

Icon

Sunday, late October.

Matteo Rossi was broken hearted. Her text was haunting him, thudding in his head and pounding at his heart like a sledgehammer. His stomach gurgled, bile burned in his throat. He couldn't keep anything down. Everywhere he looked her face stared back at him, sad and filled with pity.

He could not blame her. It was his fault.

No wonder she had found someone else.

'Elisa. Oh Elisa...'

The flames of hurt and guilt still raged five months after that crazy night in May.

The memory of what had happened began to run in his brain once more.

Saturday mid-May.

It was late, on the night after the big match.

The music centre was pounding out his favourite song, "ICON" by Siouxsie and the Banshees, on repeat. Elisa had turned it down, twice, and he had wound it up to full volume in retaliation, using the remote control. He was drunk, very drunk. He had every right to be drunk, after what had happened. He could not make out what she had said but he shouted out his reply anyway.

"A baby Elisa? You want a baby? Who the hell wants a baby? Eh? Not me! If you want babies then find someone else to have them with!"

Then he passed out.

It was already late morning when he had come round. His eyes flipped open from his drunken sleep. He was on the settee. He threw off the duvet and tried to raise his head. Impossible. His head and throat hurt, his stomach ached. The apartment felt strangely empty, and cold, even though it was May. He reached out for the duvet and suddenly it all rushed back.

"Oh Hell! What've I done? What **have** I done!"

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He rolled over, used the settee to lever himself upright and staggered through the every room.

"Elisa, Elisa, **Elisa!**"

She was gone; she had taken his drunken advice; she had left him. He was alone with his guilt, his stupidity, his pain. Tears of anguish welled up as he drowned in self-pity. She was right to leave him. He knew that. She deserved better; much, much better. At last her father would be happy. He would send her to Padua, to the same University Medical School that he had graduated from. Matteo would never see her again: Signor Alberto Carlotto would make sure of that.

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Two weeks later.

He threw himself onto the settee, opened his mobile and stared at her speed-dial name for hundredth time. Since that night he had wanted so many times to press the button to call her. But he couldn't do it, couldn't admit he had been wrong. To do so would mean facing the pain again of that night.

Every time he closed his eyes she was there. Her eyes were sad, exasperated, resigned. Elisa, so beautiful, so kind; softly spoken, never raising her voice, always forgiving, always giving, always loving and guiding him gently through his anxieties, his fear. But she had had enough. How could he live without her?

'Elisa!'

His cry rang out again through the empty rooms.

'Oh Elisa, Elisa, Elisa! Forgive me darling, please, please forgive me!'

He suppressed the tears this time and forced his mind away from her, back to himself. What had changed him into such an idiot? He immediately shut out the answer, the truth that stabbed at ego. He sniffed them back and hardened his heart. He said out loud what he had been thinking:

"Matteo Rossi, be a man! Get a grip! OK, Elisa's a great girl. But there are other fish in the sea. And you, Matteo Rossi, Icon of Juve, you are a great fisherman! You'll get another 'fish'! It's easy! Even that ugly dope Luigi, he's got them falling over him. Everyone wants a winner! He forced a false smile.

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He was showering when his phone rang. Dripping water over the lounge floor, he snatched up his blue mobile, the one he kept for personal matters, the one he kept on at all times.

'Elisa darling, please, please forgive me!'

But it wasn't Elisa. It was his sister, Carla. She was sobbing; telling him her husband Paulo had been involved in a crash with a drunken driver. Paulo could die.

'Matteo you must come to look after the kids, please. I must go to the hospital! They might not know about his diabetes, about his heart condition. Come right now Matteo, right this minute! Please.'

He almost said, "Get stuffed!" For years he and Carla had fought like cat and dog. This was the first time they had talked for months, not since that vicious row at their Mum's funeral. That was when his life had started to twist off its rails; he struggled to resist saying something sarcastic. Saying 'please' was so unlike Carla and her grief was so raw, it softened his angry heart. He sucked in a deep breath, got control and said: 'OK Carla. I'll be there as soon as I can.'

The line clicked and she was gone. No thanks, just gone. He dried and dressed quickly. Feeling too hung-over to drive and not even that sure where to go exactly, he took a cab to their converted farmhouse on the outskirts of Turin, about fifteen kilometers away.

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At first the kids were crying, clinging to their Mum. After Carla left for the hospital their natural curiosity gradually took hold, and they started plying him with all sorts of questions. His head was spinning.

When they asked him to make lunch for them it was a relief. Domenica, the oldest, was Carla in miniature, soon realising that her 'new' Uncle Matteo was hopeless in matters domestic. Domenica took charge. She liked it. She issued a stream of 'orders' while at the same time she inspected nine-month old Flavio's nappy, then changed it. Roberto, six, climbed up on a high stool to watch Matteo.

They wanted a prawn stir-fry, also a favourite of Matteo's, and something he thought he knew how to make. Domenica kept him right, stage by stage. It was the

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first hot meal that he had ever made. It turned out to be delicious, his hidden skills uncovered by Domenica's firm and detailed instructions.

Standing back as the two children ate, he was suddenly transported to his own childhood, seeing Domenica holding her little brother Flavio, remembering how his sister Carla had held their own baby brother, also called Flavio, his Mum smiling in the background.

This thought brought back the hurt again with a vicious stab to his heart. His Mum had died quietly, a ghost of her true self. At the funeral he had heard people say amongst themselves that she had died of a broken heart, stirring up again the guilt he always felt when he thought of his brother Flavio and how he had died.

Why the Hell did Carla have to call *her* baby Flavio? Was it not better just to forget their brother Flavio? Oh God Flavio, Flavio, Flavio. Why the hell did you follow me that day! I told you to go home, told you that you were too small to play football with me and the bigger boys. But you were always stubborn. Why the hell did you cross the railway line to follow me? The train came so quickly!

Flavio!

Everyone had said it was not his fault, but Matteo knew what they were thinking. And now this baby was also called Flavio! Oh God he even looks like Flavio, he thought.

Then a little voice said, 'Uncle Matteo, are you really the guy who plays striker for Juve?'

Matteo turned to look at Roberto properly for the first time. Oh Hell! Even Roberto looks like Flavio. For years Matteo had wakened in a sweat to see his long dead brother standing at his bedside. Flavio never spoke, just looked at him with those same grey eyes and those eyebrows raised as if to ask a question. As he stared at the Roberto his face changed. ***It is Flavio!*** Am I in some sort of weird, mad, realistic night-mare but awake? Have I gone over the edge? Flavio was looking at him, as in the dream. ***Just as Roberto was looking at him now!***

Matteo was jerked back to reality when baby Flavio began to cry loudly.

'He wants fed too!' declared Domenica, nearly ten years old. 'So you will have to heat a bottle from the refrigerator for him. I am not allowed to use the stove, Mum says it's too dangerous but I do know how to do it.'

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Matteo stood in frozen silence, hearing her words but unable to respond because he couldn't take his eyes off Roberto. The boy stared back at him with his brother Flavio's eyes. Those same stubborn grey eyes and eyebrows raised in query.

'OK', said Domenica, 'will I just do it then?'

Matteo still did not reply.

'So, will you give Flavio a cuddle while I do it?'

Without saying anything Matteo reached for the infant and held him close. The child smelled nice, a mixture of warm milk and sweet baby powder, not fruity and spicy like Elisa, but a nice all the same. Flavio cried for only a minute or so, then snuggled closer to him and grabbed at Matteo's nose with a little hand and pulled hard.

'OK, OK Flavio I know I have a big nose but I want to keep it all to myself.'

'I think he likes you', said Roberto, 'which is funny really, because he normally cries worse when he sees a strange man. But Uncle Matteo, are you the Juve striker?'

'Yes, I am', Matteo admitted, feeling proud that this child of six seemed to know something about him. He doubted if Carla would have told him, or Paulo, so this must have come from school.

'So when are you going to score for us again? How long is it now since you last scored?'

The child asked quite innocently, without the sneering tone he had been hearing from his team-mates and his Manager over the last few months. He was saved from facing the question by the telephone ringing.

It was Carla checking up on him.

Paulo was just out of the operating theatre, out of immediate danger but in intensive care. They said the next few days would be critical. Being a former nurse, she explained the medical facts. These flew straight over his head. Re-asserting her bossy nature she said: "Matteo, despite you're many faults, you'll just have to stay and look after the kids! There's no one else I trust." This was an order now, not a pleading request. God help the Doctors and Nurses, thought Matteo, they were in for a very hard time

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And thank God the football season had ended yesterday and he had a few weeks off. He shied away from the memory. Juve had lost the last match of the season to Inter, their hated rivals. He had missed two sitters **and** a penalty. Then, in the last minute, defending a corner, he had given away a penalty that Inter scored to win the match. No trophies for Juve this year and it was all down to him.

He knew what they were all thinking in the dressing room but no-one actually said it directly to him. In fact to him they said nothing, talking only to each other, ignoring him. They did not even indulge in their now familiar mutterings. Just silence. No one would even look him in the eye. No one wanted to say anything to him because no one wanted to be tainted by him. But he knew what they were saying and thinking behind his back. Matteo Rossi the Juve Icon would be out of the team next year. Matteo Rossi had lost it. Matteo Rossi would soon be history.

And the hardest part for Matteo was that they were right.

It had all started to unravel ten months earlier, at his Mum's funeral. That was the night that his Flavio nightmares had returned. And they were even more realistic than before. He had started drinking more than he should, trying to escape from Flavio's visits. Most nights he shut out Elisa when she tried to stop him drinking, becoming sullen, exhausted, craving sleep yet fearing it.

His fitness edge had gone. His calm assurance in front of goal, his trademark, had deserted him. He started missing sitters by trying to hit the ball too early and too hard when all he needed to do was stroke it in. Now unable to spin and skip past opponents he was getting caught on the ball. Slow of mind and body he had started pushing, tugging and diving to compensate. All the things he used to scorn in other players. He, Matteo Rossi, had become one of those lowlifes he had always despised. A dirty player, a cheat! He hated himself for that!

That was why he had gone out alone after the Inter match and got stinking drunk. And then the brutal row with Elisa.

'Uncle Matteo, are you all right?' asked Domenica.

'Eh?' Matteo replied, returning from his reveries to the farmhouse kitchen.

'Look,' she said, 'why don't you go out to the garden with Roberto with his ball and I'll look after Flavio. Mum lets me look after him all the time,' said the girl in her bossy little voice, reaching out for the infant and sitting down with him in the crook of her arm to offer him the bottle.

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'Ye-ees! Let's go!' shouted Roberto, grabbing Matteo's hand to pull him outside and kicking the football expertly through the partly open door into the garden.

What unfolded over the next few days was a revelation.

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Domenica set the rhythm for their lives, taking charge, bossing Matteo about in a firm but indulgent way, as if speaking to a not too bright child.

Matteo played a lot of kick-ball with Roberto, and did the cooking as directed by the "Chef" Domenica. He watched TV with them, helped Domenica wash and feed Flavio, supervised them as they had their showers and changed for bed.

He cuddled Flavio when Domenica was busy doing other things.

He read them their favourite stories. Often the same ones over and over.

He talked about football with Roberto who, Matteo soon learned, knew about all the games he had played for Juve and about his career as a footballer, from the time he had been 'discovered' by Man. U. as a youngster all those years ago. It seemed that Carla had been a secret fan, proud to share with her son.

After a few days Matteo realized that he had not had a drink since he arrived at the farmhouse. Nor had he missed it. Each night he had been so tired that he had slept soundly, without dreaming. He was feeling as good as he had done for a long while. But sometimes, when he looked at Domenica holding Flavio, *the girl morphed into Carla with their brother Flavio, with his Mum smiling in the background*, causing his mind to jolt, his heart to thud and the nerve to pulse in his temple.

On the fourth night, after the kids were in bed, he lay down on the couch. He was tired but content with his labours. He dozed off, not quite asleep, not quite awake, revisiting an old familiar dream.

He (aged twelve) and Flavio (aged seven) were playing football with their friends.

Both boys were good, but Flavio was a 'natural' footballer. When he ran with the ball it seemed to be a part of him. He did not even look at it. His head was always up looking to see where to pass or how to dodge past other people. Of course

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the bigger boys both admired and hated Flavio. And from time to time they would floor him and hurt him. This made Matteo so mad, leading him into fights and shouting matches. But Flavio had never complained, just picking himself up, never crying when hurt, just getting on with it. Dribble, pass, receive, shoot, score: hundreds of goals.

Everyone knew Flavio was going to be a big star. Everyone said that Matteo was really good too, but that it was already clear that Flavio was the real footballer in the family.

And that was the real reason that Matteo had told Flavio to go home that fateful day he had died on the railway! Jealousy! Matteo knew it but would never admit it, even to himself.

The waves of memories washed over him, drowning him in sadness.

He had hated the awful silent brooding at home after the tragedy. His Dad was devastated. His little wonder boy Flavio was dead. Arturo's heart was broken. He could not be consoled. He stopped eating properly, stopped taking his heart pills, and was dead within three months. He just did not come to breakfast one morning. After his funeral the house was even sadder. His Mum sat and did nothing, lost in her own world of sadness, staring out to the far distance, weeping quietly.

It was Carla who 'took charge', her way of coping with the grief. Matteo 'escaped' by playing football, obsessively, avoiding the sadness at home. Every minute that he was not at school he played football, driving himself on the field and in the gym, making himself tough in body and mind.

It was then that Elisa came into his life. She was fourteen and he was sixteen. She was small, always smiling, calm to his hot temper, serene. Soon he could share everything with her and she had listened, counseled wisely and had gradually helped him to put his night-mares where they belonged, in the past. He began to like himself a bit better. Elisa was as clever as she was beautiful. He knew he was lucky to have her. But he was not accepted by her family, at least not her father. Alberto Carlotto had big plans for his daughter and she was destined for University, to become a Doctor like himself.

At seventeen Matteo had been tall, athletic, trained hard, and shrugged off injuries quickly. He was a very good all round footballer, making up for skill deficits with bravery and strength, able to take the hard tackles, to shrug off the pain. Emulating Flavio's attitude, he never complained if he was fouled. Referees learned that he did not over-react, did not 'dive'. And being brave, Matteo was 'calm in the

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box' often getting 'taken out', punished for his goal scoring audacity by unhappy opponents. He scored lots of goals and if he missed because he got whacked he usually got a penalty. He had only ever missed a handful of penalties and had scored hundreds of goals in "Serie B" by the time he was 'spotted'.

Man U came and, very flattered, Matteo had said "YES", turning down a rival bid from Juventus.

Alberto Carlotto said "NO", forbidding Elisa to go to study in England. In any case, she was too young, her father emphasised. It was time for her to re-focus her life, to study, harder so that she could get the grades she needed for University. It was Matteo's fault, Signor Carlotto had said, Matteo was distracting Carla from her true vocation.

Matteo had to go to England alone, without his soulmate. After a few weeks his night-mares returned. Man U tried everything to help but Matteo spent a miserable year in Manchester and did not make the grade, not even getting a game with the Reserves. He was touted and Juventus came again for him. He came home, back to Elisa. Within two months he was free of Flavio's ghost, fit again, back scoring goals.

During those first two seasons with Juventus Matteo Rossi had become a Juve legend, earning the title "Juve Icon", because at a press conference he had foolishly let slip his taste in music. But he had lived up to it, scoring dozens of goals; crucial, valuable goals. And during those first years he never missed from the penalty spot, calmly sending the keepers the wrong way before stroking the ball into the net.

Then it came to a turning point when his Mum died. And at the Funeral the harsh words, on both sides. Carla's words rang in his head for the millionth time:

"Matteo, when Flavio died Mum lost you with him. You never once showed her that you cared for her, never held her, never told her you loved her, and that you missed Flavio too. YOU went away to play football and you never really came back! Did you? Years and years you have been away. Even when you came back home to Turin, you never came to see her! You never answered my telephone calls. You are a rat! I hope I never see you again!"

He hated those words from Carla but deep down he knew there was truth in them. Down through the years Elisa had asked him, pleaded with him to go to see his Mum but he had always found excuses, too guilty to look in her face, to see the same sadness reflected there that he felt pressing on his soul.

After the funeral Flavio's visits started again. His ghost came almost every night. Elisa held him and eventually he would get back to sleep again, but always troubled, restless sleep.

His drinking began, seeking a way of escape, trying to forget Carla's words, trying to forget that awful day at the railway, the awful, dreadful horror of it; the crushing guilt; the raw nagging pain. Alcohol did not help: it made things worse. The dreams became more real, more intense.

This quickly led to a loss of form. Matteo Rossi goals were now rare and seldom better than a lucky scuffle, to be jeered rather than celebrated. The mutterings began in the dressing room to match the jeers from the terraces. The Manager was 'on his case', making veiled threats.

Then there was the last crucial match of the season, against Inter, their deadly rivals. Matteo missed two sitters and a penalty. His shame and self-loathing welled up as did his loneliness as he bottled it all up inside. Then there was the horrible, horrible fight with Elisa. He knew he would never get her back. Her father would make sure of that.

And now the reverie spun on to its inevitable conclusion...

Flavio was back again, standing beside him as he lay on the couch. The solemn child with the grey eyes and the eyebrows upturned in that questioning look of his. He was within touching distance, looking down at Matteo, silent as always, staring, questioning.

Matteo cried out from his sleep, just as he had hundreds of times before, all down through the years since that fateful day at the railway line, standing beside the bloody mangled remains of what had been his brother.

'Oh God! Oh God! Forgive me!'

A small hand touched his shoulder.

Matteo opened his eyes.

'Uncle Matteo, Uncle Matteo, are you all right?'

It was Roberto, not Flavio.

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'I heard you crying and shouting something but you seemed to be sleeping. Please don't worry about Daddy. Mummy will make him better. She said she would.'

Roberto turned away and went back to his bed.

ooOoo

The next day Carla returned. She seemed genuinely willing to leave the past behind and they conversed as old friends without the acrimony or sarcasm that had been there way after Flavio had died. For Carla her focus was managing the situation, and although bossy as usual, he did not find this as annoying as in the past.

Paulo was out of danger, she explained, making good progress although everything had to happen slowly, to allow his spinal column to heal. When he was ready, he would be transferred to Rome, to a specialist clinic. His parents would pay, and they would visit him there every day as it was near to where they lived. Carla had to return to her job at the Advertising Agency, she explained. Their business was suffering, and she and Paulo could lose their Clients. It had been too long already. He, Matteo was still needed, she explained.

Over the days that followed Matteo and Domenica coped well. Carla although living at home again was late back, visiting Paulo when she wasn't at her office. As Matteo no particular plans for his summer break, he was happy to stay on, he said, and found that it was true.

Although tempted, because he had the primary responsibility for the children, it made it easier for him to resist the urge to drink alcohol, and he took nothing, not even wine. He noticed that he was sleeping better. And, whenever he got a chance, he went out jogging; then sprint jogging, then sprinting flat out, getting ready for pre-season training.

Mid-July

Matteo Rossi was back at Juve's training ground. With the new season ahead and an influx of new players, the atmosphere was one of optimism again. It was soon clear to everyone on the coaching staff that Matteo had changed. The old Matteo Rossi was back, but better, working harder and with less ego needing polished. Soon he was the fittest in the squad. As he became fitter his calmness and strength in the penalty box returned and he was scoring again, both in training and pre-season friendlies. When the new Season started his goal tally began to climb and he was goal leader in "Serie A".

Roberto was happy too, asking Matteo to sign football cards for all his friends at school. In their kick-about sessions with his nephew, and watching Roberto playing with his school-friends, Matteo saw that Roberto had excellent ball skills. The boy, even though the youngest in the team, was already the star, playing alongside and against older boys on equal terms, even though he was usually the smallest on the pitch. Roberto is just like Flavio was at his age, thought Matteo.

Early October.

Paulo returned to the farmhouse and began to climb his personal mountain to full recovery. He was mobile now, with a stick, and asserted forcibly that he was very able to look after his own children. Meanwhile Carla was doing her best to keep their business functioning. Paulo was a Roma supporter with rather old-fashioned ideas about how soccer should be played. Matteo had never hit it off with him.

To avoid the inevitable arguments that would arise if he stayed at the farmhouse, Matteo moved back to his apartment. In any case, with the season fully underway, he was less able to help with child-minding. When he phoned Carla to check how it was working out she told him not to worry, that she found someone else to help look after the kids, someone she trusted.

It seemed to Matteo that he was no longer as important, no longer needed. This pulled him down mentally and now that he was alone for the first time in months he began to allow Elisa to fill his thoughts once more.

Late October.

It was Sunday morning, the day after their first encounter with Inter since the famous defeat in May five months earlier. The match had gone well, 3-1 for Juventus, Matteo scoring a hat-trick. He was listening to music, nursing a huge bruise on his right thigh from a 'revenge attack' by the Inter Centre Back after Matteo's third goal.

His personal blue phone pinged. He scrambled it from the floor beside him.

It was a text from Elisa:

'Matteo,
I am being married on Wednesday of next week, to Guido Falcone.
Do you remember him? He says you met one time, after a Roma game.
Perhaps you might like to come?'

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It is here in Turin, at the Cathedral, at two o'clock.
Do come if you can, if only for old time's sake?
Elisa.'

His mind froze. He sat up, switched off the music with the remote controller. He stared at the words. His heart was pounding. He wanted to run away from this, to make it disappear. So soon, only five months from their break-up and she had found someone else. Someone who wanted babies! How could she forget him so soon? His stomach began to heave, filling his throat with bile. He wanted to get up, go out, meet someone, to tell them what had happened to him: but in those first hours he could not make his legs work. He resisted the temptation to seek solace in alcohol and crawled to bed, to sob himself to sleep. There would be no real sleep, only night-mares, but these were of a huge White Wedding at the Cathedral. He was not a guest, merely a spectator, on the steps outside, a figure of fun, wearing a very muddy football strip. And it was not a Juve strip! It was a Roma strip.

The next day, Monday, he phoned in early to the Physio to report himself as 'sick' with a tummy bug that he did not want to risk spreading to the squad. He moped around the apartment, feeling very sorry for himself, searching his memory to put a face to the name of his rival Guido Falcone. He tried eating scrambled eggs, but the food would not stay down.

It was then that he noticed how dirty and untidy the apartment had become, without Elisa to help keep things in order. He searched the local telephone directory for someone to come to do emergency cleaning. Everyone promised to send someone, but it would take a week or so to organise. In the end he decided to do it himself. What he had been 'taught' by Domenica proved useful.

He started with the bedclothes, the towels and all his shirts, socks and underwear, sorting them into the right piles. It took four trips to the Launderette, which offered an ironing service. He vacuumed and dusted, washed the tiled floors, cleaned the windows and mirrors, and deep-cleaned the three bathrooms. He got into the swing of it and kept going. It was nearly mid-night when he finished and he fell into bed and hoped that the dream of him at 'The Wedding' wearing the dirty Roma strip did not return.

He wakened late and tried scrambled eggs and this time they stayed down. He cleared up and did a final run of the dishwasher, giving the seldom used pots and dishes a good clean. Matteo lay back on the settee and switched on his music centre with the remote control. The previous day's frenetic activity had been therapeutic and he decided that he would return to training the following day, to make sure he was fully occupied while 'The Wedding' was taking place.

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He flicked his phone to read her text again. Elisa's face filled his mind: Elisa, the girl that he could never get back, the girl who was to marry someone else - Guido Falcone, whoever he was! No doubt a man her father had chosen, a man with an education, maybe some sort of medic, and probably a Roma supporter. All Matteo wanted was to be left alone to grieve for his loss.

He was about to throw the phone, to smash it against the wall, when it pulsed and started to ring. He stared at the number, but did not recognise it. It would be a reporter, even though this was a personal blue phone. Or was it a sales call again, from the telephone company? He decided to let it ring. It rang and rang and rang. Eventually it stopped.

A minute later the phone started to pulse and ring again. It was the same unrecognized number. He pressed the key.

"Bigger off you parasites! Leave me alone! I do **not** want anything you are selling! Got it! This is a personal number. Just leave me alone!"

'Oh', said the voice, then nothing, just a distant chatter of voices somewhere near her.

Oh God it was her. 'Elisa, darling, is that you?' he croaked, almost in a whisper, his chest so tight that he could hardly squeeze out the words. 'Oh, darling, don't hang up, please say it's you!'

'Are you all right, Matteo?' she asked, her voice trembling with fear.

'Yes, yes, thanks. Look, Elisa darling, I am really sorry I spoke like that just now. It's just that I think I'm going mad since your text. I can't stop thinking about you. Elisa I must see you. Please don't marry this Falcone guy. I need you. I want you, I love you.'

The words rushed out, words he had never used when they were together. Words he had always thought were soft, silly, and unmanly. Now they just spilled out like a torrent.

'Oh, Matteo, Matteo, what have we done to each other?' she sobbed. He could feel the raw pain in her voice.

His phone died, out of battery. He ran to the bedside table for his silver phone, the one he used for media work, the one he usually kept switched off. Its battery showed nearly full. He swapped it to his blue phone, threw on his puffa jacket, grabbed his car keys, and slipped into his training shoes. He was almost through the door when he realised that he had no idea where to find her. He

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checked his watch. Almost half past eleven. There was still time. Oh God where is she? Where on earth is she? OK, idiot, try phoning her mobile number! Do it now!

But before he could dial the phone rang in his hand.

'Elisa? Darling, listen, please!' he cried over the airwaves.

But it was Carla.

'Matteo, come here to the farmhouse. Right now! It is very important!' Carla was back to her old self now that things were nearly back to normal at home, using her annoying, bossy voice.

'Sorry Carla but I can't just now, I must find Elisa!'

'That's why I am phoning you great dope! She's here, with us. Come right now, or else!'

The call disconnected.

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Elisa was standing at the doorway, with baby Flavio in her arms and Domenica at her side. Roberto was standing to one side, keeping a ball in the air with his head and feet, like a sea lion at the circus. Domenica reached across and took Flavio.

'Ciao Uncle Matteo', called out Matteo. Flavio gurgled and giggled then shouted something that sounded like 'Shpidah'. It was Flavio's favourite word. Flavio was very keen on spiders from the stories Matteo had read to him.

A voice called from indoors, calling the children inside. The children protested, Carla insisted, loudly. The children smiled in defeat and went indoors as commanded.

Matteo and Elisa were alone. Elisa looked radiant. Being pregnant suited her.

'Elisa, look. Forget this Falcone guy, OK? Let me look after you, both of you. Please forgive me, please? I promise I'll look after your baby, as if it were my own. Please, please don't marry this man. Marry me, please. Give me this one more chance, please.'

He stopped just short of her. Her perfume filled his head just as it had in the past. He was feeling giddy with the desire to hold her, to kiss her, to love her.

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She raised her head and looked up into his face with tear-filled eyes.

'Oh Matteo, can you ever forgive me? Please say yes, please.'

'It's OK, Elisa darling. I love you so much. Don't worry about any of it. I will love this baby just as I love you, just don't marry him, OK?'

She stepped into his open arms. He wanted to crush her to him but because of the baby he held back, holding her gently, nuzzling her neck.

'It **will** be alright, Elisa, you'll see. And we'll have many other babies, our own babies, after this one.'

'Eh? What do you mean, Matteo?'

'The baby you are having with Falcone! But I'm OK with it. It's not the baby's fault. It's mine. I told you to do it.'

'Ah,' she smiled, 'but the whole Guido marriage thing, it's not true. Oh Matteo, forgive me, please forgive me. It was all made up. It was all Carla's idea.'

'Carla's idea? How does she come into this? How did you get to know Carla anyway?'

'When you had to start back training, I knew she would need someone to help her with the kids. I had followed you here a few times, from your apartment, so that I would know where you were. And so one night, after you had left, I went took a chance, knocked on her door, and told her everything about us. Over these past few months I have been here a lot of the time. Even a few times when you came to collect the kids to take them to football. And even that time when Carla and Paolo went out to friends, when you came to stay over and bathed them, cooked for them and read stories to them. I was here, just out of sight, listening and sometimes watch. It was so hard to stay concealed, but the kids were great about it. It was our little game, you see. They really enjoyed it.'

'You were here? Watching me? No, I would have known, surely?'

'Matteo, you changed so much after your Mum died. I tried to help you, to love you, to hold you and heal you. You know that. But you shut me out. But, here, with the kids, I saw it happen. You changed. As you got to know the kids, I was able to watch you change. Now you are even nicer than before. But since you didn't ring or try to get in touch I began to think that you didn't want me, that you didn't need me anymore. When I watched you here with the kids, you seemed to be happy enough without me.'

'No, Elisa. I was thinking about you all the time, thinking how it would be nice if we had our own family. I should have tried to get in touch. I ...'

'Shush, shush, Matteo, let me finish. So when Carla came up with this 'test of love' by sending that fake text, I was tempted. She said she *knew* you loved me but that she also knew how stubborn you can be. Can you ever forgive me? And of course my baby is *your* baby. How could you think I would love anyone but you? You

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are the only one for me, and when you said on the phone you loved me..., my heart almost burst with joy.'

'Oh Elisa, I want to take you home and...'

'That would be very nice, Matteo. And don't worry, it's allowed. And our baby is very strong and healthy. I think he or she might be a footballer, there's a lot of kicking going on down here. Give me your hand.'