

Girls Fearless – Alessandro Ferrari

Mario Brivo's thirteen. He's teased by everyone at school because he's a coward who won't stand up for himself or his friends. When the older kids poke fun at him, he avoids being the target of their stupid pranks by offering up his cousin, a freshman who's easily made sport of. Mario Brivio is a weakling.

But one summer in a distant mountain village changes all that.

His mom sends him there for a month's vacation with his grandmother. And Mario meets up with Tata. She's everything he isn't. Eccentric, bossy, determined, charismatic. She runs around barefoot and wears colored strings on her ankles. Born to lead, Tata's the head of a local girl gang. Together they explore the woods and take on the world.

Once Mario gets a load of Tata, she's the only girl on the planet. But Tata already has a boyfriend, Malerba. He's older and good-looking, and kisses her like a movie star.

But Mario Brivio has something Paolo Malerba doesn't: a place in Tata's gang. The girls have become his friends and would do anything for him. Together they set out on a whirlwind of adventures, as they explore the depths of the woods, where they find a bunker from World War II. And Mario finds that friendship means opening up to one another.

But Tata takes it too far when she calls Angela "chubby". The girls take sides, and war breaks out between them.

Tata and Mario form a new gang, with nine girls, each with her own nickname. Laura is "Inca", Giorgia is "Jo". The four of them have become inseparable. They are fierce warriors, they retaliate against enemy attacks. Of course, they also like to have fun, which includes swimming in the lake, exploring the river, watching grown-up movies, and finding nicknames for the things and people around them.

There's a brief time when it looks like the friendship shared by Mario, Tata, Jo and Inca might mean more to them than the gang war, until the day Jo is caught alone by Angela's girls, who give her a beating she won't soon forget.

Their only course of action: revenge.

Tata's gang readies for battle, a plan is agreed upon: They'll take no prisoners. Everyone's psyched, except for Laura. She knows that meeting violence with violence is never the right thing, and refuses to be a part of it.

Mario, on the other hand, aims to put himself to the test, for the first time in his life. He's the one who comes up with the plan and lures the enemy into a trap. But something goes wrong. After Tata breaks Angela's arm, she and the rest hightail it. Meanwhile, Laura bursts onto the scene to help her friends, and in doing so falls into a ditch.

Laura can't really be dead – that's what Mario keeps repeating to himself. He has no desire to go back to school and the old routine. Without the gang, without Laura and Tata, life no longer seems to have any meaning.

Until one day, when Mario receives a letter. A letter that looks like it was sent from hell, signed by none other than Laura.

Tata gets the gang back together to solve the mystery of their missing friend. They'll go to hell and back to save her, if necessary. But the netherworld Mario, Tata and Jo hope to save Laura from doesn't exist.

Tata leans over the edge of the ditch. She'd give her life to save her friend – one life in exchange for another. Witnessing this act of courage, Mario finds the strength to cry out, "I love you! Stay!" It was just what Tata needed to hear.

Only Mario Brivio and Tata are not on the same page. Tata will never love him. Jo had once said so. He realizes as much that night, when he sees Tata with Malerba in the woods. When he hears Malerba threaten her and call her "lesbian".

There's no doubt in Mario's mind. Then and there the gang gets back together. They attack Malerba and make him eat his words.

This time, when Mario returns to school, the old routine is no longer the same. Everything's changed. It all seems to matter now. Because Mario will never forget the summer when Tata loved Laura and wasn't afraid of being labeled. She wasn't afraid of what people thought, she wasn't afraid of anything. It was the summer that Tata loved Laura, and that was that.

Mario's love for Tata lasted but a summer as well. But what brought them together in her girl gang would be forever.