

PROLOGUE

In a room on the seventh floor of a Trieste hospital, Bruno Tommasi goes to the window, which, from the top of Colle di Cattinara, opens wide onto a dizzying void as far as the sea.

Thousands of years earlier, amid the shrubs and limestone on that hill, a fortress marked the birth of this future city under a warlike star. Trieste was a hub not only for soldiers but also trade and, during periods of shortage of both, a poor district at times inclined to piracy.

The old man looks at the gulf and no one can tell what he is thinking: every feeling is concealed by his wrinkles, far too deep to reveal any truth.

Despite his age, Tommasi is not an easy patient. He refuses sedatives: he'll shortly be able to sleep for all eternity, he grumbles, perfectly lucid, so let him stay awake these last few days. And how many days is that, he then asks insistently, driven by an urgency that annoys those who look after him and upsets the painfully established balance of deliberate indifference in others.

"I'm ninety-five years old," he repeats. "How can anyone believe that a few words can put the world to rights again? Don't go telling a man my age what to do with his conscience. I fought in the war, me. And not just any war but the worst war that's ever been," he adds while the male nurse who takes him back to bed pushes into the vein the line left hanging in the holder of the drip stand.

Outside the room, his grandson Mirko waves at him through the glass.

Surprised to see him at this time of morning, Bruno raises a weak arm and invites him to come in.

"Is your Aunt Anita here?" he asks with just one eye open.

"No, *Nonno*. You can tell me anything you like," he whispers. "It's just us."

Bruno does not pick up on Mirko's conspiratorial sarcasm but is glad his daughter has not arrived yet. Before he leaves this world nobody can put right again – let alone he, who can't even cleanse his conscience – Bruno asks his grandson to do something for him.

"Many years ago I had a friend. He was like a brother. He committed suicide in 1976. His name was Vasco Cekic and we were like brothers. Yes, I know, sometimes brothers can be like Cain and Abel, but not us. We were different. We had so many hopes, some came true, others never did. The only person who may know something about his death is Francesca Molin, even though she was still a child."

"Who's Francesca Molin?" Mirko asks, but Bruno has drifted into a thought of his own and seems to be speaking from another place.

"I've always made an effort to be righteous, to be on the side of the weakest, children first and foremost. But sometimes one can slip up. You're young, so you can't possibly know. I'm very old, I've tried to do good, but how can you avoid the odd slip-up, in so many years?"

Then he looks up at the ceiling as though trying to detect a mosquito. "Please, Mirko, find Francesca Molin. For the sake of everybody's peace of mind."

1.

On a rainy day in late November, Francesca crosses the road without noticing the car coming, busy as she is stubbornly trying to hold her own against the wind and the water with her umbrella. A red glow amid the drops falling thick and fast makes her intuitively take a step forward with one foot and arch her back. She senses the heat from the bonnet, the water splashing her raincoat and running cold down her trousers to her knees. She stands motionless in the street outside the hospital, following with her eyes the vehicle as it drives into the car park. The rain hammers on her neck, trickling down her blouse in icy rivulets that gather at her belt. She needs a moment to recover before walking into the building, clocking in and heading to the lift. Once the buttons for the relevant floors have been pushed, a tall young man, busy talking on his mobile, steps forward confidently and gestures at the occupants to keep the doors open for him. He enters without a thank you.

"Good morning, Dr Molin," he says to Francesca after hanging up.

She smiles at him and lets her hand slide carelessly down her soaked raincoat, as he follows her gesture meekly.

"Heavens, you're drenched," the young man says.

"A car," she explains, "didn't stop while I was walking on the pedestrian crossing."

A nurse grumbles that not stopping outside the hospital is criminal, "They should take his driving licence away."

"It was a red Clio." Francesca says nothing else but the young doctor turns pale just long enough to provoke a sarcastic grimace on the part of the nurse.

Once Francesca is in the staff room of the Obstetrics ward, she puts on the white coat and looks for a hairdryer for her wet trousers. The warm air from the device and the monotonous hum make her forget that she avoided being knocked down by a few centimetres.

That is when she receives a phone call from Anita Tommasi, a name that echoes with distant, unhappy connotations. After a few sighs and apologies for disturbing her at that time of morning, she tells her about her father, Bruno Tommasi, who died the day before. The visits schedule in one hand and the wet trousers in the other, Francesca replies abruptly that she doesn't understand, that she doesn't have time. Impervious to Francesca's tone, the woman persists. She says her father remembered her well and that her name was the last thing he uttered before he died.

Francesca doesn't let herself be affected by these details about the words of someone no longer in a position to corroborate this; she hasn't lived in Trieste for many years, she replies, so why should she know her father?

"But that's precisely what I'm asking you!" Anita exclaims. "He passed away with a request and I can assure you that my father never asked for anything. And it concerned precisely you, Dr Molin, the only person able to shed light on the death of one of his friends from when he was young, a certain Vasco Cekic. My father was ninety-five years old but he still had all his marbles."

Francesca sees the nurse signal to her that she is expected on the ward, so she answers quickly. There must be some mistake, and even if she ever did meet Anita's father Bruno or his friend Vasco, she can't remember either of them. She must go, she's at work and can't stay on the phone any longer.

Anita Tommasi has not finished.

"Did you know? – my father Bruno and your grandmother Alba were good friends. A friendship that dated back to Istria, even before he came to Trieste after the war. I was thinking of paying your grandmother a visit and asking her to tell me about him."

"And?" Francesca continues, without commenting on the connection between Anita's father and her grandmother Alba.

"Maybe your grandmother would be pleased if you were there, too, Dr Molin. And perhaps we'd discover how come my father mentioned your name when he spoke about this Vasco Cekic. Maybe he was confused towards the end, and meant to say Alba's name instead of yours."

There is no malice in Anita's tone as she corners her; no threatening or begging. She is merely informing her that she intends to respect her father's wishes to the very end, as he asked.

After hanging up, Francesca remains seated. The nurse sees her body leaning to the side, the visiting schedule on her knees.

"Is everything all right, Doctor?"

"Yes, thank you. I'm coming." She rouses herself and hands her the trousers, still damp.

"I'm sorry, I don't know where to put these."

"Give them to me. Would you like a hot drink? Tea?"

"No, really." She pushes against the table with her hands and slowly stands up.

While doing the rounds on the ward, she resumes her usual efficiency. She says hello to the forty-year-old woman still exhausted after the C-section the night before, holding tight

in her arms her baby girl, who is moving her lips as though she were suckling.

"Only just born and already hungry for life," Francesca remarks.

"Oh, Doctor, if it hadn't been for you – I don't know how to thank you!"

"She's the perfect weight and already has a full head of hair. Your belly gave her everything she needed."

"It's a shame she was turning the other way."

"It all went as well as it could have. You'll both be back home tomorrow."

After her rounds, Francesca seeks refuge in an empty office and collapses on a chair, thoughts running through her veins. She starts drawing thick doodles on a sheet of paper, black ink spirals wrapped around one another and converging on a distant spot at the end of the universe, where Francesca now wishes she could disappear.

Someone knocks at the door.

"Dr Molin, are you there? The consultant needs you."

"What, now?" she asks, covering the sheet of paper with her hands.

"You know that when all's said and done, you're the one who keeps this place in order," the nurse says with an informality that comes from many years of working together, but also as a reproach because the doctor did not apply to become a consultant. Even though she was the most qualified candidate, she pulled out.

"Okay, okay," Francesca replies. "Tell him I'll be there in ten minutes."

Left alone, she scrunches up the sheet of paper. She is owed at least twenty days' holiday so no one will object to her taking three or four now. She will have to miss a couple of yoga lessons, her life's mast, as she calls it. But she can't leave her grandmother alone with that

shrew. There's no knowing what memories she might rekindle in her. Alba is ninety-seven years old, and at that age every emotion is a gamble. She leaps to her feet. Nobody's going to touch Alba, the only person from whom she's had unconditional love and protection. She will take a couple of days and see how it goes. As long as they don't ask her for more than that. The names of Bruno and Vasco were enough to start a tingling in her feet that then rose and scratched at her stomach before quivering in her throat. And yet these two names obliged her to obey as though it were an order. She of all people, who gives the orders, as the manager, although second-in-command, of the Obstetrics ward.

It's just that sometimes, you get called on, Francesca tells herself, and you can't say no. She must pack her suitcase and get ready for the journey home.

2.

The train travels across the Lombardy then Veneto lowlands, through cities with ancient towers and domes with names that evoke Italy's charming past, then turns towards the south-east, where the landscape suddenly becomes dry. Karstic land, made of rocks and sallow grass, where signs of national culture grow more understated and blurred.

After tunnels and flashes of bushy green, a scrap of Adriatic appears through the window. The sun, still high up, is refracted on its surface *in a thousand darts* with a blinding light that conceals the coastline. Those *darts*, waiting in ambush whenever she looks at the gulf from that distance, are weak today. Dark, low, oppressive clouds are rising from the back of the sea, and gashes of pink appear in the sky behind them. It's the Leveche wind,

she thinks, watching the speed of nimbostratus clouds to see if there is going to be a storm at sea.

She closes her eyes. It's not right to go home at this time of year, it goes against habit. For the past thirty years, she has been returning there for ten days at Christmas and the month of July. But now Bruno is dead and his daughter has called her. They have never met but she will be able to face her just like any other stranger. She mustn't fear anything.

People are never afraid of one another but exercise domination.

Once Francesca gets off the train, she takes a taxi and gives her grandmother's address. The driver has seen her step severely towards him and is now glancing at her in the rearview mirror. A little invasive, but everybody knows taxi drivers are allowed a reasonable amount of indiscretion, and he tells her high water is expected in Piazza Unità tomorrow. The Leveche wind is growing stronger, the weather forecast promises a rough sea and gusts of seventy kilometres an hour. If you can trust the weather forecast, he adds hastily. She replies that she saw the clouds from the train window. He asks if she is from Trieste.

"I was from here," she says, "once upon a time. I'm one of the many who left for work."

"My son, too, you know? He lives in Rome now. I see him once every six months. I was hoping that when I retired I'd devote myself to my grandchildren. Instead, I'm going to sell my taxi licence and go fishing more often."

"Not in this kind of weather, I hope."

"Oh, but this is the best time for sea bream!"

Francesca realises too late that she is encouraging him to chat when she usually doesn't speak to strangers – and, actually, not much with acquaintances either. She is a woman who keeps her distance.

The taxi driver speaks an old dialect, only like her father did; she smiles in spite of herself. It's enough to get her interested in sea bream and bass.

Later, she gets ready to meet Anita in a café. She puts on a quilted jacket over her jeans and crewneck jumper and looks at herself in the mirror absent-mindedly. Her short, dark hair is now streaked with many threads of grey, but her pale-coloured eyes still light up her face like when she was young. She has never needed make-up and her indifference to her appearance often makes people feel uneasy; a woman who doesn't make an effort to be liked is suspect.

Not attracting attention is your best defence. Danger always walks beside us, even when we can't see it.

She promises Alba she will be back soon and leaves.

On the half-empty bus, Francesca wonders if she has been called in order to reconstruct Vasco Cekic's death or Bruno Tommasi's life. Except that she can't say anything about either, albeit for different reasons. Because of the few words of a dying old man she will be forced to turn back and look in a place she has managed, with difficulty, to put aside.

She gets off at Corso Italia and, a few minutes later, arrives at the café where Anita is

waiting for her, sitting at a table in a corner that provides appropriate privacy.

The both warm and austere atmosphere inside the café, with its wooden parquet, dark tables, floor-length curtains, softly treading waiters and subdued voices makes her dizzy: she has already taken one step into the past. Francesca recognises Anita straight away: she has Bruno's facial expression.

Anita stands up and walks towards her, proffering both hands, thanking her for coming. She says she cannot find peace, that she has been tormenting herself for days over the meaning of her father Bruno's words. At the end of the day, she is a daughter whose image of her father has been stripped of all certainty by his final breath, arousing, after all these years, the suspicion that he might have led a double life and that she, her mother and her brothers may have had only one of these two halves.

The waiter brings the coffee on a silver tray, puts the milk jug and little bowl of cream on the table, followed by the silver plates with the biscuits, the white and brown sugar, as well as the sweetener, and finally pours water from the pitcher into the two small glasses. His hands never stop moving between the tray and the table, like those of a master of ceremonies of a liturgy with knick-knacks and objects, created in order to prolong the moment of abandonment of the palate to the heat and density of the drink. And yet in this case it is not a matter of voluptuousness. They are both taking their time. Francesca clasps the cup and lifts it to her lips to warm up and allow the acidic, bitter aroma as far as the blockage she feels at the join of her nose.

Anita takes a breath then tells her about her father's only seemingly senseless talk, pretending she was there, too.

"He wasn't rambling at all, he was conscious, perhaps a little crabby, definitely, but why should he have had that attitude towards you, Francesca?"

"I'm sorry, Anita, I don't even remember meeting them. I was twelve years old in 1976."

Unbelievable arrogance. Do you really think I'm going to tell you the story of my life?

It is the first time Francesca has seen Anita, or so she thinks. But she associates her expressions with Bruno's and can tell from the way she purses her lips that she does not believe her. Naturally, she will have drawn her own conclusions and would no doubt have expected her not to remember two old gentlemen from over forty years ago, and perhaps taken into account that she will have erased potentially dramatic episodes. From her quick gesticulating, Francesca detects that Anita has above all drawn her conclusions about her anxiety, her need to know, and is ready not to be discouraged by any of her possible reactions, so she can get to the truth.

Anita takes three photos from her bag: one of her father Bruno, one of Vasco Cekic and one of their group of friends during the early 1950s, taken perhaps one New Year's Eve, judging by the streamers and balloons in the background. Meanwhile, she gives Francesca a sideways glance to register her every eye movement and tension in the jaw. Francesca takes care not to betray any emotion, but lingers a couple of seconds too long on those young, elegantly-dressed people smiling blissfully.

"You recognise your grandmother Alba, don't you?"

Francesca cannot deny it, nor wishes to. Her grandmother is so beautiful in this picture,

she must be about thirty-five and at that moment has a happy future ahead, a small reward for the grief and privations endured when she was younger. However, those were years when everybody was afflicted by suffering, with no time for weeping over it. And, afterwards, all you wanted to do was forget and go back to laughing, dancing, dreaming. But not everyone recovers from the war, some never leave the pain behind them, and all they can do is pretend, and just store it away. Sometimes, it can resurface and affect those who were not there yet, like an unwanted heirloom. Francesca smiles at the picture of her grandmother with her arms outstretched like a star of that era. Anita seizes this moment of tenderness and lunges in with her request.

"My dear," she says with unsolicited intimacy, "you see, Mirko, my nephew, would like to meet you. He was very attached to his grandfather and he would *love* to talk to you. May I give him your number?"

Francesca is taken aback.

Even now he's dead.

She thinks she has already given this woman more than her due; she came to Trieste to meet her but has no intention of being quizzed by her nephew or taking part in a search in which the booty is her recollections, the ones she has spent a lifetime trying to bury under a work routine so as not to leave any room for cannibalistic shadows. Every now and then, tiny fragments appear, like needles, but they are brief, swift, and have neither the time nor the strength to drag along distant sagas that are not hers. While Francesca hesitates between

giving her one of her abrupt replies or leaving without saying anything else, Anita pushes further and goes for broke, like in a game of poker, Francesca thinks, her only consolation being that she owes her nothing.

"Mirko is my sister Clara's son. May she rest in peace. She was so young and beautiful when she died. My nephew is a decent man, a history teacher."

Anita takes the time to drink a sip of water. Francesca waits impatiently.

"You do understand, don't you? – It's a family matter and my father asked for justice to be done for him and his friend. Are you willing to help me? I beg you."

Francesca puts a brown sugar cube in her coffee and stares at it while it dissolves and settles at the bottom of the cup. If you don't stir the sugar, it doesn't resurface.

Anita rolls up the edge of her sleeve impatiently.

"Otherwise, I'll be forced to get in touch with research groups on the Internet, launch an appeal through the Trieste local paper, just so I can reconstruct what happened that day. And everybody would find out about you, Francesca. And you seem like such a private person, I don't suppose you would like that, would you?"

Francesca keeps her eyes on the silver plate with the biscuits and cannot believe she is faced with actual blackmail, on Anita's part on top of everything else, after she has felt sorry for her, Bruno's daughter.

As if he hadn't been enough.

"Anita, can you hear yourself? You've just given me no alternative. You want to know

things from me by hook or by crook. As one final favour to you I will see your nephew. I'm going back to Milan in a couple of days. From next week you can find me at work, but then you'll need a warrant, since you like bullying people."

Anita stands up, begs her to understand, inflates her little eyes, now full of tears, and these trickle down the deep crow's feet. Francesca turns around, afraid of chance witnesses to this handkerchief-and-sob melodrama. She wonders how come, at her age, Anita still doesn't realise that families are places of grief where it is best not to enter. She feels powerless before this woman, so naive she never sensed her own father's torment. Seeing her in this state, she feels reassured despite her doggedness in dragging her into this situation. Anita is not made of the same substance as Bruno, she thinks, and, strengthened by this certainty, actually feels ready to help her. She touches her shoulder, reiterates that she will see her nephew Mirko the following morning, and in the end they are reconciled.

Francesca needs to breathe, even if it is the annoying, damp and heavy Leveche wind. She reaches Piazza Unità, which prior to 1918 was simply called Piazza Grande, and lived up to its name not only because of its size. That was where the Österreichischer Lloyd offices were, the symbol of the 19th-century city, that of an international harbour, of trade routes, of ships bound for every continent; the "Imperial Free City" – opulent, thriving, multinational. The building is still there and is now the region's administrative headquarters. She pulls her beret down over her ears and crosses the square briskly, but two tourists ask her about an exhibition in the former fish market. She stops hesitantly, still unused to thinking of Trieste as a tourist destination. She raises an arm towards a brick building by the water. The tourists look where she is pointing.

"You mean the church with the bell tower?"

Francesca cannot stifle a laugh.

"You're right. After all even the *triestini* used to call it Santa Maria del *guato*, but it's not called that anymore."

"*Guato*?" one of the tourists echoes.

"It's the dialect word for the goby, a small fish you fry in a pan. Once upon a time people ate it every day, like bread. If you want to try a local dish, ask for it in a restaurant."

The tourists thank her and as they walk away Francesca hears them remark that *triestini* must have a religious rapport with fish. She, however, is in a good mood again.

There should be more tourists who ask questions. Maybe there would be fewer secrets.