

Chapter 3

Wednesday, October 29, 1943: Fort Sheplen, Sokroshera Island, Marmot Bay, Alaska

Unit Supply Specialist Owen Faltrip stood before Master Sergeant Pender "Penny" Ardet in the makeshift supply office of the nearly completed, yet now to be vacated Fort Sheplen. "All they can spare us is two power barges, and now that all of the 155mm 'Panama-mounts,' the fifty-calibers, and all the ammo have been removed, all that's really left is odds and ends." Faltrip was clearly disgusted, but continued. "Do they really think that we should stop and remove all the stoves from every Quonset hut, the butcher-block table from the mess halls and junk like that? And by Friday at 10-hundred?" Faltrip swore and looked at his superior officer as if Ardet could really provide any answers. Ardet put out a cigarette and shrugged. Their non-regulation familiarity was from hours of hard work for a common purpose and an unusual meeting of the minds on almost everything.

They had proved to be an amazing team, putting together a fort from the odds and ends left over from the three coastal batteries off Kodiak that were finished and commissioned this past April. Putting in an advance airstrip for the Army Air Corps and then building the small coastal battery with its unique bunker on the side of the cliff, and all in a big desperate rush, the 151st Combat Engineers of the Alabama National Guard had done it all in under a year. Quartermaster Pender Ardet and his phenomenally talented Unit Supply Specialist Owen Faltrip of the 69th Quartermaster Battalion were even faster in fitting out the fort. They had everything from toilet paper to long-range artillery for the gun emplacements on the cliffs, and even found a surplus 1936 REO Stutz fire truck from an Army Air Corps training facility in California for the airstrip. They were nearly done.

But after nearly a year of frenzied activity, the ill-fated Fort Sheplen was to be abandoned. Not placed in "caretaker status" like a proper fort, ready for active duty should the tides of war change, but left to the wind and the weeds like a ghost town. August 1943 saw the Allies regain the islands of Kiska and Attu. Suddenly the Japanese were no longer a serious threat to Alaskan waters, leaving the new fort stranded on the sands of history. Faltrip was not even sure their masterpiece had made it to any of the maps. Other facilities up and down Kodiak Island suffered the same fate, but none of them was as grand and well-laid out as their Fort Sheplen. After all that sweat and aggravation, the Army Air Corps had a decent landing strip, and there was a lovely tower atop Mount Sokroshera just waiting for its radar equipment. The concrete bunker labyrinth on the cliff face could have withstood almost any attack, even a siege, with its own unique water supply and hidden tunnels. However, by October, with the war shifting southward and westward, most of the men stationed here had already been transferred to distant units.

The rationale for Fort Sheplen's placement and layout had been based on sound military judgment, should the Japanese have been able to advance eastward from their Aleutian toehold on American soil. The main waterways between Marmot Bay and Shelikof Strait to the west were almost all narrow, shallow, and treacherous in

one way or another. It was quickly determined that any attack coming through those channels would be by stealth, in small commando-style raids. The other three forts could repel a full-scale attack involving large warships approaching from open water, equipped as they were with huge "coastal battery" cannon and unobstructed views of the Strait and the Gulf of Alaska.

Once the architects realized that the most remote of the forts protecting Kodiak should be designed with a stealth commando-style attack in mind, they and the Army Corps of Engineers had a field day converting that mound of a mountain into a splendid fortress. It was an ingenious and ambitious structure, well suited to its purpose. Fort Shepley could command the defense of the entire waterway from Marmot Island to Whale Island, and every narrow passage through which enemy raiders could attack. The 155mm cannon were perfect for knocking out small raiding craft of the size that could safely navigate some of the nearby passages between the islands, or even fending off submarines, should any surface within the arc of Marmot Bay. The cannon were also good enough for giving fits, at least temporarily, to any large-scale ship that might sail their way from the Gulf side. The airstrip was long enough for light bombers and fighters to patrol and defend the entire north end of Kodiak and Afognak islands and a good portion of Shelikof Strait, and it was protected by anti-aircraft batteries at each end. With the airstrips at Chiniak and at the main base in Kodiak, the entire north end of the islands could have air cover.

The builders, with tons of leftover concrete, blast doors, and anything else they needed from the surplus materials of the other three recently commissioned coastal defense forts, had a field day too, especially on the cliffside fort with its dual levels and tunnels. Nevertheless, the top brass just shrugged, unconcerned that the fort had never been finished, and moved on when their needs changed. The coastal defense ports, after all, had a grim and practical purpose, and once their enemy retreated, their necessity evaporated. The men and even much of the materials suddenly needed to go elsewhere. No commissioning ceremony, no decommissioning ceremony either, just... *nothing*. Fort Shepley was really to be Fort Stillborn.

The two friends were about to be shipped off-island, and work separately, on other projects until the war ended. But no matter what else they ended up doing, both men would be proudest of the elegant features and spectacular setting of poor, unappreciated Fort Shepley. "Who knows, maybe someday this place will turn out to be useful to somebody," said Faltrip with a grim smile, speaking as much to himself as to Ardet, who shrugged and lit another cigarette.

"Get what you can into the power scows, and try to keep an accurate record for the higher-ups," said Ardet to his friend. "We'll have to leave the generators, since we used the cannery's old power shed to hide them in, and they're used by the town anyway. Be sure the new water pumps by the upper lake have any spare parts that they need, because the cannery's old pump and mains at Lake Stephanie haven't worked for years. I doubt if the brass will care, or even know, about the big stuff. Can't fit most of it on a power barge anyway. We'll leave it in the control of the

village elders, since it all still works and they need it. Just shut off the feed to the upper fort's water tank, since the cannery's got its own tanks the village still uses. Cut all the power lines that go up the hill past the upper lake's pump house. And make sure you weld shut the access to the pump room and cistern on the cliff. I don't want any of the locals to be injured poking around in there, since we never got proper railings installed."

Ardet paused for the tiniest moment, but didn't quite look at his friend. Then he added, with as much solemnity as he could muster, "You *do* know, don't you, that if you don't get that air strip fire truck running by 10-hundred Friday, we're just going to have to drive it into the sea." Ardet attempted a serious face, took a puff on his cigarette, and sat down, pretending to look through some files on his desk. "I'll take care of it, sir," said Owen, but got no response. Faltrip was dismissed; he grabbed the keys from a peg on the wall, saluted, and left. As he exited the supply office, Faltrip suppressed a smile. For reasons of his own, he loved that fire truck. He knew just what he would do with it.

Thursday, March 22, 1951: Hoboken, New Jersey

Dear Mr. Owen Faltrip,

It's Fat Lip in the second round with a knockout! Took awhile to find out where you were, old man. Surprised you'd consent to spend any more time in Jersey after experiencing the bright lights and high culture of Sokroshera Island. If you're tired of ordering sheets and soap for the Hoboken Hard Times Hotel or wherever you are, perhaps you'd like to reenlist in Pender Ardet's Army? I did not go back to counting pennies (accounting is where I got my nickname "Penny," ya know) like I did prewar. I went home to New Orleans all right. One day I was talking to my uncle who owns a string of canneries out on the Gulf Coast, telling him about my experiences at Fort Sheplen. After a couple of beers, he was very interested in starting up a cannery using the old Marmot Bay Fisheries Corp. herring facility at Sokroshera Cove.

So long story short, once sober, he did some investigating, looking up expected output in cases, wholesale prices, freighter costs and the like. He decided to back a venture, provided I was the one who came up and ran the place. Well, found myself back in Kodiak after all these years. I bought some old "Canco" equipment for processing one pound and quarter pound cans from a processor in Karluk that went bankrupt before the war, brought it to Sokroshera, and last summer we shipped our first 10,000 cases of wonderful Marmot Bay salmon under the name Pacific Endeavor Seafoods. "Pacific Endeavor" could be taken to mean "peaceful business." That fits me, the old soldier, going back to my old army post as a civilian, making food for the folks. Oops, I'm getting poetic, cue the music! You would like a little Harry James, perhaps. I've traded "Sleepy Lagoon" for a surprisingly busy Sokroshera Cove!

Anyway, old man, I'm prepared to offer you a quarter share in the company if you come up and help me run it, because I know that if you do, we can make it work. I can't really afford to build what I need, but I figured you'd be able to reuse materials from some of the old fort buildings. The locals have already scrounged anything that they need from the hills. The buildings the herring boys left behind, well, I've pounded most of them back into bare usefulness.

So come and help me reconfigure more of the old herring operation for whatever we think we'll need to process more salmon. I'm in luck here, because seems like every family in town wants to contract to fish for me or to work on the lines, and they're even writing their cousins and ex-wives to come join the fun.

I'm sure glad the Army repaired most of the dock, 'cause I won't have to do much to it for the next few seasons I hope. I decided to blow my uncle's wad on three 44-foot gas powered seiners and maybe a couple of 58-foot diesel tenders from a shipbuilder outfit in Seattle. I even bought a little 35-foot seiner in case you or I want to go putting around the bay for the hell of it – thanks to my dear uncle advancing the cash! Well, once he saw the wholesale price on those 10,000 cases! I guess the normal way to run that end of things is to lease the boats to the local families, who then go and get us the fish. Sounds like a great deal for everyone.

Finally, on a more serious note: Owen, I was going to ask you "Where is my damn fire truck!?" But don't you see? I found it. Nice hiding place. Had a good laugh for most of the week when I recognized it. And one of the local boys got it running with surprisingly little trouble. So—are you *sure* it was still broken when you "drove it into the sea?" Found one or two other nice things hiding around that somehow didn't make it to those two power scows by 10-hundred. I listened to "Sleepy Lagoon" and thought of you. So come see what you can do with the mess you left me!

Get back to me right away one way or the other. Help me make us and my old Uncle Ardet rich!

Pender "Penny" Ardet, President
Pacific Endeavor Seafoods,
Sokroshera Cove,
Sokroshera Island,
Alaska Territory, USA

"KMZW-48 Sokroshera Cove" on your marine band radio dial,
broadcasting at 2512 megacycles!

Former Unit Supply Specialist Owen Faltrip put down the carefully-typed letter and didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He'd been the recipient of hundreds of handwritten notes from Ardet; this was different. His former boss had obviously wanted the letter to be as clear and serious as he could make it, in spite of its informal tone. And Owen suddenly knew what he had to do. Ardet had often had that effect on him. But that was only a small part of it; that island had more of a draw on him than anything else ever could. It was the missing piece. He had helped to build that big, abandoned fort, but nobody cared about that now, so that wasn't it. Sure, he knew nothing of cannery operations, but he was a fast read, and maybe he could get a few grand tours of some local facilities before he headed north. Weren't there some canneries north of here?

But another burning question intruded, and he finally allowed his mind to formulate it. The question brought back an almost overpowering flood of memories: none of his letters had ever been answered or even returned, but if he went back to Sokroshera Cove, would he find *her* there?

Thursday, August 22, 1963: the Pacific Endeavor Seafoods cannery

So Mr. Faltrip had once been stationed at the fort on this very island. Judson thought about that a lot. Would he be the one he should ask about the fort's secrets? One day near the end of serving their sentence in the office, while he and Sandy Ann were sorting papers into manila folders, Judson endeavored to hint around about it. Finally, the man turned to him and said, "Since I got here in 1951, I haven't once set foot beyond Lake Stephanie. I've got no need to. I helped build the damn fort, and it's like visiting a cemetery to me. I hated to see it just wasted, which is what the damn Army brass did. I'd really hate to see what's happened to the place."

Judson seemed satisfied with the answer, but surprisingly, Mr. Faltrip was not finished. On each occasion that the kids were there sorting things for him, he'd increased his level of conversation, but this was more than usual. "That doesn't mean there aren't a few practical mementos of the fort still around. You know Mr. Lindseth's— Serafina's dad's jeep? I left it on the far side of the concrete pump house on the north side of upper lake, the one that serves the village and used to serve the Quonsets and the mess hall up there. The damn Jeep broke down a couple of weeks before the order to evacuate. I had extra parts on order, but they obviously went somewhere else. Howell had no trouble fixing it after we left, and in the way of the war years, it's finders keepers. Glad he got some use out of it. His trailer is all that's left of an old Ford truck that the herring plant left here."

Mr. Faltrip had something to show them. He motioned to the kids to follow, and motioned to Sandy Ann to stay quiet (for once). She complied, but she had a big grin on her face when she guessed their destination. They stepped out onto the slippery dock as a light mist enveloped them—something Mr. Lindseth called "liquid air." Somehow, it almost seemed worse than a real downpour, because it seemed to get you wet from all angles at once. But locals were in the habit of ignoring such common nuisances. They went toward the building used for labeling and casing,

which ran beside the angled portion of the dock and extended partway out over the water. It had a peaked roof with a cupola-like structure above it, but which stretched the entire length of the building, and was filled with windows. "From back in the day when electricity wasn't wasted on lighting," Faltrip explained. It was part of the original herring plant, which opened back in 1915. That outfit had closed long before the Army took an interest in the island. The Army left the herring buildings where they stood, and used some of the cannery's water lines and the old generator shed for their own needs. This might give an enemy spy plane the impression that only a cannery existed on the island, and an abandoned one at that. Once the airfield was built, hiding the fort was out of the question, and the Army's plans changed too quickly to build proper warehouses for most of their equipment. That was the adults' back-story. But to the kids, this building was mainly the place where they liked to jump from the net loft into the pallets of seines.

They turned right instead of heading down the dock. On the part of the building that extended back over the shoreline, on the side facing away from the dock, a small ramp led down to a grass-covered dirt driveway. It joined up with the shoreline road that led to the bunkhouse beyond. Mr. Faltrip stepped to a decrepit sliding door, unlocked a padlock, and shoved it down its track with a series of loud squeaks. "Time to oil that track again," mumbled Owen. Just inside, mostly in shadow, the kids could see an open cab, enormous running boards, and a pair of headlights on either side of an enormous grille. Mr. Faltrip beckoned again, with what seemed like considerable pride. He introduced Sandy Ann and Judson to the monstrous truck as if to a member of his family. "This is the infamous 1936 REO/Stutz fire truck, the pride of Sokroshera Cove," he announced. "When the base closed, I was ordered to get it running or push it into the sea. I didn't have the heart to send it away—it sort of *belongs* here. So I had some of the men push it into this garage, and even pinned a note on the sliding door labeled 'the sea' so I could *almost* tell my boss the truth. I was a *brat*, but I saved my fire truck!"

Former Unit Supply Specialist Owen Faltrip laughed louder than Judson had ever heard him do before, and continued, still chuckling, "My old Army boss Mr. Ardet became the owner of Pacific Enterprise Seafoods, and when he came up to build the cannery and use it for salmon, well, he soon found my beloved truck. I guess he got a good laugh out of it, too. But I always thought it might come in handy someday, so I keep it running. I bring it out once or twice a month and drive it to Lake Stephanie and run the pumps, or use the city water from one of the old fire hydrants. Kids like to run around in the water when I spray the hose in the air. Have to turn the pressure way down – this thing could knock over an elephant! I have a platform set up in the lake so the feeder hose won't suck mud. You can come along next time. And like I said, even though they are old, all the fire hydrants in town work, too!"

He looked at Judson, who seemed suitably impressed. The kind of person who can make a go of it in a place like Sokroshera Cove would have to be creative, Judson thought. "Why is your fire truck that ugly green color? I notice the hydrants are, too. Tripped over one that was hiding in some—what do you call it?—*pushki*." Mr.

Faltrip just grunted and said, "Well, this baby was in the tender care of the U. S. Army Air Corps when I lost it for them. In wartime, everything was painted that infernal 'olive drab' color. I could paint it a nice shiny red, but it's telling a story the way it is." He looked like he was about to say something else, when Sandy Ann interjected, "Yeah, it's fun to see the big spray of water and try to run through it. He uses his truck for our parade on the Fourth of July, too!" Faltrip grunted and said, "That's if you can call one old fire truck and three other vehicles driving up and down an old overgrown airstrip a parade!" The grouchy Mr. Faltrip had returned.

"Oh," Mr. Faltrip said, as an afterthought, "When Sandy Ann's dad and I were looking over the school, we noticed the fire extinguishers were so old that they probably wouldn't do much. I've got four new ones on order, and when they arrive, I'll bring them over." He shook his head, "That old building would go up like a cardboard box, likely as not. So would all of these," he remarked, waving his arm in the general direction of the cannery buildings.

Mr. Faltrip looked as though he were more than finished talking to the kids. But grouchy or not, Mr. Faltrip needed to supply a bit more information for the suddenly curious Judson. "Do you know anything about the cows? I mean, I almost stepped in the evidence a while back." Mr. Faltrip snorted. "Well, when I told you I never passed beyond the lake anymore I wasn't kidding. But soon after I moved here, the military started something called the 'Aleutian Cleanup,' in which they tried to find a way to dispose of all their abandoned forts up and down the Alaska coast. On a lark, I applied for grazing rights and got 'em, so technically, the fort end of the island is under my control. It's part of an old land grant that the cannery owns now anyway, but I thought getting the grazing rights couldn't hurt. I bought a few head of cattle from Ed Opheim at Pleasant Harbor down on Spruce Island, and traded some surplus cannery equipment for a few more from the Fields family out at Anton Larsen's Bay. But heck, I'm no rancher. I just thought it might be useful to snap up the rights to the land since I live here now. I get the Truck Brothers to do all the 'cowboying' for me in exchange for all the local beef their freezers can hold. It'll be butchering season soon, and you might like seeing how it goes." Sandy Ann scrunched up her eyes and puffed out her cheeks in a face that looked like she was about to vomit at the very mention of butchering, so Judson wasn't so sure he'd want to watch after all.

Judson couldn't help but ask one more question. "What happened to Mr...." – Judson searched his memory – "...Pender Ardet? We see his name in a lot of the letters we've been filing." Mr. Faltrip looked very sad, and spoke quietly. "Ol' 'Penny' passed away in 1958, back home in New Orleans. Probably from all that smoking—he was never without his pack of cigarettes. He lost his initial excitement after four or five seasons up here away from his family, and once I joined him, he eventually just left me to run the place. He married his sweetheart right after the war – you know, Stephanie." He looked at them as if they should know her. "Oh, the lady of the lake—I mean, the lady the lake is named after!" said Judson.

Faltrip just nodded and continued. "You know, he had a rich, full life down there Stateside, with a wife and a couple of kids, and I didn't have anything else but this place, so I stayed here. He trusted me with his life, so why wouldn't he trust me with his cannery? When the salmon seasons started going bad a couple of years ago, our company started losing a lot of money. He's still got relatives around that are part owners. Luckily, I've saved enough that I've been doing just fine, but for them, this is an *investment*, not much good if it *loses* money. They've given me maybe another season to turn things around before they close down the company and either sell or dismantle the cannery. You can't really blame them, because they don't know or love the place, and they don't want to lose their shirts. But I've got one more trick up my sleeve, and I should know in a month or so if it's going to fly." "Salmon season is already over, sir," said Sandy Ann, abnormally serious, but typically right up with the times and seasons of the village. "So it is, kids, so it is." He turned and left.

They were done sorting for the day, but the soggy weather would keep them indoors. Judson looked at his friend quizzically, wondering what her next idea would be. Sandy Ann motioned for Judson to follow her. She still had another favorite "Thought Spot" to show him. From where they were standing, the roadway meandered a short distance past the net building where the fire truck was parked, and slightly to the left as the shore of the cove began to curve. There was a short section of sandy beach, no more than a hundred yards wide. Then there was one more, odd-looking cannery building, which stuck out from the shore and over the water. From what Judson could see, it was shaped like a capital T, with the top of the T parallel to the shoreline and the perpendicular part extending over the water, facing the cove's entrance. That part had only one floor, and had a short deck with a railing over the water. Four of the six smokestacks were in that part of the building. There were no cleats or ladders on the face of that dock, and no access from the road to the front deck, so it was not for loading or unloading anything.

"If the cannery ever comes back, this place'll be full," Sandy Ann explained as they walked toward it. "They used to call it the Filipino bunkhouse, but now anybody who gets a job and doesn't live here already can stay there. It's a old herring building. I sometimes go inside when it's rainy or windy and look out at the cove and Marmot Bay. I know how to get in." There were two locked doors side-by-side, covered by a small porch with a roof and two sides. The left door opened to the downstairs, where women workers stayed. The right door went to a stairwell leading upstairs to the men's bunkhouse. On both floors were rows of windows, many with ratty looking curtains hung in them.

Sandy Ann did indeed know how to get in. She ran around the half-wall holding up the porch over the doors and pulled a nearby pallet up to the closest window as a makeshift ladder. Judson noticed that she didn't need any help. "It works if I..." she shoved the bottom half of the window upward on its track and dove inside. Judson followed. From what he could see, each floor had two large bunkrooms with eight bunk beds each, and small, numbered closets between each bunk. Cream-colored paint on the walls and dark green, cracked linoleum floor tiles gave the room an industrial look. The little plywood closets were all the medium green color of a good

spring lawn. A battered brown oil-fired space heater at the far end of the room looked like it would do little for anyone more than a few feet away. A central hallway between the bunkrooms connected each room to the kitchen and shower area downstairs and to the central stairwell leading upstairs.

The décor was non-existent, the paint was peeling, the beds that hadn't been braced by leftover scraps of lumber looked saggy, the room smelled musty, and it looked very unappealing to Judson. Sensing this, Sandy Ann explained, "Nobody cares where they bunk during canning season. They are working day and night, and they stay here just long enough to sleep most days," Before heading upstairs to one of her thinking spots, she showed Judson the showers and kitchen facilities. There were four showers, unlabeled, with little changing rooms attached. The locks were of the loop and hook variety. Painted the same green as the closets, the plywood doors to the changing rooms were open to an average adult woman's chin level at the top and one foot up from the bottom; the amount of overall privacy in that building was minimal. Across the hall were restroom stalls, four in a row, with little hooks to close the rickety plywood doors, and like their shower counterparts, they gave only a little privacy.

Down a short hallway, the kitchen had two home-sized oil stoves, stone cold until the day work resumed at the cannery. Beside and above the stoves were a collection of pots and pans stacked on shelves that, like the walls, had the familiar off-white industrial color that Judson was ready to name 'cannery cream.' A side pantry with many shelves, each numbered to match the closets in the rest of the building, gave workers a place to keep their food. Your stuff wouldn't be secure, but you would have your own spot to stash it. Opposite the closet were two sinks and a long drying rack. A list of rules for use and clean-up were posted in Mr. Faltrip's angular block printing on a large, fading section of butcher paper thumb-tacked to the wall above the drying rack. From reading them, one got the impression that the last thing Mr. Faltrip wanted to do was supervise anything in that bunkhouse. The terse posters displayed a fair bit of Mr. Faltrip's famous grouchiness.

Sandy Ann ran to the middle of the room, towards the windows. "Look what Mom and I did earlier in the summer," said Sandy Ann, and pointed to cheery new red and white checkered oilcloths on the five round tables at the far end of the room. "Mr. Faltrip had us working in here for a few days, in case the cannery starts up. Everything was filthy and faded out before." Matching curtains hung from every window, and that end of the building seemed to be mostly windows, so there were a lot of cheery curtains. At least one place in this building is pleasant and homelike, thought Judson, who couldn't imagine how focused on work you'd have to be to endure living here.

Sandy Ann suddenly turned and bolted down the hallway, through a side door, and up the stairs. At the landing, doors left and right opened to men's duplicates of the women's bunkrooms, Judson assumed; they didn't bother to look there. The wall facing the stairs also had a small square plywood door held closed by a bent nail, of the type one sees in old houses with side attic access. That's what this was. Sandy Ann turned the nail out of the way, opened the plywood door, and dove down a two

plank-wide catwalk that spanned the rafters above the showers, restrooms, and kitchen. It was dark in the attic, and Judson, practically crawling hands and knees to follow her, ducked past various vents, pipes, wires, and chimneys until they reached the wall. There, a cheery circle of light fell on a spot where a couple of castoff sofa cushions had been placed on a makeshift floor of boards on either side of a large round window which nearly filled the end wall and reached to within a foot of both eaves of the peaked roof above. It had a patchwork of windowpanes in a frame that had once been painted white, and the curved pieces on the edges had once required considerable skill to cut and put into place. What had possessed the herring plant to put such a lovely architectural feature in such a utilitarian structure?

Sandy Ann plopped down on the cushion on the right, and motioned Judson to take the other. Through the small and frequently wavy old panes of glass, Judson could see most of Sentry Point on the northwest side of the cove through the mist. There was a low spot in the dunes, where the western edge of Duck Bay, the Unuak Channel, and the mountains of Afognak beyond would be visible on a clear day. Straight ahead, he could see the rockpile with its crooked warning pilings on top, and to the far left, visible from Sandy Ann's cushion but not his, was a misty view of the main dock. On this misty day, Judson could only guess the location of the southwestern half of the cove, and the grassy mound of Selivanoff Point. On a clear day, this would be one of the best vantage points in the entire village. A perfect "Thought Spot" indeed! As they crawled out, Judson realized why nobody ever bothered her there; the place was hard to get to, even for a kid. How many times had Sandy Ann crawled to her round window, and what situations had made her need the alone time? Perhaps the existence of her little brother Jake answered that question! But her resourcefulness to go exploring on her own and then set up this comfy little space impressed him. He found himself wondering what she thought about in her solitary moments on those shaggy cushions in that dim attic, gazing out her ancient round window.

Thursday, August 22, 1963 in the Cannery Store

Jeffrey Hansen stepped into the cannery store and looked around to see who else from the village might be congregating there. He'd already noticed that the store served as the heartbeat of the town, and not just because it was also the post office. As soon as he stepped into view of the long counter at the end of the room, he heard Laura Rezoff's cheerful voice, "Jay-Jay and Sandy Ann are off somewhere exploring – you just missed them!" He responded by simply nodding and smiling. He went to get a couple of loaves of bread from the freezer, and checked one of the other freezers, grabbing a brick of vanilla ice cream from the store's limited and dwindling supply.

He heard the door open and close, and as he approached the counter, he saw the new customer. She was dressed in what a few years ago would have been a stylish wool coat, which was open, revealing a low-cut blouse, which seemed to be missing the top buttons. She had dark blonde hair, and her almond-shaped eyes were framed by a haphazard attempt at eyeliner. She stared at Jeffrey with an

expression that seemed to be trying for provocative, but only managed to look haughty. Her voice was none-too-steady. Jeffrey shuddered as he recognized the effects of way too much alcohol, way too early in the day.

"Ohhhh...you're the teacher, all alone out here?" She was nearly beside him now, and placed her hand on the counter to steady herself. He unconsciously stepped back, as Laura shot him a sideways glance. He was about to reply when Anya managed to pick up on his body language. "Aw c'mon, teacher, we're *friendly* around here, 'specially down at *my* house. Besides, you can't get away *now!*" She laughed a little too loudly and a little too long. Laura cut in. "You here for your usual?" She turned to Jeffrey and continued. "Jeffrey, this is Anya." He was about to offer his hand, but Laura almost imperceptibly shook her head. Laura handed Anya a pack of Pall Mall cigarettes, made change, and made sure she had moved a few steps down the counter to do so. "See you soon," she said, as Anya gazed once more at Jeffrey, snorted, and turned to leave.

When the door had closed, she turned to Jeffrey and said calmly, "*Don't... Don't* let her get her mitts into you. I'm sorry, I don't have to tell you that, do I?" Jeffrey shook his head, just as Will Rezoff came in through the office door. He kissed Laura, and then turned to Jeffrey. "What's the matter, Mr. Hansen? You look like you've just seen a ghost!" Laura made a grunting noise and explained. "Anya," she said, and Will exhaled a slow "*Oh boy!*" and what looked like a shudder. He grabbed a can of Shasta and walked out through the office. By this time, Jeffrey's purchases and money were on the counter. He accepted his change, put the paper bag under his arm, and left. Back in the school's apartment, he realized that he'd never said a word the whole time.



Pacific Endeavor Seafoods, August 1963. Buildings left to right: the bunkhouse with Sandy Ann's round window, the long net/can labeling/casing building, the little oil shed with Sandy Ann's thought spot, the mess hall, the store/warehouse, and the main cannery building with processing, retorts, boilers, and generators. The "Evangel" is at the long dock, and a barge and crane are working on the front dock.

Friday, August 23, 1963

The next morning, a light rain was still falling, but to the northwest, Judson could just barely make out the dim outline of the mountains of Afognak, five miles away. I'm becoming just like a local, thought Judson. They all told me they live and die by the weather here, and it sure seems to be true. Then he pulled up the hood of his jacket and remembered the dry, hot weather of Arizona. They joke that it always rains here, except it's not a joke! About the only option left for him to do today was to go back to the store and help Mr. Faltrip awhile. He also enjoyed talking with Mrs. Rezoff when she was there. He realized with a bit of a shock that he had yet to experience a truly boring day in Sokroshera Cove, and he didn't expect one today, either. He couldn't believe that he'd already lived a whole week without television.

Judson passed Mr. Rezoff and Herman on his way to Sandy Ann's house. Apparently, Will had come home from Kodiak no worse for wear, thought Judson. Mr. Rezoff looked and acted in better spirits today. Judson threw caution to the wind. "Sir, I'd like to ask you about Fort Sheplen sometime—or maybe go with you next time you explore." Herman had that unreadable expression again, his eyes hidden by his long dark hair. "Mr. Rezoff laughed. We'll make a proper *pagook* out of you yet, Jay-Jay. Right, Herm?" He looked at Herman, who just gave a quick smile and said nothing. "Come by the house anytime and I'll show you some of the stuff I've found in various places. It's like living history around our house—or a huge junkyard. One day I swear I'll come home and my wife'll have it all out back with a can 'o Blazo and a match, and send it all to Kingdom Come." Somehow, Judson doubted that. Then Will Rezoff laughed a genuine, sober laugh, and clearly had the look of someone who was beginning to enjoy life. It seemed that he was treating Herman better. "You know, Jay-Jay, Herman here knows almost as much about the fort as I do. Maybe on Saturday you and he can go exploring after he finishes his chores." At that, Herman said a quiet "Sure," but at the mention of chores, frowned and turned away. Judson left it alone. Maybe things were looking up around the Rezoff household.

In the cannery store, he and Sandy Ann were finishing up all the sorting and filing that Mr. Faltrip had asked them to do. The kids were proud of themselves, despite the smoldering resentment they had felt the day Mr. Faltrip had marched them into the office. The old filing cabinets now had neat folders labeled in Sandy Ann's careful printing. Judson had been surprised that for some things, she was far more patient than he was. The folders had titles such as "Herring Plant Records 1915 – 1933," "Land Grant Marmot Bay Fisheries Corp. 1926," "War Years Fort Sheplen," "Pender Ardet Correspondence," (she had asked how to spell that one), and even a "Russian History Sokroshera Island."

In the latter folder were several yellowing letters that seemed very fragile, all written in Cyrillic Russian script by a careful hand. "Looks like, someone in the town back in the herring plant days gave these old documents to the superintendent for safekeeping, forgot they were here, and they stayed in these cabinets until now," Faltrip had explained. "Good to know they're here. Maybe Anicia or somebody will read them to us sometime." After trying without success to decipher the Russian

letters, Sandy Ann remarked, "Wonder if any of these talk about Father Zakhar?" Judson asked whom she was talking about, and she explained, "You know, the mystery of the missing maybe murdered Monk!" This set them both giggling, even though Judson tried to stop, and tried to explain that it was actually a serious topic. "I know that!" said Sandy Ann through her giggles, and suggested they try saying things with other letters. "Sokroshera Serafina's silliness suddenly ceases!" said Judson finally. "Hey, that's no fair! *ceases* starts with a *c*," said Sandy Ann, crossly. "Yeah, but it's the same *sound*," said Judson. They both tried to say other things starting with various letters, until that finally got boring.

When the pair started carrying on like this and got sidetracked by giggling, Laura or Owen would peek in and make sure they were ok. But they always left with a smile for what was turning out to be the Cove's two most entertaining young people. However, most of the time the kids had worked in near silence, and Judson had marveled at the intense focus that Sandy Ann could muster. She had scrunched up her nose a lot then. Every few minutes, one of them would pull out a sheaf of papers and ask, "Where do you think this should go?" or "Should we ask Fat Lip about this one?" Even after throwing out large stacks of the papers, as approved by Mr. Faltrip, and burning them in a rusty open oil barrel in the little field past the mess hall, there were a lot of files left in that old cabinet. But now they were neatly labeled and sorted.

In the end, the time came when Mr. Faltrip was pleased with the result, grunting and nodding before informing them curtly that their services were no longer required. Both kids looked genuinely disappointed. They had sort of gotten absorbed in the task. For Judson's part, the history of the town of Sokroshera Cove and its cannery was turning out to be a lot more interesting than he could have imagined. And he also realized that for an active kid like Sandy Ann, having something to do was important. She had no access to TV, rarely saw movies, and sometimes needed a break from the usual village life of cleaning fish, hanging out the laundry, keeping her room neat (a total failure most days) and reporting the latest antics of her brother Jake in those serious, shocked tones that only an older sister can produce. But of course, Mr. Faltrip, for all his grouchy exterior, was not a harsh taskmaster. They had only worked for a few hours a day, and at the end of each shift, in stern tones, Mr. Faltrip had told them each to take "only one can of soda and one candy bar" and to clear out. But usually not before he turned on the old jukebox and played a tune or two for them. It was a routine that they would actually miss.

Sandy Ann, of course, was still Sandy Ann. At the news of their dismissal she blurted out, "Can we still go out on the dock where you found us? We're going to go anyway..." Mr. Faltrip raised his voice only a little, and interrupted her. "*Hell yes you are!*" and shook his head in resignation, waving them off. As they turned to leave, Sandy Ann's face shone with triumph. But Mr. Faltrip suddenly called them back. Their shocked looks revealed that they thought they'd gotten in trouble again somehow. "Here," he said curtly, reached into his pocket, and pulled out two crisp five-dollar bills. "Nothin' much to buy here, so don't waste it all on Shasta Orange Soda and Big Hunks," he said, eyeing the goods in their hands. "This is *Kodiak*

money," he said, emphasizing that their treasure would go a lot farther 'in town.' He turned quickly away, almost as though embarrassed.

In the summer of 1963, five whole dollars was still a princely (princessly?) sum that would prove very useful, even allowing for the expensive prices of rural Alaska, *if* the kids could save it all until they got to town. Judson suddenly realized that in a town full of rough fishermen and hard-working housewives, two crisp, clean bills would be nearly impossible to come by. Mrs. Rezoff, queen of the cash register, had likely been in on this little plot from the beginning. Laura Rezoff would probably be a conniving, nosy, annoying person if she wanted to be, but every plot Judson had ever heard about involved her doing something nice for somebody. And Fat Lip: is he a grouchy old man, or a really nice, lonely old man? It was a puzzle.

Out on the dock, at Sandy Ann's "The Place," her so recently re-conquered Victory Spot, they gazed out at the boats anchored in the cove, and Judson spoke first. Sandy Ann's mouth was working hard on a too-large chunk of chewy Big Hunk, and she was momentarily incapacitated. "I'm going to miss the breaks Fat Lip gave us back with the jukebox." Judson looked intently through the mist at a noisy outboard motor that was pushing a skiff—a "kicker and dory" in the local dialect. Someone was headed out to one of the anchored seiners. "I like that Harry James guy. So..."—He groped for the word—"Versatile. There'd be all those loud songs, where the trumpet was almost annoying. Then there'd be those soft, pretty ones like..." "Thleephy Lagoogh!" Sandy Ann interrupted rather moistly, the Big Hunk still winning the battle with her mouth. "Yeah, that's it, Sleepy Lagoon. And remember that love song he played for us a couple of times? The one he seemed to get almost choked up over? I can never remember the title right—*It's Not a Mistake...*" "*It Can't be Wrong!*" Sandy Ann interjected, still a little indistinctly through the stubborn remains of the Big Hunk. "I didn't like the singing at first." She imitated a bit: "doo doo doo...eww!" Judson grunted at the ease with which his friend could make something funny, although she was a lot softer about it than her brother Jake. Sandy Ann gave up pretending to sing and stated flatly, "All too mushy for me. But I kind of like it, now that I've thought about it." "I'm trying to remember the words," Judson frowned. Sandy Ann decided to finish her bite of Big Hunk and let him think.

He closed his eyes, reciting: "Wrong, it can't be wrong to kiss, knowing I feel like this, it can't be wrong to try..." Sandy Ann waved her hand in front of him. "*Whooftie*, don't go getting no ideas there. Blekk!" Sandy Ann made a Vomit Face for the second time that day. That word "*Whooftie*" was a local dialect word of Scandinavian extraction, which perfectly expressed surprise, amazement, or disgust. Judson was gradually absorbing the rhythm of Sokroshera Cove's English thanks to his new friend. "Naw," he said, in reference to any potential reenactment of the romantic lyrics, but nonetheless he suddenly had a great interest in a seagull that flew past. He abruptly turned toward Sandy Ann, pounded the side of the oil shed behind him, and spoke with an intensity that even he was surprised by. "Mr. Faltrip acts like he was in love with somebody here once. I'm sure of it. He never said anything exactly..." "Yeah," she responded excitedly. "He hinted around half the time and got almost mushy, especially when he played that one song on the

jukebox. Weird!" Sandy Ann scrunched up her nose and shook her head. "Whooftie—Fat Lip in *love*?" She made the Vomit Face yet again. They changed the subject.

Sandy Ann was suddenly in the mood to go to one of the village kids' hangout spots. One day they had gone out to the very tip of Selivanoff Point to look for boats, and had been there in the bright sunshine when the *Kolodka II*, Pete Kurtashkin at the helm, rounded the southwestern point and entered the cove. Today being a bit soggy, that was not a great idea. Judson was slowly getting used to playing in the rain, an activity unheard-of in faraway Arizona. Sandy Ann suggested the stand of spruce trees between the village and the old airstrip, and off they trotted. The trees had been converted into a village-style amusement park adventure. There were various rope swings and ladders and forts built of driftwood and scraps. One of the favorite rope swings was the one the kids called their "merry-go-round." A spruce tree, with limbs shorn to about fifteen feet up, had a long piece of castoff hemp tie-up line attached near its top. Some kindly adult, probably old Petey Kurt, had spliced the end into a nifty loop. Kids would unwind the rope to its maximum length, run in an arc while sitting in the loop, and soar around the tree, circling ever closer and faster.

If you were good at it, you merely ran up the side of the tree at the end of the spiral. But little Jake was not always good, and emitted a good imitation of Bugs Bunny hitting a wall whenever he wiped out, his chest or side slamming unceremoniously into the trunk. Judson and Sandy Ann arrived at the stand of spruce trees just as little Jake spun into the merry-go-round tree, Eagle doubling up with laughter. No one ever got seriously hurt from this; Jake just shook himself off, unwound, and took another run at it. The only real downside was that your butt would eventually get chafed from sitting on the scratchy hemp line for too long. It was free village entertainment, provided by leftover fishing gear and kids' imaginations. Judson tried the swing, but wiped out even more frequently than Jake did. Naturally, Sandy Ann was the most coordinated at the "merry go round" tree, but kept her gloating to a minimum. They each took turns, and stood, a bit dizzy, waiting for the next go-round. The only grief Judson got today was when he inadvertently stepped within the arc and Eagle sent him flying face-first onto the wet grass. "Hey Jay-Jay! This is a swing, not a *bowling* game," laughed Jake.

After a few more minutes, Judson and Sandy Ann wandered off toward home. Judson, to be sure, was soaked from his fiasco in the rain-soaked grass. But his mind was on the secret that he and Sandy Ann had uncovered: that Mr. Faltrip had once been in love with someone from the village. It made him feel ill at ease, as though he had been caught peeping in someone's window. Sandy Ann apparently was thinking similar thoughts, for they were nearly silent until they reached her place. She mumbled a goodbye, waved and smiled as she entered the house. Judson continued on through the mist, toward his apartment in the schoolhouse.

Thursday, February 4, 1943, a clear, cold, slightly hazy morning before sunrise, Fort Sheplen

For seemingly the umpteenth time that morning, Owen Faltrip checked his watch. He stepped into Ardet's office and took down the almanac from a shelf behind his boss's desk, checking it also for the umpteenth time. "Penny" Ardet emerged from a side room and said, resignedly, "Yes, I got your note, and yes, you can go AWOL on me for the rest of the day. But what do you mean, you need to work on the fire truck again? Maybe if you didn't take it all the way up the hill at all hours it wouldn't need so much attention." But his boss had a smile on his face; this was a small island, there were only a hundred or so construction workers and assorted military on the island yet, and there was really no way to keep anything secret for long, not if the protagonists were using the road system, anyway. "It's not totally wise to give civilians access to our equipment, Owen." Ardet lit another cigarette. "Please, sir, don't be crude. I... I can't explain it, sir. She's something pretty special." Ardet decided to have mercy on his indispensable assistant. "Well, I may pound on your door at 0300 tomorrow just to see how useful you still are to me. Get out of here before we lose all semblance of military discipline. That's an order," snapped Ardet. He waited this time to laugh until Owen had closed the door and left, and found that he just shook his head instead. Hope he doesn't leave his heart here, his friend said to himself. His mind wandered back to his own Miss Stephanie, waiting for him back in Louisiana. His friend had managed to find himself in an equally romantic situation. It's easy to lose your heart, isn't it?

Faltrip parked a jeep outside the large Quonset hangar that held the base's fire truck, and slid wide the hangar doors. The 1936 REO/Stutz was of course in perfect working order, and Ardet had somehow known that. Owen drove it slowly out of its hangar and onto the road that turned past the runway and up into the fort. He stopped where the road dipped at east beach and was completely hidden from anyone in the village or meadow. Out of the nearby alder brush came a doe-eyed lady with long black hair that she had tied into a cute pony tail. Pariscovia Rezoff, widow of Wilfred Rezoff, who had spent most of her life on Sokroshera Island. She jumped into the passenger seat. She was carrying a paper bag with a picnic, but she had no idea of the surprise Faltrip had in store for her, something of cosmic proportions that he could never have planned, but had managed to predict.

They drove in near silence, pretty easy to do since the REO's gasoline engine had to strain a bit going up some of the steep hills, and the chains on the tires made an unbelievable clatter. Finally, after carefully negotiating an even steeper grade, the truck's chains slipping a little when they came in contact with the exposed rock below the roadbed, the unlikely love machine fire truck and the equally unusual coupe parked near the end of the road at the top of Mount Sokroshera. Owen had turned the truck so that the nose pointed toward the mountain, and the tail nearly hung over the cliff. "My son Will is coming back to live with me before Christmas," said Pariscovia. "I may go down to visit him and my late husband's family in Karluk before then. It's just such a long boat ride, and I don't do as good as most people out on the water." "It was kind of them to take your son when you got so sick," said Owen.

Parisovia changed the subject. "When you brought the medical guys here for check ups, they looked me over, too." "I bet they did!" interrupted Owen. Paris giggled, punched him in the ribs, and continued. "No, I mean they said it wasn't T.B.—possibly asthma, they weren't sure. But it does get worse in the winter. I may have to move to Kodiak to be closer to the doctor. I would *hate* that, haw?" she said, and let her eyes tell him the reasons why. He was silent now, his mind filled with thoughts. These local people—so much meaning in so few words. He could learn a lot from a woman like this. Scratch that; he *wanted* to learn a lot from this lady. It was becoming the passion of his soul to get that opportunity, and to experience everything else that would come with it. And she obviously felt the same passion. He came back to the moment; his face had slowly softened into a smile as he, too, 'sent his soul to his eyes' as she liked to describe it.

Her long convalescence from whatever was confusing the doctors had begun with walks along Stepan's Beach and above east beach, and especially by the shores of the lake, of course mostly in good weather. It was there by the lake he first saw her, from a distance at first, greeting her with a pleasant wave of the hand. And then one day he had come down to the shore near the old abandoned cannery pump house and found her sitting nearby, risking her warmth to splash a bit in the cold, clear water, afternoon sun at her back, after months of keeping herself carefully bundled up. He had let his fleece-lined jacket be the towel. Her eyes, her voice, her soul had mesmerized him ever since. He often called her "the Swan" after their awakening at the lake. "Better callin' me that than your *Loon*," she had said, abruptly tilting back her head and imitating the strange, almost goofy call of the beautiful and elusive but vocally cursed waterfowl. Caught off guard by the silly sound being offered by this lovely lady, he had laughed until he could hardly stand up.

The return of her own quick sense of humor showed her that this scrapper of a thin Statesider had brought more than physical healing. He was good for her, she realized. She knew he'd been a boxer, but hardly believed it, seeing deeper into him than anyone else ever had. For his part, her story—the sad tale of losing her husband, her pride in young Will, her hopes for the future—all burned their way into his soul. But how could he possibly promise anything? There were already rumors of redeployments and of halting the construction; he couldn't bear to think of that. If he happened to still be here when Will came home, he would have another adjustment to make, and another chance to keep promises and be the kind of man he realized he wanted to be. Was he the father type? He promised himself that if given the chance, he would do whatever he could to help that boy. And he already wanted to give heart, soul, and the ground he walked on to this sweet swan of a lady that had so easily broken down his walls.

He interrupted their thoughts. "It's time for our picnic," he said firmly, casually looking at his watch and trying not to glance at the sky. They were sitting on the tail of the fire truck, legs over the side, trying to get as comfortable as possible on the coiled hoses he had piled up as the only available alternative to the bare metal. Such a view was worth creased butts, he hoped. "Oly or Lucky Lager?" asked his

swan, pulling out two cans from her paper bag. "Olympia, *please!*" the scrapper said. "Lucky tastes like yellow snow." She giggled at the ancient joke. They shared sandwiches and homemade cookies, and could be forgiven for barely touching their cold beers on a February in Alaska near the summit of a mountain. What was I thinking, Owen wondered, but she was fine. Breathing easily, laughing quickly, talking clearly, and more than fine.

Suddenly she looked at him. "What is happening?" All around them, it was suddenly growing darker. There were fine wispy clouds on the horizon, but mostly clear skies above. Mostly clear *black* skies, with the slightest hint of stars. "Ooh," she shook her head in wonder, trying to take it all in, Marmot Bay, Spruce Island, the long coast of Kodiak Island, Whale Island, Raspberry Island, Afognak Island, and their own Sokroshera Cove below, suddenly in deep shadow at midday. Her head turned and her eyes danced as she tried to absorb all of it, almost as though she were trying to inhale it. "You brought me to see the black daytime," she said. "I've heard old ones speak of this, but never saw it." He grasped her hand, not bothering to require her to look at him. "I love you," he said. It was the first time those words had ever passed his lips. Ever. To anyone.

Thursday, October 30, 1943 – Evening at Fort Sheplen

"Your last night here, haw?" "Yes, and the lights go out for Fort Sheplen tomorrow when we cut the power lines past the pump house, the ones that go up the hill. I have to be aboard by noon." Owen winced as he realized that he had tried to soften the moment with the minutia of military data. Pariscovia waved away the annoying details. "You can write me—the cannery watchman gives us letters whenever the mail boat comes in." Owen dispensed with the Supply Specialist talk and spoke with his heart this time. "I will write you, and let you know where I'm stationed. I promise I will find my way back—to you—somehow." He did not promise lightly, and she realized that. "You will come back, and you will always be—" she paused and looked him in the eyes, "*—here*. I feel it. You will always know that your heart is here." She touched her fingertips to her heart, and then raised them, in a sweeping motion, toward the mountain. Finally, she turned and gazed at him, full attention on this man who had brought her so much. "You made the sky black so I could see the light in your heart," she said, her mind reliving that day on the mountain. "But now you're makin' me into some kind of poet." She sounded almost cross at this, but smiled bravely, and Owen knew she was trying hard not to cry. Among all the improbable wartime love stories, these two desperately wanted their story to end differently, that somehow, by force of will, they could make this work in the end.

The sunlight had returned for both of them. They were standing in the twilight beside Lake Stephanie, the place where he had found his Swan. Not wanting to spoil the mood, he gestured toward the fire truck, and they walked silently up to it. He had one last gift to give. He took her in his arms. He was amazed at how light she felt, and how warm she was. He turned and reached carefully under the seat of the REO, pulling out a paper bag. "Not much of a wrapper..." he admitted, handing her the package. She slid the paper off, revealing a new record binder. She opened

the hinge, not looking yet at the contents, but searching for a note or message. She was not disappointed: "To the Swan from the Scrapper, with all my Love." Only one disc was in the binder, a new copy he had ordered the day he noticed she liked it. The military was slow, but they got this one right on time. "Oh," she said, her eyes shining. And again, "Oh, look—our song." Dick Haymes and the Song Spinners: *It Can't Be Wrong*.