

Aleutian Rogue

WITH

The Amanat

SERIALIZED

Chapter Six

1.

Surge crashing against rocks as gulls hover, stationary as kites on strings, their cries sharp as the wind-chill, the wind still strong as the mast creaks under the strain of the poles with their fish in the water, dampening pitches and easing rolls, while a single twenty-five watt bulb above the table casts dim yellow light across the wheelhouse—Jay holds Catherine as he lies beside her while diesel burning in the oil stove roars quietly, the wheelhouse warm. He feels exposed although he doubts any plane will fly today. They should run with the weather, try to catch the *Northfjord*, which he knows the *Coyote* doesn't have enough speed to do, displacement hull speed being a function of the square root of the waterline. Unless the crabber puts in at King Cove or Sand Point for a day or two, a possibility, slim but there, he is destined to be two, probably three days behind it into Kodiak. He can save half a day by sailing directly for Blue Fox Bay, and after the shooting, he really can't put in at Kodiak itself so his choices are limited.

"I hurt," Catherine tries to raise her head, "where I didn't even know I had places." Her bruising has settled deep into muscles, causing swelling and stiffness.

"More aspirin?" He doesn't have much he can offer her.

She nods. He hands her half a glass of boxed, whole milk and the bottle of generic aspirin. In a voice so soft she would have to raise it to whisper, she says, "Thanks."

Making a face, she says, "That milk tastes funny."

"It's canned whole milk in a box. Not supposed to spoil. It's left over from last summer's fishing groceries."

"You fish every summer?"

Nodding, he takes the glass. He has been thinking about what she said, three tons or ten tons of ivory, he can't remember which. Either amount represents a lot of dead walruses, and explains why Sarah wanted to talk to him. He imagines she wanted him to haul the ivory off the island, not something he would have volunteered to do. So the questions are, how was Davy involved and what about the two yahoos? He hasn't done much shooting lately, but his aim, the trigger control is still there. That pleases him although he regrets having to pull the trigger on the two. They were just persistent enough they didn't give him many options, and none he wanted to accept, especially not after seeing how Sarah was beaten. Catherine doesn't appear much better—they worked her over with considerable professionalism.

He nuzzles her hair, which still smells of her perfume, as he says, "You lost me on the ivory. Ten tons?"

"Three tons. There were ten tons in the shipment, actually nine thousand kilos. We—our people—recovered all but three tons on Thanksgiving day." She again tries to rise as she adds, "That's why you have to take me back, please."

"You saw how those seas are running. You really want to try to buck into them?" He could if he had to, but returning to Dutch would be going in the wrong direction for him. "Imagine how sick a couple of hours of getting pitched up and down will make you."

"Isn't there another way?" She rises on one elbow. "You don't understand how very important it is for me to return."

Shaking his head, he says softly, "As soon as the wind lays down, I'm heading for Kodiak—have to stop John from picking up Sarah. I'll put you off there if you still want, but you saw why I can't go back. You even got some of their blood still on you."

"How can you tell theirs from mine? Besides, why are you involved?" She drops her head back down on the pillow. "I came to this wilderness to die, I feel like I am." All her life she has lived in one wilderness or another, most mental landscapes where she struggled with thoughts of freedom, of finding her way out, and here she is, in a real wilderness and all she can think about is her need to return to captivity, and she hates herself and everything that has happened to her. If she could die, she would just to spite herself—she used to think she was a strong woman, but it turns out that she is merely additional meat for an ever expanding market.

Her effort to think is too much for her and she drifts, just drifts through darkness, a void without sensation where she has to do nothing, achieve nothing, be nothing but a speck drifting farther and farther away, not returning, not responding, but just drifting on and on, farther and farther away, a fallen leaf on a river...but she has to go back, has to—

"Wish I wasn't involved," he says softly, seeing that she has again slipped into sleep. That is what her body needs right now, sleep, time to recover, to heal. But he hasn't much time as he adds, whispering, "Too late now, though. I am involved, very much so."

There are many things he regrets doing. Sometimes his life seems one continuous regret, a regret over which he has had no control, like who his targets were. His kill book was government property. He wonders if it still exists. He probably would have liked a helleva lot of those *targets* if they would have met under different circumstances. But that is what war does, turns the enemy into gooks and his side into the good guys, a two-sided world where civilians have to live on the coin edges. One day he was a good guy with a whole side of a coin on which to move around, and the next day he was restricted to the edges. It felt so much better being a good guy, even on a SOG black ops across the boundaries that divide the worlds. For a few minutes back there in UniSea, for those few moments after he had overcome the wall separating life from death, he was again a good guy on another black ops across the boundaries, his kills recorded in his personal book of life. And now, again, he is about to begin the long withdrawal from enemy territory, hopefully avoiding having to fight his way out, but ready for a firefight from which there won't be any helicopter rescue, where he is on his own to make it or to die, his spirit lost and wandering half a world away, the lines that connect living things cut by governments that draw boundaries defining good guys and gooks. If he knew the songs, he would sing all governments to sleep and let people splice those lines severed in the beginning, when time was still small and seas covered the land.

"Please," her voice, faint and far away, "take me back."

He feels her spirit return as if it has been lost and wandering, blind and without hope. "And you can bring those two yahoos back to life?"

His years of living in the woods, his survival training, these years as an outlaw—all work together to urge him north before the weather improves and planes start searching for him. Even a small boat is easily seen from the air, and the *Coyote* isn't that small. They really have to go.

Lying now with her eyes open, Catherine, her voice a little stronger, says, "How do I make you understand? All you had to do, have to do now is tell us where—" her voice fails.

He wiggles a little to free himself from where she lies against him as he says, "That would be breaking a trust."

"Who cares? You should be looking out for yourself." The words cause little explosions in her mind that flare like reflected colors along darkened corridors, kaleidoscopes of rotated triangles in erupting wilderness, hers, his, theirs. Who and what belongs where seem to collide, sending long spikes of doubt through her as if those spikes were pain signals fired through nerve networks, each arriving simultaneously in her overloaded brain, bruised like her arms and ribs and soul.

"Is that right? You'd say that even after tonight?" He felt her spirit, felt it against his arm when it returned; he knows its fears, and even some of its failures. Deliberately touching her bruised collarbone, he asks, "You think you could've kissed and made up with them after they roughed you up like they did?"

His touch sends waves of pain through her, nauseating waves that rack her body, the pain beginning in her shoulder and flowing downward past her stomach and thighs and into her toes, then returning to cramp calves and pelvis and cortex. Between waves, she asks, "What happened tonight?" Then as if suddenly remembering, she adds, "You shouldn't have butted in."

"And what would have happened to you if I hadn't?" With his spirit lost a half world away, he has only hers to share—and her spirit fears the darkness in which it has wandered for a very long time.

Gritting her teeth as yet another wave of pain pushes through her, she says, "Nothing that hasn't happened before."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Truly sorry." But from when her spirit touched him, he knows she tells the truth.

"Take me back...I'll pay. You name it." She has money, things, property. She has recovered the possessions her father lost when he went to prison, but the family name, that has probably been forever lost.

Hooking one leg off the side of the bunk, he scoots back an inch, another, as he says, "Don't need your money."

"My arm, left shoulder, where you touched me. Feels like it's out of joint."

Standing, he says, "Let me see."

"OUCH!...Be careful."

Moving her arm, hearing through his fingers what sounds like a bilge pump sucking air, he grips her biceps with his right hand, slips his open left hand under her arm, then keeping his finger extended, he pulls hard, real hard as he attempts a closed reduction. And he feels the joint slip, then come together as she screams, long, loud, levitating herself off the bunk, landing hard, whimpering, when she comes down.

"I think it's okay now, but you need it looked at by a doctor. All I can do is put your arm in a sling, keep you from moving it around. And there's no doctor at Dutch."

"Please, take me back." Her words are forced through the whimpering, through the adrenaline numbed sobs that momentarily interrupt even her breathing. "What do you want? It's yours if you take me back."

He listens to the wind whistling between the wheelhouse and the rock wall, feels the *Coyote's* gentle rockings, but doesn't answer her. He wishes she would want to escape with him, the two of them together in the worlds between wind and weather, hiding from this two-sided world, but he doesn't know the songs that will let him cross over..

There is no escaping the war between the spirits, the war his grandmother told him about, a war fought everyday with casualties mounting as fewer and fewer people believe in the old ways, which were already lost by the time he was a boy, replaced by chainsaws, falling wedges and scaling tapes so the world of living things can be measured and sold as if it were cordwood.

"Is it because," her voice falters as she waits for another lull between waves of pain, "of those two guys," again she pauses, "that you," one more pause, "won't take me back?"

"Told you it was—but actually," he considers his words as he wonders if he should weigh anchor and go right now, "I couldn't get around the corner again tonight even if I wanted to. Just too rough." It will be light in a few hours. Perhaps he should wait until then before attempting the pass around Egg Island.

"Jay...may I...call you Jay?" She reaches with her right hand for his hand as he holds her left arm against her body while trying to make a sling from one of his T-shirts. "If I don't go back...I'm...dead...we both are."

As he nods agreement, he looks into her eyes. If eyes are windows to souls, her smoke gray soul smolders. "Your face is gonna look rough in the morning. It's already black and blue."

"The mortician will cover the bruises. They're pretty good about that." She has to rest. She can't continue pleading for her life.

"Yeah, I saw some wonders they worked when I was in 'Nam, but I don't personally intend to find out just yet, though." He smiles as he adds, "Actually, a mortician won't have to do much to make you look good. You're easy on eyes now."

She squeezes his hand in thanks as the drifting returns.

*

Daylight comes, but the wind doesn't slacken nor does the day brighten above the dull gray of the early morning. A five-foot surge continues to roll in from the Pass. With her poles out, the soft-chined ex-troller tips, tilts and lifts gently as Jay whiles away the hours, awake but almost asleep, listening for planes, afraid he might hear one.

Although her trembling lessened hours ago, Catherine, her left arm in the makeshift sling, continues to drift in and out of consciousness. She still has shaky hands, and if anything, feels worse than she did when she wanted to die. She needs to relieve herself, but when she tries to sit, she blacks out, leaving her in desperate need of a bedpan and unable to care for herself as if she were again an infant beginning life in the cramped quarters of a fishing boat, afloat on an angry sea.

He has a decision to make, run with the poles out while no planes are flying, the resistance of the stabilizers consuming additional fuel and costing him speed, or sit it out till dark and hope the weather improves. Peggy, on the morning marine forecast, called for a five-day-ridge of high pressure to blow-in during the night. The ridge should cover the Alaska Peninsula and Eastern Aleutians. But she was wrong yesterday; so he doesn't know what he should do. If the ridge materializes, then planes will definitely be flying.

Once they are underway, the noise of the 6-71 main will make conversation difficult. He will either need her to spell him at the helm or he will have to set out a sea anchor. He has a quarter seine he can rig as an anchor, but doing so will be a pain. So he needs her cooperation which is, at the moment, anything but assured even if she were physically able.

He hears her stirring: "Can I get you anything?"

"You could pee for me."

That would be interesting if he could, but he understands her problem. He doubts she can use the head with as many hooks and gangions as he has stored in it, but he has a deck bucket, a blue, five-gallon plastic pail that still has its Chevron gear lube label glued to its outside. So retrieving the bucket from where it's tied to the davit, he sets it beside the bunk, then slipping his arm under her shoulders, he lifts her from her bunk and balances her atop the pail—

"That's cold!"

He suspects the lip of the pail is, but it will warm up when she sits on it—he eases her back down. He removed her pantyhose last night when he cleaned her up as best he could; so she has nothing on her bottom half and only one of his gray sweatshirts on her top. And while her age might show on her face, it doesn't on her body. She is neither white nor tanned nor shows the protection of a bikini.

She would resist being held while she relieves herself if she could, but her need to go is too great, and she can't stand, can't squat by herself. And she just can't let it go, then lay in it; so she has to accept this violation of her personal space, this forced intimacy that isn't sexual but feels so much more forced, feels like he has taken control of her body and the two of them occupy the same space.

After he returns her to her bunk, he takes the bucket and steps outside where he pitches its contents into the wind that grabs the drops and droplets and hurls them in a wide arc far out into the bay as if casting bread crumbs onto many waters where gulls and eiders hurry after them. Then after retying around the davit the rope attached to the bucket's bail, he pisses with the wind, letting its strength add distance to his stream, coupling nature with nature to achieve superhuman results. If, he decides, he is in a pissing contest, he will pick the terrain, the battlefield and the wind direction, and by damn, he'll win.

He starts the main, its rattle reverberating throughout the wheelhouse as he waits for engine temperatures to rise.

Over the top of the rattle of the Jimmie, he says, "We have a few minutes before I pull anchor. You want something to eat before we go? You might be able to keep a can of soup down."

"Where will we go?" If it is anyplace but back to Dutch Harbor where she can report in, she will be doomed. The Organization will think she, like her little shitass dealer, will have gone private, not that the price of ivory is all that much, thirty-five dollars or so a pound; three tons, a couple of hundred thousand. She handles that much in contraband all the time. Difference is, they always know where she is. Her bosses get nervous when they don't know where their mules, owls, or songbirds are.

"The wind now must be headwinds to a high pressure front that's supposed to move in." The tough part about sailing along the Alaskan coastline while trying to hide is the amount of air traffic. "Seas will still be rough, but to our stern. We should be all right so I plan to loop east of the shipping lanes, see if we can stay between lanes."

"You don't sound like you really believe that."

"I believe we'll be spotted if we hug the coast, how I would normally sail north to Kodiak, our first stop." He still has his radar reflector in his rigging, which he will have to take down. "After Kodiak, I'll take you wherever you want to go. You pick the place and I'll figure out how to get you there...but I'll need you to run the boat some."

"You'll trust me with the helm?"

"Before this is over, I'll trust you with my life." His words, even to him, sound a little corny and not really believable.

"Don't." Her voice firm, stronger than it has been, she adds, "Don't ever trust me."

"I didn't hold a stone last night, didn't set the shoulder of one—so give yourself a chance. Except for maybe Little John, all of us are a mixed bag." He checks the engine gauges. Time to go. "You might think you're a wild rose with petals that'll fall if picked, but I live with wild roses, I don't pick 'em." Then as if an afterthought, he asks, "Do you kick in your sleep?"

Surprised although she doesn't know why she should be, she says, "Most certainly do." Her words sound indignant, but her eyes betray her. "You should already know."

"Ahh, you hurt too much last night to move around." It will take him a minute or two to pull the anchor and the reflector so he slips on a halibut shirt. "Feds, your people whoever they are—no one will come after us until the wind dies. No planes will fly. So we'll have two, maybe three days headstart. How long do you think it will take them to figure out where we're going?"

Although she says, "Not long," she wonders if that is true. If she were searching for him, would she go first to Kodiak. She might, especially if she had any kind of a tip.

"Two days is all we need." He outlines what he intends to do, and how long each leg of the journey should take.

She doesn't like what she hears: "I think you'll have a reception at Kodiak. You're underestimating everyone, except yourself."

"Possible, but I think we'll locate Sarah with time to spare." He tries to sound confident. "Hey, I'm the unknown, the quantity they can't plug into a computer and figure out what I'm gonna do next."

"You don't know how sophisticated our computers are." She hurts too much to argue. "After you get Sarah, will you go for the ivory?"

"Don't know where it is."

"Sarah does."

"Sometimes I lay awake seeing the half blown away face of a seventeen year old boy, slumped down, his chest against the bottom of the steeringwheel, one eye dangling, the other gone, his jaw missing as well as part of his neck, back of his head. Drunk on Blitz. He'd shot a cop while drunk. They said he committed suicide."

She wonders where the image comes from as she asks, "Do you see that happening to you?"

"Not hardly. The Mezzenger kid surrendered, gave up. I guess he trusted in getting a fair trial—and one of the officers put a shotgun under his chin and pulled the trigger." He grasps the latch as he pauses an additional moment before stepping outside. "That image sustained me for weeks as I fought my way out of Laos, where everybody was an enemy and I didn't even look like the local inhabitants. There can never be any surrendering, ever. That's the only way you're guaranteed not to win."

"So you have no interest at all in the ivory?"

"I'd tell you where it is if I knew. Believe me. My only interest is keeping us alive—and ideally, together." He steps outside so he can't see her reaction to the idea of them together.

The *Coyote* begins to drift away from the basalt wall as soon as the anchor is wrenched loose from the rock it snagged. The boat turns beam-to the seas and snap rolls before he gets the anchor secured, but once at the wheel, Jay gets its bow turned. With the seas now to their stern, the ex-troller plunges ahead, with the port side fish snapping at the end of its pole, the stabilizer out of water as much as it is in.

They shoot through the Pass, quickly leaving behind the dark silhouette of Egg Island. One twenty foot swell after another overruns them, lifts first their stern's port side, then drops it to jerk up the starboard side. The ex-troller lays over side to side; her roll snaps her fish from the water. The stabilizer plates swing wildly at the ends of her poles. And Catherine begins vomiting.

He sets an easterly heading, setting a course that will take them a hundred miles out to sea and will keep them well away from where a small boat should be this time of year, a course east of Reeves' flight patterns, east of all flights except Coast Guard C130s searching for foreign strays.

When Egg Island disappears from his radar screen in, maybe, a long hour, the seas lengthen as they become swells that look like ranges of foothills stretching beyond the horizon. With his heading locked in the ancient autopilot, he checks what he can, then swivels his chair around to see Catherine still about half green.

Careful how he touches her, he steadies her, helps her to the bench behind the chart table where she wants to sit. And with her face next to his ear, she says, "You deserve to know, when I was thirteen, I was bought by a Shriner for a weekend party. My father sold me to pay a gambling debt. And I don't know why I am telling you this, but I wanted you to know."

"Your dad ought to have his balls cut off—"

"Worse things happened to him...and to me."

"I'm not one of them—"

"I know."

* * *