



CASALVENTO

House of the Wind

A NOVEL

GUDRUN CUIILLO

CASALVENTO

G U D R U N C U I L L O

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First Edition

PRELUDE

Sometimes the angels lay the pathway on where to go

And it can lead to something high.

They bring with them “fate.”

You can feel the angels—they come together.

They come to you and both of you start to shine.

And both of you start to swing,

First with the look that bonds you,

Then with the closeness of the body, the mind, and the soul.

You can feel the beat of the heart.

You can feel the heat that brings the body to life.

You start to swing.

You can hear the strings playing softly

On the instrument.

“The song of unity and love”—

The song lingering in the air.

Part ONE

I

ERIKA GERMOGLIO LIKED TO think of herself as a self-made woman, and anyone would be hard-pressed to disagree. Business was what she did best. She was proud of what she'd become—a high-powered professional specializing in turning distressed companies around, climbing the upper echelons of New York's social scene with her equally successful fiancé, Craig Bernhardt, a well-known real estate lawyer. Erika shared a high-rise condo on the Upper East Side with him. The breathtaking 180-degree view of the city didn't disappoint. Newly redone by Erika's old friend Todd, a sought-after designer, the condo showed off Craig's art collection and reflected their lifestyle—streamlined and elegant, a bit chilly. Exactly what she'd pictured years ago when they'd joined forces as a couple. Their home was a place to entertain and show off to friends, a setting that proved her life was very much on track.

These were the pleasant thoughts running through her head—she'd just woken up—on the morning after her thirtieth birthday. As she stretched in bed, she recounted the celebration dinner the night before. What had happened still came as a surprise, despite its inevitability.

"Honey, we've been engaged for a few years," Craig had told her. "I'm going on thirty-five, and you just turned thirty. I think we should set the date for this September."

"What?" His words had caught her off guard. "Are you really serious?"

"Yes," he replied. "I mean, yes, yes—let's do it." He leaned over, caressed her cheek, and handed her a glass of champagne.

"Here's to us," he said, smiling. "But drink carefully!"

Erika looked at the ring glistening in the bottom of the flute—the pale amber liquid magnifying the already large diamond. She stared in awe at it.

“I know you already have a ring,” Craig went on, “but not the one you deserve. Five years ago I didn’t have the money I have now. Our lives and income have changed. We need to change with it. Happy birthday!”

“I know you and my mom will make the perfect wedding happen,” he went on.

Craig smiled, and Erika considered for a moment his mother’s knack for having things just the way she wanted them. He took after her in that way. “Just make her feel important,” he added.

Erika slipped the ring onto her finger. “I love you,” she said. “So much.”



On Monday, Erika hurried to her office, coffee in her right hand, briefcase in her left. She’d dressed carefully, and for effect, as always. The black pencil skirt showed off her lean figure and long legs; her wavy auburn hair was loose and reached to her shoulders. She couldn’t wait to break the news to her staff.

Molly, her assistant, would be pleased, but Erika wasn’t so sure about Tiffany. The young woman was a good businesswoman—competent and attractive, with pampered, long blond hair. Tiffany always dressed well, her high heels accentuating her six-foot height. Erika relied on her to deal with clients. But there was something puzzling about Tiffany’s personality. And her recent breakup with a boyfriend just added to the mystery.

“Good morning, Erika,” Molly called out from behind her desk. “Tiffany’s already in her office . . . and you look extremely happy for a Monday morning.”

“I am! Craig finally asked me to set a date.”

“That’s great, Erika,” Molly added, laughing. “It was about time, if I may say so. You two have been together forever.”

The conversation drew Tiffany out of her office. “What’s that I hear?” she said with a hint of surprise. “When will this wedding be? And where?”

“September second, in the Hamptons. At Craig’s family’s golf club.”

“Fancy, fancy!” Tiffany said. “I guess all Hamptons society will be there.”

Moments later, after numerous questions about what she had planned for her gown, the music, catering, and things of that nature—none of which she had answers for yet—Erika was back at her desk scrolling through emails when Molly buzzed her to say she had to sign for a registered letter from Florence, Italy.

“You know I hate being disturbed,” Erika said, more to herself than Molly, who of course knew that. *What could possibly be that important from Italy?* she wondered as she signed for the letter and pushed it into her designer bag to look at later.



She remembered the letter when she met Craig for a drink and dinner after work. Even with their beautifully renovated kitchen, they rarely ate in and never cooked. It made her feel a tad guilty, but why bother, when they were surrounded by amazing restaurants with chefs competing with each other to turn out gourmet dishes from all over the world.

While they waited for their food, she opened the envelope and started to read. “This has to be a joke,” she said. But no, the letter was real and seemed authentic, though the news it contained was barely believable—a relative of hers had passed away. As his only heir, Erika was to inherit his vineyard in Tuscany. She was to contact the lawyer Bernardo Morselli as soon as possible to set up a meeting in Florence.

“Since when do you have relatives in Italy?” Craig asked.

“It’s news to me,” she said. “I know my grandfather was Italian and my grandmother’s family was from Italy, but she was born in the Bronx. And no one ever spoke about them. No one wanted to talk about it.”

“Do you know why not?”

“A long time ago,” Erika answered, “I found out that apparently my father’s father immigrated from Italy in the early 1950s. He met my dad’s mother in New York, and they got married. My father was born a year later. He was maybe one or two when his father left them. His mother—my grandmother—remarried, and no one ever mentioned her first husband after that. Years later, my father found out that the man his mother was married to was not his biological father. After that, my father and

his mother never had a close relationship. She never even came to his wedding.

“And now there’s no one to ask,” she said. “With both my parents dead.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know . . . call the lawyer tomorrow, I guess.”

After dinner, when they returned to their apartment, she went to the windows to admire the view. She loved having New York spread out in front of her. She could watch the pedestrians below and follow the lights of traffic that never seemed to slow down. This was her life. Sure, she enjoyed a good glass of wine in the evening, but what could she possibly do with a vineyard in Tuscany?

II

*W*ITH A SIX-HOUR TIME DIFFERENCE, Erika didn't wait long the next morning to call Italy. She was used to dealing with sticky or complicated situations in her line of work. Why put it off? Surely one phone call could take care of everything.

But she was surprised to hear the lawyer speak perfect English and even more surprised by his insistent tone as he quickly explained that she had inherited a small vineyard in the heart of Tuscany in the Chianti Classico region near Radda in Chianti. He did not go into details. Those would come when they met in person in his office.

"You can get a flight out tomorrow evening, Wednesday," Bernardo said, "and arrive in Florence or Rome on Thursday. Just let me know the airport and flight number, and I'll arrange for someone to pick you up."

"But that's impossible. I'm getting married in a few months," Erika explained. "I'm busy planning my wedding. Why can't we do this over the phone, or in a teleconference with you, me, and my U.S. attorney here in my office? I have no interest in owning and operating a vineyard. In any case, I'm sure I'll want to sell it."

"Signorina Germoglio," said Bernardo, "that is not how Italy works. I'll expect you on Thursday. Let me know where and when you'll arrive." He hung up.

"Who does he think he is?" Erika grumbled to Molly over lunch, not at all pleased at being ordered around. "I just need to get through today's meetings and see what Craig has to say about it tonight. I can't imagine he'll be happy about my little trip to Italy. Why couldn't I have inherited a winery in Napa? That I would love, but Tuscany? No way."

That evening, Erika met Craig for dinner at one of their usual restaurants. They talked about their work, the house he wanted to buy in the Hamptons, plans for the wedding. When she could put it off no longer, Erika told him about her talk with Bernardo.

“Honey, there is no way for me *not* to go.” It was what she had finally decided was best. “The sooner I leave, the better. I’ll have it all handled, give the property to a real estate agent, and come back home.”

Craig frowned. “I don’t like you going alone. But there’s just no way I can take off right now.”

“Look at it this way,” she went on. “We could use the money from a sale to have an even grander home in the Hamptons.”

He looked at her sideways and gave in. “When do you have to leave?”

“Tomorrow, late afternoon. I have to be in Florence by Thursday.”

“Okay,” Craig said, “but I’d really like you home by next week. We have so much to do.”

That evening, Erika booked a flight for the next day, leaving JFK in the afternoon, changing planes in Frankfurt, and going straight into Florence. It seemed silly for someone to go all the way to Rome to pick her up.

But it was all so sudden. She couldn’t quite believe it. She slept restlessly, getting up in the middle of the night to look for her passport, tossing in bed as she debated what to take, and suddenly beginning to get excited. Not just for the travel or the twist of fate that was the inheritance, but because, for the first time in a long time, she was doing something on her own.

Without Craig.

They had been together for years, since college, building their careers, getting ahead, not exactly planning the future, marriage, or kids, but still leaving it implied. Well, the ball had started rolling, and all that would come eventually, she guessed, as she finally fell asleep.

Erika awoke to the smell of fresh coffee.

“I’m a lucky woman to have you,” she told Craig.

“No, Erika. I’m the lucky one. When do you leave today?”

“The flight boards at five.”

“Let me get a car to drive you to the airport,” Craig offered, “and I’ll tell my secretary to call the phone company. You’ll need a plan for cell service in Europe.”

“Now, I have to go,” he continued. “I’ve got early meetings. Have a safe trip and call me as soon as you land in Florence.”

After they’d kissed goodbye and the door closed, Erika finished her coffee and looked at her closet. *How do you dress in Italy? she wondered. A little of everything, I guess.*

A couple of hours later, her Vuitton luggage was packed, her laptop was in its case, and her Chanel coat was thrown over her shoulders. As she got into the waiting cab, Erika assessed the luggage sitting on the curb. She was leaving for only four days, maybe a week tops, and it looked as if she was moving out. But she was going to a place she’d never been and didn’t exactly know what to take.

From the car, she texted Bernardo her arrival information and went through her mental checklist: *Molly should be able to handle everything while I’m gone, and Tiffany can help. My mobile number is the same, and my computer is with me. The internet should be available, even in the hills of Tuscany.* All she needed to do was check in, get on the plane, go to sleep, and wake up in Europe.



On Thursday, by midmorning, Erika had landed in Florence more than a little exhausted. After collecting her bags and going through customs, she looked around for whoever the lawyer had arranged to pick her up. No one seemed to be waiting for her, though she’d told Bernardo exactly when she would arrive and even sent a photo so her driver would recognize her. And where were the porters? What kind of a country was this?

Grumpy and tired, she found a trolley, piled on her bags, and pulled it out of the departure hall. It seemed unusually hot for the beginning of May as she came through the sliding doors and searched for someone who could take her to Casalvento, the estate Bernardo had told her about.

In her designer coat and high heels, she was quite a contrast to the Italians, who were wearing jeans, casual shirts, and sneakers and paying little heed to the chaotic airport, where pedestrians were dashing in front of cars, creating a cacophony of horns and shouting.

She took off the coat and threw it over her luggage, causing the heavy

trolley to take off on its own. Just as she grabbed it, she saw a man holding a sign with her name on it and waved him over. He was dressed in blue jeans and a blue shirt and looked to be in his early fifties, very suntanned and not tall, with silver-gray hair and a little beard.

He walked over and held out his hand for her to shake. “*Ciao, Signora. Io sono Santo. Sono qui, e vengo per portarla a Casalvento.*”

With a big smile, he added, “*Andiamo,*” and pointed to a blue van.

Erika just nodded as she realized that this man—Santo—didn’t speak English. But the logo on the side of the van said Casalvento. He was definitely the right person. She followed him across the road, and, after he struggled to fit her suitcases into the back, he opened the passenger door for her.

As he started the car, Santo kept talking, trying to explain something in Italian. “I don’t understand,” Erika replied, but when he pointed to the air-conditioning dial, it dawned on her that he was telling her it was broken.

Oh, okay, not a problem. She rolled the window down to let some fresh air in and waited for a breeze. All she could think of, though, was how she would manage. She didn’t want to make a bad impression with the people who worked at the estate, but this was not going to be easy.

She asked how long the ride was, but Santo just kept talking in Italian, waving his hands in the air rather than keeping them on the steering wheel.

Then she had a thought. “Radio . . . music,” she said out loud. That needed no translation. Worn out as she was, she kept her eyes on the road as they drove out of the airport onto the highway toward Rome. But at the second exit, marked Siena, Santo got off the highway and began the trek up a series of narrow, uneven roads that didn’t seem wide enough for two cars. All she could think, as they followed the signs for San Donato, Castellina, and Radda in Chianti—twenty kilometers—was that she’d never be able to drive on these roads. *How many miles is twenty kilometers?* she wondered. Before she could remember the conversion, she realized that, in all the airport commotion, she’d forgotten to call Craig.

She reached into her bag to get the cell phone, turned it on, and waited.

Benvenuti in Italia, her phone announced as the signal activated and messages in Italian popped up one after another.

At least my phone understands Italian, Erika thought. She dialed Craig’s

number, but almost immediately reception faded. She gave up. *I'll try again when I get there*, she thought.

Looking up from her phone, she saw that the roads were becoming increasingly winding. The frequent sharp turns and the heat were beginning to make her carsick, so she distracted herself by looking at the distant countryside. The Italian music on the radio played softly in the background, helping to soothe her. She had to admit, the view was beautiful, the landscape of trees and vineyards painted in deep, vibrant greens, with flowering bushes covering the ground like a natural carpet and unfamiliar flowers blooming bright yellow.

This must be Chianti, Erika realized.

At that moment, the view opened to a magnificent panorama. Here, high in the hills, she could see castle-like villas dotting the landscape. There were towns, too, surrounded by gray-green olive groves and the dark twisted forms of old grapevines. The landscape was a kaleidoscope of green and browns, with distant mountains rising to an amazingly blue sky.

Erika couldn't help herself. "Stop!" she called out.

Santo, startled, replied, "*Si, si, si*," and pulled over to the side of the road.

Erika tapped the camera button on her phone and got out to take pictures. How else would Craig and her other friends in New York ever believe that she'd been in such an incredibly beautiful place?

A few minutes later, Santo drove them through a small town called Castellina, after which he took a sharp left and continued on. Here were buildings that seemed to be small hotels, interspersed with stone houses, some with barrels at the entrances with signs that read "*Vendita diretta*."

Are those wineries? Erika wondered. Maybe one could just stop and buy wine directly from the winemakers.

After another fifteen minutes, Santo turned right at a sign that proclaimed, "Radda 6 km."

We must be really close, Erika thought, beginning to feel the prickles of nervousness, unsure of what awaited her. One more curve, and Santo was pointing out something straight ahead and speaking quickly in Italian.

Erika could see a massive stone wall and entrance with an iron gate embellished with grapes and leaves. Just beyond she could make out the bronze statue of a woman holding a basket of grapes.

This must be it, she thought, but, no, Santo kept driving. He was staring straight ahead, concentrating on taking each curve.

Suddenly, he said, "*Eccola*," and turned into a gate that closely resembled the first one. Next to the entrance stood a barrel and the now-familiar sign, *Vendita diretta*.

He drove up a hill, past towering cypress trees that grew on both sides of the road.

This must be the house, she thought.

Santo honked the horn twice, parked the car, and again said, "*Eccola*," with a delighted smile.

Erika got out of the van and stood there, breathlessly taking in the incredible view. She felt as if her heart could stop at the beauty of it. Then she heard a voice behind her.

"*Bella vista*."

She turned around, and the voice said again, "*Bella vista*, is it not? That means 'beautiful view' in English."

A tall man with curly black hair and intense emerald eyes reached out his hand and, with a light Italian accent, said, "I'm Paolo de Alberi, the estate manager and winemaker for the late Signor Germoglio."

Erika just stood there, totally stunned, not only by the panorama but by the man who was standing in front of her.

Paolo was strikingly handsome, with a muscled body, a firm handshake, an oval face, and a smile that could melt any woman's heart. He did have rather strange taste in clothes, however, as evidenced by his checkered green-and-white shirt, khaki pants, and multicolored shoes.

But the thing that really took her breath away was the late owner's last name—Germoglio. It had been made clear to her that he had been a relative, and the last name indicated that he was on her father's side. But who was he? And why hadn't she heard of him—or from him—before now?

Erika was so surprised that she almost forgot to introduce herself.

"I'm Erika, Erika Germoglio. It's nice to meet you."

"*Benvenuta*. It's truly nice to have you here," Paolo replied. "We were all a little worried. Let me introduce you to everyone. Your grandfather . . ."

"My grandfather? This must be a mistake. This can't be my grandfather's place," Erika mumbled. But who would have chosen her to inherit

this estate except a relative? But a long-lost grandfather, that would have never crossed her mind. She suddenly wished her father could have seen this—chances were he would have been as surprised as she was.

III

PAOLO APPEARED SURPRISED by Erika's reaction, but he kept on talking. "Your grandfather was a truly amazing man. He took care of all of us like family. As you can see, here are the homes he had built for the staff, like the caretakers, Santo and Mirella." He pointed at a few small villas clustered together. They were stone-walled and surrounded by shrubs and small trees. The wine cellar appeared to be embedded into the mountain, as if part of the landscape and forest itself.

"You've already met Santo. Here is his wife, Mirella."

"*Benvenuta, Signora,*" said Mirella. A stocky woman with short-cropped brown hair, she wore pants and a shirt, and, with her staunch demeanor, it seemed clear who was in charge in that family. But a kind smile softened her masculine bearing.

"Mirella takes care of the wine cellar," added Paolo, "and this is her eldest son, Luca."

"*Benvenuta, Signora,*" the boy said shyly.

"And hiding behind Luca is Mirella's youngest, Robby," Paolo said, finishing up the introductions.

There was a big age difference between the two boys, Erika noticed, as her eyes teared up at the sound of the boy's name. "That's my dad's nickname," she said. "His name was Roberto, but everyone called him Robby."

"Yes, we know," Paolo said. "Signor Germoglio asked Mirella if she and Santo would name their son Roberto, and they had been with him so long they were honored to do that. But now, I'm sure you must be exhausted from the long trip, and hungry, too. Let's get you up to the house."

"This is not the house?" asked Erika, looking at the sizable stone building.

“No, this is the wine cellar. Your house is up the hill.”

This must be a huge property, Erika realized as Santo drove the van farther up the road and made a sharp turn through another gate adorned with grapes and lions’ heads. He came to a stop at some large, well-trimmed hedges.

In front of Erika was a beautiful rustic country farmhouse, all in gray stone with a portico supported by massive wooden beams. Terra-cotta pots of flowers flanked the entrance and graced the front of what seemed to be an enormous garage.

The smell of lavender and herbs was almost overpowering, and everything was green and lush. On one side of the house, Erika could see a vegetable garden as well as a patio with a table and chairs cushioned in yellow and white. On the left, a fountain and a few statues were set among English-style flower beds. A stone wall separated the house and its gardens from the vineyards, where a little dirt road lined with olive trees climbed up the next hill.

Erika stood there, speechless. Conflicting thoughts raced through her mind. She’d really had no expectations, no idea what this place would look like. Frankly, she hadn’t had time to even think about it. All she knew was that someone had left her something she didn’t want—especially now, with the wedding plans and her business. The timing could not have been worse. *But look at this place. It’s heaven! What am I going to do with it, or the people who live here? My grandfather created a little family for himself here.*

Erika’s mind was filled with questions. Why did her grandfather leave America? Why in the world did he leave his family, her father, behind? She needed to find out. She needed to know who she was. Someone had to know the truth. And how would she explain all this to Craig? How nice it would be to sit down and sip a glass of wine right now.

As if he’d read her mind, Paolo came out of the house with two glasses of wine in his hands.

What a handsome man he is, she thought, *a real Italian. He fits this place perfectly.*

“Ms. Erika.” Paolo handed her one of the glasses. “Can I call you that?”

“No, just call me Erika.”

He smiled. “Cheers, Erika! *Benvenuta in Casalvento.*”

“Cheers, Paolo,” she replied, taking a sip. “This is my granddad’s wine? I don’t know a lot about wine, but I do know what I like, and I certainly like this. What is it?”

“This is our Chianti Classico—a blend of eighty percent Sangiovese and twenty percent Cabernet. You know, you can’t just make Chianti Classico like this. The property has to have the rights to do so, and Casalvento has had the rights for generations, since the early seventeenth century. But there will be time to explain all that,” Paolo went on. “I don’t want to overwhelm you with it now. Do you want to get settled in?”

“Yes, that would be great.”

Paolo led her in through the door to the kitchen, which was rustic and spacious, big enough for people to cook together, but updated and efficient. The stove occupied the center of the room, with pots and pans hanging from a rack above. A tall Black woman was preparing a plate of *antipasti*.

“This is Doris,” Paolo said, introducing her to Erika. “She was cook, housekeeper, and all-around helper to your grandfather for many years. At the end, she was the one who cared for him. He was to turn eighty-nine in October.”

“Hello, Ms. Erika,” Doris said with a lilting accent and a friendly smile.

“You speak English,” Erika responded. “Thank goodness!”

“Yes, I was born in Nigeria,” Doris said, “and came to Rome some years back. Then I married an Italian who lived in Radda. That is how I ended up here.”

“Let me show you your bedroom,” Paolo broke in, leading the way upstairs. “The house has an interesting history. It’s a thousand years old and has been in the family for five generations. The stones for the building came from around the property. The walls are thick, to protect the owners and animals from the cold in the winter and from heat in the summer. In fact, in the old days, the first floor had no kitchen or living room. It was just for the animals, with stalls for the pigs, cows, and horses. The second floor held the kitchen and living quarters all together. Now there are two bedrooms with a living area in between, and when you look out the windows, you can see the vineyards. Here’s your bedroom,” Paolo added. “Santo brought your bags up. I’m sure you want to freshen up. The bathroom is there to your left. I’ll wait for you downstairs.”

Erika was only too happy to shed the clothes she'd traveled in. She took a shower, changed into some pants, and was about to go back downstairs when she remembered she had never called Craig.

She dialed his number, and he picked up right away.

"Darling," Craig said, "how was your trip? What does the vineyard look like?"

Erika started to describe Casalvento, but something stopped her from getting too excited over the details. *I don't want him to know how surprised I was*, she told herself. *I don't want to give him the wrong idea, and maybe I should leave out the grandfather part for now.*

Revived, Erika went downstairs and asked Paolo if he could show her more of the property.

"Sure," he replied. "We can take the little green tractor."

The John Deere was parked in the garage. Erika climbed in, Paolo started it up, and off they went, up the hill.

"The vineyards and the house are all fenced," he told her. "But the rest of the property isn't. It's too large."

"How large?" she asked.

"Seventy-nine hectares."

"How big is that in acres?" she said.

"Multiply by three. The property is self-contained. It has its own water wells, gas station, and generators. Here's the vegetable garden. And next to it are your truffle trees."

"Truffle trees?"

"Yes, your grandfather planted those trees some years ago, and now, every winter, someone comes with dogs to search for the truffles."

The next landmark was the chapel at the top of the hill. "The *cappella*," Paolo informed her, pointing at it.

"Everything is so well kept up," Erika said. "Who takes care of the grounds?"

"Mirella and Santo."

"Only them? That's amazing. In the States, we would need a small army."

Back at the house, Paolo parked the tractor near the garage and showed her the last surprise, a swimming pool tucked behind a row of hedges.

"I have to return to the cantina now," he said, "but if you need anything

else, ask Doris to call me. Have a good night's rest, and we'll speak tomorrow. It's good to have you here."

"Thank you, Paolo."

Erika went into the kitchen. When she saw the small plate of prosciutto, cheeses, olives, and fresh bread Doris had assembled, she realized she was ravenous. She sat down at the wooden table and drizzled the plate with a bit of aromatic olive oil.

"That's from Casalvento too," Doris said. She brought out a plate of pasta and poured Erika another glass of red wine.

"This is delicious," Erika said, thinking that she and Doris would get along well. Truthfully, she liked everyone she'd met so far. They had all been so kind and welcoming.

Doris interrupted her thoughts. "I'm about to leave, Ms. Erika. I'll come at nine a.m. Is there anything you need me to bring for you?"

"No, Doris, I can't think of anything."

"Good night then, Ms. Erika. I'll lock up downstairs and leave your house key at the table by the front door."

"Thank you, Doris."

Feeling the effects of her long day, Erika went upstairs and found the suitcase with her toiletries and moved them to the bathroom. *What a lovely, relaxing space this is*, she thought, admiring the tan tiles and the mirrors framed in the same dark wood as the cabinets. It was modern and elegant, but with a rustic feel—so different from the sterile apartment in New York.

With a curiosity that overcame her exhaustion, she started to explore. Outside the bedroom, a wooden staircase rose to a third-floor tower that had been converted into an office. Folders and paperwork were lying around the room. She couldn't wait to see the view from the windows in the daylight.

Returning to the second floor, Erika admired the sitting area between the bedrooms. It had a coffee maker, a television, a small table, and three armchairs. It would be a good place to relax and read a book.

The other bedroom had the same layout as hers, but, whereas her room was all appointed in warm pink, this one was in green. It was all so tastefully done. She wondered if there had been a Mrs. Germoglio living here at some point.

She went back down to the main floor. The living area was basically one long room, divided by large arches framed in brick. The white walls made a beautiful contrast. At one end was a cozy sitting area with an open fireplace. Paintings on the wall depicted views of Tuscany. At the far end, another sitting area had cabinets of dishes, glasses, and knickknacks. Persian rugs warmed the floors, and ceramic pots were filled with plants and flowers.

In the center of the long space was the dining room, with shelves built into the walls for books and glassware. In one corner, a bass guitar leaned against a keyboard. Erika wondered who played those instruments.

Someone had had exquisite taste. What was strange, though, was that there were no photographs around. Not a single one.

She went back to the kitchen, poured herself another glass of wine, and carried it upstairs to her bedroom. She opened the door to a balcony and walked out. The breeze carried a rich scent of cypress trees and earth. Yesterday, at this time, she was in New York, boarding a plane, and today she was in the heart of Tuscany, looking out over the vineyards she could just vaguely make out in the darkness. Even the sky looked different here. It was like a dream.

Tomorrow, she would meet the lawyer.