

Aleutian Rogue

WITH

The Amanat

SERIALIZED

Chapter Three

1.

Watching the cab disappear into the darkness, Jay can't really say good riddance, but he pities whomever ends up in a relationship with her. Anna Louise Toski is, undoubtedly, the last person he wants to see again, and he would still like to know the person who sicced her on him. He ought to break his nose, the least he could do for the person.

He told Sarah he'd call Little John today, would have John meet her in Kodiak. Also, he needs to swing by her place. He doesn't know what she has for belongings, he doubts much. But he should send along whatever she has, maybe have one of the waitresses pack her personal things, not that he can't. He just doesn't again need anything to remind him of Judy, her memory one he can usually cope with quite well. But alone on Thanksgiving (as far as that goes, alone on any holiday)— that is when he resents still being here, when he wishes he, too, had died.

Between seasons, he really hasn't much to do, but he can't see himself as an observer on a foreign boat. Besides, the Feds would run a background check on him. What if they found he doesn't exist, then what? He would have invited a lot of trouble onto himself for what, to prove the obvious, that given the opportunity foreign boats cheat on quotas. He suspects he would, too. His Rogue ancestry owes the government that much at the very least, owes them Phil Sheridan's scalp on a carved platter. Maybe the Lakota people would then give him some kind of an honor. A wife guaranteed not to die would be acceptable.

His thoughts are crazy this morning. The present and the past are mingled like willows growing from a coal seam. He needs time to untangle his thoughts before the future becomes as petrified as the fruit trees that once grew in the Garden of Eden. Yes, he needs to make that call to Kodiak, then get back to his own boat and his own affairs, maybe take advantage of the break in the weather and run around to Beaver Inlet or over to Akutan, anywhere to get out of town for awhile.

He fishes for Pacific Pearl: their office is around the corner, and he can use their phone, the one on which the cannery allows fishermen to make and log long-distance calls. Then he can take off, his obligations satisfied.

Although it's still dark he knows that someone will be in the office so he starts for the cannery, glancing over his shoulders as he goes. He's being watched; he feels the eyes, feels the spirit of someone on UniSea's converted Liberty ship, now their cannery. About the second deck. And not wanting to, he slips back into hunting mode, scanning for his target, lining up another kill before he is killed, the same thing all over again. *'Nam, before & after... the hillsides behind his house were logged by his dad in the '30s and '40s. Timber was then cheaper than gravel, and his dad planked the road with old-growth fir sawn at the mill, burned down now. The millsite where he lives— Dad was killed within a mile of the fork in the road.*

His nails bite into the moss-covered planking. He takes the right hand fork, and where the planking ends, he turns right and climbs a spur, feels the steepness of the roadway in his thighs and stops when he reaches the crest of the hogback. There, on a road going nowhere, he waits for sunrise.

As the blackness fails, blurry shapes shrink into huckleberry bushes and hazelnut clumps. He watches a jay swoop from treetop to treetop. A flock of juncos swarm through nearby second-growth, stripping seeds from their cones. Ahead lies a series of tiny, golden brown fern openings, each with facets of shimmering cobwebs and all strung together by a brushed up skid road along which deer have worn a criss-crossed trail that looks like the string from a feed sack. He catches a glimpse of a coyote slinking across a fern opening, and levers a cartridge into the Winchester's chamber.

The updraft brings the smell of the returning storm and carries his scent ahead of him as he follows the trail through the ferns, his nails making no noise as they trample the hollow fern stems. Where the hogback joins the main ridge, bushy firs stunted from overbrowsing replace the ferns. Seedling maples, chittams, and cherries replaced stands of mature second-growth. And he heads for an isolated seed block of bastard growth fir.

Beneath the firs, salal grew to his shoulders. Their bright green, waxy leaves rattle as he takes a step, but they make less noise for him than they do for a forked horn that doesn't see him raise and cock his rifle.

Arriving at the outside stairs to Pearl's office, he glances back towards UniSea's converted Liberty ship. Whomever has quit watching. Pacific Pearl's plant is at the end of a short, narrow peninsula— to return to the subdock, he will have to again walk past those eyes, not a comforting feeling, daylight or dark, and it is still very dark.

As he climbs, he wonders why Sarah came to him. There are plenty of other fellows who would have helped her, especially if she sweetened her request with a little hanging bait, cocaine being the hanging bait of choice for fishermen to catch cannery rats... from the top of the steps, he hears Marge ask for Dave Woodhart, Pearl's Kodiak plant manager. Hurrying on in, stepping in front of Marge, he says, "I need to talk to Dave." She nods, and hands him the receiver after a minute.

"Dave, this is Jay, the *Coyote*. I need a message sent to Little John at the lab." He explains a little about Sarah, then says: "The *Northford*. The Standard Oil dock. In two days. Tell him." Dave repeats the time and place. Jay smiles. This fortunate bit of timing saves him paying for a call.

He thanks Marge by blowing her a kiss. In mock anger, she threatens to tell her husband if he doesn't get out. Laughing, he retreats, but promises, "I'll be back," before descending the outside stairs two at a time.

Pearl's dock leadman, *Hold On There*, not his given Vietnamese name but its corruption to which *Hold On* long ago quit objecting, waves for Jay to step inside the cannery's receiving floor.

"What's up?" Jay asks as *Hold On* backs into shadows cast by a forklift.

"Look," *Hold On* points towards the end of the subdock, not fifty yards of wind and cold channel away. "Two men, they have pieces of pipe."

Jay strains to make out one fellow on the *Judi B's* picking deck: the fellow crouches beside the king hauler, the length of pipe he holds catching the reflection of the crabber's picking lights, burning constantly to use up the surplus electricity generated as the boat awaits the tanner opening. "I see one."

"One high, one low."

"I see the fellow on the picking deck."

"The other, he in the companionway so he can see dock."

Now he sees the second fellow. They are waiting for him, were probably watching him from UniSea's ship, probably hurried around behind him. And what is he supposed to do? Swim back to the *Coyote*? That might be his only choice. "*Hold On*, do you have an extra survival suit, big one?"

"Maybe, Jay. But I thought you bought spare suits last year."

He points towards the subdock: "They don't do me any good on the boat when I have to swim from here."

"Bad place, here. I know about these things. You drift with the wind. No splash that way." *Hold On* takes a suit from the cannery's trailered skiff. "You hurry. It be light soon."

"Thanks, *Hold On*. Glad I never had you in my sights."

"You would've missed."

Jay doesn't answer. One time, at a cannery picnic when *Hold On* had too many beers, they talked about what each did in the war. *Hold On* fought on both sides of perimeters, but he wasn't the only Vietnamese who did. However, he wouldn't have received refugee status if all of his exploits were known.

Not believing there is enough darkness left for him to hike all the way back to the subbarn, he dons the borrowed suit in the shadows of the cannery and enters the bay opposite UniSea's Liberty ship. The ebb tide pulls him towards the subdock as wind gusts out of the southwest of forty-five knots and more, split by the knob separating Captain's Bay from the harbor, create erratic crosswinds both parallel and perpendicular to the dock.

The suit is bright red, but in the darkness, appears gray.

He lets the wind push him along. The chop covers his splashings as he floats on his back and paddles with his hands. He drifts through shadows of boats, dock, pilings while spray burns his eyes and fills his nose. Where the wind meets the water, it whistles with the fury of a full-fledged gale.

He drifts under the *Judi B's* stern and on towards the *Coyote*, along her stern and her port side. When he reaches midship, he grabs the bait knife, its handle covered with herring scales, that he keeps in the davit's base. The survival suit's mittened hand makes gripping its handle difficult, but he manages to hang onto it as he feels his way back towards the *Coyote's* stern and to the doubled three-quarter inch nylon lines, on which he saws away. The knife, dull, its edge nicked and only really good for chopping frozen herring, eventually parts the lines. And the wind pushes the *Coyote's* stern against the *Judi B*.

Bracing between the hulls, he works his way forward, where he worries the doubled bow lines in two.

Slowly at first, the wind shoves the *Coyote* towards the channel. He catches a pair of sixty inch crab bags, swings himself aboard, and quickly steps out of the survival suit as he palms the Smith.

The crosswinds drive the *Coyote* faster and faster, soon leaving behind the portion of the harbor lit by picking lights. The black can marking the channel disappears behind the longliner as Jay hastily opens shutoffs and flips switches. But the wind pushes the deep draft ex-troller into the shallows of Unalaska River's mouth before the 6-71 main starts. The keel bumps over rocks while he waits for the oil temperature to rise enough that the engine will pull itself. He then engages the marine gear, cuts sharply to port, placing the new Pearl plant between himself and the *Judi B*, and slowly bumps his way to deeper water, hoping he doesn't ding either prop or shaft as the sky turns gray, then pale pink.

He'd like to see the faces of those assholes now.

He passes Whitney's, East Point, the crabbers at Pan Alaska, and starts down the channel towards Ballyhoo.

Because of the new bridge, he can no longer duck into Captain's Bay, but must run around Amaknak Island.

Two hours into Captain's Bay, then another hour and a half until he drops anchor behind the Rat Islands at the head of the bay— when he's satisfied his storm anchor will hold, he finds himself without anything to do. It's eleven o'clock. All too soon, the sun will set, another day will have passed. It all seems so pointless. And he sits behind the lipped chart table, his head in his hands, his memories between his fingers, threatening to slip away and again live as an on-going story without end, the characters all productions of his imagination. Whatever he thinks seems to materialize as if he were truly a shaman like Ivan Chickenof.

Squeezing all the life he can from them, he grips his memories as he sees again that morning eight years ago:

At the edge of the bastard firs, the forked horn stops, sways its back and stretches, and sprays piss on the invisible trail it follows before continuing uphill.

He waits until the young buck tops the ridge before, keeping the breeze to his face, he follows the main ridge three hundred yards. He then swings lower, turns around and skirts the seed block in which he saw the fork. Along the edge of the firs, branches are broken on every bush. Shredded bark hang above pawed patches of moss— many of the antler-scraped alders haven't yet turned red.

As a shadow might slide between viney maple saplings and hazel nut shoots, he slips into a fern opening where he expects a big buck. Instead, he spooks a spike.

The yearling buck bolts from beside him, runs sixty feet, stops, looks back, but not at him. Rather, the spike stares at a solitary fir thirty feet to their left.

The spike doesn't interest him, but the other deer, the one at which the spike stares, might so he stands as still as the spike and he waits.

A bluejay hops from one hazelnut branch to another, checking husks for nuts that haven't yet fallen.

Although continuing to stare at the fir surrounded by salal, the spike breaks his freeze by rolling one ear forward. Both ears twitch. The yearling sniffs the ground, turns towards him, then looks back at the fir, apparently confused. Slowly, the spike steps towards the fir, pauses, and cautiously looks behind him, then to each side.

The little buck never sees the .38-55's muzzle swing towards him, never sees the sights centered on his head. Instead, the spike takes another step towards the fir, stops, seems to beckon towards the tree. And from behind the fir comes a low grunt.

He smiles as he lightly rests his finger against the side of the Winchester's trigger. The grunt belongs to an old buck. And he sees him, or rather, his rack: a four-point rack, stained red-orange, shows through the fuzzy edge of the fir, disappears, only to reappear away from the boughs. The heavy-beamed rack seems to float on top of the salal.

Heart pounding, tense, ready to shoot (the buck's head remains hidden), he blows a scratchy half note that is almost a whistle.

The gray-faced buck slowly raises his head.

The .38-55 speaks with its usual sureness.

The buck collapses upon himself, the bullet breaking its neck so as not to ruin its rack. The spike freezes, seems unsure of what to do and unable to believe what happened. He waved the yearling away. Perhaps, he hopes, the spike would learn from its mistake.

He should have returned to the house for a packboard: the buck weighed more than he should have carried, especially with his bum knee. But after gutting the four-point, he made a pack from it, then twisted it onto its back before he hesitated, knowing how bloody he'd get. He didn't have a choice: he laid on top of the buck, slid an arm under each hindleg, arched his back and rolled over. Using the Winchester as a staff, he pushed himself to his feet— and the four-point's bony knees bit into his shoulders.

Before he reached the skidroad, he felt ticks crawl across his neck, pause. Blood plastered his hair to his scalp and trickled down his back. Sharp antler tines stabbed his calves as the rack flopped from side to side. His knees felt as if they were being kicked from behind; his left knee threatened to buckle. So when he reached the steep spur he climbed before daybreak, he bypassed it, opting instead to return home by a longer but more gently sloping haulroad.

Deer had eaten a trail around the alders, past the blackberries and through the scotch broom overgrowing the haulroad. With the four-point on his back, he was wider than the trail in places. He held the .38-55 vertically with his arms extended and his shoulders hunched forward. Even then, the buck's hindlegs, despite being pulled together, hooked slender scotch broom whips. The snagged whips slapped his face, making his cheeks sting, and dangling blackberry cane scratched the welts.

But he was within a mile of his house so he pushed on, ignoring the welts as best he could, ignoring the blood, his blood.

In a particularly thick patch of scotch broom, a doe walked towards him, spotted him, stopped, sniffed the air, took a step closer, then hesitated. Obviously confused by the conflicting scents, she took a second step towards him, again hesitated, then decided she best leave the trail. Less than twelve feet in front of him, she turned broadside and seemed to melt through a wall of green scotch broom switches.

Behind the doe, with his nose under her tail, was the bench-leg, the buck that had outwitted him for years. The buck's rack wasn't much, a throwback two-point, the same as last year. But he couldn't let it get away. He awkwardly eyeballed along the top flat of the Winchester's barrel, and as the buck twisted broadside, the .38-55 barked.

The bench-leg took a step backwards, began to sit, then lunged ahead, penetrating the scotch broom by less than its length before falling.

Casting testicles aside, he dressed the white-faced buck, getting his arms bloody to his biceps—*I'll wash when I reach the millpond. I only have a mile to go, not that far, especially not now that I've killed you, Mr. Bench-leg. You were a tough one, but thank you for finally giving yourself to me. I won't waste a bite of you; I'll remember how many times you outwitted me with each bite. But you finally screwed up. Couldn't stay away from the ladies, huh? They'll get you killed every time.*

Caching the bench-leg, he again wrestled the four-point onto his back... the scotch broom thinned as he neared the millpond. The trail widened. And where the haulroad intersected the planked mainline road, he stepped around some small alders and sapling firs, woven together by spindly blackberry cane. Turning his back to the sticky brush, he let the buck slide to the ground. Home, almost. The house was another couple of hundred yards away, but he would use his pickup to haul the bucks the rest of the way. He straightened, stretched and rubbed the tops of his shoulders, then stepped to the millpond to wash the blood from his hands. Across the pond, a blue heron waded near the leaning reflection of the weathered scaler's shack. Here and there, small trout dimpled the pond's quiet surface. Several long viney maples, partially stripped by beaver, floated near the outlet. Rafts of muskrat cuttings drifted along the shore where sedges still had a few green stems mingled among their yellow and brown blades. Blackberry cane growing between the water's edge and the road had been recently snapped by beaver, and sometime during the night, mink and raccoon, a doe and her fawn, and a bobcat with two nearly grown kittens left their footprints in the mud.

He splashed water on his arms and jeans, and vigorously scrubbed his wrists and hands. Though rivulets of blood ran from his arms, entered the pond and stained it red for a foot in either direction, his hands wouldn't come clean. He picked at the clotted blood under his cuticles as he glanced across the pond's dammed outlet. The buck, he thought, would be all right behind the sapling firs: he had no close neighbors. He bought the farm/millsite after the sawmill burned down and wasn't rebuilt, and the privacy afforded by its long lane remained its most attractive feature.

He started back up the haulroad. Before he had gone a quarter of a mile, he saw the heron clumsily flap overhead; he wondered what had startled it and where was it going. Perhaps to Wycaver's pond. He needed to see Wycaver about some sausage. Maybe, he thought, he would do that that afternoon.

When he reached the buck, he pegged its legs together. The bench-leg seemed heavier than the four-point. Its bony knees bit deeper into his tenderized shoulders. His best gait was a stumble; he was barely able to step over the blowdowns, and his mind was on Judy and the boys, not on what it should have been. The signals were all there. The heron, his instincts, everything, but he felt out of control, like he's falling, going over Klamath Grade in the pickup, being pushed by the buck as his

jeans seemed stiffer than his knees, especially his left knee. But each step brought him closer to the logdump so he ignored all of the warnings. He shouldn't have.

As he staggered onto the mainline road, he rounded the sapling fir where the four-point lay. He combined the moves of pitching, dropping, and swinging the bench-leg from his back into a rolling flop. And in the middle of the maneuver, he heard a yelled, "HALT!"

His knee buckled, and the momentum of the bench-leg carried him over and across the four-point as a shotgun roared. Alder twigs, fir needles and deer hair sprayed his face. Instinctively thumbing back the Winchester's hammer as he wiggled behind the two bucks, he numbly scanned both pond and field.

A figure in a combat squat pumping a shotgun emerged from behind the log skids of the abandoned set of triple drums.

He pinched the Winchester's trigger.

All of those years before 'Nam, then those years with a heavy barreled Model 70, .30-06, a hunting rifle, bedded, not much different than what he would have used for deer, only the targets were gooks, a mortar team eight hundred yards away or maybe a Colonel emerging from an underground bunker twelve hundred yards out— he was asked to make the shot, expected to kill whatever he shot at. Two of them, him and his spotter, a Hopi who didn't want to be there, the Injuns, their reputation secure long before his spotter was rotated back to the States and he was sent into Laos as part of a SOG team, a black operation from which none of them were expected to return. He almost didn't. He was left behind to cover their escape. It took him seven weeks to make it back across the line, weeks during which he learned that the M-60 round fired just fine in his .06 even if didn't pack the punch it should. But it packed enough punch that he fought his way out— and he was quickly sent home before he could tell anybody where he had been or what he had been doing. Mustered out in less than a week, some kind of a record.

Some kind of a record: well, that was only the first one. I can't remember exactly what my nearly two hundred ounces of flakes and small nuggets brought in dollars. I hardly had the money in my possession long enough to count it. But it brought me the most money I ever had until then, even more than they gave me not to talk about what we were doing across the Border. And while I hadn't planned to spend the winter in Alaska (I had no plans at all), I stayed because of that moose that I killed in maybe record time:

He had bought a '55 Dodge pickup, and had lived in its cab once he left the hills. He had seen moose all summer, had wanted to kill a big rack, but couldn't eat a thousand pounds of bull before it spoiled. He had needed someone to take most of the meat, and on a whim while driving past the Soldotna Clinic, he had stopped and had spoke to the doctor on duty, who had asked, "Where is this moose now?" When he said, "Still running around," he had been abruptly dismissed with, "Call me when you have something."

He slides the coffee pot to the heated portion of the stovetop, waits a minute, then pours a cup of the thick, black brew that passes as coffee after three hours of sitting warm.

He didn't know then that getting a moose wasn't a given. Sometimes it pays not to know too much— he doubts the Mezzanger kid ever suspected he would commit suicide. Life would sure be simple if there were no extenuating circumstances.

He had left Soldotna in a huff, had turned onto the Swanson River Road, had parked the Dodge in front of the locked gate of the spur road to Fingers Lake, had hiked the three miles to the drilling pad, then into the Burn another half mile. There, he had shot a five year old bull, not as big as he would have liked, but plenty big enough to impress the doctor.

Sun was setting as he butchered that bull. Clouds of no-see-ums, whitesoxs, mosquitoes smelled the blood. He became another slab of meat— is anyone really more than that? Damn bugs crawled up his nose, down his throat, ears, became entangled in his hair.

His shot attracted the attention of a green uniformed, Fish & Wildlife biologist in a green pickup. Through his riflescope, he watched the fellow in the green uniform park on the pad, and locate the moose with binoculars. For a moment their eyes met, his finger, out of habit, resting on the trigger, adjusted down to about a pound and three-quarters. That is now a moment he can laugh about, but at the time, well—

The biologist introduced himself: "Name's John Littlehaus, and I want the bull's lower jaw."

Although willing to surrender the bull's jawbone, he was at first reluctant to accept the biologist's offer of help. But with the two of them packing quarters, they made quick work of hauling the moose to the drilling pad. Then despite regulations to the contrary, the biologist used the green pickup to ferry the meat out. With the locked gate between the two Dodge pickups, the meat was transferred from truck to truck.

The biologist dismissed his thanks with, "You can pack like a horse."

"That comes with a simple mind. Even a damn fox is smart enough to eat its kill where it falls."

"If you find that fox, bring it to me and I'll show you it hasn't been eating all that well."

"The coyotes I trapped last winter all had plenty to eat."

"You're a trapper?"

"Why do you ask?"

John told him about his lab on Hogg Island in Blue Fox Bay, about his winter-kill predator study and his needing a steady supply of sample carcasses, told him that his pay would be the furs he caught but that all of his gear and fuel would be provided. And he caught fox that winter, lots of them. Red. Blue. Cross. Caught otter. A few martin. He needed the furs checks because he gave most of the dollars he received for his summer of panning to Edna.

It was ten till nine when he returned to Soldotna with the moose. He still remembers the hour, and the hassle trying to get the hospital duty nurse to call the doctor.

The doctor finally gave him the phone number of a family that needed the meat; said Mrs. Edna Lundstrom was expecting his call. That night seems a lifetime ago. She helped him hang three quarters of that moose from a plank extending across the top of her garage's ceiling joist. Invited him to wash up. Offered to wash his clothes.

He must have looked pretty rough. Blood plastered hair. Dried blood mingled with moose hair glued to his hands. Shirt stuck to his back. Jeans to his thighs.

When he didn't immediately accept her offer to wash up, she took him by the arm and pulled him towards her backdoor, saying, "Shower's in the bathroom."

He hadn't had a shower in nearly a year— a person can forget how good hot water feels.

Divorced, with four kids, the older two in grade school, Edna was hungry for adult company. He made small talk the way he never had with Judy. He spent the night, and the next night. Quite a few nights, in fact. But he never slept with her. Instead, he became her silent partner.

"Dad left me three deeded gold claims. You said you know something about gold... the patent reports are good."

He put up the money, and she put her kids to work. Billy, twelve, the oldest, skinned Cat. Bobby, ten, mucked. And he spent two winters on Afognak with Littlehaus, two summers working gravel with Edna.

The past and the present are indeed the same, both a little foggy as he squeezes all life from his memories. As if his memories were tangible things, thawed by the warmth of his hands, droplets seep from between his fingers and slide down the backs of his hands, wrists, forearms until the cuffs of his shirt catch them, imprison them, mingling them with salt and gurry, their identity lost at least for a while. Rising from the lipped table, he paces the wheelhouse as the Coyote rocks in short pitches as a stiff breeze pushes over the pass from Muskushin Bay. And he wonders why he left Edna.

He knows why. She wanted a husband, and he wasn't able to form a relationship. Destined to live in shadows. Anytime someone from his past might recognize his profile, his voice, his walk. Other than his name, he changed nothing. He has become like Coyote, the trickster; he is a Rogue.

He has remained friendly with Edna. Seven years. Their partnership has proved profitable. She is now the president of their privately-held mining consortium, has a six-figure income, handles his financial affairs, and she has never remarried.

Billy, nineteen now, oversees two of the consortium's placer operations. He's a good kid, smart, hard working. Even when he took Billy trapping that second winter, he never had the problems with him that Edna had, especially not after he thumped him the one time. He doubts Billy expected that, but what did the kid think would happen when he said he didn't have to mind him? Something called *Time-out?* That really works with boys, right?

The Barrens, Kodiak, Aleutians are far from the old growth firs of the Oregon coast, but they are linked by a ribbon of fisherman. He isn't free to claim his past, nor his name. Henry Jay Shoulders was conceived, but never born. Perhaps it, too, is a reservation name.

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