

Excerpts—THE CALLING

from Chapter 1

Rising in the air, pausing, then dropping like an icicle from a ledge, the spike sunk in deep. Surprisingly deep.

A quick yank couldn't free it. Only by working it forward and backward, side to side. Pushing against the hole it had made, pulling it wider. Then lifting.

In the shadow of the roof, the evening air was cool. The scent of pine and balsam fir carried from the heavy trees across the wide lawn. From far off, the smell of the lake was pure, clear, like a vesper bell.

Surprisingly deep.

Not that anyone was left to surprise. The grounds were quiet. The caretaker had gone.

The old house stood mutely behind, and the only sound under the overhang of the roof at the corner was like a rough whisper. It could have been a hoarse breath at the end of a phone in the senseless pit of night. Or a sardonic whistle through dry lips. Or a July evening settling through sun-dried grass at the edge of the woods.

No one else heard it, the sound like air slipping up through a throat like a dry sleeve, and there was no one to see. Nothing could have seen but the red-tailed hawk.

Two thousand feet up, circling on its wide bank of air, the sound in its ears was a thin rush. Far below, the oblong lake flashed white, like a chunk of mirror, in the corner of its eye.

It could have spotted what was happening beside the great house, beyond the black fingers that stretched across the grass from the tall firs. The hawk's eyes, like precision lenses, could have tightened on the spike as it rose just inside the square shade of the eave then drilled down in the same patch of shadow, at the corner of the long slate-colored roof.

It was drawn to imperfection. Any quick glint of a blade would catch its eye, or the slash of something not quite a blade but a blade of sorts, a kind of claw.

It would spot the small detail, even in the forest, the hard sharp whistle that ripped the leaves, long before the dark burst and the gushing warmth it could nearly taste on its black whip tongue, or the dead weight going down on heavy knees then tilting, pitching forward, mouth gaping in wet rot.

The spike rose again and hovered there, as though considering its target. The air was still.

Down. Tock.

Down and in deep. Tock. A hollow pop like suction in an empty skull.

There. That would do.

Dark patches spread over the grass. Long before they joined the shadow of the eave, the spike had been ground back and forth and lifted free.

Hands had reinserted it into the hole it had come from, out in the middle of the caretaker's green lawn. The hose, reattached, lay in precisely the same path, the wavy green tracing from the old house to the sprinkler. No one had seen.

In the patch of shade made by the corner overhang, the cross-shaped holes in the black dirt had been tamped shut. Hands had patted and smoothed the deep punctures made with the spike. The hands had closed all but one—so whoever saw it would know.

As deepening shadows spread all the way to the eave, the heady smell of firs and matted needles and rich, dry earth in evening slipped from the mouth of the forest. It settled like a dark breath against the walls of the old house which sat cooling, and waiting.

from Chapter 6

Louis went upstairs for his wallet and Dana wrote down whatever she could think of that seemed healthy and natural enough to suit their surroundings—various greens, whole grain bread, dark beer, chicken. She thought of couscous, realized it was probably unobtainable, and wrote down rice pilaf instead.

A few minutes later, it felt a little strange to her to be waving from the door as the Peugeot rolled down the long drive and disappeared into the trees. It was a big house, very big for one person. She pushed the heavy door shut and locked it and whistled on her way back to the kitchen.

Two bowls and two cups to wash, that was it. Simplicity in the woods, Dana thought. She could live like that. She rinsed them and watched the water swirl down into the disposal. *Pulverator* it said on the stainless ring around the drain. It was very much like the one in their apartment, but she couldn't remember whether theirs had a name.

She rinsed faster. Silly, that's what it was. She tried to tell herself that it was, even as she watched the water make its hypnotic swirl, circling down. She always had the same feeling, even though she knew it was silly. Imagine what it would do to a hand.

Dana could almost see it—engaging the fingertips first and not letting go. It would rip in circles like a steel shark, clamped on and spinning. The rotor. If a hand slipped in, drawn by some invisible weight, a kind of compulsion...

It was the same again. She was starting to feel tight in the shoulders. Light-headed. It couldn't happen, not by mistake. But what if a hand were forced in somehow—seized and driven down into that loud, ripping spin? What could be done? Could you even wrench it out? Her mother was strong, she could pull the hand back. But what if you clamped her arm and kept your weight behind it, held it down with all your strength? Held it down. There would be blood, lots of it, spraying up out of the hole, speckling the enamel, and worse, bone—white splinters, cartilage, fragments pink and white...

Dana felt like she was being dropped. She looked into the drain and she was falling.

She reached for the faucet and shut it off matter-of-factly. She could do that and she knew all along she could. She was only playing. She shook her head briefly twice then tipped the second bowl to let the water run out and placed it upside down in the drainer.

She wasn't quite there yet, that was all. They had worked on it in therapy. It was part of a process. You couldn't separate it out from the rest. It was part of the general working-through. Dana knew she could turn it off when she wanted. Her mother didn't know what Dana could and couldn't do, but Dana did.

Soon she wouldn't have to think things like that at all if she didn't want to. That was the goal, and she would reach it. She just wasn't there yet. She started upstairs and by the time she reached the landing, she realized she was whistling again.

from Chapter 9

The music rose in the old walls like a pulse of the house itself. It settled from the shadows in the long halls. It even sounded faintly in the kitchen cupboards and haunted musty guest rooms, although those doors were closed and locked.

Noah Taggart heard the music all too clearly in his bedroom on the second floor. He dealt with it as he would an old, familiar pain. Actually, it was only an annoyance, so much milder than the knifing sound of electric music from a radio or the brakes or horns of cars.

Of course it was loud to him, much louder than to the others. He was accustomed to that. It was music of his own choosing, and if there was discomfort, there was also stimulation in it, the rhythm like the one that fired the blood, and the pure human tone of breath across the mouth of the pipe.

In the oval mirror above the dresser, he adjusted the tunic. All black and simply cut, nothing about it drew attention. It threw Taggart's face into relief, adding black to his eyes, deepening them, much the way faces, especially eyes, were showcased by tuxedos or mourning clothes. Such was not Taggart's intention.

In the mirror, his hair, black and gray, swept back like smoke above his forehead. It interested him as little as the features of his own face. He was not inattentive to his appearance, however. He knew that to the others it was a condition of commerce, a set of understandings they shared. Of all qualities, they trusted it most, the property they could see and therefore seem to know.

That was how Taggart regarded the appearance of the physical shell. He could participate in commerce by going among them in his disguise. Of course it was tedious. Of course it was beneath him. It was necessary nonetheless.

The other details were aesthetic, fine points of pleasure and beauty as it served pleasure. His clothes were only incidentally pleasing to the eye. Their real beauty was texture, smooth fibers inviting to the touch and tailored perfectly—no synthesized material with tiny plastic lashes, no seams ineptly done which lay like crooked agony against the skin.

The furnishings reflected in the mirror around him were valued for the same reason. That they were costly was irrelevant. Money to Taggart was a relic, quaint as a prior generation's hit tune. The fine brocade curtains suspended from the canopy above the bed, the sheets of satin and the robe of dark brown silk, the fur-lined slippers and the shoes of calfskin, the chairs with their upholstery like velvet as rich and soft to the touch as the velvet curtains that hung darkly to the floor beside the window—the value of these was their transparency, their ability to be, yet vanish, without intrusion.

Senses tuned to insects emerging with nightfall, outside the house and a hundred meters down the hill, to the perfumes and human smells that flooded, dense and suffocating, through a drawing room—these senses were enemies. Taggart's clothes, his bed sheets, all the textures which encountered his skin were what they were because they respected the senses. They allowed them to exist in peace. They shielded him from chaos.

How fine, the others may have thought, how charming, when they saw Taggart and his worldly things. He adjusted the shoulder of the simple black smock. The familiar aroma rose from it: dusky smoke, incense like sweet clay, seasoned with the giving of life, exhaling the rot of evergreens, cedars, and yew.

He was not smiling in the mirror, but he was smiling inwardly. They had agreed to accept such silliness, to trust what they saw with their own two eyes. It was the fundamental agreement among them that allowed commerce to take place. They surrendered it so grudgingly, like infants being weaned. Taggart's eyes in the mirror looked old, like stones, but he was smiling inwardly. Things were so seldom what they seemed....

He crossed the deep carpet to the window. Was it truly beginning again? Had the question returned to pose itself again, testing for a clearer response, a fingertip probing closer to the wound?

Beside the bed, one small lamp burned dimly. Taggart switched it off and held the heavy curtain back. Blackbirds were racketing on the rim of the quarry. Could it be beginning again or was it only a phantom, a shadow cast by ones in other places, other times? A shriek pierced the woods at the base of the hill: a woodchuck or ground squirrel. A ferret took its throat.

If the desire began again, there could be trouble. The new woman could be difficult, he had felt it at once. Of course, she would be useless as clay to him without that tension he felt when he pressed her hand and read her eyes, a charge not unlike heat lightning building between ground and cloud.

Of course she was a shadow. Surely she had once taken another form, but as always, traces had been added and others stripped away, like a canvas reworked through centuries. What came of that was unpredictable, even for Taggart. But her special property, the charge that betrayed her so eloquently, that much he was sure of. He looked out through the glass, trying to clear her from his mind. He heard the blood scraping in his own veins.

She was there in memory, a form he would never be rid of. Mara was coming in from the garden, descending the winding stair, rising from the bed. It flooded back, his hand on the cool, moist ledge and, rushing up from the base of the wall, the scent of flagstones damp in the night air. The memory was of Mara and a brief time of peace.

It was Bastille Day, Taggart thought, and laughed quietly. Midsummer. He recalled the other Bastille Days and fixed on one, inevitably.

Her perfume came from behind him in the room. He stood with his hand on the broad stone ledge, looking out the leaded window on the flagstone courtyard, down the satin hill in darkness, where no birds sang.

from Chapter 13

Tock.

Tick tock lock pock.

Tock.

Tock. Tongue click on roof of mouth. Tock.

The rhythm was steady, like a pendulum swing in the grandfather clock of the tall trees.

Tock.

Tick tock lock pock.

The trail twisted up a short hill and seemed to disappear for a moment in a clump of Sitka spruce. She nosed into the brush at the bottom like a porcupine and kept going. The hands of the berry bushes never scratched, just patted her along.

Tock. Tock.

Go way. Snake. Rat face. Go way.

Hands can grab the root, pull up. In the clear.

She made it to the other side of the brush and rose to her feet in the small opening. Sunlight was funneling down.

Stump. Rock. China. Three four seven eight.

Across the brief clearing, she hopped for a moment onto the stump, wide and flat and scored by hatchet blades, and jumped down nimbly. The roots were high but her foot hit at the angle it had learned well, and she kept going across the pine needles.

She went on to the boulder, cool round surface, then giggled and ran toward the base of the big oak. It was a favorite because of the hole. Bored in its base, it was black inside, and even if you stuck your arm in, there was still more than you could reach. It could go to China. Cool and spongy in there. Green and black under the fingernails when you pulled out.

Tock.

Muddy bark. Bloody bark. Five six nine ten.

She crossed the fallen log that ended nose-down in the mud. Then on to the tallest tree she knew. As she always did, she tagged it with her hand on the heavy corrugated bark with the distinctive russet-orange color inside, the blood color of the Ponderosa pine.

Past the big tree, she crouched down and crept in through bushes that would have looked impenetrable to the ordinary traveler. She picked her well-worn way among the roots, and the branches and foliage made a ceiling inches above her head.

A bird flushed from the bushes and flew out over a grassy clearing, then ducked into the tree line on the far side. In a moment she crawled out of the bushes through a little opening the size of a dog door and stood up on the edge of the same clearing.

Fly around. Swoop down. Yellow cap. Blue cap. You could stoop and swoop, keeping low. Just brush the yellow tops and the blue tops.

In the grassy opening, goldenrod and phlox bloomed yellow and light purple. She made her way across like a stunt plane, arms out, twisting and swooping, coming in low to buzz, wing tips just grazing the flowers. Now and then a bee flew up, but it didn't sting. It flew so hard, it disappeared into the sky. Tumble bee. Humble bee.

She turned sideways to slip in between the bushes on the far perimeter of the grass. The carpet of leaves and needles felt spongy and still moist in spots even though the sun had been high for hours....

Plane again. Arms out, whirling in the grass, looking up and turning and the big wheel of tree tops rotating around and around the ring of sky. Flop down soon, back in the soft grass. Turn and turn and when you're dizzy—

It hit the back of her leg and she tripped. It felt like a big root, but in the instant that she fell backwards into the grass, she remembered no root there, and if someone had put a root or something else in the sunny clearing, who had done it? There was buzzing around her, much

buzzing going all around and up over her head. The back of her leg lay across the obstruction when she sat up to look.

No! She jerked her leg back, knee tight against her chest. No no! Go WAY!

The body in the grass reminded her of something. It lay on its back, and although the back was arched, the stomach did not protrude. In fact, there was little stomach left. The irregular cavity in the shirt front had been pecked and clawed to shreds of black stain.

The head lay to one side, and it would have been staring directly at her if the eyes had not been pecked into empty sockets with a few fibers dangling inside like the stringy pulp of a jack-o-lantern. The throat was a ragged gash in flesh that resembled sunbaked rubber, and the skin on the forehead and temples had dried nearly black and pulled taut against the bone.

The man's lower jaw hung like a door off its hinge, one side sprung open, matted with old black blood, the same substance that caked what remained of the shirt beneath the throat and still lay like spilled paint on the grass around the head and shoulders. The baked-on blood spattered even his pants leg, the outstretched leg that had felt too big to be a root.

The buzzing that had gone up was coming back down. The flies that had billowed up from the carcass when she tripped were settling back to their work, swarms of house flies and fat black and blue ones that looked iridescent in the sun. The body reminded her of something.

Flies landed and scurried in the open remains of the guts. Like tiny spaceships, they cruised in under the side of the open jaw....

She wondered what the flies were doing. She wondered how long it would take for him to be just like dirt.

from Chapter 21

Whit was going hard as he hit the first bushes. He had to stop for a minute. The gun was getting heavy and his heart was charging. He bent over, hands on knees, to catch his breath.

He could hear crickets some distance away, but none close. They had stopped their racket when they heard him coming. He could hear his own breathing but not much more. He stood up slowly. He was feeling a little unsteady, but it would pass. There it was again.

This time it was close, only a few yards ahead in the firs. It was a kind of dragging sound, more like shuffling than like footsteps. He squinted, but it was darker than in the yard, and he could only make out the masses of the tree trunks against the shadows of the brush.

It stopped again. It moved and stopped. Whit judged the direction and the distance. Not so far. Not far at all. Okay, he told himself, the jig is up.

He took one last deep breath and let it go then bulled forward through the underbrush. He made enough noise to flush all bobcats for miles and he knew it, so he kept the revolver straight in front of him as he ran, thumb on the hammer, ready to plug any moving thing.

He charged through the dense scrub to the first few trees. It was there, right there. He stopped to breathe on the very spot where he knew he had heard the sound. He checked the ground for tracks or a path through the leaves and needles, but it was too dark to tell. If it was a bobcat, it could have gone up the tree. He looked up the nearest ones into the low branches. He waited. No cat moved up there, nothing. A few stars twinkled calmly between the boughs.

He was getting dizzy so he looked down. He had to admit he was feeling none too hot. The ticker wasn't bad, but it wasn't twenty years old anymore either.

He stood for almost a minute, wavering slightly. Normalcy began to return to his chest, but nothing moved again in the woods. Probably a big skunk or coon, he decided, burrowed in somewhere. Oh well, great white hunters get skunked sometimes. It goes with the territory. What the hell. It even crossed his mind that it could be Jolie. He never had seen her. Maybe he would, if he could stand as still as a tree....

It was a shame, Whit was thinking. He had looked forward to getting off a few shots. He remembered a pine cone he had seen in one of the trees. Should he? Why not? There was nothing out there. No Jolie anyway. It would be a test of skill at that distance. Would it wake Ellie up? He was far enough away—what did it matter? He was squinting up into the branches, trying to locate the pine cone when it hit him.

He was blindsided, hard. He traveled three feet sideways, into the trunk of a Douglas fir. Something snapped in his chest. The pistol flew out of his hand and out of sight into the bushes. His breath was gone, but he clutched the tree with both hands and stayed upright.

He glanced in the direction of the attack and there was a shadowy form, and eyes—fiery eyes. Sulphurous. He couldn't stop himself—he was thinking, cheap effect.