

LICIA TROISI

The impossible cases of Zoe & Lu

A friend in need

Illustrations by Ilaria Palleschi

MONDADORI

The Case Archive

Zoe and I opened our agency after the events which were to become known in history (well, our history) as “*A friend in need.*” Zoe would have preferred a more official-sounding name, like “The Hal Case” for example, but she eventually agreed to go for something more evocative. We did risk our skins after all, so an adventurous name summed it up pretty well. In all honesty, the agency existed before that, long before, but it wasn’t called Zoe & Lu Investigations – the neutral name we agreed on after much debate because Zoe wanted to mention things like “ghosts”, “paranormal” or at the least “mystery”, whereas I, well, I don’t really believe in all that. So, I was saying, it wasn’t called Zoe & Lu Investigations because Zoe and Lu (that would be me, by the way) didn’t exist back then. But I’m wittering, as usual. I’m no good at telling stories but Zoe said we need a case archive, so here I am.

“Events repeat themselves, Lu, the world is an obtuse place. That’s why it would be useful to know what I’ve investigated in the past,” she said. I felt a little offended at the “I’ve investigated” bit. Am I invisible or something? But that’s just Zoe, though, there’s no one like her in the world, which is why I like her so much. I try to ignore the less pleasant sides of her personality, she wouldn’t be Zoe otherwise. Oh, I’ve lost my thread again...

Let’s do it in order, Lu, one case at a time, not getting side-tracked. You can do it, you got 8 out of 10 on your last Italian test.

The long and the short of it is Zoe asked me to write up a case archive. And I thought it would be a good idea. Only, as I said before, I’m no good at telling stories. I had no idea where to start - we’ve investigated heaps of cases, I have my favourites and, unsurprisingly, Zoe has others – so I needed a way to classify them. After much thought, I made up my mind. I’d start from the beginning, from our first ever case. We didn’t know each other back then, I hadn’t become Zoe Jaga’s assistant yet. I was just Lucrezia Proietti, twelve years old, comic and computer enthusiast. And Zoe was merely a client.

A friend in need

PHANTOM MANOR

Dad looked out the window, perplexed.

“Are you sure this is it?”

I followed his gaze and swallowed nervously. We were deep in a forest, at the end of a bumpy track, he'd had to slow down to twenty km/h for the last kilometre.

In front of us was a wrought iron gate, bristling with pointed spikes and reminding me of the entrance to a graveyard. All that was missing was a skull and bones. Beyond that, you could see a driveway leading up to a huge house, like nothing I'd ever seen around here. It was just like Phantom Manor at Disneyland: wooden walls painted dark grey, pitched slate roof...the typical horror film mansion that had somehow ended up in the Roman Castles. It had a patchy garden around it with a solitary and very sad-looking rusty swing.

I'd imagined something very different when LukeXXX had mentioned Zoe and given me her address. If nothing else, it was going to be even more difficult to convince Dad - nervous Nellie that he was - that the people living in the house was absolutely normal and it would be perfectly safe to entrust his twelve-year-old daughter to them for an afternoon of study. That was the excuse I'm come up with.

“Dad, I'm going to study with a friend today.”

He'd jumped for joy, literally.

Okay, maybe I should rewind a bit. I don't have many friends. Well, let's say I don't have any at all and be done with it. It's because I find it difficult to get along with people. I always say the wrong thing at the wrong time. I never know when to laugh at jokes. I don't even like the things other kids my age like. I draw cartoon strips. I like the Japanese ones, and lots of Italian artists, too. But no one ever reads them. I adore computers, can even programme them. But if I try talking about it with

someone, they end up looking at me like I'm speaking Greek. I'm like a fish on the highway, the proverbial square peg.

Over the years, I've learned not to even bother trying. I just lurk in the shadows, don't take part. It's better that way. At primary school it was a nightmare, I was constantly teased, and I don't want to go through that again. So, that's it. Zero friends. Imagine Dad, then, when he heard someone had invited me round to do homework together. He was on cloud nine, gave me the third degree, filled my head with advice and my arms with boxes of pastries to take round to say thanks. Above all, he gave me instruction after instruction.

"Have fun, eh? Play, chat, do all the stuff girls your age do. But don't forget to study. It's important. Because if you don't do well on your tests, I'd have to stop you from going back, and I don't want to keep you away from your friends, do I?"

Rewinding just a bit more – Dad is a real nervous Nellie about everything to do with me. I think it's because he's a single parent. I never met my mum because she died when I was young, so he's terrified I miss having a "maternal figure". He's actually pretty amazing, and I don't miss anything, especially something I never had, like a mum. But Dad's not so sure.

"Hey, that's right, they warned me the place was a bit weird," I said, forcing a smile. I hoped it would convince him everything was cool.

He still seemed doubtful but I opened the door before he could change his mind and took me home again.

"Wait, I'll come with you," he offered, pulling up the hand brake and turning the engine off.

He walked with me to the gate and pressed the buzzer. I saw a video camera swivel round to look at us then heard it click. The gate ground its way open, swinging slowly back on its hinges. With every *creeeeeak*, I felt progressively worse.

"He's going to grab my hand and drag me away.." I worried to myself, which would be disastrous because this was my last chance.

Dad did actually take my hand but to walk through the open gate with me.

We arrived at the front door. A brass lion's head with a huge ring in its mouth stared menacingly from the black wood.

"Ooh, fancy!" I squeaked, smile still stamped on my face. Dad didn't look at me, he simply lifted the brass ring and gave it a firm knock.

The door seemed to open by itself and a butler appeared behind it. I'll admit I considered running away at that point. Because the man standing in front of us was nearly seven foot tall. And looked like an Egyptian mummy. His skin was pale, almost transparent, and a disturbing greenish colour, stretched tight across his head, on which a handful of solitary hairs poked out. His lips were more or less inexistent and I swear I could see a pale green light shining in his eyes.

"The Proietti's I presume," he said, in a voice that seemed to echo from another world.

Dad replied. "That'll be us."

The man spun around with unnatural agility, as if he had wheels on his feet, and held out a cadaverous hand to show me the way. Shivers ran along my bones. What was this place?

"Ahem..." Dad cleared his throat. The mummy's eyes switched from me to him. "I'd...I'd like to meet Mr and Mrs... Jaga," Dad said, embarrassed. I realized he didn't trust the place, that we were on the point of beating a hasty retreat and I didn't know whether to hope he'd whisk me away or that everything would work out and the mummy would find a way, any way, of reassuring him.

"Mrs Jaga is at work and not at home. She will return this evening but is aware of your visit," the mummy said. Dad hovered on the doorstep, uncertain. "If you'd like to be sure, you can reach her on her mobile phone. Shall I give you the number?"

"Just in case," Dad sighed. It was going to work after all. He took the number and called it.

"Good evening, this is Lucrezia's dad.. ah, yes, oh, great! Well, since you weren't home, oh, that's marvellous. I'll come back and pick her up, not too late. Thank you, thank you all the same, many thanks..."

I was in. I still wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not. But I was in.

Dad looked at me.

“I’ll be back around half past six, alright? Be good,” and threw the mummy in the doorway an anxious look.

“Everything’s fine Dad, don’t worry,” I smiled again. He kissed me on the forehead – he always does when we say goodbye – and shook the mummy’s hand. “You’ve been very kind, I’ll be back in a few hours.”

He said goodbye another couple of times to me then headed back through the garden. I waited to hear the car drive away.

“After me,” the butler’s glacial voice startled me.

I turned, glanced into the semi-darkness on the other side of the door, and stepped over the threshold. I had entered the world of Zoe.

DARIMA

The inside of the house matched the outside: a typical American-style Victorian manor in which someone had died a horrific death and the heroes had moved in only to meet a similarly terrifying fate at the hands of the phantoms haunting the place. Spooky stuff.

Well, it was tidy at least, all new and sparkling clean. Wrought iron lamps with coloured glass shades cast a dim light over rooms filled with dark wood – the furniture, the doors, and the large staircase in the centre of the hallway. There were bronze statues, thick rugs on the highly polished floor, and heavy brocade curtains on the windows.

“This way,” the mummy muttered, and I followed.

We arrived in a sitting room with an open fireplace in which, despite the fairly mild temperatures out, a roaring fire burned. Serious pictures of men and women with furrowed brows (ancestors possibly?) hung along the walls, a green velvet armchair and a white floral sofa had been arranged around the fire. It felt like I’d walked into the 19th century. Even the teapot and two china cups set out on the table seemed to be straight out of *Beauty and the Beast*. The only thing that didn’t seem to belong in this setting was Zoe.

Until then I’d only ever spoken to her on the phone. She had a slightly raspy voice and had seemed a little abrupt. She’d asked what I wanted and I’d stammered something about it being to do with a case, feeling immediately ridiculous. A “case”... like I was part of some sort of whodunnit. But she hadn’t batted an eyelid and simply asked me to come over.

Now, I don’t know what I was expecting. Maybe someone dressed like *Mary Poppins* or one of those 1930’s female characters on the front covers of the crime novels Dad liked to read, hat askew on a mound of lacquered hair, lips painted red.

What I actually saw sitting in an armchair was a “runaway kid” as they say around here.

She was my age only a lot thinner than me – that didn’t take much, though, at primary school I used to be called “chubba chops” - had long, super straight hair that was so dark purple it verged on total black. It hung over her face, leaving only an important, pinched-pale nose, and a lolly stick, poking out. She was wearing a Fullmetal Alchemist t-shirt over a pair of ripped jeans and a pair of Converse that had seen better days, crossed under her on the chair. She stood out against the green velvet like a punch in the face and I had mixed feelings at what I saw.

The t-shirt was an enormous “yes”. I loved Fullmetal Alchemist, and Japanese cartoons in general. But the personality vibe going on around her, well, that was intimidating.

Her hands were clasped around her knees.

“Welcome,” she said, pointing to the floral sofa. I sat down cautiously. It had the air of being a valuable antique. Awkwardly, I handed her the tray of pastries.

“My dad sent them,” I said. The mummy stepped forward and took them out of my hands. Then, without the slightest haste, opened them and set them down on the table, beside the teapot.

“Thank you Amilcare, that’ll be all,” Zoe said. The mummy withdrew silently.

Silence fell, making me feel extremely uncomfortable. Zoe started at me intently, not speaking.

“Drink some tea,” she finally said, tersely.

“No, thanks, I...” I stammered.

“Drink it.”

It felt like an order so I obeyed, even though I don’t like tea very much. I poured myself a cup and a pungent smell of orange and cinnamon travelled around the room. Zoe did the same, crunching on her lolly pop, of which only the plastic stick remained, and added a splash of milk to her cup and mine.

“No, no..” I tried to protest, but it was too late. I was seriously regretting having gone there by that point.

We drank the tea and I confess it was actually quite good. The orange and cinnamon had an intense aroma, the milk tasted nice and the warm feeling that spread from my stomach to the rest of my body was comforting and reassuring. Zoe crossed her legs again, put her cup down and resumed the position she’d been in when I’d arrived.

“Enough of the pleasantries.”

“Pleasantries?” I thought, baffled.

“Why you’re here.” It wasn’t a question and it took me a few seconds to work out whether I should reply or not.

“Well, I know it’ll probably sound crazy but I think a friend of mine is trapped online.”

I’d prepared a little speech, clearly. It’s just that, when I’d practiced it at home, I’d felt like such an idiot. It was all so crazy. Even I didn’t really believe it. Yet, sitting in that outlandish house, the story didn’t sound so madcap after all. It all seemed extremely plausible. In fact, when I’d said my piece, Zoe didn’t bat an eyelid.

“Tell me more.”

So I took a deep breath. Talking about Darima was still difficult, but I summoned my courage and began.

I mentioned earlier that I’d never had any friends before Zoe. Well, that’s not exactly true. Before Zoe, I used to play Fortnite. I’d started with Battle Royale, met some people there, and we’d switched to Save the World. There were four of us, me, LukeXXX, DeathSoul and her, Darima.

Playing with them was fun, they were like me, we had the same interests and whenever we were together, I felt at home, something that NEVER happens offline. Except with Dad, but that doesn’t count.


Anyway, we ended up swapping phone numbers and chatted on WhatsApp. We had *epic* conversations, they were so great we’d often say we should meet up in person

one day. Only I had no idea how I'd explain it to Dad. He's not a big fan of videogames and stuff like that. I also knew that LukeXXX was older than me, I knew nothing about DeathSoul, and the only thing I'd gleaned about Darima was that she lived in Rome. Yes, that brings me to Darima.

Out of all my virtual friends, she was my favourite. I felt like she understood me, and she was nearly the same age as me, just one year older. We talked all the time, even on the phone at one point. She had a really explosive laugh and always made me feel good. She was one of those people who's always cheerful and has a great sense of humour, delivering funny one-liners continuously. When we played, she'd always be the leader of our little group. Over time, I'd come to think of her as a kind of older sister. There, that's what I miss, a sister, but it's always going to be just me and Dad in our family. He's totally jinxed when it comes to relationships: if there's someone within a three-mile radius that could break his heart, you can bet that'll be the person he'll fall for. Anyway, I'm babbling again. Get to the point, Lu.

Darima, or Dar as I called her, was my best friend. That's why I was so upset when she disappeared. One minute she was here, the next she was gone. I went online one night and there was no sign of her. We'd arranged that afternoon to hook up, she'd said she'd be there.

[I'll be online at nine](#)

she'd written. I'd replied with a  and at nine o'clock on the dot I'd logged on. But she wasn't there. She didn't come online the next few nights either. I messaged her but she didn't reply. I tried to phone, but her mobile just rang out. That's when I started to worry.

A week later, I went back online and saw that LukeXXX had posted a newspaper article. Just a few lines really.

Thirteen-year old girl falls into coma after online gaming.

My heart lurched. I read on. She'd been found in front of her computer. Our game was on the screen. Had it been a heart attack, maybe, an undiagnosed malformation, it wasn't clear. The doctors were still carrying out tests but she wasn't responding.

What's this? I fired off.

It's about Darima LukeXXX replied.

How do you know? It could be anyone I suggested.

It's her, I'm telling you LukeXXX insisted Daria Maddaloni.

Dari-ma. Do you get it? She was in my friend's class at school, she told me.

Suddenly, the devastating truth hit me. I hadn't even known Darima's real name. We'd always just gone by our nicknames: I was LuLu, she was Darima. We didn't need anything else, not us. A couple of times we'd video called, on our mobiles, but it hadn't lead to anything. She was as uninterested in the real world as I was. We never spoke about that because there was nothing to say. We went to school, we had no friends. End of.

I froze. Darima was in a coma. They didn't know if she'd wake up. I wouldn't be hearing her raucous laugh for some time, maybe never again, I wouldn't talk to her about how cool Katniss Everdeen from Hunger Games was, or how boring Ginny Weasley was in Harry Potter.

Dad found me alone, crying over my keyboard.

"Hey pumpkin, what's up?" He'd burst into the room, having heard my hiccupping and didn't even stop to tell me off, like he would usually do when it was eleven o'clock and I was supposed to be in bed asleep because the next day I'd be falling asleep on my feet at school. I hugged him and after a bit, felt brave enough to tell him everything.

"Don't worry, she might come round. You young people are strong," he said, trying to smile. Then he offered to contact the hospital my friend was in to see if he could find anything out, and that he'd also take me if I wanted to go.

Zoe interrupted me with a noisy yawn, and I looked at her, confused.

“Are you planning on getting to the point of this story or am I going to get your whole life story?” she asked, bored.

“Sorry?” I squeaked, not sure whether to be surprised or angry.

Zoe glanced over at a pendulum clock hanging on the wall.

“You can have five more minutes. I’m easily distracted, you know, and you seem to be doing your best to send me to sleep.”

I clenched my teeth, irritated, but there wasn’t much else I could do. Dad wouldn’t be back until half-past six, I’d ventured out to this place in the middle of nowhere, even getting past the zombie butler, to help Darima. If you’re on the dancefloor, I thought, you may as well keep dancing. So I continued with my story.