

Aleutian Rogue

WITH

The Amanat

SERIALIZED

Chapter Eight

1.

Although she still hurts all over and her left shoulder hurts almost more than she can bear at times—her heartbeats throb inside her shoulder as if she were being beaten with sledges; to take enough aspirin to sort of dull the pain causes her ears to ring and her facial muscles to twitch—Catherine nevertheless can now negotiate around the wheelhouse without bumping into things, all hard and all causing her shoulder to explode in pain. She watches as Jay leaves the wheel for longer periods. He still hasn't slept yet, which worries her, but he seems to know what he is doing. She just wishes that she could trust him, just wishes that for one time in her life she had a friend. But she knows his penis will get in the way—they always do just about the time she begins to trust a man. He won't be any different.

The bench behind the chart table has become her refuge, the charts being maps to wildernesses described but not explored. And as she draws her knees to her chin, she groans, "Can't do that," and straightens her left leg.

When he passes by her, an oily rag in his hand, she asks, "Do you believe in God?"

Her question takes him by surprise. Not sure he heard her correctly, he halts almost in mid-step, looks at her and says, "Yeah, I suppose."

"You'd better. Only God can save you now."

"I'm not sure He'd want to." The rattle of the 6-71 has become background noise. Voices have been raised subconsciously so they can talk over its racket. "I probably already have my ticket to hell."

"Two tickets to hell?" She smiles. Taking advantage of him would be so damn easy if she felt better.

"We'd be together."

"Is that important?" She has warned him not to trust her. What more obligation does she have to him? If he wants to be played for a fool, then he will only have himself to blame. And she burps more bile froth, of which there seems an endless amount.

Knowing he needs to check the wheel, check what lies in their path, check the radar for other vessels, that he can't stand and talk, not here with the wheel unattended, but also knowing that he will have few opportunities to touch the woman concealed within her shell of experience, he scares himself a little by saying, "Yes." And looking into her eyes, he sees that the softness and the seriousness of his answer momentarily surprises her. "I've taken a lot of life, most of it justified, but the blood doesn't wash away, not from inside."

Not knowing exactly what he means, she says, "You're not just a fisherman, are you?"

"Have you ever loved anyone, even yourself?"

"I don't believe in love."

"Just sex and whatever you can coerce from your partner?"

"I've never needed a partner." She knows the implications of her words, and she is willing to let those implications stand without further explanation.

"I'm not just a fisherman, no. And..." pausing as he listens, thinking he might have heard a plane, deciding he didn't, "you now have a partner whether you really want one or not." He checks, without moving, what he can see through the wheelhouse windows, sees nothing but swell after swell, each the same and different, so he returns his attention to her: "Worst thing that happens to people is they get so damn good at what they do they don't think they need anyone's help. I'm sure you're that good."

"You can't help me...you're involved now all right. In way over your head." Certain he is a nice guy, she feels sorry for him, knowing what will become of him.

"Guess I'll have to make myself a pair of stilts."

"You know those two were working for the Feds, the two you shot?" He doesn't, she's certain, know who all of the players are. She hates to deflate his ego, but—

"Figured they might be...assholes anyway." Running seems easier the more he practices. "I need some help. If the Jimmie breaks its blower shaft, I can fix it. I have another, the tools, the know-how. If a seacock springs a leak, I can plug it, get by until I can beach the boat and fix it. Even if a plank springs and the boat goes down, there's a pram we can get in, a raft we can inflate, we'll make it. But I don't have a patch, the tools, or even the know-how to reach inside you and fix what is wrong." He pauses as he searches her eyes for the soul he knows they hide. "I have touched your spirit—that Rogue, Umatilla metaphysics of grandparents. I know where you bleed, but you'll have to help me repair the damage that has been done to you."

"Worry about yourself."

"Oh, I'll do that, too." He really needs to get back to the wheel. "But what's wrong with me is pretty simple compared to the havoc that lives right there," he touches her chest about where her heart would be.

2.

After returning from Toledo armed with the recent history of Lincoln County and a name she doesn't want to accept, Louise Toski tosses, turns, and rats in bed as sleep eludes her as if it were a single pollock in a five ton tow, the fish still trapped in the codend with the trawl doors pinning her down so she can't paw through the catch, the fish unmarked so she'll never know which one it is even if she finds it, her search being all she can hope to accomplish. She considers calling the police, notifying them that Peter Keipers is Jay Shoulders, that he has a boat in Dutch Harbor, Alaska, where the world circles around upon itself, tucks its ends together and forms a ball stuffed with feathers and fur, and spins in a nine planet course where the laws of physics seem horribly elastic. Yes, there are reasons why he couldn't say more: how could he explain just disappearing from Oregon? She imagines, with rustlers and all, that he was scared; she would be. And she suspects he knew the IRS would be after him, the Fascists. But he didn't have to stay gone, doesn't have to keep on hiding in the seams of the world.

So Alaska & Jay? OSU & her degree? Those seem to be her choices. And she doesn't even know if he would want her to return although she needs to tell him that whatever happened, it's all over. He needs to tell the police what happened to the policeman, who was probably killed by the rustlers. They need to know so they can quit looking for the officer.

Jay can return to his farm...she went by it, saw it, walked around for a while. The fields are all blackberries and alders, the fences broken down. But it is right on the river, and all of that property sells now for more than twenty thousand an acre. So a hundred forty acres, along with everything else he has—he can't just leave that kind of money sitting around. It has to be used for good, and she knows he is a good person; so he has to return and spend it to help others.

She needs to talk to him, to ask him if he's really Peter Keipers. There's so much she needs to hear him explain.

Checking her clock radio, she bounces from bed, and hurriedly dresses. She has overslept when she didn't even know she was asleep. And as she dials information—she's sure he said he fished for Pacific Pearl—for the cannery's number, she hollers at her mother, "May I call Alaska?"

Although her mother doesn't answer, her resolve to call Jay wavers as she waits and waits and waits for the information operator; her urge to hang up becomes almost overpowering before a series of bleeps is followed by a phone ringing.

"Pearl, Marge speaking. May I help you?"

She has nothing to say, and starts to hangup. How can she ask if he really is Keipers?

"Hello? Anyone there?"

She hears herself saying, "I need to get a message to Jay aboard the *Coyote*." There are little breaks between her words from some sort of interference in the satellite transmission.

"Did you say Jay on the *Coyote*?"

"Yes." Her urge to hangup again seems overpowering.

"Is this a joke?"

Rattled, she blurts, "No! I've an urgent message." Now she is mad because again nobody listens to her, not even a secretary at the end of the world.

"I'll take it down, give it to him if he shows again."

"What do you mean, shows again?" This is important, something she needs to know. "What's happened?"

Marge tells her about the rape, the shootings, and Jay's disappearance, then about the report of the *Coyote* going down off Egg Island.

Disappeared again, and this time probably drowned—her heartbeats grow faint. Good sense tells her to wash her hands of him, but Jay will need her now if he isn't already dead.

She was aboard the *Coyote*, and she knows a little about boats, fluid dynamics, and marine architecture. Unless something bad happened like a hull breach or hitting a rock, she wouldn't have thought the *Coyote* would have gone down in a storm, unless, of course, Jay made a mistake and got crosswise to a sea, which, she knows, is easy to do for someone who doesn't listen very good. But then, she realizes, he disappeared one time before and he is Native American and they have a way of vanishing when they are in trouble, almost as if the ground swallows them up—in this case, the Pacific—then spits them back out because they taste bad or something. She wouldn't be too surprised if he weren't still alive. That would be the Native American thing to do, come back after everyone thinks he is dead. She just wishes he would shave that ugly, ugly beard of his.

If he isn't dead and she hopes he isn't, he will need someone to listen to him, and she is a good listener. "Does anyone know where he was going?"

"All I know is that the bad guys were involved with drugs. The police have questioned everybody, even looked at our phone log and at Vita's. I told the chief that he called Kodiak Friday. Well, not really called." Marge tells her about the message Jay asked Dave to relay.

She knows who the man from the lab was supposed to meet; she met her, the woman who was beaten up. Yes, she is a good listener, and she has an excellent memory. "Does anyone there know what his message means?"

"Don't think so. The chief didn't seem to care, and now with the *Coyote* sinking off Egg Island, it doesn't matter much." Marge pauses, then adds, "The Coast Guard quit looking for wreckage last night. They didn't find anything, and the weather hasn't been very good as of late."

Having met the woman who was beaten up and knowing that Jay helped her get away to Kodiak gives her more of a lead than anyone else has at the moment, or so she suspects. Even if the *Coyote*

went down, she should still tell Jay's friend and his brother in Ketchikan about what happened, and what she knows. Hopefully, they will listen to her.

She twists the phone cord as she decides what to do. "Thanks, Marge." Does she, she wonders, still have enough money to get to Kodiak? and what then? What if she doesn't have enough to get back, can she get a job there, one that won't last past the start of next term which is just a couple of weeks away?

Wearing heels and taking very short steps in a very tight skirt, which, Louise knows, is too short for a woman as old as her mother, her mother enters, and crosses the living room. Her mother is a constant source of embarrassment. In a minute, she knows, her mother will start telling her the sordid details of who's playing around with whom's spouse. So she quickly asks, hoping Marge hasn't already hungup, "Oh, what's the number of your Kodiak cannery?"

She dials while avoiding looking at her mother, who straightens a picture frame bumped during last night's party, another Bourgeois grab-ass affair where too much liquor was consumed in too short a time by too many of her father's clients, each as horny as their tom cat. That's what everything is about here: sex, sex, sex. It's absolutely disgusting. And all she really wants is away from here.

From the receptionist or whomever answered Pacific Pearl's phone in Kodiak, she learns that John somebody (who she imagines is the person with the laboratory) is to meet someone (the woman who was beaten) at the fuel dock, that the message has been relayed to somewhere called the Lab (she was right). Really, now all she needs is the name of John somebody—and she has to get away from her mother. She again calls Marge.

"John," Marge says, "is probably John Littlehaus. Jay's had us send him checks before. But as for who he's to meet, I wouldn't know."

She knows, yes. And she needs to be in Kodiak before John Littlehaus meets the beat-up woman at the fuel dock. She has to go now, before her nerve fails.

*

Through Seattle and at thirty-plus thousand feet over the Queen Charlotte Islands, far past the point of no return, Louise admits to herself that at best what she's doing is crazy, insane, sheer madness. She don't even know what to call him: Jay, Peter, Dutch (his nickname). She thinks the name Peter is as disgusting as his beard. And she hopes, fervently hopes that he is still alive. There has to be some explanation for the shooting. Surely, no jury would find him guilty of killing rapists...as far as she is concerned, a man should be shot for just pinching a woman's behind. Women shouldn't be stared at, or groped, or pawed as if they were fur pelts to be graded and sold at auction. Jay was a gentleman, and that counts a lot with her. She applauds him for shooting those rapists; she saw what they did to the other woman. If more men would shoot molesters, then maybe a woman could go into a bar and be treated with respect. And she hates herself for thinking that women have to rely upon men in order to have respect. That isn't fair, isn't right.

Her conscience wouldn't allow her not to try to locate this John Littlehaus and talk to him, tell him about Jay—to her, he'll always be Jay Shoulders. And she thinks she now understands his tethered restlessness she felt without really getting close to him.

Anchorage is a blur. She changes planes, but doesn't get anything to eat, and now she has a hunger headache, which the little bag of almonds doesn't make go away. She looks out the jet's starboard side window, but sees nothing but what looks like lit matches, the flares off oil drilling platforms, wasted energy that ought to be going to help people instead of being wasted. And the next thing she knows the jet feels like its falling out of the sky. She hangs on as the deflector flips over the back of the engine, its roar about deafening beside her.

The sun set hours ago; so it is very dark when her Wien flight lands in Kodiak, and she can finally get out and stretch her legs and count her money, of which she doesn't have much, certainly

not enough to return to Oregon so she will have to find a job, even if it isn't much of a job. She takes a taxi the ten miles to town, again counts her money, counting out enough for her room, and she feels tremendous pressure to find this John Littlehaus tomorrow. Maybe Jay can afford this hotel, but she can't—and this one is supposed to be the cheapest of the three in town.

Key in hand, she climbs the half flights of stairs, finds her room, turns on the TV, and feels like getting stoned. Yes, she does that, and she doesn't think getting stoned is as bad as getting drunk, but she understands how somebody could equate the two, both of them a wasting of brain cells. She wishes she had some grass, but since she doesn't, maybe she'll walk downtown instead, anything to get away from all of the questions she has about whether Jay really drowned or just disappeared again like he did from Oregon.

Her feet lead her towards the deserted boat harbor where salmon seiners bob in their slips, their rigging casting eerie shadows that weave through the dark like illusory sentinels standing ghostly vigils above the dormant fleet. She steps over Natives asleep in the shadows of waterfront buildings, lying out of the wind, cuddled around bottles in brown paper bags. She stares at three fellows, not much older than her, huddled together, apparently unable to sleep. The harbor smells of dead crabs, rotting kelp, diesel fuel. In a store window she sees a T-shirt reading, *KODIAK--It's Not The End of The World, But You Can See It From Here*. Maybe she can; maybe she has. The lights on the floats twinkle like distant suns about to die.

She walks, the wind sharp and cold, until she is tired, just like she did yesterday on Jay's farm there along the Siletz River. So when she returns to her room, all she wants is to warm up: she soaks in the tub, the water as hot as she can stand it, and she feels like she's pulling petals from a daisy. *He loves me, He loves me not*. And wishes she hadn't picked the flower.

Morning brings her no sense of relief. She is hungrier than ever, more miserable, and a little afraid of what lies ahead as she debates whether she should check out of her room and take a chance of finding somewhere else to stay tonight. It's really a matter of whether she has money enough to eat.

The cannery isn't too far, not according to the desk clerk who offers her a maple bar, not something she would normally eat, its sticky frosting really bad for a person's health. But this morning, she doesn't refuse it. And she is still licking her fingers clean as she climbs the steps to Pacific Pearl's inner office, where she timidly waits.

She arrives at eight. But the plant manager won't be here until nine so she fiddles with a zipper pull, chews on a hangnail that is starting, and rehearses meaningless words that mean everything: "Mr. Woodhart, I called yesterday about the message Jay Shoulders asked to have relayed to John Littlehaus. Can you direct me to his lab?"

"Didn't I tell you, his lab's in Blue Fox Bay." As if dreaming, she stares into the pale blue eyes of the white-haired manager. "I'm certain I told you. You're with the Attorney General's office, right?"

A panicked twinge. Cramps. She needs a cover story. "I'm a marine biology student at Oregon State." And she says that Jay suggested she look for a job at the lab.

"Why didn't you tell me you're who John's supposed to meet? He needs help right now, that's for sure, especially with that Malina Bay study for Fish & Game. Why don't you," he picks up his secretary's phone, "catch a ride out there with them. I'll fix it up." And before she can object, he talks to someone named Jeb, then hangs up. "There, you're all taken care of. Be down on the floatplane dock in twenty minutes."

She starts to object, but stammers, "Thanks," instead. She thought John was supposed to meet the woman who was beaten at the fuel dock here in Kodiak, and she really didn't have any intentions of asking for a job though she has to have one, but she can't afford to charter a plane, however far away the lab is. This might be her only way to warn Jay's friend about what has happened, especially if someone from the Attorney General's office is on his or her way there.

"Do you know how to get there?" Evidently it is her confused look that causes the manager to add directions to the float dock.

She hurries to get her bag—and with her dufflebag over her shoulder, she follows Marine Way to the breakwater for the small boat harbor. Cormorants dance around the green channel light. Gulls huddle on the riprap. A lone bald eagle chases a raven down the channel, and a sea lion surfaces near her, looks at her, then slips out of sight.

A tan pickup with a stenciled Fish & Game seal on its side doors parks on the breakwater. And without saying more than, "Hello," the fellow in a green uniform takes her bag, stows it, then helps her onto the float of a blue and white Super Cub.

Where is she going? She doesn't remember. She doesn't really even know why she is here. And she finds herself buckling her seatbelt as if she were someone else watching a different person buckling her seatbelt.

The Cub taxis the length of the channel, turns into the wind, and roars as it drives its floats through eighteen inches of chop. She feels the plane leap into the air, but once airborne, the Cub slips sideways as the wind tosses them about. She grips the sides of her seat, and is all right until the Cub springs high when they cross from water to land, then falls two, three hundred feet when they pass from land to water, its wings all the while flapping like a gull's.

A thirteen-hundred-foot high fog bank covers the Shelikof side of the archipelago. Grim-faced, the biologist, who offered her a plastic bag a moment too late, flies above the soup, locates a bare peak, circles it twice, then holding a northeasterly course, drops into the fog.

Her heart swells in her throat; she catches her breath, and pushes back in her seat. Arms stiff. Legs stiff. Expecting to die.

Counting as he watches his compass and altimeter, Jeb suddenly levels out. And the Super Cub's floats skim a nearly flat bay.

Through the fog, she sees land and trees! on all sides.

They taxi on the bay until a faded red barn extending far out over the water materializes in the fog dead ahead. Jeb guns the engine while holding full rudder. The Cub swings ninety degrees, and beaches on the sand next to the barn, where Jeb hops onto the float, pulls up his hip boots, and secures the wings to lines buried in the bank.

The barn rests on pilings. It could be from a turn-of-the-century tintype of a forgotten, timbered slough along the Columbia or on Puget Sound. She has seen it before. Yes, she has, but she knows she hasn't. It's sort of like waking up in a dream and not knowing what is dream and what it real—her confusion she has to blame on the sugar, the maple frosting with its imitation flavoring. She knew better than to accept the pastry, but she was hungry and it smelled good.

Two houses are built on the hundred yard long spit. The one in front of the barn has a steep roof, is gray trimmed in white, and has a covered porch running its width and steps leading up to the porch. The other rambles where the spit gives way to a timbered knob, has a wind generator on its roof and smoke coming from its chimney. A rooster crows, and a raven answers. Gulls cry, and little surges lap at the sand beach. Whippy willows grow down the middle of the spit, and old shackles of gillnet webbing lie diapered along the near edge of willows. Half buried in the sand are the ribs of three dories, and the lower units of a half dozen outboards. Gale. Sea-King. Four Evinrudes.

Despite how she feels, she follows Jeb through a garden and to the backdoor of the far house, which they enter without knocking. What's the cider press for? Surely, he doesn't have apples. Not here.

Above an antique dish hutch, a kraut cutter hangs on a wood peg. An array of cast iron frying pans, griddles and kettles hang from pegs to both sides of the woodrange. Wood bowls stacked beside the cider press, table covered with a red and white checked oilcloth, part of a wheel of cheese

and a loaf of dark bread, a bowl with six still unwashed eggs on the drainboard—the kitchen looks like her grandmother's.

A fellow with sandy hair the color of hers enters through double doors. He seems neither surprised nor annoyed that they have barged in. And without an introduction, she knows this is John Littlehaus, she just knows.

"Your reports are ready."

"I brought you some help. Your friend Jay sent her."

"That's good," he says without even looking at her, which upsets her greatly. Then he adds, "I think you'll find the results in Malina Bay interesting. They contradict your field surveys. Rather, they agree with what the draggers have been saying. And I want to know how your people made a tow in there. I had to move pots."

Jeb opens John's refrigerator, takes out a jar of mayonnaise, then cutting two slices of the dark bread—talking all the while he works—and a thick slice of cheese from wheel, he smears on a little mayonnaise, jams everything together and hands it to Louise, saying, "This will make your stomach feel better," before continuing his conversation with John: "I need a preliminary draft of the complete report Friday. Thought I'd fly out and tell you personally."

"Impossible. Not by Friday."

The sandwich tastes good although he could have left off the mayonnaise as far as she is concerned—Louise watches the harried biologist object while inwardly agreeing to having the draft ready by Friday, just something she sees in his eyes, she thinks.

"Got to have it," Jeb says. "Dammit, John, the Advisory Board meets Saturday, and based on our sampling, I'll have to recommend the fishery be closed. Now, we both know that's not the case."

She hears the biologist say, "Not for a month at the earliest, not a preliminary draft," but she knows he doesn't mean what he says.

"John, I know your report isn't due for two months and that the Shellfish Meeting isn't until May, but I need—yes, need—your data in Juneau Saturday. Without it, I'll be farting in the wind."

She wants to say something, but she doesn't really know what is going on. However, she sees that the pilot isn't really listening to John. If he were, then he would know that the biologist will have the report done by Friday.

"Tell them in Juneau that your temporary help didn't even wet their trawl. They couldn't have."

"Saturday, John, Saturday...I have to go before the fog gets worse. It was a little touchy setting down." Without waiting for further objections, Jeb vanishes through the door, and the plane vanishes into the fog.

When Louise hears the plane powering-up, she dashes outside and sprints towards the barn. He can't leave me. Not here. She waves frantically, but the Cub, swallowed by fog, engine muffled, passes high overhead. She then hears nothing, except the surge. And the rooster.

Returning to the kitchen, she collapses on a straight-backed chair. What the hell, she says to herself, it could be worse.

The biologist says, "I got word you were coming, but we've been socked in since the weekend. Brad was to meet you at the fuel dock."

"You have me mixed up with someone else." She glances around, and hears her mother's warnings against strangers, the only useful thing her mother ever told her. And yes, she intends to be careful. "Exactly where are we?"

"What was this about you working for me?" John asks as he picks up the loaf of bread.

The bite of real food in her stomach partially straightens out her thoughts: "I can't explain a situation to you that doesn't make sense to me. I only came out to give you a message about your friend Jay."

"Then I wasn't supposed to meet you?"

"No, we weren't supposed to meet." She tells him what she knows about the shootings in Dutch, about Jay's disappearance and reported sinking, then about what she learned in Oregon, adding finally, "I didn't know how else to get a hold of him if he didn't really go down, and I don't think he did."

The biologist holds the loaf as if he doesn't know quite what to do with it: "I haven't seen him for—two years—maybe longer, but I suspected something like what you told me happened in Oregon. A lot of people come North to start over, some of them for good reasons."

"What report has to be done by Friday? I might be able to help while I wait." She details her qualifications. After all, she is employable even without her degree, and she does need a job in the worse sort of way.

"Can you type?"

You sonofabitch. This she hadn't expected: "What does that have to do with anything?" *I didn't study marine biology to work as a damn secretary, damn him anyhow.*

"What I need most is someone who can type."

"I don't type well." She'd rather lie than be a secretary with pretty legs like her mother was before Dad married her, like what her mother's friends are, each marrying one or more of their bosses, breaking up existing families to do so.

"If you can't type, can you print color? I'll need forty 8x10s." The biologist seems, to her, exasperated.

"I never printed color—"

"Then what can you do?" His voice betrays his irritation. "If I'm to get a completed draft by Friday—"

Not finishing his thought, John starts for the double doors with the loaf of bread still in hand.

"Can't," she hears the edge in her voice, "all women type?"

"I wouldn't know so you tell me."

"Although I haven't done color, I've printed lots of black and white...and I can type." What the hell, there's no sense fighting with him—and all she really wants from him is for him to listen to her.

But he seems not to hear what she said as, seeing the loaf in his hands as he starts through the doors, he turns around and asks, "A sandwich? I was gonna make one for myself."

She can't believe this: she still has half a sandwich in her hand and he asks if she wants one. Can't he see what is right in front of him. "No thanks." But thinking about how good the sandwich tastes and considering that she didn't eat anything but airline food yesterday, she changes her mind: "Yes, please. I am hungry."

"There's too much to do and too few hours, so don't mind me." He uncovers the end of the wheel of Longhorn, then slices four pieces of bread from the loaf he had been lugging around. "I'm not very good at saying no, which creates all kinds of problems for me."

"I need something to do until Jeb—that is his name, isn't it?—returns."

"Jeb Jebson. I've known him a long time, and won't fly with him." He flops the sandwiches onto a griddle that is still mostly cold. "One of these days, he'll smack into Devil's Paw, and I'll probably be the one who'll have to scrape him off the side of the mountain."

"There wasn't any hole in the fog."

"That's par for him...I forgot to ask, do you want anything but bread and cheese on your sandwich?"

"No." She watches him check the two sandwiches at least once every ten seconds. When they are sufficiently brown (from embarrassment, she suspects), he barehands one onto a plate that he awkwardly shoves in front of her.

She waits to see if he will cut the sandwich in half before she picks it up. When he doesn't, she can't resist asking, "You can cook, but can you type?" Then surprising her, the taunt, "Roll up your pants, I want to see your legs," passes through her lips.

"I apologized once, didn't I" he says, blushing.

He's red. She likes that, and she feels much freer than just a moment ago. "I've been wanting to ask, what do you use that for?" She nods towards the cider press.

"Squeezing berries. Doesn't work real well, but maybe I don't know how to use it." He tells about picking salmonberries and about his garden, but stops in the middle of telling how to put up sauerkraut. "Forgive me. You're not interested in that, and I don't have time to go into it."

Yes, she is interested: "You just shred and salt the cabbage? Is that all?"

"You bruise it after salting, then put a plate and a rock on it so its juices seal it. Set it where it's cool. Yeah, that's all there is to sauerkraut. But forgive me. I'm talking too much. There's work to do."

"Do you make salmonberry wine, too?"

He chuckles, then says, "I have a bottle Jay left if you want some, but no, I don't make any, don't drink, just one of those things I never started doing."

"No thanks on the wine, but I had to ask." She thinks he might listen to her, but how can she be sure?

"There's a room in the loft you can have. Do you have a bag?"

"Jeb threw it up in the willows." She saw it there when she went out to try and catch him before he took off.

"I'd better get it before the fog soaks it. This fog rolled in Monday. Supposed to break by the weekend, or so Peggy says."

She likes this guy, who doesn't seem to need anything from her. He might be six feet, but he isn't real big. One hundred sixty pounds, no more. He appears real ordinary; he could pass through a crowd and nobody would remember him. And she asks, "How well do you or did you really know Jay?"

"I've never seen him miss a shot when he aimed...Dunno. I suppose I know him as well as one person can know another. Know him well enough not to have asked him questions. When I first met him, he was hurting inside, the type of hurting only time heals."

"He never talked about his past?" This, she should know.

"Are you some sort of investigator?"

Her cheeks redden. He does listen. "No, no. It's just that, for one day, I learned an awful lot about him."

"I see...I'd better get your bag—and while Jay might not have been his real name, it was a good enough name for me." He leaves her alone in the kitchen.

She chews slowly as she takes in everything in the kitchen a second time, a bit envious. Even though she could still verbally decapitate him for asking if she can type, she sees, she realizes he has here what she always hoped to have. No Twinkies. No Monsanto syndrome here. She detests her mother's plastic world, with its imitation reality.

She doesn't hear him enter as the dark bread lies stone heavy in her stomach, doesn't know he is behind her until her dufflebag falls over on the floor beside her.

John asks, "What term do you need to complete your degree? Winter? Spring?"

"I've put off taking P-Chem as long as I can. There's a couple of labs and three more hours of Humanities that I need, why?" He does listen to her, really does. That excites her.

"There is this job issue still on the table. I really can't afford to hire you, and I certainly can't afford to both train and pay you. So where do we stand?" He turns a chair around, and sits, almost

across the table from her. "After September, money is always tight. I bid these jobs close, and weather's never a factor I've been able to figure accurately into my bids."

"You can afford me until Friday." She has no idea how she will pay her return fare to Oregon. She suspects she'll have to find a job in town when she returns.

"Then I'll show you how to print color. It's like black and white, but in absolute darkness."

*

Pleasantly surprised by the sharpness of John's transparencies but not at all happy with the resin-coated paper he has—it is all shadows, much too contrasty—Louise focuses the enlarger before she turns off the safe light so that she can print his slides of both healthy and diseased shrimp eggs. She feels like she is stealing from him. The rush to assemble this preliminary draft of his shrimp study has robbed him of the special savor of wrapping up a completed project, something she has only experienced a few times...he can't be much older than herself (at least he doesn't appear much older), but he has accomplished so much more, and she feels like a failure.

He spent an hour in the darkroom last night showing her how to print the 8x10s, and how he wants the Ektachrome positives cropped. He then surrendered his bed to her, said he would sleep on a cot in the lab, but as far as she can tell, judging by the number of prints drying, he was up all night. When she last saw him, he was staring into his typewriter. She imagines he still is. And she wonders if she should check on him just to make sure he is all right.

While she was with him last night, asking questions, making sure she was doing exactly what he wanted, she felt, coming from him, a quiet strength, a calm reassurance that everything would work out. It seemed like he was listening to her thoughts, hearing what she wanted to say before she spoke. She kind of liked the implied intimacy of him never touching her or making even a suggestive comment while anticipating her apprehensions, her next question, thought without her speaking. He has been nice to her considering she just dropped in on him, literally, landing the way the Super Cub did, and there are things she should know about him, but they don't seem as important as what she already knows. Her mind is at ease here, where all she hears is the throbbing whisper of the wind generator, the rooster and the lap of the surge. The tension driving her to get her degree, to get away from her mother, to fight against the greed of corporate America and world Capitalism—all of it is gone, and she wishes she never had to leave.

What is she to think of him? The pressure he's under, much of it self-imposed. He hasn't snapped at her. He works quickly, steadily. Doesn't play games. He's attractive, actually cute. And most important, he doesn't seem to need anything from her.

Clipping the last print to the drying line, she dumps the trays. She has worked herself out of a job; so she leaves the darkroom, peeks into his office, and asks, "Can I get you anything? I'm on my way to the kitchen."

"I think the fog has penetrated my brain," he says, leaning back in his chair.

"What are you trying to write?"

"One clever sentence saying the shrimp stocks are in bad shape due to disease destroying their eggs, not over-harvesting. But nothing I write is either clever or much good."

"You have to be tired. Why don't you take a nap?"

"No time."

"You can't keep going all the way till Friday morning without getting some sleep...maybe I can read what you've written and suggest something while you get some rest." She would like to see what sort of a writer he is.

"I can't ask that. You've already done more than I can afford."

From behind, she places her hands on his shoulders, massages the back of his neck with her thumbs, and says, "I'm glad to help. Just hope I am helping."

"That feels good. I must be tired."

"Lie down. You can't be creative without any sleep."

"I'm not supposed to be creative. That's what's wrong now. The state's suffering from creative mismanagement."

She leans over as if to kiss his cheek, her hair falling over his face, something she has seen her mother do a thousand times to her father and to other men. She hates her mother, especially right now as she feels herself shaking her head just a little, knowing the effect her hair can have, and not wanting to be like her mother but being her. Why is she doing this? what seems so natural but is so alien.

She stands up straight, her hands first to her side, then behind her, clutched together. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

"What? I don't understand...I must be sleepy."

"You're tired. Really, you are. Go ahead and lie down."

"Naa, I'm all right. I can make it through. Have to. Don't have a choice considering how messed up the data state biologists presently have." He pauses, then asks, "Did I say that right?"

"I know what you mean, but do you?"

"Ask me when I'm awake...I usually don't get myself into a deadline situation."

"They'd better appreciate what you're doing."

"Jeb might. No one else will. If anything, I'll be blasted on some point I overlooked." He scoots his chair back, stretches and yawns. "If you want to read this, have at it."

She sits, and begins reading a stack of papers. His writing isn't smooth, but not objectionably rough either. Perhaps a little more spare than she is used to. An uninvited thought creeps in: she hopes he isn't gay.

He starts to leave the room, but she stops him. "Do you want me to mark changes I think this needs?"

After a moment, he says, "Mark whatever you think is necessary. I've been working on it so long I don't know what's good anymore."

"It looks like you could use full time help."

"If the full time help was any good, I couldn't afford to pay them half what they're worth—and if they aren't any good, I couldn't afford them at any price, cliqued but so true it can't be rephrased."

She turns, and with flushed face, says, "If you'd ask, I'd stay and work for a while without pay."

"Run that one by me when I'm awake. Besides, you have to finish your degree. Top priority." Then with sudden excitement in his voice, he asks, "You haven't met my girlfriend yet, have you?"

"Girlfriend?"

"Come on." Grabbing her wrist, he drags her across the kitchen and out the backdoor. Once outside, he begins calling, "Here Sweetie, com'ere Sweetie, here Sweetie."

A doe followed by her yearling fawn steps from behind the chicken house.

"You can scratch her ears, but don't try to touch the fawn. She won't allow it."

"She's adorable. An absolute darling."

"Sweetie, I want you to meet Louise. She might someday be staying here so treat her nice...Louise, Sweetie."

"Why didn't you tell me about her before?"

Searching for a treat, the doe nuzzles his hand. He rubs her nose, behind her ears and down her back while the fawn sniffs its mother's hindquarters. Louise cautiously strokes the short, stiff hair down the bridge of Sweetie's nose.

"Stay with her while I get her some goody." He gives her hand a squeeze, then quickly steps to the feed shed adjacent to the chicken house. His sharp movements startle the fawn, which darts away.

Returning with a two-pound coffee can full of sugar beet pulp, he sets the can down. Sweetie promptly tips it over, and licks the dried pulp off the ground. And while her head is down, he runs his hand along the fawn's back.

"How long have you had her?" Louise rubs Sweetie's back.

"This is her second fawn...I found her as a yearling, about four miles out in Shelikof Strait. Evidently the current swept her away from one of the islands."

"You rescued her then?" This is an important thing to know about him. It goes to his character.

"I suppose. She suffered some sort of a mental breakdown, really gets panicky now when I leave in the skiff. Planes, bigger boats don't bother her. Just skiffs...I really think she believes she's people."

"So she really is your girlfriend."

"Oh, I keep telling her that the only reason I feed her is so she'll be good and fat when I butcher her."

"You're kidding?" *Why would he say such a thing? Surely, he doesn't mean it.*

"You have to ask?"

His voice, if she remembers what he said and how he said it, didn't indicate that he was joking, but evidently he was. She will have to listen more carefully to what he says: "No, I don't think so."

"You'll have to stick around, though, to know for sure."

Again, his voice doesn't give an additional information so she doesn't know how to take his words, which by themselves could mean several things. How is she to know for sure what he means? And she asks, "An invitation?"

"If you want it to be one...but only if you want it to be one." The fog thins, appears to be lifting. Distant clouds show faint orange streaks along their bottom edges as the sun drops beyond the horizon. He points to the light spot the in southern sky where it had been, and says, "From right here, in February, you see some of the prettiest sunsets in the world, middle of the afternoon sunsets, glorious ones at a time when you can enjoy them."

"Maybe someday I might," she pauses, suddenly overwhelmed by the rapidity of what might be developing. What is she rushing into this time? This is too fast, much too fast. "There might be a day when I would like seeing sunsets here." Nevertheless, she slips her arm around his waist, and he lays his on her shoulders.

Sweetie pushes the empty can around with her nose. The fawn scarcely received a lick of the beet pulp and is trying to figure out what it missed.

A cool breeze blows off Shelikof, blows towards them and chills Louise, as he says, "I don't have another major project lined up so I don't know how I'll get you more pay."

She wants to say, *Quit thinking about money*, but no words flow as she realizes how close she has come to repeating the mistake she made with her former roommate. She doesn't know John well enough to be anything except friends. Doesn't. Just doesn't. And she wonders why her thoughts seem so out of character for her since she arrived here on Hogg Island in Blue Fox Bay, off the coast of Afognak Island and just north of Devil's Paw Mountain. To herself, she seems another person.

The vastness of the faint sunset shrinks into darkness without either of them trying to stop it. The breeze becomes sharp, and he feels her shiver. He says, "Sweetie'll be here in the morning. Let's go in."

Upon entering the lab, she heads for the stove: "I'll fix us something to eat."

"There's leftover stew in the frig. That's probably easiest." He pours himself a cup of coffee while scanning channels on a single sideband set mounted on the wall just inside the backdoor.

As the stew heats, she turns the crank of the cider press, examines the krautcutter, lifts hanging pans as if looking for secrets behind them, and doesn't realize how much time passes until he says, "You're burning whatever."

Returning her attention to the stove, she stirs the stew, stirring its scorched bottom throughout it. She never prided myself upon being domestic, but she didn't need this, not tonight.

"It's warm enough," he says, taking her spoon.

She sees him wince as he dishes himself a bowl, but he doesn't complain. Instead, he sits at the table, and begins eating.

It smells terrible. She pushes the meat aside, lifts a chunk of potato to her mouth, grimaces: "This is awful. Would you like something else?"

"That stove sits over there all day just waiting for a chance to burn something. I'm not going to give it the satisfaction of knowing it won."

"You're nuts." She scrapes her bowl into the chicken bucket, rummages through his refrigerator which holds more than beer, and returns with something that looks like a salad.

"There's a dozen eggs in there that need used up."

"I'll fix them for you."

"Don't have the time. Jeb will be here tomorrow if he comes. He won't wait until Friday, the voice of experience speaking." Finishing the stew, John sets his bowl in the sink.

"You mean he might not come? After all you've done." She can't believe the pilot would be that cruel.

"Fog hasn't blown out yet, just lifted a little." He leaves the kitchen to return to his typewriter, saying as he leaves, "One of these days, Jeb will smack into Devil's Paw. He won't be the first, nor the last. But he might be the messiest."

The thought isn't one on which she wants to dwell as she watches his back disappear through the double doors, her words now ready to come freely. But she says nothing as she stays where she is as he types without pausing. When standing in the kitchen staring at the double doors finally becomes too awkward to continue, she locates her parka. He doesn't hear her eventually slip out of the lab.

With her parka drawn tight around her, she stands on the tip of the spit, hears a seal or something splash in the darkness ahead of her, again hears the splish of the wind generator and the lapping of the little surges rolling in from Shelikof Strait. Otherwise the night is silent. No sirens. No horns. No cars. No laughing, partying, voices, music. The silence of darkness and fog. The feel of loneliness. The insignificance of self. Of being a shrimp studied by John. Damn him anyway. She coerced an invitation to stay, but he doesn't seem to mind, doesn't seem particularly interested in her. He doesn't seem the type to go for Barbie dolls or fashion plates. So what's wrong? Why can't either of them just let nature take its course? She is afraid to guess why. Something is wrong; yet everything is right. And she feels forces over which she has no control.

She slowly strolls towards the lab, passes it, and begins a tour of the small island. Following its perimeter, she climbs the knoll behind the lab, and once she is beyond the light cast from the lab's windows, the night is very black. She seems to float in the darkness as she gropes for tree trunks to clutch, squeezing between gnarled butts of stunted spruce, instinctively ducking green and dead branches.

Sweetie follows her as a timid dog would, making no noise but always there, a step behind.

They stop, she and Sweetie, atop a rocky bluff where she looks down at the darkened sea a dozen yards below. She pets Sweetie's back; the doe rubs her head and neck against her pantleg. "You're a pretty girl, Sweetie." And she tells herself, *I can be as hard to run off as you are if I want to be.*

It's very late when she returns to the lab. Still, she hears the ball of his typewriter rapidly slap the platen as she tiptoes through the kitchen, her boots in hand. She pulls the sheet back on the bed wide enough for two...the next thing she knows, she's awakened by Jeb calling from the kitchen.

She hears John stumble through the double doors separating the kitchen from the rest of the lab. Hastily dressing, she is barely awake as she pushes the swinging doors aside and volunteers, "I'll make coffee."

"I already got it. Thanks anyway."

"Hey, I can't stay. The weather's going to hell so I had to come out early." The pilot pours himself a half cup of coffee that must have been made hours ago as thick as it is.

John also pours himself a half cup so there will be some for her: "Yeah, I heard the marine forecast before I laid down."

Louise takes the now mostly empty pot, dumps the grounds and refills it with water—she will wait for fresh.

"Shit, John, you must've just got to bed."

"I have a draft you can take. It's rough, but readable, I hope. Definitely not ready for publication."

Producing a white cardboard box of powdered-sugar covered doughnuts, Jeb says, while indicating that both John and Louise should help themselves, "How about you going to Juneau and presenting the paper yourself."

Yawning, John shakes his head: "You know me better than to even ask. You know what I think of that circus down there."

"Just this one time."

"NO!"

"You're cutting off your nose. You know if you go, it'll lead to another study." The pilot takes a third doughnut, each two bites apiece.

"Better I cut it off than have them peck at it until it falls off." This is fished-out water into which the state biologist casts his line: John is on Blue Fox Island because he tired of politics long ago.

"It'd be nice if you'd go this one time. Make the presentation. The pay'll be good. Expenses plus one-fifty a day for every day you're gone from here, and you know how the weather can be this time of year."

"No."

"Don't you want to present your work?" asks Louise.

"Sure I do, but presenting my work doesn't have anything to do with this. They'll want the paper on Saturday, they always do. And Jeb here knows I don't work Saturdays. Plus, I can't leave the lab this time of year. Too many things need tending here." He has said more to Louise than he intended.

Knowing how important the presentation of a paper is, Louise volunteers, "I can stay here."

"No...there are cultures that have to be kept warm, and it'd take too long to show you what needs done, and I'm the only one who knows how to keep the generators running if the wind ever decides to quit blowing."

"What's the chance of that?" Facing him squarely, Louise says, "Those are excuses, not reasons for not going."

"I've also begun some mouse bioassays—PSP testing." He pauses, knowing he is only giving excuses. She wants reasons, and he doesn't want to go into them. Nevertheless, he places his hands on her shoulders, and says, "As far as going to Juneau goes, I've battled with subcommittees and advisory boards for the last time. They can either accept a written report or come here and talk to me. My time's more valuable than theirs. Besides, the more days they're away from Juneau, the better off Alaska is." She doesn't, he believes, need more reason than that.

Jeb turns to Louise and asks: "Perhaps you'd like to make the presentation? It'd be better if someone other than ADF&G staff presents John's results." To John, Jeb asks, "Would it be all right if she presents your paper?"

"She can if she wants. She knows enough."

"John, I don't want to take this from you. I can watch the lab, really."

"You probably can, but I wouldn't leave you here alone."

"I'll be all right—"

"Yeah, more all right here than in Juneau, but I'm still not leaving you, nor going."

She ought to stay here, but a hundred and fifty a day and just when she needs it, that is too much not to jump at. Besides, she will have to return to tell how the presentation went. To Jeb, she says, "I think he is making a mistake, but I'll go if he doesn't want to but only to represent him."

"That's all right with you?" Jeb asks John.

"Yeah. Just make sure she has everything she needs. She isn't to spend a cent. None of this *reimbursed later* business."

"I'll see that she's provided for...plane's idling. We need to be goin'."

She hasn't yet unpacked her dufflebag so she says, "I'll be there in a minute." Then ducking through the double doors, she returns hugging the typed draft, and a manila envelope of prints. Short of breath but wanting to do this, she gives John a goodbye peck on her way out the door, then waves to him from the plane.

* * *