

Aleutian Rogue

WITH

The Amanat

SERIALIZED

Chapter Eleven

1.

The Cessna 440 flies directly to Kodiak from Unalaska.

Passing over scattered islands and stretched kilometres of blue water, Tanya searches for the fisherman's boat. Finding it would be a fluke, but stranger things have happened. Walter. Last night. Who seduced whom? A standoff, perhaps. The waitress, his father—both are correct: he is in league with Satan. And it wasn't on Akutan Island where he learned how to care for a woman. No indeed.

Trying to put thoughts of him away, she thinks of promyshlenniki sailing these waters a hundred, two hundred years ago...what would happen if weather kept her at Akutan for the winter? An irresponsible, but exciting thought. But also a thought emanating from that corner icon, which, this morning, seems brighter than the glare off the water. Duty, however, won't allow weather or glare to distract her.

What was it like to sail in the *Tri Sviatitelia*, the *Tri Ierarkha*, the *Sv. Ekaterina*? St. Catherine? Catherine Alden is certainly no saint though she is a woman men adore.

And as the Cessna, on its approach at Kodiak, banks into the wind over Woody Island, she forces herself to forget last night, a disturbance in the orderly course of affairs. Nothing else. Nothing, nothing, nothing else.

Repeating the cover story used in Unalaska, in less than an hour she learns that Sarah McPhearson wasn't met at the fuel dock by John Littlehaus, but left for Seward on the *F/V Dawn*. But it isn't until late afternoon Friday that she learns of the search warrant issued for Littlehaus' laboratory. Knowledge of the warrant is an especially bitter pill. For most of the day, she has been trying to charter a floatplane to fly to the remote laboratory; for most of the day she has been told there would be no flights to Shelikof Strait till the fog lifts off the strait; for most of the day she has had nothing to do but wait in glorious sunshine for the fog to clear, much of it within her own mind, especially after her call to Viktor.

"Alden must not talk to Justice."

"I need a helicopter and a pilot." She explains the situation, and again demands transportation: "I am hostage to the weather, hostage to these flight services that are more concerned with being safe than flying. I must be able to fly even if I have to grow wings myself."

He agrees, saying that he will contact a cover organization, a management company, that already has contracted to lease two Bell Rangers from a Homer-based flight service. The Rangers were to have been used to check coordinates on their new radar-positioning maps used to guide their first-strike missiles.

"Unfortunately," he says, "you will not receive delivery of the first one for another twenty hours."

"Not until tomorrow afternoon? That's unacceptable." The words spring from her mouth before she can choke them down.

"Agent Grinenko, you will restrain yourself."

"Yes sir."

"Good." If Viktor had a male operative, he would use him. But there is no one available, not for another few days. So softening, he adds, "The Revolution needs soldiers, not martyrs. You have accomplished much. Perhaps you should become part of the island's background until we locate this *Coyote*. Our satellites will find it if it floats."

The eyes of the Revolution rather than her instincts are what he trusts—her instincts are not quantifiable. Photographs can be reduced to digits transmitted in a binary code, but instincts are feelings, suspicions, hunches, none able to be turned on, then off in streams of seven or eight or ten.

2.

John rises before sunrise Sabbath. Although not wanting to let Louise dominate his thoughts, he finds he can't think of anything else, hasn't been able to think of anything or anyone else since she left Thursday. He worries about her flying with Jeb, about her having to present unfamiliar material; wonders if she's thinking of him, if she can stand up to those good ol' boys who run Juneau; hopes she runs roughshod over the Advisory Committee; and worries that the weather will delay her return.

The drone of a circling plane interrupts his thoughts. He listens to its engine throttling back to land. And quickly slipping his feet into a pair of cutdown rubber boots, he hurries outside in case Louise might be returning early for some reason.

The sun isn't fully above the horizon. The fog lifted yesterday afternoon so the broken clouds are tinged pink on their southeastern sides.

The plane breaks out of the clouds, and sets down in the channel. It's a Super Cub all right, but not Jeb's. Rather, it's the one used by the Troopers.

As he watches from the garden, the Cub taxis onto the sand beach beside the barn. Four uniformed officers, all wearing bullet proof vests and carrying shotguns as well as their handguns, bail out and fan across the spit.

The lab is quickly and efficiently circled.

He doesn't believe what he sees, and can't imagine a reason for the SWAT-type tactics.

"Are you John Littlehaus?" asks one of the officers.

"I am, but do you guys have the right place?"

"I have a search warrant for your premises. Do we have your cooperation?"

"I suppose. Let me see that warrant."

"It's for the persons of H.J. Shoulders, male Caucasian. C.P. Alden, female Caucasian. S.M. McPhearson, female Caucasian. Are any of these people here?"

"No...don't even know the women."

"You are acquainted with Mr. Shoulders, then?"

"Haven't seen him in a couple years. What makes you think he's here?"

"You'll have to ask the issuing judge the reason for the warrant. We're just here to look around. We have a job to do. That's all."

"Does this have anything to do with the shooting in Dutch?"

"I suspect it does."

"Go ahead and look around. I'm here alone."

After searching the feedshed and chicken house, the barn and the neighboring setnetter's house, three of the four officers search the lab while the fourth officer waits outside with him. The tension eases. And the conversation turns to chickens. A half hour later, with each officer armed with a

dozen fresh eggs and with him knowing that someone in the Federal Attorney General's office had secured the search warrant, the four officers board their Super Cub and depart. He also knows that as far as the officers are concerned, Shoulders was lost at sea when the *Coyote* went down a week ago last night.

3.

Kodiak ferments in a pickle of diesel fuel and putrid gurry as cold drizzle comes in waves and silently passes beneath the street lights. Each light seems dim and so very alone. The town is dark, depressing, dreary. Streets, deserted. She hasn't been here before, but it seems like she has, that she has seen all of this before. Enmelen, maybe. Or Providenija, Vandrakinot—villages that, too, reek of cooking crabs, where seagulls also huddle atop the power poles and mud tread tires whine as they sling water from the wet pavement and stray dogs wander the alleys, going from garbage pile to garbage pile.

She sits huddled on the stoop behind Tony's Bar; she sits a ways away from a little cluster of derelicts, all prematurely wizened, all sharing a single bottle wrapped inside a brown paper bag. Leaving the cluster, a hag of indeterminate age, with black snags for teeth, smiles and extends her hand. The hag holds out a nickel and a penny. "You sell me a cigarette? I can pay."

She looks at the coins, shakes her head, and says, "Don't smoke," as she wishes the Revolution would hurry and liberate these workers who have no work, no honor, nothing but wind and weather and the hope of hell.

Disappointed, the hag returns to the cluster.

She watches her go. Uncle Sam looks a lot like a White Tsar. And she falls asleep leaning against a dumpster. Her cheeks are wet; it must be the drizzle this year of Jubilee.

A caw awakens her. Gray. Still drizzling. Nothing has changed. A jake brake off in the distance. A cannery whistle. Lonely cries of gulls. The moan of the whistler buoy.

A second caw prods her to her feet. She leaves the alley, fuming, as she hurries to where she can observe the state police officers board their single-engine floatplane. She's certain the officers won't find McPhearson at the laboratory, and she doubts that they will find Alden. Shoulders got away from Unalaska too cleanly to be routinely taken...she isn't surprised when the officers return empty-handed three hours later.

Despite the officers returning with nothing, she still must visit the laboratory. She has questions to ask.

Her hotel room remains as uninviting at midday as it was last night. If she lies down will the images return? She knows they will. Already, the glare off the corner icon forces her to make decisions: everything now requires thought, a commitment, a consideration of consequences. Nothing is automatic anymore. Not even eating, drinking, breathing. It seems as if a war rages in her mind between the unwanted glare and the shadows created behind every object, each object requiring an interpretation that links it to the icon.

As Viktor promised, she receives the first of two helicopters early in the afternoon: she sits alone in her hotel room when the pilot who ferried the machine from Homer calls. The pilot is anxious to sign off the craft so he can return to the mainland via Wien's Saturday evening flight.

A problem. A machine without a pilot. Under the terms of the lease, the management company supplies certified pilots. But the two pilots Viktor is sending are coming with the mobile squad, which won't arrive in Alaska until tomorrow. The pilot waiting for her at the airport is an employee of the lessor, and technically, not under obligation to her. Yet she needs to visit Littlehaus' laboratory today. McPhearson's trail grows colder by the hour. Alden will turn up anytime. So when she arrives at the airport, she tells the pilot, "I will not sign for this machine until I'm satisfied it is in perfect condition. Have it fueled. We shall fly across the island."

"No way, lady. Delivery only. I'm not flying you all over hell's half acre."

"Either fly me where I want to go, or you can sit here until Monday waiting to get this machine signed off."

"I don't have to put up with your bull shit."

"Very well." She turns to go.

"Wait a minute. Maybe I can fly you around a little, just so long as I don't miss the Wienie bird back to Anchorage."

"That's not my concern."

"I got a date in Anchorage tonight."

"Then you best hurry."

So an hour and a half from when the pilot called her, they fly diagonally across Marmot Bay, across Afognak, and set down in a cleared area that appears to be a garden on a small island in the middle of nowhere or Blue Fox Bay if the chart is to be believed. She ducks under the rotor, and runs to the building with the wind generator on its roof. But before knocking on the laboratory's backdoor, she checks the chamber of her PPK. She doesn't expect trouble, but intends to be ready for the unexpected.

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His mind on Louise, John sits to the kitchen table, the open Bible unread all afternoon. He hears the helicopter land, but doesn't rise. Only oil company officials arrive in helicopters, and he doesn't want to talk business today.

"K--k, K--k"

The inevitable knock that he must acknowledge. He stands on stiff legs, opens the door, and expecting a man wearing gray flannel, he's surprised to see the tall woman with short blonde hair and innate aggressiveness.

"You've come a long ways to be told I don't do business today."

"Are you Mr. John Littlehaus?" She knows he is.

The pilot, having shutdown the turbine and stepping from the machine, empties his bladder on the landing pod. From the edge of the garden, Sweetie and her fawn watch the pilot, who pretends to shoot them with his thumb and index finger.

"Mr. Littlehaus," Tanya repeats her cover story about being with the U.N. as she flashes her credentials. "Apprehending Catherine Alden is of utmost urgency."

Knowing he has to say something, John nevertheless dismisses what she just told him with, "UN, huh?" then hollers to the pilot, "Don't try to touch either of them. The doe kicks."

The blonde woman says, "Yes, Alden is an assassin." And the pilot waves to acknowledge John's warning.

Recalling the way the troopers stormed the lab this morning—they behaved as if they were searching for an assassin—he believes her, but doesn't know why she tells him what she has. He wants an explanation: "This morning, they said she was only being sought as a material witness."

"I'm sure you understand how politically sensitive UN-US relations are, especially with so many in your country wanting your nation to withdraw."

"No, I don't, and I'm not interested in finding out."

"You're being unresponsive. I don't like that."

"Really."

"May I come in." Brushing him aside, she barges through the doorway. "I must have your cooperation."

He yells at the pilot, "Coffee, beer, anything?"

"Yeah, a beer."

Then to her as she stands three strides inside his kitchen, he says, "Your pilot's staying for a beer. Would you like to come in?"

"I'll have tea." She slaps her gloves down on the table.

John waits beside the door until the pilot enters before fetching a beer from a six-pack that has been in his refrigerator since summer before last. And only because it isn't in him to be inhospitable, he puts water on to boil for tea.

She keeps pushing: "I must insist, Mr. Littlehaus. Why did you send Sarah McPhearson to Seward, and to whom?"

"Wait a minute. If what's her name went to Seward—"

"That information isn't confirmed."

"Why am I talking to you? Exactly—tell me again—how do you fit into all of this?"

She again produces her diplomatic visa, and she repeats her legend. The pilot shows interest.

"I didn't know she went to Seward." John explains the arrangements he made to have whomever met in Kodiak. "I've never met her, don't know her, and the fog was too thick for me to leave here...you say she got on the *Dawn*, huh? I don't know who she's meeting."

"Don't lie!" Her words are sharper than a November breeze off Shelikof Strait.

"I'm not—and don't." He hears his indignation and wishes it wasn't there.

"You are most naive, Mr. Littlehaus."

"Been told that before, and always took it for a compliment."

"Don't think you can hide anything from us."

"Then why question me if you already know everything? I'm getting a little tired of your attitude."

"Don't mock me."

"The only mocking going on around here is the mockery you're making of the manners your mother should've taught you."

"My mother didn't teach manners—"

"That's apparent."

Her face glows like hot iron. "I insist upon your cooperation, or you'll face criminal charges."

The water boils. He yanks the pan from the stove and dumps the water into a china teapot. "You want honey for your tea. You could use some." He sets the pot in the center of the table, and sees her glance contemptuously at his Bible.

"Take your beer outside and don't disturb us," she snarls at the pilot.

Although he starts to protest, after glancing at her, the pilot retreats.

As soon as the door closes, she demands, "Answers, Mr. Littlehaus, answers."

"Is it your time of month, or what?"

She slaps him hard, hard enough to snap his head sharply to one side. She then backhands him, snapping his head smartly the other way. Blood trickles from his nose. Both sides of his face sting. And he is madder than he can remember: "Get out. NOW!"

"Are you a Christian, Mr. Littlehaus?"

"That's none of your business."

She backhands him again, but he leans back and only her fingertips strike his cheek. Stepping towards him, she hurls, "You trash eating dog," as she cocks her arm.

He throws his arm up to block hers.

She plants her feet, grabs his arm to throw him, turns, shifts her weight, but he doesn't throw. A high school wrestler, four year letterman, John hooks his right leg around hers, rides up her back, locks arms and grapples for advantage, using his height, strength, and the moves he hasn't practiced in years.

She slams an elbow into his midsection as around they go.

Chairs fly.

They bang the frig; its door flies open. Out tumbles mayonnaise and pickle relish jars.

His foot bumps the stove hard, and the oven door drops.

Struck by a flailing arm, the coffee pot sails into the corner by the door, rattles around, and rolls towards the table. Coffee splatters the wall.

Tablecloth jerked. Teapot shatters! Pots and pans bounce off pegs. Plates slide out of open dish hutch doors. Around and around they grapple with him riding her back.

She steps on a teapot shard, trips. And he throw her headlong into the open refrigerator, where she crashes into still loaded shelves with a thud loud enough to bring the pilot, her head squarely striking the edge of a metal shelf, its brackets breaking, dropping its front, dumping its contents on her and the floor.

He stands over her, panting. Blood pours from his nose. One corner of his mouth bleeds. Shirt torn. And she draws her PPK before realizing the pilot has entered the kitchen.

"What the hell," stammers the pilot in midstep.

Broken dishes cover the floor. Coffee grounds are strewn from drainboard to the door. The doors to everything stand open. Tanya sits on the floor with her back against the refrigerator shelves, her head pinning a canted egg carton diagonally upright. Chunks of broken shell are tangled in her hair and cling to her left cheek. A plastic ketchup bottle with its top popped open lies on the floor beside her. Most of the ketchup is on her.

When she sees the pilot, she shoves her pistol back into its inside pocket holster, wipes the ketchup and egg off her face, and warns John, "This will cost you," as she stands.

"I'll be here." He wipes the clotting blood from his nose with his thumb. To the pilot, he says, "Get her outta here and don't ever bring her back."

He watches her leave with the dignity of a cat thrown outside, landing on her feet and strutting away with her tail in the air. He continues to stand motionless in the doorway until he no longer hears the beating of the helicopter's rotor.

The stillness of the evening draws anger from him. With the door open, he sits on a straight-backed chair and stares into the failing twilight. Who else wants Jay? The Coast Guard hasn't been by, but maybe the troopers, Justice Department, U.N., and a former lover is enough.

Well, Jay, you've outdone every Kodiak creek robber I know. Red would be proud of you. Proud. He can hear Red laughing, big belly laughs rolling in like tidal surges all the way from Big Fort Island.

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