

WANDI

FAVEL PARRETT

The thing I remember most is my mama's soft tail, warm and snug over my body. It was my blanket, and it kept me and my brothers and sisters warm through the night, even when the snow fell heavy and solid above our den. My nose was never cold, my tummy never empty, and I was safe.

I could hear my mama's heartbeat – strong and constant. Always there.

I was connected to her through that beat. It told me everything I needed to know – when to be quiet, when to play, when to hide away and when to be brave. It was there in my dreams, there in my slumber. It was there.

But one day Mama's heartbeat changed. I heard it skip and race and scream.

And that was the last time I ever saw her. My mama.



CHAPTER 1

From his place in the sky world, Bunjil looks down at all of his creations. The waterways, the animals and the plants. Everything that he has made. And there, high on a mountainside dusted with snow, a tiny dingo cub stares up at the night sky – bright eyes blazing with wonder.

He woke for no reason.

It was quiet, still – everyone asleep. His mama's tail covering him, his papa's tail there, too, warm and soft. He could hear his brothers and sisters

breathing, feel the movement of their sleeping bodies. He told himself to close his eyes, to try to rest, but it was no use. He blinked against the darkness. Something was telling him to get up.

He wriggled and rolled over his fat brother beside him, all roly-poly-tumble until his soft stomach flopped onto the dirt. He got to his feet and he shook himself straight. No one stirred.

He moved towards the entrance of the den, a bit wobbly on his sleepy legs. He could see the light of the moon, a bit of the night sky. It was calling him.

Outside, the snow had stopped falling. It lay silent and still on the ground, making the landscape glow a soft blue. The air was cold on his nose, clean and crisp, and he breathed it in. His land. His mountain. Where his family, his ancestors, had lived for thousands of years. He

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belonged here. To the rocks and the scrub and the snow and the trees. It was his place. Home.

The stars above him bright and full – the Milky Way cracked open, shining brilliant.

He would never be able to count all the stars in the sky, the sparkling lights in black, not in his whole lifetime. There were so many it made his head spin. They swirled and pulsed and he felt dizzy with them.

Then, he saw it.

An eagle in the sky. An eagle in the stars – large wings outstretched.

A giant bird made of shining lights.

His heart quickened, his eyes widened.

What a thing to see. What a crazy thing to see.

Something nudged his side hard and he turned his head.

‘Little One, what are you doing?’

It was his papa.

‘Can you see the eagle, Papa?’ he said.

‘You must stay in the den. I’ve told you so many times.’

‘But I was just looking at the stars, at the –’

His papa nudged him again, harder this time.

‘You must do what we say.’ His papa spoke quickly now, his heartbeat rushing. ‘It is dangerous. There are so many dangers.’

He looked right into his papa’s eyes.

‘Like what?’ he asked.

His papa shook his head. ‘It’s time for sleep.’

He pushed him once more and forced him back into the entrance of the den. They moved in step together, silently.

‘The most dangerous thing of all is the Human,’ his papa said in a low voice. ‘The tall animal that walks on two legs. If you smell one, you must

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run. If you see one close, you must hide. They poison us. They shoot us and they hang us from trees. They don't even eat us; they just kill us. They just kill.'

His papa closed his eyes. Maybe he was thinking about a time long ago. About his parents, his grandparents, the family that was no longer here.

'You must promise me you will stay in this den and do what you are told.'

He nodded. 'I will, Papa,' he said.

He found his way back among his brothers and sisters, and rested down under his mother's tail.

He thought it would take forever to fall asleep because he had so much to think about. The Human that walked on two legs. The eagle that flew in the stars. But his belly was still full of

milk and he was feeling so warm. He fell into rhythm with his brothers and sisters' breath, their bodies rising and falling together like they were one five-tailed creature.

He slept and slept, and he did not dream of anything.