

An adventure to remember

"GOOD MORNING BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE!" a joyful melodious greeting spread outside in the morning air.

Luke had already woken up to the sound of his alarm clock but he was still pretending to sleep. Since *she* had arrived, now he had to get up. He washed his face "making a lake on the floor": no harm done, his dad would have found it out only when he left. He went downstairs: Giulia had already burst in the house.

Luke's family was like a second family to her.

"Good morning, Giulia" answered Luke's dad.

Mr Beltrame was always more energetic in the morning than his son.

"Luke, quick I need to go to school early today."

"Okay, but please lower down your voice. I just woke up," he replied grumpily.

"Fine, just be quick, PLEASE!!" she had *someone* on her mind she absolutely wanted to see that morning. Luke couldn't put up with all this joy and mirth at 7.30 am.

They took their bikes and darted to school together. In a way they were really similar: going to school made them very bored.

They were in the courtyard, waiting for the bell to ring when Giulia saw *him*.

Tommaso was talking with his friends. His black hair was flowing through the air and his smile warmed her heart. Then, he entered the school and walked right next to her: Giulia felt as if she was going to die from love. She was daydreaming about him when she accidentally dropped her history book. She turned around as red as a pepper.

"Let me help you, here's your book." That melodious voice couldn't belong to him!

"Thank you!" answered the girl. She finally looked at him: it was Tommaso, the one and only love of her life! Her heart was racing and her cheeks blushed hopelessly.

Although he had always overlooked her, she felt as if she was going to faint from happiness: her world stopped and had immediately become amazing!

"I've decided: I will never touch this book again; I will put it in a shrine and it will be my relic."

"Why don't you put your hand in a shrine too? After all, it touched the *holy book*" chuckled Luke.

"I don't care about your silly jokes," replied Giulia, smiling.

That day, while Luke was sad and with no energy, Giulia was still carrying in her heart a bit of magic caused by that extraordinary unpredictable event.

There was an advantage about being in love: the boredom and harshness of school life didn't have to be hindered with creative distractions. Love was enough to make everything different. First period was Art.

"Good morning kids" Mrs Baggio was the only teacher whose joyful tone was easily recognisable among the dull, monotonous voices of their teachers.

"Good morning Mrs Baggio" was the not-so-ready reply of the kids.

"Today I'm more excited than usual because we'll be studying one of my favourite topics: the *Pala di Castelfranco*, a painting by Giorgione."

"Ah! Giorgione! I know him!" uttered Anna.

"By person?" asked Giovanni laughing.

"Do you know where he was born?" started Mrs Baggio again.

"In Giorgione square, of course!" answered a few boys proudly.

"We just need to know that he was born right in our town, and that's why we have a statue of him in the centre of our main square. I bet everyone in that room has seen it."

"Of course, we often hang out near there in *Casted!*" chipped in Giulia.

"You see. So, this portrait was commissioned by Tuzio Costanzo, for the chapel of Santa Maria Assunta, due to the death of his son, Matteo..."

"Prof, am I wrong or the *Pala di Castelfranco* got stolen?? My uncle was talking about it with my mother's cousin" asked Elisa, making everyone in class more interesting than usual.

"Yeah, even my grandmother was gossiping about that with all her friends just after the Holy Mass!" chipped Rosa in.

"I heard that in the news, Don Andrea almost fainted and it took him ages to recover!" Chattered Miriam.

The kids started to become giddy.

"Calm down guys. This is sadly true. A terrible loss. We cannot admire it at *Duomo* anymore."

"What about the robbers?" asked Giulia.

"*Carabinieri* are suspicious of some foreigners in the area," chimed Francesco in.

"Well, obviously..." added Mario.

Giulia looked at Luke and sensed his disappointment and sadness. The fact he wasn't a real *Veneto* often made him feel uncomfortable. Being looked down on just because of your origins wasn't a pleasant feeling. Giulia, on her side, did not care about it. They just happened to be friends and have fun together. That was all.



Third period was Math. Luke's brain was melting trying to understand such a difficult subject in a language that sounded like Chinese to him. The topic was also super boring, so he was just lying on his desk thinking about break time.

Mr Marcon was speaking too fast and he couldn't understand anything. It was so annoying! The boy literally wanted to toss him out of the window. He looked at the clock above the

crucified Christ: time seemed to be infinite. "Oh, God!" he uttered loudly, addressing his desperate eyes to the wooden Christ.

"Luke!" If you want to talk, just come to the blackboard to solve this pretty easy exercise.

Meanwhile, taking advantage of the teacher's distraction, Giulia was passing a little note to her friend Anna. The paper fell on the floor. The girls panicked.

"What do we have here?" asked Mr Marcon smirking.

Giulia blushed. The class fell silent. The boys started whistling.

The name of the boy Giulia liked had come out. The tragedy had just started.

"When's the wedding? I want to be invited!" rubbed Daniele in.

"Yeah, me too" said Enzo, the second clown of the class. Giulia just hated them. Mr. Marcon tried to make them stop but he wasn't an authoritative person. He had a solution: a detention test. The test was the only weapon that some *prof* had to make the students listen to them. Giulia didn't know if she had to be more anguished for the bad impression she had just made being caught by the teacher or for the test she had to do. Thanks to that *pampe*, that was Mr Marcon, everyone found out. EVERYONE. EVERYONE! What a tragedy! Her heart was so broken that honestly she didn't even care about the test.

"What if I get a 3? Who cares!" she thought. The world was evil to her. She wished she had disappeared at that very moment.

Moreover, the news would reach her mum in no time, and she would be grounded for the next 10 years. The *general* didn't allow ANY boyfriends or crushes until 10th grade.

"What if we do our homework together tomorrow? It's Saturday and I don't have to help my dad in the vegetable garden, luckily" suggested Luke, in order to distract her friend. He was pleasantly surprised by the quickness his brilliant idea had just popped up in his mind.

"Are you asking me to copy my math's homework?" asked Giulia suspiciously.

"We can trade your math homework for my English one!" This was an appealing offer to Giulia. "Deal".

That day she was more irked than usual when she got home. She threw her backpack on the floor sorrowfully, while her shoes whirled in the air before falling messily on the floor.

"I'M HOOOME!" she shouted.

Mrs Antonello appeared on the threshold like a giant.

"What a mess! How many times have I told you to be tidier and neater?!"

"Ugh, mom! It's not even that messy. Why can't you just turn a blind eye on this? I've just come home."

"Just tidy it up and we can end the discussion here."

"Okay, but let me breathe," added Giulia in an annoyed voice.

"Listen here, Missy. Lower your voice and be more polite, alright? You know I can't stand this mess!"

And you don't know how many things I can't stand either - thought the girl.

"Fine, just chill out!" replied Giulia, rolling her eyes.

Mr Antonello glared at her. Who knows what she would have replied if her brand new pressure cooker hadn't started whistling. "That's not the end, Missy!"

Giulia rushed upstairs stamping. "Pah! Why is she like that! She never tries to understand me, she just cares about my grades and she scolds me everytime I... Ugh! Why can't she be more caring?" A tear came down her cheek. She wiped it with her sleeve, but another one followed. Mr Antonello could hear Giulia complaining in a hushed voice. She was aware of her harshness, of her obsession to want her daughter to be just as she wanted.

"After all, I am struggling raising my child all alone. This is the best I can do!" she kept repeating to herself. Thanks to this thought, she didn't have to change anything about her. It was Saturday morning. A new day, a new light, the same tragedy. Her red face staring at Tommaso was her worst nightmare.

"Mum, I'm off to Luke! We're doing our homework at his home, alright?"

"Ok, just be home in time for lunch, you know today is my only Saturday off of the month! Don't make me wait for you as usual!"

"Only if you cook *polpette!*"

"We'll see!" replied the lady.

One thing she appreciated about her mum: she had overcome her prejudices about Luke's family in no time. It was all thanks to her. She smiled proudly.

His friend's house was just within a stone's throw.

"Hi there! Let's start now, so that we'll have time to play outside." suggested Giulia.

"I've got a better plan: you wanna go on an adventure?" asked Luke, all excited.

"Sure! You know I love adventures, but first we"

"No, there's no time! - chipped Luke in - my dad has heard from the bartender of *Opera* they're starting working *there* again on Monday!"

"Where?" asked Giulia in an inquisitive way.

"In the abandoned building site! Apparently not so abandoned anymore! The work was interrupted one year ago as they found old debris of ancient sites," continued Luke.

"Yeah, but they said they would not continue it," added Giulia.

"I know, but apparently some Cultural Heritage Offices or something like that will deal with it."

"I didn't know you were so cultured," smirked Giulia.

"I said I've *heard* it, are you just deaf?" After all, he had a reputation to save.

"You know that place creeps me out. We don't know what we can find there!" Giulia's tone had changed now.

"That's why we *have to* go and find out!"

They kept on arguing on whether they should go or not. Giulia didn't even realise they were heading towards the *forbidden* place.

In double-quick time a huge grey maze of walls, stones and concrete opened before their eyes.

"It's perfect to play hide and seek!" suggested Luke.

"Oh, yeah!" replied his friend ironically.

The site showered with a trace of mystery. Luke started browsing among the garbage and the ruins. He was really happy because he found a world of gewgaw and old objects belonging to bricklayers.

"Wow! That's better than a gold treasure!" he shouted out.

"That's just trash!" replied Giulia in a picky voice.

Luke wasn't even listening to her: he was just busy working upon his fantasy and wondering about what he could do with all these things and the money he could make out of them. The sound of Giulia's steps matched the banging of the few cimicids left from the fall. Her gaze fell on the dark emerald ivy invading the debris of the never-ending building. Nature had a marvellous capability: despite the domain of the human being, it was able to reclaim its space.

She wandered absent-mindedly when she accidentally landed on a rotted wooden panel that collapsed, making her fall into a dark tunnel. "HELPPPPPP!!!" she shouted to Luke, so busy that had forgotten the existence of his friend.

"What have you done now?! If I look away from you, you get into trouble..."

Luke pulled her up with difficulty. They rested on a rock wall and breathed a sigh of relief.

"Where is this *odor de freschin* coming from?" asked Giulia, covering his nose.

"From the tunnel!" answered Luke. "Let's get in!"

"Wow, there's life here! Look at those lines of amts!"

"Those cockroaches are more interesting!" pointed Luke.

"Where?!" screamed Giulia disgusted.

"Let's catch them! I'll bring them to school tomorrow to prank Mr Marcon! You know how happy he will be," he added laughing.

Suddenly they heard some clonk in the distance.

Their eyes got narrow and their mouths were lockout. They tried to hide in that stink. They found a door and entered without hesitation.

Luke stepped on something and a ray of light appeared in the room. It took them half a second to realise that light was coming from a flashlight. They explored the room and immediately their eyes were attracted by a huge black cover. They moved it away and discovered something incredible: the *Pala of Castel Franco* lied before their eyes! A shiver ran down their spine.

"OH MY GOD!" screamed Giulia. Immediately Luke shut her mouth. The sound of footsteps got closer. They turned the light off and hid behind the painting without thinking it over. The shadow of two tall men appeared. Peering through the worn fabric they could see the two men dropping heavy bags on the floor.

"Something must have got in here! I've heard a noise!" said one of the men, pointing at the tunnel. "Maybe some rats have entered through the broken countertop," whispered one of the two thieves.

"Yeah Bruno, you'd better lock it with these chains. We'll open it again when we come back tonight to take *it*."

"Dang it! Where did you get them? Knick knack store?" uttered one of them, trying to lock the entrance. "They lock nothing!"

The kids could hear almost everything in the distance.

"Oh my! They must be *the* thieves!" said Luke, trembling.

"What could we do?! We're stuck in here now!" whined Giulia "They've closed the entrance! We're so dead!"

"Wait! Did you hear that metallic sound when they got out?" asked Luke

"There must be another exit at the end of the tunnel!"

Giulia couldn't hear anything; she was just desperate. "This morning I didn't even say "hello" to my mom. You know, we don't get along, but I actually love her. It's just that sometimes I can't stand her. She knows how to be hefty." This was Giulia's way to ask her mom to forgive her. But maybe she would never know.

Meanwhile Luke was rummaging through the walls.

"There's a lever here!" to his sixth sense he thought it would save them. Without thinking twice, he pulled it. The wall opened. Luke was on cloud nine.

"Thank God! Let's not waste any more time!" cried Giulia.

They quickly ran towards Luke's home. They needed a safe place to think it over.

"We have to tell somebody!" whispered Luke.

"What if we just keep it a secret..." suggested Giulia.

"Are you kidding?! They stole the *Pala by Giorgione* and we shouldn't tell anybody?"

"I don't even know if anybody would believe us! Especially our parents. They always treat us like we're babies, even if we're not!" uttered Giulia.

Just when they seemed to have lost all their hopes, a glimpse hit Luke.

"I KNOW!! We could ask Don Andrea!" he whispered "After all, he's a man of faith."

"Oh, you're empty-headed. He has faith in God, not in two kids." She stared at Luke, who seemed pretty confident, then she hesitated a little: "Actually you might be right about him. I think he could believe us." ended Giulia.

Don Andrea was sitting in his office at *canonica*, skimming all the papers on his desk. The two friends rushed inside. He lowered his thin grey spectacles. "Giulia, Luke! Why are you so upset?"

"Don, we have a confession to make!" chipped Luke in.

"Not, here, dear. Reconciliation schedule is hanging outside the door. It's tomorrow before Mass. However, I can find some time if you..."

"No, we have to tell you something...it's not a sin. It's much more frightening!" said Giulia.

"What's more frightening than a sin?" asked the Father, perplexed.

"We found the *Pala*! It's hidden not far from here!" chimed Giulia in.

"What??" asked the man bewildered.

"Yes, but we have to hurry up: the thieves are coming back tonight to take it away!" said Luke.

"Oh, dear Lord! You also saw the thieves! Are you ok??" asked the man.

"Yes, we'll tell you everything on our way there! Shall we call the *Carabiniere*?"

"Of course! But meanwhile we'd better go there to make sure they don't come before we expect." Don Andrea's sense of danger and adventure roused inside himself. His dad had been a police officer, like his grandfather, who was also appointed *Maresciallo*. The two friends looked at him with a renewed sense of respect.

"I knew we could count on you, don!" Said Andre thrilled.

"You've been really brave, kids! Let's go now."

They left the *patronato* on Don Andrea's bright red *Fiat 128*. They got to the site and got him. The man walked ahead, trying to protect the kids with one arm and holding a sharp shovel on the other hand. The secret door was still open. "Stay here, you two, I'll get inside" said the man in a fatherly tone.

"We have to show you, it's a labyrinth down there!" replied Luke bravely.

"Okay, but pay A LOT of attention! We have to stay together, hoping that they are not inside." Don Andrea wasn't 100% sure about the discovery. The kids could have easily been mistaken. At the same time, he wanted to trust them. He entered the hideout: the Pala was still under the cloth! "I can't believe it!"

"We told you!" said Giulia proudly.

You shall not steal. Don Andrea recalled the sixth commandment subconsciously.

If I steal something that has already been stolen, well, it's not stealing! He immediately took his set of screwdrivers out of his little bag, and unscrewed the frame of the canvas. The kids helped him: they had to be as fast as they could. They rolled the painting delicately and carried it on their shoulders till they were finally outside.

"Let's lean the seats over and help me put it in my car!" Like real Italians they didn't mind if the trunk had to be left open and half the painting was leaning outside the car. They just wrapped the treasure in its cloth.

They darted towards the church. The *Carabinieri* were on their way to the building site, but they were informed by the Father to come straight to the *canonica*. Right after they arrived, the scientific committee placed the painting in a shrine made from a thick glass and took it away. Everyone smiled at the two kids with a look full of respect.

Luke and Giulia were dazed.

"I was so impressed by what you did," said Don Andrea in a fatherly way. "Now we have to call your parents," A smirk of fear appeared on Giulia's face. Her mom would be so mad at her that she would be grounded for the rest of her life.

"Don't worry," said the Father. "I'll talk to Mrs Antonello. I hope she realises how brave and capable you are."

"Don Andrea" Maresciallo called him. "We need to take the kids to the police station and ask some questions. If they have seen the thieves, they can help us identify them. Their parents will join us there."

There wasn't much time left to decide. Both Giulia and Luke knew the risk they were running saying the whole truth. They would have nightmares about the two thieves chasing at them for the rest of their life.

"What have you seen?" asked one of the *Carabinieri*.

"It was really dark and we couldn't see anything..." whispered Luke.

"So, aren't you able to make out the identity of the two criminals? Did you notice if they were foreigners? Did they have an accent?" asked the other man non-stop.

Giulia immediately thought about the *fake news* their Art teacher gave them about the criminals: *they say they're immigrants.*

"To be honest, I did see something!" exclaimed Giulia.

Luke looked at her in a surprised way. He didn't expect her to say that!

"There were two men, I think their names were Giacomo and Bruno, that's how they referred to each other. They were very tall and of strong constitution."

"Do you remember anything else?"

"I think one of them had grey messy hair and the other one was bald," added Luke, while Giulia nodded.

"We thought the men under suspicion were the ones... now we have to think it over again," said one of the officers in a low voice. "It's a small town. We'll catch them. Thank you for your contribution. It was precious, you made the difference," said Maresciallo addressing the two friends. Their hearts were beating fast and crazily.

"What happened! Giulia!" Mrs Antonello rushed to the station. She hugged her daughter: "I'm so proud of you!"

Giulia couldn't believe her ears. "Next time you'll get into trouble without my permission I'll get really mad, missy!" added the woman in a half sweet half harsh voice.

"Now I can recognize my mum!"

Giulia turned around and smiled at Luke, his companion, his true friend.



The next day they were heroes: Giulia's mother greeted her daughter while she was leaving for school, accepting the fact her daughter was a badass, and sometimes a pain in the neck. Who is not? She raised her eyes towards the sky and prayed to the Lord that, with His help, she could make it.

Giulia and Luke walked in the school like heroes. They felt a bit embarrassed and tried to lower their heads. Everyone was looking up to them. Their names were consumed because of the countless times they were nominated. The guys pretended not to hear the comments and the clamour of the schoolmates at their passage, but, in fact, it was vital nourishment to them. During the break Tommaso approached Giulia. Her heart started beating fast and the butterflies in her stomach were eating her snack instead of her.

"Hey, how are you?" asked Tommaso.

"Good... what about you?" answered Giulia.

"Good, thank you. Listen here, I wanted to ask you something... Are you free tomorrow?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Well, I wanted to ask you if you wanted to go on a date with me?"

A second went by, and it was infinite. "Well... I'm afraid I can't. I'm pretty busy now. I'm sorry."

The guy was stunned: it was the first time he got rejected from a girl. Luke looked at her friend amazed. "You, turning down the *love of your life*?" he asked incredulously.

"The love of my life? That's a big word, it's gonna take ages to find it! We're still young and we just have time for... adventures! Don't we?"

"Well said!" replied Luke smiling. Their gaze encountered. A strange idea came in her mind just like a flash. A pleasant thrill ran through her veins.

It was an early afternoon. Luke was trying to understand the geometry homework. Beams of light seeped from the window, lighting up his desk. The hero's life, unfortunately, didn't include a dispensation from homework. The phone rang: "Luke, It's me, Giulia! Are you ready for another adventure?"

A smile appeared on his face. His heart started speeding up. Was it for the exciting proposal Giulia had made him or for the discovery of a new feeling in his heart?