

## Seven

*Tuesday, 4.30 am*

The thylacine lay quietly, half asleep and breathing rhythmically.

The eucalypt trunk, hollowed by fire long before she was born, and now lying rotting among the thick scrub, was an ideal refuge. However, it was not completely dry. Earlier, before the rain had stopped, water from above had dripped onto her back, making a muscular twitch ripple down the fur on her spine, and irritating her.

She was lying on her side in the dark, with her hind legs tucked in, and her front paws stretched out in front. Her two pups were asleep beside her. Their characteristic odour stirred vague memories of when they were born. Then, her body had decided it was time. Acting on instinct, and the experience of three previous litters, she had moved into the same log and given birth.

There had been three young this time. For months, she had carried them in her pouch. She hardly noticed their existence at first, so that she felt no need to alter her activities. However, as they grew, they drained her energy, and hampered her hunting.

It was during those heavy weeks before weaning that she appreciated their father alongside. He provided their food, and, if her unruly offspring ventured from the pouch and overplayed, he disciplined them. When the pups finally left her body and felt no need to return, their father disappeared. Nevertheless, she knew that soon they would mate again, as they had in previous seasons.

She had lost one of her pups recently, and it had saddened her. The smallest male became ill. She sensed it coming long before he died. Then, later, she came across his body, mostly eaten by devils and birds.

Until her mate returned, it was her job to train the pups. They followed her everywhere, never far from her side, smaller, darker versions of their parents. Slowly, she was teaching them the living skills learned from her own mother. Her hardest task was showing them how to hunt well, for she knew they would not be fast over short distances. Some of their prey could outrun them. It was better, she knew, to be smarter and patient: first to stalk, then to pounce. If her prey was startled to flight, it was usually fruitless to try and run it down. Instead, it was better to wait and watch, to anticipate the direction of its flight and then attack across the short cut.

She coughed gently, stirring the pups, and raised her head. Through the end of the log, she saw the first pre-morning light. Soon, they would go and hunt. Ordinarily, she would have done so the previous evening, and perhaps by now her belly would be full. However, the rain and the bush had dampened her spirits and the chances of a kill. Besides, the gate had been locked so she could not tell if there were any sheep.

She dozed briefly, then glanced out. No. Not yet. It was too dark to see. Then shortly before sunrise, she judged from the rising sound of birds, and possums scratching noisily home in trees, that it was time. Gently she nudged the sleeping pups, and with a stretch and yawn, they wobbled sleepily out with her to meet the day.

She sniffed the air, fresh and clean after the rain. The pups urinated. In the east, the sky was slowly silhouetting dark trees.

The thylacine turned and walked uphill. Her pups followed, coughing gently, darting left and right. They were hungry too. The family had not eaten for three days.

She had lived all her life in this bush, and she knew every part of it, every track, every tree. There were no predators, so she and others like her were free to roam. Not even the man was a threat. She noticed him often, sometimes inside the fence, sometimes outside it, and usually at a distance. Occasionally, he would venture right up to her lair, bend down with his head almost covering the opening, and stare in. Even then, it did not worry her for he never seemed to want to harm her or her family.

At the fence, she stopped, and looked around. Yes, the man had been this way again, not long ago, for his scent was strong. She turned right, and the pups followed. Then, up ahead, she saw him, waiting beside the gate. Her pups stopped, uncertain. The thylacine turned to them, nudged them gently, and kept going. Slowly she walked closer, stopped briefly before the open gate, and became aware of two other thylacines - both males - emerging silently from the trees to her right. She looked up at the man, sniffing at the air. Her pups cowered behind her, growling quietly. Then she walked slowly through the opening, and they pattered behind. The man watched and waited, and noiselessly moved away along the fenceline, leaving the gate open.

The thylacine walked uphill through thinner forest. The light was almost enough. Ahead, the dark trees opened out, and she was moving in low scrub towards the paddock. At the edge of the clearing she turned to the pups, and gently coughed. They stayed beside her. Good, they were learning. Slowly, she raised herself on her haunches, and like a kangaroo or a dog, with front paws hanging, looked slowly and carefully about, sniffing the air.

The sheep were here, close, and moving very slowly about, completely unaware of her. It would be an easy kill, even if in their immature enthusiasm her pups managed to spoil the surprise again. There would be enough for her family, and for the others.

She lowered herself, and crouching on all fours, crept closer, scraping her belly on gravelly ground. Her pups, still uncertain, walked slowly. Closer. The pups sensed the stalk, and began to get agitated. They started coughing in their high-pitched voices, and darting left and right behind her. Annoyed, she growled and nipped at them, and they were quiet.