



**HAVING
FAITH
IN THE
POLAR
GIRLS'
PRISON**

CATHLEEN WITH

one

It's early morning and Faith is fussing again, hardly got the sleep out of my eyes. I tell the worker that comes in that sometimes Faith can't get her mouth to seal around my nipple. She leans over us both, gently smooths her finger over Faith's upper lip. Faith flutters her little lashes like she's trying to wake up more and I shift her closer in to my nipple. The worker reminds me that preemies get tired easily from the sucking and maybe too used to the bottles. She looks at me like she's gonna say something more, but then she goes and leaves us alone. Faith is snuffling a bit against my breast, starting to latch on, and I feel relieved she's finally sucking proper. I'm thinking this is the best feeling ever, makes all the outside shit go away, the other girls in here, some of the staff looking at me with needles in their eyes. I never know who's related to that woman from the Aurora Store. I mean, in Jackfish Bay everyone is related to everyone. Hell, I think even I was related to her.

Through the sliver of a window I got in here I can see some of the Iceroad down the hill, the white headlights of one or two cars making their way north to Tuk or maybe south to Inuvik, hook up with the Dempster Highway and away from here. The Iceroad's not just one road; you got the oxbows of the east channel going to Tuk and out to the Arctic Sea, then a windy road going west to Aklavik. Lots of kettle lakes and channels connect up, and though maintenance rigs patrol it, with sensors even to check the ice, still a blizzard

come up and it's easy to go off the road. Or just get lost in the loneliness of the dark and the ice, let the green ghosties of the northern lights come dancing, lead you astray.

Even though it's early morning, there's no bit of light anywhere near the Iceroad. Sun won't really touch our town until January, just some dusky skies around noon, sun squeeze up for a little peek maybe 11 a.m., then right back down to shine on them in the south. November and dark days here in the Mackenzie Delta.

Saturdays are sometimes bad. Even though I get to spend the day with Faith, and not have to give her to the workers while they make me go into the classroom and learn my language arts and math, I still spend the whole day thinking about Tyler, what he's doing down there in Yellowknife, if he's thinking about Faith, or me. Would he even have wanted us, once she got born and her being the way she is?

Some workers say maybe even foster care can't take her, she's so retarded. Don't think Auntie or Nanuk come to take her; been here three weeks now and they're not come in to see me, too ashamed, only Keely been to see me. And the Snow Nanuks are too old and almost gone out of their house, most of them at the Elder Hospital. If Faith could have the Snow Nanuks who looked after all us kids, maybe things could be okay. Simple and sweet, like when we was real little. Me and my best friend Keely dreamed of being like them when we grown, like they all good and looked out for their little ones, and then their kids' little ones, us coming from the back roads of Jackfish Bay. The Snow Nanuks always had their door unlocked and something hot to drink on their stove. Maybe they won't let me in now, what I done, where I am going and maybe for life. No one to look after Faithy now, maybe just strangers. Mom would of taken her, she been here, Mom would of taken her right up, not scared of any retarded kids, not my mom. But that Iceroad taken her long ago. That worker says maybe I got

two more months with Faith in here, then they're thinking about what to do with her.

On a good day, when the snow is flaking down soft I'm in my small room, watching it flutter onto the scrub trees, some kids zipping by on Ski-Doos, can see the flash of their faces under the facility lights, their cheeks red and chafed, mouths open and laughing. Me and Faith inside, warm, and Faith at my breast, sucking proper, I think of her all-normal future, running to her new mom. Her hair in pigtails, her feet have on the beaded slippers Nanuk sent her, and me watching her on the webcam here. Don't know how long they're keeping me inside for what I done. I forget all the good I keep trying to remember, how we're calling our grandmothers Nanuk, and trying to get some old spirits talking to me in here, like Nanuk says to me: "Trista, remember your Snow Nanuks, we all who are loving you. Remember the good they learned in you." Who is going to save me and Faith but those northern spirits long gone? Who is going to look at me—quarter Eskimo, three-quarters rig-pig, and who knows what else—and my fucked-up baby?

Faithy starts to gurgle a bit, this hum she makes when she's done feeding. I swear she's looking at me with those dreamy eyes, lips pushed together with her tiny mouth humming, and I put her up to my shoulder, pat her bum. Her hand brushes against my ulu necklace, the one Mom gave me when I was five. Then the red light goes on, and the bell goes off. My door snicks open, free from its electric lock.

"Trista. You coming?" Deanne says. Her eyebrows pointed up like they do when she knows I'm in my head, just mooning over Faithy and not paying attention.

"Yeeah. Let me put her in the rolly crib." That Deanne's always out and getting to breakfast or going to Group the minute the door opens, but I hate to leave the warm of my bed.

We got Group Saturdays after breakfast and it sucks because the weekend float staff's on instead of Linda and Deb. They got names, but none that we care to remember. Maybe they're not as committed to it or something, being they're on weekends. Maybe they got other work they do all week. I know I worked with one over at the Northmart, but she's okay.

It's the Bitch we have to look out for. The Bitch's got her concentrated look on, with her plain black pants she probably irons right before work and then takes a cab here so she doesn't mess them up pulling snowpants over them. Her hair is near perfect and I think she might even get blonde highlights done in her brown hair. Pay big money for that, only place they do it is Inuvik. She's yapping something at Megan, and Megan is fiddling in her seat none too happy about it. Aimee's picking at the chair's arm, not looking at anyone, and Deanne's just sitting there grinning. Deanne's almost always good for coming up with something because most of us hate Group, feels like we're on camera or being studied like some science project.

"I'm reading that book on addictions," says Deanne.

The Bitch looks over at her and nods, asks her, "So what are you getting out of it?"

"Just ... Stuff. Like how you gotta get away from triggers and that. Thinking Yellowknife was a big trigger for me," says Deanne.

Me and Aimee's looking at her, but then real quick we look down because you never know when the Bitch is going to start on someone else, she whips it around quick, her talk. Group is better with Linda or Deb because even though I only been here three weeks, easier to know them, know what's coming up.

Deanne's older than us, she's sixteen and from Yellowknife and been here already three months or so. She's skinny, but skinny tall, like a model with her black hair long and straight, she's got straight-across bangs too, makes her eyes bigger underneath her bangs, glow kind of.

Then there's Megan, who's been here maybe a month and she's the youngest, thirteen, but you wouldn't know it because she's funny, brave, hyper, and real outgoing-like, electric. She's dyed her hair orange and it don't look too bad, more like a red fox, just lights up the room, can't help but see her, fiery.

Me and Aimee are new, I come in, then Aimee a week later and we're both fifteen, Aimee's real small for her age though, not skinny like Deanne but more skinny sick. She's got beautiful long hair too, down her back, it's got a kind of dark brown horsetail colour to it. Makes my heart hurt for her hair, kind of looked like mine except mine is black, hers just straight and long everywhere, no bangs. I miss my long hair, could brush it and brush it, tie it in a knot even and it was strong, soft against my cheek when I slept, my own built-in pillow. Mine's the shortest now, in a bob that's kind of below my ears like a little kid's. Used to be down to my bum, before that night.

Deanne's going to Yellowknife again soon, she can't be in the facility much longer because she needs to be in the youth detention there past sixteen. But she had to get out of Yellowknife, bad shit at that youth facility she got into. Not like she tells it, but like the workers say to her.

"I'm thinking I can go to meetings, you know, Narcotics Anonymous, and then maybe hook up with that one family took me in when I was ten, maybe they can take me in again," Deanne says. She's all confident-looking, but I can tell she's nervous just by the way her hand's rubbing at her jeans.

"Be careful not to get your hopes up," the Bitch says. She's looking down at her clipboard, writing something we can't see.

"Yeeah, I know, it's not like it would be a big deal, just would be nice to know someone," Deanne says.

Deanne looks over at me and winks, and I know she's just stalling for us all again. She's good at that, getting the attention off us, then making herself look all good and healthy. Most times Linda

and Deb don't fall for it. I don't think the Bitch is gonna either because she says, "So, Aimee, you have some visitors coming today?" Megan sucks her breath in and Aimee just starts chewing at her hair nervous, because we all know Aimee don't ever have visitors and what's that Bitch doing bringing it up like that? But then I think maybe the Bitch doesn't know, because she says in a more gentle voice: "Aimee, you want to talk about the letter you got yesterday?"

"No," Aimee whispers, and we can see her closing up right then and there. And I think the Bitch's gonna go into her, but she just leaves it, starts going on about chore allocation for the week, how we might have to do more upkeep stuff around the facility because there's only four of us right now and usually in winter there's eight or nine.

The girls are sweet on me and Faithy. They like to see a baby in here, makes them remember and miss their little sisters some. With Aimee it's because of the letter too. Her own baby died of SIDS and she showed me that letter. The official death certificate. Linda let her come into my room yesterday to open it, and after she didn't cry or nothing, just asked if she could hold Faith some. On the CBC we know they calling us the babies who having the babies up north; we're not stupid to how those people from down south see us. We got them workers come up from down south at first, they been telling us that they going to university, hearing about us all huffing paint. Then they come up and stay a while and know we're not all like that of course. Yeeah, you got some of the boys try huffing on a dare. But it's not like we can just go into the hardware store and get it. They know we're kids and the town tries hard not to get us paint, even booze. Okay but maybe not at the house parties, but the town people try anyways. Drugs are easy though. People drive them up the Iceroad, or over the Dempster come summers, weed, heroin, coke, even meth. Sometimes easier to get that shit than to get some old drunk to buy you a mickey at the liquor store.

We're not like other northern jails you hear about, how Nunavut's getting all with their culture and shit, trying to rehabilitate proper just within their own territory. We got girls from all over the North here in the Polar Girls' Prison, really called the Polar Girls' Youth Facility, but we know what it really is: jail. Most girls are placed here because they don't want them in the other smaller communities, they don't have any jails there. Some of the girls come from other areas like we got Inuvialuit lands at Banks Island and Victoria Island, then Gwich'in over Aklavik and Fort McPherson too. Sometimes we get some of the girls from Yellowknife here too. Then there's the Yellowknife prison, it's a youth facility. But they say you get to know worse girls there, like they've been in and out of jail a lot, and they do more needle drugs there and they don't act like us. Like Deanne and how she's been hooking there in Yellowknife and says she's only into having girlfriends not boyfriends, only doing johns for money. Not something I know much about here in Jackfish Bay. Sure we get all the drugs and shit, but if someone is hooking maybe they doing it out of their home I guess, not on the street.

Now Deanne's got her mouth open and she's all talking about getting more phone time to call her friends. She gets it going most days in Group because the rest of us too quiet, except Megan. She's in from Paulautuk and she's got HIV. We're not supposed to know how she got it and then of course we all do, because it's jail and that's how it works. We don't go whispering it to each other, not secret-like. But we're doing chores, dishes or something, and Megan, she just tells us. Us that's on dishes. She just goes, "You won't get it from having your hands in the water with me." We know that anyways, we got them public health nurses coming from Yellowknife and telling us that, but she's just telling us to let us know, that she's going to tell us, that's she's letting us in. That's what Linda and Deb want, to let everyone in and then we get better somehow.

That older worker's here today in Group too, we're lucky that it's not just the Bitch. The older one's got her hair cut real short, it's grey and spiky and she's nodding at Deanne like she cares, she's good at that. I know she does care, but Deanne's trying sometimes, anyone can see that, even me, though she's older than me. She just wants some good attention to her, been without parents and in one foster home after another so long.

"And maybe we can get some more Arctic char for dinner? I haven't had char for so long," Deanne says.

"Where do you think you are, the Mackenzie Hotel?" the Bitch says.

Megan's shifting. "Be fun if we could go to the hotel one night, could we? Like maybe do work training there, maybe in the kitchen like Sherry teaching us some too," Megan says, and she's getting all into it you can't help get kind of excited about it too maybe.

Grey spiky-haired worker says, "Let's get off the food topic, on to other things."

"I just think there should be more phone privileges too. Like every night," Deanne says. She's looking over at me, trying to make me say something about it too and I just nod my head because I know she's thinking about me and Tyler, how I get waiting to phone him. How he's never fucking there at that number and wonder when he's ever gonna pick up the phone and call me.

"Okay, Deanne, we'll look into it, but let's get on to more serious things," the Bitch says. "How was your visit with Sam?"

Deanne's got her own fancy lawyer from Yellowknife, not legal aid from Inuvik like most of us. Because her court case is part of something about prostitution and RCMP and rings. I swallow hard because I'm jealous. Deanne looks so grown up, and she talks about it like it's something. Something not bad she's done, but like street justice. Wonder how she lives with the knowing. Me, don't even know when my court case is set, haven't got a date yet. Might be I

get sentenced to forever and then that's forever without Faith too, or Tyler. Only dates have been with the doctors, they figuring out what to do with Faith, testing her. Maybe taking her away and I can't think about that now, don't want them to make me think about that now. Deanne goes on about Sam this and Sam that and her voice never loses that proud thing she's got going on. She can talk about her crime in Group like she done some service to humans.

Deanne winds down and the Bitch asks me: "When's Dr. Petterson coming in again, Trista?"

"Huh?"

"When's the doctor coming in to take Faith for the tests at the Inuvik Hospital, did she say when she had her checkup?"

"Maybe Thursday."

Jail and sentencing and tests and baby and doctors and Group. Makes me happy my mom isn't alive to see me in here, this fuck-up, got enough feeling bad for Auntie and Nanuk. I say something more, but it feels like just all the stuff I've been saying about Faith and how she's eating and how I'm eating. Hollow words that don't fill in for the pain I got in my gut and the period blood that started with Faith that night and hasn't stopped and pushing away the worms inside that want to swarm out of my mouth and scream, What did you do, Trista? Look what you done and what's gonna happen? But the Bitch is checking in with Aimee and talking some with Megan and it's off me for today and I don't want to think about it any more. Everybody piles up the chairs and we leave the Group room, spend some time before lunch in the living room and the workers let me have the roly crib to myself. I'm holding my baby, warm, she's sleeping. Doesn't feel real, this prison, Faith.