

World Between Worlds

**A Novel Based on the Early Life of Caterina,
the Mystic of Siena**

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Capitolo 1

Morte

Dialogue 94:

There are four winds: prosperity and adversity, fear and conscience.

August, 1362. Siena, Italy.

Very soon, my sister is going to die.

This is something I know deep within myself, a truth I'm unable to deny. It isn't a knowledge I wish for, nor one I particularly want. It's simply there, present and pressing, a still small voice within.

There's no rational reason for me to feel this way, yet the knowledge of Bonaventura's death has settled deep against my soul, burrowing inside my body, pulsing from a space of absolute knowingness. It feels as if God is whispering to my spirit, and although He's telling me something I don't want to hear, He's also blessing me with the grace of preparation. He is bolstering me, strengthening me for what's to come.

Yet, I don't feel strong. I'm weak, and small, and not ready for this.

Even so my chest is filled with heavy understanding, a simple statement of how things will come to pass. No effort on my part can change what I know to be impending truth: no tantrum or prayer, no cajoling or convincing, no forced change of circumstance.

Death clings and clutches, warbling within the halls of my very self. Even Bonaventura feels its dry grasp, closing slowly against her

belly.

Yet still I hope, trusting Something beyond my knowingness, believing all will be well. Somehow, all shall be well.

It's in His hands now. As it always is.

Bonaventura walks with a bend to her spine, a painful arch she seems unable to straighten. "Is this how it's supposed to feel?" she frets as soon as the midwife arrives. "Is this how it should be? Even my teeth ache with pain."

Chiara sighs, nodding her head as if she expected the complaint.

"Birthing is always difficult, especially the first time. Be patient, child. Have you been walking?" Her face is kind, yet I can see the worry-wrinkles in her elderly forehead and within the squint of her eyes.

I press myself between my sister and the midwife. "Up and down the hall, back and forth, across and around. I've been telling her to keep up the pace, to move as much as she can. I've seen enough births to know. Well, at least I've heard enough about them." My cheeks feel warm as I take a step back. As the last of my mother's twenty-five children, I'm hardly experienced at such things. I can contribute nothing, but still I want to do what I can, to be here and to be attentive.

Yet I am afraid.

I have no reason to fear. Women from our area of Siena, the entire parish of Sant'Antonio, tend to be strong, hardy, resilient. Perhaps there's a special grace in the waters of the Fonte Branda, where a spring tucked into the tawny hillside flows downward to collect in the three chiseled basins of our local fountain. Yet again the mystery

could lie in the cool peace of San Domenico's basilica as it keeps watch over the neighborhood, regal on its sloping hill. None of my other sisters have died in childbed, nor any of my brothers' wives. I have twelve nieces and nephews, enough that I should feel confident in the process God has ordained.

Why am I so filled with doubt? His will shall be done, no matter what that will may be.

I want God's will to be my will, to be totally enveloped in the Holy Spirit and graced with His grace. I want His plan to be my plan, His ways my ways, which means Bonaventura will live. I know that's wrong, yet still I want it.

For myself, or for Bonaventura?

Inside, silently, I beg my beloved Jesus to hear my voice. *Per favore, Gesù Cristo ... per favore.*

The words I hear in return fail to comfort me.

Accept. Release. Surrender.

How am I supposed to do that, when it means the death of my beloved sister?

Not long after Chiara arrives, I realize Mamma hadn't exaggerated when she'd told stories of childbed. I struggle with the urge to scream each time Bonaventura screams. Where is Niccolò? He should be here, close to his wife at a time like this. He should be in the adjoining room, pacing with fret like any good husband. Is he with his dice, his wine, and his friends, or perhaps locked inside the council chamber of the Palazzo Pubblico, plotting rules and crafting new taxes with the other members of the governing council of the Dodici?

I feel sick, dank, and musty and old. I don't know where Niccolò is, nor does anyone else.

The evening is long and troubling. As it grows dark, the screams become louder, echoing as if deep in a catacomb, bouncing off ancient powers and the energies of those who have gone before. They splinter even the downstairs shadows, touching each space until the house is as full as a vat of dyeing fluid, bubbling and changing color.

Twice during the long evening, I try to sneak upstairs, but each time I'm caught and reprimanded. Bonaventura's servant, Adelasia, holds my arm in a slack yet forceful grip. She shakes her head.

"It's better if you stay down here," she says, a smile glimmering with fretful moisture against her lips. I don't like the way her skin glistens in the deep candlelight, the way her tongue falters and lisps before gathering the strength to continue. "Let Chiara do her work. She's the best midwife south of Florence. We don't need to worry."

Yet, I'm not worried. I'm flat with knowledge, but I can never admit that to Adelasia. She would wonder if I'm strange, perverse, less than human. Like my own Mamma, she'd think me unable to experience regular, worrisome emotion.

Perhaps they both would be right. I've come to understand how odd I am, that the colors before my eyes aren't of the same hue as the shadows others tend to see.

So be it. It's who I am.

Bonaventura has always encouraged me to change, to shape and shift myself into something I'm not. I love her more than all my other sisters, and realize she means no harm. Goaded by Mamma, she thinks her ways are better than my ways. Now that I've reached the age of fifteen, what more is there to life than to find a suitable

husband?

Yet I don't want to secure a good marriage. Marriage and motherhood are lovely blessings, and I admire that. I'm sure I'm less than others because I feel a stirring toward something different, but I cannot deny what I feel. I know God desires something unusual from me, something beyond my understanding, something that brilliantly mirrors the state of my true self. There's no name for this call; there's only a feeling. It agitates my insides with its vague promise, its glimpse and glow, its presence which is a shadow, a mere breath of what I know to be Truth. I'm filled with a choking desire, an embracing desire, a consuming desire which both devours and feeds my very self.

Yet, it's a desire I barely understand. I can do nothing but keep watch, both within and without. Keep watch, and pray.

It's nearly Matins when the screams shudder, convulse, increase. Then they stop.

Niccolò has finally arrived, creeping about so as not to get caught past the city curfew. The monks have long since chanted Vigils, the grand cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta lies closed and silent, the streets ring with nothing but sleep and moisture. My brother-in-law stumbles, smelling like a vineyard over-ripe for harvest; the bulge in his sack reveals he won at dice, and his demeanor tells me he's quite pleased with himself. It's a relief to see him like this, because it's better than a foul mood.

I brace myself, preparing to be the one who delivers the news.

Bonaventura has been in labor since the noonday bells of Sext rang from the church of Sant'Ansano, but nothing has happened.

She's in pain, she's weary, and she needs a comfort I cannot give. She needs her husband.

Yet she doesn't have him. As soon as Niccolò hears my words, he grins as if a son has already been born. He then falls asleep, fast and wine-weary on the floor, with nothing to shield his head but his own drunken dreams and a bag full of *soldi*, worth more to him than his wife's anguish.

Adelasia has taken a nap. No full night of sleep for her, but at least she can sneak an hour or two of rest before beginning preparations for the morning chores. Tucked away in the small room behind the kitchen, she's no longer concerned about where I am or what I might be doing, and I'm glad. I want to be left alone, to creep upstairs, to be close to my sister.

The door to Bonaventura's chamber is open—just a slight crack, but enough for me to see. I squeeze one eye closed, the other open and watching.

Bonaventura is glistening, red and wet, and I wonder how much she can tolerate. It looks like too much effort, the tearing of spirit and skin; surely, it's only by the grace of God that any child can be born into the world through a body so fragile and corruptible. She sits on the edge of the bed, pink-stained linens beneath, her bare belly shimmering from strained egg-shape to soft mound, back to firm egg-shape again as another pain hits. I squint my eye for a better look, opening the opposite wider.

Heavy breathing, a grunt. "It's okay, it's okay." Chiara strokes Bonaventura's forehead with a wet cloth. I'm not certain if it's damp from water, or from my sister's sweat.

“Push. Push! Almost there. Push again! Breathe through it, and push. We can do this.” The look on Chiara’s face is grim, lips thin and pressed, but I’m not sure if it’s determination or terror. Bonaventura screams again, her abdomen pulsing and heaving.

Fear rises, fear falls; quickened by the vibration of my soul it beats in solemn chant. With grief and fire, I silently cry out, deep within the cave of my belly: *What can I do for you, what can I do?*

My sister’s face is deep like Tuscan wine, and just as slick.

“Come on, come on. Nearly there.” Chiara’s voice is soft, barely a whisper, as if she’s afraid of disturbing the unborn child.

“I can’t. I can’t!” The color of Bonaventura’s face has changed again, to a shade I can no longer describe: too dark, too smooth, too purple to be flesh.

“You can, yes you can,” Chiara says in that whisper-worry voice.

You can, you can, yes you can, I repeat to myself. I’m not certain what’s happening. I know I can’t do anything but watch, and wait, and watch, but the chanted words help me feel useful.

Even so, I’m frightened. I just want it to be over. I want Bonaventura to feel better.

I want to be wrong.

When Chiara’s face shrouds in gray, I feel a trembling in my stomach that’s new and sickening. Boulder deep, pressing, painful like too many green apples. “You can, you can,” she chants, but without conviction.

Even through the partially-opened doorway, I can hear the weakness of her words.

“Bonaventura. Listen.” Chiara moves to the top of the bed and begins to stroke my sister’s face. “The babe is sideways, you can’t

push him out like that. I have to turn him.”

Bonaventura screams, her throat so raw it sounds like a cruel wind scraping across the hills and gullies of the Val d’Orcia.

Footsteps scramble up the stairs, awkward and heavy, full of panic. “Caterina? Are you up there?” Adelasia calls from the top step. “*Mia cara*, you should not be here. This is no place for you. Everything will be fine, just let Chiara do her work.”

“She needs me, Bonaventura needs me, and the baby is wrong, I heard Chiara say the baby is in the wrong place and I don’t know what to do ...” I turn to face Adelasia, afraid she’ll make me leave, hoping she’ll make me leave. I can’t stay, weak wretch that I am, I can’t continue to watch the pain, the agony of my sister. If she fails, she fails twice: once for her own life, and once for the child who so desperately wants to be a part of this humble human existence.

It’s too much. The throbbing in my stomach is thick enough to make me dizzy, and I can’t remember the last time I ate. I need rest and I need nourishment, yet I find it impossible to move.

I cringe at my selfishness; how can I even think about my own bodily needs when my sister is in such agony? Shame creeps from within my chest, flushing against my cheeks. The pain in my belly pierces through my abdomen to grab my lower back, heaving and stabbing, restricting itself to one spot like a sword struck deep within, unrelenting and taunting as if lost in a nightmare. Perhaps that’s what this is, perhaps I’ll wake up ...

But I don’t wake, because I’m not asleep. I’m never asleep, at least not lately. I have to remain watchful, in case I’m needed.

“Caterina. Come with me.” Adelasia grips my shoulders, tight and loving. She starts to twist my body, trying to lead me down to

the chambers below where the gruff work of my sister can't be heard, but at that moment Chiara looks up, away from Bonaventura's wet face.

Peering through the doorway, she nods her head in my direction. "Come."

She beckons with her finger, a crooked thing too exhausted for her years. "Your mother should be with us this day, but I understand she's taken a fever and is abed. You'll have to do. You'll have to be old enough. I need your help."

Adelasia's hand relaxes as she kisses the top of my head. "It would be wrong of me to argue with the midwife. If she needs you, then go."

Suddenly my feet release, propelling me forward until I'm in the room, grasping Bonaventura's hand as Chiara has instructed, using the damp cloth to wipe my sister's face as she slowly lowers her spine downward until she's resting on the bed.

Bonaventura grips my hand, squeezing so hard I want to cry out in pain, but I won't, I refuse. I can never show weakness when I know what Bonaventura is feeling is so much worse; infinitely worse, incomparably worse, like the agony of a martyr. *Giving one's life for another, is it truly worth it?* But no! I have to stop such a thought. It's evil and destructive, and it encourages negative spirits, demons I can't do battle with right now. I'm not strong enough, at least not yet. Will I ever be strong?

"I have to turn it," Chiara says. "It'll hurt; I refuse to lie about that. But I have to turn it."

I'm afraid, I'm not sure what to expect. Chiara reaches inside Bonaventura—*inside, down there!*—using both of her hands. I turn

my head, away and down, ashamed for my beloved sister. The ache in my belly feels heavy, burrowing inside; deep like an infant, as painful as new life. Never, never will I have one! I vow before God that I'll never go through the agony of childbirth; it can't be worth it.

Chiara reaches further inside as Bonaventura screams, deep yet shrill, terrifying.

"What is it? What?" Adelasia calls from the top step where she has yet to move, as if afraid her very breath will cause an even greater calamity. Even though Adelasia can't see the movement from where she stands, Chiara shakes her head to silence unnecessary words.

Blood. There's so much blood: splattered on the floor, drops on the wall. Chiara's arms have emerged from inside Bonaventura and they're dripping to the elbow. Red. Bright. Too much. Where has all that blood come from? How can one body lose so much yet still go on living?

When I grasp Bonaventura's hand, I expect to feel that fierce pain again, the agony of her grip nearly crushing my bones. Instead, the fingers are limp, not responding.

The stone in my belly is suddenly gone, replaced by a crater so full yet hollow, deep and long and forever, that I wish the painful stone would return. This is worse. This is more than fear, more than groundless worry. This is real. Bile lodges in my chest, burning my lungs, making me wheeze and sputter. I want to say something, perhaps recite a Pater Noster to give my sister comfort, but words and bile have mixed together to form a sticky, incomprehensible mess.

"Bonaventura?" My voice is barely more than a whisper, but she must have heard because she turns her head slowly. Her lips are

white, cheeks wheat-colored, forehead soggy with thick, murky sweat.

“Caterina,” her mouth says, but no sound comes out.

My head is fogged, dense with steam. I want to be rid of it, to think, to pray, to know what I should do. I know nothing. I am useless.

“Turn, turn. Turn! Come on, turn. Turn, *per amore di Dio!*” Chiara’s voice remains calm, but the softness has been replaced by an edge so firm it makes me shudder. The midwife palpates Bonaventura’s belly, chanting “Turn, turn, turn, turn . . .” She reaches inside again, but Bonaventura doesn’t scream. She tosses her head, yet not even a moan leaks from her throat.

Turn, turn, turn, turn, turn . . .

“Caterina. I need you here. Let go of your sister’s hand.”

I’m unable to move. I don’t want to obey. Let go? How can I? How can I desert Bonaventura, take away the comfort I hope I’m giving, drop her hand so she has nothing to grasp? I stroke her forehead, begging for time. Maybe if I wait, just one second or a few, the baby will come out. Miracles have happened, miracles always happen, every day. We may not recognize them, hidden within the loaf of our daily bread, but they’re always nearby. We can have one now. It’s still possible.

Yet, I know my sister is going to die.

“Caterina!”

I try not to listen to Chiara. I refuse to move. It’s better here, next to Bonaventura’s head, looking into her face. Perhaps she should sit upright again, but she seems too exhausted for even her shallow breaths. “Are you all right?” I ask, and she smiles—so slight, such an

insignificant look that I'm not at all comforted. Terror rises from my hollow belly and into my chest, filling my heart and ribs until both are painfully numb.

"What can I do for you?" I whisper.

"Caterina! I need an extra pair of hands!"

I look up at Chiara. The midwife's hair has fallen out of its plait and is splaying around her head, gray strands clinging to her cheeks while others poke in the opposite direction. Her eyes are rimmed, swollen.

I know I have to obey. I'm needed, I'm necessary. I have a task, yet I can't move from my sister's eyes. I don't know what will happen if I do, and I cannot take the risk.

I want to move, I want to help, but my feet won't work, they no longer exist. My torso is resting on two pillars of cold marble. Unmovable. Solid through the center. Dumb and daft and useless. Pillar of salt.

"Caterina!"

I have to force myself to move. Turn the salty stone to flesh.

I'm needed.

I am needed.

I push one leg forward, but it doesn't shift. Only my lips have motion, and I know what they must say.

"*Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum ...*" Bonaventura reaches over to clasp her other hand against mine, both of them fixed together, pressing my palm in the middle, a trinity of flesh in prayer. Her whisper is pale, yet she begins to recite along with me.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven

...”

And then my voice is solo, carrying the prayer forward as tears gather in my throat. They climb to my eyes, descend into my heart.

Bonaventura’s belly heaves, then stops. Her eyes flutter but don’t close. The clammy palm resting against my hand loosens and seems to turn cold in just that instant.

But that’s impossible, bodies can’t grow cold so quickly. Even as I know it, I can’t stop the apprehension from shimmering beneath my skin.

“... lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil ...”

The tears are coming too fast now, I can’t finish, I can’t say the final, most important part.

What if I never finish? Will God accept an incomplete prayer? For Bonaventura I try, I gather my breath for the final words, but my voice hurts too much, they won’t come out ...

I cannot speak. I’m mute. My prayer has been lost in the chaos.

Yet through it all, through the anguish of my soul and my own knowingness, I hear the redemptive word.

“Amen.”

Beyond the haze of my watery eyes, I see Chiara standing next to me. Blood is beginning to cake on her arms—no longer dripping, but stagnant and final. She touches Bonaventura’s forehead and neck, leaving crimson smears, and then she leans over to kiss my temple, her red hand gently grazing the top of my head.

My sister’s eyes are open, but she isn’t looking at me. She isn’t looking at Chiara.

She isn’t looking.

I want to turn away, but the salty stone that has replaced my skin

won't allow it. The non-looking eyes see things I fail to understand.

I am terrified.

I'm terrified of the eyes, terrified of what they see, terrified of what they don't see, terrified because they're gone, terrified that they're somewhere else. Terrified I can't go to that place of *some-where else*, terrified I'll be forced to go, and I don't want to follow even though I want to be with Bonaventura. I want to be in my bed alone asleep in a dream and to wake with fresh sun above the basilica and everything beautiful like it was before except now with a baby, healthy and chubby because that's how it's supposed to be and we're all supposed to be so happy and even Niccolò will get reformed, the baby will change his heart, and I'll be the best aunt Siena has ever seen, and I'll help and there will be such happiness because that's the way it's supposed to be, and why can't it be that way now and terrified. I am so terrified, terrified ...

"Bonaventura?" She doesn't answer. "Bonaventura?" Nothing but stillness. "Bonaventura!" And then I'm levitating, in one swift motion like a grasping wing or a mysterious breath, I'm floating upwards ... For an instant, I see what those dead eyes are seeing, and it isn't good, it isn't bad, it just *is*. I kick at something, I don't know what it is, but it's something, and then I'm leaning my head against warmth, solid and real, not like those dull eyes but something living. As I sink further into the human warmth, I realize I'm being pressed close against a chest, a chest smelling of wool and the earthy scent of red dye.

Papà has lifted me up. He has come to rescue me. He shouldn't be here, in a woman's room, but love always propels him; it's just the way he is. He's always the one to save me, no matter where I find

myself, and this time he has rescued me from a nightmare.

Somewhere in the distance—my ears can't tell where because my head feels like it's floating, but somewhere, somehow—a baby cries. Then it stops.