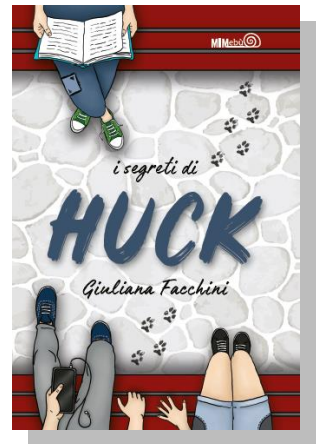


# Huck's Secrets

By Giuliana Facchini



## PLOT

Huck is a six-year-old Border Collie with thick, ash grey fur. His dark eyes hide in their depths many secrets, some about his past, and others about his breed's past. This book is about him and his experiences at it tells the story of how the lives of three rebellious sixteen-year-olds intersect. For the last few months, Irene's family has been forced to face her grandmother's failing health as she fights Alzheimer's disease. One sweltering day in August, in search of peace, Irene seeks refuge along the Adige River that runs through the park.

The park is a place of refuge for Alex as well, as he escapes his stifling grandmother and his mother, who had him when she was sixteen and is ill-equipped to fulfill her parental role.

The two teens meet on a bench where they become friends and plan an interesting mission: find Alex's dad, who spent three years of his life in prison, and try to understand why he abandoned his son.

Martina lives at Saffri, a center for dog training and a dog-lovers dream. She has always grown up with dogs but has never had one to call her very own, until Huck comes along. She is immediately enchanted with him and can't help thinking about a mysterious letter she received years earlier. Abandoned by her mother when she was three years old, something about Martina's past is awakened, and she becomes obsessed with figuring out who this Border Collie really is and where he had been before the day he came into her life. Opposed by everyone in her family, she begins to investigate the dog's past and traces him back to a cabin in the mountains, a farm, and three alpine shepherds. In a cabin in the mountain pastures of Trentino, the three teens and the dog meet. In fact, Alex's dad Nino, after having left prison, has lived in that cabin where she discovers that Huck has spent two years of his life.

A storm prevents them from descending into the valley. Nature's fury is unleashed, and night falls.

The situation gets worse: the sheep escape out the pen; Darian, a young shepherd, falls off a ledge, and Alex lowers himself down to get Darian with a harness and cord held by his father. Due to Darian's severe injuries, Nino decides to take him to the nearest lodge, where he will call for help. Huck goes with him. Nino had saved Huck years earlier, but tonight it's the Border Collie who will guide him to the safety of the lodge.

In the meantime, the teens wait in the safety of the cabin with the oldest shepherd who, pressured by Alex, tells them about how sixteen years earlier Nino was driving drunk and ran over a young boy. Even after serving time in prison, he hasn't been able to get over his sense of guilt for having taken a life right when he knew his son Alex was being born. The boy was confused and exhausted. While going to get firewood, he kisses Martina despite having feelings for Irene. An unexpected attraction between the two of them is born and upsets them both. In that moment, she explains that she is reconstructing Huck's life because she is convinced that the dog is a gift she never received from her terminally ill mother who left her a mysterious letter.

Searching for the truth can be painful, and new relationships can be unsettling. Yet the morning brings new optimism. The storm has subsided, and the sun is shining and drying up the earth. Nino returns to the cabin and finally faces Alex.

The moment to return home has come. Their parents have calmed down, but for Martina, the worst is yet to come. She has an argument with her dad and angrily voices her suspicion that Huck is her dog, one last gift from her absent mother who is sick with cancer.

Next it's Irene's turn to confront her parents, and she's just in time to say goodbye to her dying grandmother in her hospital bed.

Alex's family reunites, and he tries to ignore his feelings for Martine. It's Irene who finally urges him to go to the girl he loves. Although she had hoped to be Alex's girlfriend, Irene knows the right thing to do. Her relationship with Alex transforms into a strong friendship.

Trying to trace the last few missing pieces to Huck's past, Alex and Martina find themselves in a small, uninhabited medieval village near Garda Lake, where they discuss their feelings and fears. The three young teens have finally dealt with their pasts. Now it's time to build their futures around friendships and family.

Huck has finally made it home. The DNA test will be the last piece of evidence, but Martina and her dog already know they have found each other.

## CHAPTERS

### A black brush stroke

Irene and Alex understand each other. They're compatible. He's happy around her, and he's surprisingly happy that she wants to know about his life. He normally doesn't trust others easily; he's reserved, minds his own business, and prefers not to go around telling everyone about himself. However, she is sweet, friendly, and reassuring. He feels at peace because she's a stranger, as far as two sixteen years olds can be strangers. Alex has his head in the clouds while Irene keeps his feet on the ground.

"So you want to know the story of my life?" asks Alex lightly and sarcastically.

"To tell the truth, I only asked you because you're here every morning by yourself on the bench. But if you have a story, I wouldn't mind hearing it," explains Irene.

"I've already told you that I'm here because I don't want to be at home. But I don't think that answer satisfied you."

"You're right. I'm not easily satisfied. Your grandma is pretty tough on you?"

"You promise you won't ask me who she is? I mean, her name, right?" asks Alex.

"I don't care who she is. I'm not a gossip. I want to get to know you, not go around town spreading dirt on you."

"So, if I tell you about myself, you'll keep it a secret?"

"Of course!" exclaimed Irene with conviction.

This conversation is becoming ridiculous. They have seen each other every morning at the park for 10 days and yet haven't said a word. Then one morning they talk and begin telling their secrets. It's a paradoxical situation that swelteringly hot, dry August day that ends up frying your brain. For a minute, Irene thinks that Alex has a screw loose, a guy who looks normal but in reality is a little nutty. She soon changes her mind. She's not prejudiced and welcomes everyone to be her friend. She manages to see the good in everyone, and if she can't see anything good, she makes it up.

"I'm ready to keep your secret, Alex. Shoot!"

“Okay. My grandma cut my father out of my life and won’t let me or my mom make any decisions. I avoid her.”

“Why don’t you confront her?” asks Irene, after having thought about it for a while.

“Because she’s invincible.”

“Oh, come on! Does she have superpowers?!”

“Yes, she’s super intelligent, super over-bearing, super clever, and the super dictator of my family.”

“She isn’t so clever if you’re able to sneak off and come here, telling her you’re somewhere else.”

“Over the years, I’ve learned how to defend myself, but avoiding her is still my main goal every day.”

Sophie the puppy got down off the bench and looked at Irene meaningfully.

“I’ve got to get back home,” said Irene, getting up.

“If you want, we can go to the mall this afternoon. It will be cool inside and we can walk and talk,” suggested Alex, and for a moment he felt some butterflies in his stomach.

“Okay,” said Irene, as Alex breathed a sigh of relief.

Irene put on her sunglasses, hooked Sophie’s leash, and walked away slowly: a black brush stroke in a park full of dry leaves.

## **In the pouring rain**

[...]

“Hurry! Everyone outside to round up the sheep!” yelled the shepherd. “The fence is open, and the sheep have escaped. There’s lots of delicious grass but lots of cliffs.”

The dogs bolt after Maggese.

“I’m with Huck,” yells Martina as she grabs a flashlight on her way out the door.

“Don’t go too far. The dog knows what to do and knows the area. You don’t. I want to be able to see every one of you guys at all times, is that clear?” Nino’s tone was authoritative.

Martina's eyes shine with excitement, and she searches for Huck with her flashlight. The dog is running with his tail, belly, and chin to the ground. His pointed snout and his staring eyes hypnotize the sheep and guide them back towards the pen. In the light of the flashlights, she sees the other dogs as they surround a group of sheep, crouch down to the ground, and then running and sloshing around again with their fur sopping wet and their eyes shining like golden pebbles. Martine feels the rain hitting her face. She walks towards Huck, but he pays no attention. He is totally concentrated on the dangerous situation, the electricity in the air, and the roaring of the thunder. Suddenly, Huck guides the sheep towards her, and she moves in the direction of the pen. She's fully in tune with the dog.

The other two dogs follow Maggese's whistles, but Huck stays and works with her. They leave a dozen of sheep with Irene who, hindered by her oversize coat, pushes them into the pen, almost slipping in the mud and mire. Martina calls Huck and has him go after more scattered sheep. He takes off like a missile into the darkness that even the flashlight cannot penetrate. She follows him carefully, calling his name. She oscillates between excitement and fear, and then from out of nowhere, four sheep appear with Huck close behind. Martina laughs while she imagines his hypnotic eyes and tense muscles that allow him to zip around the group of sheep. They're having a sheepdog lesson at night in the torrential rain at an altitude of almost 2,500 meters!