

A detailed oil painting of an elderly man with white powdered hair, looking slightly to the right with a serious expression. The background is a neutral, textured grey.

A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF  
**FILIPPO MAZZEI**

**AMERICA'S  
FORGOTTEN**  
FOUNDING FATHER

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**M**  
THE  
MENTORIS  
PROJECT

# Chapter One

## FAMILY FIRST AND FOREMOST

“Hail Mary, full of grace.”

Elisabetta Mazzei’s hoarse, dry throat repeated the opening line to that sacred prayer to the most sacred of all mothers over and over again. On the verge of childbirth, she was attended by her sister-in-law, Caterina, who joined her in prayer: “The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.”

Elisabetta fell back on the very thin straw-stuffed mattress. With force she rose up and began again between her pains. “Hail Mary—”

“Stop! Please,” Caterina blurted out. “I can’t bear to hear it again. Listen to the children. They are serenading your new child...music at birth promises a life of love and fortune.”

“They are serenading Mary’s child,” said Elisabetta. Her eyes brightened at the sound of her favorite son, Jacopo, whose strong voice rose from the other room in her favorite Christmas carol:

*Tu scendi dalle stele, O Re del Cielo*

(You come down from the stars, oh King of Heaven)

*E vieni in una grotto al freddo al gelo.*

(And come into a cave in cold and frost.)

Slowly, the reedier, thinner voice of her second son, Giuseppe, joined in:

*E vieni in una grotto al freddo al gelo.*

(And come into a cave in cold and frost.)

*O Bambino, mio Divino, Io ti vedo qui a tremar.*

(Sweet child, my divine, I see you tremble.)

Then Elisabetta and Caterina joined in:

*O Dio Beato! Ah, quanto ti costò l'avermi amato.*

(Oh Blessed God! Oh, how much it cost you to have loved me.)

*Ah, quanto ti costò, l'avermi amato.*

(Oh, how much it cost you, I loved you.)

As the song faded, Elisabetta felt one last labor pain and lost consciousness. When she awoke, Caterina was placing the newborn in the arms of Elisabetta's husband Domenico as he, Jacopo, Giuseppe, and Domenico's parents entered the small bedroom together. It was December 25, 1730.

"What's his name?" young Giuseppe blurted out.

Nonno Giuseppe smiled broadly as he always did, and tousled the curly black hair of his outspoken grandson, who beamed. "You have already given my name to one son," he said to his daughter-in-law.

So far Elisabetta had followed the Italian tradition of passing down names from generation to generation, but a third son

offered an opportunity to choose a name to her liking. Before she could catch her breath to respond, Domenico spoke.

“Domenico.”

Elisabetta had never liked her husband’s name, but had never told him so, and she wasn’t sure how to change Domenico’s mind when it was made up.

But Nonno Giuseppe had no such apprehension. “No,” he said forcefully, “this is Christmas and this child is a gift from God, third in line to a fine family. He has followed Jesus into this world today, so he shall be named for the apostle who followed Jesus first, Filippo.”

Because Jacopo, the eldest child, loved showing off, and hated to see his mother interested in anyone but him, he began to recite. “Filippo, third son of King Amyntas III, was father of Alexander the Great.”

Elisabetta closed her eyes, immensely enjoying the sound of her favored son’s voice. The seven-year-old noticed this favor, as always, and continued, though his memory began to fail him. “Filippo reformed his army...and was assassinated by his own bodyguard.”

Domenico could not defy his father, for he was not in such a habit. Instead, he mumbled, “We’ve already promised your namesake to the church when he’s old enough. I don’t need two priests in the family.”

Finally, Nonna Maddelena found her moment. She took the child from her son’s arms and cradled him in her own. “No,” she said, “Jacopo will belong to the business, Giuseppe will belong to the church, and this one, this Filippo, he will finally be our scholar.”

“But *I* want to be the scholar...” Jacopo began.

“Enough,” Domenico brusquely quieted his son. “Do not disrespect your *nonna*. You will run my business. Filippo—”

“Filippo will be our scholar,” Nonna confirmed.

No one standing in the room that day could imagine how true that prediction would prove to be, least of all the young infant listening gently as Caterina, always the mediator, led the family in the hymn:

*O Dio Beato! Ah, quanto ti costò l'avermi amato.*

(Oh Blessed God! Oh, how much it cost you to have loved me.)

*Ah, quanto ti costò, l'avermi amato.*

(Oh, how much it cost you, I loved you.)

Six years later, Filippo found himself living his nonna's dream, sitting in a classroom in

Prato, about five miles to the north of his hometown of Poggio a Caiano, and roughly ten miles from the great Renaissance city of Florence. All three cities lay within the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, as that section of Italy was known before the unification of 1870. Though his nonna's word “scholar” rang in his ears, he wasn't so sure he wouldn't rather be Jacopo, apprenticed to their father's timber mills and riding the horse to visit clients all day, or Giuseppe, reading the Bible for hours in preparation for entering the seminary. After all, the Bible was full of stories about miracles. Filippo's studies were full of far too many dead war heroes and daily recitations of Latin and Greek conjugations. Luckily, even at the age of six, Filippo had a facility for language that would serve him well across all his life's travels.

“To travel. *Adiciō, adicis, adicit, adicimus, adicitis, adiciunt.* To travel,” Filippo chanted mindlessly while Professor Rosati listened for mistakes.

Filippo had a restless spirit. He questioned everything and always wanted to know why unfairness and injustice seemed to thrive in the world. Often, while he recited by rote, the young boy’s mind wandered off on such questions. Other days he dreamed of the far-off places he would someday see, like Florence, which was more than ten whole miles away. Or England. Or India, with its spices and the Taj Mahal he had seen drawings of in his Professor Rosati’s books. Or that fantasy land across the ocean, discovered by an Italian over a hundred and forty years earlier.

When he wasn’t daydreaming about a faraway land, Filippo missed sitting inside by the fire at home on a rainy day, watching Aunt Caterina and Mama help Nonna make the daily pasta. The ladies in his family smiled when they were working together, much more than when Papa came home after a long day at work. Filippo missed the many cousins who played in the streets with him all day. He also missed his new little sister, Vittoria. But mostly he missed sitting in his *nonno*’s store, watching him comfort those who could not yet pay their bill. His mind flew back to the time one woman came into the store crying, but left smiling and carrying a loaf of bread.

“*Che è un successo,*” Nonno said as he slapped Filippo on the back in pride.

“But she didn’t pay her bill,” the young boy said tentatively, never wanting to question his precious grandfather. “And you still gave her the bread Nonna baked. How is that a success?”

“God will smile on me when we meet in *Paradiso*,” Nonno said, and quoted his favorite Bible verse: “For I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink.”

Filippo joined in: “I was a stranger and you invited me in.”

“Let this be your guide in life, for as you invite in strangers, so strangers shall invite you. But do not do these things in hope of earthly rewards,” Nonno cautioned him, then added, “Do not be like Jacopo. I see when he behaves well it is only for show. He will see. Someday, all of this will go to the brother who earns it, not merely he who was born first.”

“I won’t be like Jacopo, Nonno. I’d rather be like you.” The boy beamed when he imagined being anywhere near as good as his grandfather. He was too young to understand the importance of inheriting his grandfather’s lands and money; he only wanted to be loved by such a good and gracious man.

With the dream of demonstrating benevolence in his mind, Filippo turned to the next customer who entered the store with a smile on his face, a welcome in his voice, and another free loaf of bread in his hands. “*Buongiorno*. May I help you?”

*Smack!* The intruder punched Filippo in the face, pushed Nonno to the ground, and grabbed the pouch full of coins from the day’s transactions. Filippo scrambled to his feet, but the intruder knocked him down again as he ran out. Filippo moved to run after him, but Nonno’s voice held him back.

“No!” Nonno insisted. “Leave it be. Your life is more precious than money.”

Filippo wavered between listening to his grandfather and running after the robber, but in the end Nonno won. Filippo ran to him to see if he was all right.

“I’m fine,” Nonno promised. “And so are we all.” He pulled a handful of coins out of his pants pocket. “Always keep savings

aside, keep it safe, for later.” Then he handed Filippo one coin of each of the Tuscan denominations. “Know these things so you won’t ever be cheated.”

“I won’t ever be cheated, Nonno,” the boy promised.

*Smack!* The professor’s stick caught Filippo in the shins and shattered his beautiful reverie. “I said it was time to turn to literature. What are the three parts of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*?”

Quickly, Filippo changed gears. “Inferno, Paradiso, and...” he stumbled.

“Purgatorio before Paradiso,” the professor finished with another flourish of the stick. “Giuseppe never forgot Purgatorio, which is why he will make an excellent priest. Neither did Jacopo, who is on his way to being the true scholar of your family. What a waste to see him in business. But what will you be, my young charge, if you cannot focus better than your brothers?”

Filippo wondered this himself as he turned to his reading work. In all his years of studying, what Filippo never understood was the way Jacopo made people think he was good when the family knew his frequent unkindness. Whenever he thought of his older brother nowadays it was of the time Mama sided with Jacopo over Filippo despite Nonno’s best efforts to change her mind. Filippo had given Nonno’s Tuscan coins to his mother for safekeeping. Some days later, he wanted to use one of them to buy a treat.

“Mama! Mama!” he had shouted as he ran into her arms, which were covered in flour as Elisabetta and Nonna had been kneading more bread to offer the poor. In the corner, Jacopo stoked the fire. “May I have one of my coins?” asked Filippo. “I’m going to buy—”



“Those are my coins,” Jacopo insisted.

“You lie! Nonno gave them to me,” argued Filippo from the comfort of his mother’s arms.

“Don’t disrespect your older brother, Filippo,” Mama said as Jacopo took shelter under her other arm. She absentmindedly tousled Jacopo’s flyaway hair and murmured “*Cuore mio*”—“my heart”—to him out of habit.

That endearment gave Jacopo the support he expected. “He gave them to you to bring to me,” Jacopo said sadly to his mother. Then he shouted at Filippo, “You lie!”

“All we have to do is ask Nonno,” Filippo said.

“That would mean you think your older brother is lying. We can’t have love in this family if we treat each other with such disrespect,” Mama continued while Filippo squirmed.

“But you always take Jacopo’s side,” Filippo said as gently as he could. “Always.”

“And you always rush to conclusions, you rush everywhere, my little Fastidio.”

Mama handed the coins to Jacopo, who knew enough to stop talking when he was on the winning end of the discussion. She turned to Filippo. “This will be a lesson to you, my son.”

Filippo noted that she never used the “*cuore*” endearment when speaking to him and realized that despite how hard he tried, he could never win out over Mama’s favorite. Never.

When he complained to his grandfather later, the answer was simple. “It is a fact of life that a Mama will often love her firstborn son best. Perhaps because he is the one who made her Mama in the first place.”

“But—” began Filippo.

“But nothing. I know, because I was the third son, too. I also know that fighting against what is true is a waste of time,” Nonno

said as he hugged Filippo. “But that doesn’t mean you stop. It means you double your efforts because someone, someday, will see the truth in you.”

School days went on with Filippo daydreaming and Professor Rosati drilling him until Jacopo moved away to live with the tutor preparing him for university and Giuseppe moved into the seminary. Then his parents brought Filippo back home to study in Poggio with a new Latin teacher. One day, quite early in the new experiment, Filippo came running to his father’s timber company office.

“Papa! Papa!” Filippo cried as he ran around looking for his father among the many workers. He crashed right into his uncle, Father Mazzei, and became entangled in the older man’s long black cassock.

“What is it, Filippo? What can have you away from your studies so soon in the day?” Father Mazzei asked gently.

“I threw a stone at my professor,” Filippo confessed, his words running together as he offered his swollen arm to his uncle. “But he broke a chair over my arm! For nothing!”

His uncle examined the large red welt and felt gingerly around the wrist and elbow bones as Domenico approached from his office. “What now?” he asked.

Filippo launched into a long explanation of how his teacher hit him often, even when Filippo knew he had given the correct answer. But his father cut him off.

“You will never argue with a teacher,” Domenico said brusquely. “What do I pay them for?”

Filippo's heart fell. Would neither of his parents ever believe him? "I had all my conjugations correct. I did. I know I did." He began reciting, but his father cut him off again.

"Who is the teacher and who is the student?" Domenico demanded, ready to strike the boy himself.

Father Mazzei grabbed his brother's arm before it contacted Filippo's face. "That teacher is a miserable idiot," he said matter-of-factly. Then he gently added, "Today of all days, let the child win." The two men exchanged a sad look that was not lost on the young boy.

"Why today?" Filippo asked. Neither man would answer him.

It wasn't until Filippo returned home that day that his little sister, Vittoria, told him the terrible story of Giuseppe's first day at the Capuchin monastery. She told the story dramatically, as befitted the youngest and only girl among a set of brothers.

"Uncle—who traveled with Giuseppe, you know—told Mama and Papa that the first thing the monks did was shave his head," Vittoria began when the two were alone. "Imagine, all his beautiful curls dropped to the floor like so much straw for horses. I can't picture Giuseppe without his beautiful, beautiful hair. Uncle says they do that to all the novitiates so they won't be too prideful. Then they took all his clothes—his beautiful shirt, you know the one Mama let me sew the sleeves on? And they dressed him in sacks tied with rope."

Filippo's eyes began to tear up at the thought of his handsome brother being disfigured in such a manner. Vittoria noticed.

"He cried, too, Uncle said!" she claimed in awe. "Uncle said even *he* cried, so it's okay if boys do."

Filippo did more than cry. He wept most of the night over this first experience of loss, but he also began to formulate a plan—the kind of plan that makes sense to a seven-year-old.

The next morning, Domenico announced without emotion that Filippo would be returning to Prato and to his studies with Professor Rosati at the end of the week. Filippo knew he had to work fast, to live up to his nickname “Fastidio,” if he were to succeed. The morning of his departure he made much of missing them all as he walked down the street carrying his satchel. Instead of turning toward Prato, however, he walked the five miles to the monastery and presented himself as another novitiate, determined to live again with his beloved brother. Though Vittoria’s story about the monks made them seem mean and cruel, the very head of the order welcomed Filippo and offered him supper after his long walk. No one brought him to Giuseppe, however, and when his uncle stormed into the dining hall, Filippo learned why.

“You already have the child we’ve promised the church,” Father Mazzei said, standing toe to toe with the Capuchin. “This one comes back with me.”

“But I want to stay with Giuseppe!” cried Filippo.

“Giuseppe belongs here,” Father Mazzei said. “You belong in school. That is the way of the world. Accept it or you will never survive.” His uncle dragged him out of the monastery as the Capuchin looked on in disapproval.

A week later Filippo sat again before Professor Rosati, now resigned to never seeing his brother again and sure this was the worst experience of his young life. Meanwhile, there were more unpleasanties to endure. The students spent one full day on their knees in prayer upon hearing that Gian Gastone, son of Cosimo III, the last male heir to the Medici Grand Ducal line, had died. As a seven-year-old Filippo knew nothing of

the political machinations of the Medici family, only that a leader had died and rosaries had to be said for his soul, one Hail Mary after another, over and over, all morning long. Such rituals were deeply difficult for young boys to practice since the only movement allowed was the fingering of the beads of their rosaries. Teachers would slap a switch across the boys' bottoms if they were seen fidgeting, so Filippo fell back on daydreaming to pass the time.

A few weeks later, one of Nonno's best customers, a farmer from the outskirts of Poggio, arrived at Professor Rosati's home in the middle of a lesson on handwriting. Filippo had been rewriting the year, 1737, over and over again, trying hard to make the 7s match. The farmer handed a letter to the professor, but Filippo didn't need to be told what it said. He took one look at the men's faces as his teacher read the missive, dropped his quill pen, and ran toward home.

Within days he found himself standing beside the newly dug grave of his beloved nonno, felled by a stroke. His mother stood in the parish churchyard, holding hands with Domenico and Jacopo. Aunt Caterina held Filippo's hand as Father Mazzei read the scripture and the sons of six of Nonno's friends lowered the coffin into the ground. What Filippo noticed most was not the brightness of the sun or the deep green of the trees at this time of year, but the many, many poor local peasants who stood at the grave and wept.

*Who else will bake bread for them from now on? Who will help the less fortunate?* Filippo wondered, but the answer came to him almost before the question left his lips.

*I will.*

## Chapter Two

### FRIENDS (AND LOVERS) AT SCHOOL

Ten years later, Filippo, serious and lean at seventeen, stood on Piazza Santa Maria Nuova in Florence, at the gates of Santa Maria Nuova Hospital, unsure whether he could even enter a place with such an imposing history. Founded in 1288 by Folco Portinari, the father of the beloved Beatrice of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Santa Maria Nuova was also the place where Leonardo da Vinci had once been a medical intern, as Filippo was about to be. How could he even begin to walk in such shoes? It was one thing to hold in your hand a book that told the story of your hero. It was quite another to come face-to-face with the proof of his earthly existence.

He was less than fifteen miles from his parents' house, but it may as well have been 1,500, so far from home was he. It made Filippo wonder how much farther he would travel in his life. He had cried a bit at leaving home, leaving his friends and the places where he could turn any corner and remember his nonno, but now that he was here, Filippo felt exhilarated about his next stage of life. Having been turned away by the Capuchins as a child, he knew the church was not his calling, though he still felt an interest in life in the church. Was medicine his calling?

Domenico initially opposed the idea of Filippo becoming a surgeon, but seeing how much his wife adored Jacopo's intellect, he had decided it suitable for Filippo. Filippo would study medicine, hoping perhaps then Mama would love him and Jacopo equally. Remembering this motivation, he took a deep breath, switched his leather suitcase into his left hand so the right would be available for shaking hands with the new friends and teachers he was about to meet, and stepped through the gate.

Courses at Santa Maria Nuova—or “Nuova,” as the students called it for expedience—often challenged, sometimes frightened, but always stimulated Filippo. Learning was not confined to the campus. Local religious leaders visited artist salons held in the homes of the Renaissance city's most esteemed intellectuals. As a student at Nuova, Filippo found himself the beneficiary of several invitations on a weekly basis.

At one such salon at the home of his new friend Raimondo Cocchi, Filippo found himself in a heated debate about purgatory and divine intervention with a vacationing lecturer from the University of Pisa, Father Crisilli. It all began with a story that had been bothering Filippo for years, ever since he first heard his nonna talk about it while baking the bread for the peasants.

“My nonna handed a loaf to one of the peasant women in my village,” began Filippo, “and then she crossed herself and said a Hail Mary. When I asked why, Nonna said that the woman was a midwife and had done a blessed thing.”

“What blessing can an untrained, unordained midwife provide?” Crisilli scoffed as he rubbed the wrinkles under his eyes.

“She saw the child's life was ebbing too soon and rushed him off to my uncle for baptism,” Filippo explained.

“And by what magic is this uncle privileged to provide a baptism?” asked Crisilli.

“My apologies,” said Filippo. “I forget, you do not know my village. My uncle is Father Mazzei of our local parish.”

Crisilli seemed satisfied with this outcome. “Ah, then it is he who blessed the child so that it could reside in the house of the Lord forever. It is due to the intercession of the church, not the midwife.”

“That’s my question, Father Crisilli,” Filippo began tentatively. From similar discussions with his uncle over the years he had learned that one must tread lightly when questioning the church. “Many, many sad children are not privy to such a fast-thinking midwife—but I cannot reconcile myself to the conception of a divine justice that would relegate some infants to eternal happiness and others to eternal suffering due to the negligence of those who happened to be around them when they were not yet capable of making such a decision for themselves.”

Crisilli stiffened. “To die unbaptized is a grievous sin,” he said, and Filippo nodded in agreement. “But to question such matters is also a grievous sin.”

Filippo’s face fell. Would no religious man manage to assuage his fears of the existence of an unjust God?

Crisilli could see the young man was not pleased with his response. He began to write out a note for Filippo. “There are people especially trained for such discussions, much more erudite than I, who handle such matters.”

When the Father handed Filippo the note, the young man shuddered. “The Inquisitor? He will imprison me for my doubts when I am only trying to strengthen my faith. No, I do not wish to have anything to do with the Inquisition.” Then, seeing the Father’s face, Filippo tried to lighten his reaction. “You know what happened to Galileo.”



“No need to be afraid. I am an honorable man, not a spy,” Crisilli promised. “I have written the note in such a way that you can go quite safely and have your question answered, as you hope.”

After Crisilli had left, Filippo sat over a late espresso with Raimondo, a second-year intern at Nuova whose own father, the renowned Dr. Antonio Cocchi, was also their professor of anatomy. The two young interns had been eating and studying together since the first day.

“Should I go or not?” he asked Raimondo.

“My father would say...” Raimondo began to do his very good impersonation of his father’s lecturing style, though he never did it in front of his father, “...nothing is learned if nothing is tried. Imagine—”

At that moment Dr. Cocchi appeared in the kitchen doorway behind Raimondo and joined in on the impression: “Imagine, the first doctor who opened up a cadaver and held a human heart for the first time.”

Raimondo’s voice faltered as his father’s grew stronger.

“Imagine. My son listens to my lectures.” Dr. Cocchi smiled and tossed back the last of Raimondo’s espresso. “But there will be none of us prepared to listen—or to lecture—tomorrow if we don’t get some sleep tonight.”

As he walked up the narrow steps to his bed for the night, Filippo wished he felt the same comfort and connection to his own father, but knew it was not to be. Nonno had been his great support, and after Nonno’s death Father Mazzei tried to advise and approve as Filippo faced the move to Florence. Domenico never seemed to notice his third son, much less agree with many of his ideas. *Perhaps that is why I wonder so many things*, Filippo thought as he readied for bed.



Though Filippo remained uncertain about visiting the local Inquisitor, Dr. Cocchi's philosophy of trying gave him the final motivation to present Father Crisilli's note. The local Inquisitor promptly invited Filippo to a discussion over dinner at a local café. It took three such four-hour dinners across a month for Filippo to realize these meetings were not intended to assuage his doubts, but to crush them into nonexistence. Once he realized no answers were forthcoming, and worse, that such long harangues would continue across the months until Filippo declared himself doubt-free, he did exactly that. Pleased with himself, the Inquisitor then invited Filippo to be reblessed at the local church. Filippo begged off, saying he did not need such a ceremony as his faith was now completely solid, but the Inquisitor felt it was the only way to obliterate all measure of the devil's ideas. To put an end to the whole experience, Filippo finally consented to letting the Inquisitor bless him by tapping his shoulder with a religious artifact, then embrace him and send him away with a promise that they would be friends forever.

"Since then I have had no further doubts," Filippo declared to his group of friends as he regaled them with this story over a friendly card game of *scopa*—"friendly" being a polite word for wagering between friends. Having won ten lire the night before, Filippo had bet that much tonight, and more...to the point where he was digging into money set aside for living expenses. This time, he lost all of that, plus over fifty scudi he did not have on hand, but added to the pot with his marker.

As he handed over the money and the marker, one of the players said, "We need more than a marker to secure the debt."

Filippo stuck his hand in his vest pocket, fingering the coins his nonno had given him the day of the robbery so long ago, the

ones he had begged his mother to give him as a gift when he had graduated. They were the only monies left to him. Filippo pulled them out of his pocket and suggested a deal. “For me, and for the honor of our friendship, may you hold these coins for twenty days, allowing me the chance to redeem them.”

The new player wasn't sure, but then Filippo's friend Giuseppe Michellini stepped forward. “You can trust this gentleman,” Giuseppe promised. “I trust him so well that I promise to cover his losses if he does not.”

This assuaged the new player and he agreed to the twenty-day moratorium. Meanwhile, Filippo worried about how exactly he would raise enough to pay his debt and keep himself in food and shelter until his father's next tuition monies arrived. He could not ask his nonna or his mother, for they would surely tell Papa of this disgrace. Whom could Filippo trust to keep such a secret? Not Jacopo, who would use it as another way to denigrate Filippo among their village friends. He knew he could trust his beloved brother Giuseppe, but he had taken a vow of poverty, so he would have no money to send. Aunt Caterina! He saw her happy face in his mind and quickly dashed off a letter begging for a loan of the necessary funds and threatening to “run away to distant lands” if he didn't receive the funds *presto*, and asking her not to mention this event to Domenico. Three days later, a local Poggio farmer arrived at Nuova with a small bag full of coins and a response from Aunt Caterina.

*Cara Filippo,*

*I apologize it took time, but without asking your father it took me a few days to collect it all. You are obliged to thank Father Mazzei for contributing enough to complete the amount. And*

*I would be obliged if you never fell into this situation again,  
but if you do, don't hesitate to turn to me.*

*Love, Zia Caterina.*

Filippo kissed the bag of money, nearly kissed the farmer who brought it, and ran back to his rooms.

He considered risking a little of this newfound bounty in order to win a larger sum to pay Aunt Caterina back. The words of Dr. Cocchi came to mind: “Nothing is learned if nothing is tried.” Did that mean he ought to try one more time to make the money back? Then the promise he made to his nonno rang in his ears: “I won’t ever be cheated.” While his friends did not cheat him in playing the game, Filippo realized gambling itself was a cheat. It promised you joy, but there was no security in that promise. There and then, he promised himself he would never gamble again, and he never did, at least not with money. Life would offer him other kinds of gambles—over the places he traveled, the causes he supported, and the women he loved, one of whom he was just about to meet.

On a short visit home, Filippo stood with his sixteen-year-old sister, Vittoria, outside their nonno’s shop, which she now ran. A young lady burst into their conversation, giving Vittoria an exuberant embrace.

“Vita!” the young lady shouted with glee.

“Sandrina!” Vittoria returned the warm-hearted hug.

“Sandrina?” asked Filippo in shock. Could this elegant young woman be the little girl, the daughter of his beloved godparents, who had played street games and sung with him in church all those years ago?

“Of course this is Sandrina,” said Vittoria with a smile, seeing the adoration on her brother’s face.

“You don’t recognize me,” Sandrina teased, with a pronounced pout.

“Well, yes,” stumbled Filippo. “Of course, I see now in your eyes. How are my godparents?” he asked, both to be respectful and to divert attention from his mistake.

“They are well,” Sandrina answered and then used his feint to her own advantage. “Will you be visiting us while you’re home?”

“It would be rude not to,” Vittoria nudged.

“It would be rude not to,” Filippo agreed.

From that day, he and Sandrina were inseparable until the time for Filippo to return to his studies. The night before he left, he was as honest as he could be with her.

“If I were in a position to take a wife,” Filippo began, “I would prefer you above all women I have known. But I am still only a student, with no independent means of support.”

“I understand your circumstances,” Sandrina replied, but then hesitated. There was more to say and she was unsure of how to say it. “But I don’t know if you will understand mine. I need to be honest, though I fear it will lose your affection.”

“Never, my love.”

“Another promised his love and loyalty to me...and I believed his sincerity and so I gave him certain privileges—”

“I understand, my love,” Filippo interrupted to keep her from voicing her regret fully. “And I love you more. If you will wait for me to finish school—”

“I will wait forever,” she vowed.

From that point on, Filippo determined to study harder and longer in order to graduate sooner and claim a position at the

hospital that would allow him to marry Sandrina. Luckily, his godfather found reason to do work in Florence on several occasions across the next few months and each time he brought Sandrina. The two young lovers walked from one artwork to another in the city, often stopping off at the nearby church of Santa Margherita de' Cerchi to pray at the grave of Folco Portinari. Filippo told Sandrina how students often went there to pray to the founder of their hospital for help on their exams. She was more interested in Portinari's connection as the father to Dante's real life Beatrice.

"Imagine, crawling through hell on her word," Sandrina thought out loud.

"Who says I wouldn't do that for you?" Filippo teased as they exited the churchyard.

On her frequent trips to Florence with her father, Sandrina and Filippo would sit outside at a café across the street from Santa Maria Nuova and grow even closer as they debated the day's news over coffee.

"It is odd that I, the male, should be teaching you, the female, that you have every right to study what you wish," Filippo found himself insisting to Sandrina on one such visit. He had been regaling her with the story of two married couples from the University of Bologna whom he had been privileged to meet as they guest-lectured at Nuova. One of the couples, professor Giovanni Manzolini and Anna Morandi Manzolini, were well-known makers of wax anatomical models, used for medical studies. In the other couple, Giuseppe Veratti and Laura Caterina Bassi, Bassi had earned the second doctoral degree ever granted to a woman and became the first woman to earn a professorship from a university in Europe. Bassi brought

Newtonianism, the concept of the universe as governed by rational and understandable laws, to popularity in Italy.

“If I hadn’t read that in the newspaper myself, I would not believe it,” Sandrina insisted. “Not because I don’t think a woman can do such a thing, but because I don’t know any fathers or brothers—or husbands,” she said with a wink, “who would allow their women to do so.”

“The place of women in society is changing,” insisted Filippo. “We can be such a couple.”

“Perhaps,” mused Sandrina. “Perhaps. But now I must meet Papa or we will miss our coach.”

They tossed back the rest of their espressos, now cold for all the time they had spent avoiding saying goodbye, and ran to the station holding hands.

Sadly, their union was not to be. A month later Filippo contracted a malignant fever that all the ministrations of Dr. Cocchi could not abate. The young student lay in his bed in his rooms near Nuova in a haze, never sure what time of day or night it was each time he woke from his sweaty sleep. Cocchi tried everything he knew, and Filippo’s friends from the hospital came by often with new ideas and new treatments. At first, the older doctor dismissed their ideas, but by the end of the week with no progress, he allowed them to attempt a few, while also writing a letter home to Domenico, telling him to come to Florence to be with his son in case the fever might take him.

Domenico arrived the next day. Luckily, the fever had broken that night with no one knowing whether to thank Cocchi or Filippo’s friends and their innovative treatments, or merely the grace of God. Filippo returned home with his father to

convalesce, believing it would be a chance to make public his dreams of marriage to Sandrina now that he had cheated death. Instead, Domenico came down with the same fever, and it seemed to take an even stronger hold on the older man.

Filippo, his mother, and Vittoria called Jacopo home from his position at the University of Pisa and Father Mazzei back from his work at the priory to sit at Domenico's bedside. Despite all their good wishes, Domenico died within days, surrounded by his loved ones.

His last words were a plea to Father Mazzei about his children. "They are left all alone!"

"No," promised Father Mazzei. "I will watch out for them, brother, as if they were my own. Elisabetta will never want for bread, Filippo will finish his studies, and Vittoria will be provided a dowry that the town will never forget."

With that promise in his ears, Domenico died, holding Elisabetta's hand. Hauntingly, Filippo noticed that instead of looking to Father Mazzei in her moment of need, his mother looked directly at Jacopo, who smiled oddly. Filippo worried at his brother's ability to smile in any manner at such a sad moment.

A few weeks later, as Filippo prepared to return to his studies at Nuova having buried his father and fully convalesced from his own bout with the fever, he understood his brother's smile. Rather than leave the family management to their uncle, Jacopo gave up his chair at the university to stay in Poggio. He then urged Father Mazzei to return to his duties at the priory, which the older man did, leaving Filippo and Vittoria without a supporter in town.



“What do you mean there is no money?” Filippo argued one morning at breakfast after Jacopo expressed doubts about allowing Filippo to continue at Nuova. “The timber business is thriving!”

“So Papa wanted us to believe,” Jacopo began slowly. “But I have looked at the books. I have seen the debts. We will all need to contribute to its payroll or it will fail, leaving us with nothing. Your allowance for Florence must be cut.”

“Fine, then,” Filippo decided. “I’ll take my portion of the inheritance and manage that myself.”

“I discussed such a request with Uncle before he departed,” said Jacopo.

“You discussed my affairs without me in the room?”

“These are delicate matters. Tradition decrees there is no split of the estate. As the eldest son, on the death of our father, it belongs to me.”

“This is ancient tradition. It has no place in modern Italy,” Filippo argued. “Papa spoke often of dividing among us!”

“That is easier said than done,” Jacopo insisted. “We must allot for Vittoria’s future dowry as that is an outstanding debt of Father’s...”

“*Certo*,” agreed Filippo.

“How can we know now how much she will need later?” Jacopo asked cagily.

“How do I know how much Sandrina and I will need once *we* wed?”

“Perhaps you should consider marriage now. Her dowry can assist you as you finish your studies.”

“You know her father will never agree to her marriage until I am able to care for her.”

“That is not my concern,” Jacopo insisted. “If she loves you, she will wait.”

Filippo thought his spirit had died with his father, but this betrayal truly killed it, for it killed his future with Sandrina. When her father, his own godfather, who had been so pleased by their union, learned that Filippo was a pauper, with barely enough money left to support his studies, he called off the engagement. In a week he betrothed Sandrina to a richer man in the village. The injustice of her inability to make her own choices in life never left Filippo’s mind, and Sandrina never left his heart. Though other women would come and go from it, Sandrina and her smile stayed there for the rest of his life.

Dejected and alone, Filippo returned to school, and to a series of other girlfriends, each too similar to Sandrina to carve her own place in his life. Then, in an act designed to destroy him because he believed he deserved it, Filippo fell in love again—this time with Maria, a beautiful young woman he met at a party during Carnevale. But this was doomed from the start because Maria had a husband, nearly twice her age to be sure, but a husband in the eyes of the church all the same. The husband hired Filippo to give his young wife dancing lessons and Filippo was too weak to refuse. He grew to love Maria more and more during the clandestine kisses they shared during those dancing lessons, but soon dangerous rumors spread.

A man approached Filippo one night at a party as Filippo watched his lover use his dancing techniques in the arms of her husband across the room. This man whispered the rumor of Maria’s infidelity, but when he named the illicit lover, it was another man. Filippo staunchly defended Maria’s honor, but in his heart he realized the truth of the slander. Maria had begged off a series of recent lessons in order to study pottery. It devastated Filippo

to hear she had used the same excuses he had heard her give her husband in order to see Filippo. Yet out of loyalty to Maria, Filippo demanded satisfaction for her honor as a stand-in for her husband.

At that time most men in Italy carried their swords with them, and that night was no different. Each man already had his weapon at the ready. So Filippo and the accuser stepped out into the darkened street to duel. Once away from the noise of the party, however, the man quickly apologized for his accusations and disappeared down the street.

Whether it was Sandrina's inability to choose her own husband or his brother's ability to control his life as head of the family or the mean way Maria had used him, Filippo began to form ideas about individual freedom and natural liberty. Were not all humans created equal in the eyes of God?

One instance that added to this ideology happened on one of his weekly trips to the Jewish quarter of Florence, to the shop of Salomon Balloff, whose son, Beniamino, had become a great friend to Filippo.

As he approached the shop, Filippo called to his friend. "Beniamino! *Come stai?*"

But Beniamino did not respond. He was far too focused on throwing a punch at a ruffian who stood outside the store, slamming a stick into the cart full of fresh figs. Filippo hurried down the street.

"*Basta!*" shouted Beniamino.

Filippo could not make out the response as the ruffian faced away from him, but he could tell by the body language that it wasn't a compliment.

Salomon came to the door of the store and yelled for his son to let it go, to let the guild men police the situation, but

Beniamino wouldn't lower his fists. The ruffian slammed his stick into Beniamino's stomach, knocking him to the ground, stunned. When Salomon ran to his son, the ruffian moved to slam the stick into Salomon's balding head. Filippo caught the ruffian off guard, slamming the flat of his sword across the man's back. The attacker stumbled forward as Beniamino stood up shakily. Now faced with two young men as opponents and a growing crowd of onlookers, the ruffian turned and ran, tossing a final, angry epithet as he rounded the corner. Filippo moved to follow him, but Salomon held him back.

"Leave him to his hate," Salomon said. When Filippo hesitated, clearly wanting to chase the other man, Salomon urged him otherwise. "Help me get Beni into the house. And thank you."

Filippo tried to brush off the gratitude, but Salomon continued. "An act of grace is an act of grace. Let an old man show his appreciation."

"I did nothing out of the ordinary but show my loyalty to two good friends," Filippo insisted. "What kind of a world do we live in that a simple act of humanity and justice seems a surprising feat?"

"This world," Salomon said.

Filippo wasn't sure if that was a sad reflection or a challenge.

He didn't have time to ponder that question for long, however, because his own situation grew more challenging on his next trip home to see his mother and sister. He found them in greatly reduced circumstances. Jacopo, now in charge of their affairs, had fired the once-a-week help and had the ladies doing their own cooking and cleaning of the house each day, even as Mama grew older and took on that bent back so common in the peasant women of the village.

Instead of being angry with Jacopo, or even disappointed, Elisabetta loved him all the more for being the one at home. In her mind Jacopo was the one who sacrificed his position to come and care for them while Filippo had returned to his frivolous life in Florence.

“But Mama,” Filippo said, trying not to raise his voice or be disrespectful, “I am nearly finished with my studies.”

“Those so-called ‘studies,’ all those girlfriends, they have ruined us,” she said. “And then to take your part of the inheritance early...what will happen when Vittoria needs to marry?”

Filippo realized he had heard the same sentiments from Jacopo during their father’s funeral; now his mother was echoing them. “When I’m a surgeon I will send money,” he countered. “I’m almost done. But even now, come and live with me. I will care for you. You will love Florence.”

Filippo argued all morning to no avail, finally cutting it off in time to begin the bread-making for the peasants, a tradition he missed while in Florence. But Filippo learned that not only had Jacopo ended the family’s benevolence, he had also padlocked the pantry to prevent their mother from giving even a slice of bread to any poor person who came knocking. This was the final blow. While Filippo had learned to be a benefactor from their grandfather, Jacopo’s philosophy had become “Whoever wanted to eat his bread had to earn it.”

When Jacopo said this to Filippo with that tinge of arrogance only Filippo seemed to hear, Filippo wanted to beat his brother into the ground. Instead, seeing the futility in fighting when his mother’s mind would never change, Filippo said quietly, “By saying that, you have killed Nonno again.”

Then he turned to his mother sadly. “Goodbye, Mother. May God reward you as you deserve for your behavior toward

me. If you will not listen to me, if you will not see the error of these choices, I will spend the rest of my life proving you have given all your love to the wrong son.”