

Carlo and Fabio

Fabio walked back down the steep stony road that led from Anna's parents' house at the top of the village. He had a spring in his step, and he shouted 'Ciao' to people he didn't really know, almost running down the last part of the road into the centre of the village.

Anna Leoni was, in Fabio's mind, the prettiest girl at the village school, and ever since his parents had moved into the village the previous spring, Fabio had suffered from a huge crush on Anna. She had dark hair, always tied back in a single ponytail, large dark eyes, and a small nose that turned up ever-so-slightly at the end giving her pixie-type appearance.

As the new family in the village, Fabio's parents had worked hard to integrate, holding big social events in the well-maintained gardens of the substantial villa that the mob had provided. All the adults attending these events were polite and respectful, acutely aware of his father's elevated status in the gangland scene. This extended to the support that Fabio received at school, where the teachers did their best to help Fabio feel welcome, and to be accepted as just another fourteen-year-old at the small village school.

The children at the school were a different matter entirely.

Fabio was not accepted by them.

The girls giggled about Fabio behind hands held over their mouths, always whispering to each other, but never speaking to him directly. The boys had an established pecking order already, and although Fabio was tall for his age, he was very slim, and no match physically for the top-dog Lombardo brothers, or for Paulo Panebianco, the school hard man.

Fabio was used to the special treatment that being his father's son involved and had developed good instincts for spotting and avoiding trouble. There were some initial threats and warnings from the Lombardo's and their cronies, but for his first year in the village he had avoided any real confrontation. Fabio was confident of his karate skills which he practised in a neighbouring town twice every week, but he recognised that those defensive skills were not going to help him against someone like Panebianco, who's sheer size and strength would not be easily overcome with martial arts from a smaller opponent.

All of that careful avoidance of confrontation couldn't stop Fabio having eyes for Anna Leoni, but she was always in a group of girls, never alone, and for all his confidence Fabio didn't have the self-belief to approach her in front of the other schoolkids. His opportunity to speak to her came when he found her alone and crying, outside the schoolyard, one lunchtime. Most children went home for lunch during the two-hour lunch break in the middle of the hottest part of the day. Girls being girls, Anna had done or said something heinous which meant that she was now no longer part of her group of friends. She had just been told exactly that and was distraught.

Fabio had offered her a shoulder to cry on, and Anna was surprised at his thoughtfulness and gentle manner.

'You're not at all like everyone says you are,' she had said as she turned to go into her house at the top of the village.

'Not every boy is like his father,' Fabio had replied, fully aware of his father's violent reputation as an enforcer for the local mob.

Anna had avoided speaking to Fabio at school, but the stolen glances and secret smiles that she sent across a crowded classroom were enough to set Fabio's heart racing. When school broke for the summer, he had walked past her house every day for a week before Anna had come out to speak to him.

They were only fifteen years old, and Fabio was extremely aware that there was a limit to the physical relationship that he and Anna could have. His father was a big man in the village, but Fabio would never dare bring disrespect to Anna, or her family, and his father would have beaten him if he had. So, they had shared walks in the surrounding hills, and held hands when no-one was looking, but today was a special day. They had kissed for the first time, well away from the village, then walked back chatting in earnest about what the future might hold, and their shared hopes and dreams. For Anna, this meant a family and a pretty house in a nice village with a comfortable income to be able to travel occasionally. For Fabio, this meant a family too, and whatever it was that Anna wanted.

Unfortunately, Fabio and Anna had been trailed by one of the Lombardo boys who had witnessed them kissing, and quickly run back to his old brother, Gianluca, and eagerly told him all about it. Gianluca Lombardo had two reasons to hate Fabio. Firstly, he got kudos that he didn't deserve because his dad was a big man in the mob. Gianluca had been the top dog at school for years, and deeply resented Fabio's arrival. He also resented Fabio's good looks although, up until now, he hadn't taken advantage of the admiration that many of the prettiest girls in the village held for Fabio.

But kissing Anna Leoni! That was too much. She was an angel in Gianluca's eyes, and this was the opportunity he had been looking for to put Fabio in his place. The Lombardo gang was quickly rounded up, including the enormous Paulo Panebianco, and when Fabio left the village square to cut through an alleyway to his parents' house, they were all waiting for him. Paulo had received his instructions from Gianluca and the six boys in the gang stood across the alleyway as Paulo advanced towards Fabio.

'You think you can do anything you like, right?' said Paulo in his deep man's voice. He stood six foot two inches and weighed 200 lbs to Fabio's slight five-foot nine frame.

'Hey, I have no quarrel with you, Paulo,' replied Fabio, carefully moving his feet into a position from which he could either strike out or turn and run. Confrontation was to be avoided but running from the main gang in the village was going to mean his life would change. He needed to take a stand, but Fabio doubted whether he could take down someone the size of Paulo.

'You think you're safe because of your father? Well, you're not,' said Paulo advancing on Fabio at speed.

Fabio landed a kick to Paulo's knee, designed to cause pain, and disable an opponent, but it made no difference, and Paulo sent Fabio tumbling onto his back with his first punch, cheered on by Gianluca and the Lombardo gang behind him.

Getting the Lombardo's gang together at short notice had been a noisy affair and had not gone un-noticed in the village. In particular, one boy from the year below Fabio at the village school had seen the gang come and collect Paulo Panebianco from the house opposite his own. It was well known that Gianluca was out to get Fabio and, suspecting that this might be the occasion when it happened, the boy had followed the gang down to the village square and seen them disappear into the alleyway towards Fabio's villa.

The boy was strong and athletic, a good footballer and good at most sports, although in the village football was everything. He saw Fabio disappear across the village square and ran to catch up, grabbing a broom handle from the display outside the hardware store as he ran. When he came into the alleyway, he saw Panebianco looming over Fabio, who was lying on his back on the cobblestones. The bigger boy was about to drop onto Fabio and there would be no escape from the beating that was coming.

Fabio was more dazed than hurt, but in the second it took him to realise what had happened and gather his bearings, Paul Panebianco was on him and if he pinned him to the ground there was going to be no getting away. He readied himself to lash out toe first into the bigger boy's groin area, but his plan of attack was shattered by a scream from behind him somewhere and a shadow flashed over him and Panebianco's nose exploded in a fountain of blood.

Fabio was on his feet in a moment and ready for the fight to come, but that young boy Carlo from the year below him at school was handing out a beating to Paulo Panebianco with a stout wooden pole. Panebianco tried to fend off the blows, but he was struck on the head, in the stomach, on the shins, and the fight was quickly ebbing away from him. He turned his attention instead to Gianluca, the gang leader, who was now moving towards Carlo backed up by his gang.

Without a moment's hesitation, Fabio pirouetted in front of Gianluca landing the heel of his foot onto the side of the boy's head. Gianluca staggered backwards, stunned by the blow and Fabio struck him once in the middle of the face. Another bloody explosion where his nose had been, and the fight was over. The Lombardo gang turned and ran up the alleyway, Paulo Panebianco pushed past Fabio and ran off across the square holding his hand to his busted nose, leaving Fabio and Carlo breathing heavily staring after the retreating boys.

'That was amazing!' said Fabio slapping Carlo on the back. 'I thought I was going to get the beating of my life there for a moment.'

'Never going to happen when I'm around,' said Carlo, smiling at the older boy.

'Listen, thanks. That was brilliant.'

As the boys walked up the hill towards Fabio's parents' villa, they chatted and relived the very brief but very violent fight. Fabio was both delighted and surprised that Carlo had been there to help, and he had always suspected that the younger boy was a fan of his. He'd seen him following Fabio back from school, and once or twice out on his walks with Anna, but never really thought much of it. Fabio attracted a lot of attention from a lot of different schoolkids.

Carlo was on cloud nine and walked with the most beautiful person he had ever met to his house, to meet his mother, and maybe meet his father too. This was a day he would never forget.

Now in their mid-fifties, Carlo and Fabio were brothers, a bond that had been forged in many encounters in the world of gangsters, but that had started that summer's day forty years earlier. Fabio had married his Anna, and with the changing gang scene they had moved to their hillside villa where, for the past ten years, Fabio had looked after his increasingly distant wife, who was slowly being taken from him by dementia.

They had never been able to have children, which Fabio regretted deeply, and with his side of the family all executed in his early twenties, he kept in distant touch with Anna's family. This drifted when his mother-in-law passed away a few years ago, but Fabio still turned up at her grave every year with fresh flowers on her birthday, a grave that sat only twenty yards from those of his parents, who he honoured in the same way.

Carlo's life had been complicated. He loved Fabio. He loved him deeply and had held out hope that his love might be returned one day, but it wasn't. Fabio only had eyes for Anna, and Carlo soon accepted that this wonderful young man was only ever going to be a brother to him, and never a lover. Carlo lived in a world that was publicly intolerant of homosexuality, but that allowed each man and woman to lead their own lives in private. He had a few boyfriends, but no-one that could ever truly compare to Fabio, and settled for a lifelong friendship with the man that he loved.

Fabio realised very early on that Carlo was in love with him in a way he would never be able to reciprocate, but it never proved to be a problem. They had saved each other's lives so many times over their years of becoming Don Piacelli's preferred enforcers and executioners, that their bond was one that was deeper than anything physical. He loved Carlo like a brother, and along with Anna he was the person that he shared his most intimate secrets with. Theirs was a friendship forged in adversity and strengthened over the years with each brutal assignment. Only the two of them would ever know or understand how they had lived their lives, and the things that they had done for their Don.