

Chapter Seventy-Seven

William, feeling that Prairie Wind was not close beside him, rolled over in bed and looked at her: she was staring at the ceiling with her eyes wide open.

“Prairie Wind, what’s wrong?”

“The Little One can’t sleep.”

“Oh. But what about her mother? It’s the middle of the night. Why are you awake?”

“If the Little One can’t sleep, the Mother can’t sleep.”

“Oh. And . . . why can’t the Little One sleep?”

“Because she doesn’t want to leave Mo’orea, and the lagoons, and the whales, and these wonderful, wonderful people. She doesn’t want to go some other place where they’re getting ready to fight a war.”

“Ah. Tell the Little One that I fully agree with her. The madness up there is just getting worse and worse.”

Both Prairie Wind and William had read the online news from America about the presidential campaign between Hillary and Trump. And about the construction of an oil pipeline near the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota. They had often talked about the worsening situation in America. Were they really going to leave their peaceful sanctuary south of the Equator, where people wove their two cultures together into one beautiful fabric, just when the simmering pot of racism in America was about to boil over? Did they really want to be in their new home on the Rosebud, just when Big Oil not only built its pipeline, but took over the White House in Washington?

The bedroom was faintly lit by the glow of moonlight outside the windows. The air was fragrant with frangipani. The breeze from the sea stirred the thatch in the palm trees above their snug, safe, peaceful little home.

Prairie Wind said quietly, “The Little One wants to snorkel in the lagoons until the day that she’s born. Then she doesn’t want little pink booties. She wants little pink flippers.”

William said quietly, “I know. With all of my heart, I wish she could have her little pink flippers. But your law degree is useless on a French island. And my medical degree is useless on a French island. And the folks at home . . . well, they’re counting on us. They might even feel that we abandoned them, if . . .”

“If we don’t go back to the war zone.”

“Yeah, the good old American war zone.”

“I got an email from Marceline in Tampa. She says that she’s really scared. The Trumpers are marching, and the rallies are getting bigger and bigger. She says it’s just like what we read about in World History . . . Germany in the 1930s.”

“Some people got *out* of Germany during the 1930s. They knew what was coming and they got themselves out before the borders closed. They escaped to Sweden, to London, to New York. They were the smart ones.”

“But what would my grandmother say if we don’t go back? She wants to meet the Little One.”

“Of course she does. Aunt Jennifer and Uncle Richard want to meet the Little One. My mother and father want to meet the Little One. The whole Rosebud wants to meet the Little One. But does the Little One really need to grow up in the middle of the collapse of American civilization?”

“William, I’m so scared.”

She sat up in bed and looked at him with eyes that saw further into the future than most people ever bothered to see.

Then she swung her feet over the side of the bed and stood up, naked and beautiful in the glow of the moon, fragile and frightened in the glow of the moon.

She put on her white bathrobe and went out the bedroom door to the back porch. William could hear the sound of a chair rocking on the wooden floor.

He climbed out of bed, put on his white robe, then he joined her on the back porch. He sat in the rocking chair beside her and stared at the moonlit forest that rose up the slope toward the peak of the mountain.

He put his hand on her hand, curled over the arm of her chair.

“Prairie Wind, I love you.”

She looked at him with her deeply worried Lakota eyes. “William, I love you. At least we have that.”

“Yes, wherever we go, at least we have that.”

They rocked in their chairs together, slowly, gently, so that perhaps the Little One might be able to go to sleep.

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Chapter Seventy-Eight

She almost didn't go on the second dive to see the whales. Ever since that night when the Little One couldn't sleep, she felt a sadness worse than anything she had ever felt before, even on the Rosebud. She spent one horrible day at the verge of tears, as if wails were ready to burst out of her . . . but she couldn't cry. Nor could she explain why she felt this way—why exactly she was so sad, here on this beautiful island. She felt, one especially awful afternoon, that her blood had become black ink. She sat in a rocking chair on the back porch and stared into the thick green forest that rose up the slope toward the distant blue sky. William sat beside her. She was at the black ragged edge, but William sat beside her.

He knew as a doctor that she was suffering from depression, depression that sometimes hit like a tidal wave. It was not uncommon for pregnant women to go through bouts of depression, because of changes in hormone levels; because of stress within the family—or lack of family, if the father had vanished; because of money worries. But Prairie Wind was struggling with something far beyond a temporary hormone imbalance. The black demon inside gripped her soul with a stranglehold, and it would not let go . . . until she found some way to fight back.

When William visited Arava and Haumana one evening and told them that Prairie Wind could not go with Arava to the University the next day to work with the students on their website—something that she had so much enjoyed just a week ago—they asked if they could talk with her. Maybe they could help in some way.

William was glad for their help. Arava took her son Temanao next door so that her mother could look after him—she mentioned that Prairie Wind was, as William had put it, “struggling with depression from something hidden deep inside”—then she and Haumana walked with William to the cottage next door and found Prairie Wind in a rocking chair on the back porch, dressed in a white shirt and white trousers, wearing white socks, as if she were out in the midday sunshine . . . at eight o'clock at night.

She was not rocking in the rocking chair. She sat absolutely still. Arava said softly, “Hello, Prairie Wind. May we join you?” She did not answer, but stared at the black forest that rose up the mountain toward a black sky filled with distant stars.

William and Haumana brought the other two rocking chairs in the living room out to the back porch, then the four of them sat in a row—William, Prairie Wind,

Arava, and Haumana—lit by the porch light in the ceiling overhead. The two pillars that held up the corners of the overhanging roof, and the railing with gracefully carved spindles that wrapped around three sides of the porch—with a gap for steps into the yard—were painted white. The pillars and railing, lit by the ceiling light, were bright white against the darkness of the yard and the forest beyond them. The four friends sat in their row of chairs as if in a fragile white box—protected by mere spindles, carved on a lathe, as delicate in the night as the bare bones of hope.

“Prairie Wind,” said Arava, her voice quiet, gentle, encouraging, “can you tell us what’s wrong?”

After a long moment, Prairie Wind said, without looking at her friend, her voice no longer firm and bright, but a torn rag of speech, “Everything.”

They sat in the silence of the night, until a breeze rattled the thatch of the palm trees high above the yard.

“Not quite everything,” said William. “The Little One is doing fine. We listened to her heartbeat this morning, steady and strong. Mother has a good pulse too, no fever, no pain.”

“Well,” said Haumana, with a bit of cheerfulness in his voice, “you’ve got a good doctor.”

She stared straight ahead, into the darkness that reached all the way to the vast black emptiness of the far reaches of the universe.

William heard footsteps coming into the yard. He spotted two dark figures who, as they approached the light from the porch, became Mateata, Arava’s mother, holding her sleeping grandson, and Amura, holding a green oval breadfruit.

Mateata wore a pale blue *pareu* with pink hibiscus flowers. Amura wore the faded green work shirt that he wore every day at his furniture shop. The child was wrapped in a yellow blanket, like a package of sunshine.

They stood just outside the railing, in front of Prairie Wind.

Amura said to her, “I made that chair you’re sitting in.”

Prairie Wind looked at him. She did not speak.

Mateata said to her, “We had just lost our firstborn child. We had been married less than a year.”

Prairie Wind looked at her. Mother looked at Mother.

“Something about her heart,” said Amura. “The doctor said something about the baby’s heart.”

Grief was now speaking to Grief. The parents of a lost child spoke to a mother with a living child, a healthy child, a mother with a vision of a lost planet.

Amura continued, “I had a job working for a Frenchman in his furniture shop. He had taught me how to use a lathe. How to carve the graceful spindles. How to cut and carve and polish the curved runners. How to piece together and glue the seat. He gave to me the finest mahogany he had in the store room, and he said to me that I should make a rocking chair for my young wife who had just lost her child.”

Mateata said, “Amura worked on the chair with such devotion, carved every spindle, carved the curving arms, carved the curving runners, made the seat,” she smiled, “that just suited me. He worked on it for almost a month, and then he gave the chair to his young wife, so that she could rock in it . . . until she became pregnant again.”

Amura said, “The young mother rocked in that chair for nine months, and then she nursed her child,” he pointed at Arava, “in that chair.”

Mateata said, “I taught my little girl her first words in that chair.”

Amura said, “I taught my little girl her first songs in that chair.”

With a push of her foot, Prairie Wind gave her chair a slight rock, back and forth, three or four times, until, without any further pushing, the chair became still again.

Mateata said, “Prairie Wind, we knew before you and William came—we knew from what Arava had told us about you—that you were doing more than getting a degree at Stanford University. Somehow, you understood that the oceans needed help. Somehow you understood that indigenous peoples needed help. Somehow you understood that we are all very close to storms that never end, to fires that never stop burning, to rain that never falls.”

Amura said, “And so you, *both* of you, studied and studied for eight years, so that you could learn how to help. So that you, William, could help a dying child with a defective heart. So that you, Prairie Wind, could help a dying planet, poisoned by a defective creature called People.”

Mateata said, “William, as we understand, you have studied for four years and then worked for four years, using your knowledge and your skills. But Prairie Wind, you have studied human evil for eight years, and have not yet gone into battle against the racism and the ignorance and the violence and the greed. Your time is coming. You do not yet know your own strength.”

Amura reached over the railing with the breadfruit in his hand. “Here is the fruit of the tree of my living daughter.”

Slowly, gripping the arms of her chair, Prairie Wind stood up. She stepped forward and took the breadfruit into both of her hands.

She whispered, “Maururu.”

Mateata, holding the sleeping child, and Amura, his open hands catching the light, stepped back from the railing.

Mateata said, “Your work awaits you on the Rosebud. From there you will reach America. From there you will reach the world.”

Amura said, “Twenty-one years ago, only *twenty-one* years ago, France tested a nuclear weapon at Mururoa Atoll, 700 miles southeast of Tahiti, within the boundary of French Polynesia. Despite protests in Pape’ete, France exploded five more nuclear devices, destroying life in the sea, and showing us Polynesians who was the boss.

“Mateata and I were thirty-nine years old at the time. Arava was a girl of fourteen. We remember. People came here from Hiroshima to join our protest. We remember.

“That was in 1995. Six years after the Berlin Wall was torn down, four years after the Soviet Union collapsed, during a decade when the Russian people could barely put food on their tables, France had to show the world that it still had its *Force de frappe*.

“From the harpoons that killed our whales almost to extinction, to the bombs that await the push of a button, we have shown again and again that we do not deserve to be here on this planet. People do not *deserve* to be here. The Earth would be so much better off without us.”

The master craftsman was quiet for a long moment, until in the silence of the night, his words were borne to Prairie Wind as if on a pillow, “And yet . . .”

Amura reached his hand toward the child, bundled in a yellow blanket, who was now awakening and beginning to squirm. “Does this child deserve to have his Earthly home stolen from him? Does this child deserve to go down in flames with the rest of us?”

Mateata stepped forward and handed Temanao over the railing to Arava, who took her precious bundle and began to rock in her chair.

“Prairie Wind,” said Amura, “this blackness which tonight grips your soul, is a mother’s response to the life she carries inside her. She fears for her child.

“We should *all* feel this blackness, every day of our lives, until we have stopped our madness. Until we have learned some degree of gratitude.”

“We thank you, Prairie Wind,” said Mateata. “Sleep in peace, dear. Your great work is about to begin.”

Their blessing bestowed, the two angels turned and walked beyond the glow of the porch light into the darkness.

William stood behind Prairie Wind with his strong hands on her shoulders as he whispered, “Maururu.”

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