

## Chapter Eighty

Prairie Wind did not wear her coral-orange bikini on the second whale-watching expedition. She was at the end of her twenty-first week, just past half-way through her pregnancy, and her Little One was now seven inches long, crown to rump, or ten inches long, crown to heel. Prairie Wind's bulge was very noticeable now, and she thought that in the presence of twenty-five students, she should be discrete.

So Arava stopped at a shop in Pape'ete and bought her a proper bathing suit for pregnant ladies. The upper portion of this two-piece outfit had good support for swelling breasts, and a flowing skirt that hung from the upper portion to well below the lower portion. The lower portion was an ample pair of shorts with a drawstring. Mother's outfit was ocean blue, nicely decorated with leaping dolphins front and back.

During the past week, Prairie Wind had felt a faint fluttering in her abdomen. William called these movements of the fetus in the uterus the "quickenings". She had not felt any real kicking yet, just the faint fluttering of a butterfly.

On Saturday morning, when she and William walked with Arava and Haumana to the beach, William carried her wetsuit and flippers, so that she carried only her mask and snorkel, her mushroom hat, and a towel. She was neither tired from the pregnancy, nor exhausted from the passing episode of depression. She was quiet and focused on the day ahead. When they met the students on the beach, she even smiled as she chatted with them.

She was very glad to learn from Anapa, who met the group on the beach, that he had sighted the same mother humpback and her calf several times during the past month. Their favorite spot seemed to be just west of the passage through the coral reef outside of 'Ōpūnohu Bay, about half a kilometer out from the reef. The calf had grown, and was swimming now close to its mother. The same bull whale was sometimes with them, sometimes not. After a month of almost daily visits from snorkelers, the mother whale was not as shy as she had been when her calf had just been born.

Matahina, standing beside her brother on the beach, glanced at Prairie Wind's bulge with a grin. "That mother whale is waiting for you, I know she is. She wasn't sure before, but this time she's going to *know* that you are bringing a little calf into the world."

Prairie Wind said quietly, “Thank you. We shall see.”

Teva clapped his hands to get everyone’s attention, then he reminded them, “The boats must stay at least one hundred meters from the whales. Snorkelers must stay at least thirty meters from the whales. If a whale wants to come closer to you, that is the whale’s decision. You may stay on the surface, or you may dive down to ten meters, but do *not* swim toward the whales. Stay together as a group, both on the surface and when you dive. The whale needs to be able to watch you. If you swim around a whale like a swarm of bees, the whale is not going to like it. Your guide will bring anyone who breaks the rules right back to the boat. I’m sorry to sound so strict, but we had a group from a hotel a couple of days ago who wanted pictures eyeball to eyeball. We are here in a sanctuary, and those are the rules.”

Prairie Wind clapped her hands silently. Twenty-five students were listening. Twenty-five students were learning.

The students and four adults boarded their five boats, then the flotilla headed west single file along the lagoon to the Tareu Passage through the outer reef, where they turned to the north and headed out to the Big Blue.

Many of the students had brought underwater cameras, either their own or rented from Teva, so that they could take pictures and even videos of the whales. They wanted to use the pictures and videos on their developing website—“Weaving Together the Schools of the World”—which they would launch in early October, when schools north of the Equator would be one month into their autumn semester. Great pictures would draw people to the website. They would also have a map, showing the whales’ route of migration from Antarctica to Mo’orea, and back.

The text of the website’s inaugural blog would discuss the warming of the oceans, the increasing acidification, and the threat to the Antarctic food chain, with a focus on the algae, the krill, and the humpback whales. The students would combine scientific information with their own personal observations about *what it felt like* to be swimming with the whales. Their sentences would be short and clear, easy to translate.

Arava’s students hoped that this initial blog would encourage other students around the world to write similar articles about their own biospheres.

Imagine, if the website could gather the links to twenty-five blogs, with pictures and videos and further links—and maybe even music, maybe even a poem—from twenty-five schools around the planet. Whales, and elephants, and polar bears, and

orangutans, and butterflies, and reindeer, with maps, and a group photograph of the proud student authors.

Now *that* was education.

Outside the barrier reef, Teva once again instructed the boat pilots to form a line from east to west, with a hundred meters between boats, so that together they could sweep north toward the open sea. Matahina's boat was second in the line from the east, enabling Anapa with his binoculars to survey the waters where he had previously spotted the mother whale with her calf.

Arava and Haumana shared their binoculars with Prairie Wind and William. Raimana had brought on this expedition not only a rented underwater camera, but his own binoculars. Thus many eyes were searching the sea for the telltale burst of spray, up to four meters tall, when a surfacing whale let out a long-held breath.

Anapa spotted several scattered single spouts, but he was looking for two spouts together, one large, one small. And perhaps a third spout, not far from the mother and calf. He had already agreed with the other guides that if anyone, during their dives, spotted that particular mother—the black-and-white markings on her long fins and flukes made her readily identifiable—they would call him by radio. He had brought his video camera, and he was determined that Arava and her student Raimana would have an extraordinary video for their website.

Prairie Wind and William both wore their round white hats with broad brims, but they did not need to wear white shirts and trousers any longer. They were deeply tanned, children of the sun, children of the sea. Like everyone else on the expedition, they wore Polaroid sunglasses to protect their eyes from the glare of the sun on the rolling water.

The loose skirt of Prairie Wind's maternity bathing suit fluttered in the breeze. William occasionally looked at her with a smile of amusement, though his eyes were filled with something deeper, a blend of love and gratitude.

"There they are!" called Anapa, pointing a little west of north. "Three spouts, two large and one small. There's a fourth spout, further out. The calf has a good strong spray now."

Prairie Wind looked through Arava's binoculars and quickly spotted a whale spout. "Hey Boss, I hope you're with us today. You deserve a swim in the Big Blue, to make your old heart happy."

While Matahina steered the boat toward a position a hundred meters from the dark backs of two whales, one large and one small, the five snorkelers and their guide put on their wetsuits. Prairie Wind's wetsuit still had ample room over the abdomen for her to zip her zipper.

William asked, "Is the Little One tucked in?"

She replied, "The Little One is tucked in and ready to say hello to a fellow member of her generation."

When the boat was in position, Anapa hooked the ladder over the stern so that while the other snorkelers put on their long fins, sat on the sides of the boat and then dropped into the sea with a small splash, Mother could step carefully down the ladder and slip quietly into the sea. William helped her to put on one flipper, and then the other.

As they looked at each other through their masks, their lips wrapped around their snorkels managed to smile at the corners.

Anapa led his team of five well-trained snorkelers toward the distant misty shapes, a hundred meters away, of what he already knew—just by the way the calf hovered beneath the mother, protected by her long pectoral fins—were the ancient creatures who had come all the way from Antarctica to bless his island. The tourists in the hotels paid the bills, but the whales, and especially this mother and her calf, came to visit with an entirely different purpose. They were like pilgrims who had come to swim in the sacred waters of not only a sanctuary, but a church. A church where new life emerged into the world. And his job, since he had been a child with his first mask and snorkel, was to be a caretaker of that church.

Prairie Wind could feel, as she steadily kicked with her flippers and took long deep breaths through her snorkel, the faint fluttering of a butterfly. The Little One was moving in her uterus. She glanced at William, but he was staring straight ahead at the whales that were now only fifty meters away.

She wished, suddenly, that her grandmother could somehow be with her now. That she could see what her spirit knew must exist *somewhere* beyond the battered world in which she lived. Her grandmother had never given up on her belief that the world had been made for beautiful creatures, for caring creatures, for creatures crafted by the loving hands of the Creator. Never mind the barbarian invaders who understood nothing. In the end, the Original Plan would be fulfilled.

Anapa could tell that the mother whale now not only saw him, but recognized him. He wore an orange wet suit so that the tourists always knew where he was if they needed him. But the orange suit also made him readily identifiable to the whales.

The mother whale turned slightly toward him. The calf turned as well between her flippers.

As the six snorkelers approached, the calf swam with easy strokes of his flukes out from between his mother's fins and up to the surface ahead of her, where he paused to breathe. Prairie Wind could not see the spray, of course, but her ears, just above the surface, heard a faint burst of wet air.

After about half a minute at the surface, the calf dove down and circled beside his mother so that he swam back to his position between her long flippers. She moved slightly, embracing her child.

When the snorkelers were thirty meters away from the whales, Anapa held out his hand: We stop here.

They held their position for about five minutes, watching as the calf rose to the surface again for air, and as the mother humpback lifted her head to take a breath.

When Anapa had determined that the mother seemed comfortable with their presence, he gestured to the other divers that he wanted to speak to them. They treaded water in a vertical position, which enabled him to take the snorkel out of his mouth so that he could explain their next move.

“Both whales are comfortable with our visit. I suggest that we dive down to ten meters, so that you are looking at an upwards angle toward them. Raimana, you can take some excellent pictures of the whales in the blue water, with sunlight rippling on the surface. I will swim behind you and shoot the opening of a video with five divers and the two whales fairly close together, again with blue water wrapped around us and the sun shining on the surface.”

Everyone nodded that they understood.

“Try to dive fairly straight down, then hover in a line with a couple of meters between you, so that I can get a picture of five clear silhouettes with the whales in the background. Don't bunch up in a cluster. Give each other room, with open water between you. When you need to go up for air, try to go straight up. We don't want to get any closer to her. Let her get comfortable with one simple dive.”

Everyone again nodded that they understood.

Prairie Wind took several deep breaths, glanced at William, who gave her a thumbs-up, and then the two dove together. As she flipped down, she looked into the immense blue abyss below of her, the Big Blue that wrapped around the planet. Beams of sunlight, wrapped around her like a halo, reached down into the depths.

The five snorkelers hovered at ten meters, with open water between them, as Anapa had instructed them. Raimana aimed his camera at the two whales and took the most gorgeous picture he had ever taken in his life.

Prairie Wind could now clearly see the bellies of both whales, white with dark lines running the length of the long throat. She could see the undersides of the long slender fins, with their distinctive black markings. The calf had grown substantially during the past month. When it rose to the surface to take a breath, Raimana took another sequence of pictures.

Anapa swam behind the group of five, positioning himself so that the snorkelers were a bit below the whales; the whales themselves were thus clear in his viewfinder. As he filmed, he swam in a half-circle to the left, so that he got a more frontal shot of the whales, and a more profile picture of the snorkelers. When they rose one by one up to the surface, he opened his lens to wide angle and kept shooting until all five were in the rolling silvery mirror, while the whales remained down in the blue. Then he too rose to take a breath.

Anapa looked at Raimana, who gave him a vibrant thumbs-up.

Anapa knew that many guides allowed their divers to move in for pictures almost as soon as they encountered the whales. So a few tourists got some shabby pictures, and the whales became increasingly disturbed.

He kept his divers quiet, at a respectful distance, for at least twenty minutes, so that the whales were comfortable, and the snorkelers—hopefully—felt the spirit of the ocean, the spirit of life, before they went chasing after their souvenirs.

Another whale swam far to the left, heading further out to sea.

Anapa gestured to his snorkelers, then they dove down again, this time a bit more in front of the whales. He beckoned Raimana to follow him, and positioned the student photographer at about forty-five degrees to the length of the mother whale, a perfect angle when she lifted her head to take a breath. Rings of water around her head caught the sunlight.

The snorkelers floated a third time, unobtrusive, unaggressive, unthreatening. And then . . . Anapa saw the mother whale give a sturdy push with her flukes as she

began to swim toward the snorkelers. The calf swam along with her, just ahead of her long slender fins, with rhythmic strokes of his own flukes.

Anapa had always told his divers, “We keep a distance of thirty meters, one hundred feet, from the whales. If they want to come closer, that is their decision.” Now the mother humpback had made her decision. She did not swim directly toward the snorkelers, but would pass them with about ten meters, thirty feet, between them.

Anapa had to make a decision. Should they remain at the surface and watch the whales pass beneath them . . . Or should they dive down to ten meters, and thus be at the same depth as the calf when it passed by?

The whales were about twenty meters away, sixty feet, when he gestured to his team that they should dive. Without hesitation, all together, they dove straight down and hovered, while the mother and her calf continued to swim toward them. Anapa and Raimana hovered together at the left end of the divers, so that Anapa could shoot a close-up video of the whales without people, and Raimana could capture the picture that would be on the home page of the website that went out to the world.

Prairie Wind thought briefly, “Hey Boss . . .” but she could think nothing more.

She was inside something now, inside a moment of existence, as close to the origin of life as she had ever been. Her heart was thumping, the blue ocean embraced her, and then as the calf swam past her, looking at her with his watchful eye . . . she felt the kicking in her uterus, sharp, distinct, and insistent.

“Yes,” she thought. “Yes. Yes.”

The calf, a miniature adult, was about a third of the length of his mother. He held out his long fins like wings—a knobby pointed tip passed about twenty feet from Prairie Wind—while his flukes undulated up and down with a steady rhythm.

The Little One was kicking, kicking, deep inside. It was such an odd, wonderful feeling.

The mother whale, swimming above her child with her flippers reaching down protectively, was unbelievably huge. She was dark, almost black, with flecks of white. Her long pectoral fins were black above, white below and white along the front edge. But it was her flukes, her enormous tail rising and falling as it swept through the water, eighteen feet wide, that showed the true size of the whale. As she slowly passed with ponderous yet graceful momentum, Prairie Wind could feel through her wetsuit the wash of the water pushed by the mother’s tail.

The rumbling continued in her uterus as the twin flukes, small and huge, sweeping each with its own rhythm, moved further and further away.

Finally she rose to the surface and breathed and breathed and breathed.

Peering down at the mother whale with her Little One swimming beneath her, she watched them become dim and misty in the distance . . .

. . . until they disappeared into the vast blue expanse of ocean.

They had more than given her their blessing. They had given her their strength, the unrelenting strength and determination and tenacity of life on this planet, so that when she spoke on behalf of the whales—of *all* life—in the court rooms and the conference halls of South Dakota and New York and Washington and Paris and Geneva and The Hague, defending their *right* to live on this planet, she would prevail. She would demolish the paid prevaricators as if they were bowling pins. She would write the laws that needed to be written, and then she would defend those laws with the strength and tenacity and if need be, the ferocity, of a fierce mother defending her threatened child.

Trump? One more weasel. An oil pipeline? The last gasp of a scurvy bunch of thieves and thugs.

Her grandmother was right: the Original Plan would be fulfilled. In modern terms, it was called the Clean Energy Renaissance, built by young people who rose up with a bold new vision of life on this *gift* of a planet.

She would speak in the courts of the world with words like bolts of lightning. And life, precious, sacred *life*, would prevail.

William touched her arm and gestured that he wanted to talk with her.

They lifted their heads above the water and took out their snorkels.

Before he could say anything, she announced, “The Little One is kicking!”

“Kicking!” His eyes inside his mask were exuberant.

“She’s ready for her flippers.”

Prairie Wind and William held hands as they followed Anapa back toward the boat. The Little One kicked a couple of times more, then settled down.

Her generation was coming. In all of its wondrous and magnificent forms, her generation was coming.