

## Chapter 12

### Thanksgiving, 1963: Pacific Endeavor Seafoods' mess hall

In the moments of relief and disgust that followed the news of Kirk's rescue, Laura called Owen Faltrip and Howie Lindseth over to the counter in the store. She reminded them that most people hadn't received their Thanksgiving food orders from town because the planes had been backlogged with mail and passengers and the weather had turned bad before they could make any freight runs. "I don't think very many of us got our shipments of Thanksgiving supplies—I know I didn't! Whaddya think of calling a general potluck for tomorrow evening in the mess hall, and we can feast on whatever we can come up with?" Mr. Lindseth said, "Betty had the same worries. This'd solve her menu dilemmas—nobody will care about missing Thanksgiving food when there's a potluck." He patted his stomach in anticipation, eliciting a little giggle from Laura. "We'll just roll each other home afterwards!"

Owen agreed. "Sounds like a great plan, Laura. Get on the horn and let 'em know. What, maybe about 6 tomorrow?" Laura nodded. Mr. Faltrip added that he'd ordered a few turkeys and other 'fixins' for sale in the store, and that they were supposed to come in on the *Kolodka II*, but that Petey was holding in Kodiak until after this latest storm. Windy Bazaroff was with him. Mr. Faltrip turned to Howie, "Could you ask Betty to fire up the kitchen in the mess hall tomorrow in case anyone needs help cooking something?" Howie nodded, and Owen suddenly let out a snort and added, "Anyways, it seems I've already let our *biggest* turkey get away!" Howie Lindseth laughed at the reference to Kirk Thorsen, and left by the side door to talk to Betty about the plan, discussing Quirky's alleged parentage under his breath. Laura thanked Owen, and ducked into the office to call the village "in the blind."

After making the announcement, Laura was amused to get a call from the *Sally G.*, safely tied up again at the Ouzinkie Packing Company dock. "Hey Laura, this is the *Sally G.* Should we send out a raiding party to crash your feast? I hear we've got an extra boat on the other side of Cat Island!" Laura's voice took on an exaggerated whine, "Aw Sam, poor Owen's still in a state of grief. Now don't make it worse! Maybe our food'll make him all better. Happy Thanksgiving, Ouzinkie!" Sam came back more seriously now: "Roger, Sokroshera Cove. Could 'a been a lot worse. Guess we do have things to be thankful for. *Sally G.* out."

Faltrip told Laura to go home and take care of her own feast. "I'll be up in my apartment doing some paperwork, but I've got my old Northern 'ship to shore' radio up there if I need to talk to anybody. It doesn't have quite the range of the set here, but nobody's out on the water anymore, so you go home and enjoy your evening." Laura patted his arm and shook her head in sympathy. With that, they shut down the lights, locked up and went their separate ways. Losing the *Penny Earned* was like losing a beloved dog or seeing the old homestead go up in a prairie fire for poor Owen. It was almost, but not quite, like losing a family member to lose your boat, so profound was the bond of man and machine in these waters. No one *actually* thought of their boats as family members, but for those like Owen who had

just lost his boat, it did feel like losing something almost that close to you. Someone who didn't live in a seagoing community wouldn't quite understand.

In his room, listening on the portable radio, Judson wondered just how long it would take for the Kirk Thorsen fiasco to die down. He had absently turned to the shortwave band while reading, and had caught almost all of the drama with the *Penny Earned*. Now, he was hooked, like some homebody who was glued to the afternoon soap operas because something big was possibly going to happen, eventually. Except that when things happened up here, they really *were* big. He went into his dad's office and told him about the sinking of the *Penny Earned*, and his father had a more measured, but equally uncomplimentary, appraisal of how Quirky had conducted himself. Then they talked about cooking, to see if there was anything edible they could make for tomorrow's feast. Neither Hansen thought so. The bachelors knew they just couldn't compete with these remarkable village mothers in the palatable cuisine department.

People began arriving before five on Thanksgiving evening. Only a couple of families had experienced a traditional Thanksgiving feast, those with big freezers and great foresight. When the *Marla S.* went to Kodiak and got the saltwater pump fixed, Billy, Jr. had taken a long shopping list with him, and Alice had planned ahead. So this evening Alice Selivanoff, with Marla in tow, brought a large platter of sliced turkey, from their own feast. Marla carried a nice pumpkin pie with a box of Dream Whip mix tucked under her arm, so those who needed a traditional fix could get one.

Danny had thoughtfully provided Carla, the kids, and Dottie with a ride, and carried in a big stew pot for Dottie. Carla Bazaroff carried in a yellow cake she had fancied up with chopped canned peaches inside, and a powdered sugar cinnamon glaze on the outside, which all proved to be a delicious combination. Not bad going at all, considering that her house had no electricity or running water, and considering that her husband was stormbound in town, unable to run interference with the little ones. Mrs. Dottie Kurtashkin, also uncharacteristically without her weather-stranded husband, unveiled what was in her huge pot: Dottie's famous venison stew, with big chunks of turnips and potatoes from her own garden, carrots, and an expert's blend of spices. Judson thought of some Disney fairy godmother working magic when he envisioned Dottie hovering in her little kitchen. Judson was sure it would be awful, and was pleasantly surprised by its wild but memorable flavors. He shunted Disney aside when his devious brain reminded him that this was like eating Bambi. But he was not to get much more than a taste, and not until later, thanks to the other masterpieces on the menu.

Mrs. Lindseth had made a huge blueberry cobbler in one of the mess hall's industrial-sized baking pans, using frozen blueberries picked from the not-so-secret patch on the side of a hill, under the trees above the upper lake. She naturally had free reign in the mess hall kitchen where she worked, but had helped several others with their creations when their little oil stoves would have been unequal to the tasks. She told her own family to "eat something simple" for lunch, while she

staffed the mess hall kitchen all afternoon to assist whoever might need it. More almost reflexive “pulling together,” thought Judson when he found out about it.

However, the triumph of the evening was the dish that emerged through the swinging doors of the mess hall kitchen shortly before everyone began to eat. Those with perceptive noses had caught the promise of its existence as they walked past the store onto the front dock. In one of the mess hall’s enormous baking pans, carried carefully by a weary but triumphant Gail Pankoff, was Kodiak Island’s best *perok*. Judson watched with amazement, as it immediately became the center attraction of the feast. Sandy Ann had taken one look and whiff, and warned Judson to get in line or regret it forever. Drawn only by an aroma that hinted at its contents, the locals had no prior experience at all with Gail’s *perok*, but were more than willing to take a chance. And word had gotten around almost telepathically that Gail had created something awesome.

Judson followed Sandy Ann through the line in time to get a big, square piece of *perok*. Soon, at one of the long tables, Judson discovered what all the fuss was about. Granted, every family in town could make *perok*. Some even made it with canned corned beef. *Corned beef!* Sandy Ann had brought her Vomit Face out of retirement for that discussion. But as Judson later discovered, Gail Pankoff had followed, and executed perfectly, Edith Swan’s recipe from Larsen Bay. It took several minutes for Sandy Ann to backwards-engineer the recipe from the steaming, savory success on her big mess hall plate, narrating each step with her mouth full.

An Edith Swan *perok* had interspersed layers of cooked rice and salmon with a piecrust top, bottom, and sides. That’s your basic *perok* ingredients, but for this dish, it was like saying a Rolls Royce has four tires and a horn. A layer of thick salmon fillet pieces lay upon a layer of white rice and the bottom crust. Gracing Gail’s layer was a good “red” salmon, carefully de-boned. Truth be told, here in the village, no one ever minded a few surprise bones, and chewed all fish dishes with a preliminary rolling motion to safely weed them out. And no one minded that by this time of the year, the salmon had first been in the freezer for several months.

“Here’s where it gets good,” Sandy Ann barely was able to say with a full mouth. On top of the salmon fillet pieces was a layer of finely chopped cabbage with bits of onion, with enough black pepper on it to be almost painful. There was salt in there, too, but that was invisible. Then another layer of white rice was followed by another Swan innovation: chopped fried bacon pieces and chopped hard-boiled egg pieces on another layer of finely chopped and heavily peppered cabbage and onion, over which the top crust was laid. Sandy Ann’s garbled diction indicated she was in awe by this time. The aforementioned crust, of the apple pie variety, was pressed into perhaps an even more delicious role here. It acted like a Dutch oven, and sealed in just enough moisture and circulating flavors to give this *perok* a character far greater than the sum of its parts.

Judson’s piece of *perok* was almost four inches square, in all directions, a hearty feast in itself. As he was wolfing it down, Sandy Ann was mentioning something

about some people using shredded carrots with the cabbage, or substituting rutabaga. He thrust aside his own desire to make a Vomit Face at the thought of rutabaga, and just took another bite. The *perok* was creating an explosion of flavors in his mouth. Soon it was reduced to only a few specks of crust. He barely had enough room to sample the venison stew and then stumble over for a small portion of the blueberry cobbler, leaving his dad to vouch for Carla's cake.

In a near coma, Judson tapped Gail on the shoulder and complimented her on her amazing dish, "That *perok* was so good, I feel that I should marry you now!" Danny, sitting strategically close across the table, shot Judson a quick, surprised frown, and Sandy Ann, standing behind Judson, put her hand over her mouth before catching herself and staring away with pretend unconcern. Meanwhile, Rinny, sitting beside Danny on the other side, punched him repeatedly in the arm. He seemed to ignore it. While trying to suppress a giggle, Gail quipped, "That's the tenth offer I've had in the last five minutes. Who'll make it eleven?" She turned partly in Danny's direction before facing Judson again, knowing that he'd be as beet red as Sandy Ann could get by now, and smiling slyly at Judson.

She decided not to prolong the pain, and settled on the back-story. "When I worked at the Alaska Packers' cannery down in Larsen Bay, I met Edith Swan, and got to know her and her mom, Alice Aga. One day when the cannery was taking a day off, she asked me over for dinner. She served me her *perok*. I couldn't believe how good it was. She said she just threw in a little of this and that—but I twisted her arm, and I got her to write down the recipe." She paused, ever so slightly, as if choosing her words with care. "I could have gotten it right, maybe, after a few tries. But this one is the best I've ever found." She looked as if she were about to turn her head again. "*No jokes,*" said Judson, and the whole table laughed at his use of the local slang. Now she *was* talking about *perok* recipes just then, was she not? Judson realized that a lot of Rinny's alluring, flirtatious qualities must have been inheritable characteristics.

It was traditional for people to sit around and talk in these mess-hall gatherings for as long as possible, and Judson was one who tried to stay around till the last. Judson was on the edge of a conversation between Mr. Lindseth and Truck Brother Jake when he heard Mr. Faltrip at the next table. He was standing beside Marty Pankoff and Billy Selivanoff, Jr. "So, pump's all fixed and ready to go? Ready to get out there and round up some more crab? I'd say it's time to do good for a while, gentlemen." In between, each of his sentences had been indistinct mumbling from his former sparring partners. Judson smiled at the educated and articulate Owen's deliberate misuse of the word *good*, stressing instead their need to stay out of trouble. He noticed that the two men seemed to have caught Owen's drift. Wonder how long this sweet little truce will last?

### **Christmas Season in Sokroshera Cove, 1963**

When Mr. Hansen told the students of the letter confirming a new school for the following year, they were suitably excited. The mess hall wasn't a proper school, even though they'd all done a remarkable job of making do. The kids were nostalgic

for real desks, a real playground, and for a place away from the distractions of the cannery. Naturally, they all wanted to take Mrs. Lindseth, the kitchen, and their "mug up" privileges with them to the new school. There were several loud groans when Mr. Hansen explained that wouldn't be possible.

Rinny seemed to be doing better. She had developed a strong friendship with Sandy Ann, once the latter was reasonably convinced of her safety around Judson. Herman was playing a strange 'observe and report' kind of game with his heart, and had made no overt moves in Rinny's direction, though Judson could tell he was still smitten. Rinny, apparently done with theatrics, seemed to admire Herman at least, and they did talk on occasion. A molasses relationship, thought Judson, borrowing yet another phrase from his grandmother about someone taking his sweet time. Jake and April were acting just as good little second and fourth graders should, and played on opposite ends of the playground, until which time Jake saw fit to terrorize the other kids. But April no longer seemed as afraid of having a boy as a friend, if not a 'boyfriend.'

April's change of heart, or at least a reduction in her terror, was due to the changed environment at Anicia's old house, where the Bazaroffs stayed. Anya was staying sober, and the house was staying clean. She was acting like a mom for the first time. She even found part-time work building boxes in the warehouse of the cannery. Anicia was more than willing to watch the littlest Bazaroff now that the house was no longer a total mess. Judson finally learned the baby's name was Delia, and was already nicknamed "Dilly." But the biggest change in that household was the frequent, prolonged visits of Jakob Pedersen. It was true that the elder Jake and Anya were sometimes seen walking on Stepan's beach together, or even taking a ride in Jake's tank of a truck up into the hills of the fort. But in actuality, Jakob's visits did not primarily involve Anya.

Jakob was also coming to the house to spend regular time with his son Ward. He was taking him out on Danny's boat to relearn seamanship at every opportunity. Because the fire had damaged Ward's hands, Jakob put his son through every exercise and manual dexterity task he could think of, to help Ward get his motion and strength back. Acting more and more like a father, Jakob had also taken up assisting Ward with his correspondence classes, leaving very little for Mr. Hansen to do other than to double-check. Jakob figured Mr. Hansen already had a full plate, and there was some truth in that. But it was very good for Ward to have a father figure. Ward and his real dad were developing a strong bond, something he'd needed for a long time. Through all of this, Ward Bazaroff was transforming into an almost completely different person than before the fire.

Yet even this was not the main reason that Jakob Pedersen was spending time in the old log home with the red trim. He would come over in the evenings and spend several hours huddled with Anicia Novikov, poring over old books, and talking softly in Russian. Sometimes she would go to a shelf in her room and retrieve another aging volume for them to talk about. Frequently, he would borrow one, returning a few days later to discuss it, only to borrow another one. When Ward told him about this, Judson wondered aloud when Jakob had learned Russian. Ward explained that

while his dad was in the Mission in Ouzinkie, he had often gone to help out Sam Gelsen's grandparents, and they had taught him to read and speak Russian. Ward added, "My Dad says that he decided to be a corpsman in the service because of helping the Gelsens when they got sick." Judson nodded appreciatively at this new knowledge; the oldest "Truck Brother" was much more than he seemed to be at first. Perhaps, in visiting Anicia, the elder Jake was merely learning about local history and culture from the village matriarch. But somehow, Judson doubted that's all it involved. And it wasn't until the Christmas season that Jake Pedersen decided to explain himself to the community.

The days leading up to Christmas began a season of turmoil in Judson. He felt the isolation, the intense quiet, and loneliness, more than at any other time. The hectic shopping trips to Phoenix and Flagstaff, the push and shove of long checkout lines, accompanied by a soundtrack of shallow holiday tunes and excited chatter – all of this had vanished. It was replaced by the monotonous dripping of rain, or the sparkling silence of deep snow, when it was so quiet you could swear you'd gone deaf. What should have been a joyful time was becoming anything but. Judson reluctantly reminded himself how hard it had actually been during those first Christmas seasons without his mother. He and his father had grimly waded through crowded stores, only to return, tempers on edge, to their apartment prison. Judson had endured the drunken rages, finding scant refuge in the mindless diversions of the television. These recollections brought pangs of pain and sleepless nights. He felt the absence of his mother more intensely in this season, and even more when he was alone, so he tried hard not to be. He spent more time than usual hanging out at the store, and jumped at any opportunity to hang out with his friends. Judson finally shook off his mood after taking a long walk on Stepan's Beach, and making a mental list of all the good things about Christmas in the village. And he was shocked when he realized the obvious fact that if they'd stayed in Arizona, his mother would still be gone, and his home life might have gotten much worse. Judson shuddered and dismissed that previous existence as he headed off to find his friends.

A cutthroat game of "Sorry" at the Lindseths' after an equally invigorating snowball fight sealed the deal: Judson was finally ready to enjoy Christmas. Their old neighbor Petey Kurt provided another high point one morning at the mess hall school. It was hilarious to watch Mr. Kurtashkin in his battered old Santa suit as he thoroughly convinced young Alexander and the twins of his identity as the real St. Nicholas. April and Barbara had their doubts, and all the other students knew him from the first words out of his mouth, even if remembering his shtick from past years had not been enough. Judson thought it was very cute to listen to a Santa Claus speaking about salmon and seiners and crab with the intonation of an old village elder to the delight of all the students, since the real Mr. Kurtashkin, as himself, was already a beloved character to all of them.

Neither Hansen had any opportunity to shop for the other, so they had no gifts at all to wrap. A quick conversation the week before the big day convinced both of them that they were fine with that. A box of wrapped presents from Grandma Hansen and another smaller one from his mother's parents made the space under

the tree look somewhat normal. Another high point in this Christmas in their new home was the unusual process of finding a tree. One evening just before Christmas, Danny took Judson up to a side road in the fort, and they slogged through sodden snow until they found a perfect tree, cut the top two thirds off it, and brought it back to the superintendent's house. "Always leave three or four feet worth of branches alive at the bottom," Danny had explained. "That way it doesn't leave a big hole in the forest." He pointed out several trees that had been topped in this manner some years earlier, as they drove down the hill. The topped trees looked a bit like candelabras with their multiple trunks, many of the remaining branches having grown upward, rather than outward. Judson would never have guessed that they were once someone's Christmas tree.

Danny's method was right; there were no ugly stumps in this forest on their account. Danny had filled a bucket with leftover coal from a pile he found just outside the "rec hall" above the lake, telling Judson that this was the best way to keep a tree alive. The coal and water around the trunk kept it nice and snug and apparently helped the tree stay fresh. The young Sitka spruce tree, especially since it had grown out in the open, looked a lot more like a big green muffin in their living room than the traditional towering triangle of the Christmas cards. But it smelled great. Judson and his dad did a decent job of decorating it to their satisfaction. Going out to cut his own tree was the most memorable detail of a village Christmas so far. There would be more to come.

On Christmas day, the Hansen men had breakfast and then sat beside their little Christmas tree decorated with lights and colored balls that they had bought from the small selection available in the village store. They took turns opening presents, and it was Judson's job to write down what they had received and from whom. The grandparents on both sides seemed to think that Judson was likely to freeze to death, and mittens, a scarf, and several thick pairs of boot socks came his way. Thankfully, the colors weren't too out of line for Sokroshera Cove fashions, and his fuzzy collection would come in handy. Unfortunately, he found the handmade mittens to be practically worthless against wind or moisture, and usually stuck to a pair of fleece-lined leather gloves he'd bought at the store.

Judson's other grandma, the one who usually sent him records, came through in a big way. From Grandma Hansen he got a hardbound copy of a book with a strange title, *A Wrinkle in Time*, and decided it would be worth trying. By the time school started up again in January, he had already read it twice. He didn't think he was like Calvin at all, and certainly was no genius like little Charles Wallace, but he saw hints of Sandy Ann occasionally in Meg. What most captured his imagination about the book was the epic battle of good versus evil that spanned generations and even planets. He wondered what it would be like to join in the battle to save the universe. But when Madeline L'Engle described Mrs. Murray, Meg's mother, it made him miss his own mother terribly, and even brought him to tears, alone in his room, on one occasion.

Without the clutter of endless TV specials and frivolous commercials for this or that, both he and Mr. Hansen found music to be of great comfort at Christmas. Their

holiday collection totaled exactly three albums, and they played them frequently during the Christmas season. Percy Faith's *Hallelujah!* had splendid versions of "What Child is This?" and "Away in a Manger," and neither Hansen cared that this album fell under the category of 'elevator music.' It was not the time of year to worry about such things. *Christmas with the Augustana Choir* came from Kayah's Lutheran parents the year she passed away. It was a large, well-trained choir of Lutheran college students presenting both common and unusual Christmas hymns. Both Hansens thought of Kayah each time they heard it. Judson liked the fact that with his head between the speakers, the music had a "you are there" feel to it. His father preferred the Kingston Trio's *Last Month of the Year*. Judson did enjoy this frequently high-energy Christmas album featuring guitars, a banjo, and even a Greek bouzouki. The strains of the English caroling song "Wassail, wassail, all over the town... bless all in this house 'til we come again!" were stuck in his head all season long.

Then, a week before Christmas, Mr. Faltrip casually left another album on their doorstep, *Christmas with Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters*, which had the original "White Christmas" on it. Within days, Judson was in danger of wearing it out. He skipped the sappy "Christmas in (fill in the blank)" songs used to pad out the album, and concentrated on the former 78-rpm sides, now on LP, with both Bing and the Sisters. Was there ever a better version of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town"? Strangely, the famous Bing solo, "I'll Be Home for Christmas," did not make him homesick for Arizona, to his great surprise. Instead, the sentimental song made him think of the parallel universe-quality of the love affair of Owen and Pariscovia, writing letters that neither would read, yet somehow sensing each other's thoughts across the long miles, "...if only in my dreams." His mental association with that long-ago love story made the song almost too eerie to enjoy.

Judson didn't worry much about a "White Christmas," because Sokroshera Cove had snow in abundance followed by rain in excess back and forth for several weeks before the big day, with a roulette wheel guess as to which you'd get on the 25<sup>th</sup>. It was rain, but it didn't much matter in the end. The previous three days had blanketed the hillsides with snow, creating acres of picturesque snow scenes courtesy of the suddenly majestic-looking mountain, the thousands of snow-laden spruce trees, and a half-day of clear, cold, sunny weather to take it all in. On that one sunny morning, he, Sandy Ann and Herman had hiked to the upper lake, absorbing the views of snow-covered forest and gleaming ice. Then they walked out past the airstrip to the Unuak Channel, and took in the dramatic brilliance of the mountains on Afognak, shining in the rare, nearly cloudless winter sunlight against the dark, sparkling blue water of the channel. At every turn, a new and jaw-dropping vista awaited them, and Judson noticed that his village friends were just as impressed with it all as he was. Judson was learning that if you were a local, you soaked up the sunny days like a tourist, and ignored the others to the point that everyone's mental image of their surroundings was always the sunny, Technicolor one. His dad had called it having a "photogenic memory," and he and Sandy Ann had laughed, because it was so true.

A few days after Christmas, Sandy Ann came over around sunset (in mid-afternoon) and warned them not to take their Christmas tree down yet, until she told them to, and she didn't explain. So they hadn't. Then on the evening of January 7, she stopped by, bringing with her Mrs. Lindseth's framed copy of Warner Sallman's "Head of Christ" painting. It was very Baptist art for an Orthodox household, undoubtedly given to Betty by someone at the Mission when she lived there as a child. "This is the only *other* Holy Picture we have," she explained, referring to the lovely Russian Orthodox Ikon of Mary and Baby Jesus gracing a corner of the Lindseth kitchen. She asked if it would be ok if she propped the borrowed painting up in a corner of the living room on a bookshelf "Where everybody can see it," assuring the Hansens that she'd bring it back to her mom's "After." Then she made another strange request, as though reciting a message from someone else. "Please put about two gallons of water in a large pot on the back of the stove. Promise!" After getting their assured cooperation, she didn't explain any further. Then Sandy Ann, the friendly secret agent left, refusing any of Judson's requests for more clarity. They just shrugged and did as they were told.

At a little after eight, the Hansen men heard a lot of stomping and clattering out on the porch, and (no, not eight tiny reindeer) at least eight adults plus many of the kids poured into the big living room, one of them carrying a huge multi-rayed star on a wooden shaft that allowed it to be twirled. It had an Orthodox Ikon, in the center, attached to the shaft, which did not turn. The star, decorated with sparkly gold and silver streamers, measured almost four feet tip to tip. Ward Bazaroff was the one doing a commendable job of holding and twirling the star. Plenty of manual dexterity on display here, thought Judson with satisfaction. The guests all approached the picture of Christ that Sandy Ann had brought. Ward began to twirl the star while facing the painting. The group began singing in Russian, a bit haltingly as though the memories of some of the singers were a bit rusty. But the ancient songs had the same otherworldly, ethereal quality as the "Memory Eternal" sung by Anicia at the memorial service for Will Rezoff.

Judson noticed that Petey, Dottie, Jakob Pedersen, and Anya Bazaroff did the majority of the singing. Danny was watching from the sidelines. But Betty Lindseth, Laura Rezoff, Gail, and her brother Marty were joining in, too. Marla Selivanoff was there, but mostly seemed to be watching Ward and soaking it in, as though it were an almost foreign event for her. Judson understood why; how many other ceremonies had her antagonistic father ever permitted her to witness? It made Judson happy for some reason to see the recently inebriated and troublesome "Smarty Pants" becoming something more and better, if only for this season. Maybe old Faltrip knocked some sense into him after all. Speaking of Faltrip, Owen had come down the porch from his apartment when he heard the crowd, and was standing not more than two feet from Marty at that moment, a rare smile of appreciation on his face. The small choir was singing something that sounded like "*Rah—du—shah, Mah—ree—ah...*" and Judson recognized the Russian form of the name Mary (or is Mary the American version of Maria?) Judson decided it didn't much matter. This was the time to honor the Mother and the Child.

The song changed to one wishing in English "Many, many happy new years!" For this, Ward was spinning the lovely star in the opposite direction. "I think that represents the many years that have passed..." Sandy Ann was explaining in his ear. Judson jumped slightly, but Sandy Ann didn't seem to notice. When did she come over to stand by him? Finally, the village choir sang two verses of "Silent Night," in English, joined by Jeffrey Hansen, singing baritone. Then the ceremony was over, and the Hansens thanked their guests for their unexpected and beautiful gift. "Oh, we're not leaving," said Betty Lindseth with a conspiratorial laugh, "At least if that's all right? We chose your house last so we could warm up here before we go home." Betty and Laura and Gail made a beeline for the kitchen, there being *no* objection to this from either Hansen! Soon the resourceful women had magically produced various holiday breads and cookies from shopping bags Judson hadn't noticed anyone carrying.

The teakettle soon began singing, announcing tea and (instant) coffee, and the "two gallons of water on the back of the stove" had magically transformed into fragrant, steaming hot cocoa. Sandy Ann played tour guide again, explaining that the Russian Orthodox Church used something she called the "Old Calendar," which had the same dates, but was thirteen days off. "A teacher told me it was because of a... um... *miscalculation* of the time it takes for the earth to orbit the sun. So the Old Calendar kept getting farther and farther behind," Sandy Ann stated proudly. Judson appreciated by now that when Sandy Ann knew something, she really knew it. He also liked that she somehow managed to avoid being annoying in the process. She's never been *insufferable*, he thought, grasping for the word, and laughing that he was doing what she often did. But another thought, stronger than the first, was that he was getting a good holiday season after all. So this was Christmas, again, Christmas enhanced, expanded, and redefined. Judson immediately liked the concept, and suddenly understood why all the Christmas lights in the village had been strung only a couple of days before "American Christmas," and were still shining now. The last of the Christmas lights would come down sometime in February, after what his mom's parents had called "The Epiphany," celebrating the arrival of the Wise Men.

They had all of them just settled in to visiting and consuming Christmas goodies when Alice Selivanoff, little ones in tow, stomped up the stairs a bit crossly. "I tried since everybody started at Anicia's to get my Billy to come along this time, but he..." She let the group fill in the blanks. Judson realized that the 'starring' group had not dared to enter Billy Jr.'s house, and suddenly felt sad for Mrs. Selivanoff and her kids. Alice continued, "Still dunno why he hates church things so much. And now I missed your beautiful..." She was more than out of breath; she was at a loss for words in frustration and disappointment. Ward looked at his dad, then at his mom, and walked outside to get the star, which he'd carefully placed out on the wide porch, well away from any stray feet. Once again, he faced the picture, and they all rose to their feet, some with cup and plate in hand, and sang the song with "Maria" in it again. At the end, Alice's face was wet with tears. Her little sister Gail came over and gave her a big hug. Marty, her brother was suddenly fascinated by a slice of apple cranberry bread on his plate. It's like a ping-pong match in here—so hard to keep your eye on everything, thought Judson.

The family dynamics was in no danger of dampening the spirits in the room, and soon the conversation resumed with no difficulty. Judson, seated nearby, heard his father talking to Owen about losing the *Penny Earned*. He wasn't surprised to find out that it was insured, but it was uncertain whether the incident counted as negligence, in which case Faltrip would get nothing. "You could say it was stolen," said Marty, suddenly helpful. Owen politely rejected that idea. But he thought there was one detail that that would probably satisfy the adjusters. Owen explained that Kirk was nearly an hour into his journey when he came out from behind Spruce Island and was surprised by the squall. Judson thought that sounded like a reasonable version of the facts, and noticed Mr. Faltrip's reluctance to place blame, even in this situation. Jeffrey changed the subject. "The island has a Russian name, but everyone calls it Cat Island. Do you know why?" Mr. Faltrip laughed. "Supposedly it's from a multitude of litters of kittens that took their last vacations there," he said. "That's pretty awful," declared Jeffrey. Owen agreed. "Or if you prefer, you can just say it looks like a sleeping cat from the Ouzinkie side," added Owen with a chuckle, letting Jeffrey decide the etymology of the name for himself.

Kirk Thorsen had returned to the cannery the day after Thanksgiving, but had been keeping a low profile lately, coming to work and then disappearing into his trailer. He had even been nice to Laura while getting supplies. "So 'Pride cometh before destruction,' and all that," quoted Mr. Faltrip, who added with considerable charity, "And that kind of misfortune can happen to *any* of us, even though Kirk made it look pretty easy!" He shook his head, and continued, "I like what Norm Smith always says on the radio when he signs off, 'GWWP: God Willing, Weather Permitting.' Your plans and the weather have to match or nothing good will happen, especially in a small, underpowered boat with no radar like the *Penny Earned* or the *Evangel*. You take your eye off the ball..." Owen had shifted metaphors here, "...and Alaska has a way of smacking you upside the head. It might even do that if you *have* been paying attention!" Mr. Hansen nodded. Owen got no argument from anyone for that observation.

Marty was just asking if the cannery was going to stay operating, and if somebody was going to get to run the *PES-4* or the more lucrative, larger *PES-7*, which was only slightly smaller than the *Marla S*. Owen calmly told him that the *PES-4* was still available for Pete Kurtashkin, Jr. if he ever moved back. His tone with Marty reminded Judson of a teacher explaining the class rules. "Next season, if everything works out, the *PES-7* will be outfitted as a crabber, and I think I'll put Windy Bazaroff at the helm. Of course, I'll make sure it gets brand new water pumps," added Owen dryly. Marty looked shocked. But his reaction was cut short by the insistent *ding, ding, ding* of a teaspoon whacking a coffee cup. Owen appeared relieved at the interruption, and Marty reluctantly stashed whatever comment he might have had ready, turning toward the sound as well.

Judson looked up to see Jakob Pedersen, seated next to Anya, rise from his seat, and look around the room. Betty, Laura, and Gale stuck their heads out of the kitchen. "As many of you know," he began, "I've been seeing a lot of Anicia Novikoff lately." "Ummmm!" interrupted little Jake, loudly pretending to be

scandalized, and his mother shot him a brusque "Shush!" Sandy Ann turned to him and said, "Oh, for goodness sakes, not *that* way!" The rest of the room had a good laugh before the elder Jake could continue with his announcement. "I'll have to work on using more 'little Jake'-proof sentences in the future," he laughed. A considerably *warmer* person than when I first met him, Judson observed. "The reason..." he looked at young Jake with a mock frown followed immediately by a little smile, "...I have been over there is that I have been studying some of the materials used by the Blessed Readers. As you know, Anicia is related by marriage to the last Blessed Reader of this village, back in the 1830s." He paused briefly, "And I have decided to become a Blessed Reader. I will also begin the work to build a church here on Sokroshera Island." Anya took his hand and he did not let it go. Judson was mesmerized by the scene, and forced himself to look away.

Jakob Pedersen was not through with his announcements. "I've also decided to become a family man, and a husband. As soon as Anya and I can make the arrangements and get a Priest out here to Sokroshera Cove, I intend to get married, and to offer my services in training to become a Blessed Reader." He held up his hand, barely getting the quiet he requested. "I have Laura and Will to thank for showing me what a real family is." His sister Betty nodded; he was referring to how the Rezoffs loved their adopted children, not slighting her and Howie. "I have grown to love *all four* of the Bazaroff kids, and will be proud to step in as their daddy. So Anya, thank you for saying yes to shaggy old me." He turned and smiled at her through his abundant dark beard.

Anya just looked up at him and returned the smile, a real, honest blush appearing across her beautiful, striking, exotic features. The shameless one had actually blushed; miracles were in the air. What an amazing transformation from the slutty wreck of a woman who had greeted Judson that horrible day! Jakob Pedersen had been the missing piece of her puzzle, the one who finally gave her soul an anchor. In very a real sense, she and their son Ward were becoming his soul's anchor too. Judson, already impressed with "Anya the Avenger," tried not to stare at what a beautiful person she was becoming. There was a happy pandemonium for some time after this, but Alice Selivanoff was shaking her head and talking to Marty. "You know Billy won't like this at all, but we *just can't* let him get in the way this time." She pounded her fist into her knee. "Make sure *you* don't get in the way either!" There was a lot of noise, but Judson was sure that's what he heard.

Sandy Ann came back over to Judson from where she had been talking to Rinny, Herman, and Marla in the other corner. "What's a Blessed Reader?" Judson asked. "I thought you'd ask me that. Well... as best I know, they act like a Priest in places where there is no Priest. They can't do everything a Priest can, but they know all the prayers and saints' days and stuff." "Oh," said Judson, "Just like Jake Pedersen is a 'bandage man' where there is no doctor!" "That's right," said Sandy Ann. "Larry Ellanak in Ouzinkie is a Blessed Reader. I think I heard Gail say that the one down in Larsen Bay is named Robert Agik. Most villages have one, 'cept ours. We haven't had one since before the original herring cannery came in. Dad says that after the war, some of the families tried to build a church and train a new Blessed Reader,

but the church that was almost complete burned down in a windstorm. It's been like that for ages around here."

Sandy Ann was doing her trick of talking whole paragraphs without seeming to breathe, but Judson was not thinking of that. Judson suddenly felt like he was on the mountaintop with the heavenly flying creatures in *A Wrinkle in Time*, looking across space into the dark evil in the distance. And in spite of the warm, nearly stuffy atmosphere of the living room, he suddenly felt chilled. Shortly thereafter, the party broke up, with every last dish washed, dried, and put away, and the leftover cocoa (alas, only about two or three cups worth) put in a pitcher in the refrigerator. Herman actually complained at having to leave, but as Laura said, "It *is* a school night, son, and we want our good teacher to get his rest!" At this, she punched Jeffrey playfully and herded Herman and Barbara out the door.

### **January 1964: on the island**

After the season of Christmases had passed, the village settled down to its work routine, and the students settled into their studies again. Crab season would be pretty much over by mid-February, and was already slowly fading out. The cannery no longer operated every day, but everyone was still plenty busy. The school day still presented its challenges for Jeffrey Hansen. Barbara still needed to write her sentences a couple of times to get them to make sense. Neither Jake nor Eagle had a surefire grasp of their times tables yet. The twins were very good at copying short passages, but could rarely construct a written sentence unassisted, and had occasional difficulty spelling their own names. Some days they seemed to be learning, only apparently to forget it all the following day. Mr. Hansen and his sometime assistants struggled to tamp down their frustration at this, and patiently went over the lessons again. And yet the twins were invariably the most cheerful and talkative of all the students.

Herman stayed home for a couple of days in mid-January with a sore throat, and Sandy Ann and Rinny made him some soup and took it to him after school. The next day in class, Jake, somehow forgetting his own sister's role, laid into Rinny instead. "So Rinny... you made Herman soup! *Heeeeer comes the briiiiiide!*" "Oh, for Pete's sake, Jake, it was *just soup!*" said Sandy Ann, crossly. Rinny took a long look at Jake's head and pretended to heft a saucepan. "I know *just* what to do with the soup pan when it goes empty!" she said calmly. Jake dropped it. But Sandy Ann's inadvertent rhyme nearly glued itself to his name. The twins, for example, said "Pete's Sake Jake" (in unison, as usual) every time they saw him for the better part of a week before it faded mercifully away. And once, when little Jake lent a pencil to April, his merciless sister gave the village sound for shock and outrage, "*Ummmm!*" and reminded him, "It was *just soup!*" Will this quick blowback give Jake cause to think before he speaks? Judson sincerely doubted it.

The Friday after Herman got over his sore throat, Judson and Sandy Ann wandered into the store after taking a stroll down the dock. Laura Rezoff was beaming, behind the counter, with a stamp pad and a stack of postcards in front of her. Laura announced cryptically, "99646!" "Been trying to crack my old gym locker

combination, have you?" asked Judson, laughing. "9 - 9 - 6 - 4 - 6," repeated Laura, and was on the verge of explaining herself when Sandy Ann blurted, "Nine hundred ninety-six salmon for six cents a pound—not a great season!" Sandy Ann noticed that Judson didn't understand that one. But Laura repeated, "99646! It's the Sokroshera Cove *official* ZIP code! And today is the 'First day of issue!' So... wanna make some history?" Sandy Ann quipped, "Now I'm supposed to tell you how all the boys ask me that!" Judson almost blushed.

Laura Rezoff was not to be deterred. "My, what a mood you two are in. Really... *focus*. Our teeny tiny little post office is now officially on the map and in the books. Now it will take a week to get a letter, instead of seven days!" She laughed and then calmed herself down. "It *is* historic, kids. These are some 'First day of issue' postcards, like I told you. Mail them out, to anybody you like, because after today they'll be collectors' items! Stamp collecting is a big deal to some people, and these postcards are like gold to them." Sandy Ann and Judson both decided to send one to each other; Laura smiled as they each separated to opposite ends of the counter to write their messages. Sandy Ann sent one to both her Truck Brother Uncles, Judson sent one to Herman, and then he sent one to each of his grandmothers. And he suddenly couldn't think of anyone else. The closest thing he had to friends in Arizona had been some of the migrant workers' kids, who tended to move away without warning. It shocked him when he realized that he and his dad had been isolated and almost in solitary confinement in that school apartment back in Arizona. And here, with far fewer people around, he was awash in good friends and wonderful people like Mrs. Rezoff, the Lindseths, and the Truck Brothers. He almost forgot; he sent one to his dad, as "Head Schoolmaster, Sokroshera Cove Grade School, Sokroshera Cove, Alaska, 99646." They watched as Laura hand cancelled each one with her brand-new rubber stamp.

Sunday the 26<sup>th</sup> of January dawned clear and cold, after several such days. No wind, no new snow, and way too cold for rain. By mid-afternoon, the temperature had climbed slightly, reaching the high twenties, and Howie Lindseth checked his calendar and whispered something in Sandy Ann's ear. She clapped delightedly and ran to a box in the closet to dig around. That evening after supper, she, Herman, Jake, and Barbara, followed soon by Eagle, April, Rinny, Ward and Marla, congregated at the foot of the stairs at the superintendent's house. Mr. Lindseth roared up in the jeep, his tire chains clattering as he rolled along the frozen roadbed. Sandy Ann bounded up the stairs. "Judson, Mr. Hanson, the moon is out, so come out and *plaaa—ay!*" called Sandy Ann loudly in a singsong voice.

The Hansen men poked their heads out of the door. "It's time to ice skate," said Barbara, her own pink skates barely visible in the moonlight against her pink coat. Herman stepped forward. "Jay-Jay, my mom thinks you can fit my dad's skates," he said. Mr. Lindseth spoke up for the sake of two perplexed Hansens, "There's a little lake that is thick enough that I could drive my jeep over it—but I won't. There's a lower road that gets all the way down to the shore end. I'm gonna go over there and build a big fire, and you can use my skates, Mr. Jeffrey." He pointed to the trailer, with a large stack of dry firewood already piled in it. "Hop in wherever you can fit. I'll drive slow." His two kids hadn't moved yet, expecting something.

"Good thing I'm not bringing Ruth. If she fell out, then I'd be ruthless!" Judson and Mr. Hanson laughed, but no one else did, having heard this one before. Besides the pile of wood, there was also a Donnelley and Acheson shopping bag with unknown contents, because Howie was keeping it up front with him. They all piled in, with Sandy Ann, Jake, and Eagle in the jeep with Howie, and all the rest, including Mr. Hansen, crawling for space in the trailer. They all fit in somehow, and huddled together, the coziness helping to keep them warm out on the road.

Mr. Lindseth instructed Sandy Ann to hold his big flashlight and help him see the road. Once they turned left toward the lake, they were beneath the spruce canopy in almost total darkness, broken intermittently by the dim grey outline of a Quonset hut or other unidentifiable edifice visible in the shadows. Occasionally they could see part of the frozen upper lake through the trees, and its wide surface shone a purplish grey color in the moonlight. A single bare bulb glowed yellow from the pump house across the lake. At last, they turned right, down a small, forested hill past the far end of the lake, reaching a spot where the old Army road crossed a beach, bouncing through dunes and dried beach grass. The mountains of Afognak seemed close enough to touch, glowing blue in the moonlight to their left.

The beach ended at a rocky point, and the road curved steeply up to the top of the bluff. There was a place for anti-aircraft guns up there, Herman explained. Howell parked a little off the road and to the right, with the rocky, driftwood-strewn beach to his left. They were at the west end of a small frozen lake, separated from it by a fifty-foot wide swath of dormant meadow and beach grass. Between the jeep and the lake, Howie began setting up his campfire. He'd brought his own gasoline and diesel oil mixture, which he called his "joy juice," to speed the process, and soon the dry wood he'd brought was a roaring blaze. Howie added some beach logs that the kids had quickly collected, and these burned more slowly. The bonfire was now a perfect warm-up spot. Judson and Ward looked at the fire and then each other. Without a word, both seemed to realize that they needed to give open flames a new and happier association. Judson shrugged and walked toward the campfire, joined seconds later by Ward. They had both decided to try to enjoy this blaze.

Judson's skates did fit perfectly. As they all put on their skates, Jake looked at him and said, "This is the skating lake, but it's also skip rock beach, right over there. We still *gotta* come back here and have a contest!" Then Jake jumped up and down as he usually did when contemplating a wonderful future event. Not sure what Jake meant exactly, Judson just said ok, and stepped out on the lake. He had skated before, in an indoor rink, but this was nothing like that. The air, he realized, was not that cold, since there was no wind to sap your body heat. It was just four or five degrees below freezing, well within safety range for the ice, and good enough for a couple of hours of fun, interspersed frequently with scorching visits to the bonfire.

Judson noticed he was skating on a pretty pond of a lake, roughly oval in shape, with dark forested hills on either side. The larger, upper lake was hidden somewhere above them back in the trees, and this beachside pond was like a hidden gem, even by moonlight. He made a circuit of the lake, which was only

about three or four acres long and about two acres wide. The advantage to this lake as opposed to the "upper" lake was that this one had the nice beach area for a fire, and road access thanks to the gun emplacement on the cliffs above. The upper lake only had a short road as far as the pump house where Howell had once found his jeep, and would have made a fine skating choice, but without the spectacular mountain views across Unuak Channel, or a good spot for a bonfire. While Judson was making his lazy circles around the lake, Sandy Ann, Herman and the rest were seemingly running circles around him. He looked up in shock to see Herman sailing by in reverse, a skill, Judson realized, he didn't even know existed. Ward and Marla seemed not to be in the mood for dramatic displays, and just skated, arm in arm, across the ice.

Judson was making his third or fourth circuit (he'd changed it up by making huge, lazy figure eights every so often) and looking out at the strikingly beautiful mountains of Afognak, when one foot suddenly stopped cold. His body, still in motion, abruptly tumbled forward. He landed rather ingloriously on his right knee and the opposite wrist. He was soon grateful that his writing hand wasn't involved, because his wrist and knee hurt something fierce. He ended up in a bit of a heap near where he had spilled himself. Sandy Ann was beside him in a flash, her skates sending up a cold spray as she skidded sideways to a stop. "Oh, you've found the stick, or the leaf. There's always something stuck in the ice, and when a skate hits it, it's like perfect brakes. You have to put your uh... *appendages* on rotation," she said, retrieving yet another vocabulary word in Sandy Ann fashion.

Sandy Ann launched into a recitation reminiscent of little Jake's movie narrations: "Rules for falling on the ice: You land on one knee, then the next one, one elbow, then the next one, one shoulder, then the next one. And never land on your head, because you only got one of those!" She sounded so much like little Jake narrating a movie, and Judson laughed out loud. Once Judson had finished laughing, she explained that the idea came from an Alaskan humorist named Ruben Gaines, who read his stories and poems on an Anchorage radio station every week. "My Dad never misses it!" Judson felt better after laughing at her words and her delivery, in spite of the pain in his knee and wrist. It hurt a bit to bend both of them, but he could tell it was nothing too serious, and soon was back out on the ice, gliding around somewhat more warily this time. Eventually he threw caution to the wind, and sped up again. He stopped looking for obstacles in the ice, which would likely have been invisible in the glow of moonlight, and stared across the Channel toward the spectacular mountains.

Mr. Hansen, originally from Minnesota, was not as shy about the ice. He was surprisingly good, although the skates were probably one size too small for him and would soon retire him for that reason. He swooped and spun, and ducked and pivoted, and Judson was frankly amazed. For all his young life, his dad had been a teacher in the Arizona desert, out where the winters were considerably different from this one. "Dad! When did you..." The elder Hansen called out an answer as he did yet another swoop by. "I played hockey when I was your age. Minnee-So-Cold is a great place to learn to skate!" Judson realized his dad was not having as big an adjustment to winters in Sokroshera Cove as he was. In fact, the Kodiak Island

area had a considerably milder winter climate than Minnesota, due to the warm Gulf of Alaska acting to moderate its sub-arctic latitude. So the real adjustment had come when Jeffrey Hansen had moved out into the desert of Arizona, not just for college, but to live. What would possess him to do that? Good word, he realized. Kayah, his mother, had possessed his father. Does love inspire you do things like moving to a new world? In the case of his parents, apparently so.

Mr. Lindseth suddenly laid on the horn of the jeep, a little pipsqueak of a thing next to the sound of the Dodge Power Wagon his brother-in-law owned. He called out, "Come and get it!" like a cattle drive 'cookie' by his chuck wagon. What *it* was remained unknown, although the Lindseth kids undoubtedly knew. When Judson got to the fire, he saw that Mr. Lindseth had pulled about a two-foot square section of coals out onto the rocky beachside turf, and a metal rack was propped above the coals on four strategically placed rocks. On the rack lay two whole packages of bacon, crispy and sizzling. And a whole collection of soda cans was propped up in the coals away from the rack. "Hot soda? Never tried it!" remarked Judson. Mr. Lindseth preferred this time not to say but to show. Howie had brought Shasta orange, root beer, grape, and cream soda, and the already-opened cans were piping hot. Some had bubbled over. Judson asked for orange.

Mr. Lindseth grabbed oven mitts (that would clearly later need washing) and delicately placed a can on the top of the rack. It had overflowed a bit as it heated up. "Keep your gloves on, Jay-Jay. This is hot stuff!" laughed Mr. Lindseth. Sandy Ann retrieved a few pieces of bacon and handed Judson some. Steaming hot Shasta orange soda and just fried bacon—does it get any better than this? All of them suddenly had a ravenous appetite, and the entire stock disappeared within minutes. He'd be going home greasy, sticky, cold, and bruised, and none of that mattered. He took another look at the spectacular view across the Unuak Channel and Duck Bay, and then came back to the fire to stand near Herman and Sandy Ann. They stared at the coals for what seemed like ages, and thought long thoughts, before they finally realized it was time to leave. What a wonderful night! On the bumpy, slow drive back through the fort and across the meadow, Judson noticed that whenever trees obscured the nearly full moon, the sky seemed to be gray with stars. That's the only thing about tonight that's like the desert, he thought.

### **February 1964, in the village**

On Saturday, February 8<sup>th</sup>, Sandy Ann turned thirteen. For some reason she did not want to have a party, and when her mother wrung it out of her, she completely fell apart. "I... should be in seventh grade... I'm *older* than Jay-Jay... I'm not pretty like Rinny... Serafina is a silly name..." These rolled out of her soul like waves, and crashed against her mother. But Betty was an authoritative village woman, and had about enough after the "I'm not pretty" stuff. She held Sandy Ann by both shoulders and stared her down. "Seems to me that you have no trouble getting and holding a young man's attention, and I can tell that young Judson thinks the world of you. He's the most loyal friend I've ever seen for a guy his age. And your name, well, it means *one of the angels*, and that's how you looked to us when you were born!"

Sandy Ann crashed into her mother's shoulder at this point, sobbing, but within a few seconds, she was quiet again. Judson would perhaps have been shocked at how beautiful she looked, quiet and calm, her eyes shining through wisps of dark red hair. "Oh," her mother added, in the perverse way mothers have of ruining the moment, "I have invited the Hansens to have dinner with us tonight." Sandy Ann turned and fled to her room, with an "Oh, *Mother!*" Howie, who had been out in the kellydoor and had entered quietly midway through Serafina's tirade, shook his head and said, "Now Betty, don't torment the girl!" "I'm not," she stated flatly. "Remember how we said the Hansens are trustworthy people? I think it's good for us all to have them around. They sure have brought out the best in our Sandy Ann." "You're right about that," said Howie, and gave her a squeeze. Betty looked up at her husband. "Besides, I'm thinking of asking Jeffrey for a little favor." She did not elaborate.

That evening, Judson and his dad joined the Lindseths for another memorable local dinner. This time, the menu seemed excessively simple, and almost strange. The store had procured two cases of lettuce, and a smattering of other fresh produce, a comparative rarity, so there was a large salad of lettuce, sliced carrots, celery, and canned peas. The dressing was mayonnaise, ketchup, and sweet relish with a dash of pepper: homemade Thousand Island. Judson wasn't so keen on the canned peas, which were roughly the same shade as Faltrip's army fire truck, wondering just how much practice these folks got in making salads. But overall, it was a real treat to have salad, since the Hansens had used the last of their lettuce months ago.

During dinner, Mrs. Lindseth kept saying enigmatic things—mostly to young Jake, who seemed to be extra fidgety—like "Be sure to eat your salad or you won't get anything else." Jake started to say, "Can't I just wait for..." and then voluntarily closed his trap as the other six Lindseth eyes glared at him. He's learning not to let the cat out of the bag, Judson thought, remembering their first hike up to the fort, when Jake wasn't so successful. Finally, most of the salad was eaten, and Jake's was down to three or four peas, which he was trying to hide beneath his fork. Betty looked at Howie and asked, "Is it ready?" He got up, looked at a pan on the stove, and nodded. "Go get it, and let's get to it then," laughed Betty. Mr. Lindseth went out to the kellydoor and retrieved a large stainless steel bowl about two feet across, with a towel across it. The towel was bulging. Judson recognized it as bread dough that had been left to rise. At the stove, Mr. Lindseth took the lid off a wide pan that had been at the back of the stove, and moved it over the firepot, releasing the odor of hot cooking oil.

"Ok, the rest of this meal, at Serafina's request, is *alodakees*," said Mrs. Lindseth, as though that settled it. Sandy Ann turned and said to the puzzled Hansens, "An *alodakee* is fried bread dough with good stuff on it, or all by itself." Mr. Hansen nodded and said, "Frybread is very common in the Native communities of Arizona. We sometimes put beans and shredded beef and tomato and peppers and sour cream on them." Little Jake thought his teacher's description sounded perfectly awful, having never heard of a taco, much less a 'Navajo taco.' "Oh, I'm afraid ours

are not *nearly* so healthy," said Mrs. Lindseth, bringing a tray from the kellydoor with a variety of jams and a bowl of what turned out to be powdered sugar.

The kids all helped shape the dough, or dry the fried bread dough on a towel, assembly line style, but Mr. Lindseth held the dangerous middle job, placing, turning, and removing the pieces from the very hot oil. Soon there was quite a pile, and the aroma in the room was downright intoxicating. Mrs. Lindseth had cleared all the other dishes, and put a big pile of *alodakees* on a platter in the center of the table. There was soon a lot of passing and smacking of lips, as jars of jam and the bowl of powdered sugar made their rounds. How could such a simple thing be so unbelievably tasty, thought Judson, and said as much, frequently, through mouthfuls. "Our Sandy Ann would never think of having a plain old birthday cake!" said Betty Lindseth with a laugh.

After everyone had helped to clean up and put away, Mrs. Lindseth asked Judson to go with Sandy Ann and Jake upstairs to their bedrooms and play a game or something. She then turned to Mr. Hansen and began talking earnestly as the kids led Judson up a steep and narrow set of dark green-painted stairs to their attic bedrooms. Judson reached into his pocket at the top of the stairs, ducking to avoid a bare light bulb that hung, socket and all, from the low ceiling. You got it to light up by turning the bulb in its socket until it made contact, something Sandy Ann called an "Alaska light switch." Alaskans seemed to excel at self-deprecating humor. But if an outsider said the same things, most Alaskans would probably get angry and defensive.

Now safely past the glowing bulb, Judson handed Sandy Ann a folded piece of cream-colored construction paper, scrounged out of supplies salvaged from the school fire. On the front fold were the words, "What is The Place to Be When You are Thirteen?" The words were in outlined letters, filled in with various colored pencils. Inside was a simple picture showing the dock, the oil building, their little ledge she called 'The Place,' and two reasonable facsimiles of Sandy Ann and Judson standing and watching the bay. There were no other words inside, but Judson had written a little note at the bottom of the back page in black pen that said, "Mr. Faltrip says your gift is the new railing he plans to put up!"

Judson had debated forever with himself over whether he should show the two of them holding hands, or him with one arm on her shoulder, or what. Since they had never done the holding hands thing, he rejected that. Since the arm around her shoulder incident had been when she was upset over once being held back a grade, he rejected that as well. He decided on the one with him looking, and Sandy Ann pointing at something. He thought it summed up all the times she had patiently explained things around here, and he thought it looked *welcoming*. He liked that word for it. Welcoming. And comfortable. Sandy Ann looked it over and started to cry. "Mom was right about you," is all she would say. She took it into her room and propped it up on top of her bookshelf, next to a ratty-looking Raggedy Ann doll that she'd probably had since she was a toddler.

At that moment, Jake arrived from his room expecting to play a board game with them. They pushed all other thoughts aside and just enjoyed a nice game of "Sorry!" Jake seemed to be an expert at getting a "go backwards" four and being able to avoid sending his pieces around the board. It took a couple of games before either Sandy Ann or Judson managed to cut him off by using the "trade places" and "back to start" cards. They were on their third game when Mrs. Lindseth called them downstairs. Back in the kitchen, Betty said, "Sandy Ann, Mr. Hansen has given you a wonderful birthday gift. He's going to recommend you to skip up to eighth grade next year! Now you *will* have to take some extra tests..." Sandy Ann flew like a torpedo into Mr. Hansen, nearly knocking him over. During the silence, Mr. Hansen said, "From what I read in your file before the fire destroyed most of them, you never had any trouble understanding the work, but just *doing* the work. And, if I read the comments correctly, the teacher couldn't control you. That's certainly not a problem now, is it young lady?" Mr. Hansen had switched to his teacher voice, probably on purpose, but the effect was overly dramatic nonetheless, and the whole group laughed.

When it was time to leave, Sandy Ann thanked them, misty-eyed, and Mrs. Lindseth gave them a sack with some of the leftover *alodakees*. Jake was about to be rude and complain about losing all their *alodakees* when Mr. Lindseth pointed to the platter on the table. There were a dozen pieces still left (in spite of all their best efforts). Jake sighed with relief, and everybody laughed. The Hansens left smiling, happy, and full. "Dad, you sure know how to give a lady a good time," laughed Judson, once they were down the road and out of earshot. "Betty and Howie say so do you, young man!" Judson didn't quite know what to think about that.

Judson's sweetness and light came to a sudden and wrenching halt on the evening of February 14. It was Valentine's Day, and a Friday. Mrs. Lindseth, working in the kitchen for the cannery "mug up," was making an extra amount of noise today, and was coming out and talking rather secretively with Mr. Hansen whenever he could break free. Finally, as they were cleaning up for the day, he told the students that tonight there would be a Valentine's Day party. In honor of the fact that they had not been able to do a costume party at Halloween, they would do one tonight, but with a Valentine theme, not a scary one. Mrs. Rezoff had already made the radio announcement to the village, and parents were going to help out. "See you at seven!" The group erupted into general jubilation that did not abate until Mr. Hansen began bringing kids their coats.

Mrs. Lindseth was being completely devious. Without the other's knowledge, she had asked both Gail and Danny to help chaperone. Mr. Lindseth would be helping her in the kitchen. Laura was to help Mr. Hansen with the games, but Mrs. Lindseth had prepared all the materials. Mr. Hansen had his own surprise, which he felt was bound to be a hit. Almost everyone arrived a bit early, and even Alexander and the twins came in some kind of costume. Marla, no longer trying to prove anything, came as a movie star, looking convincingly Elizabeth Tayloresque. Ward had a minimal costume meant to look vaguely like James Dean or someone from "The Jets" of *West Side Story*, but had somehow lost the attitude he could have filled it out with.

The twins were both dressed as Cupid, draped in half a sheet each, with hats made out of knitted skullcaps festooned with pieces of plastic holly made to look like a wreath. They carried bows made out of alder branches and seine repair twine. The combined effect, especially when they came up and told you, several times an hour, and in great detail, who they were, was absolutely hilarious. Alexander was Zorro, inspired by a Disney movie Mr. Faltrip had showed them the previous year. His black cape was a silk jacket borrowed from his dad's closet and far too big for him. A black sock with holes cut in it served as a mask, and the sword was a rung from an old folding clothes rack, with a cork seine float stuck at one end to form a handle with a blade guard. He kept running up to every lady in the room (and once by accident to Mr. Hansen) and saying, "I wiw pwotek you!" followed by fierce and dangerous-looking swooshes with his 'sword.'

Barbara arrived with Herman, followed by their mom Laura. Barbara was in pink taffeta, and it was hard to believe that it was available here and that it fit her. Barbara made a delightfully believable princess, her usual calm demeanor passing convincingly for regal reserve. "It was an old prom dress I still had stuffed in a box. I cut it down and sewed it to fit this afternoon. When am *I* gonna need a prom dress again?" Laura explained to Judson when he commented on it, bowed, and kissed Barbara's hand, accompanied by the slightest hint of a giggle from the princess.

Herman, looking a bit uncomfortable, was dressed in green slacks, a green shirt, and a green hat cut to look like the latest styles of Sherwood Forest. It was another product of Laura's swift sewing needle, and looked great with a seagull feather stuck daintily out of it. The hat and the pink dress explained why Mr. Faltrip instead of Laura had been watching the counter when Judson dropped by the store this afternoon. Herman was carrying an alder branch bow as well, but this one looked like it would actually work, and made a satisfying "dwonnnng" when Judson plucked it appreciatively. But Herman turned several shades of red when moments later, Rinny arrived in what could only be a Maid Marian outfit, replete with cone shaped hat. A dainty white handkerchief dangled from the point of the cone. Who had tipped her off? Where did she come up with that gray dress, and how come she's filling it out so nicely? Judson was finding himself slightly distracted.

Eagle and April arrived as Hansel and Gretel, in suspenders and a makeshift bonnet. As brother and sister characters, they had completely missed the Valentine theme, but they couldn't think of any other characters, nor could they come up with anything else for their costumes. Mr. Hansen made sure he complimented them on how they looked. They looked unbelievably cute, something Eagle would never aspire to. Even older brother Ward was mercifully charitable and didn't tease them either.

Sandy Ann and Jake arrived a bit late, with Jake dressed as a debonair French dandy in a beret he and his mom had made by cutting down an old black skullcap, and a black and white striped shirt his dad had in his closet. The stripes went the wrong way, but a red scarf that Mrs. Lindseth had provided, which Jake twirled

constantly, saved the outfit. He began an insufferable and exaggerated strut and swagger, which he mercifully gave up after one circuit of the mess hall. Meanwhile, the red scarf kept twirling.

But Sandy Ann had badly misfired in her costume, wearing her mother's sky blue dress, and a new mop head borrowed from the store with Laura's permission as a rather shaggy-looking wig. Try as she might, she could not get herself to look like her intended target, Sleeping Beauty. The mop was gray, not blonde, and straggly to boot. And she was just sensitive enough not to be able to glide her way through it like Rinny would have done. It was probably the result of Mrs. Lindseth being busy all afternoon in the mess hall kitchen, but there it was. Sandy Ann made for a corner and hoped that no one would notice her. Judson, eyeing the gray mop wig and thinking she was aiming for a humorous 'Sleeping *Grandma* Beauty' look, gave her an enthusiastic 'thumbs up,' and she had turned away. Judson was confused by this, but decided to let her alone for awhile.

Mr. Hansen was dressed merely as himself, mostly in the borrowed clothes he'd been wearing since the fire. He told the crowd before announcing the first event that he was going to judge everyone else's costume later. Judson had thrown together some sort of Prince Charming outfit with a white shirt many sizes too big for him belted tightly at the waist, and a pair of red jeans and his black snow boots. He had merely combed his hair mostly forward, making for an Ivanhoe sort of a look. Since he'd already kissed Barbara's hand, she consented to be paraded around the room on his arm, and that gave him the cachet needed to survive whatever deficits his costume had left him with.

The first event, as Mr. Hansen announced, was as follows: "As you know, Jud and I were from Arizona. One of the old movies we found in the school is a short film about Arizona, especially the Grand Canyon. We're gonna show it now, so that you can see a little of what our old home was like." Judson and his father had both cringed at the staged and amateurish acting when they previewed the movie, but thought the nature shots would outweigh the negatives. Besides, they could always explain—but what was it his father had just said? "We *were* from Arizona... our *old home*." It was exactly how Judson felt now.

After the short movie, Howie and Betty Lindseth served cookies and punch, with coffee and banana bread for the adults. The bananas that arrived at the store about twice a year had shown up this time nearly black, and Betty had put them to good use. While Judson was munching on three or four kinds of homemade cookies, the "Holy Terrors" suddenly interrupted him. He looked down into two very excited faces. "Jay-Jay... we saw in the movie... people riding horses... in the canyons... can you ride a horse... could you teach us please... please!" This message was delivered while both boys jumped up and down like pistons, trading off phrases as though rehearsed. "Well, I do know how to ride a horse, sort of. I can't do anything fancy, but I can stay on one, and get one to go and then to stop, so I guess yes. Now as far as teaching you, well, there are no horses on Sokroshera Island, unfortunately." Judson had started nearly as staccato as they had, and ended nearly as teacherly as his dad. The boys, crestfallen, walked away, and one of them

said, "We just *gotta* get a horse!" Amazing what even a *bad* movie will do for these kids here, Judson thought, almost (but not really) missing television. He also hadn't the heart to tell them that what they'd been watching in those scenes were *burros*.

Danny and Gail had very little to do thanks to the efficient Laura and Betty. So they stood and talked in between watching the various events, laughing, teasing, and acting like buddies. Judson was somehow happy that both seemed more at ease in each other's presence. They were treating each other like real friends, a situation that was probably new to both of them. He noticed his dad and Laura in an apparently animated conversation off to the side. Laura was clutching a paper she'd retrieved from a cardboard box on a side shelf. She was pointing to one of the items and looking quizzically at Jeffrey, who was alternately shrugging and shaking his head. Wonder what that's about, thought Judson. He soon found out. There were a few silly games like "Pin the Tail on the Donkey" and even a version of "Duck, Duck, Goose" around one of the picnic tables for the youngest kids. The "Holy Terrors" and April and Barbara were unceremoniously lumped into that category. And then, all hell broke loose for Prince Charming and at least one other person.

Mrs. Lindseth had perversely devised a "game" in which the boys and girls had to pass candy Life Savers to each other via toothpicks held in their mouths. It wasn't kissing, but it was an incredible simulation, and most of the older kids groaned in dread. Mrs. Lindseth had written down the order of victims for this ordeal: Ward, then Marla, then Judson, then Rinny, then Herman, then Sandy Ann. When Sandy Ann had learned of this game, she had pleaded, her face already red, with her mother, asking *not* to be placed next to Judson. Her mom had reluctantly complied. "It's only a game, Serafina," her mother had said, but nothing would dissuade Sandy Ann from insisting on an order change. Truly, her mother had invented this game just to torment her, she told Judson later, in all seriousness. Some game.

Ward passed to Marla with no trouble, they apparently already having practice at this sort of thing. Ward scandalously patted Marla on the behind as she turned toward Judson with the candy, and Marla giggled, nearly dropping her cargo. Laura, watching the proceedings, said, "Here, here, now!" in mock seriousness, to a titter of laughter among the surprisingly riveted onlookers. Judson figured out the secret of the pass, and ducked his head, tilting up to let the Life Saver slide onto his toothpick. Marla the starlet had no charms for him; first, he could see Ward peering at him from behind her, and second, in spite of her 'drop dead gorgeous' makeup, her breath smelled like onions. Live and learn, Marla, dear. Live and learn.

Now in possession of the tiny ring of red candy, he turned toward Rinny. She also knew the secret, and tilted her head up, allowing mercifully for a quick slide of the candy to the safety of her toothpick. But as it slid, she gave Judson a wink and a little smile through clenched teeth, and a tiny little giggle. He felt his insides turn outside, and didn't want to think about why. Now he watched with suddenly very mixed feelings as Rinny turned toward Herman, who seemed to have developed some of Sandy Ann's capacity for instant sunburn.

Now we rely on the instant replay provided by little Jake, who had crowded in so close that he was almost between them, and swears it was deliberate. Rinny, quick as a flash, dropped the toothpick and Life Saver and kissed Herman on the cheek, in one heart-stopping moment. Whatever Herman may have felt was interrupted in another flash by his mother, out of instant mercy, stating matter-of-factly that Herman needed a new toothpick and Life Saver, which she conveniently seemed to have. Judson, however, saw the shock on Herman's face; he had not been the least bit prepared for Rinny and her little kiss.

Desperately collecting himself, Herman turned with his new toothpick, and said to Sandy Ann between clenched teeth, "Hoad your chigh upf!" Sandy Ann caught his drift, and dutifully raised her chin. The now orange Life Saver slid smoothly down his toothpick to the safety of hers, but at the same moment, her gray 'mop top' departed from her head. The "Holy Terrors" and most others in the room thought that to be hilarious, but Judson saw humiliation in her eyes, as she shook her real hair out from the tangle it had become under the mop, and fled for the door. Judson dived after her. Mrs. Lindseth turned to follow, but Laura just motioned for her to stay and mouthed "For now, ok?" at her. Betty nodded and Laura turned back to start the next game.

Judson quickly followed Sandy Ann across the planks to the edge of the front dock. There was dim illumination from a floodlight near the crab butchering station and another on the far side past the oil shed, but most of the light was from the windows of the mess hall. When he approached her, she was temporarily blinded by the blazing lights behind them, and shakily asked who it was. "Jay-Jay," he replied, and they both turned sideways to see better. It was cold enough that they could see their breath in the glare. Sandy Ann had a large shock of hair mostly covering one eye, but Judson could see that her cheeks were wet. Judson lightly pulled her hair to the side. Her hair now fell past her shoulders; when had it grown so long?

She started on him immediately. "I saw how you looked at Rinny—I thought you both were my friends. I thought you..." She was starting to sob, but she managed to look directly into Judson's eyes. "...I thought you were *different*." Judson decided not to deny anything. "Rinny can be really... *scary* to boys when she wants to be. We've seen that before." He laid his hand on her arm and continued, "Did you see that she *kissed* Herman? On the cheek?" Sandy Ann shook her head, but Judson could tell that wasn't enough when she continued, "I didn't see that. I was watching *you*." He could hear the devastation, the sense of betrayal and loss, in her voice. Judson could think of only one thing to do. He bent down and kissed her on the lips, so quickly that neither exactly remembered what it felt like afterward. "There, are you awake now, Sleeping Beauty Serafina?"

They were silent for a long moment, in which Judson wondered if he'd killed her (or if perhaps he was going to die). "Oh, Jay-Jay, you're the only one who probably figured out who I was trying to be, and you're the only one who... who would make me snap out of it *that way!*" It was two topics at once, but Judson understood what she meant and just smiled, and let out a little involuntary sigh of relief. She gave him a big hug, a thank you hug, a sister hug, a completely comfortable with you

hug. They wordlessly decided to walk back inside. "Neither of us can ever say we've never been kissed," she added after pondering what had just happened. "So keep your big trap shut, Handsome!" Again, Sandy Ann seemed to be talking in two directions at once, but he still understood. And at this reference to how she had scrambled his last name at their first meeting, they both laughed hard, and were still giggling when they arrived, blinking, into the mess hall as the party was breaking up. Her parents looked at them, then at each other, shrugged, and turned to start cleaning up.

Later that night, Judson saw his dad reading in the office. The lights were staying on until midnight tonight, thanks to Mr. Faltrip. "Dad, can I talk to you?" His dad put down the book he was reading and asked, "Is this about what happened to Sandy Ann? Or about Rinny? Laura told me about..." Judson interrupted this by breaking down in tears, surprising both of them. Mr. Hansen let him finish. In a few moments, Judson had collected himself, and said, "Dad, Sandy Ann makes me feel... welcome and *comfortable*. But Rinny, she's something else again!" He shook his head almost violently, trying to dispel the image. "She acts like Anya did when she was drunk, and she makes me feel... *wrong*. Nasty even."

Mr. Hansen nodded; Judson had told him about the Anya incident soon after it happened, and his father had assured him that he'd done nothing wrong whatsoever, bringing Judson enormous relief. "We can't be responsible for other people's choices or actions," he had said then, and he knew that his son was remembering it now. "Sometimes this can be a very sexually-charged place," his father intoned, sounding professorial. He inwardly shuddered at the memory of his first meeting with Anya in the store. But he switched back to father mode in an instant. "Rinny may flirt with you, but I'm pretty sure she has her heart set on Herman. And I think he could calm her down a bit. Remember, she is still hurting from feeling rejected, and flirting helps her feel better for the moment. I doubt if she is trying to hurt you." Judson nodded. "By the way, any man worth his salt would feel a little..."—Mr. Hansen scratched his head, searching for the best word—"...*interested* in Rinny, or even Anya under those conditions. It's a natural thing, a *guy* thing. We always have to tell our bodies to calm down." Judson shuddered, rather than nodded this time, overwhelmed by the complexities of relationships and the cascade of emotions that he was experiencing for the first time.

Mr. Hansen's voice abruptly softened. "I wish Kayah were here at a time like this—I don't feel up to talking about *relationships*, and your mother would be so much better at it." Mr. Hansen's eyes grew misty, and Judson gave him a hug. His father collected himself, and spoke with renewed confidence, "But as far as Sandy Ann goes, I can see that you think the world of each other. You've brought out the best rather than the worst in each other, and believe me, that doesn't always happen!" His dad scratched his head again, searching, and then concluded, "The best relationships often start with a solid friendship." Judson came to realize that his dad was doing a good job of explaining things after all. He could see how this 'friendship first' thing was true of his relationship so far with Sandy Ann. She was clearly his best friend, in a way he had never seen before. Herman was his best friend in an entirely different way, like brothers. He and Sandy Ann were not brother and sister,

and they'd proved it to each other the instant Judson had kissed 'Sleeping Beauty.' But they weren't boyfriend and girlfriend either in any conventional sense. In a larger school, with scores of classmates and many more pressures, their relationship would have had a very hard time existing.

It was a moment or two before either Hansen spoke again. "It's strange," Judson admitted, "because Sandy Ann and me—we didn't seem to have much in common at first." His father's reply seemed to be changing the subject before swinging back around to him. "Rinny and Herman are opposites, and because they are both so extreme in their own way, they are good for each other. But it's like fireworks, and they would always have to work at it so that the fiery one wouldn't constantly hurt the quieter one. But you and Serafina, well, you get along *better* than brother and sister. You seem to read each other's minds. Your relationship would be like a warm oil stove. Not fireworks, but a strong, steady flame."

He quickly added, "But son, I'm not pushing you into anything at all, far from it. I just see it for what it is, and this is all new to me, too." Mr. Hansen cleared his throat, "Have you kissed her yet, by any chance? Uh... Don't tell me if you don't feel like it, Jud." His dad wasn't granting permission, but somewhat awkwardly taking stock of the situation. It was a strange way to express his train of thought, and that word "yet" sounded especially out of place, but Judson decided not to back away. He felt his face burning again, and also felt on the verge of tears again. He was plainly shocked at the power this new relationship was exerting over him. He took a deep breath, and went ahead and told his dad about what had happened out on the dock, how Sandy Ann had accused him, and what he had done to convince her otherwise. His dad just shook his head and said, "Judson, *that* was really smooth of you, young man. I couldn't have thought of that if I'd planned it for weeks."

They talked for a long time. Judson told his father that he had never even been slightly interested in anyone before moving here, and that he had been upset tonight because the pressure of being attracted by two people had almost been too much for him. "There's a big difference between them, Dad, and I see that. Rinny is gorgeous by anybody's definition, and I don't even know off the top of my head if Sandy Ann is pretty or not." He was embarrassed to say this, but his dad nodded and assured him that she was. Judson said quietly, "But Dad, she feels safe, and..." he thought for the words he had used in thinking about her birthday card, and in the end repeated what he'd said at the beginning, "...she feels welcoming and *comfortable*." "That's worth something, son, it really is," Mr. Hansen asserted, and then said quietly, "Don't ever take that for granted." His father admitted that he had been a friendless dork where girls were concerned, at least in his own eyes, all the way into college. He and Kayah had started as friends, then good friends, and both of them had gradually backed into the realization that they were in love. "I guess if there's any advice here..." Jeffrey spread his hands as if to say he was no expert, "...it would be, don't look for someone you could live with. Look for someone you can't live without!" His dad gave Judson a hug. They said goodnight moments before the lights went out for the evening.