

The
B o s t o n
+ A Novel +
C a s t r a t o



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I

*Quando il vostro diavolo era uno studente, il mio era l'insegnante.
When your devil went to school, mine was the teacher.*

NAPLES, ITALY, 1906

This was going to be his day. Raffi seized control of the rail platform, pushing away the other *scugnizzi* just as the gleaming carriage from Rome slid to a stop. As the glass doors opened in the hiss of steam rising to the vaulted domes of Napoli Centrale station, he was encouraged to see it was full of a dressy crowd, all fur and silk ribbons. If he worked quickly, maybe he'd be able to eat more than just moldy bread tonight. He closed his eyes and cleared his mind.

He had just one shot.

Raffi started to sing, very slowly, very controlled. One missed note and he knew he'd lose them. This time he wouldn't scratch the streets; he'd build a tower. He swept into 'Caro Mio Ben' in a lucky way, the soaring notes clear and fine without a hint of sharpness, exploring the sweetest heights of his range. The concourse wheeled slowly around him. He felt a warm rush. This was it. He was transported, all eyes on him.

In the dusty scuff, baggage handlers, vendors, soldiers, even the rats on the tracks—all stopped short. He had them.

His mother's ghost drew near, set down her suitcase, smoothed her skirt, and fell into his music. Raffi drifted out of himself and into her heart. His pure notes curled above the gas globes and gate signs and vibrated across the ceiling, wafting back and forth until the echo seeped into the stones and became part of the foundation.

His captivated audience on the upper balconies held its breath. Even the massive locomotives lowered on their suspension systems as if to put their ears to the ground. Behind them, Mt. Vesuvius leaned into the window. Raffi's final note was a shining arrow that pierced the coal-soot dusk as it rose to the domes, then softly fell.

‘You are my wonder,’ his mother cooed. ‘You have such a gift. Don’t squander it.’

Nannies joined the buzz and rewarded him with figs from the tin pails they hung from net-covered carriages.

‘How old are you?’ asked a lady with a beaver collar as she drew a coin for him from a drawstring bag.

‘Old enough,’ Raffi said, making people laugh, though he wasn’t sure why. He just knew six sounded like such a baby. Bad form to look at the purse. ‘Thank you, signora. Thank you, signora.’

‘Where are your parents?’ the lady asked.

‘My father lives at the base of the volcano, where the giants sleep.’

Fathers were luxuries. Who could boast of one? Grandfather Vesuvius knew him best. As long as he could remember, the slow blue slope had followed him—an attentive audience. It roamed with him through the city, into Virgil’s Tomb where he sold daguerreotypes to sightseers, down sooty alleys where the dustbins stood, rich with treasures, disappearing and reappearing at the end of sunlit squares to whisper, ‘I’ve got my eye on you.’

The woman watched as he stuck the coins in his pocket. ‘And your mother?’ she asked softly.

‘My mother died two months ago, from the typhus.’ He’d thrown himself down and wept beside the Fountain of the Little King.

The wallets and purses opened. Coins spilled and sparkled around him. Raffi looked behind her voice. A dark shape glided to the edge of the throng. A little man in a black robe. Crowded eyes. It wasn’t the first time he’d noticed Father Diletti watching.

‘Beginner’s luck,’ the priest said. ‘You can only travel through the *zona di passaggio* like that if you have no idea what it is.’

Raffi looked for his mother, but she’d disappeared again. He felt a tug on his shoulder. ‘That’s enough, little stray,’ a carabinieri said. ‘Get out of this station, now. Stop bothering the tourists. Get out, I say!’ Awkwardly, the brute started dragging him. ‘A train station is no place for music.’

‘Hark,’ Diletti said. ‘I’ll handle this.’ In a quick motion he grabbed Raffi’s hand and led him away.

Squeezing his upper arm, Diletti yanked Raffi through the series of narrow alleys above via Vicaria Vecchia. Beyond the Archbishop's Palace, a shadow cast a chill from the great gray stones of the Duomo di Napoli.

Inside the cathedral, Diletti soundlessly descended three passageways with a simian grace, pausing just once to light a candle without releasing Raffi's arm. The boy heard water dripping on stone before he saw it in the flickering gloom. When had it started to rain?

'Where are you taking me?'

Diletti turned on his heel, crouched, roughly gripped Raffi's chin with his bony fingers, and stared him in the eye. 'Consider this your baptism.' The monk's upper lip curled back, exposing the rotten teeth of his bulging maxilla. The black hairs in his flared nose were a tangle of snakes.

'Why so close, old man?' Raffi said. 'Are you trying to kiss me? I'm not your girl.'

'So cocksure, aren't you? What a wolf pup I've brought into my choir, pissing on everything.'

'You old queer.'

'That screeching of yours back there might have impressed the illiterati, but to me it was sickening. I almost couldn't watch it. Still, I might make a singer of you yet.'

The black stairwell where Diletti pointed was like looking into a rifle barrel. But Raffi relaxed when he heard the sound of a choir.

'The practice area is in the basilica, above the necropolis,' Diletti said. 'We certainly don't want to offend the angels if we're not ready.'

In the murk, a railing barely saved Raffi from falling into a bottomless cistern from the slippery stairs. The sound of their steps rang along passageways decorated by faded frescoes. A door swam up from the darkness. Diletti turned the lock and looked back. 'I suppose you're hungry.'

'Attention,' Diletti said as a dozen boys looked up from their music charts. He pushed Raffi in front of them. 'This boy wants to eat you alive. I commend him to your discretion. Get him some lunch.'

Raffi shrugged and stuck out his tongue.

'Nice,' the priest said.

A moment later, they were scuffling and playing as if Diletti weren't there.

But he was always there, an icy presence. During the next six months, Raffi no longer thought about food all the time, though a sense of uneasiness sometimes stole his appetite. One thing about the Monkey: Diletti knew the music, cold.

He occasionally plucked one of the boys out for a special session. The others were left to hold their facial muscles still while singing into mirrors, so as not to over-emote. The morning after Diletti had forced Raffi to sing trills, scales, and embellished *passaggi* well past midnight—until he cried for his cot—the announcement came.

‘Rafaele is my new protégé. After your transformation, you’ll one day be *primo solista* at the Sistine Chapel.’

‘You promised me!’ Carlo screamed. ‘I’m the one who earned the *onore e fortuna*. I was the one who got all the applause in the Jubilate Deo.’ He turned on Raffi. ‘How dare you? You did this.’

Diletti shook his head. ‘Talent like this appears just once in a generation.’ He disappeared behind the rood screen.

Raffi, asking for it, thrust his chin up and flashed his teeth.

‘Lucky stiff,’ Carlo shouted. ‘What did you do to make him pick *you*?’

‘I’m so sorry,’ Raffi said. He rubbed a false tear.

‘*Bastardo*,’ Carlo cried and sprang. ‘You’ll pay for this!’

‘They’ll pay *me*!’ Raffi laughed, dancing away.

The displaced star raised his fists.

‘Aw, come on, Carlo, don’t you know the old Monkey just loves to see us draw blood?’

Raffi sensed the swing slowly departing the platform—just a quick shift to the left was all he needed. The punch whistled past his chin. As though he’d dreamed it but couldn’t stop it, he watched the big goon slip off the chancel, rattle his foot in a wash bucket, and crack his head against the stone floor. The other choristers gasped, looked at each other for permission, then laughed. But it was no longer funny. He felt a chill, even a pang of regret. Carlo had been one of the hardest to read, but if there were anything Raffi had learned about his fellow singers, it was that Carlo’s only certain virtuosity was a gift for recalling a grievance as clearly as one of Aida’s elephants. He sure wasn’t going to forget this.

The next night, Raffi listened to the pounding rain. The table in the butcher shop felt cold, but the wine was warm and woozy. Through a cracked windowpane he caught sight of the Cathedral tiptoeing across

the alley. It slipped behind his volcano, floating through the moonlight. He tried to sit up, but the straps seemed to tighten around his wrists.

‘Be still,’ Diletti said and poured some more of the *Lacryma Christi*. ‘Just think how good you’ll feel about yourself.’

‘Will it hurt?’ Raffi asked.

Diletti sighed. ‘All the others in Monte Compatri greedily received their gift, which opened so many doors while softly clicking the tiniest shut. A passage to lust and dreams, maybe, but not to rapture. You wouldn’t want to be chained to a madman like Socrates says, would you?’

Raffi didn’t know who Socrates was, but it sounded bad. Was he the devil?

As though the devil had tickled his ear, Diletti reached to check his own privates. ‘Surely I’d have jumped at this, little demon, as did so many at the Conservatorio. If the prestige isn’t enough, there’s the twenty gold *Umberto* coins, a great deal more than your father—if one would claim you—could steal in three years.’

‘But will it hurt?’

The door creaked and the butcher’s apprentice shuffled in behind a flash of white cloth and green glass. Diletti uncorked the bottle and waved it under Raffi’s nose. The vapor was sweet and sharp at the same time. His eyes watered as the room darkened two shades. He was certain Diletti said, ‘I’ll stop right now unless you beg me to continue.’

With liturgical reverence, the Monkey unrolled a velvet pouch of sparklies near his feet. ‘Knives, scissors, *emasculatome*.’

The apprentice shuddered. ‘*Gesù Cristo*.’ He shook his head and backed away. ‘Maybe I shouldn’t take this money.’

‘One more word from you,’ Diletti growled, ‘and you won’t have to worry about being paid.’

‘Does it have to be now?’ Raffi asked.

‘Imbecile. It’s now or never. I’m doing it to protect your voice before it’s too late. Actually, I might already have heard tinges of something “other” in your *floritura*. Singing is your one and only grace. I can’t stand by and let time take that away from you.’

‘Father, what if I change my mind later?’

‘Child, are you asking a man of God if he believes in miracles? Anything’s possible in science. But from my experience, eunuchs are always happy with their lot. They have no time for trivial reflections.’

They're too busy choosing between offers to sing in the greatest basilicas and opera houses in the world.'

'Will it hurt?'

'You won't feel a thing. What did Abelard write to Eloisa? "A long fixed calm of still repose." Don't squirm in the face of lustrous culture. You're not losing much for greatness. Just two tender clams shucked from shells, fresh from the Bay of Naples.'

Raffi struggled. His eyes grew wild. 'Carlo told me I could never be a man, sir.'

'Rubbish. Castrati are the world's greatest lovers. Tenducci married and fathered two children. Did he remember his old choirmaster in all his fame? Bah! But you'll remember me, won't you?'

Feeling a rush of dizziness, Raffi looked up to see spider webs lit by the tapers flickering on the chandelier. He reached to touch them, forgetting something was holding his arm down. He blinked quickly, and the chandelier began to spin.

'Lust is an interruption to pure thought, little sparrow, an erupting volcano—a false urgency that blocks the music of the spheres,' Diletti whispered. 'Who wants a leaping serpent when he's contemplating Saint Thomas Aquinas? Why plod through life grounded when you can soar? Look!'

From the folds of his robe he drew out a smoky photo in a silver-filigreed frame. 'This month the greatest living singer is in Teatro di San Carlo and La Scala. This will be you.'

Raffi studied the supercilious expression on Alessandro Moreschi's face. Cast in chiaroscuro, the singer's cavernous eyes were sunk in deep dark circles of exquisite *tristezza* like two moons over a fleshy lake. With his chins thrust slightly upward, arched eyebrows, and glistening black coiffure, he exuded an exotic air of both focus and indulgence. 'Sing well, eat well,' the Monkey always said. The entertainer's luxuriant wrap, a cloud of cashmere, coordinated carefully with a matching three-piece suit, a flash of white shirt, and a viceroy's striped sash arranged *just so*. Moreschi sure had God by the leg.

'Just imagine the esteem in which the whole world will hold you.'

'But...'

The priest shrugged. 'You'll never be a man if you shrink from beauty. Maybe you don't have the balls for this. Ha!'

Raffi forced himself to conjure the feeling of singing for his supper in the train station to fend off that gnawing hunger that never went away. He could smell the night soils in the alley, his only bedroom. A cusk he'd run into on the little black beach near Castel dell'Ovo after a deadly storm—and considered eating—opened his dull eye to warn, 'Your hands will never be warm again.' He'd caught the fish's twin with his bare fingers just feet away in the silvery waves and marveled at its rainbow scales—its live, golden eye. He thought of his voice, the only thing in this world that still loved him back. Maybe he could stand a little... editing.

'My pay'd better be in gold, not paper, old man.'

He lay still as the Monkey covered his nose and mouth with the handkerchief dipped in ether. The ceiling floated overhead as the paralysis bathed him. The priest metamorphosed into a descending black cloud, and Raffi drifted in and out of consciousness. The voices melted away, then grew near.

The apprentice waved a tin of olive oil over a kerosene lamp; Raffi heard the tinkling sound as the can warmed. Diletti poured the oil in a thin stream on his nether regions, and the boy felt the lower half of his body drift away.

'How can something so inconsequent mean so much to so many?' Diletti murmured.

Then he gently pulled Raffi's left testicle, the one that cradled his unborn sons, with the *emasculatome*. With a scope of twine, carmine and cutting, he tied the skin above it until it was barely a hair's-breadth wide. 'Just the smallest snip, and you begin your ecstasy,' Diletti said. He turned to the apprentice. 'Now, the scissors. Cut right here.'

'I just can't. You do it.'

'Oh, why not?' Diletti said, holding out his hand. 'I have to do everything else around here. I'm curious, what did you accept the money for? Is there not a sign on your quaint shop that promises in addition to your wormy steaks and chops, *Qui si castrano ragazzi*, here boys are castrated? You at least have, as promised, his box?'

The apprentice took it out of his greasy apron.

'Well, it *looks* like gold, anyway,' Diletti said.

Raffi stirred.

'His eyelids are moving,' the apprentice said. 'He's not waking, is he?'

‘Just a reflex. Maybe he’s running in a dream. Don’t worry, they’re all like that.’

With a smooth movement, the scissors clicked and Diletti dropped in the scrap of flesh. ‘See, there isn’t so much sensation.’ He peered down as a tiny pulse of dark red appeared. ‘Humph.’

Measure for measure, ‘It looks like a heartbeat,’ the assistant said. ‘Is that supposed to happen? Doesn’t that mean you’ve nicked a vessel?’

‘So now you’re the expert?’ Diletti wiped it with the back of his sleeve. Then he looked into Raffi’s eyes. ‘You’re almost there, angel.’

Raffi raised his head and was enveloped by a beatific calm as he watched the blood pool against his creamy leg. He tried to speak, but his lips wouldn’t move.

Diletti guided his head down and finished with neat, catgut stitches, stealing an admiring moment before swaddling him in a snowy gown. ‘It is done. I release you—from the fever of life!’

Suddenly a tremendous thumping erupted behind the iron door until it swung open, nearly off its hinges.

Gasping, Raffi surfaced from his sickly lagoon. ‘Hey, Carlo, what are you doing here?’ But Carlo, pointing, wasn’t alone. He was surrounded by a coterie of priests in white, a cardinal in scarlet.

‘Fetch the surgeon!’ the cardinal roared.

‘Belphegor!’ a priest charged at Diletti. ‘God help you for what you’ve done!’

‘You’ve heard him sing,’ Diletti shrieked. ‘He’s like an angel! He’ll be the next Moreschi!’ He took a step backward and balled his fists.

‘You’ve heard the papal decree,’ a Slavic monsignor in a black beard said in basso profundo. ‘There will be no further mutilations.’

‘That was advisory in nature,’ Diletti said, spitting. ‘I do not mutilate but celebrate.’

A dark-complected initiate gaped. ‘He didn’t get the memorandum.’

‘Restrain him!’ the cardinal said, then touched his ring to his lips. ‘You’d better hope this boy doesn’t die from exsanguination.’

‘Oh, there was never a chance of that,’ Diletti said. ‘This is a matter of art for me. You can’t tell me the congregations won’t worship his voice.’

They’d sure better. Raffi propped himself halfway up.

Red as his gown, and athletic from the polo field, the cardinal rushed three steps and slapped Diletti backhanded with his ring.

'Mercy, your serenity! Forgive an old man.' Diletti dropped smoothly to his knees. 'If I thought this was wrong, then all the others I've brought to beauty would be wrong, too. I couldn't live with that.'

'Contemptible toad. You'll roast in hell.'

'I beg for you to receive me in confession.'

'You stink of the ignorance of the province,' the cardinal said, 'which may be the greater shame. This rabid search for the exquisite. The clipping of boys disgusts me. You're finished, old man.'

'No, he is mine to train. His music will be unearthly. He is most precious.'

'You have my word, no one will ever hear him sing. The Church is out of the monster business.' His Eminence took in a purple stain on the filthy stone floor and wrinkled his nose. 'What a foul Bacchanal. We expunged these abominable rites from Florence, only to have to race to Milan. Now it's resurfaced here in my own Naples? How is this possible in the twentieth century? I want all evidence of this destroyed and wiped clean.' He stopped at the door. Fascinated, Raffi watched him examine the mold-blackened ceiling. Scrawled at its center was a devil dancing around a tiny fountain.

'What, more barbarism?' The cardinal seemed to be addressing the painter, long dead. 'Did you think this could pass for art?' He scowled at the worn sign in the window. 'Pull down the walls, if you must. Turn this into a haberdasher's.' He turned to stare at Raffi.

The cardinal's mouth moved—a flicker, like candle flames disturbed by a basilica full of ghosts. 'The worst of it is, I never thought much of Moreschi.'

Raffi looked back at his volcano, encircled in a crown of smoke. He fell headlong into hell.