

Aleutian Rogue

WITH

The Amanat

SERIALIZED

Chapter Two

Armed Forces' radio news, mostly about Iran, hostages and human rights, announces the morning. Louise smells coffee, hears potatoes being diced, and through the wheelhouse windows, sees that the sky is still very black and that the snow continues. Inside the bay, the wind remains, maybe, forty-five knots with gusts to sixty. She suspects that in front of the island it blows a hundred knots and pushes forty-foot seas. She is certain no planes will land this afternoon.

"I have to check on my samples," she says, suddenly feeling trapped on this boat tied beyond a gap in the world. "And I don't know who you are? And is that other woman all right?"

"Would you like to eat before you head off?" She should, he hopes, be able to get a room for tonight in the Inn, not that she isn't welcome to stay if she is still stuck in town. He isn't sure, though, how much of her he can stand, one on one. But Reeves should fly; they usually get in a few flights during lulls between blows. "And what is this about samples?"

"That bastard at the airport was gonna let my samples freeze, can you believe that? He didn't care about them at all, not one little bit. I can't believe he could be so callused. He must have sharkskin for a soul." The potatoes smell good, and she is hungry. "Maybe I'll have a few potatoes, not very many, and you still haven't told me your name."

"Jay Shoulders, I thought you knew." He shovels a spatula-full of fried potatoes onto a plate, then sets beside the spuds a half dozen chunks of batter-fried cod.

"Do you know the ancestry of your name?" She pauses as she notices his red beard, or what there is of it, a little moustache and a few long whiskers around the side of his mouth and on his chin. The color is disgusting. It hadn't looked that color in the restaurant or she wouldn't have talked to him, because that color is like an old fox skin and is really disgusting. He is, she imagines, maybe thirty-five, six feet and a little more. A broken nose, probably several times. A jagged scar above his eyebrow. Short dark brown, almost black hair and that ugly, ugly beard. She can't believe he wouldn't shave, considering his beard is such an ugly color and with no more of it than he can grow. "I thought you were Native American? Didn't you tell me you were?"

"No, I didn't, but I suspect the name Native American is a reservation name, why?" He is still a little sleepy after last night's excitement. He really isn't in the mood to deal with much wackiness. "Tell me, what do you think a Native American is?"

"That's a silly question, why would you ask a question like that? Everyone knows who Amerindians are so why are you trying to trip me up? What have I done to you? I want to know."

"Forget it. Here," he hands her the plate, "eat—and pretend I'm listening to your every word. I'll get you to the airport in a little while."

"Isn't the wind awfully strong to fly in?"

He isn't sure how much fun he ought to have with her: she is, he thinks, gullible enough to believe whatever he tells her. "Take my hand and we'll sing an Indian prayer to make the wind stop blowing, an old prayer of my mother's grandmother."

"I don't know if I want to do this—"

"Then I go and sing it by myself. The wind will stop, you'll see." He glances out the side port of the wheelhouse and checks where the tide is. Although the morning is still very dark, by *Judi B's* picking lights he sees that the tide is full, ready to ebb. "I go pray, and in one hour, the wind, it will stop blowing hard. Blow just a little, like a mouse squeak." He wishes he wouldn't slip into village-speak when he gooshes a cheechako, but the creole language seems so much more appropriate than the words he was taught in school, the words used to rationalize cluster bombs.

The storm has blown itself mostly out. When the tide turns, so will the wind. So he might as well slip back into the Inn and get his raincoat, get hold of Hank and his cab and have him ferry her out to the airport. He suspects she would benefit from returning to the Lower Forty-Eight—she lacks the makings of a typical cannery rat, which is, he reckons, a compliment.

Crossing *Judi B's* picking deck, he watches as snowrounds find holes in which to hide as he suspects he should be doing—the morning's lingering darkness brings an inherent calmness that feels false as atmospheric pressure remains low, the air heavy and the wind strong. But when he heard Peggy, the voice of the marine forecast, calling for winds only to twenty knots, seas to thirteen feet by this afternoon, he believed her.

In UniSea's kitchen—he enters by the backdoor—Jay hears that Armed Forces' radio news carries even more about Iran and the hostages as he signs last night ticket and collects his raincoat. On the restaurant's lower level, Hank sits smoking, nursing a cup of thin coffee, thinking about one of last night's fares, a vice president for American President Lines who he left standing in the storm when the executive threw punches at another v.p.

"Hank, I need you to haul a passenger out to the airport in about twenty minutes. Okay?"

Jay counts, in Hank's one sentence response, nine "fucks" or its derivatives as the cab driver complains about a privileged class that thinks any behavior is acceptable this close to the end of the world.

"I have to get her. She's still on the *Coyote*." Jay says when he finally gets in a word.

"Who?" Hank asks.

"The passenger you're taking out to the airport in twenty minutes. She'll be flying standby so she needs to be there early."

"Got yuh...I don't have to cross that fucking gap in that fucked up dock, do I? You hear about Davy Godell. Just fell fucking in. The fucking gap finally got one. Fucking drown him. Seven minutes, that's all the fucking long you got if you fall fucking in."

Shaking his head, Jay says, "That's bull shit, Hank. I fished that fat Irishman off the garbage scow out after he'd been in forty minutes. He was a little stiff, but he was still alive."

"Yeah, and he drowned a fucking week later when the *Columbia* rolled over. All you did was cheat fucking death one fucking week." Hank says more, but Jay isn't listening. He is already on his way back to the subdock, where that descriptive gap awaits him and that tiny light streak already on the eastern horizon, obscured by Unalaska Island.

"Louise, you need to be in line by seven to get on the standby list"

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier—it's already seven fourteen, and it will be seven fifteen in just a minute."

Interrupting, he says, "I know. Grab your things. We have to go. You have to be there early."

Surprised that the wind has almost stopped since he left to go pray, Louise now isn't sure what to think about the power of Native American spiritualism—she feels less threatened by the jump from bulwarks to bulwarks, then from the *Judi B's* upper deck to the subdock although on either of her jumps she could have fallen; there was nothing to catch her, and if she fell between the boats she would most likely be crushed. She doesn't even want to think about falling through the dock, and there are so many places where the decking is rotten and spots that have to be avoided she can't not

think about falling through despite setting her mind on the condition of her samples that she finally can't keep all of her thoughts straight.

Without the wind and snow, the ordeal of recrossing the suspension bridge is less frightening, and once across the gap, she feels the need to hurry. The cab awaits her. She collects her satchel and dufflebag from where she cached them behind UniSea's front counter, and beside the taxi's rear door, she extends her hand towards Jay, who, instead of shaking it, kisses it, which embarrasses her. Then she leaves him standing in a mud puddle, beneath a black sky as she wonders what his kiss means, if it means anything.

The orange Checker bears testimony to the number and size of the potholes between the Inn and the airport. With sagging springs and either broken or no shocks (she can't tell which) and with a crumpled fender that rubs against its left front tire, the vehicle jolts and jostles her over pond-size puddles, around concrete machinegun pillboxes, across washboarded gravel roadbed, and past ghostly silhouettes of partially collapsed buildings that once was the hospital complex the Japanese bombed. The ride to the airport depresses her. She is returning to an insane world. Her doubts about whether anything in this insane world means anything reach, as a pickpocket would, inside her and steal her expectations of what she will do with the money she earned as an observer. She was so sure of how she would spend her thousand dollars, but now she seems not to have any money and no plans for where she should spend what she doesn't seem to have.

She arrives at 7:29, and already, six people stand in line, awaiting the nine o'clock ritual of the door opening. She pays the driver as much as she earned in a day as an observer, and she wonders about her money, remembering now that she has some. She wonders if she'll have any money left when she returns to Oregon. She would like to return to Alaska because she really hasn't seen very much of the state, and because she believes there are jobs up here, ones that relate to fisheries, what she knows most about. And she wonders what quirk of fate brought her together with Jay, who kissed her hand, something no one else has ever done. Karma, perhaps.

Lugging her bags, she takes her place in line. Reeves' terminal fits Dutch Harbor, America's #1 fishing port. Single story. Wood framed and sided. Painted white with its paint peeling. Radio antennas and wind gauges jut from its cedar shingled roof. And a roped-off area of the runway's apron serves as its parking lot.

Thirty-five degrees and rising rapidly—the runway softens as it thaws. Don, Reeves' station manager, drives his pickup the length of the gravel airstrip. Jay had warned her of the possibility that Don might declare the strip unsafe, thereby canceling the calm weather, which she didn't expect but which he prayed about and which came to pass and that means a lot to her. So she hopes the station manager doesn't declare the strip dangerous, and she looks from the station manager's pickup to the ground where snowdrifts hiding in the grass along the edge of the building can no longer escape the penetrating fingers of the climbing temperature.

One person crowds the terminal's door while the other five lean against its sidewall. Like herself, two of the five are first-timers, still lugging their dufflebags. Three are veterans of this waiting war: their clothes have that slept-in look. The first-timers fidget with their bags and fiddle with jacket zipper pulls, but the veterans are almost asleep on their feet.

A Pan Alaska van discharges a load of passengers a few minutes after eight. A Sea Alaska van deposits more passengers. The taxi brings a full load. And Icicle Seafood's Toyota pickup adds three more to the swelling line. The taxi returns with another load, and Northern Commercial mechanics sitting in their pickup laugh at the jockeying for position as more than forty people stand in line, with more arriving.

At last, nine. The terminal's doorknob rattles, but after a moment, stops. The key won't open the door.

With its head cocked and its neck feathers thrown forward, a raven perched on the terminal's roofline watches the Standbys. The black bird shifts weight from foot to foot in an apparent attempt to better observe the flightless creatures beneath him, then caws and flies to a powerpole across the road.

The rattling of the doorknob begins again. And stops again. From within the building, two voices curse the lock.

The line stands at attention.

Once more, the doorknob rattles.

A surge beginning at the back of the line pushes forward, forcing the early arrivals against the door.

The rattling stops. Retreating footsteps can be heard. Then from deep within the building, someone hollers, "Door's open." The lead man tries the knob. The door yields. And a fellow in slimy, yellow raingear crowds in front of her, making her eighth in line.

Still thinking about him kissing her hand—that was a romantic thing for him to do—she lets the guy in the slimy raingear cut in line unchallenged. She wonders if he was encouraging her to stay, if she missed the signal he was sending, and she wants to go back and ask him what his intentions were. If she didn't have reports to fill out in Anchorage, she'd walk back to the subdock and do just that, ask him why he kissed her hand when all she expected was for him to shake it. If he wants her to stay, she could learn to fish, to pull gangions. Hard work, rough weather, cold water—she knows she would like the life. Honest work, money, people. Yes, she would like to know an honest man.

Sixty-one potential passengers file past the ticket counter, receiving a number in exchange for their name. A fuzzy PA speaker invites them to be seated, then tells them, Louise thinks, that when their number is called, they can purchase a ticket. And all around her, cigarettes are seemingly lit in unison.

The numbered Standbys mill, like corralled cattle, about the terminal building. They trip over their dufflebags. And their neighbors'. Dufflebags are piled head-high in the corners and four feet high down the middle of the floor, with smaller piles around the wood posts that support the low ceiling. Incoming bags, the ones airline employees have time to bring inside, are stacked beside the doorway.

She waits. There's nothing else to do. And she thinks about him kissing her hand. She doesn't even want to rub where he kissed; it was such a romantic thing he did.

The crowd din drowns the taped background music as smoke quickly fills the building. Rumors circulate that four planes will land today, weather permitting. A call is made for a possible charter to Anchorage. A seventh name is sought for a chartered Lear flight to Kodiak. And she shares a week old edition of the *Seattle PI*.

The music stops as does the din. The PA announces that a freighter will arrive at ten o'clock. CHEERS! Freighters haul freight in, but Standbys out.

A Japanese built YS-11A bearing Reeves' logo touches down with its full load of freight and two week old mail a few minutes before ten. Two pickups back against its cargo door, and the plane is unloaded by hand.

Sitting along the south side of the building, Louise leans diagonally against the wall in a futile attempt to stay beneath the cigarette smoke. Six names are called. Six tickets purchased. Dufflebags from the middle of the floor are weighed. Then boxes of frozen king crab sections magically appear to be weighed and tabulated. Four more names are called. So she will be one of the lucky ones, maybe.

More dufflebags are retrieved. More shipping boxes marked *FROZEN* appear from seemingly nowhere. More tabulations are computed in pencil so weights can be juggled. She checks her samples, covered by a slip for excess baggage. And more names are called as the tabulations

continue. The crowd separates into lucky and unlucky Standbys. One more name is called, making thirty-three, all that will go on this flight.

The boarding begins with the waving of the magic wand over each passenger—she hears the PA announcer interrupt the music to say that another plane is already on its way from Cold Bay.

Airborn, she watches the faint yellow circle of the painted tips to the port side prop pass over the Aleutian Range as she listens to the steady drone of the Rolls Royce engines. The mountain peaks appear as pointed goosebumps on a shivering arm. To each side of the peaks, rough water. White streaks shoot across ruffled seas as waves crest and break.

The plane sets down in Cold Bay for a brief refueling stop, then sets down again at Sand Point where a Native boy on his way to an Anchorage dentist boards.

Finally, after four hours and after darkness overtakes them, they reach Anchorage where the pilot eases the plane down on the international airport's icy runway. And even after the door opens, she remains in her seat, staring at runway lights, feeling like Gate Seventeen could be Stalog Seventeen. It has been that long a day.

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