido saw this and shook his head. "No good. Papa left his key in the keyhole. We can't unlock it."

Ernesto's next actions seemed almost automatic. The gardener had left a pruning ladder up against a cherry tree. Ernesto grabbed it, flung it against the house and began to climb. When he reached the terrace window, the guard took out his semiautomatic and used the butt end to smash the glass. The sound of a siren screeched through the estate as he reached inside to find the latch and let himself in.

The alarm was still screaming when Ernesto unlocked the office door. Yolanda, Guido, and Dr. Sentini were waiting on the threshold. "He's dead," the terrified guard announced in disbelief.

Yolanda looked past him and saw her husband. The judge was face up on the carpet, three circles of blood emblazoned on his chest. Guido turned his mother away from the sight as Dr. Sentini rushed into the office.

"There's no one in the room," Ernesto stammered. "And no gun."

"Dead," the doctor confirmed as he knelt over his brother's body. "Guido, get your mother out of here. Ernesto, turn off that blasted alarm and call the police."

Guido and Ernesto did as they were told, returning to the office as soon as they could. The soothing strains of Vivaldi still filled the air. "Don't touch anything," Dr. Sentini said. "I have no idea how any assassin could get in, but we're locking this room until the police arrive."

They all watched as Ernesto turned the key and took up his post in front of the crime-scene door. He was still there a half-hour later when the Naples police docked at the jetty and raced up to the house, only to be faced with an impossible crime: a locked-room mystery that was to strike fear into the heart of every judge in Italy.