

Chapter One



THEY CAME FOR ME WHEN I was nine. Without warning, appearing suddenly at the orphanage as if they knew all about me. I had never seen them before. I was scared. There must be some mistake, I told myself. They must be looking for another kid. They told me they were looking for a special little girl. But I was ugly. They asked me a lot of questions. Did I know where Crowsbeak was, and what did I think about going to a new school? The one thing they didn't ask me about was my scar. Peter had told all the kids at the orphanage that it was the mark of a wizard. If they made fun of me, he said, I would turn them into toads. He was my best friend. My only friend at the Orange Order Orphanage in Indian Head.

I was a little darker than the others, except for the Native kids. I even wondered if I might be one of them. But no one seemed to know who my parents were. I had no childhood memories of a mom or a dad. My earliest memories started right here — nightmares. I remember lying frozen

in fear with my mind full of monsters. Paralyzed, alone, helpless. Unable to cry out. Those were my first memories. They haven't stopped.

Peter knew I was hurting, though I didn't know how to describe the violence of my dreams. His solution to everything was running. He used to chase me through the wheat fields playing tag on long summer evenings. He made me run so fast I felt sick. But I did get stronger. That really helped me later in my new school. I needed a lot of help because I was a stunted, withdrawn girl with an ugly purple mark running down my face and neck. He was the only one of the orphan kids who saw beyond it. When I told him about the old couple who had come to see me, he got excited.

"You're going to a real home!" he cried. "You're going to have real parents!"

"They're old," I told him. "I don't know why they want me."

"They want someone special. Not like all the other girls."

"But I'm not special," I protested.

"Yes you are. Only it takes another special person to see it."

They came back the next day to get me as they promised. So I left the Orange Order Orphanage, the only home I had known, and started my life over with Moll and Dagget Enger in northern Saskatchewan. Peter saw me off. He gave me a long, tight hug. He even shook Dagget's hand, like a grown-up. His hand looked so small in the old man's grasp. Peter looked both my new parents in the eye.

"She's special, you know," he told them seriously.

"I know," Moll replied, smiling kindly at the only friend I had in the world. "We'll take extra special care of her, too."

Dagget hefted my brown cardboard suitcase into the back of their pickup. And then we drove away. It was another nine years before I saw Peter again. Half a lifetime, in which I became a woman and he became a man.

They lived beside a huge lake called Crowsbeak, about four hundred and thirty-five miles north of Indian Head. I had never been that far away before. I found it quite amazing that they should travel such a distance to adopt a child, especially me. Moll was sixty-five when I came to live with them; her husband was a year older. Her voice and eyes were still soft, like a younger woman's. Dagget had a more rugged look to

him. He moved with effort, often painfully. Moll said he had arthritis. And he'd also had a few airplane accidents. When I got older, I learned that his "accidents" were actually dogfights with the Germans over Malta. She didn't tell me about their war years until I reached my teens. I came to know them more as grandparents, from the back end of their lives. I never appreciated what they went through until much later. I never suspected that the old pilot had his own nightmares. Maybe worse than mine.

Certainly, Moll and I were much closer in the beginning than Dagget and I. He was a gruff old man who frightened me terribly. I remember crying, wedged in between them, and Moll stroking my hair. She talked to me in that soft English voice as Dagget drove us across the Prairies. She told me about the little town on the lake I would be living in, their home, my own room, my new school. As the geese rose from the canola fields and farms popped up on the horizon and new towns opened their streets to us, I began to feel curious. Maybe there was a life for me out here, away from the orphanage, and Indian Head.

The sun had swung around behind us by the time we got to Prince Albert and stopped for lunch. We had driven almost five hours. I had no idea the prairies were so big. Little towns and grain elevators, always falling behind us and sprouting anew to the north. But the shape of the land was shifting; we had run out of fields, and trees had sprung up all over the horizon. Now we had reached a real city, the biggest place I had ever seen. And so busy — so many cars! I don't know how Dagget managed to avoid them all.

My new foster parents bought me a sandwich and glass of milk at a café. Moll gave me a candy bar to eat in the truck, but cautioned me that it was a special treat that I shouldn't expect too often, because it really wasn't good for me. I slipped it into my pocket. Peter and I had shared candy bars, but I had never eaten in a real restaurant before where a lady comes out to serve you and brings whatever you want. This time I was pretty sure I wouldn't have to wash the dishes.

"How much farther is it?" I asked Moll as we climbed back into the truck.

"Only another three hours, dear. But first we need to go shopping. There aren't any good stores in Crowsbeak for little girls' clothes."

Three hours! I felt so tired of riding in the pickup. I couldn't believe they lived so far away. But Moll was right about my clothes. They were all pretty worn and I was growing. I would need to replace a few things, especially starting a new school. Dagget drove us to a store that was bigger than anything they had in Indian Head. The sign read "Fields." Moll and I got out.

"I'll meet you back here in an hour then," he told her. He gave me a wink and drove off.

"Is Dagget going shopping too?" I asked Moll. She was already looking in the store window.

"Yes. He needs to buy some things for his airplane, dear. Look! What a pretty dress! Let's go inside."

Moll had me try on dresses, pants, jackets and shoes until I had to ask her to stop. It was overwhelming for a girl who rarely got anything new except underwear. At the orphanage we just kept growing into clothes that the older kids grew out of. It was a pretty good system. Nobody felt better dressed than anyone else. We didn't care as long as there were no holes in the knees or elbows. But clearly, this would no longer work. I would have to look nicer at my new school in Crowsbeak. The kids would probably still laugh at me, but no use making matters worse.

We each carried away two big plastic bags full of clothes. It was a good thing I stopped her when I did because Dagget pulled up, saying, "Hell Moll, you didn't need to buy out the whole damned store!"

But she just laughed. "We had so much fun, didn't we, Briony? Oh, I've been wanting to do this for so long!"

"She oughta be set up for the next three years."

Dagget grumbled a lot but I didn't think he was really angry. At least he said that I might be around for the next three years, which reassured me somewhat. And he had an airplane. That interested me.

"One more stop and we're on our way, Briony," Moll said. She patted my knee. "Oh, you are going to look so pretty in these new clothes when we get home."

It felt like we would never get home. After picking up several cases of canned goods at the grocery store, which was also enormous by Indian Head standards, we crossed a river and continued north. This was the

North Saskatchewan, Moll informed me. I settled back between them, now very tired from so much happening in one day. The roar of the truck engine filled the cab. I slumped against Moll's side. I must have nodded off because a sudden jarring of the tires startled me. When I looked up the whole country had changed: no more fields, no more valleys, no more houses. Only trees. Trees lining both sides of the highway, as far as I could see. A lot of bugs had also splattered against the windshield. Bugs and black trees no taller than telephone poles. Millions of them. We were threading our way through a never-ending forest with no sign of human life. Only bugs. And trees.

"Where is everybody?" I blurted.

Dagget let out a laugh that for a moment drowned out the noise of the truck.

"Welcome to the north country, Briony. It'll grow on you."

Something was growing all right, but it didn't feel very good. I nodded off again. Each time I opened my eyes it was the same bleak scene. I was near despair by the time we reached the outer limits of town and things began to look more normal. There were streets again, and stores and people. I couldn't decide if it was bigger or smaller than Indian Head, but at least it had more people than trees. As we drove along, a lake appeared on our right, full of boats and airplanes and docks.

"Why are those airplanes on the water?" I asked, pointing out the window past Moll. She and Dagget both laughed.

"That's how we get around up here, Briony."

We passed a hotel, a restaurant and an old-fashioned building with a sign that said "Norbert's Trading Post." I didn't see a school. Dagget turned to follow a road along the shore. A few minutes later he pulled into the driveway of a nice single-storey house. It had a lawn and even a white fence with flowers. Beyond the house I could see a yellow float plane beside a dock.

"Welcome home, Briony," Moll said. She helped me down from the truck.

I stood, wobbly from the long ride, trying to take it all in. This was way farther than I had ever been in my life. So far from Peter and the orphanage. We were in the middle of a black forest by a lake in the middle of

nowhere. I knew nobody, except for these two old folks who seemed to think I belonged with them. They stood watching me. My heart pounded. This was a huge mistake. I felt like a frightened bird. I just wanted to fly away. But where would I go? I was stuck.

“Can I please have my suitcase?” I asked. I must have sounded pathetic.

Dagget reached in and plucked it from the back of the truck. He blew the dust off, then handed it to me. I glommed onto it like a life ring. I don’t know how long I stood there clutching my suitcase, looking at that house, wondering how I would ever get back to Indian Head. Then Moll took my arm and gently guided me through the gate.

“Come on, dear, let’s go see your new room. I know you’re going to like it.”

So there I was in Crowsbeak, my new home. Moll made sure I had everything I needed but never doted on me. She must have sensed that I was unused to attention. Dagget seemed indifferent. Maybe deep down he’s really like Peter, I thought, and I remembered all the things Peter said he would do when he became a man. I forced myself to look past the calluses and whiskers and gravelly voice, and see an older version of Peter. It was quite a stretch. But I kept looking. I liked Moll a lot. But even her gentleness couldn’t stop the nightmares. They were like a pack of wolves waiting to attack me in the dark, in my most vulnerable hours. I saw gruesome images of victims burned, boiled or mangled. Things no kid should see. Things I couldn’t tell anyone, not even Moll.

I started grade four that fall. It was horrid. The kids at Orange Orphanage could be nasty, but these kids were just plain mean. At least at the orphanage we had a common bond: none of us had parents. It forced us to accept each other. At my new school there was none of that. I might as well have been from another planet. With an unsightly birthmark owning half my face and a mop of rust-coloured hair, I made an irresistible target. There was no Peter to protect me. A few girls made an effort to play fair, but school was a living hell. I thought for sure it would never end. Somehow, with Moll’s encouragement, I made it through. She was my rock.

I cherished the hours we spent kneeling together in her garden weeding, or baking scones in her kitchen with our matching aprons. I had a room all to myself. I could put my stuff wherever I wanted. Moll had stocked my bookshelf with wonderful stories. My teacher at the orphanage had apparently told her that I was an early reader. It was true — books were my great escape. Homely teens grew into full-breasted movie stars. Crippled girls became ballerinas. Poverty-stricken waifs married princes. I devoured all those books and Moll brought me more. It gave me time to adjust, because it wasn't at all clear what my role as Moll and Dagget's new daughter should be. Whatever they expected, I was sure I would fall miserably short. But it wasn't like that. There were no chores, no scolding, no long list of house rules. They seemed to be content just having me around the place.

I was free to help Moll in her garden, or the kitchen, or visit the hangar where Dagget spent most of his time when he wasn't flying. It perched on the edge of Crowsbeak Lake in front of the dock. He could winch his plane up a little track inside the building when he needed to work on it. He and the Norseman were a one-man bush-flying business. I didn't feel quite as welcome around Dagget and his plane though. He always seemed busy and didn't talk much. I still felt a little afraid of him. But Moll would happily spend hours showing me how to bake or embroider or garden. She never seemed to care how it turned out. When I pulled up a flower instead of a weed, she just laughed. The important thing, I learned, was not how much work got done but how much fun we had doing it. It took me a while, but I finally got it.

I loved her voice. Especially at bedtime. No one had ever read to me. There was something in the way she lifted words from the page and brought characters to life in my mind. They often stayed with me to confront the dark entities, who had no defences against storybook heroes. For a while, my nightmares began to soften. I began to feel a sense of home. But still, I questioned why she and Dagget had chosen me. There were prettier girls at the orphanage. Normal ones. It made no sense.

I feared for the longest time that they would take me back. But they didn't. There was something different about them, something that set them apart. Whatever it was, it drew us together as a family. I had no

idea until years later, when I discovered myself on the verge of womanhood, that Moll recognized a piece of herself in me. She had her own dark secret that only Dagget knew, until she broke and shared it with me. And so, in their senior years, while other couples enjoyed retirement and grandchildren, they undertook the task of raising a nine-year-old girl. By some mysterious alchemy of love, wisdom and patience, they succeeded in drawing me out of myself.

As far as the townsfolk were concerned, I was Dag's niece from Medicine Hat. His brother's young wife had suffered a fatal accident leaving him with too many children to raise. Few people knew much about Dag's life before he and Moll settled in Crowsbeak. So the story held up well enough. I was happy to go along with it. It spared me the stigma of being regarded as an orphan. In fact, I liked to fantasize that it was all true. I reinvented a whole new past for myself, with lots of brothers and sisters. Like the caterpillars inching through Moll's garden, I felt my life transforming, taking on new colour and shape.

"Look, Briony!" she exclaimed one summer day while we weeded. "Can you believe that lovely butterfly came from a creepy crawly caterpillar?"

It was pretty hard to believe, all right. Seemed like another fairy tale to me.

"That's what you are, child — a butterfly in an old caterpillar's coat. One day you will throw it off and fly."

"But I like caterpillars," I told her. It seemed they always got a bad rap just because they had too many legs. "They're fuzzy and like to crawl up my arm. Butterflies don't play with me."

"Oh, but they do, sweetie! I have had them land right on my shoulder."

She must be a saint, I thought. Nothing that beautiful would want to land on me. But if I stuck with Moll, I might be lucky. Her world of plants and insects was fun, and very different from Dagget's. There was no place for me in his world yet. But if caterpillars could sprout wings and fly, then I might even find something that a gruff old bush pilot and I could share.