

Chapter 1

The Broken Kapu

Joe stumbled as he plunged down the road toward the beach. Catching his balance, he hurried on his way, with no light to guide him or help him avoid the bad places. A thin cover of clouds dimmed even the small amount of light the stars could have given him. In his hand he carried a covered bucket to fill with ocean water and quickly return to his home. At his side, his little poi (mongrel) dog kept pace. Joe felt tension in the air. As he neared the beach, he could hear the breakers crashing. The atmosphere became so oppressive that he felt as if he were going to suffocate.

The jungle growth on each side of the road closed in on him. Rustlings among the trees and bushes raised the hair on his head. The back of his neck tingled. Muffled voices spoke to each other in Hawaiian but were too indistinct for Joe to understand. The tone of the voices, however, sounded increasingly menacing. The volume gradually built until it seemed that his head would burst with the intensity. Haranguing spirits argued among themselves.

As Joe reached the water's edge, he panicked. The feeling of suffocation increased; and the sound of voices echoed out over the water, roll after roll, like the sound of thunder clapping in his head. He felt pressed from all sides. He reached out to push the spirits back, but his hand pressed into nothingness.

Quickly he dipped his gallon pail into the ocean, filled it to the brim, and snapped the lid into place. His growing panic stole all his composure as he hurried back up the road. He raced up the last little hill, panting, tripping, and stumbling. The voices followed him, and he could still hear the moving of the spirits among the roadside trees. Then he heard a sound like a Model T Ford rattling by.

He cringed against the bushes, yet saw nothing although he felt the breeze it stirred up.

Hattie, his mother, waited impatiently for him at home. She threw open the door as she heard Joe's feet pounding up the path. His wild appearance told her more than he could have said had he been able to speak.

Giving her the pail of water, Joe collapsed exhausted into a nearby chair. He anxiously watched as Hattie helped Kalani, his father, take

SPIRITS IN HIS PARLOR

the salt water and carefully wash and then dry himself. Kalani was desperately ill, and all because of himself, Joe.

Joe's mind drifted back to a time earlier in the evening when all had been well with his world, and he had planned a special treat for his parents:

The evening stars were sparkling like jewels. The full moon cast eerie shadows behind each shrub and tree as Joe, accompanied by his little dog, carefully wound his way through the tropical trees to the beach near his home. His face brushed against rootlets hanging from the vines that climbed the trees. Occasionally he stumbled as his foot dropped into a deep rut made invisible by shadows on the road.

The heavy fragrance of ginger blossoms hung in the air, reminding him that summer had not yet passed. Joe felt a sense of peace and well-being, yet also adventure.

Suddenly his poi dog stopped by his side and growled deep in his throat. Joe stopped and peered ahead. He strained his eyes until he could barely make out the form of a dog approaching in the roadway. Joe's dog became even more agitated as the form drew closer. Joe watched it intently.

Joe knew about this spirit dog, not only from stories handed down, but from personal experience. He quietly waited for it to approach, while he tried to decide whether or not he should continue.

As the dog came closer, it increased in size until it reached the proportions of a large horse. Joe's little poi dog whined and pressed against Joe's leg as the huge animal passed. Joe heaved a big sigh of relief as he saw the spirit-dog float on down the road. The fact that the spirit ignored him meant he could continue his way to the beach safely.

Avoiding chuckholes and stepping over rocks in the road, Joe grinned as he remembered the first time he had met a spirit-dog. It had been near this very place in the road several years ago, when he was a small boy on an errand for his mother. On that occasion the huge dog had blocked the road in front of him, and he and his poi dog had fled, terrified beyond all reason, the errand unfulfilled.

Never again had the strange dog interfered with his activities, but neither had he questioned the right-of-way. All the people on the valley road held this spirit-dog in awe, knowing that if it blocked their way, they would remain much healthier if they changed their course.

This evening, as Joe had neared the beach, his little dog had returned to its more normal pattern of behavior - trotting ahead, turning and going behind him, much as it had throughout the many

SPIRITS IN HIS PARLOR

years of constant companionship between the two. Although Joe was no longer a child, and the little dog was growing old, it still felt responsible for Joe's safety.

When he had reached the beach, Joe felt at complete peace with the entire world. A few clouds scudded across the sky - small, white clouds that threatened no rain. A multitude of bright stars twinkled, and the light of the moon created a silver reflection, lighting a pathway from Joe to the horizon.

The receding tide had left the sand damp, and Joe dug his bare toes into it thoughtfully as he sat on a rock near the water's edge. Joe often sat on this rock and reflected on many things at the end of a day. Time seemed to have no beginning or end when he sat there alone with his faithful dog. At his side a sack rested - a sack that he hoped to make use of after the tide went out a bit farther.

Leaving the sack by the rock, Joe had wandered down the beach kicking pieces of seaweed to one side, examining shells washed up since his last visit, and watching little sand crabs kick sand inches away from the small burrows they dug to hide themselves when they felt his approaching footsteps.

Much later he had returned to the special rock, picked up the sack, and walked out to some rocks exposed by the low tide. These rocks were not often accessible, and he found the opihis (limpets) so thick that he scraped them from the rocks into his sack, soon filling it. How pleased his parents would be when he showed them all the opihis he had harvested! Picking up the heavy sack, Joe called his dog. As they made their way slowly back the same road, the moon no longer shed its pale light; and Joe walked more carefully so as to avoid the rough places.

The clock read half past two in the morning when he arrived home. He quietly warmed some water on the stove and put all the opihis into it. He took great care not to get the water too hot, as that would make the opihis too tough to be really good eating. Just as he had hoped, with very little help from him the tender meat fell from the shells. He removed the shells, dished up the meat, and called his sleeping parents.

"Why do you want us to get up this time of the night?" asked his mother.

"I have a special treat. Get up and eat with me."

"What kind of treat?"

"Opihis."

SPIRITS IN HIS PARLOR

Day and night mattered very little to them; so, although they were very sleepy, Hattie and Kalani soon caught Joe's excitement and prepared for a feast.

Up to this point Joe's remembering had been pleasant, but now he shuddered as he remembered how violently ill Kalani had become after his first spoonful. He cramped, became nauseous, and doubled up in agony. Joe couldn't imagine what had happened, nor did he know what to do. The surprise so eagerly planned earlier had turned into disaster.

Joe realized that Hattie knew the problem when she asked, "What are you having with opihis?"

Joe well remembered the sinking feeling in his stomach as he replied, "Only opihis."

He realized that he must have done something kapu (taboo), but couldn't imagine what. Joe was never one to deliberately break a kapu!

His answer didn't satisfy Hattie, who told him to go examine the shells again. When he did, he found mixed in with the opihis shells another shell - a smaller, dark one - the one they called pupukolea. Before he could tell them about these shells, Kalani said, "You've got pupukolea in it too."

Uneasily, Joe admitted that he had found a few mixed with the opihis.

"That's it," Kalani said, sounding really sick. Joe began to get even more frightened.

Hattie told him that only he could help Kalani, because he was the cause of Kalani's breaking one of his kapus. That was when she told him, "You must go back to the beach and bring back a bucket of water."

Kalani had told Joe where to find the pail, how to clean it, and to put on a lid. As he watched Joe get the bucket ready, he explained about his kapu. Joe knew that Kalani couldn't eat of the flesh of the kolea (golden plover) bird. But he hadn't realized that the sea snail, known to them as pupukolea, was just as deadly a kapu. As Kalani had explained everything to him, he said that it would take a whole gallon of beach water, with nothing else in it, to remove the kapu.

And so it was that at three o'clock in the morning Joe had started back to the beach, a walk he usually enjoyed, but one that was now a nightmare.

After returning and catching his breath, Joe told Hattie about the voices, how loud they became, and how they appeared to be arguing

SPIRITS IN HIS PARLOR

among themselves; and then he asked, "What do you think? Tell me what you think happened."

Hattie had told him of having lived in homes with kahunas (witch doctors), when she was younger, and Joe hoped that she could help him understand the meaning of the voices.

Hattie explained, "These voices belong to spirits. Some are good, some evil. The good spirits are God's spirits. They want to help you. The bad spirits want to keep you from getting water for Kalani to help him get better. You are their target because you try to help Kalani. Bad spirits did not harm you. You're lucky."

Joe pondered this as he dropped off to sleep some time later. When morning came and Kalani appeared as well as if nothing had happened, Joe was greatly relieved. Never did he forget the power of kapus, and he resolved again never to break one. This would not be easy, because he knew that all Hawaiians had at least one kapu, and most had several. His mother had raised him to fear and abide by them. Each kapu differed from the others, but each person knew his own kapus and never knowingly broke them. Joe realized that Kalani had been fortunate, indeed. The evil spirits might have killed him.

As far back as Joe could remember, he had known about kapus. Hawaiian parents, most of whom practiced spirit worship of one kind or another, taught their children early in life things to be avoided. Joe's mother taught him never to sweep trash through an open door after dark. If he did, the door slammed shut in his face. Neither could he whistle in the house at night. The one time he forgot, Joe stood horrified as he watched the light in the chimney of the kerosene lantern mysteriously go out, as though blown; yet the lantern could be carried in a strong wind without being disturbed.

All his forefathers believed in Christian prayer. Joe's mother believed in it. Joe had learned the Lord's Prayer at an early age, although he had no idea what the words meant or to whom he prayed. But with spirit worship so rampant, many people would spend an entire day in an attitude of prayer and supplication to the many spirits or gods, asking for their protection from harm and danger. Especially they requested help to remember all kapus. Joe had picked up this habit and had continued it into young manhood.

While it relieved Joe to find that Kalani felt well the following morning, he resolved to pray even more constantly for help. What would have happened to Kalani if Joe hadn't been able to get the ocean water needed so desperately to restore Kalani to good health? Joe could

SPIRITS IN HIS PARLOR

only guess, but he didn't even like to consider the possible consequences.