

Sacred Gift

BOOK II IN THE
SACRED JOURNEY SERIES

KAREN HULENE BARTELL

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ISBN: 978-1-942428-14-5

Interior design by Kelsey Rice

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Pen-L Publishing
Fayetteville, Arkansas
Pen-L.com



THE MISSION OF NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LA PURÍSIMA CONCEPCIÓN looks much as it did in the early 1700s when it served as the mission's center of religious activity. The solar illuminations highlight several celestial and religious events, including the Feast of the Assumption. The National Park Service, which manages the grounds of the mission, is open for tours 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. every day except Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year, although tour times can vary.

MORE INFORMATION AT:

www.NPS.gov/SAAN/learn/historyculture/conc_history1.htm

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Of Cabbages and Kings	1
Sacred Gift	10
Family Resemblance	18
Like a Heart Needs a Beat	37
Warp and Woof	43
Supposals	48
Gift of God	56
Trophies and Swings	72
Serenading Ceren	76
Bejeweled Serpents and Rings	81
Mariachis and Rainbows	89
Higher Education	91
Then What?	94
Earplugs and Communication	98
Illumination	107
Sun-kissed	114
Parenthood.....	126
Heart of Stone	137
Past, Meet Present	143
Daddy?	151
Puppies and Pyramids	159
A Lifetime in My Heart	176
Life Lines of Communication	182
Stone Heart	189
Quote-Along	195
Mea Culpa	198

Starry-Eyed.....	205
Like a Horse and Carriage	212
Sacred Spaces	217
Visibility of the Invisible	231
Woman on a Mission	237
Rubbings.....	243
Portents	247
Transitions	251
Call to Order	268
Sounds of Silence	271
Enlightenment	274
Reading Group Guide for <i>Sacred Gift</i>	289
Recipes	295
About the Author	299



OF CABBAGES AND KINGS

“...more things in heaven and earth . . . than are dreamt of...”

— *HAMLET*, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

After Judith tucked Angela Maria in for her afternoon nap, she watched her adopted baby.

Fascinated, the infant focused on the wall. Her eyes rapidly tracked the sunlight’s muted play of light and shadow on the wall, as if watching a movie.

Judith noticed the baby’s eyes open wide in wonder and then crinkle, as if thinking or laughing. Chuckling to herself, Judith shook her head. *What is she doing?*



Her eyes glued to the wall, the baby watched the streaming video that only she could see. She saw tall pyramids, nearby palms swaying, their leaves waving in the virtual breeze.

She listened intently to the audio, a voice that spoke only in her inner ear.

“Mesoamericans built step pyramids,” said the baby’s personal narrator, Toci. “More like the Mesopotamian ziggurats than Egyptian pyramids, the Mesoamericans built the largest pyramid in the world, the Great Pyramid of Cholula.”

The wall her private movie theater, Angela listened and watched the moving images, intrigued.



“I’m too big for a nap,” Angela Maria complained. With a frown, she pursed her lips.

“You’re growing up way too fast,” said Judith, tucking her in. She sighed. “But you’re still only two, and two-year-olds need naps.”

Angela pouted. “Abby says I’m too old for naps.”

“Abby?” Judith chuckled. “Who’s Abby?”

“My best friend, Abigail, but she wants me to call her Abby.”

“Really,” said Judith, swallowing a smile. “Where did you meet Abby, at the playground?”

“No, she comes and visits me.”

“Where?”

“Here, in my room. She’s here now,” said Angela, “by the closet.”

Judith turned her head, humoring her. “By the dresser?”

“No, on the other side of the closet, by the window.” Angela knitted her brow. “Don’t you see her?”

Judith smiled as she nodded. “I see. You have an imaginary friend.”

“What’s imaginary?”

“A person who only exists in your mind.”

“No, Abby’s real.” Angela’s knitted brow turned into a serious frown. “She’s my sister.”

“Your sister?” Judith cocked an eyebrow as she leaned over to kiss her. “Tell Abby it’s nap time. Sweet dreams, baby.”

As Judith closed the door, she heard Angela whispering. “Mom said we have to take a nap.”

She walked into Sam’s office, chuckling. “Angela certainly has an active imagination.”

“Why do you say that?” Sam looked up from his computer.

“She has an imaginary friend, Abby, that she says is her sister.”

“Maybe she’s lonely.” He lifted his eyebrow. “She’s an only child.”

“True, maybe we should enroll her in classes or take her to play dates,” said Judith. “Let her be around kids her own age.”



“I don’t like kindergarten,” announced Angela.

“Why not?” Judith glanced at her daughter as she drove.

“The kids are mean.” Angela’s brows furrowed together.

“Mean? Why do you say that?”

“They make fun of me when I talk to Abby, Toci, and Nana.”

Judith’s ears perked at her daughter’s words. *Toci’s another aspect of Tonantzin.* “Who’s Toci?”

“Toci’s my grandma.”

Stopped at the light, Judith asked, “Have you heard me speak of Toci?” The girl shook her head. “Then how do you know that’s her name?”

“She told me. She tells me all sorts of things.”

“At school?”

Angela shook her head. “No, at home.”

“How?”

“She shows me movies on the wall and teaches me about them.”

Judith smiled at the girl’s imagination. “Who’s Nana?”

“You know, Nana, your mother.”

Judith gasped and covered her mouth with her fingers. “Angela, my mother passed away when I was a little girl, not much older than you.” She took a deep breath. “You can’t see her.”

Angela shrugged. “But I do.”

“My mother’s dead.” The light turned green, and Judith pulled into traffic.

Angela looked at her mother. “But I see her.”



At Angela’s First Communion, Sister Pastora handed her a small, tissue paper wrapped box.

“What is it?” Angela asked, dark eyes dancing.

“Open it and see,” said Pastora.

Angela inhaled the wrapping paper’s distinctive odor. Bright-eyed, she smiled, as if proud she had guessed a riddle. “That’s Nana’s scent.”

“What?” Pastora squinted as she looked from Angela to Judith, trying to understand.

Judith scratched her ear as she shrugged. “Angela has imaginary playmates.”

“Nana’s not a playmate,” said Angela. She looked from Judith to Pastora. “Nana’s your mother.”

Pastora went pale. Her eyes flashed wide open as she studied the girl.

“Our mother’s dead.”

Angela shrugged. “I know, but I see her.” She smelled the tissue wrapped gift again. “And I can smell her cologne.”

“Go on, open your gift,” said Judith, tactfully shifting her seven-year-old daughter’s focus.

The girl undid the wrappings. Then she put the yellowed box to her nose, inhaled, and turned to Pastora. “This was your mother’s, wasn’t it?”

Pastora glanced at Judith, her eyes wide. Wordless, she nodded.

Angela lifted off the box’s cover. Inside, nestled on cotton, lay an antique blue rosary.

“Nana’s.” Angela reverently picked it up, stared at it, and then held it to her heart.



Two days before her eighteenth birthday, Angela went shopping with Judith. They entered the mall through the anchor store’s perfume department. Chandeliers hung overhead. Mirrored walls reflected row upon row of glass bottles lining the shelves. Displayed

behind glass-encased counters, the yellow, pale-orange, and icy-blue perfumes called out to shoppers through their fragrance and packaging.

Angela lifted her head and inhaled. “Nana’s scent.”

“What?” Judith turned toward her daughter.

Still sniffing the air, Angela said, “I smell Nana’s fragrance.” She looked into Judith’s eyes.

Judith studied the girl’s shoulder-length dark hair, high cheekbones, and creamy complexion. She gazed into her dark eyes. *Who is this young woman? This college girl can’t be the baby I adopted.*

“Don’t you?”

Judith shook her head, realizing she’d been daydreaming. “Don’t I what?”

“Don’t you smell Nana’s fragrance?”

Before she could answer, a woman eagerly approached with a bottle of perfume and fragrant, grosgrain ribbon samples.

“Would you like to try this?” She held the bottle like a can of pepper spray, poised to shoot.

“No, thanks.” Judith turned up her nose as she walked away, her automatic response to aggressive sales tactics.

“I would,” said Angela.

“Hold out your wrist,” directed the heavily made-up saleswoman.

Angela smiled but made no attempt to move. “I’d prefer a sample ribbon.”

The woman handed her one, and Angela waved it in front of her nostrils, inhaling.

“We’re running a special on it today. Do you like it?”

“Mom, smell this. Do you recognize the scent?” Angela held it up to Judith’s nose.

Judith wrinkled her nostrils. “It smells like vanilla.”

“Good nose,” said the woman. “It’s Vanilla Missions, been around for years, but now it’s making a comeback. Do you like it?”

Angela turned to Judith. "It's Nana's scent." She turned back to the saleswoman. "I'll take a bottle."



When they finished shopping, Angela and Judith waited for Pastora in the mall's bistro. Hand-lettered chalkboards displayed the menu. Faux gas lamps set a cozy, cheerful mood, and the high-backed booths provided privacy.

"This shopping's worn me out." Taking a deep breath, Judith leaned back.

"That's what iced tea's for." Angela sipped her tea and smiled. "It revives you."

"Not when you're my age." Judith chuckled as she appraised her daughter in her new blouse. "At least you won't be starting college threadbare. With all the bags and boxes in the trunk, I could barely close it."

"Thanks, Mom." She grabbed her hand. "It's been great shopping with you."

"You don't turn eighteen every day." Judith smiled and then sighed. "Eighteen . . . are you sure you want to start your freshman year during summer school?"

"We've been through this." Angela stifled a sigh as she sat back, letting go her mother's hand. "It's the only way I can graduate in three years. I want to get through with school and on with my life."

Judith shook her head. "I can't understand how a daughter of mine is so opposed to education."

"I'm not opposed to education. I'm just against marking time in classrooms."

"What alternatives are there?"

Angela took a deep breath and looked hard at her mother, debating.

"Remember when I was little, I told you how Toci tutored me?"

"You had an active imagination." Judith grinned. "I'll give you that, but I was hoping you'd pursue an academic career."

“I’m not you, Mom. I have different goals.” Angela took a deep breath and counted to five. She consciously put on a smile. “Let’s not spoil a good day with an old argument.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Judith held up her iced tea.

As Angela clinked her frosted glass against Judith’s, she saw her aunt approach.

“Pastora, come sit next to me.” She slid over and patted the leather seat beside her.

Pastora sat down and sniffed the air as she hugged her.

“What’s that scent?”

Angela grinned. “Can you guess?”

“It’s familiar.” Pastora sniffed the air again and squinted, staring into space, thinking. “It reminds me of something . . . someone . . .”

“Give up?”

With a sigh, Pastora folded her hands and put them on the table. “I can’t place it.”

“It’s your mother’s scent, Vanilla—”

“Vanilla Missions,” said Pastora, her clouded eyes sparkling at the recollection. “Yes, now that you mention it, I do remember.” She leaned toward Angela and breathed deeply. “I’d forgotten. How did you know?”

“I recognize it.” Angela bit her lip, debating whether to say more, sensing where it would lead. *I’ll be eighteen*. With a self-affirming nod, she gave herself permission to speak her mind. “It’s Nana’s scent.”

“Nana? Not this again.” Heaving a sigh, Pastora faced the girl. “I thought you’d outgrown all your childish notions about ghosts.”

Judith grimaced. “Pastora, do you want some iced tea? I know I need a refill.” She waved the waitress over.

Pastora shook her head as she addressed Angela. “I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again. There’s no such thing as a ghost.”

“What about the Holy Ghost?” asked Angela, trying to suppress a mischievous smile.

“You know what I mean. I’m talking about spirits.” Pastora raised her eyebrows. “Father Schmidt wrote that the cult of spirits is nothing but a substitute religion.”

“Then what about angels?” asked Angela. “Aren’t they spirits? As Christians, aren’t we encouraged to believe in them?”

“Angels and the Holy Spirit, yes, but not other spirits,” said Pastora. “The *Bible* doesn’t mention ghosts.”

“Yes, it does.” Angela cocked her eyebrow.

“Where?”

“In the Old Testament.”

Tilting back her head, Pastora’s eyes narrowed as she watched her niece. “Where in the Old Testament?”

“In First Samuel,” said Angela, interpreting it as a challenge. She sat up straight. “Saul talked the Witch of Endor into conjuring up Samuel’s spirit.”

“You’re taking it out of context.” Pastora shook her head. “Believing in spirits is simply not in keeping with God’s wisdom—”

“What can I get for you ladies?” asked the waitress, handing Pastora an open menu.

“More iced tea to start with,” said Judith. “Pastora, what are you having to drink?”

Pastora grunted as she turned her attention from Angela to the menu before her.

“Water, please, with a lemon slice.”

“And while my sister’s deciding what to order, I’ll have the Reuben sandwich.” Judith turned to her daughter and winked. “What are you having?”

Angela grinned at her mother for changing the topic. “Let me see.” She opened her menu and purposely deliberated, giving her aunt ample time to decide. “I’ll have . . . the Greek salad and . . . vinaigrette dressing on the side.”

Her pencil poised, the waitress turned toward Pastora. “And what’ll it be for you, Ma’am?”

SACRED GIFT

“I’ll have a BLT sandwich, please.” Pastora folded her menu and handed it back to the waitress with a warm smile. Then she turned toward Angela and Judith. “Now, where were we?”

“We were just saying how it doesn’t seem possible Angela’s going to be eighteen,” said Judith. “Where did the time go?”