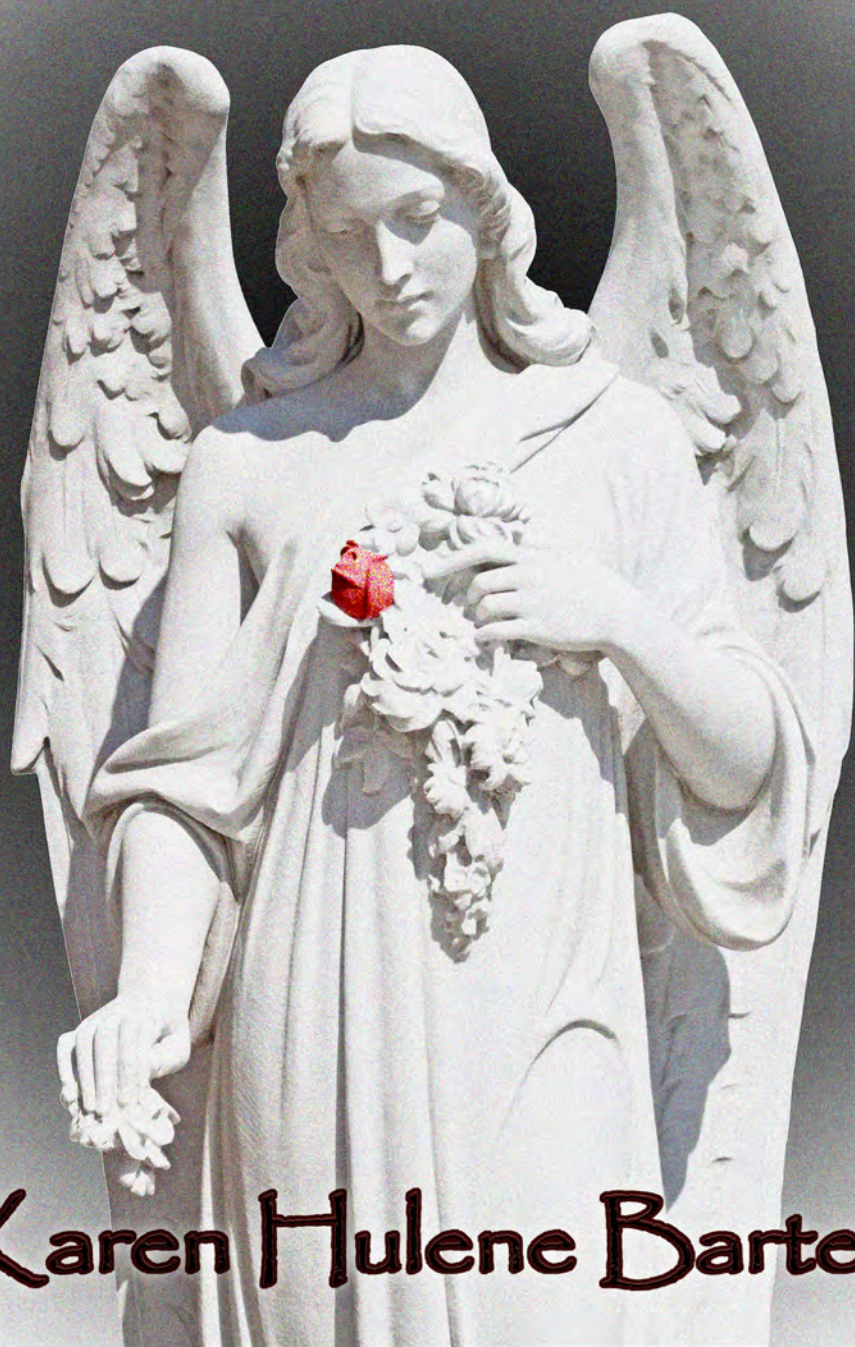


SACRED CHOICES



Karen Hulene Bartell

Sacred Choices
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Love Puts the Hope in Tomorrow

"Fairy tales are more than true; not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten."

~ G.K. Chesterton

September 3: Ceren woke up grinning, knowing. Her chocolate-brown eyes smiled mischievously at her reflection in the dresser's mirror. Her complexion, creamy in the morning light, contrasted against her lustrous, coffee-brown hair.

With a gleeful squeal, she hugged herself, squeezing her knees. Then she reached for the phone to call Jarek.

Mid-air, she paused. With a moan, she pressed her lips into a hard, white line.

No, not yet. He'll want proof. Something 'quantifiable.'

Instead, she set the receiver back in its cradle, closed her eyes, and replayed the dream still fresh in her mind.

She had been chasing a numinous, white snake until it disappeared

around a corner. When she rounded the bend, the serpent was gone. All she saw was a beautiful girl, no more than two years old, with long, silky, black hair.

The little stranger had looked up through dark, dancing eyes and said, "Hi." With that one word, she expressed volumes, as if telepathically.

The greeting had resounded, echoing, until it woke Ceren. With a wistful sigh, she wished the encounter had lasted longer.

Was that just a dream or a message? Then the feeling in the pit of her stomach returned, answering her question. Nodding to herself, she smiled.

But proof, I need proof.



Ceren took the steps two at a time, her brunette ponytail bouncing against her neck and battered, leather briefcase knocking against the railing. She burst into the Humanities office as a draft caught and slammed the door behind her.

Startled, the office assistant looked up from her paperwork.

"I . . . I ran all the way." Ceren stopped to catch her breath. "Didn't want to be . . . late." Hearing herself, she chuckled at her unintended joke.

From behind thick bi-focals, a mirthless stare greeted her.

Ceren felt her smile droop. *Does she think I'm a student, too?* Her lips instantly curved into a self-conscious smile as she composed herself. Fresh from grad school, she looked to the older woman, to everyone, for acceptance as a university lecturer. Cheeks flushing, she smoothed the wisps of wind-blown tendrils escaping from her tightly pulled-back hair.

"I have a meeting with Dr. Witunski."

"The dean's busy. You need an appointment."

Ceren straightened her shoulders. "I have an appointment. I'm Professor Hernandez." She glanced at the clock above the dean's door, adding, "At three." She watched as the minute hand ticked past the hour.

"You're late." The assistant shuffled a stack of papers, smirking as she thumped them with the stapler.

Its echo told Ceren she was being dismissed, but, taking a deep breath, she stood her ground.

Another cold stare met her. Behind her glasses, the woman rolled her eyes. "Dr. Witunski's in a meeting."

Ceren settled onto the nearest chair. "I'll wait."

"Suit yourself." The assistant gave an indifferent sniff and feigned returning to her paperwork.

Ceren felt the assistant's eyes on her. She took a textbook from her briefcase and pretended to read but instead watched the clock, chafing until she could tell Jarek the news.

The assistant peeked over her bi-focals, appraising her. Eyes narrowed to slits, the assistant sucked her teeth as her lip curled.

Twenty minutes later, the dean's door opened. Anticipation shot through Ceren as she raised her eyes.

Out walked a thirty-something, angular woman dressed in sensible black shoes and a conservative gray suit, its austerity relieved only by a scarf's muted colors.

"We're due at the Pearson's at five," said the woman over her shoulder.

As she crossed in front of Ceren, the assistant said, "Welcome back. How was your stay at the clinic?"

The woman acknowledged her greeting with a smirk. "Lost eight pounds."

"Congratulations!"

What am I, invisible?

When she reached the outer office door, the woman turned back, arched an eyebrow at the dean, and said, "Don't be late."

Even after she closed the door, Ceren stared, her jaw slack. Was that his ex-wife? She knew about her husband's first wife. Jarek had told her what a cold, loveless union it had been. A marriage of convenience, nothing more, he had said.

Besides, that's in the past. I'm Mrs. Jarek Witunski now. She breathed deeply, centering herself on that knowledge. *But what's she doing here?*

The assistant's steely glare drew her attention, causing a flush to start

at the base of her neck. Ceren snapped her mouth shut but straightened her shoulders, refusing to cower before the woman's calculating expression.

"No more calls or appointments, Peg." Ceren looked up expectantly at Jarek's voice. He stood in the doorway of the office, his silver-gray hair glinting in the overhead light. "I have to prepare for the inter-departmental meeting."

Ceren's heart quickened, while the phrase 'silver fox' popped into her head. A wide, silver streak in his light-brown, wavy hair added a distinguished elegance to his otherwise boyish appearance. His tanned face sported a few freckles on prominent cheekbones. His cerulean blue eyes caught and held hers as she studied him, trying to read him.

"But I . . . that is, we have . . . had an appointment, remember?" Ceren stood up, never dropping her gaze from his. Only when the book slipped from her lap and clattered to the floor did she break eye contact. She stooped to retrieve the textbook, her cheeks burning a brighter shade than when she had entered.

"Ah, Professor Hernandez." He smiled with a father's indulgent tolerance. "That's right. You'd called earlier, hadn't you?"

"There's no record of it in your appointment book," snapped the assistant, eyes narrowing, observing him over her bifocals.

"Hold all calls please." He gestured Ceren inside and closed the door on the assistant's scowl.

His full lips curled into a half smile. "We wouldn't want to be disturbed now, would we?"

He held out his arms, and she ran to him. Throwing her arms around him, she kissed him as if it had been months, not hours, since she had last seen him. Though reluctant to break the mood, she had to ask.

"Who was that woman that just—"

"So," he interjected, holding her at arm's length as if to see her better, his gaze piercing. "What's so important that you called my cell?"

His shower of attention changed her focus instantly. Remembering her news, she chewed her lower lip and took a deep breath. She felt like

a child with a secret: could not wait to share it, yet was unsure how to announce it.

He eyed her expectantly. "Yes . . . ?"

"It's positive!"

Shrugging, he shook his head. "What's positive?" he asked with a quizzical, half laugh.

"I'm . . . we're pregnant!"

"Pregnant!?" Glancing at the closed door, he brought his voice to a hoarse whisper. "What do you mean, we're pregnant?"

Ceren flinched. This was not the reaction she had expected. "The test was positive."

"You're sure?!" he asked, visibly paling beneath his freckles.

"It's confirmed." Proud she had taken the initiative, she added, "It wasn't a home pregnancy test. I just came from the gynecologist, and I'm . . . I mean, we're preg—"

"You're sure it's mine?" he interrupted, his voice gruff.

"Of . . . of course, I'm sure it's yours What are you implying?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," he said, hugging her close, stroking her back. "I'm just surpr . . . so incredibly happy."

"You doubt it's your baby?" Her joy stolen, she felt suddenly empty, barren. She pulled back, watching his expression.

"Of course not, how could I? Nothing could be farther from my thoughts." As his eyes roamed the room, his arms grasped her, enfolding her. "You're an elixir to me, Ceren. With you, I'm ten years younger. Anything's possible."

"Do you mean that, Doc . . . Jarek?" In private, he was Jarek, but, on campus, he preferred that she call him Dr. Witunski. To be alone with him at the university was a first, blurring the distinction between private and public. She shook her head as if to settle her thoughts. Why be shy about using his first name? We're certainly on a first-name basis . . . especially now. She raised her eyes to watch his response.

While his lips smiled, his eyes remained aloof, distant, as if his thoughts were elsewhere. "Of course, I mean that. The world's ours . . .

which reminds me. I have news of my own that I hope you'll find just as exciting as I do."

"What? Tell me!" Delicious thoughts swirled through her mind as her heart leapt. Tell everyone? End the secrecy of their marriage? Take that honeymoon he had promised?

He paused as his eyes shifted from bookcase to file cabinet to desk, but his prolonged delay only increased her anticipation.

"Don't keep me in suspense. Is this a game? You want me to guess?" She watched his eyes settle on a stack of paperwork. All she could make out was the word 'Mexico.' "I know! You're taking me on our hon—"

"It wasn't easy," he began slowly, as if searching for his words, "but I secured you a place on the Writing-Across-the-Curriculum, inter-departmental grant." Responding to her blank stare, he added, "How do you like that?!"

She opened her mouth to answer, but no words came out. Except for a small gasp, she remained silent.

He began speaking faster as his eyes drilled into hers. "It was a challenge convincing the review board to add a new adjunct professor to Dr. Truman's project. But I persuaded the foundation that, with your Hispanic background, excellent Spanish, and most importantly, expertise in Religious Art History, you have all the necessary credentials. In fact, you're the only woman for this job." He held her at arm's length, looking at her. "What do you think?"

"But—"

"Just think," he said. "This faculty-exchange program with Mexico will give you the opportunity to lecture and conduct your research at a foreign university. What a once-in-a-lifetime experience for you. Plus, you'll come back a published author."

"But that would mean being apart. I don't—"

"Only long enough for the gossip to settle down." His eyes met hers.

"I still don't see why we have to keep our marriage a secret," she said, unable to keep the disappointment from tingeing her tone. Glancing at the door, she grimaced. "I'm your wife, yet even your office assistant thinks I'm a student. Why this charade?"

"There are some in the academic world who wouldn't understand us marrying so soon after my divorce."

"I want to tell the world—"

"You can when you come back from Mexico. We'll be together, a prestigious academic team."

"But you'd said—"

"We'll start fresh, no encumbrances." He held her closer, and she gazed into his azure blue eyes, unable to see past them to his thoughts. "Think of it. You'll be on your way to becoming a full professor at this university with this feather in your cap."

"We'll have a baby to consider—"

"That's right," he said, working his jaw. "We'll be raising a family."

His lips curling in a smile, he bent his head to kiss her. His long kiss left her weak-kneed, yearning for more, yet the pause gave her time to think. The baby would be showing in two, three months.

"How long," she cleared her throat, "how long would this faculty-exchange program last?"

"Only until the end of the semester, maybe less, just long enough for the paperwork to be finalized."

"What paperwork?"

"For the annulment," he said.

"But you said—"

"And . . . just for the interim . . . it might be best if we kept the news of this between us." He winked as his hand gently gripped her belly.

"What do you mean? I'll be showing soon. Whether or not we announce it, everyone will see for themselves. Why can't we share our news now?"

"How do you think that would look to my wife's lawyers?"

His choice of words irked her, and she pulled away. "Why did you say *my wife's* lawyers?" An exasperated sigh escaped her lips. "I'm your wife. Why not *the lawyers*, or at least your ex-wife's lawyers?"

"Habit, nothing more, but, whatever I call them, they'd jump on any opportunity to delay court proceedings."

"But you said the divorce was final when we met months ago, that it was 'just a technicality' holding up the paperwork."

"It's the annulment that could drag on for months," he said. "You wouldn't want our baby born before we're married in church, would you?"

"When the Justice of the Peace married us, you said that—"

"This is just a minor technicality, some legal mumbo-jumbo." His blue eyes looked into hers. "We don't want to give them any reason to slow down the due process of law, obstruct justice by raising questions about a correspondent, do we?" Not waiting for an answer, he continued, "Now, if you're out of town—"

"You mean, out of sight." Shoulders drooping, her heart sank.

"Never! How could you think I'd want you out of my sight, out of my reach?" He drew her to him tightly, caressing her. "I simply mean if you're out of town—"

She stiffened. "Out of the country—"

"Exactly," he said, not missing a beat, "that would remove any suspicion on the part of my . . . the lawyers. We could be married in church by the end of November, by Thanksgiving."

"But you said by October . . . at the latest. By the end of the semester, I'll be entering my second trimester."

"Plus," he said, pausing, "maybe I can arrange to join you in Mexico for part of this assignment, possibly next month. We could make it a romantic getaway, that honeymoon you want. Wouldn't you like that?"

"I still don't see how—"

"Believe me. You'll thank me later for giving you this opportunity. Besides, when you're busy with this assignment, the time will zip by until we're together again."

She breathed deeply, trying to catch her breath after having the wind knocked out of her. *No!* shouted her instincts. *This isn't right.* She looked into his face, recalling their recent vows. Love defeated instinct, and she tried to view the scenario from his perspective.

"I don't feel now is a good time to leave, but if—"

As if sensing his advantage, he put her on the defensive. "Don't throw away this opportunity for yourself just because you're unsure of us."

"I'm not unsure of us." She rushed to vindicate herself. "I love you.

I've never been surer of anything than my love for you. I'm just uncertain that you—"

"Nonsense, I adore you. You should know that by now." When she didn't answer, he pressed her closer to him, kissed her tenderly, and then tipped up her chin to look at him. "Shouldn't you?"

She stared into his eyes for answers or, if not answers, at least clues: *nada*, zero disclosure. Still his nearness was irresistible. With a sigh, she nodded.

"Good, then we're agreed." Abruptly letting her go, he pressed the intercom. Caught off-guard, she had to take a step back to regain her balance. "Peg, ask Dr. Truman to come to my office."