

THE COURSE OF THE BROOCH

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Spring always returns
every year, and every spring takes away
a little of our wickedness
or of the wickedness we have witnessed.

Mario Rigoni Stern

Prologue

He had slipped it into her hands just before she climbed the two iron steps. A small, cold weight between her sweaty palms. She had been unable to resist looking at it for even a moment. She had never owned anything precious before.

Her eyes welled up with tears, which she held back; she was not allowed to give in to the emotion of that farewell.

She slipped her hand into the pocket of her skirt, which was stained with mud kicked up by the cart's wheels all the way to the city. She, too, was searching for what she had to hand over to him.

It was at that moment that she saw her. She was hiding behind the pillar of the shelter on platform one. Behind her, the shrubs, parched by the air as the trains passed, peeped out. Short and rough-hewn in her black dress, the fringed shawl wrapped round her head. She had emerged from her hiding place with the confidence of someone who uncovers the truth in a single gesture. The people standing on the platform seemed oblivious to her, to what was happening, so that for a moment Maria wondered if it was just a vision, a trick of her imagination, of fear or pain.

But that woman's eyes could only be real. She felt that gaze strike a part of her stomach she had never known she had.

Her hand froze in her pocket. The other continued to clench that unexpected gift she had just received. She wrapped it in the skin, flesh and bones of her fingers clenched around her palm, in the hope of hiding it.

For the first time, at that moment on that day in 1895 – a year which, until a few weeks earlier, had been a fairly gentle one, all things considered – in that station, with people walking and lingering by the platforms, waiting, departing or arriving, for the first time her breath clashed with her soul, and fragility began to vibrate in every empty and full space within her.

The old woman stood still, at a distance. Her arms hung by her sides. She opened and closed her lips, thickened by life. No sound of a voice came forth.

Maria read in those silent words something that had to do with a formula recited from memory, a bad prayer made up of final consonants. An ancient language. Unknown.

When the lips fell silent, with a sharp movement the old woman pulled a slender, snapped hazel twig from a cloth pouch; she flung it towards her, bringing her arm to her chest seven times. And she walked away.

The twig landed silently on the platform. No one saw it.

An icy gust ruffled the chestnut locks that had slipped from Maria's plait during the journey to the station, and a shiver ran through her body in a wave that stiffened every muscle and froze every thought.

She only realised the train was moving when he called out to her from the lowered window. He hadn't noticed a thing. Never had her name, spoken in his voice, sounded sweeter and emptier at the same time. She saw the young man's hand wave, and the word 'goodbye' remained in her mouth, never to be spoken.

Alone on the platform. He was gone for ever. Life seemed to her like a faded trail behind her and nothingness ahead. Everything would fall apart. She was certain of it.

The people at the station were moving bodies. Just moving bodies.

She opened the hand that had remained in her pocket, letting its contents slip into the fold of the fabric where they had always been. She hadn't managed to give him what she was supposed to. It was the old woman's fault. Her eyes. The cold darkness she felt rolling through her veins.

She opened her other hand. She looked again at the gift she had received and realised it was stained. Her blood had never seemed so red to her.

Chapter 1

Two days had passed since she'd found out, since the evening when her mother seemed in no hurry to prepare dinner. She was chopping the tomato to add to the salad with the calmness of someone who wanted to prolong every movement.

Lucia listened to the slow, rhythmic sound of the knife on the chopping board whilst she stood with her back to her.

She'd noticed it straight away. Something was in the air. And it wasn't the inviting scent of ready-made cordon bleu.

She finished the last exercise, and closed her arithmetic book.

"Done! I'll clear my things off the table and set the table."

It was at that precise moment, after the word 'set the table', that the woman had placed the knife and the dripping quarter of tomato on the kitchen worktop. She had dried her hands on her apron and sat down opposite her.

"Lucia, I need to tell you something." That's how she'd begun.

Lucia had learnt that adults often, before talking about something important, enter a long pause where their movements and the silences between words stretch out. Perhaps to gather their thoughts, or simply to buy time. She wasn't sure which.

Her mother did that. She slowed down. She'd seen it for herself that evening, the evening she'd learnt that the family would be moving in a little while (that's exactly what she'd said, "a little while") to what had been her great-grandmother's house, on the opposite outskirts of the city. "The family home," her mother had specified.

"Do you remember? The house I told you about when that registered letter arrived from the council's environmental department."

Lucia had no memory of that registered letter, or of the conversation, nor did she know that her mother had owned a house of her own practically all her life.

It didn't make sense.

This whole thing, this house, the idea of moving – it didn't make sense.

And then: fifteen years. She was fifteen and had never known anything about that property on the outskirts.

And who was this great-grandmother that nobody had ever told her about?

The tips of her fingers and her lips had gone numb. It always happened when she couldn't quite put her emotions into words, and that evening too, for a few minutes, the tips of her fingers had lost some sensation and her lips felt as though they were being pricked by tiny needles.

She had stepped into a bank of damp, cold mist. It was all in there, down there. The disbelief at what was happening, the anger, the curiosity. Everything was inside a surreal mist, along with her.

She simply listened.

She listened to her mother's desire to live in the countryside, in a quiet house without washing machines spinning at night upstairs and the screech of bus brakes at the stop on the street. She realised she didn't know her mother well enough.

She listened to the news about her father – the fact that he'd got a pay rise thanks to that batch of aluminium profiles he'd managed to secure for the company at an excellent price. They would be able to cover the costs of a major renovation.

She listened to the scant details about the inherited house, and how a reminder from the council's environmental department to make the adjoining green space safe had sparked in her mother a desire to return to her roots, which until then had clearly remained buried underground alongside all the unknown ancestors of that family.

Lucia had listened, she hadn't understood, and she had voiced her firm refusal, which had counted for little.

And her father? He had come home later than usual and brushed the whole thing off with, "It's just on the other side of town."

Sure. The other side. Ever since that evening, everyone seemed to be on the other side. Lucia didn't know where exactly, but certainly not on her side.

That was what had happened.

The car she was now sitting in, behind her father, drove down the broad avenue that led from their home to the school and then to the town square. It kept going. Past the supermarket. Past the shops. Past the gas station. Past the cemetery. It turned beyond the park and slipped into a narrow street in a residential neighbourhood that seemed frozen in

the 1950s, lined with boxy houses, palm trees in the gardens, and neatly trimmed boxwood hedges.

In fifteen years, Lucia had never once been there. Those little streets were simply not places you happened upon.

She glanced out the window, then back inside the car. The three-quarter profile of her mother irritated her. There was an impatient excitement on her face, an expression Lucia had seen only a handful of times before. In that woman she could suddenly glimpse the little girl she must once have been, a child barely able to contain her excitement. As though everyone in the car should naturally be thrilled about the change she was about to impose on them.

When the brand-new Fiat Bravo they had collected from the dealership only a week earlier pulled up beside the curb, Lucia was still thinking how exhausting it must have been to deal with that spoiled little girl who always managed to get exactly what she wanted. She had grown up that way. Her mother always knew how to get her way, and her father, the kind of husband who preferred a quiet life, was giving in to her once again over the house. Perhaps that brand-new car had been the sweetener she had agreed to, only so she could later make a far more demanding request. That was what Lucia thought.

"Marta, did you bring the keys?" Sandro asked, pulling up the handbrake.

With a broad smile, Marta jingled the bunch of keys in front of his face.

"Right here."

Those keys had been in their house all along. Lucia had seen her mother take them out by lifting the hem of one of the sofa cushions. How many times had she sat on that cushion? How many times had she stretched out on it to relax, to nap, to watch television, never suspecting that hidden beneath her lay the very thing that had now become the source of her unhappiness? And why, why keep the keys to a house hidden away?

The thought that this old set of inherited keys had been kept in the house for years without her ever knowing only deepened Lucia's resentment.

Her mother had been remarkably good at keeping the secret. Not a single word for years after Grandma's death. And now, all at once, there was a house, a set of keys, and this irresistible longing for a life in the countryside. Her mother, who had always seemed inseparable from that apartment and its endless household chores, forever carrying the vacuum cleaner or finding yet another excuse to tidy a room, as though those walls contained her entire world.

Everything that had happened over the past few days lay beyond Lucia's ability to make sense of it. Her mother included.

From the moment that evening began – the evening she would always remember – after she'd finished her arithmetic homework and her mother had said, "I need to tell you something," everything and everyone seemed to exist somewhere beyond her reach, in a place she couldn't quite define. And that something had turned out to be everything all at once. Nothing she had once known seemed recognizable anymore. It was as though everything that had belonged to her life had somehow slipped outside it. And she, too, had been cast outside, along with everything else.

She slammed the car door behind her, leaving the smell of the new Alcantara interior behind – a smell that had given her a faint wave of nausea, though perhaps it was her thoughts, not the upholstery, that had made her feel sick – and walked over to where her parents were already standing in front of the property.

"So where exactly is this house?" Lucia asked, her voice edged with sarcasm.

Marta turned to look at her daughter but said nothing. She merely bit her lower lip, leaving faint traces of lipstick on her teeth.

Lucia wasn't wrong, she thought. Where was the house?

Even Sandro's expression betrayed his bewilderment and growing unease at what lay before them.

Lucia's first impression was of a vast rectangle of woodland. It looked less like a garden than a piece of land deliberately abandoned, as if to demonstrate nature's inevitable triumph over everything humans built. She pictured her class on a school field trip: an experimental lesson on the meaning of chaos.

All this on a side street, in a side neighbourhood, on the outskirts of the outskirts of the city.

Anyone passing by would have assumed it was an empty lot – perhaps zoned for construction, but never built on. Certainly abandoned.

Grass, weeds, and every kind of wild vegetation imaginable covered the entire plot, rising well over a metre high. Trees entwined with purple wisteria and yellowing honeysuckle cast cool shadows across the brambles. The house had to be somewhere farther in, near the back of the property, or at least well away from the fence that bordered the narrow

road. Through the tangle of climbing plants, Lucia could just make out the grey corner of a low, gently sloping roof. It looked like a single-storey house.

She wondered how the neighbours could possibly have tolerated such neglect without reporting it, or at the very least complaining about it. Rats. Grass snakes. Stray cats... A shiver ran down her arms at the thought of everything that might be crawling, scurrying, living, slithering beneath that dense tangle of growth.

Within moments her eyes began to water. She slipped a hand into her pocket, pulled out a handkerchief, and blew her nose, already running with thin mucus. Even her grass-pollen allergy, which had seemed to give her a reprieve that spring, had flared up again. No. She didn't like this place at all.

"Leave it, Marta. There's no way that gate is opening."

Sandro watched his wife struggle with the gate lock. The only part of the gate still visible was the rusted keyhole.

The wrought-iron railing had disappeared beneath the twisted body of an ivy vine that, like a boa constrictor, had wrapped itself around the vertical bars so tightly that their presence was betrayed only by the sharp spearheads protruding above the foliage.

Lucia felt her throat tighten, as though the climber itself were about to strangle her with the force of the sap pulsing beneath its rough, bark-like skin. Instinctively, she tilted her head back and drew a deep breath. Despite the rust, the pointed finials at the top of the fence caught the sunlight. They looked like giant hatpins, long and razor-sharp.

"Forget the keys. We'll need a chainsaw and a brush hook to get in here. Assuming we get in at all," she said, leaning against the car.

"That's enough, Lucia!" her mother snapped, with the irritation of someone whose long-awaited surprise had just been ruined.

"I think she may have a point," her father said gently, slipping into the calm tone he always used to keep the peace. "I don't see any other option, Marta. We'll have to call a landscaping company. Nothing's happening today."

Marta shot him a withering look. There had to be some way inside.

She suggested climbing over the fence by using the ivy as a ladder.

"Of course," Lucia laughed. "And then we can hack our way through the nettles and those lovely seed heads with our bare hands, trying not to get bitten by the adorable little mice waiting to welcome us." She was interrupted by a violent sneeze and had to blow her nose yet again.

"Marta, we're talking about a few days at most. I'll call Andrea tonight. You remember him? The one who pruned the plane trees in the park after the windstorm last year. Maybe he can come over with his crew."

While her parents continued arguing, Lucia noticed an elderly woman approaching from the far end of the street. Bent with age, she was struggling to carry what looked like a heavy shopping bag. The moment the woman saw them, she stopped. She set the bag down as if to catch her breath. After a few seconds she picked it up again with her other hand and resumed walking slowly, keeping to the opposite side of the road. As she drew level with them, she lowered her eyes and, with her free hand, quietly made the sign of the cross before continuing on her way.

'Well, that's reassuring. Lovely neighbourhood,' Lucia thought, letting out a long sigh. What a dream it would be to live here. She looked at her mother, who, with an expression caught somewhere between bitterness and resignation, dropped the keys back into her handbag.

"Come on," Marta said, motioning for Lucia to move away from the car door she had been leaning against.