

## Chapter One

*St. Lawrence Seaway, July 1973*

Leaping over luggage in her path, she races through the Montreal Airport, looking for other travelers in her party. They are not there. Taking eyeglasses from the leather bag slung over her shoulder, she props them on the bridge of her nose. The slight angle of her neck shows a practiced elegance even in the reading of her boarding pass, “Sicily Marshall, July 28, 1973, Montreal, Zürich, Berlin, 7AM...” Sucking an ear guard on the glasses, her gaze expands, scouring the Swiss Air departure lounge. Then she sees *Him*—

His legs stretch out in a mile of blue jeans and cowboy boots. On his neck is a bone choker with twinkling clear glass beads, and a suede medicine bag partly obscures a silver cross without a Christ. Smooth dark braids, bound with beaded ties, rest on either side of his heart. There is a perfect patina to his bronze skin.

Gravitating within an arm’s length of his boots, the spectacles still dangling from her lips, her mouth gapes open in awe. The eyewear tumbles toward the floor. His single swift motion catches and returns the lenses to her hand, a breath before he resumes his repose.

“Th-Thank you,” she says.

“You’re lost,” he says.

“The people I’m looking for are the ones lost.”

In the seat next to him feathers flow to the floor like a fountain or a flock, red, yellow, orange, gold. Moving the feathers to make room, he says,

“Come talk to me until they find themselves.”

‘It would be too obnoxious to pull out my camera,’ she thinks, never having seen anyone look this damned good. He seems older, probably in his mid twenties. ‘Everyone says I’m mature for my age,’ she rationalizes her growing attraction.

He watches her also. How could he not? A thick black elastic band thwarts dark curls from escaping the fountain of spirals at the top of her head. Her travel attire is a soft yellow wide legged pant of T-shirt fabric with a matching boat necked shirt, displaying her sculpted clavicles while the pastel illuminates her Manzanita skin. Ankle-tied flat sandals, worn vainly to camouflage her height, match the beige pashmina wrapped around her waist. An understated elegance sets her apart from other travelers. Her eyes glance between his and those feathers.

“Can I touch?” she asks.

“Depends on what...” he says.

“I mean the feathers.”

“Dancing gear, a headdress.” He nods once.

“Pretty.” She pets the plumes as if they are a more exotic relative of the peacock.

“They’re a pain in the butt to carry across the ocean.”

“Where are you going?”

“Berlin, dancing, the World Youth Festival...”

“I’m going to Berlin and dancing too.”

Spare with words, he has a jazz to him which is the essence of ‘cool’. Lacing fingers in her lap, a technique inherited from her childhood dance classes, almost masks that he makes her nervous. Standing, he positions himself directly in front of her chair. She wilts. Holding her

shoulders, he shifts her torso this way and that, looking behind her. “What exactly are you doing?” she asks.

“Looking for your feathers.”

“Do *I* look like Josephine Baker?”

“More like Maria Tallchief.”

“Maria? The Firebird? In my dreams—but I do dance ballet—leotards travel better.”

“I might need me some of those.”

Normally disinclined toward being manhandled, somehow she is neither frightened nor offended, more puzzled. Resisting the desire to rest her cheek against the thigh of his jeans, she breathes him in. He’s spicy like smoke from a campfire built of pine needles, sage, and lavender. “I’m imagining you in leotards. Don’t get me wrong, your body is perfect for them.” Still holding her kissing distance from his groin, he releases his grip as if dropping a hot potato.

“I do Powwow, *Men’s Fancy Dance*. Leotards aren’t an option.” He bounces to his chair.

“Isn’t that the most athletic traditional Indigenous American dance form?”

“Yeah, agility, stamina, jumps, leaps, twirls.” He is impressed that she knows what Powwow dancing is. “I never saw a Black chick, or anyone else your size, do ballet,” he squints.

“Then you’ve never seen Maria Tallchief. We are exactly the same height.” She meets his gaze. “Honestly, at five foot nine, I haven’t seen five foot since I was nine.”

“How old are you now?”

“Old enough,” she says.

“Not old enough to be runnin’ around the world unescorted lookin’ like you do.”

“I can take care of myself. At least, if you are going to Berlin, I’m in the right place to meet the rest of the American delegation.”

“You mean, *The United States. America* is more than the USA. That flight took off. The Canadians will be here soon. I hang with the Quebecois.”

She looks confused.

“French Canadians... One on one, they’re more fun than the English. We have our tussles since they, like us, also seek sovereignty.”

His explanation soars over her head.

“Are you all right?” he asks, seeing her dazed.

“No, I flew to Montreal from San Francisco on short notice. I’m exhausted and don’t handle details well when I’m tired.”

“Not many of us do,” he says.

Biting her lip she contemplates whether he would think her an imbecile if she admits what is on her mind. She blurts out, “Fatigue contributes to my delayed recollection of being on the Canadian delegation. I’m from the US but my new Canadian stepfather and my mother arranged this trip. They’re in Winnipeg, where I’ll go to study for the first time after the festival. In my family, we do most things on a ‘need to know’ basis. That’s part of why I never have a clue what I’m doing.”

“Umm—that almost makes sense,” he says. Tilting his head to see her from a slightly different angle he continues, “Okay, you said that’s part of the reason. What’s the other part?”

“I’m not as smart as I look. Anyway, what’s *your* nationality?”

“First Nation...”

“I expected you to say US or Canadian.”

“I’m what you’d probably call ‘Indian’—”

“Actually, I say *Native American*... more accurate and politically astute.”

“‘Native American’ is an ethnicity or a race. *First Nation* is a nationality usually delineated by a specific affiliation.”

“And what is your ‘affiliation’?”

“Mum is Dené. My father was Potawatomi and Ojibwa.”

“Ojibwa?”

“Long story. Pop’s folks used to hang out around Lake Superior and built damned good birch boats.”

Rarely does she feel informationally out-matched. This is clearly one of those times, a situation she intends to rectify.

“Dené?” she asks.

“Like most First Nation names it means *The People*.” He surmises beneath the surface of this smart, romantically awkward, gorgeous ballerina exists a detail-oriented obsessive-compulsive. “The Dené come from the edge of the tundra, in the boreal forest. It circumnavigates the Arctic above the 50th parallel but below the 60th at Hudson Bay. Mum lived near Tadoule Lake—another long story”

Delighted to find he knows things she does not, hopefully he will tolerate her barrage of questions coming next.

“What passport do you carry?” she asks.

“Don’t usually,” he says.

“Doesn’t that make it hard to cross borders?”

“I try not to go where they don’t recognize the legitimacy of my nations or my people.”

‘Talk about your limited audience...’ she thinks.

He is blessed with the gift of intuition, and she cursed with transparency.

“It limits me as much as being a giant Black ballerina does you,” he says.

“Yet, I have the advantage of a passport. How do *you* cross borders?”

“United Nations aboriginal papers and sometimes my Canadian Indian Card.”

Until now their banter is fast paced. Unexpected silence causes a noticeable gap. “Are you doin’ all right?” he asks, several times. Too many beats later, she registers his question.

“Few people notice when I space out,” she says.

“‘Space out’? Is that what you call what just happened?”

“Sometimes I have out of body experiences.”

“That’s a good thing in my cultures. And of course in the twilight zone.”

“In mine, it’s a seizure, the partial complex, absence type.”

“Should I do something if I see you having one of those *moments*?” he asks.

“Make sure I don’t fall, burn myself on a stove, or stab my hand with a fork.”

“Umm—your parents must be concerned about you.”

“They know I’m hard to cage and almost legal.”

“Legal, meaning...?”

“Age of majority, voting, can be a felon in my own right, won’t need anyone’s consent to make love or donate blood.”

“Good to know,” he says.

Sure she has given him too much intimate information, she returns to the clinical. “It never happens while performing.”

“Muscles can run on auto-pilot, like sleep walking. How does it feel?”

“The seizures? Who knows? They are blank spots. Like reading sentences without consonants, I’ve no comprehension. A dead skunk in a chimney smell, or noise turning to flashes of light warns me, without prevention. Strobe lights, missing meds, shock, exhaustion—all the kiss of death.” She unfolds her legs, stretching. “How did you notice?”

“Safe to say, I pay attention to all kinds of things others don’t.” He slips off his chair to the floor, crossing his boots at the ankle, sharing her eye level. “Where are you from?” he asks, checking one more fact, hoping he hasn’t fallen off a precipice into a disaster—

“You mean like what planet, since I’m spacey?”

“Let’s stick to terra firma.”

“Los Angeles, well, I lived in Marin County, in Northern California and—”

“I mean your people.”

“Ahh... Oklahoma... I even have some Seminole going on in me... I was born in St. Louis... but my stepfather is actually exiled from apartheid South Africa...” She babbles like the Mississippi breaching a levee. Taking a breath, she says, “Now you know all about me and I don’t even know your name.”

“Forest, Forest Odjig—what do they call you again?”

“Sicily Marshall...” Realizing his inquiry was peculiarly worded, she asks, “Why did you say, *again*?”

Forest puts his palms over his eyes, hoping not seeing her might help. Sicily catches her bottom lip between her teeth.

“Your parents...” he says.

“Vern and Ellie?”

“They thought I might run into you.”

“You made a fool of me...”

“It took a bit to realize who you were. I expected to see you in Berlin, with the Americans.”

“You *mean* the US delegation.”

Forest masks his smile with a hand. He shakes his head at how quick she is.

“I think you were playing me, a cat with a ball of yarn,” she says.

“More like a dog chasing a kite.”

“Say you’re not supremely evil and duplicitous—how do you know my parents?”

“Mostly through struggle,” he says.

“And what are you struggling for?”

“For better. I wasn’t trying to hurt you. Never doubt that my wanting to know *you* has nothing to do with your parents. Sicily, I exist in one tense at a time, mostly the present.”

“Be quiet. Are they acquaintances or are we extended family?”

“Do you want me to ‘be quiet’ or speak?”

She glares at him.

“From what I know of your folks, you’re a sister.”

“I was hoping for a different relationship than that.” She had not meant to say that aloud.

“Careful what you ask for,” he says. Unearthing the silver cross from beneath his other neckwear, he unclasps the chain, handing the bobble to her. It dangles at the level of her eyes. Each of the four post are divided in two, making eight.

“Damn. I should have noticed. This is one of Ellie’s favorite protocols. You are my guardian angel,” she says.

“Maybe a guardian, but I’m no angel.”

“If someone has this cross, I know that Ellie means for me to trust them. It carries her weight. The way it works, you give it to me only if I won’t follow your instructions. Otherwise, you return it to Ellie.”

“She told me.”

“You can hold onto this.” Sicily places the cross in his palm, certain she would follow this man anywhere. The public address system squawks in French.

“Our flight is boarding,” Forest says. Standing, he reaches out a hand to help her. She ignores him, floating up from the ground, seemingly without use of a single muscle. Pulling a well worn leather bag from under his chair, Forest hoists it over his shoulder. Grabbing the headdress at its crown, the train flows to the floor at his back. Walking to the gate, others passing gawk at them, quills garnering most of the admiration.

Sicily looks around asking, “Where’s the rest of the Canadian delegation?”

“The English Canadians and Quebecois were to meet at Terminus Centre-Ville then come here on a bus.”

“Why didn’t you travel with them?” Sicily asks.

“Quebecois and English rarely cooperate. I didn’t expect they’d manage to catch a plane together.”

Swapping seats with other passengers enables Sicily and Forest to sit together during the transatlantic crossing. The flight attendant wants the headdress crushed into the overhead compartment. Forest protests, sliding into the window seat without stowing his dance bonnet. Wrapping his arm around Sicily’s waist, he pulls her closer to him. Draping the feathers over them coyly, as if hiding illicit activity, Forest says, “It’s not luggage. It’s a blanket.” The attendant rolls her eyes and moves on, reminding them to fasten their seat belts.

The jumbo jet roars. The two dancers are perched between possible death and the birth of something new. They reach escape velocity.

“See that little ribbon of water...?” Forest asks, looking out the window, “That’s the St. Lawrence Seaway. It connects the Arctic Ocean and North Atlantic to the Great Lakes, including Lake Superior...” He looks at her intently. “Tell me the rest of it,” he says.

“The rest of what?” Sicily asks.

“Your whole story, it’s a long trip.”

Sicily sees his flickering smile and suspects she will be his in-flight entertainment.

“Are you with me?” he asks because she is silent.

“Sometimes, I’m quiet because I’m thinking.”

“Are you with me?” He is more emphatic.

“You’re asking a lot for a guy who couldn’t remember my name. Besides, I don’t know my *whole* story,” she says.

“But, you know what you’ve been told.”