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Prologue

The short Alaskan summer had passed, and the sharp smell of fall was in the air. Majestic tamarack trees in the lower valleys had turned bright gold, a striking contrast to the deepening red of the higher alpine meadows. On the lower slopes next to a shimmering lake, lofty poplar trees drew sap back to their roots in preparation for a long, cold winter. This part of interior Alaska is a vast wilderness where the presence of man is so rare that seasons pass and generations of animals live and die without witnessing a human footprint or the sound of an axe.

High atop a cliff an adult male eagle perched close to his empty nest. Not long ago, a chick had hatched from an egg in this nest. The eagle glanced toward his mate riding the air currents high above. They would soon leave for the long trip to the southeast coast, and their offspring must practice his flying skills and strengthen his wings. But the male rested, gazing down on the land like a king

on his throne. Below the new snowline the endless hillsides had darkened to crimson from the leaves and berries of the high bush cranberries. As he turned his regal head, he caught sight of the rippling movement of brown fur in the distance. Giant grizzlies wandered the slopes, stripping huckleberry bushes of their precious fruit.

At the base of the mountain a great column of steam lifted from Kurupa Lake, a remote, narrow body of water about 10 miles long and one mile wide. The air was colder than the water so the lakes and streams would continue steaming until they froze. The lake water was crystal clear, except for a faint tinge of grey in the upper area where a broad stream flowed into the lake, fed by a massive glacier in the distance.

The northern shoreline of Kurupa Lake sloped gently down to wide gravel beaches where animals came to drink. But along the other side a massive vertical wall scaled the mighty Brooks Mountain Range where the eagles had their nest. Most of these southern slopes were stripped of trees by the spring avalanches that raced down their faces every year. At its western end the lake emptied into a wide, slow moving river. A large pond near the lake also emptied into the river; a family of beavers had created the pond by building a massive

dam across a small stream near the lake.

On that particular day the eagle's sharp eyes also took in the aftermath of a recent mud and rock avalanche. Mighty rocks, some larger than houses, lay in random piles along the southern shore of the lake as though an unseen hand had cast them there. Great masses of uprooted trees lay in the water, torn from the mountain by the sudden movement of soggy earth. And beyond the tangle of rocks and fallen trees littering the shoreline, the eagle spied a small creature swimming alone in the clear waters of the lake.

Chapter One

Brand-new Babies!

Several months earlier in late spring Kayla, a North American river otter, had left her mate, Karga, and found a long underwater tunnel below an overhanging bank in the beaver pond. As large flocks of wild geese and swans arrived at the pond and splashed happily about, Kayla worked energetically to enlarge the old tunnel for her needs. She curved the long entrance upward and then dug the den itself above the waterline, just beneath the surface of the ground. Back and forth she went through the tunnel, carrying out mud and material as she worked. Once the den was completed she gathered soft grass and leaves from along the bank and spread them on the floor

of the den. Over time they would turn half dry, creating a warm bed and perfuming the air with the musty smell of decaying grass.

Kayla was heavy with pups, and as a first time mother she was anxious about her den. When it was completed to her satisfaction, she curled up in the bed to wait for the moment of birth. Sometimes she awoke to the sound of mice scampering back and forth through their tunnels, grabbing tiny pieces of grass from her bed, then running back to build their own nests. During the night there was a different whimper, and Kayla turned her head to lick the two newborn otter pups lying beside her.

Baby otters are called kits or pups and are helpless at birth. Ossie was the firstborn, measuring five inches from the tip of his little black nose to the base of his tail. As the firstborn otter, he is called the dog pup. His fur was grey and silky soft, much like a pussy willow bud. All otter pups are born toothless and blind and wail like a little baby when they are hungry. Tig the born second; he was smaller, but just as hungry. Kayla spent most of her time curled up around her new pups so they could nuzzle in her soft fur to find their source of milk and so they could stay warm.

Once in a while, when Ossie and Tig were full of milk and sleeping contentedly, Kayla would slip