

Chapter FOUR

THE SUMMER TOOK AN eternity to pass, but eventually it did. I was working outside one day when the last of the outsiders' boats returned to Aklavik carrying both freshly plucked children and those they had regathered. We saw them make their way past us, where we knelt in the garden.

"We will start classes tomorrow," Agnes told me. I felt like dancing around the potatoes, but the Raven was watching me, and I didn't dare.

Walking into the classroom the next morning, I stood as straight as I could. I was hoping to impress Sister MacQuillan, but I was in for a shock. The kind nun wasn't there. It was the Raven who hovered behind the large wooden desk, where Sister MacQuillan should have been. How could the Raven be my teacher? The smile shrank from my face as I squeezed into the small desk that she pointed me to. Unfortunately, it was right in front of hers. After all of the other children had been seated, she let out a croak. By now, most of us who were new had become very good at following the cues of the older girls. We had even learned a few phrases of English.

Each of us found a reader inside of our desk. We pulled the books out and set them before us. The Raven rose from her seat, closing in on me, and pointed a yard stick in my direction, motioning for me to stand.

"She wants you to read aloud," whispered Agnes from the seat behind me.

I rose to my feet, but how was I to read? I didn't even know which page to turn to.

The Raven cocked her hip and tapped a foot.
“Welllll?” she said.

My cheeks felt hot. I looked around me, from child to child. The faces stared back, blank, waiting, as my stockings began to slide down my calves.

The Gwich’in girl raised her hand high into the air.
“Katherine,” acknowledged the nun.

She rose and started reading aloud from her own schoolbook.

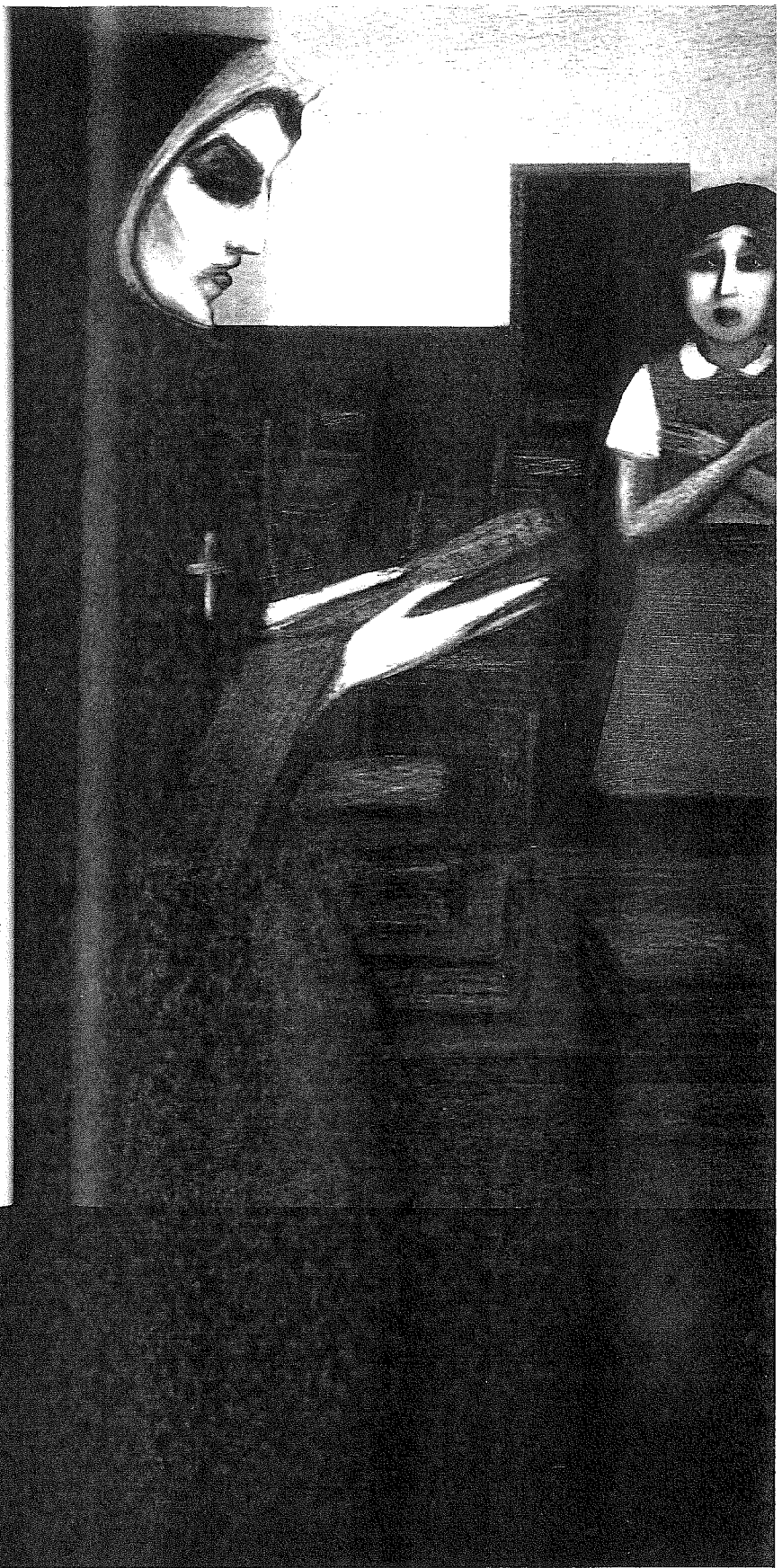
The Raven raised a wing-like arm, silencing Katherine. She turned back to me and pointed her finger to the ground.

The other children giggled.

“You can sit down now,” Agnes said in a soft voice.

How did the Raven expect us to learn without speaking to us in our language, so we could understand?

My first reading lesson had not been what I had anticipated. I was grateful when it was over, and I launched myself from my desk, eager to follow the others outside to play. But the Raven stopped me. She put a brush in my hand and pointed to the colossal chalkboards. I gave her a questioning look. I did





not know why she was making me stay to clean them. She answered with something in English that I did not comprehend, and my older classmates cried with laughter as they left the room.

Later, I stopped Agnes in the hall.

“What did the teacher say that made the others laugh at the end of class?” I asked.

“She said that cleaning the boards should be no problem for you, because you are so tall your stockings won’t even stay up.”

“She has it in for me. I know she does.”

“Who?” asked a lyrical voice in our own language. It was Sister MacQuillan. We had not noticed that we were standing in front of her office.

“No one, Sister,” answered Agnes, in English, before tugging me down the hall.

THE RAVEN THOUGHT SHE knew a lot, but she cared more about making us do chores than about teaching us. She said that chores were part of our education. For some reason, she seemed to think that I needed more of an education than the others, and as the weeks went by, I was forever mopping the floors, tidying the recreation room, and emptying the honey buckets. I wasn’t sure what she meant to teach me, but I had something to teach her about the spirit of us Inuvialuit.

ONE EVENING IN OCTOBER, after a hard day of the Raven’s education, I sat over my bowl of cabbage soup in the long dining hall, watching the other children eat. It was the same food we had been force-fed when we first arrived, and I remembered how many girls had become ill. Those same girls were now lapping



See photo on page 96.

it up, because they were starving. It made me angry. How could they expect us to eat this meatless mush? My father's sled dogs would not have licked the bowl it was put in. My stomach hurt, but that night I refused to touch it to my lips.

"Perhaps you need help with your appetite," suggested the Raven as she dropped a soppy wet rag right in my lap. She didn't have to say another word. By now, I knew that she intended for me to wipe down all of the tables.

I looked to Katherine and the other Gwich'in girls. They were like a flock of open-mouthed hatchlings, giggling at me.

"If I had a pocket of stones, I would shoo you with a storm of pebbles," I said, and pushed the rag to the floor.

That Raven swooped down and clutched my dress in her claw. "This is no place for a willful child," she hissed.

I jerked back, knocking my bowl over.

The mush oozed down the Raven's dark habit. This time the hatchlings were laughing at her. She raised her claw at me and I crouched to avoid the blow. Then



Sister MacQuillan glided between us, the Swan protecting me with her gentle wing.

The Raven fixed her sharp little eyes on me for a long moment before scuttling off to clean herself up.

The refectory had long since been deserted by the time I made it to the last table. A dark shadow grew in the doorway. It was the Raven. "You seem to require a little more education!" she whispered.

I knew I was in for trouble.

Chapter FIVE

I WAS A GOOD STUDENT despite the Raven's cruelty. I looked at it as a game and practiced harder at reading, writing, and arithmetic than any other girl in my class. Not only did I enjoy proving my teacher wrong, but I figured I had to learn as much as I could that year, because I planned to leave on the *North Star* with my parents the next summer and never return. While my schoolmates played cards and made dolls during their recreation time, I chose to read. I started with the simple readers we were given,

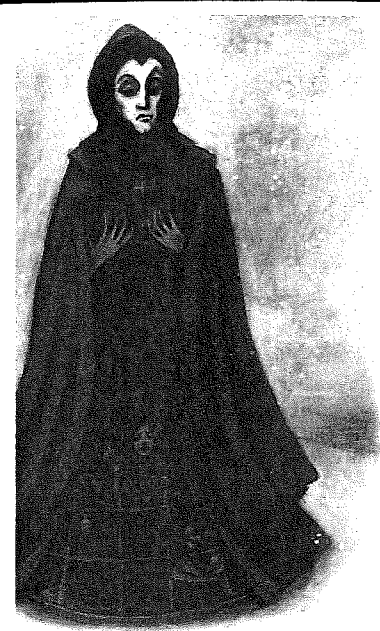
tracing my finger over the words again and again, trying to sound them out and decipher what they meant, but by spring I was reading books like the ones that Rosie had. I bided my time and waited to escape the Raven.

When the first boats began to appear, I could hardly believe the time had come. It would not be long before my parents arrived. However, on one of the boats was a letter from my father. The *North Star*, along with the other schooners, had not made it home to Banks Island the summer before. They had been stranded on a smaller island by an early freeze. The hunting and trapping had not been as successful there, and the entire group had decided to do their trading in Tuktoyaktuk instead of coming all the way to Aklavik, for fear of being caught by the ice again.

I was devastated. This could not be happening. By now I could read and knew my times tables as well as Katherine, and I was ready to go home. It was



See photo
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time—and my parents were not going to come for me. Not sure if they would ever come for me, I cried until the letter was so soaked with tears, it tore in my hands. That night I had a nightmare. I dreamed I was locked beneath the Raven's habit with many other children.

She cackled and laughed as we tried to break free, straining against its weight, knowing that we would never see our parents again.

Outside, men competed in athletics and women gossiped, and everyone sang and danced and shared the stories of our ancestors, while I delivered meals to the sick patients in the hospital. It did not take me long to discover that being a nurse was not the glamorous job I had imagined. I would have given anything to be with my people eating dry meat and muktuk—delicious tiny cubes of whale blubber and skin.

If I could not go home, or even to the games, the least the nuns could do was continue to teach me. But of course, they did not.

While I was not the only child who did not go home that summer, I was lonely without Agnes. She was able to return home to her family, as they were now living in Tuktoyaktuk. But the nuns did their very best not to return any of us. Keeping us at the school was an easy way to ensure that we would return each fall, which was important to them. It wasn't just the chores—they were paid by the government per student, and plucking us from our homes and keeping us in their nests was a money-making business.

MY SUMMER SCHEDULE provided little time even for reading, and I was happy to have regular classes begin again in the fall. The Raven was nearly bearable in comparison with the long hours of chores and hospital work. But when the wind turned cold again in October, the whole of the North seemed to come down with a sickness called smallpox, and the

hospital filled to capacity. Our classes were halted, once again, just weeks after they had resumed. Into November, as the hours of darkness lengthened day by day, we worked around the clock with the nuns and the men who were hired to do the chores that we children could not do. We were instructed to call these men Brothers, but they were far from being family. I was pretty sure that some did not even believe in God.

I was no stranger to hard work—life in the North required it—but I really disliked working in the hospital. The trappers were ill tempered and the sick women cried for their babies. Caring for them required so much of us that I longed for the return of the midnight sun to light the pages of my book, because I could only find a moment's peace to read very late in the evening. As it was, I held fairy tales and adventures to the window, desperate for escape, squinting in the darkness to catch the aquamarine glow of the northern lights.

Many of my classmates fell ill eventually, tiny blistering sores rising on their skin and covering them

with the same pox we had seen on the patients we attended. I no longer complained of the work. At least I did not have smallpox. As I watched several of the other children fall under the torment of the disease, I forgot both my exhaustion and my desire

to read, and worked hard to do what was necessary.

I had been emptying bedpans and basins of dirty cleaning water for many hours one day when my bladder started to hurt. I needed to hurry, but each time I made for the door, the Raven gave me another job to do. I pressed my bare knees together and shuffled from bed to bed, trying to ease the feverish patients. If only the pain would disappear, or the Raven would go away. My bladder grew heavier and heavier. I crossed my legs and tried not to think about it.

Just when I thought my whole tummy would burst, I noticed that the Raven was busy chastising Katherine.



northern lights: curtains of light, often green or greenish-blue, seen near the magnetic North Pole, most visible at the equinoxes (March and September). Also known as aurora borealis.

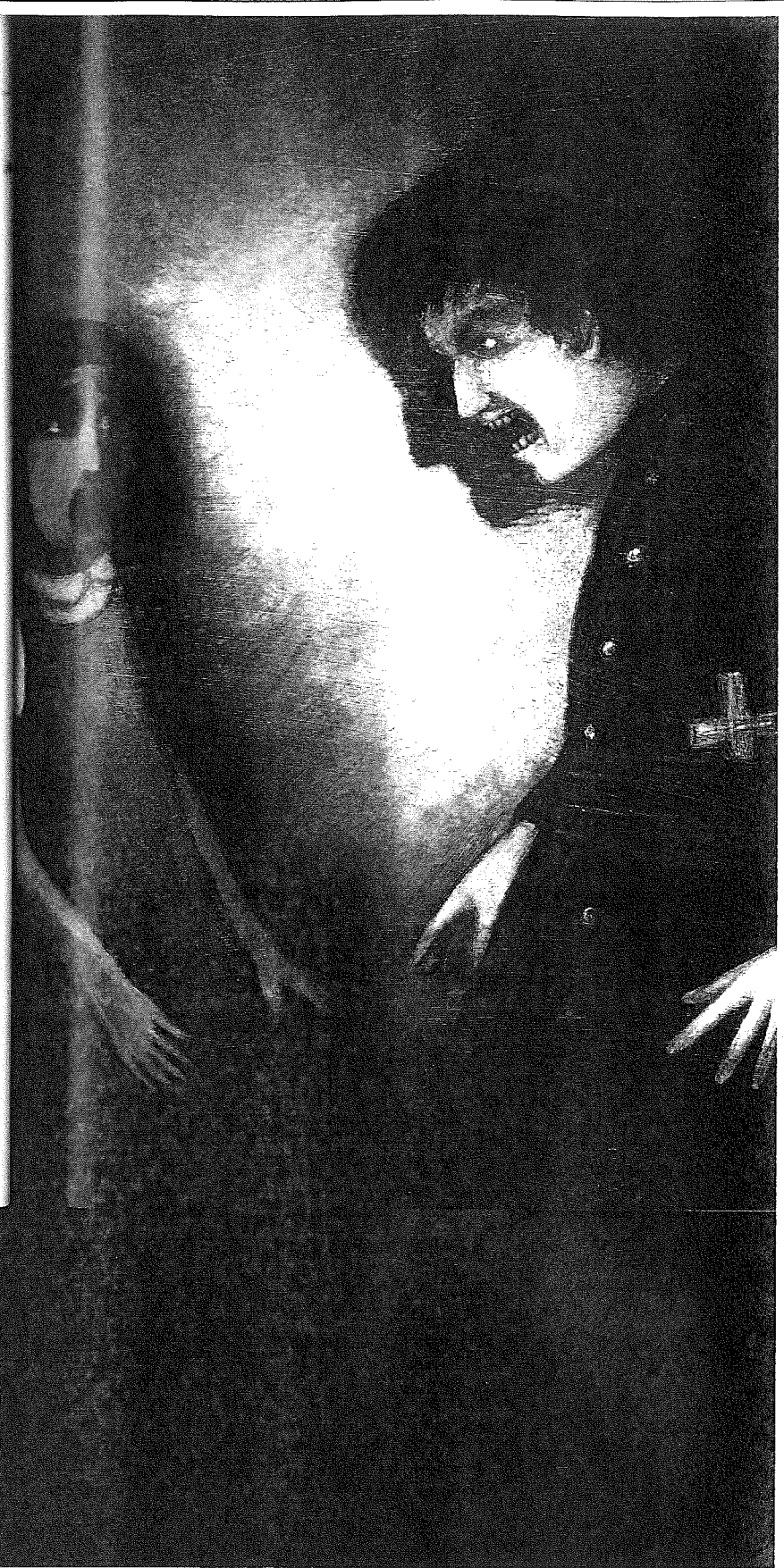
I would have laughed out loud, if it had not meant I would pee myself. This was my chance, and I ran through the door. The hallway was like the tundra—it went on forever. No matter how far I traveled, I never seemed to get anywhere.

I was just one step from the doorway—when from out of nowhere appeared two hungry eyes, like those of an owl. They leveled themselves to the height of my nose. The mouth beneath them opened, baring fishy, yellow teeth, and instead of letting out an owly *whoooo*, the mouth growled. I felt something warm run down my legs, as the Brother ran off laughing.

Before I could make it back to my room to clean myself up, the coarse voice of the Raven called after me. Her heels clicked and scraped against the floor, as she came closer. There was no escape.

“You are a filthy child,” she said, when she saw what I had done.

I told her about the Brother, but she accused me of lying. To educate me, she left me shivering on the front lawn with a bucket of hot soapy water. I didn’t



need to look up to know that the other girls would be looking through the window and laughing, while I washed out my canvas bloomers.

AS PEOPLE BECAME WELL again in late November, classes resumed. By then, I had read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* four times. Rosie had been telling the truth: Alice had not been hunting the rabbit at all. I would have brought its pelt back for my father.

One day, the Raven entered the classroom and told us that we would write letters home to our parents. I could hardly restrain myself in my seat. Not only did I long to make my father proud by telling him all that I had learned, and about all of the books I had read, but I wanted to ask him to come for me the next time the sun returned to melt the ice. We dipped our pens in our ink wells and wrote *Dear Mother and Father*, as instructed. For most of the students, the exercise was almost pointless. Many of their parents were unable to read English, just as my mother could not. Next we

were told to write *I love it here at the school. The nuns have been very kind to us.*

Kind? That was a stretch. Instead, I wrote:

Dear Mother and Father,

I hate this school. You were right. The food is awful and the nuns are very mean. They won't even let me wear the stockings you bought for me. As you can see, I have already learned to read and write. Please, come to get me as soon as you can. I am ready to go home

Love,

Olemaun

I did not hear the rest of what the Raven dictated, but it didn't matter. I had written everything that I needed to say. I passed my letter to the front with the others.

Now, all I had to do was wait—or so I thought. Two days later, the Raven called me to her desk. "This is not what you were told to write," she said, tearing

my letter in half and throwing it in the trash can. "Now, write it again, so it reads like this." She handed me a slip of paper to copy from.

The other children were dismissed to go and play in the recreation room, but I was held back to write my letter. I stared at the ceiling and imagined I was bundled in hides, safe in my father's dogsled, whizzing through a snowy valley of white. I counted the stars and watched the northern lights dance, frost clinging to my nostrils.

Sister MacQuillan glimpsed me through the door as she floated by. She stopped, stepped into the room, and looked over my shoulder.

"It's all right, Margaret," she said. "You may go to dinner now."

The Raven scowled at me when I handed in my letter. All I had written was, *Dear Mother and Father*. She would have held me there all night, had it not been for Sister MacQuillan, but it would not have mattered. Nothing could make me write that I loved the school.

I found a seat next to Agnes in the refectory. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"The Raven won't let me send a letter to my parents asking them to come and get me."

"Don't worry. I overheard two nuns talking today. Next week we are going over to CHAK to broadcast a message to our parents. You can tell them then."

CHAK was a new radio station that had been established in the North not long before I started school. My parents loved it. They would be listening.

The following week, we were marched over to the small wooden building in the middle of town and lined up outside in the dark. My knees nearly froze solid in the frigid winter air. Christmas was less than three weeks away. The nuns were crazy to make us children stand outside.

I had practiced and practiced what I intended to say, but when I stepped inside the warm building I was handed a piece of paper with writing on it. *Hello, Mom! Hello, Dad!* it read. *Merry Christmas! I miss you, but the nuns here treat us like family and school is very fun.*

I did not know what the nuns thought they were going to accomplish with these messages home. The



See photo
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false praise of the school would be lost on the many non-English-speaking parents.

“And if you do not say what you are told to, we will cut the transmission,” the Raven informed me. “Is that clear?”

I should have known. Why would this message be any different?

I stood in front of the microphone. *Mother, Father, get me out of here, please. Take me home! I'm freezing and my teacher is wicked and mean,* I thought, but I said nothing. Not one word. I never stopped talking at home; my silence would surely tell them that something was wrong.

Chapter SIX

EVERY TIME A BLACKBOARD was to be cleaned or a floor mopped, the Raven was sure to put me to work doing it. I prayed that she would forget about me altogether, but her attentions only grew with the daylight hours. I returned to the dormitory one Saturday night in April, after an evening of the Raven's education. She was not pleased with my silence at the radio station and cleaning the nasty chicken coop was how she made me pay for it.

My raw fingers stung as I opened the door to an



See photo on page 99.

explosion of excitement. Agnes was giddily twirling around her bed. She kicked up a leg to show me.

"New stockings," she chirped, as I pulled my own slouching pair back up over my knees. "Aren't they beautiful? I bet they belonged to a fancy Toronto lady. Everyone is getting new stockings!"

Maybe the outsiders had come to their senses: I might just survive another winter of the Raven's education if I could get my hands on some new stockings. I stripped off my old ones and threw them on the pile, praying for a nice black pair, like Agnes's. I closed my eyes and waited my turn.

The Raven swooped in. "I saved a special pair for you," she said.

I stared. I closed my eyes again and slowly opened them wider and wider. I looked to the other girls and examined their stockings, and then turned back to my own.

The Raven had played a heartless trick on me. Embarrassment and anger swelled in my heart. These stockings could never have belonged to a fancy lady from Toronto.

"They're... they're red!" I stammered.

The Raven cackled as I ran to my bed beneath the window. It was bad enough that I was much larger than the other girls, and that my calf muscles were far more pronounced than those of my skinny-legged classmates, but now I had to wear the only bright red stockings in the school. I pulled them on to see if they were really as bad as I thought. They were worse. The stockings made my legs look even bigger than they already were. I stared at my big fat red legs. I looked like a plump-legged circus clown.

The laughter of the other girls enveloped me. It wrapped a million fingers around me and would not let go. As soon as the Raven was gone, I pulled my favorite book from underneath my pillow and imagined the Raven in the role of the Queen of Hearts.



See photo
on page 99.

THE NEXT MORNING, I crept into the refectory late, my calves on fire in those hideous stockings. A buzz filled the room and swarmed about the tables. I felt dizzy. Every eye was burning into my legs. I wanted



to dissolve into my bowl of mush.

Katherine turned and pointed. "Fatty Legs," she laughed, bits of food spilling from her mouth.

"Fatty Face," I called back.

The Raven caught me by the ear. "If you cannot eat nicely with the other children, maybe you would be happier tending to the dirty laundry for the rest of the week," she said. "Now, get going. There's a fire waiting for you."

I could hardly will my feet to move under the weight of my big fat red legs, knowing that everyone

was getting a good look at them as I sidled down the aisle and out the door of the dining hall.

My chest ached. As I stirred the dirty clothing, a tear escaped my eye. It fell from my chin onto the scalding cast iron vat.

Ptsch.

The tear bubbled and vanished with a poof of steam.

"Aha!" I whispered. In that moment, I knew how I would stop all of this Fatty Legs business.

I had only to await my chance.

FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS, the other girls made sounds like the heavy beat of a drum when I walked by. "*Boom! Boom! Boom!*" they called.

They could go ahead and have their laugh at my expense. It would be short-lived. Although when they started calling Agnes "Skinny Legs," I felt like setting out across the ice and walking home, then and there. Katherine teased Agnes so mercilessly that one day, for the very first time, Agnes did not pick me first to be on her team at recreation time. My resolve hardened.

I could not lose my best friend.

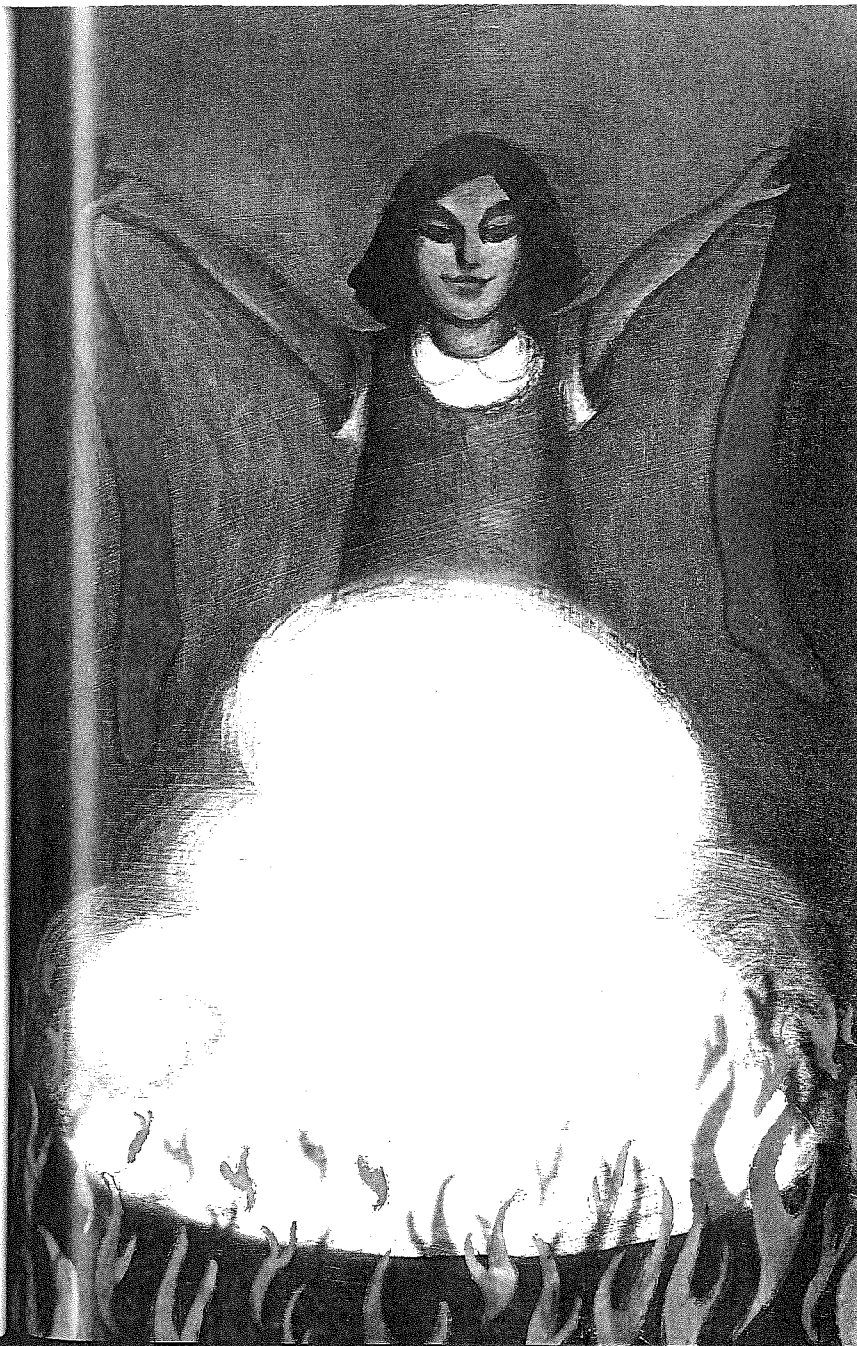
The time had come to put my plan into action. Each morning as I pulled up my red stockings, my spirit rose. All I needed was opportunity.

On Sunday, my last day in the laundry room, it came. I looked around to make sure I was alone. The Raven usually went to her room after church to listen to the radio, and the Brother who helped to stoke the fire had gone out for a cigarette. I stripped off the stockings, and in one quick motion, shoved them into the blazing fire beneath the vat. The hideous things sizzled and crackled in the fire as they shrank before my eyes and vaporized into a thin wisp of smoke.

I smiled with satisfaction. I would not be bested. The Raven was about to find out what I was made of, and was she ever in for a shock.

She flailed like a fish on the ice when she noticed my bare legs, and threw her hands up in the air. "How dare you enter the refectory without your stockings? You will be dressed appropriately at all times. Now, go back and put them on this instant."

"I can't," I told her.



"And why not?"

"I just can't."

She could scream all she wanted. It wouldn't bring them back.

She rose from the table. "Margaret, you go back to your room and get those stockings, right now."

"They aren't there."

"Margaret Pokiak." Her beady black eyes bore holes into me. "I will find those stockings. Rest assured."

The hatchlings weren't giggling anymore. Everyone had to help in the search. We tore the crowded dorm room apart and scoured the whole school from top to bottom. We emptied our trunks and the nuns rummaged through our belongings. The Raven had each girl strip her bedding and flip her mattress.

"You had better tell her where those stockings are," Katherine said to me.

"Nope," I said. "No one's going to call me Fatty Legs, ever again."

"You think you're pretty brave, don't you?" She leaned forward and fixed her eyes on me, but I wasn't scared of her. I stood my ground.

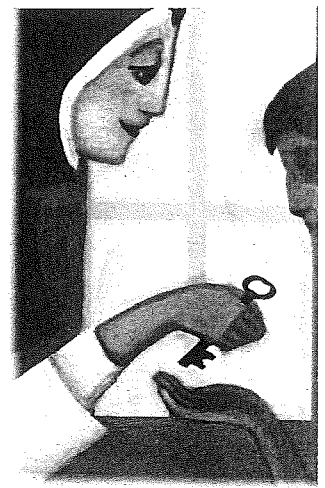
"You *are* brave, Margaret," said Sister MacQuillan, stepping around the corner. Katherine moved away from me and rejoined the other Gwich'in girls. The Swan handed me a key. "Go and get your stockings from the storeroom."

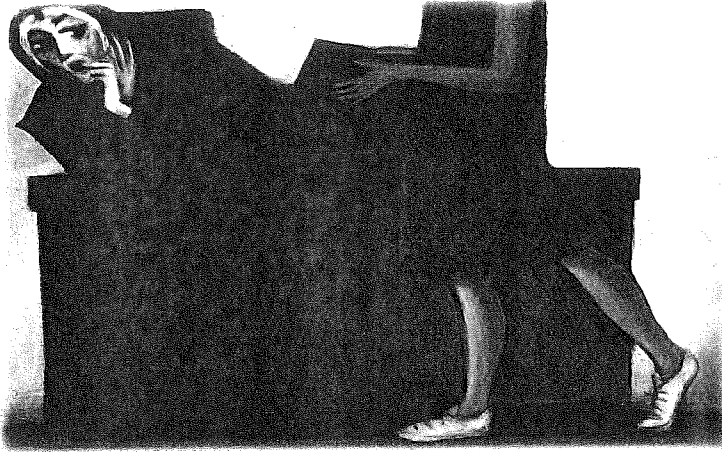
Agnes met my eyes from where she stood over her upturned mattress and smiled.

It was time for lights out when I returned with the stockings. I would have to wait until the next morning to put them on.

When the morning came, I put on my beautiful thick pair of gray wool stockings. They were gorgeous. After our chores and prayers, I ran back up to the dormitory bursting with pride. I danced between the beds, whirling around for so long that I missed breakfast. I was eager to get to class on time, though. I sprang down the hallway stairs, like a gray-legged wolf.

The Raven choked on the claw she had been nibbling, as I strutted my sleek new legs past her desk.





Her face turned as red as seal's blood on snow. Sister MacQuillan stepped through the doorway and headed straight for the Raven. She whispered something in her ear, and the Raven blew up like a ptarmigan balloon. Her ears nearly popped off. Then Sister MacQuillan tilted her head gracefully in my direction. A faint smile crossed her lips. I knew the Raven would no longer be free to "educate" me as much as she had been.

The Raven thought she was there to teach me a few things, but in the end, I think it was she who learned a lesson: Be careful what birds you choose to pluck from their nests. A wren can be just as clever as a raven.

Chapter SEVEN

AT TIMES, I FELT as though my parents might forget me—forget that they had a daughter in a faraway school. And the dream returned often. The one in which I was trapped beneath the weight of the Raven's habit. I would never escape.

School ended, once again, and I soberly prepared for another summer of delivering meals to the sick and wishing I were back home. However, with the first boats came a new letter. It asked that I travel to Tuktoyaktuk on one of the school's boats. My family

would meet me there. They wanted me to come home! The first time my father had written to me in English, it was to say he would not be coming for me. That letter had been painful to read. Now, at last, I could revel in each of the words he had penned on the page. I had not been forgotten. His letter proved it.

I couldn't wait to put the Raven at my back and some distance between us. The only outsider I would miss would be Sister MacQuillan. I could not leave without thanking her, so after I had packed my things, I went to her office.

"I am grateful for your kindness," I told her.

"You are a strong child. You will go far in life." She touched the top of my head and a tingle ran down to my toes. Then she pulled a book from her drawer and gave it to me. "I know how much you love this one."

It was my very own copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. "Thank you," I said, taking the book and pressing it to my chest.

"You will be very missed, Margaret." She paused a



moment. Then she changed her words: "You will be very missed, Olemaun."

She had called me by my name—the name I had not heard in two years. Hearing it now brought tears to my eyes.

"Qugyuk," I said, pointing to her. It was the name I had always associated with her: Swan.

Sister MacQuillan elongated her neck and raised her arms like she would take flight. We both giggled.

I was sorry that I would not see the swan-like Sister again. I was sure that once I told my father about the Raven, he would never allow me to return to school.

THE TRIP TO TUKTOYAKTUK aboard the Roman Catholic boat, the *Immaculata*, was crowded. We had no choice but to sit quietly as hour after hour drifted by and turned to day after day. The journey back to the ocean took much longer than the journey into the delta had because many children had to be dropped off on the way down the Peel and Mackenzie Rivers. Wherever the boat stopped, we children would scramble up the banks of the shore and run around wildly, stretching our legs and enjoying the space.

When we reached the mouth of the Mackenzie River, the saltwater smell of the bay unlocked distant memories and made me long for Banks Island. At that point, I was truly free of the outsiders' school. I had left it behind me, back past the tree line in a tangled

cluster of waterways. After two long years, I was out on the open water, where I belonged. Each nightless day in that tiny boat had taken forever to pass. Now we were so close!

We made our way across the bay to Tuktoyaktuk, and there was the *North Star*, anchored in the harbor. The moment was here at last. The *Immaculata* had only grazed the shore when I gave Agnes a quick hug and leaped from the boat. The Brothers couldn't stop me.

My father stood right there on the shore. He would have given them a what for if they had tried.

I was safe.

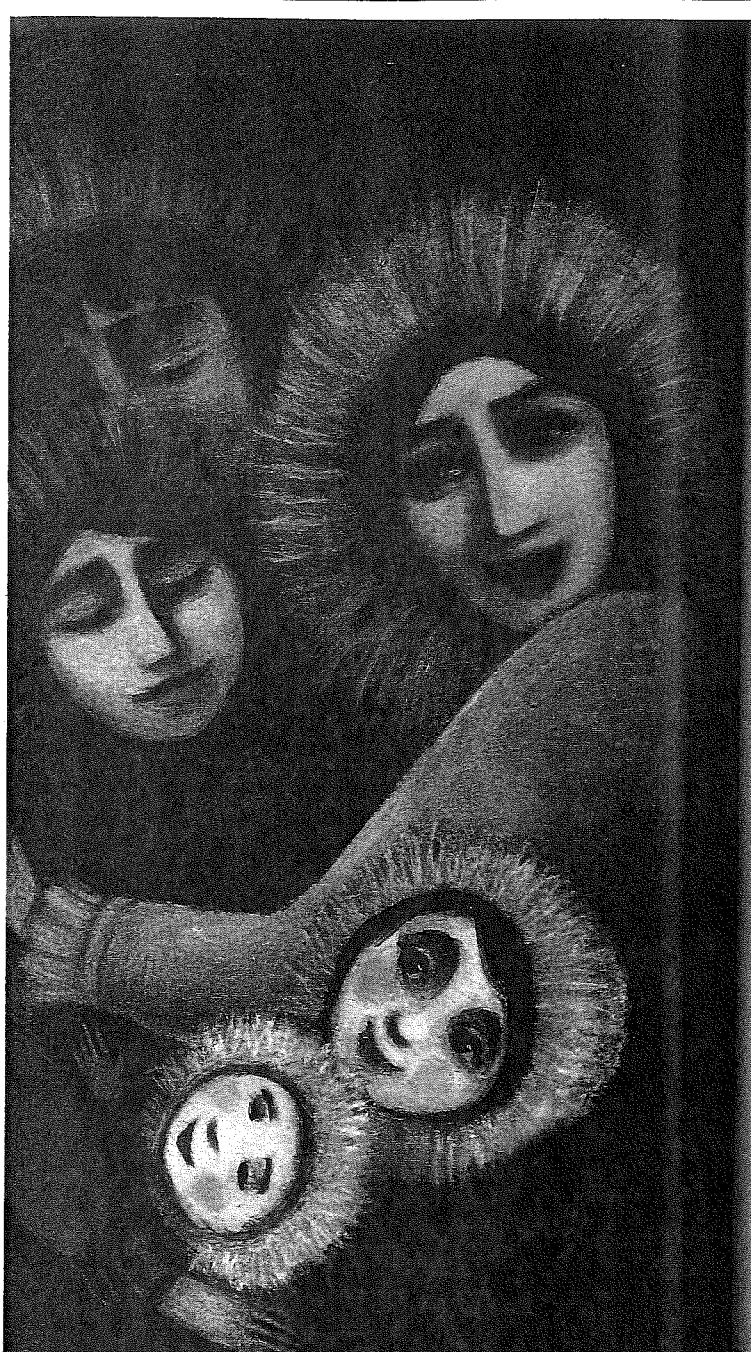
But my mother didn't know me.

"Not my girl," she told the Brothers. "Not my girl."

Those three words thudded between my ears, over and over, and I feared the Brothers would take me away with them again. I had not seen my mother in two years. She remembered a pale eight-year-old with pudgy cheeks. I was now tall, lean, very tanned, and ten years old.



See photo
on page 100.



My father knew me right away. He wrapped his arms around my body, and after a moment, so did my mother and siblings.

My mother had brought a small package of all of the things that I had liked to eat, assuming that I would be eager to try them once again. However, the food was strange and difficult to eat. It felt greasy and was salty, with a strong smell. I was not sure I would ever be able to eat it. My mother cried and said I was now an outsider. On the way to our camp, she asked my father to buy me some of their outsider-food from the Hudson's Bay store in Tuktoyaktuk. He laughed and told her that I was still Inuvialuit, and when I got hungry enough, I would eat. Eventually, I did.

