

hunter's DAUGHTER



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Hunter's Daughter

Chapter One

NILLIQ

Tears still burned on her cheeks in the brisk morning breeze. Nilliq heard a distant scraping sound on the bay-ice, from the south, and thought it might be Aiti's father, Pingousi, returning from his hunt. She expected to see the approaching dogsled veer in to shore through an opening in the ice wall. Instead the driver headed straight toward her on the big rock.

For an instant she understood the need of an animal, a bird, to become invisible. Lacking such power as some shamans claimed, she remained sitting, as if frozen to her rock surrounded by ice.

That gray-and-white lead dog was not one of Pingousi's. And the man now walking beside his sled wore a thin, drooping mustache. She averted her eyes from the stranger, and with a sleeve of her feathered tunic she wiped away the tears.

The dogs halted at a soft command from their master and sat on their haunches, their tongues dancing, their pale blue eyes looking up at her. *How well-mannered!* she thought. Unlike the rough mutts of her camp, who by now had caught the scent and set up a mad barking from over the hill. She wished them to be still.

The stranger ignored the distant ruckus from the camp dogs. His sturdy legs planted in a wide stance, the whip hanging loose in his hand, his gaze caught hers.

Nilliq tried to look away — too late.

The man's eyes seemed friendly, almost familiar, with a slight downward curve reminding her of her uncle Quingak. This younger man had the eyes of a hunter, yet with something other, a remote sheen, as of distant sea-ice.

His lips held the hint of a smile. Her own lips began to tingle and turn open, and Nilliq covered her mouth, coughed, and looked away, out to the open blue water of the bay where earlier she'd watched two gulls dive in the pink light of dawn. Now she saw only flecks on the choppy water.

"Anything out there?"

The stranger tucked his whip under a thong on his loaded sled and took a few steps closer toward the rock, peering out over the bay to see what she could see.

Nilliq could find no words. The feathers on her bird-skin tunic ruffled in the chill breeze, and she shuddered recalling her father's admonition against wearing it feather-side-out.

The barking of the camp dogs turned sporadic as the wind shifted. Nilliq felt a painful, fearful shyness, and bowed her thoughts back to Aiti, and to her mother. Both dead.

The stranger's voice came close and deep: "They're gone now."

She shrank away from him, her blood beating like furious wings. Her damp cheeks seared hot and cold, and she sat twisting thoughts into strands of black hair.

He backed off to a more respectful distance and said, "I thought you were a pretty loon, sitting on that rock."

This remark made her cheeks flush hotter. She glanced at him and away again, her chest constricted, finally gasping a gulp of air: seal come up to steal a breath under watchful eye of bear.

His words continued, taunting. "It's a little early, isn't it, for sun-basking?" He spoke her tongue, Inuktitut, with a slight, odd accent.

Despite her apprehension, Nilliq felt her blood quicken from the rich, confident tones of his voice. Another smile wanted to emerge. A pretty loon, indeed! With her long thin nose, her sticklike legs? Yes, she could wear this name better than what the children called her, caribou girl.

Aiti, and no one else, had made her feel pretty; and Nilliq heard his voice when the stranger spoke again.

"They will be coming from your camp to see who I am."

Blocks of fractured ice heaved behind them on the tide, groaning, sighing. With a shiver on the back of her neck Nilliq pictured her father waking in his snowhouse to find her gone. Somewhere she found the courage to say, "The children will want to know your name and where you came from."

The stranger let out a small snort of recognition, at her grace in deflecting the direct question. More camp dogs barked. The stranger's dogs shifted, now restless. With cold eyes he looked past her; even, it seemed, past the camp and the hill beyond.

He spoke next in a low tone, perhaps only to himself: "Maybe I should go on my way."

Now Nilliq had to say more. She surprised herself by blurting out, "Will you stop for a visit here?"

He faced her again, flashed a knowing smile. "That's why I'm here," he said. "Yes. For a short visit."

She appraised the size of his load, the fully packed sled, lashed tight with skins and thongs.

"You've been travelling all night?"

"The snow's better, frozen harder. So then I sleep in the daytime, a lazy hunter. Ha! I catch no meat that way, but now I'm here."

The first rays of sun streamed out from behind the hill, highlighting the man's face: a strong and open brow, weathered cheeks, a wisp of beard. He wore clothing of the old style, furs tightly stitched by a capable woman. His woman? The stranger looked toward the camp, squinting.

Nilliq thought of the empty snowhouse. Aiti's snowhouse, with its winter dome now shrunk to a shapeless hump.

He turned his eyes back to her and said, "You must be Nilliq."

The words intruded like a rough hand against her tunic.

"How did you know that?" Her own words sounded like a gull's croak.

"I know people who travel this way."

Who, she thought, Pingousi? It could be any other hunter of the coast. It didn't matter. Why had he come here?

He cocked his head to one side and stood with arms spread before her, offering no threat. With a courteous smile he returned to the earlier question. "My name is Wallin. I come from the town down the coast, Postede-la-Baleine."

Nilliq's wariness eased with respect and larger curiosity. "Oh, the big settlement, what we used to call Kuujjuarapik. Poce-Balen," she said, giggling.

"Ai, that one." He waved his arm toward the south. "I'm not going back there. It's getting too big now. Too many khalunat."

For an instant Nilliq saw the wide land, bright with the warming sun, open its immense arms to welcome a new man and woman, walking together. She hadn't called this bird-thought to her, but her heart quickened with the next one, a question.

Was he that man, and she that woman?

As his town had grown too big, had her old camp grown finally too small?

Then she lowered her eyes and saw herself for what she was — a gangly, foolish girl, unworthy of a fine-looking young hunter with a well-laden sled and team of patient huskies.

A burst of ducks took off from the open water far out on the bay. Wallin stood shuffling his feet on the ice: a seal-hunter who has lost patience at one breathing-hole and is ready to move on to another.

Nilliq let words out flying: “My people lived around Kuju — Poce-Balen, before I was born. They say it has lots of big wooden houses that are warm all the time. And the houses have lamps that burn without oil, all night and day. Is it truer?”

Wallin’s eyes wrinkled at the corners. “Yes, those things are true. And instead of hunting for food, the people spend their days and nights playing khalunat games, and get their food from cans.”

He leaned casually against the rock. Nilliq didn’t move.

“I’ve tried the food from cans,” she said. “Some of it tasted good — sweet.”

“Aghh. Do you know what happens to your teeth when you eat too much khalunat food?”

“No.” Now she had offended him. She pressed her lips together and stared down at her feet folded beneath her, wriggled her toes in the sealskin boots.

“Well, you’re lucky. Have you never been in a settlement?”

“I’ve been to Townsend Bay.”

“Oh, that pile of tin boxes.”

Nilliq noticed that Wallin was not too proud to carry a rifle, or to make his sled runners hard with steel instead of glazing them with mud and ice. In a meek voice she said to him, “The way you speak, you must have been very unhappy there, in the big settlement.”

“Ah,” he said, fixing her with the gaze of a raven, so she could no longer look away. “This is a question. You have heard the answer. I made a decision: that kind of life is not for me. Not any longer. So maybe, you think, I’m looking for a camp such as yours?”

Nilliq said nothing.

Wallin leaned away from the rock. His grey-and-white lead dog stood up and wagged its tail. “Things are not as simple as they appear,” he said then in the dry voice of an old man. “Even this camp of yours is a settlement, only a different kind. It’s not just how big or how many khalunat, but also: how you fill your days and nights; what pictures your thoughts make; what the animals say to you. Are you happy here?”

In his eyes Nilliq saw the brightness of truth-knowledge. She felt trapped inside herself again, an idiot sea-bird perched on the cold, hard rock. She shifted her folded legs, and once more she felt her face grow red.

After too many moments she found a tiny voice that said, "We live in the old way here. My father, Sandlak, provides enough to eat—" She turned back, with seawater eyes, in the direction of the four little snowhouses of her people's camp. She couldn't speak about her father's simmering moods, or about those who had died, or about her loneliness. "There are no other young people, now, except Tiniq, who's not yet a man. And the smaller children, of Palli, the only woman left who's not old and wrinkled." Nilliq's voice began to choke shut. "My mother—"

"Maybe you're hungry. Come—" Wallin nodded his head sideways in the direction of the camp. "I have fish; we'll bring some to Sandlak, your father. Would you like it cooked the way they do in Poste?"

What an odd thing for him to say — a guest offering to serve food to the host. And the host, Sandlak!

Sandlak's daughter didn't know how to respond. If the stranger had any notion to court someone named Nilliq, he chose the worst way to go about it.

A pair of ravens came swooping over the hill, diving and circling, children of the air. Then they disappeared as quickly as they had come.

"Ravensway," Wallin murmured.

Nilliq hardly heard him. Her lemming fears ran aimlessly, a husky hot in chase. Maybe she and Wallin should not even go into camp, but should leave at once, to disappear into the land together. Foolish! her father would say. She pictured his rage, his face a mask of grim fire. She recoiled, blinked away the vision. Yet no one else remained, with Aiti gone. Was this her only chance for a year, or more?

The truth remained, the stranger had suggested no such thing. He had proposed to come to camp with her and cook a fish for her father. Her cramped legs unfolded and she found herself standing before him.

"Why not? Come with me and we'll have a meal together." Nilliq said this foolish thing, knowing it was all wrong.

Wallin smiled in a satisfied way. "Good," he said. "I would like to meet your father."

Chapter Two

POSTE-DE-LA-BALEINE

“You’re not gonna like this,” Nancy said, her sing-song voice almost cheery, as soon as I walked in the door.

I looked up at her while trying to wipe the spring mud off the sides of my shoes. She sat back with her blue-jeaned legs propped on the desk, running that emery board across her nails and making my blood run cold.

“There’s been another one.”

“Oh, Christ,” I said. “Where, this time?”

“Out on the land near Townsend Bay.”

“Again? Those poor suckers never get enough of it, do they?”

“You sound like it’s their fault. I don’t hear you saying that about cities down South, where lots of khalunat get killed.”

“Hey, Nance — you know me better than that. I’m not prejudiced. Eskimos, whites, Negroes, Chinamen, all the same to me. It’s just that, after x number of these bloody so-called incidents, a guy has to wonder. What is it about that place? Clan vendettas? Evil spirits? A low pressure area?”

My secretary shrugged and began the next phase of the beautification project, painting her nails watermelon pink — like some gumshoe’s broad out of a pulp novel.

“Who told you about this one?”

Eyes on her nails, she took her sweet time with the response. “Samwillie Kingak heard it from someone coming down the coast.”

I cursed under my breath and kicked my shoe against the mat, twisting my foot just enough to send a bolt of pain through the left knee. So she was seeing Samwillie again. I told myself I didn’t even care.

“I guess I’ll have to go over and have a talk with your friend Mr. Kingak.”

“Heh — maybe next week. He went out hunting first thing this morning. Anyway, I can tell you what I heard.”

She waited for me to ask: “All right — so what did he tell you about it?”

“Just that it was a hunter killed this time. Maybe from the Townsend Bay camp. Pretty bloody, he said.”

“That’s all? Any name on the victim?”

Another shrug.

“Okay then, what about the guy who told this to Samwillie?”

“Gone down the coast.”

I swore half-silently. “Excuse my French, but here we go again.”

Nancy hid her smirk behind a screen of slender fingers. Expert at applying just the right amount of makeup — courtesy of Revlon and the venerable Hudson’s Bay Company — she remained proud that her people still followed the wild geese.

And I respected that. What stuck in my craw was the chronic elusiveness of straight facts, the tendency for obfuscation. Let’s meet halfway, was my thought process. I’m not responsible for today’s problem, even if the uniform I wear stands for something to resent. Problem, solution: same uniform, when it comes to that. Ergo, I’m neutral. I come from one side but I don’t play sides. Let’s work it out. I can help you, in fact that’s why I’m here: *to serve and protect*.

I considered my options: should I get moving on a field investigation right away, or prepare instead for an early start tomorrow? The old hockey injury, that shaky left knee, began throbbing at the prospect of the trip ahead.

“I’d better have a look at those files again.”

“What files?” she said, black eyes all innocent.

She had a way of getting to me: pricking under the skin, and then softening the sting. When I told her I wanted the file on Unnatural Deaths and the one on Townsend Bay, she slid her chair back so she could rummage through the filing cabinet without getting up. One hand riffled the files while the other held the hair out of her face, with fingers splayed to keep the wet pink nails free of the loose black strands. Ravens mocked me with frozen flight knit into her cream-colored sweater.

Of course it fell to me to put the coffee on, even at ten o’clock in the morning. Nancy’s nails came first. That’s okay, I told myself. After all, her last name was Inukshuk; she was born here, in this territory now called Nouveau-Quebec.

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White man’s percolator, white man’s coffee from the Hudson’s Bay store. I stood waiting for the black stuff to brew, hands in the pockets of my regulation trousers with their inane red stripes, stewing over the injustice of it all.

Committed, yes. Otherwise I wouldn’t subject myself to the baloney I had to put up with from those clueless blatherskites at HQ and on Parliament Hill. As for the friggin’ murders, they rankled, they didn’t disappear, they

lingered like meat our friend the polar bear cached in cold storage, tenderizing with time.

Crime's the given. It's what comes after that makes the mystery, and this dog could chew on that for quite some time, before the teeth wore down and broke, before all the juice was sucked out of the bone and it splintered and cut and fresh blood flowed.

So here we were, again.

"No more cushy office routine for Corporal McLain," I complained.

"No more reading past midnight," my secretary put in.

True enough, I had been up late the night before, this time to finish *Live and Let Die*. How did that guy Bond do it? Just like the Mountie myth — which I had so far failed to live up to — he always got his man, plus the voluptuous female accomplice, in the bargain.

Nerves of steel, is that what I lacked? Or was it rather a certain suave detachment?

In truth I felt no fear from an actual killer at large. More the renewed pressure of duty, driving past mere job security, to the actual resolution of trouble that had already touched me too close with the death of a friend, Matthewsie Konik.

I sensed a thin rivulet of sweat trickling down the cool skin under one armpit. "Shit," I blurted out. "Wait till this new hotshot Henley down at HQ sees this week's report. He'll dredge up all the old cases, and then come storming up here gunning for you know who."

Nancy had never spoken with Henley; by intuition alone she had the voice down pat: "You can let this sort of thing go only so far, Corporal." Smiling, she handed me the files. "But really, Jack, how do you know it was a murder?"

I slapped the files down on her desk. "Hey, for starters, the word you used was *killed*. You also used the word *bloody*, if I remember correctly. But no, you're right. What do I know? I keep forgetting Rule Number One: Never assume anything. Maybe it wasn't a homicide. Maybe just another suicide, some old guy who got tired of it all, sawed off his shotgun and ate it for breakfast. Or another mauling by the infamous polar bear ripper. Or Christ, some righteous act of religious fanaticism."

The coffee was nearly ready. I stood clanking a spoon in an empty mug; gazing at my dull black shoes with their muddy edges; thinking of the good old days, of dashing Barry Bickford and the clean confession. Back when the blue-lettered sign above our little plywood office still said "Great Whale River."

"Anyway—"

“And anyway, it has been a long winter and it’s about time I got out for a little ride before the ice and snow turn into porridge. Is that what you were going to say?”

“Well, you always tell me that too much office work is your chief occupational hazard.”

“Coffee?”

“Thanks, Jack.” Now a genuine, bewitching smile graced the soft angles of Nancy’s face. She tried to sip from the mug and put it down, too hot. She sat back and took up her book; and her loafers appeared again on the reception desk, skewing the little official RCMP plaque that proclaimed the power of our humble outpost.

Marjorie Morningstar. I thought the paperback was about a native girl, when I bought it in the Montreal airport as a little present for my secretary. I was wrong; but Nancy didn’t seem to mind one bit.

The hot coffee cooled me off for a moment; but I wished for that little something extra. As I stood looking at the unopened files on the desk, I missed already the false peace of mind I’d enjoyed before walking into the office, and with no shame I conjured up the taste of a healthy dash of good Irish whiskey, which in a lifetime past would bolster me on the investigative quest. Thus fortified by imaginary spirits, I picked up the files and retreated to my inner sanctum.

Nancy appeared in the doorway of the partition we called the Great White Wall. From her outstretched hand she dangled a large brown dog-eared envelope, as if it smelled like a different part of the dog.

“Message from HQ,” she said.

“What do they want now?” I tore open the envelope and held up the flimsy flag of an enclosed memo:

RE: FORM C-271 SUBMITTED DETACHMENT
POSTE-DE-LA-BALEINE QUE 6 SEPT 63.

REQUIRE FURTHER DOCUMENTATION
PERTAINING AUXILIARY STAFF SALARY RAISE
CLAIM FOR J. NATSIK:

a. SUBMIT EMPLOYEE TIME SHEET PERIOD
9/9/63-15/3/64.

b. COMPLETE PERFORMANCE QUOTIENT
RATING FORM C-47-87 ENCLOSED. RETURN
BEFORE 31 MAR 64.

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I'd just about given up on Jimmy's raise, bugging them, with no response for six months. Now they give me a deadline — last week — and there's no Form C-47-87 as advertised. But what did I expect? Jimmy only saved my life.

At least I had Nancy to hear my complaint: "Air courier — who are they trying to kid? Did you read this thing?"

"At least they're up to date on the name of the settlement," she observed in her cheeriest voice.

"Big pissing deal. Poste-de-la-Baleine, Kujerapik—"

"Sheesh, how many years does it take khalunat to learn our language? It's Kuu-juu-a-ra-pik."

"Whatever."

"Anyway, I'm glad it's just a scrap of onion skin," Nancy said. "My filing cabinet's already overflowing with their garbage."

"I like that. Your filing cabinet."

My secretary tossed her head and glided back toward the office partition. At the doorway she paused to look back at me, her fine black eyebrows raised. "Why don't you just pad Jimmy's time sheets to make up for the lost time?"

I hesitated a moment. Great idea — except for my signature on that bottom line. Still, how would anyone down at HQ ever know the difference?

"You've got a point, Nance. The guy hauls me out of an icy river, at great risk to his safety, I say he gets rewarded. Maybe I'll put in the next one for you. You might have to wait awhile, though, with that sorry bunch of pencil-pushers."

"I might be an old lady with no teeth." She giggled and returned to her side of the Wall.

Without much left of the morning, I proceeded to work out a plausibly inflated time sheet for Jimmy. Besides saving my hide, he was a likeable chap, to use a Bickfordism. Had a bit of a chip on the shoulder, but who wouldn't, taking orders from an outside force like me. Least I could do, hand back some chits of gratitude. I'm a realist, I told myself, signing off on the minor fraud. I don't rewrite history. I just clean up after: a humble janitor. I know where the refuse goes, what cleaning fluids to use. Someone has to do it.

I could hear the insistent clacking of typewriter keys as Nancy prepared the weekly report, and in the back of my mind I debated how to handle it. Should I leave out any mention of the latest killing, pending more information? Or would that just land me in bigger trouble in the end?

By the time her report was ready for signing, I had decided to buckle to the rule of prompt dispatch. With Nancy standing over my shoulder, and my stomach growling for lunch, I scrawled a brief addendum: there'd been a death up the coast, and it would be investigated immediately.

"Here," I said to her, "can you package up all this stuff for the afternoon plane?"

Too late, I wondered if I should have said please.

"Why me? Can't you do it?"

"Hey, I've got to keep giving you something useful to do around here; or with the next little memo from our friends down South, they'll be ordering me to cut staff."

Pouting, she took the papers from my hand.

"And I'm going to have to get cracking first thing in the morning, on that little trip up the coast."

Now a look of cloudy distraction passed across her eyes.

"So what do you think about that dead hunter?" I asked. "Does it really sound normal? Cultural, as you would say? Don't you think it might fit with the murders we've been trying to solve, give us the break we've been waiting for?"

"Sure it fits. They all do, one way or another."

"Okay, okay, Fatima. Seriously, think about Matthewsie Konik, for instance, just last spring. And that murder in the Townsend Bay settlement in '61. Now add this one. You know at least half the people on this coast. Do you see where there might be some connections?"

"Sure, a million connections," she said, eyes flashing like northern lights. "The tracks of a caribou herd, the many breathing-holes of a single seal. Which ones do you choose to follow up? It might help to know who that dead hunter is."

What comes after. In this work you learn to tread cautiously, step by step. The river ice might hold here, and there, today and next week, but beyond that...it's like Jerry Schaefer told me is the schoolkids' favorite line: "*You never know.*"

These Inuk kids, they're canny and cunning, and they can smell a fox a ways off in the spring breeze. They mouth a simple English phrase we take for granted, and with just such an inflection of tone, like their Chinese ancestors, you might say, they give it a whole new meaning.