

Chapter Six

THE VIOLIN

*We meet and it begins
The sound of violins
The song of birds high
On the wing
You taught my heart to sing*

—“You Taught My Heart To Sing”

The slap to Carluchi’s face caused him to yank the violin from under his jaw, holding it with his right hand while his left hand shot upward automatically. He began to pat his numb cheek as though he was making sure it was still there.

“Now again, you *somaro*... stupid little...” Josef Russo’s voice trailed off as it often did when his temper subsided. Russo was like a humid summer rain. You never knew when he would unleash himself and how hard.

“Heh!” he blared like a sharp French horn with a slighter slap. “You don’t like that?”

“No, Maestro. I work hard,” Carluchi said, offering his best jagged English, then wondering if he should have tried to say it in Italian. He knew Russo’s look, so he tried not to cry, holding back his sobs with the same force he used to pinch the violin against his tiny little neck and chin.

"That is not good enough!" the music professor bellowed in an extended scream.

"But..."

"Don't but."

Carluchi's eyes grew to pizza size.

"Play, God Dammit!"

Carluchi did. Frantically. Even if the strings whined and screeched or made no sound at all. In those moments of terror, the bow rarely reached its mark. He did as he was told, though; he played while his blond curls bounced about his head, the tiny ringlets jerking a half note behind the bow's motion.

When he finally settled down and composed himself, Carluchi would play with *vivace*—partly out of fear, partly because he loved theatrics, but mostly because he had seen his big brother play the instrument that way—and with *brio*. Besides if he moved like his brother Giuseppe, maybe he could play like Giuseppe. His brother had already mastered "La Caccia," a Vivaldi violin concerto in B-flat, as well as Tartini's violin sonata in G minor, the "Devil's Trill Sonata."

He was hard at work showing Russo how he had mastered a simple piece, one he could now play all the way through, when again Russo reached out and slapped the small boy across the face.

"That's C, not E, Carluchi, What did I tell you?!"

Ashamed again, he muttered, "So sorry, Professor. *Spia-cente*."

"I will help him, Professor Russo," Giuseppe interrupted, holding his hand up to intercept another slap. "Please don't. I will practice hard with my little brother. I promise you."

"Yes, I will practice, Maestro," Carluchi affirmed.

"You love the *musica*, Carluchi?"

"Yes, uh I love it, Professor Russo.

"You want to play with the greats, the masters?"

"Yes, *signore*."

"Then you will eat, drink, sleep," Russo pausing to make his point,

"...and shit the violin, you understand?" Before the child could answer, "And when you are great..."

Unable to contain his enthusiasm, "Then I will live my

dream." Pushing his chest out proudly, "I will be famous."

"You *sciocco*! Fame has nothing to do with it. Living your dream means being *suo meglio*." The small boy's comment had set Russo off. He suddenly became enraged as he pondered the boy's remark, "If you are famous in time, so be it, yet fame does not matter. What matters is that you are able to say," Russo threw back his head, his nose tilted upward, "that you were good enough to play alongside the best." Then shaking from head to toe, like a washing machine trying to manage an uneven load of laundry, "Because if you can play alongside the best, you *are* the best! *Capisca*, Carluchi? Anyone can be famous, but not everyone can be his best."

Carluchi tried to speak.

Russo stopped him with an outstretched hand. He gulped in air and finished his harangue softly. "Ah, and when you play your best, someday when your mind forgets, your heart...it will remember." To make his point, Russo kicked Carluchi in the shin, "Do you understand?"

"*Capisca*, *Signore*, *capisca*," Carluchi hoped he would not be struck again.

With Russo staring at him, Carluchi took his violin and put it gently under his chin. He began to play again.

Most often while Carluchi played, Giuseppe would sit and fidget, for there was only one violin between them. On Russo's bad days, he wanted to spare his little brother, to take his turn for him, including the harsh slaps across the chops. Carluchi was only four. But the bald-headed, toothless womanizer of a virtuoso obviously didn't care. Giuseppe could see that. Though he wished he could, Giuseppe realized he couldn't shield his little brother from Russo any more than he could protect him from the shocks along the boys' home front.

Slapping, shoving, yelling: they were ritual, customary as they went from one adult to the next in the DePietro household. Like a row of cascading dominoes, once the momentum started it could not be stopped. Sometimes the histrionics went in reverse order: Yelling, slapping, shoving. Then there were the singular occasions when it might be just the shoving.

In the boys' home they never knew when any of it would begin or end. True, days could pass without an outburst. But one

never knew. Such was the pattern in most immigrant domiciles. And so it went in the densely populated households of Italian neighborhoods clustered closely in the region of upstate New York. Impromptu overreactions were like beads of flying bacon grease. When things heated up, you never knew when one would spontaneously splatter, where it would land or on whom, and what damage it would cause. Eruptions were common, fiery, and erratic.

With Russo, though, whose house smelled of harsher garlic and greener spinach than that of the DePietro's, the tirades were constant and predictable. He was nearly always in a vicious mood. The boys came to expect his dramatics and his corporal punishment as regularly as they did their nightly bowl of *pasta e fagioli*. They often argued over what was worse: their house or Russo's. For the mellow and gentle Carluchi, the drama in his house was the more difficult to bear. Words and actions were like hidden landmines: he never knew when he might innocently come upon one and accidentally set it off. At least with Russo he knew he was always on tentative ground. With the violin teacher the thunderous explosions were as regular as the cannons in the 1812 Overture.

What Giuseppe most hated was when Russo kicked the furniture, such as the lamp table next to where he stationed the boys. Without their interception, the table would be sent flying into the wall or skidding across the floor like a directionless *bacci* ball. Sometimes he kicked the children. But stalwart, they would continue to stand and only pause a quarter note, aching shins and all, as they held their breath to await Russo's next move. Would there be mercy, an occasional forgiving swirl of the hand, a signal for the DePietro on deck to continue to play? Or would there be another physical assault? Mentally, the brothers huddled in hope. Wide-eyed and militia-like, they stood by to await Russo's downbeat.

Once in a while he complimented them with his tag phrase when they had done well: "*Ora quell'era molto bello, molto bello.*" Like kicked dogs, they cowered until they heard those words, their *segno*, for springing back into musical action.

Carluchi and Giuseppe went to Russo's once a week. They

traveled the streetcar for the first seven miles, then waited for the transfer to another one for the other four miles. They would leave directly from school in the afternoon and not return home until eight or nine p.m. They were always exhausted and hungry.

Every week for eight years, they took that ride.

That hour pause between streetcars, in both directions, was a crucifying hell in winter. They had only a small wooden station house to insulate them from the arctic air. Their teeth would chatter. They would shiver uncontrollably. When they arrived at Russo's they wanted a warm bath and a change of socks, but all they got was a manic musician with a palm of lead. Partly to blame was the language barrier. The children were learning to speak English and relying on it more often, but Russo ranted in Italian only. If they were lucky Russo's bi-lingual concert pianist grandson would be visiting and would interpret the teacher's commands.

Other times they were on their own.

They were always grateful when they were rescued with an occasional cookie from Russo's wife who ran about, almost on cue, cleaning up after her husband's tantrums. *Signora* Russo hoped the children would play well, for she had nearly run out of ways to repair that chipped lamp table. It was as though a woodpecker lived indoors.

The boys would take the long journey home, Giuseppe often holding his little brother's hand or wrapping him tightly inside the left side of his coat jacket, telling him stories of music and mania. He chattered without putting periods after his sentences, captivating Carluchi as he told him about what he overheard from his Pa and Ma: How Russo was a grand maestro and had played with a symphony in New York City; how lucky they were to study with him; how Mrs. Russo was once a great opera singer; and how that couple's children had all gone on to be wonderful musicians.

"Pa learned from Maestro Russo, Carluch, did you know that?"

"He did?"

"Yeah."

"Did he teach him the flute?"

"The mandolin," Giuseppe corrected.

"Did he slap Pa-pa-eee?" Carluchi had concocted his own vocabulary—his own family nicknames.

"Yes. That's why Pa quit."

"Then why don't we quit, Giusep?"

"Because. It's okay to hit a child. But when you hit another man you hit him in his *dignita*—his dignity" Giuseppe held his chin high, looking proud so Carluchi would know the meaning of the word. "But if a man is proud, like our Pa, he won't let him teach him anymore."

"But Pa-pa-eee is '*amici con*' with Professor."

"Yes," Giuseppe was always patient with his little charge. "Pa can still be his friend, but he can't be his student anymore."

"Why?"

"Because Pa would slap him back and then Professor would slap him a good one. Then Pa would slap him a hard one..."

"And they would keep slapping?"

"It would not stop, Carluchi."

"And then what? Would Pa-pa-eee come home with something broken like...like...his nose?"

"Even worse."

"What?"

"His mandolin."