

PART ONE

THE CALL OF THE SAVAGE

The moon was a white crescent in a sea of stars when the female left the ledge and came down the slope of boulders to the aspens. She was swollen and slow from the new life inside of her, the same life that compelled her to hunt more often than she normally would.

The leaves of the aspens trembled in the slight breeze, their slim boles a silvery hue. She glided with her body low to the ground and her ears pricked. It was her nose that told her deer were in the meadow, and her belly growled with her need.

She was more golden than tawny. Her mother had been golden, too, her father a great copper slayer who held sway over twice as much area as most males and was brought low in a clash with a grizzly. Her mother died when she was but a winter old, taken by a pack of starving wolves in the deep snow when she could not move as fast. Her mother had been defending her and her brothers and sister, all of whom had long since scattered to live lives of their own.

That was the nature of their life in the wild. A life that was hard and brutal. There were the quick and there were the dead, and for eight winters now she had been quick enough to go on living and to give birth to two litters besides the young now taking form.

She was in her prime, all sinew and muscle. She was bigger than most females but then her line was nearly always bigger. She did not know why that was.

She came to the last of the aspens and flattened. The meadow was awash in moonlight, and there, in the middle, five deer were feeding. Three were does. One was a young spike biker. The last was a king of his kind, large and strong, his antlers still in velvet but no less formidable. Ordinarily she would ignore him and concentrate on one of the does. But the new life demanded more meat and the king buck had the most. His antlers were dangerous. His antler could kill. But her need eclipsed her caution. She would go for the monarch.

As yet they were too far off. She instinctively gauged the distance. It would take five or six of her prodigious leaps to reach them and by the second they would wheel and flee and it was unlikely she could catch them, not swollen and slow as she was.

She bared her fangs but didn't snarl. She must stay quiet and still and wait. She was good at waiting. She could lie in wait for prey for half a day or more if she had to.

The deer scent was intoxicating. She loved to slay deer more than she loved to slay anything. Badgers were plump and elk were succulent and squirrels were tasty treats but nothing compared to the sweet juicy taste of raw deer meat. She craved it as no other.

The monarch and the others were drifting toward the aspens as they grazed. It would be a while before they were close enough. She held herself rigid with expectation, poised to release her power at the right instant. She was focused on the deer and only the deer so when the bobcat scent reached her she ignored it until she realized what it meant. She raised her head and turned it from side to side, testing the wind. The bobcat was to her left but how close she couldn't be sure.

She had seen him from a distance a few times, a big male who dared to hunt in her territory, but she had never been able to get close enough to kill him. Now here he was, stalking the same deer. He was probably after one of the does or the young spike. If he charged before she did, he would spoil everything. The king buck would be gone in the bat of an eyelid, and she would not have her meal.

She almost rose to stalk the bobcat but the deer might hear or smell her so she lowered her head and waited as they came slowly closer. Now she could reach them in three bounds but she wanted them nearer still. She mustn't miss. Not with the new life she must nourish.

The moon rose higher and the wind grew stronger and she never twitched a muscle. She might have been made from stone. Her eyes were fixed intently on the king. She saw every flick of his ear, every quiver of his nostrils. He was wary, but then his kind always were. It was as much a part of them as her need to slay them was part of her.

The spike and one of the does were now only two bounds away but she didn't want them.

The bobcat scent was stronger. She flicked her eyes to the right and saw him; belly low to the ground, body primed to spring, concentrating on the deer as she was. The wind was from him to her and he did not know she was there. She could be on him in a single leap but the deer would bolt.

She watched the deer and the bobcat, both. She must be ready in case he charged before she was ready.

The large buck was almost where she wanted him to be. A doe was so near she heard the crunch of teeth on grass. She could practically taste the warm, delicious blood that flowed in the buck's veins, and it took all her self-control to stay crouched.

The king raised his head toward the aspens.

She heard it, too. The scritch of the bobcat's claws as he dug them into the ground for extra purchase. He was about to charge, about to spoil everything. She must charge first and she must do it now or go hungry.

A golden streak in the night, she exploded into the meadow. Her first leap covered twenty feet, her second almost as much. She swept past the startled spike and a bleating doe and launched herself into the air as the king was turning to flee. She had judged

perfectly and came down squarely on his back with her legs doubled under her and her paws splayed wide. Her claws sank deep into his flesh even as her fangs sought his neck. He snorted and took a bound but her weight was too much and he stumbled. She tasted hair and then warm flesh and a spurt of hot blood filled her mouth. Her claws shredded fast and furious as she clung on and sought to bring him down. Only vaguely was she aware that the other deer were fleeing. The buck bucked his whole body and almost threw her off, so strong was he. He took another bound and this time he came down hard and his front legs buckled. He raked backward with his antlers but she was just out of reach. She sank her fangs deeper and sliced with her claws in a razor frenzy. The king snorted and heaved up but he had lost too much blood and he only rose partway. His hind legs gave, and kicking and thrashing he fell heavily onto his side.

She was awash in blood. There was a roaring in her ears and a tingle in her body. She bit down with all the strength in her jaws and the buck stopped thrashing and was still. She raised her head and glimpsed the white tails of the other deer as they melted into the forest on the far side of the meadow. She was about to lower her mouth to feed when she sensed she was not alone and she whirled, a snarl bursting from her in rage at the temerity of her challenger.

The bobcat was crouched at the edge of the aspens, a grey-brown form not a third her size but endowed with fangs and claws as lethal as her own. He had white at the throat and a bobbed tail. He growled, and coiled, and the bob tail rose.

She flew at him in a fury. She was on him so fast that her first slash caught him on the shoulder. He didn't fight her. He ran. In a bolt of fur he was in among the aspens and she started after him but stopped after only a few bounds. She would kill him another time. The new life must come first. The new life must come before everything.

She returned to the king of bucks. In death he wasn't so regal; his eyes were wide and glazing and his tongue jutted from his mouth. She bit the tongue off and chewed hungrily. The tongue had a flavor all its own. As did the heart, her favorite part to eat. Lying on top of him, she fastened her fangs in his neck and lapped at the blood oozing from the wounds. She liked this, too; drinking until she was gorged with blood. Lapping and sucking and purring in contentment, she savored the reward of her prowess.

It was almost dawn when she left the kill. First she kicked grass and dirt onto it to mark it as her own, and then she padded up through the aspens to the slope of boulders and leaped from boulder to boulder until she came to the ledge and her den, a declivity in the rock wide enough that she could stretch out at full length, and deep enough that it sheltered her from rain and snow and was invisible from below and above.

She lay on her side and closed her eyes. She wanted to sleep but she was restless. It was the new life. Their time was near.

She got up and paced. Her restlessness grew. She moved to the lip of the ledge and gazed down over her domain. In the distance wolves howled, and she growled uneasily. To the east coyotes yipped. Somewhere in that vast sea of blackness a grizzly roared and everything else fell silent.

She kept on pacing. She could pace all night if she felt the compulsion but all she felt now was a growing urge. The life inside her would not be denied, just as it would not be denied the previous times. Finally she lay facing the opening.

Her body told her when the moment had come. She yowled once and only once as the contractions rippled through her.

She licked the first of them clean and then each one after that until five newborns groped feebly in the dark. She thought that was the end. She had never had more than five. Then a new pain racked her, a pain she never felt before when giving birth. She had to strain. She had to will her body to do what it always did naturally. The pain grew worse, and suddenly the deed was done and she lay back panting. A tiny mew brought her out of herself and she sat up.

The last one was different. She could tell that right away. It was more than twice as big as the others. It was also darker, much darker, the darkest kitten she ever had, so dark that even with her exceptional vision she had a hard time making it out. She licked it clean, the sour taste filling her mouth and the sour smell filling her nose. When she was done licking she nudged the six of them together close to her belly.

Their first nursing always hurt a little but subsequent nursing was pleasant. Her life became a routine of eating to keep her strength up and feeding her brood. The king buck lasted four days. It would have lasted longer but coyotes and ravens helped themselves when she was in the den with her young. From then on she made only short hunting forays. One night she treed a raccoon. It hissed and tried to bite her but was no match for her size and strength. Another night, she came on a shambling opossum. She did not like opossum meat much but motherhood made her less particular.

Blind and helpless, her kittens clung to her when they fed and curled at her side when they slept. They were constantly mewling and touching her with their tiny paws. Their fur was covered with spots that would fade as they aged.

It was fourteen sleeps before the kittens opened their eyes. This young, their eyes were blue but that too would change so that when they were eight or nine moons old their eyes would be a distinctive golden-brown.

By now they could get around better, and now that they could see, the first

thing they did was explore their surroundings, and the first thing they explored was her. They crawled up her and over her and around her until each of them knew her body as well as she did.

The next full moon she left the cave early, shortly after moonrise. By its light she could see almost as well as during the day. She was tired of small game and hungered for deer meat. Since giving birth she had avoided the meadow but now she made straight for it.

The aspens quivered and glittered. She sniffed and listened but the meadow was empty. Disappointed, she sank flat and waited with her extraordinary patience for the telltale sounds and odors that would herald the arrival of the deer. Instead, she smelled something else.

A black bear was crossing the meadow. Grunting and shuffling, it passed near where she lay and never saw or smelled her. She let it go unmolested. It was a big male and could inflict severe harm, and she had her kittens to think of.

Not long after the crackling of brush faded, a doe appeared. She smelled it before she saw it. Young and alone and incautious, the doe moved away from the sanctuary of the trees to the open grass.

Rising in a crouch, she edged forward. She froze whenever the doe raised its head, which wasn't as often as a more mature doe would. The high grass hid her so well that she was within a single bound of her prey when the doe finally awakened to its peril. Uttering a bleat of terror, the doe wheeled to flee. She was on it in a bolt of golden lightning. Her claws raked deep. Her teeth found the jugular. She wanted to lay lapping the blood but she gripped it by the neck and dragged it up through the aspens to the boulder-strewn slope below her haven. From the ledge she could see if any scavengers came close and drive them off.

She left the doe to check on her offspring. Five of the six were asleep. The sixth, the big one with the dark coat, was walking about exploring. She had never had a kitten so new do this so soon. He would be one to watch. She licked him and nosed him to the litter and then was out of the den and down the slope in stupendous leaps. Famished, she hunched over the doe and tore at the soft flesh and ate until she couldn't eat anymore. It was her first real meal since she gave birth, and new vitality coursed through her veins.

On returning to the den she found the dark one up and about. She stretched out and offered her eight teats. The other kittens stirred and rose to feed and the dark one shouldered them aside and settled on her first. She didn't rebuke him. It was always this way. The weakest and the smallest were forced to fight for what they wanted or go hungry.

The warm feeling she always felt when she nursed came over her. She watched them suck, as content with life as she ever could be, and now and again licked or nuzzled one or another.

All the next day she watched her kill as the kittens played on her and about her. Once a fox slunk out of the woods with its long nose raised to the breeze; it had caught the doe's scent. Her snarl sent it scampering. That evening when the kittens were sleeping she descended and filled her belly.

The days and nights blended one into the other. Gradually the kittens gained strength and the courage to rove the den and the ledge. The dark one did it first, as he did everything first. His black coat, when he lay on her feeding, stood out against the gold of her own. She licked him more than the rest and at night let him curl under her chin.

Then came a day when strange sounds rose from the meadow. She sat up and beheld animals she had never seen before. They were as big as elk and seemed to have two heads. One of the heads was like that of elk but the other was unlike any head she ever saw. To further confuse her, the second heads had long black hair and from some of the hair hung feathers. She had only ever seen feathers on birds yet these strange creatures were plainly not birds.

Instinct caused her to flatten so that only her eyes and ears and nose were above the ledge. Instinct, too, caused a low snarl to issue from her throat---a snarl they were too far off to hear. But they were coming closer.

The strange beings came toward the aspens. Their hooves made heavy thuds in the earth. They stopped, and a bewildering thing happened----one of the creatures broke apart. The part that was on top, including a strange head with the black hair and a feather, separated from the part of the creature that looked like an elk.

The female realized that each of these strange beings was actually two creatures. The things with the black hair and feathers were on top of the elk-like animals. Her tail twitched and she started to snarl again, but stopped. Something her warned her not to let these creatures suspect she was there.

The one that had swung down was studying the ground. It came along with the others following and stopped at the bottom of the boulder-strewn slope. It had found the carcass of the doe and there was an excited exchange of noises between the creature on the ground and the creatures on the elk-like animals.

They all looked up toward the ledge.

