



*X*odiak town in the year of our Lord 1894. The man sits with his back against the hewn-log wall with his legs crossed before him on the floor. The spruce puncheons are dark, impregnated with grease and salt from the decades when his Russian forebears used the building as a warehouse for raw fur during an age of powdered wigs and knee breeches. There is no light save what comes from the twelve-inch unglazed window in the wall above him. Out this window is a view of the hillside and nothing more. There is a damp straw-tick mattress with a wool blanket, a bucket and an old newspaper in the far corner. Iron bars separate the man and two other empty cells from the hallway that leads to the guard office and the gateway to the world where he has lived the twenty-five years of his life.

The man has not been allowed outside in the weeks since his trial. Under normal circumstances, his skin tans in the wind and sun, but now it has faded to the ashy-gray of a mixed blood. A Creole. Or as the Americans call him, a siwash.

Beach crows caw at one another in a cottonwood tree that must be nearby, judging from the golden leaves that have blown into his cell. The prisoner doesn't move, he just listens. He is not from this island. He is from the Kenai Peninsula, two or three days sail to the north, a land his grandfather's people call Yaghanen. He knows he will never see his country again. He is to hang in one week's time for a double homicide.

His hands rest in his lap with dirt under the fingernails. He flexes them once, then lets them rest. The tips of his uncut hair fall over his face and brush at his chin.

The prisoner cannot keep accurate count of how long he sits, though it is fall, the last days of September by his reckoning. Day and night are more or less of equal length this time of year, but the grayness that passes for daylight on this isle of storm and rain offers no clues to the passing of clock hands.

His cell is the furthest from the door to the guard office. He hears the door scrape open and footsteps approach. The sound of clicking heels on the floor tells him it is a white woman. The guard Maddox appears in his blue army uniform. The woman is right behind him, smartly dressed and pretty.

“How do, Campbell,” says the guard. He is fair-haired, barely old enough to shave.

“Hello, Maddox.”

“This is that Russian half-breed you asked about,” he says to the woman. “Aleksandr Campbell.”

“Who’s she?” says Campbell.

“This is Miss Ashford. She’d like a few words with you.”

He tilts his head slightly. “Do I know you?”

Miss Ashford flashes him a fetching smile, all fair skin and dark eyes and chestnut hair pinned up beneath her sensible-yet-stylish hat.

“I’ve not had the pleasure,” she says, extending her gloved hand through the bars. “I’m Rebecca Ashford from the Bureau of American Ethnology.”

“The what?”

“The Bureau of American Ethnology. We’re a branch of the U.S. Government that records the cultures of America’s primitive peoples before they’re lost.”

“I see.”

Several long moments of silence pass. Campbell watches her. He does not get up, and Miss Ashford withdraws her hand, an awkward gesture at best. Campbell’s accent comes out as he speaks—low English words voiced with the hard, clipped sounds of Russian and the long, lisping cadence of Athabascan speech.

“You’re with the Yankee government.”

“I work for the federal government, yes.”

The notion of an unmarried woman working a job other than laundress or salmon roe packer is beyond the scope of his experience.

“What do you want?”

“I’m travelling through the territory collecting cultural data on Eskimo and Aleut shamanic beliefs. I hoped you might be willing to let me interview you.”

Campbell leans forward from the wall, his eyes fixed straight into hers. “I aint no damn Eskimo. My granddad’s people are Indians.”

The Eskimo and Aleut people Miss Ashford has interviewed have had nothing complimentary to say about their Athabascan Indian neighbors. Her superiors in the Bureau consider the Athabascans to have no culture worthy of scholarly study. No grass baskets, no carved masks or elaborate weaving, no stratified society. The prevailing opinion is that their aboriginal ways have been too diluted by Christian missionaries to be of scientific interest.

Still, despite her disappointment, she finds herself unable to look away.

"I'm sorry if I offended you," she says. "I must have been misinformed."

"It's alright. You aint the first."

"You speak very good English."

"Spasiba."

"Pazhalusta."

Campbell cocks his head, looking at her from the corners of his eyes. "You speak Russian."

"Some. I had an immigrant aupaire when I was a child."

"A pair of what?"

"An aupaire. A governess. She was from Russia."

"I see."

"I'm preparing a monograph on the spiritual beliefs of the aboriginal peoples of this part of Alaska."

"A monograph."

"It's a government report. Like a book."

"I know what it is."

Miss Ashford taps a finger against the handle of her briefcase, wondering briefly where this mixed-blood man encountered a word as obscure as monograph, and if there is enough time left in the day to locate a former shaman rumored to be living on the hill above town.

It has proven difficult to find aboriginal shamans here in Alaska willing to talk about the old ways. Their conversion to Christianity by the Russians seems to hold them back from speaking. She has been tasked with gathering such information, and it has been far more frustrating than she would have imagined. She is keenly aware of the fact that she is the only woman working in the Department of the Interior and, as such, has a lot at stake with her research.

An idea comes to her. The prevailing wisdom is that the Athabascan Indians do not merit scientific study, but there is an opportunity here, staring her in the face. She has heard a rumor about this man. Probing deeper into it could provide a needed boost to her career. At the very least it might get her an office in Washington with a window, instead of a converted basement closet.

"I was told you were a magic man, Mr. Campbell."

"Pardon?"

"They say you have the ability to change yourself into a bear."

"Who told you that?"

"I think it's best if I don't reveal my informants."

Campbell inclines his head just enough that she can see his hard eyes. He regards her for a long moment, wondering what game she is playing at.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions about your ability," she says. "And about your people's spiritual beliefs. If you'd be so generous as to share your time with me."

Campbell opens his mouth to tell her to go to hell, but thinks better of it. These are his final days on Earth, and he figures he could do worse than to spend some time in the company of a pretty white girl.

"As you like," he says.

Maddox exits the cell block and comes back a moment later with a chair. He places it so Miss Ashford can sit facing into the cell. A smirk crosses Campbell's shadow-hidden face. He can see she's well accustomed to this kind of attention, to being the prettiest girl in any room she enters, army stockade or otherwise.

"Thank you, Private Maddox," she says. Maddox looks into the cell, then back at her, trying to discover an excuse to stay. Finally he says, "I'll leave the door open, Miss. If you need anything just give a holler."

"Thank you. I will."

His footsteps clump back down the hallway. Miss Ashford opens her briefcase and withdraws a notebook and a pencil. She flips the notebook open to a fresh page and sits with her pencil poised to write.

"Can you tell me something about where this ability comes from?" She taps her pencil against the binding of her notebook. Most aboriginals she has worked with do not respond to such direct questioning. Indeed, they seem to consider it extremely rude. But she is aware that this man is to be hanged in a few days, and there is only so much time. She repeats to herself an aphorism her mother often used: Make haste slowly.

Campbell looks at the floor.

She tries again. "Why don't you tell me something about your parents? I take it from your last name that your father was an American. Or a Scotsman."

Campbell stares into her eyes from the shadows of his unkempt hair. He begins to speak. Miss Ashford's pencil scratches as she writes.

CHAPTER I

*M*y dad was an American soldier. He come up to Alaska in sixty-nine with the army when they built their fort at Kenay town. I never knew him. He got my mother in a family way, then left when the bluecoats abandoned the fort the following year. I'm told that soldiers can take their wives with them when they post to a new billet, but that bluebelly colonel wouldn't let him take my mother because she was a Russian Creole and not a white lady. All my dad give me was the name Campbell. When they lit out for the States, my mother moved us into one of the abandoned cabins the soldiers had built. It was small and dark, with no glass in the window and packed dirt for the floor. There wasn't even no door, just an old piece of moosehide to keep the weather out.

My mother's father was a Kenaytze Indian from the mountains. That spring when he come downriver to sell his catch of fur and found us living in this squalor, he went to the Alaska Commercial store and paid two dollars for a glass window. He sent word up Cook Inlet, or the Gulf of Kenay as it was called then, that help was needed, and his good friend George Washington come down from Point Possession with his two nephews Petr and Yakov. The Yankees cannot pronounce our Russian names, so these two would in later years be known as Belukha Pete and Bullseye Jake.

George Washington was a *toyon*—that's what the Russians call an Indian chief—and he was a top-notch carpenter. The four of them cut logs and whipsawed them into puncheons for the floor. They built a door and trimmed the window and generally made the cabin livable. I don't recall none of this for I was barely a year old,

but this was the house I lived in until I was eight. I slept in the tiny storage loft above my mother's bed. One of my earliest memories is of lying awake in the brightness of the summer nights and listening to the carpenter ants chewing their way through the walls.

My old granddad's Indian name meant something like Hawk Owl Watching, but the Yankees called him Lucky Jim. I'm told he had other names—many of the old-time Indians had several at any given time—but Lucky Jim was the only one I knew him by. He had not cut his hair for almost twenty years, since a wolverine come to him in a dream and told him he should nevermore put the shears to it. This wolverine is one of the most powerful spirits in the forest, and Lucky Jim couldn't disobey such instruction, so all those years later he wore his long hair clubbed up at the nape of his neck in a large bundle. I seen him from time to time with his hair undone when one of his wives would wash it; it trailed on the floor several feet behind him.

It was said that in his youth Lucky Jim had killed seven Esquimaux and Aleuts in combat. These people are the mortal enemies of the Kenaytze from the beginning of time. It was also whispered that he had killed three brown bears with nothing more than a spear and his axe, but Lucky Jim never once spoke of these things himself. Such boastfulness is considered unseemly among the Indians.

I did not see Lucky Jim again until the spring of my eighth year when my mother died of the consumption. She had the rattling bloody cough as far back as I can remember, but over the last year it got so bad she could barely get out of bed. Then one morning just after the start of Lent, I was up before her but decided not to wake her. She'd had so little rest. We had no samovar urn like wealthier homes, nor even an iron wood stove, so I fired