



the Story of an Orphaned
Bobcat

Parthur

Dawn Fritz Hopkins

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PARTHUR; THE STORY OF AN ORPHANED BOBCAT

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[DEDICATION | This story is dedicated to the memory of my father, Kenneth Wilfred Fritz, who taught me to love and respect all things of nature.](#)

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Chapter 1

It was a small noise, but it was enough to make the young, inexperienced, mother bobcat stiffen with apprehension as adrenaline pumped through her body, heightening her sense of fear. She sprang silently to her large, padded feet and lifted her head, sniffing the air in search of the origin of that tiny sound that had alerted her. Her head slowly moved back and forth as her large ears swiveled, trying to home in on what had startled her. Her sudden movement had knocked aside the small, four-week-old, spotted kitten that had been nursing at her side. He lay sprawled at her feet with a dazed and sleepy expression on his face. The mother bobcat quickly lowered her head and gave the small kitten a nudge with her nose, but almost immediately she raised her head once again and nervously scanned the area in front of her. The kitten, unaware of any danger, raised itself on unsteady legs and leaned into the front legs of his mother. Once again, the mother bobcat anxiously leaned down and quickly sniffed her small offspring. She closed her eyes as she took in his smell.

She stepped over him and assumed a low, defensive crouch keeping her body on top of his. She looked steadily in the direction where she thought the sound had come. Her body was taunt, and the fur around the back of her neck and shoulders rose in fear and aggression. All four legs were ready to spring. Her back-left foot tapped soundlessly in apprehension on the rock where she stood, and a low growl rumbled from her throat. The baby understood this growl, and now he too was afraid and flattened his body to the rock ledge and pushed himself up against his mother's back legs—looking for security.

The two cats were motionless as they waited on their rocky ledge. Their tawny striped and spotted furs blended almost perfectly with the rocks and boulders strewn around them. The mother bobcat had been lured out of her den by a gloriously warm, sunny, fall afternoon with her first offspring. It was his first introduction to the great wide world outside of their den. But now something was terribly wrong. There was danger out there, and she didn't know what or where it was. She had to protect her little one and was frozen in fear.

The bobcat kitten had been confused by his mother's quick and sudden movements. But once she had growled, he instinctively knew that something was wrong. His small pink tongue was still curled in the nursing mode and was just visible between his half-opened lips. Droplets of milk dampened the fur around his mouth, and the top of his head was still wet from the cleaning his mother had been giving him with her warm, sandpaper tongue. His gray-blue eyes were alert now as he crouched under his concerned mother. He could feel the tightness of her body, and her fear was transferred to him.

It was a warm, lazy, sunny afternoon in the foothills of the Maricopa Mountains in southwestern Arizona. A light breeze danced among the short, mesquite trees and cat's claw that made a thick ring below the ledge where the two bobcats waited. In among the trees' gnarled roots, the bleached dry, golden grasses waved back and forth with a soft crackle in the light breeze. The October sun hung low on the western horizon, washing the sky in a golden glow. Only a few elongated clouds hugged the horizon of the fall sky, and they were painted almost a crimson red from the fading sun. The huge gray and tan boulders that stood behind the cats' ledge were bathed in a warm yellow wash. Summer was stubbornly clinging to these rugged, rocky mountains.

The mother bobcat made another low growl, and the baby pushed up even closer to his mother's hind legs, folding his own legs under his chest so that he was now a small ball. He tried to be as still as he possibly could, and he closed his eyes and waited.

The small baby thought back in his memories. He had been born in a small, dark cave made up of smooth rocks that had been piled there centuries ago. After his eyes had opened and they had focused, he had been aware of the bright light that came in from the small, jagged entrance of that cave. His mother would leave every day to hunt, and while she was gone, he would curl up and sleep to await her return. But as he grew bigger and stronger, his curiosity of what lay outside his small den became irresistible. Several times in recent days he had poked his head out the small hole and looked in wonder at the things around him. He knew he was not to venture outside his home, but he loved these quick looks into the world outside.

Today had been different, however. He had been asleep when his mother entered the cave, but once she was next to him, she sat down and

started to clean his face. He was instantly awake. He could smell the blood that was caught in the fur around her mouth from the rabbit she had eaten prior to her return. He licked her face and mouth clean and relished in the taste of it. Then his mother stood up and walked to the entrance of the cave. She stopped halfway there and called to him, urging him to leave the cave. She walked out the small hole, stopped and turned and called once more. The little kitten did not need much coaxing, he was anxious to see what was out there. He moved as quickly as he could on slightly, unsteady legs out of the dark cave to join his mother.

The setting sun hit him straight in the face, so it took a few moments for his sight to adjust. His small round eyes were not focusing completely, yet, to see in the distance, but he could see well enough to delight in the smallest of things. His first encounter was a large, black beetle that was moving slowly across the rock ledge in front of their den. The small kitten stopped and stared at the slow-moving black bug. He patted at it several times and then tried to shove it with his right paw. The beetle pulled in its legs and played dead. It didn't move, in hopes that the kitten would tire of its game and spare its life. For several minutes the small kitten batted at it and pushed it one way and then another.

His mother, sprawled on the rock ledge nearby, watched him indulgently. But the warm sun on the kitten's back was just too appealing, and his stomach told him that he wanted to nurse. He abruptly left the large beetle to make its escape and walked over to his mother to nuzzle her belly, looking for a nipple. He flopped down next to her. She gave a half turn of her body to help in his search, looked at him with pleasure, and then she laid her head down on the rock ledge once he had found an engorged nipple. Her front paws flexed open and shut ever so slightly.

His small mouth nursed eagerly, and small droplets of milk spilled out on either side, wetting his face. His eyes were closed in contentment, and his front two paws kneaded her soft belly around the nipple. He felt secure and happy as the late afternoon sun caressed his back. The rock ledge on which he and his mother lay was warm, having soaked up the rays from the sun all day. He could not have known, however, that his late-summer birth meant danger for his survival. Most baby bobcats are born in the spring, but his mother's estrus, by some quirk of nature, did not happen until midsummer. The chances of this baby making it through the winter

months would be doubtful. He might not be strong enough or big enough by the time winter entered these mountains that he called home.

Now everything was topsy-turvy. Fear had gripped this little family. The mother bobcat growled again. She raised her body from her crouch and lifted her nose high into the air one more time with eyes squinting and whiskers twitching. Her nostrils quivered as she tried to find a smell that would tell her what it was that had frightened her. The small tufts of fur on the ends of her ears flickered forward and backward as they swiveled, looking for something, anything. A light breeze rose from the trees below her and ruffled the fur on her back, but her body stayed almost motionless with her baby curled beneath her feet. She lowered her head and searched the distant area.

Everything had gone completely silent on their mountain ledge. Seconds before, the air had been filled with the normal sounds of a late fall afternoon in the low mountains, but now no insects buzzed, no birds chirped and no animals scurried. There was just a deadly silence, as if every living thing in the area was holding its breath, knowing that danger was nearby. The little bobcat's mother knew without a doubt that something was out there, somewhere, and she was exposing her new cub to whatever it was. She waited motionlessly. Nothing moved on her body except her short, striped tail which flicked anxiously back and forth as she listened intently. Once again, she cautiously raised her head to sniff the air in hopes of finding the meaning or the direction of the threat, and her eyes closed again as she rapidly inhaled great gulps of breath looking for clues in the air. She sensed nothing.

The silence was suddenly broken by a sharp, explosive report that cracked through the dry air. The mother bobcat was slammed in her chest and fatally wounded by the deadly accurate shot from a hunter's rifle. Her body was savagely thrust back from where she had been standing by the impact of the bullet. Her legs felt weak as she staggered to keep her balance. She could see her small, frightened baby just in front of her, but her vision was quickly dimming. Panicked, she tried to understand what had happened.

Blood was seeping from a mortal wound, but with a mighty effort she staggered forward, put her nose down to her cringing, kitten's face and breathed in his smell one last time with a shallow, ragged breath. Small droplets of blood oozed from her nose and soiled the fur on the top of his

head. She closed her eyes and collapsed on top of him as that final breath left her body. Her last thoughts were to protect him from whatever it was that was out there. Her body went slack as it covered her most cherished possession, and her life left her limp body.

The baby bobcat was terrified. What had happened? What was wrong with his mother and why was she not moving? He mewed softly to her, hoping to get an answer. There was only silence. She did not move or make a sound. Her weight on top of him was heavy and uncomfortable. He laid there for a few minutes, hoping she would move, but when she didn't, he decided to try and get his legs up under his body so that he could stand or possibly crawl out from under her. Over and over he tried to move, but the dead weight of his mother on top of him was just too much. He was trapped. He felt something wet on his back. It was his mother's blood seeping from the gunshot wound. It matted into his fur.

Even though he was almost paralyzed with fright, every instinct in his young mind told him he had to flee, but he knew that wouldn't work because he couldn't get his legs and body loose from under his mother. But why should he run; this was his mother? She had always meant warmth, food and safety to him. Things must be all right, because she was here. But things were not all right. His mother's body was silent, deathly still and very heavy. Finally, the little bobcat decided not to struggle any more. He would stay put and just wait. He tried to curl up as best he could under the dead weight of his mother, and he waited.

Ten minutes went by, and it felt like an eternity to the small baby as it lay in fear. Then he heard it. It was far away, and then it got closer and closer. He curled up in fear into an even tighter small ball under his dead mother and closed his eyes.

The two hunters, dressed in blue jeans, sweatshirts, denim jackets and well-worn cowboy hats were making their way slowly over the rocky and uneven terrain just below the den of the baby bobcat and his mother. One of the men, the shorter of the two, was doing most of the talking. The other hunter, a tall, thin, serious-looking young man, only replied to his companion with short, quick replies. The conversation of the shorter hunter only stopped when he had to exert himself as he traversed a particularly large rock or ditch, and then he would continue. Adding to the sounds of the human voices that the young bobcat heard were the thumping and scraping noises made by their heavy, hiking boots as

pebbles, rocks and dirt gave way or were crushed under their heavy soles as they approached. The dry sage brush scraped and rasped against the legs of their jeans, and the low limbs of the mesquite trees and the cat's claw grabbed at their jackets. The baby bobcat listened in fear and confusion as they got closer and closer. And then he knew that they had made it just below his ledge.

Suddenly, all the noise stopped. The small kitten opened his eyes and listened intently. Maybe whatever it was had gone. But then the strange noises started all over again. He closed his eyes tightly, and with a cold dread in his stomach he listened to the strange sounds of the two humans talking just below the rock ledge where he lay hidden under his mother's body.

The hunters were young men in their early twenties, and they were being very careful in approaching their kill, or at least the tall one was. He wanted to be certain that the bobcat he had just shot was dead and not just wounded. A wounded bobcat can be quite dangerous, and he didn't want to take any chances. The two young men had stopped their progress just below the little rock ledge that held the sprawled body of the mother bobcat and her hidden baby for several minutes. Her still body was just visible from their vantage point, and the taller hunter watched the downed animal carefully, looking for any sign of movement. Finally, the tall hunter pulled himself tentatively up on the ledge, keeping his rifle ready.

When on the small ledge, he knelt in a crouch four feet away from the cat's lifeless body. Again, he watched for any movement. Finally, certain the animal was dead, he stood up and carefully approached its lifeless body, carrying his rifle loosely in his right hand. He lowered his rifle and carefully nudged the bobcat's body with its barrel. Then he slowly knelt by its side, placing one knee on the rock surface and steadying himself with the butt of his gun. He saw the bloody wound of his rifle shot in the cat's chest and was satisfied that it was dead.

"Jack, that was a heck of a clean shot," the shorter hunter said from below the ledge. He could just barely see up on the rocky platform, but he had watched his friend's careful approach to the dead animal. "You got that one clean as a whistle."

"Yeah, Mike," Jack grunted as he remained squatted at the head of the dead mother bobcat. He had soft gray eyes, and upon close examination one could see the admiration he felt for the animal he had just killed. Jack

Copeland and his good friend, Mike Summers, had decided to go bounty hunting that afternoon. It was the fall of 1960, and the state of Arizona was still offering bounties on animals such as bobcats, coyotes and mountain lions that were considered threats to the livestock of the local farmers in the area. Jack liked to hunt and used hunting as a way to bring food to the dinner table. This kill was for bounty and pelt money, which he needed for his family. He had a great respect for the wildlife of Arizona-bobcats in particular. They were beautiful and graceful animals. He felt some regret in taking this animal's life. He shook his head slightly and gave a tug at the front of his cowboy hat as he surveyed his kill. "Can't be thinking that way, not now," he thought.

Jack reached over and carefully propped his rifle up against a large rock next to the dead body of the bobcat and reached into his jacket pocket and took out a pair of heavy canvas gloves. Slowly he put them on as he stood up. "Let's get this one back to the trucks before it gets dark. It's going to get chilly here as soon as the sun goes down behind those mountains." Jack nodded towards the western skyline. The sun had slid below the horizon, and golden rays were now streaking over the darkening, crimson sky. A purple hue painted the far mountains with the loss of the sun for one more day.

Jack grabbed the front paws of the dead bobcat with both hands and started to swing its body up onto his shoulder for transport back to his truck. But as he started to lift the lifeless body into the air, he stopped in surprise as he uncovered the small baby. Jack stood there frozen for a moment with the limp body of the mother bobcat dangling from his gloved hands. He then placed her carefully to the side as he looked down at the shivering, terrified animal.

"Mike, look at this."

Mike couldn't see what Jack was staring at, but he quickly leaned his rifle against a small tree, hurriedly climbed over a few rocks and pulled himself up on the small ledge next to Jack. He looked down in amazement at the small, blood-smearred body of the frightened baby bobcat.

The small, infant animal had kept its eyes tightly squeezed shut, but now that the weight of his mother had been removed, he decided to take a peek. He looked up at the two giant men in front of him and was terrified. He looked quickly from side to side to see if there was some escape route or a place to hide. The edge of the ledge was to his left, that wasn't any

good. The taller man was to his right, and he was in between the small kitten and the hole to his den. He closed his eyes in fear again. The two men started talking, and he was certain that one of them was getting even closer.

He opened his eyes once more to look, and he was horrified to see one of them lean down to get a closer look at him. The small kitten backed up a few inches and hissed and slapped one of his front paws on the ground in the direction of the tall man near him. His little ears were flat against his head.

“Damn, I never would have shot its mother if I had known she had young. It really is unusual that she would have a cub this late in the fall.” Jack studied the small animal in front of him. “I’ll bet he isn’t any more than four or maybe five weeks old.” Jack was feeling a little guilty now about his kill. He had unknowingly made an orphan of this little bobcat, and he didn’t like the feeling. “Damn,” he muttered softly under his breath. “Damn.”

“What are you going to do with it, Jack?” Mike asked. “The state gives us a bounty on a bobcat, no matter its age. Are you going to kill it?”

Jack felt sick in his gut as he looked down at the miserable kitten. It looked so small and vulnerable. Jack had killed its mother, and its only chance to survive. He knew in his heart that he couldn’t harm this small, defenseless animal, but he also knew that it was way too young to make it on its own. But he wasn’t quite sure what he could do for it. Jack shifted his weight several times as he stared in silence at the little animal in front of him and hesitated.

“Jack?” Mike asked again. “Are you going to kill it?”

Jack rubbed his chin in deep thought, and then he slowly untied the dusty red bandana from around his neck. He removed his battered old, black cowboy hat and wiped the inside of the head band with the red cloth as he continued to study the frightened animal.

There was another long silence. “Jack?” Mike questioned his friend again.

“No,” Jack mumbled softly.

“What did you say, Jack?”

“No,” a little louder this time. “No, I can’t do that.” He resolutely placed his cowboy hat back on his head, placed the bandana in his back jeans pocket and stood up as he took off his over-sized, denim jacket.

Once the jacket was off, he laid it on a nearby rock. He found the two zipper ends and zipped up the jacket halfway. Then he made a knot in the bottom of the garment. It became obvious to Mike that he was making a carrying pack.

Mike watched him in surprise. "What are you doing, Jack? You aren't really thinking about taking that kitten back with us, are you?" When Jack didn't respond, Mike continued, "What will Nancy say?"

"Look, I killed its mother, and I feel responsible. I'll figure out something to do with the baby when I get back. I'll handle Nancy." Jack didn't want to appear to be soft in front of his hunting buddy, but he just couldn't kill this defenseless animal. When he had shot the mother, it had only meant money to him. But now the dead mother had left him this legacy, and he couldn't back away from the responsibility. Jack didn't want to meet the questioning eyes of Mike as he finished preparing his jacket to carry the kitten, and he hurriedly finished the job. He had made up his mind, and that was that.

Fortunately, Mike didn't pursue the matter any further. He stood there in silence as he watched Jack. In fact, if the truth were known, Mike was relieved that the baby was going to be saved.

Jack didn't have a clue what he could do with a small baby bobcat. He and his wife, Nancy, were living in a cramped, old, dilapidated trailer on the outskirts of Gila Bend, Arizona. She had been his high school sweetheart, and they had married just after graduation three years ago. She was a waitress at a local truck stop in Gila Bend, but Jack had recently been laid off from his construction job on U.S. 80. There was a lot of love, but not a lot of money in the Copeland household. Jack knew he couldn't murder this little, defenseless kitten for the bounty just because there were problems in his life.

As Jack worked on the carrying sack, Mike kept an eye on the small kitten. The baby bobcat backed slowly into a small depression in the rock wall and tried to curl up as tight as it could, facing the two men. Mike didn't interfere with the kitten's retreat; there really wasn't anywhere the little guy could go.

Trembling with fear, it watched the two humans. The men's voices were so foreign to its ears, and every time they moved the small kitten pushed harder and harder against the stone wall. A couple of times he hissed at them. Things were just too confusing.

When the carrying pouch was finished, Jack tentatively reached over with his gloved hand and paused just above the kitten's head. The small animal reacted in terror as it hissed and spat at the large glove. Then Jack grabbed the back scruff of the baby's neck as tenderly as possible and lifted the small, frightened animal into the air. The little bobcat writhed and turned as it was lifted, and it batted ineffectively with its small paws at the big gloved hand that was holding him. Jack carefully placed the small, struggling animal into his makeshift jacket-sack. He zipped the zipper to the top, being careful not to catch the fur of the little animal. He folded over the open end of the jacket on to itself, crisscrossed the empty arms to secure the opening and then lifted up the bundle by the arms of the jacket to his shoulder. The baby bobcat was secure. He gently adjusted the small sack on his shoulder till it felt comfortable, leaned over, picked up his gun and stood up.

"Mike, you carry the mother's body. We had better make tracks back to the trucks. It's getting late, and that sun went down fast."

The two hunters turned south for the two-mile hike back to their vehicles. Jack was deep in thought about the responsibility he was carrying on his shoulder. He knew that his wife loved wildlife as he did, but he wasn't certain what she would think about a wild, baby bobcat as a member of their family. How could they keep him? To say they didn't have much room was an understatement. The two-room trailer they shared was old and small. A pet was a luxury Jack and Nancy had never considered. Could a person really make a pet out of a wild animal? Jack didn't have an answer for that one, but his real concern was the expense of feeding another mouth. Granted, it was a small mouth now, but what would happen when it became a full-grown bobcat? A full-grown bobcat, now that was a thought. How do you cope with a full-grown bobcat? He knew that he and Nancy really couldn't afford this addition to their household right now. He had no job. The questions kept rolling over and over in his head as he and Mike slowly made their way back to their trucks.

Mike, usually a big conversationalist, didn't say much on the return trip to their vehicles. However, he couldn't stop himself from glancing over periodically at the small bundle hanging over Jack's left shoulder as they walked back to their trucks, but the extra weight of the dead bobcat mother on his shoulder made him concentrate on his own path as he picked his way over the low, mountain terrain.

Jack felt the little kitten squirm a few times when they first started off, especially as he struggled and slipped over several large boulders. The kitten mewed pitifully for its mother as it was bumped and tossed about in the dark carrying sack on Jack's shoulder. It squirmed and fought against the denim material of Jack's jacket as it looked for an escape. But after about a half-hour the little bundle was very quiet and still.

Jack made a silent promise to himself and to that small, scared baby. He would find an answer somehow.

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