

# 1 Birth



**Holly was hungry.** In an annexe to the underground chamber where the other meerkats in the Whiskers group were still sleeping, she had given birth to four pups. It had been trouble-free, she had bitten off the umbilical cords attaching each of the pups to her body, cleaned off the birth foetal sacs and licked the pups dry. Slowly, first one and then another of them had fumbled their way to the warmth of her belly and started to suck from one of her six nipples. The last pup, a female, was the smallest of the litter and had been slow to stir, but Holly had continued licking and had pushed it down to join the others, where it eventually found a teat and began to suck. There were two males, Thumper and Hazel, and two females, Petal and Flower.

The pups now lay in a heap at the end of the chamber. Holly needed food to restore her energy, but she was anxious and reluctant to leave them. She pushed into the sleeping pile of bodies, nosing them awake until first one and then another yawned, stretched and began to make its way up from the sleeping chamber to the bright light above. Holly's yearling niece, Risca, the daughter of Holly's subordinate sister, was interested in the pups and came over to smell them, sniffing one and then another and finally lying down beside them. Missing their mother, they clawed their way towards her belly.

It was cold and a southerly wind sighed through the dusty leaves of camel thorns, carrying the chill of the Antarctic across the Kalahari and bringing a reminder of winter ahead. It was 15 March and the burning days of midsummer had softened into autumn. When the wind was in the north or east, it was hot and the meerkats rested in the deepest shade they could find as soon as the sun was high, but when the wind was southerly, it was cooler and they lingered at the burrow before leaving on the day's trek.

Lancelot, Holly's two-year-old nephew, was the first to reach the burrow entrance. He paused, sniffing the air, and then cautiously clambered out and stood on his hind legs looking around. The sky was empty and he dropped back down to all fours and began licking his coat. Holly's yearling nieces, Aphrodite and Artemis, were next up, followed by her yearling son, Dennis Wise, and his sisters, Zola and Vialli. As the sun slowly rose above the ridge of dunes on the far side of the valley the six animals stood up, turning the bare skin of their tummies to the warmth.

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The Kalahari is a land of extremes. In midsummer, in December and January, midday air temperatures of 45°C are not unusual, though it's cooler in the shade of the camel thorns. Sand temperatures are even higher, sometimes reaching

*Previous pages:*

*To keep warm on winter mornings, pups huddle in the shelter of their babysitters.*

*Opposite:*

*Sometimes only their noses are visible.*