

Aleutian Rogue

WITH

The Amanat

SERIALIZED

Chapter Twenty

1.

Tanya checks her watch. 0618 AST. At 0730 hours, they will begin again with fewer dogs and fewer men and grudging respect for the land. Raw nature.

Shoulders hasn't moved for the past four hours. The pilot has regularly overflowed his position.

Singing hounds close on him. Their baying carries uphill. He climbs the last hogback to heaven, and awakens to hear the helicopter hovering at treetop height a few hundred yards downhill, below him.

The sky is gray. His knees are stiff. And the drone of the chopper drowns every other sound.

The breeze carries the scent of Shelikof, a brewing storm, spruce timber, and burnt jet fuel. He checks the Ruger's chamber. His head feels rummy. Neck has a catch in it. He has to coerce his legs into taking a step, then another and another. He runs. Almost to timberline, he runs as fast as he can drive his legs. And he hears the hounds.

He leaves the timber and races daylight. Four hundred yards to the crest, then downhill all the way to Danger Bay.

The chopper has quit hovering. Behind him, he hears it swinging back and forth like a pendulum as it comes.

Grass beaten down by the gale: he runs a funny bob and weave to keep it from balling up around his feet and tripping him. He runs as he never has before. Heads for a misplaced scrub spruce right on the very top of the ridge. Gulps his breaths. And knows he's not fast enough.

She sees him! right in front of her. Three hundred fifty metres and running across a grassy area. Perfect for filming. There's just enough light.

He hears the chopper stop its swing, but can't look back. Knows he's been seen. Knows he must kill that chopper.

As he nears the scrub spruce, his knees buckle. The grass spills him, sends him rolling—and as he rolls, he glances behind him. Men and dogs emerge from the timber.

He draws automatic weapons fire as he scrambles towards the lone spruce. Dives behind a tussock. Keeps a clump of grass between him and the gunmen as he crawls backwards over the crest of the ridge.

The firing ceases.

He scans what he can see of the timber. Can't find a target. The dogs are quiet. Wonders how they accomplished that trick. His hounds had never shut up, nor had Judy ever shut up about them.

The chopper swings back and forth in an arc of three hundred yards. It's four hundred yards away. Wouldn't be hard to hit, but it's like a bear in that it has a small vital area. Pilot or tailrotor.

Time's against him. They should be in the grass, flanking him. He'll have to take the shot being offered.

The .300 Mag won't damage the *Jesus nut*, but its bullet will cut the pitch control bars. That's all they're offering him.

Prone beneath the outer boughs of the scrubby spruce, he swings the Ruger's muzzle to match the sweep of the chopper's arc. The crosshairs almost stay with the rotor shaft. He says a silent prayer, to God who he doesn't know but needs right now, and he sees a vision of the bullet striking stainless steel, daylight the hub by a foot, and when the chopper reaches the end of its arc, squeezes the trigger. The Ruger bucks as its roar momentarily drowns the drone of the chopper. And he quickly drops the singleshot's fingerlever to reload.

He has a hit! a miracle. The craft shakes like the agitator of a suspended wringer washing machine.

She feels the bullet strike the rotor shaft. The machine shudders like a dog shaking water. Spins wildly. Rolls. Pitches. Nearly flips over. One rotor blade has feathered.

Treetops come up to meet them. Broken branches fly in all directions. Plexiglass shatters! explodes in her face. Crumpled sheet metal twists about her. Then—

She is down.

She pushes herself out of the craft, and half crawls, half runs fifty metres. But there is no explosion, no fire.

Crawling as quickly as he can, he wiggles downhill through the rain-hammered grass. Safety (if anywhere can be called safe) is the timbered draw ahead. And when he's almost there, he bounces to his feet.

Assault rifles open up. Ten feet over his head, bullets slash through the boughs, showering him with tips and short length of limbs.

He dives behind a foot-thick spruce, and twisting around, pokes the Ruger's muzzle through the dead branches. His hands shake as he locates a target. Squatting, skylined. Three hundred yards plus. The Ruger bucks. The target is thrown backwards.

Scooting backwards, he keeps low as he squirms his way into the draw. Then standing, running, he follows the contour of the land for a hundred yards or so before pausing long enough to slip the packboard from his shoulders. He hangs the board on a dead spruce limb at eyelevel as he would a feather flasher for lynx, and now unencumbered, he begins hunting in earnest.

Easing through the timber, looking for the flankers that he's certain have entered the draw by now, he feels the changing weather and wonders when the storm will arrive. He descends farther into the canyon as he circles. Feels the tension.

The flanker. A little behind and a little above him, one of the gunmen creeps downhill. The fellow has his head down and leans forward, hunched over some sort of funny looking rifle that he keeps pointed at the packboard.

Although he's in a better position than the gunman, he's not where he should be. Nevertheless, he freezes. The range is close. Forty yards, maybe. As far as either can see through the timber. So deliberately slow, he shoulders the Ruger.

The Leupold is set on seven power. The gunman's head about fills its tube.

He watches the fellow scan the timber above him. The fellow takes shallow breaths. He can't see the fellow's eyes, but can a pimple on the back of his dirty neck. He centers the crosshairs on the pimple.

A solid, bluegray bank of clouds, a mere speck low above the southwestern horizon only moments ago, now threatens the island. The dark cloudbank appears below where she sits on the ridge, but appears to spread like spilled paint. This is probably the cold, low pressure front she has been expecting.

She needs to get a message to Zagoskin at base camp. He can advise Command of their situation, not something she wants to do even if she were not stuck on this trash-eating dog of a mountain.

As she scribbles the message she wants relayed, the unsheathed hunting knife stabs her. She shifts position, and gets almost comfortable when

BOOM!

A single shot from Shoulders' rifle with no answering fire. She wonders whether he got Deriabin or Govorlivyi. Deriabin most likely. And she curses Shoulders, curses his rifle, this miserable island and her luck for having drawn this assignment as she scribbles *five* over the *six* for the number of men.

The top half of the flanker erupts into pink mist. He feels sick as he watches the bright pink mini-cloud slowly drift away. Scattered chunks of meat and bone steam, then don't. The echo of the shot dies. And except for the caw of a sharp-eyed raven soaring overhead, the draw is still. Until he hears a dead spruce limb *pop*, then nothing, nothing at all.

Ever so slowly, he slinks downhill and enters the alder maze, slipping over and under, around and between the deformed saplings. He hears the hounds on the ridge, wonders how he'll get rid of them without getting shot; he has an idea.

The draw he has been following intersects a draw entering from his right. Where they join, they form a lower case "y." The rounded end of the finger ridge separating the two draws offers both cover and an escape route.

Govorlivyi emerges from the timber about where Shoulders entered. He carries a strange packboard, and with his free hand, motions for them to join him.

Holding the leashes of two of the hounds and carrying her machinepistol which she salvaged from the crash, she waves her men forward. She wants them to hurry across the open hillside. They're all in danger, especially now that they've lost radio contact with their base camp. Neither the pilot nor radio nor black box survived the crash. So they are on their own, alone on this mountain with a sniper whom she has grudgingly come to admire.

There is no turning back; they have to kill the sniper or be killed themselves.

The hounds she holds lope downhill, more or less dragging her along. Their noses are filled with Shoulders' scent.

Inside the timber, their pace slows to a brisk walk. The scent trail follows the ravine, then descends into the nearly impregnable alders that are as bad as Govorlivyi described. One dog goes under a knee-high sapling. The other over the sapling. The next time, they reverse. The alders grow in clumps, one clump next to another, a half dozen saplings to a clump. One dog goes between the fourth and fifth sapling; the other between the third and fourth. Not even accidentally can the two hounds end up on the same side of an alder at the same time. She twists and curses, squirms and curses, wiggles and curses, and better understands the problems of last night.

One hound goes over a chest-high, horizontal sapling, then jumps to the ground, comes back under the sapling and jumps over a second time. The other hound does the same thing except it crosses to the right of the first hound the first time and to the left the second time. She jerks on their leashes, vainly trying to pull slack, but they're all *go* as they bay loudly. She slides under the alder to grab the dogs by their collars—and curses when they jump back up on the sapling around which they're tangled. She turns loose of the leashes and is reaching for their collars when the centers of both dogs explode!

Bloody foam, bits of bone and meat spackle her face. The alders beside her steam. The ground steams. The BOOM echoes. One dog kiyies. Then all is quiet.

She rolls over. Machinepistol ready. Waiting for the bullet that'll end it for her.

The shot seems to have come from everywhere.

Govorlivyi, who'd been above the alders, runs from tree to tree as the rest of her men cautiously advance up the adjoining ravine. She remains motionless, though, still expecting that bullet. One dog lies on her legs; its blood soaks her fatigues. The other lies beside her and kicks spasmodically. The single bullet ripped through the front shoulder of one and into the chest of the other, exited, and struck an alder near her head. Almost got all three of them. One shot. He's good, that she has to admit.

She feels chunks of lung and meat dry on her face; she wipes her face with her sleeve, scrambles to her feet, takes two leaps, then dives for cover, and waits for the shot that'll end it for her.

After lying still for a moment, she squirms to the relative safety of the spruce timber, leans on a trunk, and tries not to think about their isolation. Except for the all-seeing Razvedka satellite keeping its heavenly vigil, no one knows where they are.

He can't be lucky forever. They will get him.

Govorlivyi hollers: "He's gone. I saw him. Where's that gimp-legged hound?"

She lets Govorlivyi order the men up the ravine. She knows she should resent his usurpation of command, but right now, she feels relief that he's taking over.

Two men to one side, three to the other, fanned out like pheasant hunters, they advance steadily until they come to the open hillside. The hound indicates that the sniper circled to their right. She suspects he reentered the first draw. Someone should backtrack to where he shot from and wait for him. And she confers with Govorlivyi, who suggests that Shoulders might be returning to the first draw just for his packboard.

The men gather around as slushy raindrops start to fall. They urge her to abandon the chase before the weather gets worse. The blackgray clouds barely lift themselves over the ridge.

Through the sprucetops, he sees the storm front sweeping across the island. A black squall preceding a white broom. He watches the conflag at the timber's edge, but waits until the snow-drops reduce visibility before dropping to one knee. He rests his hand against the spruce trunk and the Ruger over his hand. Placing crosshairs on the chest of the largest member of the camouflaged sixsome, he catches his breath and squeezes the trigger. The range is less than four hundred yards.

A white string passes from Govorlivyi's chest to the hillside behind him. Then comes the BOOM!

She screams as the other four drop to the ground. She screams until Golikov pulls her down. And more from frustration than anything else, they sweep the timber with fire, burning several magazines apiece, shredding boughs.

Behind the two foot thick spruce, he rather nonchalantly drops the Ruger's fingerlever, slips another round into the .300's chamber, and for the first time, feels confident about the outcome. The squall obscures everything beyond fifty yards so he pays little attention to the hail of bullets passing wildly overhead. Even the ricochets aren't close. And he knows they aren't packing enough ammo to maintain their rate of fire for long.

The .300's echo bounces against the echoes of the automatic weapons' bursts, and together, echo joined to echo, they roll from the stormfront to the hillside and back. But as the rain and slushy snow turns to heavy, wet, Krugerrand-sized flakes, the echoes are smothered. All sound dies.

One flake clings to another until they appear like inverted parachutes drifting downward. The front's headwind, though not strong, swirls the flakes, and confuses directions. Up seems like down. Down, up. In a whirling white world.

Very quickly, snow piles up to her ankles. She calculates the rate of fall, and realizes that without food and shelter, they stand no chance. They must try to reach the helicopter. So she orders the men uphill.

Clawing her way through the snow, her boots slip. She falls, slides backwards, leads though she doesn't know where they are, wishes Kostlivtsov was here, hears a muffled shot, turns around to see the rearmost man crumple. They dive down, form a circle, and fire blindly into the flurry of whiteness.

She shoots her weapon dry, slips in another magazine, shoots it empty, and is out of ammo. She's sure she has another loaded magazine, looks for it, but can't find it.

In the midst of the firing, the hound breaks free, and runs in front of Golikov. And is gutshot. Kiyng, it flops in the snow at the edge of the circle.

Two of the men cease firing; they're out of ammo.

There's loose ammo in the helicopter. They have to make it that far at least before Shoulders realizes their plight.

Her ears ring, but she'd hear echoes if there were any. The snow silences everything. And the only movement is the falling whiteness and the twitching of the dying hound.

Snowflakes melt as they land on the still warm barrel of her machinepistol.

One of the men out of ammo raises to a crouch, runs the three steps to where the rearmost man fell, rolls over the corpse, paws through the snow for his weapon, finds it, straightens, and—*pomp*—collapses.

Without explanation, Golikov grabs her arm and drags her away from the corpses. The other private starts after them—*pomp*—and topples.

She runs, and seems to float through the white blindness. With Golikov beside her, she runs without considering direction, stumbles, and—*pomp*—Golikov's ears collapse into the missing "V" ripped from the top of his head.

She stumbles, falls, rolls, scrambles to her feet, stumbles, and rolls and rolls. When she finally stops rolling, she staggers to her feet and flees through the whiteness.

2.

The flakes are colder, lighter, smaller now. Hungry, Jay sits on the mulch of moss and needles beneath a bushy spruce, shivers, but doesn't seem cold. He thinks about kindling a fire, decides not to, changes his mind. The temperature continues to drop. By wrapping his raincoat and groundcloth around him and by huddling over the handful of burning twigs, he endures the cold. He spends the long hours of darkness feeding tiny twigs to the tiny fire, feeling tiny himself. Finally dozes. Awakens to find an inch of snow covering him.

Snow filtered down through the boughs. All of the boughs hang heavy with snow, and await the merest excuse to dump their loads. Still, it snows, snows, snows tiny flakes that tinkle.

The early morning sky is blueblack. The only sound is the occasional *plop* of slabs of snow falling from a higher bough to a lower one.

Between the trees, the snow comes to his knees. Deer tracks are everywhere; they're abandoning the open ridges before a heavy crust forms. And it takes him less than an hour to cut his target's trail.

The erratic trail of the last of his pursuers follows the draw towards the beach many miles away. He knows where the contour of the hill will take his target; so he circles ahead and begins hunting.

His target lies in the snow, looking more dead than alive. Finally stirs. Rises ever so slowly to hands and knees.

Through his scope, he watches his target crawl a few feet, then fling its mostly dead flesh forward only to collapse in the snow. He thinks about shooting the person right there in the snow. And he places the crosshairs on the struggling figure's forehead, knowing that if he doesn't shoot the person will freeze to death before nightfall.

His target's a woman!

He quickly slips the Ruger's safety on, draws the Smith, approaches the collapse form and frisks her, finding a small pistol that he slips into his hip pocket, and his hunting knife. *Boy am I glad to get that back.* Without doubt, she's one of them. He starts putting pressure on the Smith's trigger.

His hand is numb. Fingers are stiff. Won't bend. And he hears a faint, "hheeeelp—"

Don't want to help you. You don't deserve help.

But if he doesn't help her, she will die within another hour, two at the most.

He rolls her over with his foot.

He has no reason to help her, no reason not to end her suffering right now.

There were times in Laos, even in 'Nam, when he would have liked the option not to kill. But he was part of a two-sided world, a world shaped like a Gold Double Eagle, his side the good guys, the other side the gooks. But the Army's sudden discharge of him threw him over the edge, and ever since he has stumbled on the striations cut into a mostly undefined world.

The woman seems unaware that she's on her back.

"There's no reason for me not to kill you—you deserve to fry in hell." *Actually, so do I.*

He returns the Smith to its holster, picks her up, carries her from tree to tree until he finds one beneath which there is no snow. Its boughs form a natural leanto that he enlarges by lopping off dead branches.

He doesn't feel a pulse in either her wrist or neck. Her breathing is extremely shallow. Face frozen. Flesh of her upper torso like mush ice. He strips her upper body, and as quickly as he can, he tucks her right shoulder beneath his left arm. Her right arm and breast are against his back; her left breast touches his chest. By stretching his black woolies, he latches the top two buttons, then pulls his halibut shirt over both of them. She's unconscious as she rests her head against his neck.

Live boughs drape out and downward until they touch the ground. He leans against the trunk, feeling like he has become part of the tree. Knowing he needs to kindle a fire, he holds her close with his left arm while he gathers dry needles and twigs. He sticks a match under the pile and watches a single flame flicker as it jumps from one twig to another before settling down, then flaring like a covey of quail. The pile is ablaze, and he adds dead limbs as the snow continues.

The sky darkens, becomes black as minutes pass without calling attention to themselves. He feeds the fire that has burned everything within easy reach, and he shivers, at times violently though he feels warm. Drowsy, he feels like he could sleep forever. But he can't quite get to sleep. It's as if that tiny flame is in his mind, flitting about, keeping him awake. He groggily shakes his head, realizes the fire is out, and more tightly now, he wraps his raincoat and groundcloth around the two of them, lays her shirt over their legs, and kindles another fire that smolders and never does burn right.

Sometime during the night, she stirs. He feels her pulse: it's weak and very slow. And he wonders if he hasn't picked up a gila monster.

Why am I trying to save her? She wouldn't do the same. She's another Phil Sheridan, bent on killing.

He hasn't finished his thoughts when the babbling begins. He doesn't recognize the language but its inflections seem familiar. She rambles and raves deliriously. And that's the best sign—or worst—so far.

By holding her tight, he's able to scoot here and there for wood, most of which is wet. The smoke smells warm at least.

Snow falls silently throughout the day that comes unannounced. Its softness filters through the boughs now, and settles like dust on their legs.

As the third night begins, her babbling stops. Her hands move, and apparently semi-conscious, she seems to realize where she is. Although she doesn't open her eyes, she pulls her hands up to her chest to push him away, but can only push with her left arm and his shirt prevents her from pushing herself back far. After weakly struggling for a few moments, she drops her head to his chest and sleeps. Her face has started to crack; her breasts are warm.

His desire for sleep wanes. His stomach bothers him less now, and the smoke more.

Sometime long into the night, she awakens. This time, though, she doesn't try to push away. Instead, she leaves her head resting on his chest. Turning only enough to speak, she asks, "Are you...Shoulders?"

Twisting her head up and to the side, she stares at him. Thanks to the cracking of the thawed skin, her expression is grim. And after a few minutes, she drops her head to his chest and asks, "How long—like this?"

"Three days and three nights." He feels her relax.

"Where am I?"

"About where I killed the two dogs." His mouth feels like it's full of dust. His head, bloated. But he's awake enough to ask, "Can you feel your feet?"

After a while, she says, "No."

He knew without asking that she couldn't; knows that her legs need tending. So with his free hand, he pushes the two of them upright, pulls off his shirt and slips it over just her. He gathers twigs and dead branches that had been out of reach, and gets the fire burning brightly, throwing sparks upwards through the boughs, melting snow piled on them.

As carefully as possible, he removes her boots, pants and socks. And he doesn't like what he sees. Her feet are frozen. There are patches of frozen skin to her knees.

"I've lost them."

"Not yet, but they should've been looked at earlier."

"Why didn't you kill me?"

"Don't think I won't."

She is silent for some time before saying, "It'd be better if you did...or let me freeze."

"Don't be in such an all-fired hurry to die."

"Kill me—or I'll kill you."

"If you know anything more about frost bite than I do, you'd better say so now. I think I can save your feet, but I'm not real sure."

She doesn't answer. So between trips for wood, he works on her feet, rubbing one while keeping the other tucked under his arm, alternating back and forth. He also fills the enameled cup with snow and sets it beside the fire, adds spruce tips, and lets the tea steep.

Using one of her socks to hold the hot cup, she sips the lukewarm liquid, empties the cup and returns it without a word. And she fears she's hallucinating: in the early gray of dawn, sitting the length of her legs away, his features softened by firelight, she sees her father. She feels pain, and the heat of the fire. Knows she isn't dead. Tastes the turpentine tea. Seems sane to herself. And tears come to her eyes as *her father* works feverishly with her feet. She remembers days spent afield with him, and evenings spent listening to stories of the Great Patriotic War. Remembers cold nights when he warmed her inside his great coat. Remembers his shotgun, and the hares, shot or snared, roasting over glowing coals as firelight played on his face as it's doing on *his* now. She has no answers for him. Yes, she belongs to the Party. Yes, she was the Komsomol member who turned him in for selling a hare. Yes, she knew about the black mark on her mother's papers that prevented them from living or working in town. Yes, she is sorry about the twenty-five year sentence. But it's the Party's successes that matter, not her own meaningless life.

Hearing her cry, he asks, "They hurt bad?"

"Why are you doing this?"

"What? trying to save your feet?"

"Kill me...or let me die."

"Can't do that."

"You don't underst—"

"Oh, I understand that you want to die—and should—and will someday. But you haven't learned enough yet to die." He doesn't know if he should tell her about the visions he had while tending the fire more asleep than awake. He decides not to.

He feels her tremble: "Don't cry. I'll ease up."

"It's not my feet." She suddenly breaks into sobs.

Color has seeped into the ravine—and into her feet. Skin peels from them, and lymph oozes from areas he rubbed too hard.

"What is it?"

"I turned you in and you died in the Camps."

"Oh, that's a new one...Camps?"

"The Gulag."

"You're...GRU?"

"Glavnoe Razvedyvatelnoe Upravlenie, yes. How did you know?"

"Catherine."

"I must kill her...you."

"You'll have to wait in line."

"I must—"

"You'll die too."

"I know."

"Then you'll never know where the ivory is."

"That's not important."

"You make it tempting to let you freeze."

Neither say anything more until the sun has lightened the sky as much as it will today. Then as if no time has passed, she says, "You should."

"Let you freeze? What kind of thinking is that?"

"You must—"

"Oh bullshit. I don't understand you, or that kind of thinking, or even having a death wish."

She hears his words, believes them, and wonders how can she explain life without privileges. "Is there a birch tree near?"

"Scrub black birch."

"To understand, cut a branch as big as your finger, one with shoots."

"Okay, but why?"

"To understand."

"You lost me, but I'll do it anyway." He covers her feet with her fatigue top and his raincoat, steps to the edge of the alders, locates a birch, and severs a branch the thickness of his thumb.

She takes the branch, gathers together the dozen plus springy twigs, and says, "The Revolution is like this branch." She pauses, scoots closer to the fire, then adds, "Have you seen a tree leaf out in the middle of winter?"

"This time of year? No, not a birch."

"To understand the Soviet Union, you must understand magic. I will make this branch leaf-out just as we have flowered." This is what her father showed her: she thrusts the gathered tips into the fire, holds them in the flames for a moment, then pulls them back. And leaves appear on the twigs. Bright green, shaped right, they look like leaves in May, but they are much smaller. "The magic of the Supreme Soviet." Lowering her voice, she adds, "It takes privileges to see leaves the size they ought to be."

"Still don't understand. By cutting the limb—"

"As long as you think American, you can't understand." She stares, then says, "There were supplies in the helicopter...enough for two."

"What was I supposed to see, a bit of springtime in the middle of winter?" He adds another piece of wood to the fire. "And without snowshoes, I don't think I can climb that ridge. Snow'll be waist deep."

"Do you have anything to eat?"

"Here," using his knife, he peels a handful of bark from the spruce, strips the cambium layer from the outer bark, and says, "chew on what I've been eating. I'll get us a deer in a little bit."

She grimaces as she swallows the bark. He smiles. "Still think you have to kill me?"

"I don't think you'll give me the chance."

"Probably right about that." He doesn't like the looks of her feet. Already black. Oozing lymph. They have an odor. "Your feet have been frostbit before, haven't they?"

"Yes. The year after—" She drops her eyes, avoids looking at him. "Mother. It was very cold that winter."

"Thought that might be the case."

"What will happen to me?"

"Don't know. You were at the airport, the Moonie with red carnations...how did you kill Sarah? The pin prick?"

"You were there?"

"Small world, huh?" He picks up the Ruger, and checks its chamber. "You have U.N. immunity?"

"Yes."

"So there isn't a damn thing anybody can do to you?"

"I will be an embarrassment, but sent back."

"You'll get away with murder?"

Her silence says that, yes, she will. After all, isn't that why she is in Alaska.

When she doesn't answer, he says, "Then I have every right in the world," as he points the Ruger at her, holding it with one hand as he would a pistol, "to leave you lie right here."

"Yes—no."

"Which one is it?"

"Yes. It'll be best."

"Probably would be, but Little John would argue that—would say that Christ will forgive even you if you repent. Think you can repent?"

She seems to see that painted, corner icon here, apparently wedged between spruce boughs, the glare from it blinding for a moment. It sits out there in the boughs beyond her reach. And if that icon represents Christianity, repentance for her is impossible. It is unattainable, an illusion forever out there, always more dream-like than real, always light and sound without any real object or interpretation.

"Well, what will it be? Repentance? or we'll end this right here?"

"Walter, your crewman, told me I wouldn't come back if I went after you."

"He does pretty good at guessing what you're thinking, doesn't he?" The Ruger begins to feel heavy as he keeps it pointed at her chest, his finger resting on its light trigger, its safety OFF. "Your answer—I want it now."

"What is repentance?"

"A gift from God." He raises his wrist a little to keep the Ruger's muzzle pointed at the center of her chest as his finger applies slightly more pressure.

"I need that gift."

He turns, heads nowhere, just downhill. He has a deer he needs to kill, but once away from the fire, he feels like he's only going through the motions of hunting as he wonders why her words are the only ones she could've uttered to have kept him from killing her.

Beneath each spruce, the sifted snow is ankle deep, but not so between the trees. There, it's to his thighs, and the going is slow and tiring. As much as possible, he stays in the fluff. And by zig-zagging from tree to tree, he follows the canyon until it opens up, then begins sidehilling. He doesn't go a quarter of a mile before he cuts the trail of a young deer. The tracks are still sharp—the snow hasn't frozen in them since they were made.

He follows them exactly, plunging through the same deep patches of snow, skirting the same trees, stepping over the same blowdowns.

Snowflakes fine as talc fill the air, slip through the knit of his black woolies, and melt on his shoulders, chilling him. Overhead boughs send mini-avalanches of heavy flakes down the back of his neck. He shivers, and tries to pay no attention to his shivering. But when he catches up to the little towhead, he can't hold still. The crosshairs jump the length of the deer that stands in belly-deep snow, watching his backtrail.

Squatting, he forces the crosshairs to settle on the yearling's chest, more or less, and he touches the trigger, sending the bullet he had intended for her into the little buck—and the spruce boughs pitch their loads of snow into the air. Slabs fall like chunks of concrete. Light, powdery flakes sail upward, form clouds, and slowly trail away, only to light on distant boughs still heavily loaded.

The towhead lies where he stood. Jay quickly dumps his guts, pegs his legs together, and carries him as a woman would a shoulder purse. The buck doesn't weigh forty-five pounds dressed.

Upon his return, he must again coax flames from the pile of smoldering wood. His efforts produce her first smile. It almost seems like she is a different person now that there will be something to eat besides bark.

He checks her feet. They're worse than they were. Blacker, they stink more. The prospect of having to deal with gangrene frightens him. Her feet need proper medical attention.

"Will I lose them?" When he doesn't answer, she adds, "Can you take them off if they need to come?"

"Dunno. Never have faced this before." He turns his attention to the towhead as he says, "I'll have to think about what I want to do for a while. Your toes are already lost—they look like they've been burnt off by fire."

In minutes, he has the little buck's hide peeled, its backstrap sliced thin and skewered on the birch branch. Holding the meat over the fire, he considers the distance between them. "You don't have to go back."

"There's no where for me to stay."

"Don't know anybody?"

"No...other than your friend Walter."

As soon as the outside of the first slice of venison is brown, he eats it, not caring that it's more raw than cooked. And with that bite of meat, he knows he'll be all right. The visions—well, they're another story.

"I'll get you out tomorrow. Pack you down to Mike Mullin's place on Raspberry Strait." He hands her the second, third and fourth slice of venison. "Mike can get you into the hospital there at Kodiak."

"Then what?"

"That's up to you...if you get that gift, I'd go look Walt up. Stay with him. I don't imagine you'll have a whole lot to look forward to if you go back to Russia."

"That's true—"

"From a man who tells you the truth."

He imagines he ought to be angry about her getting away with murder, about so many walrus being killed, but he isn't pure enough to cast stones at another poacher living farther around the edge of this two-sided world.

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