

Chapter 9

Fifth Week of School, October 1963: Sokroshera Cove

It was morning in the Cove, and time to get up and get ready for school. A steady light rain, still a few weeks away from turning to snow, turned the entire landscape from bay to mountain into dim shades of blue-gray. It was a cloudy Sokroshera Cove morning, with the usual soaking mist the locals joked was 'liquid air.' In Anicia's old log house, Anya Bazaroff's kids were looking around for something to eat before heading out the door, after digging through piles of dirty clothes for something to wear. Their great aunt was busy in her room trying to take care of the little baby, and their mother was 'hung over' out on the couch and wouldn't be up and about for a couple of hours yet. Eagle found a can of grape soda, and April dragged a chair to a cluttered cabinet and got a box of stale pilot bread from a top shelf. They shared the grape soda, had a couple of rounds of pilot bread, and found a handful of raisins in a cupboard box—just a normal school day in their house.

Down the road, Mrs. Lindseth had made French toast, which Jake spread with canned applesauce and pieces of red licorice vine candy. "It's good," he insisted. Sandy Ann went the butter and syrup route, and made a face when she switched to the reconstituted RealGold orange juice she'd helped her mom mix up moments before. One can juice, three cans water, stir, pour, and don't drink it after having pancake syrup! Unable to escape without helping clean up, Sandy Ann washed, and Mrs. Lindseth stood in front of the door with a dishtowel, blocking Jake's way. "Rather die than dry," Jake pouted, but the dishes were all neatly dried and stacked into the tidy, oilcloth-lined cupboard shelves before they rushed out the door.

In the Rezoff household, Laura was planning to have fried eggs, and Herman had sliced and fried the Spam. Nothing better than fried Spam with eggs! Barbara had also helped by mixing the RealGold orange juice as Sandy Ann was doing a few doors down. Whatever the store stocked, the town ate, but not being used to any other way of life, no one in town was surprised to see familiar cans on each other's shelves. Will came over to where Barbara was mixing the juice, standing on a low stool he'd made to help her reach. "Won't be long until you don't need that stool anymore, young lady!" he said in a low, menacing voice close to her ear, followed by a concerted effort to tickle her ribs. She finally emitted a giggle and a smile, and he turned his attention to Laura. "I'm so hungry I could eat the hind end off a skunk," he declared, eyeing the nearly ready eggs. "If you talk that way, we'll never raise these kids right!" Laura intoned, in mock seriousness.

Will reached out and ruffled up Herman's hair, and Herman turned from the frying Spam to pretend to slug his dad. "Now Herman'll take *another* half hour to get ready. He'll have to start *all* over on his coiffure," said Laura. "Uh, huh," said Herman, who hadn't seen a comb in weeks, as he turned back to the frying pan. "This week I'm gonna be helping Truck Brother Jake wire the two-twenty for the new crane on the front dock," said Will. "When that's done, then back to work we all go!" "It's been a real blessing to have steady work all these months when hardly

anybody else did," said Laura, adding, "Maybe now everybody else will have work!" Will nodded in agreement, and carried a platter to the table. Breakfast was ready.

In the apartment in the superintendent's house, Judson threw a few pieces of bread into the oven of the oil stove, and poured milk into a saucepan, putting it towards the back of the hot stove, away from the firepot so it wouldn't scorch. If you could call it milk, thought Judson, eyeing the Carnation red and white wax paper wrapper on the tall box of milk powder. Judson shuddered. It's horrible stuff, and only good when I heat it and hide it! Or when it's ice cold and you are very thirsty, he concluded. The bread on the shelf in the oven of the oil stove would soon be the most amazing toast: completely dry yet not burnt, in a way no toaster could ever recreate. Lightly brown, and weighing less than half of what it did when he placed it in the oven, each piece would soon be slathered with peanut butter and each in turn would fit neatly into an old pie plate he had waiting on the table. Then the hot milk would make it all a steaming, wonderful mess. Even against the onslaught of hot "milk," the dry toast would remain slightly crunchy almost to the last bite. Little Jake had introduced him to the warm, comforting creation, and told him it was best with hot applesauce. That would mean cleaning up more saucepans, so Judson decided against it today.

His dad had coffee percolating, its insistent gurgle and strong aroma filling the kitchen. A pot of extremely coarse and chewy oatmeal, the one legacy from his grandma that Judson loathed, bubbled and plopped next to the nearly ready hot milk. Even raisins, white sugar, and salt couldn't make Grandma's concrete mixer oatmeal palatable for a seventh-grader. Thankfully, his dad had seen fit to let Judson make his own breakfast today. Judson reasoned he had just enough time to run to the bathroom mirror and sorta-kind of use a comb before the milk was ready.

When he returned and retrieved his food, he found his dad already digging into the oatmeal, listening to the AFRTS station on the portable radio. A program of mostly adult pop standards was interrupted by the solemn strains of the Air Force Hymn, "Lord, Guard, and Guide." A serious-sounding chaplain in mellifluous voice gave a short devotional at about this time every morning. Then the Dee Jays took over and it was mostly rock and roll until news time "at the top of the hour." Judson found Alaskan radio programming to be hugely different from Arizona stations. They seemed to play almost anything up here. Thus, Judson had received a crash course in classic country, elevator music, and even polka music depending on when he tuned in. Still, he was glad that there was just enough rock and roll to keep him informed about the hit parades in the "Lower 48."

The Anchorage stations such as KFQD and KENI came in loud and clear. Judson was amused at the latter's promo for sports news: "...so keep a keen eye on KENI (*keee-nigh*), the big K in Anchorage, for the latest sports reports!" One fascinating thing the local stations did was transmit personal news for people out in "the bush," in a feature one station called the "Tundra Telegraph." Between songs, the announcers would say things like "76 Oil would like Bert and Myrna Jackson out on mile 27 to know that their two barrels of heating oil will be dropped off this afternoon." With no phone service and intermittent mail service, this radio feature

was a major lifeline to rural Alaska. About two songs into the rock and roll set on AFRTS, Mr. Hansen pushed back his chair and headed toward the sink. Judson helped clean up and put away. Neither bachelor wanted to do dishes, but by agreement they decided to clean up every morning, because as the elder Hansen had said with infuriating accuracy, "It's no fun coming home after a long day to a sink full of crusty dishes!" They shut off the radio and grabbed their coats just as the fifth song was starting.

School in the Cove was steadily turning into its own little society, with alliances, cliques, and occasional clashes and crushes. For example, Jake was in love. He could whistle through the gap in his teeth, he could sound like a movie narrator, and now (apparently) he could fall in love. Jake was now in the fifth or sixth day of a major fourth grade crush on April Bazaroff. She was a blonde, like her mother, and the only kid in town to have blue eyes. She also had her mother's exotic, almost sultry looks. Jake was probably not aware of these things; she had always been fun to tease, but now she seemed strangely *different* from her brother Eagle, the other half of the "Holy Terrors." It surprised no one except Jake that she would be able to possess a boy's heart.

So Jake had lately been calling her Miss Amy Marie Bazaroff, almost reverently, after learning her full, real name. However, the lovely April was only in the second grade. And her second grade-ness factored in quickly, dooming their budding relationship. After several days of walking around side by side, holding hands a couple of times, and sending and receiving horribly misspelled and vacuous notes when they thought Mr. Hansen wasn't looking, April abruptly and irrevocably broke up with him. It had been the identical several days that April had been unable to play with her friends Barbara and the twins at recess. The teeter-totter no longer had a quorum, and three rather steamed girls were suddenly plotting the murder of young Jake. Not that they might have had lots of other reasons to plot revenge already. For example, the twins dearly loved their mom's old gray cat, so recently terrorized by Jake. And Barbara only smiled when her *Dad* tickled her, but was likely to hit a usurping tickler like young Jake. April was subpoenaed back into their fold on this rainy morning at recess, and when she informed Jake that they were through, he broke down and cried! Luckily, it was raining steadily; he made a few strategic passes under the dripping eaves and hid the evidence.

Mr. Hansen's partnership strategy in the classroom was yielding excellent results. Last week, Judson had sat at one of the long tables and asked Barbara to write him a story. Mr. Hansen had asked him to see if he could find a way to help her write more clearly. She had carefully written "I Lkie brids I rlely lke tuo sie the selugs fying akros the cvoe." When Barbara pointed to each word and calmly intoned, "I like birds. I really like to see the seagulls flying across the cove," Judson had a thought. He quickly wrote down what she had said to him, and took her to the plywood easel that Mr. Faltrip had made for them. Taking a strip of butcher paper and a marker, he instructed Barbara to close her eyes. He held her hand and said each word as they spelled it together. Nervous at first that Judson was there to pull a Jake and suddenly tickle her, she soon learned to trust Judson, and settled into this unusual task.

Seeing the words flow across the page in her mind's eye made a big difference for the thoughtful Barbara. Brain, meet hand, thought Judson. They returned to the table, and Judson pulled the easel close so that Barbara could see it if she needed to, and he read each word aloud to her as she wrote. She devised a ruler and eraser system so that she could follow the lines and still close her eyes. Putting her thumb down at the place to start, and holding the ruler down with the rest of her hand, she wrote until she could feel the eraser she had placed at the right margin. Then she would open her eyes, reposition the ruler and eraser, and repeat the process until her story was done. Once or twice, between words, she took a peek at her work. Refusing to look at the easel, Barbara wrote the whole two-sentence story, this time in letter-perfect order, merely forgetting the second "L" in *really*. Judson had praised her, showed her the before and after, and stapled the pages together to show her folks. Barbara ran to the store at lunchtime to show her mother.

When the lunch hour ended, Laura and Barbara stood by the mess hall door waiting for the Hansen boys. "You did a wonderful job, Jay-Jay. Barbara is so proud of what she's done!" Mrs. Rezoff showed the paper to Mr. Hansen, recognizing his son's writing in the titles of the two papers: *Before* and *After*. Judson explained what they did, and added, "Barbara's a thinker. I just thought that maybe having to look at what she was doing was distracting her. She came up with the whole ruler and eraser idea." Judson ducked inside, through with adult talk for a while.

Mr. Hansen was explaining, "There have been theories and studies about difficulties like hers, but Judson came up with this all by himself. He just put himself in Barbara's head for a minute." "You have raised a remarkable young man there," said Laura. "And Barbara comes home and talks about you almost every day. Yesterday she said, 'My teacher hears what I say.' She means that you really seem to understand her. Guess you passed that on to your boy. And Herman says he is doing better in school because he trusts you." Mr. Hansen was embarrassed at this, so he just nodded. Laura noticed and said no more. Time to start class again.

Then on a Tuesday, right in the middle of Arithmetic, Sandy Ann stood up suddenly, asked to go to the restroom, and went down the hallway, bent over and looking worried. Marla, watching her leave, caught a glimpse of a red stain and snorted. "It's salmon time for Serafina! And the 'reds' are flowing *downstream*!" "But it's not salmon season now," said Jake, confused and concerned for his sister. "Oh, yes it is, and for Sandy Ann, the reds will be flowing every month now!"

Mr. Hansen looked sternly at Marla and said, "Perhaps you could be helpful, instead of crude. Go talk to her—and be kind," he softened slightly, and added, "Please." Marla trotted off, snickering, but by the time she got to the door marked "Women," she had collected her better nature. After what seemed like several minutes, for nobody was listening to any lessons at that moment, Marla emerged. She went to the wall where the coats hung on nails, and retrieved Sandy Ann's coat. "Gonna take her home now," Marla said flatly, leading Sandy Ann, coat tied by the arms around her waist, out the door. Sandy Ann looked ashen, and made no eye contact

as they left. Jake stood up to join them, but Mr. Hansen waved him back down. "This is women's stuff, Jake. She'll be fine. Your mom will take care of everything."

Herman and Judson were only slightly aware of what had happened to Sandy Ann, but both realized that this was some sort of milestone, some sort of turning the corner away from childhood. And although neither expressed it, the situation made them vaguely nervous, as though they'd witnessed something they shouldn't have. Judson found his thoughts veering in odd and unexpected directions. At recess, Herman suddenly seemed in the mood to talk. They walked along the dock side of the mess hall, but far out of the way of the workers who were building the new crane. "I know about how you kicked Ward's butt, Jay-Jay," said Herman, and recited exactly the location and approximate outcome of the fight. "But *nobody* was around," protested Judson, a bit shocked. It was not something he was proud of, looking back at what it eventually caused. "Well, walls have windows, and tongues will talk," said Herman, simply. "I was hanging around with Ward a year or so ago, and we decided to play in his house. We walked in and there was his mom on the couch with some guy, who was in town on a seiner. They were..." He made a descriptive motion with his hands and said, "...sorta tangled up on the couch. We got outta there quick, but out in the yard Ward cussed me out, then he slugged me and gave me a black eye. I don't hang out with him since." Judson nodded without any further comment, inwardly shuddering at the imagery. Anya was a one-woman symposium on the birds and the bees for at least two of them.

A younger voice interrupted them. "I asked April to kiss me—said it's what boyfriends and girlfriends do, and she slapped me and ran away," said little Jake, behind them. He'd been hanging on their every word. Neither of them decided to whup him, but thought about it. "Next day she broke up with me. Mebbe she saw Anya f... uh... *tangled up* ...like you said, and got scared of me. I know seeing that would make *me* sick. Gotta be lots worse when it's your *mom!*" Even as he shuddered at the images the conversation had raised, Judson was surprised at this outpouring of wisdom from the usually shallow and explosive Jake. "I try not to talk about stuff like that around Eagle, 'cause he'd fight, and I think he could take me. And plus, he can't help it either how his mom acts, haw? That's what my Dad told me." Judson had never seen Jake so serious. Jake frowned and continued. "Dad wants to send them to the Mission, but Mom says that ol' Anicia is still trying to help them grow up the right way." Judson nodded, no words to add, but patted the kid on the back. Perhaps the young man's monologue was a hint of what young Jake might turn out to be like as an adult. The bell rang, ending the most serious recess Judson had ever experienced, there or anywhere else.

After school that day, a chagrined Mrs. Lindseth stood outside waiting for Mr. Hansen. She launched into her apologies as soon as she sighted him. "Oh, Mr. Hansen, I am so embarrassed. My little girl is growing up and I had never had a talk with her. My generation didn't do that. I grew up in the Mission, and somehow we didn't want to talk to the old ladies there about stuff like that. Miss Setze was a nurse, and she tried to explain, sort of. But I learned most of what was going on with me from my older friends at school. Guess Marla took that job for my Sandy Ann." There was a 'did she take a breath in there somewhere?' quality to her

speech that mirrored what Judson had heard from Sandy Ann on occasion. He decided it might be brought on by nervous excitement. The usual village discourse tended to be at a slower pace than in most other places.

At Mrs. Lindseth's speech, Mr. Hansen just gave her a 'no harm, no foul' smile and nod, and she continued, slower this time. "We never can talk about sex things out here. The kids learn about it from each other, from watching the cows and bulls in the spring, and... from Anya, unfortunately." Judson had walked over to join them halfway into the conversation, before he grasped their train of thought. Now he looked uncomfortable and turned to leave.

"Jay-Jay, please be sure not to tease my Serafina," said Mrs. Lindseth seriously. "Sandy Ann is the person I would... *least* like to hurt," said Judson, surprised at his own bluntness. "I thought as much, young man!" said Mrs. Lindseth, flashing a big smile at him and pounding him on the back. Women in this town are more (he struggled for the right word) *authoritative* than most of the ones back home, he said to his dad later. Except about guy-girl stuff maybe. Mrs. Lindseth produced a small paper bag that neither Hansen had noticed her carrying. "Here's some cookies, to change the subject!" Polite laughter and the exit of Judson to go home and sample the goodies ended the conversation.

Wednesday, October 30, 1963: Sokroshera Cove

It was another rainy day outside the mess hall school in Sokroshera Cove, several days of pelting, persistent rain, and not their usual 'liquid air' light mist. Every roof in town was getting a good workout. Eagle and Jake were drilling each other, rather unsuccessfully, on their times tables. Sandy Ann, back from her strange adventure mercifully without comment from the older kids, was helping young Alexander with his printing after hearing that he hoped she was alright. And Judson and Barbara were about to start another story, this one about "The place where I can visit my grandma," when Mr. Hansen interrupted. Recess was scheduled in about ten minutes, so maybe he was going to announce a new game to play. But it was still raining heavily, as it had for several days, and their gravel play yard was pockmarked with multiple puddles several feet across.

Mr. Hansen addressed the students: "Tomorrow is October 31st so... would you like to have a Halloween Party?" Eleven students can still make an enormous amount of racket if excited enough. Anyone as far away as Afognak or Ouzinkie could have heard that the answer was yes. "I've talked to most of your parents, and it means a late night with school the next day, but we've decided to start school on Friday an hour later, so that we can all stay up late." Mr. Hansen continued despite the roar of the crowd. "Mr. Faltrip ordered a movie for us, and we have the projector and screen here already. It's a spooky one from a few years ago, about ghosts and leprechauns, called *Darby O'Gill and the Little People*. Mr. Faltrip says he's never shown it here before, so ask your parents if you can stay to see it. And think of a good costume to wear. Tomorrow we will make masks out of old paper bags, and you could ask your folks for some old clothes you could borrow."

Mr. Hansen ended his announcement to thunderous approval, and reminded kids that since it was raining, they'd play table games for recess. Judson was suddenly glad for the bright, bare light bulbs of the mess hall; it looked unusually gloomy and gray outside. A box of blocks appeared from under an unused table, and board games appeared from a closet, and soon the kids were all engrossed in a reasonably entertaining version of recess. With rain being so frequent, one has to stop arguing with the weather and learn to adjust. Easier said than done, Judson thought, suddenly missing the dry, hot canyons and mesas of Arizona.

Truth be told, Judson did have times when this little town was painfully boring for him. On those long, quiet evenings when he had finished his homework, written in his journal, and couldn't seem to choose which record to put on his stereo, he would still catch himself looking around for a television to watch. Then he would pull himself back into his present reality and grab a book, grateful that a good author can transport a patient reader into a different time and place. Or if he felt the apartment closing in on him, he would grab his coat and take a walk, even in the rain, because nothing cleared his head like the cold, moist, salty air of the Cove. He came to realize that he was more comfortable in the world of friendships and human contact than he had ever been before. And some of the people here were closer to him than anyone besides family had ever been. That surprised him the most. All of this was a huge improvement over the dual solitary, troubled lives he and his father had lived back at the Arizona school. The people of the Cove, living cradle to grave with only a small circle of family and neighbors, were used to a level of closeness that Judson had never before experienced. Obviously, there was a downside to this, causing Sandy Ann to seek out her "Thought Spots," but Judson saw it all as mostly positive. And the young people's school activities, especially on rainy days, exemplified that family atmosphere.

As part of his adjustment to living in a close community with frequent bad weather, Judson had become adept at every board game on the shelf at school, and every game found in both the Rezoffs' and the Lindseth's closets. He'd come to appreciate these table games: the unpredictable nature of the give and take, the good-natured yet somehow cutthroat competition, the fleeting alliances, and sudden treachery. During rainy recess game time, Herman was by far the best at any kind of strategy. Sandy Ann was infamous for sudden intrigue and competitive fierceness, turning into a vicious backstabber and a striking cobra at unpredictable moments. Judson was most famous for the sarcastic, yet good-natured comment, for his comedic take on ordinary events, and for expert plays that were just rare enough to catch his opponents by surprise. With his mind whirring constantly and not always on the game, he was the most likely to be distracted.

And Marla, well, she was turning out to be the most easygoing of the lot, except when she felt betrayed in one of the vicious twists of an especially competitive round. Then she would lightly pound the table with the palm of her hand and stare at the perpetrator with a sharp "Hey! Did ya *hafta* do that?" Since the twins were famous for their stare-downs when something upset them, it was vaguely amusing coming from their older sister. Judson even saw her exhibit this sense of moral outrage when others fell victim to treachery as well. He was coming to recognize

and appreciate Marla's strong sense of justice and fairness. It puzzled him to see that quality in her, given her family heritage, and guessed that it came from her mother.

Somehow, all of it seemed to draw them closer. No matter how intense the game had been, it was all laughter and smiles at the end, or a few minutes after the end. It was always the spontaneous humor, the scrambled sentence, the flubbed play, that they were talking about after they'd long since packed up the field of battle. Judson especially learned to appreciate the unannounced thumping up the steps that signaled that his neighbors were bringing a shopping bag full of games, and his boredom was about to be spectacularly evaporated. He imagined trying to tell his old acquaintances in Arizona that he liked to sit around playing board games, and laughed at what he knew they would say to that.

So now, as the rain beat down outside, the students of the little school in the mess hall were anything but bored. Judson looked around and listened, as the students in the mess hall entertained themselves. Nope, I'm not bored after all, he thought. The lights dimmed for a couple of seconds, and then came back up, the side effect of the various projects going on, no doubt. If the power actually goes out, I think I'm gonna be depressed, thought Judson. It's easy enough to feel down after days and days of rain. More rain, plus the gloom that would descend if the lights went out... well that would be just too much. Marla was playing checkers with Herman, and next to her, Jake was playing checkers with Barbara, who had proven rather tough to beat lately. Concentration versus total distractibility equals no contest, thought Judson. Jake could occasionally bluff, bluster, and distract just enough to win, and that kept him in the game. The contests between little Jake and Barbara, polar opposites, were quietly entertaining for Judson to watch.

Although absorbed at some level by their board games, the students were still thinking about the upcoming movie. "I wonder if leprechauns are anything like our Hairy *Olocks*, remarked Marla, and Jake turned to her with his full attention. "What's a *leper*... uh... *leper con*?" asked Jake in all seriousness. Marla was surprisingly patient after weeks of helping to tutor the younger students. "A leprechaun is a tiny man who lives in Ireland and grants wishes to anyone who catches him," she stated with reasonable accuracy. "Ok, so what is a *hurryolek* or whatever you said?" asked Judson, equally perplexed. Marla related the old stories of a hairy, manlike creature who "was seen" from time to time in the woods.

Every village, even ones without forests, seemed to have legends of such a creature, and everyone knew someone who claimed the *Olock* "was seen" by somebody they knew. Other villages called him an *Ohooluk*, and Judson suspected their pronunciation was closer to the original. Judson said that he was fairly sure this was the same kind of story as Bigfoot, the Yeti, the Abominable Snowman, and other variations across the globe. Several kids were surprised that other places had similar legends. So many places with similar stories—that just makes it harder to doubt *all* of them, he thought.

Judson was in the process of explaining to Jake that he had said "*abominable*," not "*abdominal*," when the door burst open. Mr. Lindseth stood there, in distress and confusion. "There's been an accident... Mr. Rezoff... Will..." He did not continue, perhaps could not continue, but abruptly turned around and left. Mrs. Lindseth rushed in moments later saying, "Mr. Hansen, I need to take Herman and Barbara to the store to be with their mom. Can you see that my kids get home safely? I... I think everyone should *go home*—and we will tell you everything later. Right now we need to have nobody in the way." At an eruption of questions from young and old students alike, she took a deep breath and said, "*Wóspodee!* I'm so sorry to tell you that Will Rezoff passed away in an accident a few minutes ago. Please, kids, help us now, and go home."

Betty left with Herman and Barbara. Herman looked like he was about to faint, and Barbara had a scowl of concentration on her face, trying hard to process news that would be difficult for anyone to handle. Grateful that the authoritative Mrs. Lindseth had taken the matter in hand, Mr. Hansen dismissed class, and made sure the remaining students had someone to walk them home. Gloom of an entirely new variety descended on all the children. The older ones understood at a deep level that someone they all knew was now dead. But the little ones grasped only that suddenly all of the older people were upset and sad. Marla took her three siblings, met halfway home by their mother. Eagle and April lived right next door to them, so Marla conducted the Bazaroff kids to their home, and went inside for a few minutes to talk with Anya and Anicia. After the rest of the kids had gone, Judson walked Sandy Ann and Jake home, opting to walk slowly with his friends in the hopes that some understanding could descend into the confusion. On the way to the Lindseth home, little Jake suddenly blurted out, "So this means no Halloween party then?" His sister's fierce shaking head told Jake that it was no time for anyone to worry about trivial stuff like that. But moments later, her arm was around him.

Judson walked the Lindseths home, and outside the kellydoor, all three spontaneously huddled and hugged. Before he left, he told them how much he admired their mom for doing such a hard thing. "Give her a hug for me," he said. Then the three of them had hugged again. Little Jake, with the aborted Halloween party finally swept from his mind, had begun to cry; Sandy Ann was already crying, but trying to maintain her composure as best she could. They parted in silence at the Lindseth's door. Judson wandered back down the road, all the ache of losing his mother adding to the sadness of this new tragedy, sending pangs of pain like a swarm of roving knives in his chest. Almost aimlessly pacing in the driving rain, he finally dropped by the store, reasoning that it was sort of on the way to the house, and because he really didn't want to be alone.

He walked in to a scene of grief that was far too familiar. All the adults seemed to be trying to hold everything together by sheer willpower. They were trying to do something useful in the face of great personal loss. He couldn't see Herman or Barbara, and guessed that Mrs. Lindseth had taken them under her care. Many voices speaking at once in several clusters of adults made it hard to pick out what had happened. Nevertheless, he heard snatches of conversation: "...didn't know

that circuit was still hot. We thought we'd shut off everything. It shorted because of the rain leaking through the roof into the walls..." – Jakob Pedersen. "...no chance ...the shock threw him back into that old herring tank and he was... gone before he hit the ground..." – Danny. "...already called the State Troopers so they can examine the scene and take the body if they need to..." – Mr. Faltrip (who seemed to have the most trouble controlling his voice). "Jakob worked on him for a long time, but he was already gone. He did all he could, I know." – Danny, his voice shaking. Finally, his dad's voice was the only one speaking. "Betty's right...they shouldn't be alone tonight. They can stay with us, because Jud's room has a spare bed, so does mine, and the office room has a couch that I can use." There were murmurs of assent at this plan. "...thank you for... for watching the kids, Betty. Can someone call Ouzinkie and get ahold of Mr. Smith? I'd like... I'd like him to do the service." – This was the saddest voice of all, Laura Rezoff. Then his father again, "I will cancel school until Monday. We can all pitch in and help the family."

Finally, there was one more voice, clearer this time. "Laura, you and I have a lot to talk about, and I'm sorry, but some of it needs to be soon. I'll be up to the superintendent's house as soon as you get your things. I'll explain... *then*. Danny, can you go with her to get what they need? Thank you, Jeffrey, for closing down classes for a few days so we can use the mess hall... for the memorial service and the dinner." – Mr. Faltrip again, his voice strangely focused. Mr. Faltrip turned toward Jeffrey, said something, and Mr. Hansen said yes.

Judson realized that for some time he'd been staring vacantly at a shelf of soup cans, listening intently, but unable to bring himself to actually face anyone and talk. Judson didn't want to be alone, but he didn't want to be in the way, either, so he left without being noticed, and no one spoke to him. He hurried to the house to get ready for guests. Under the worst possible circumstances, he thought. Our job tonight is to take as many tasks off the Rezoff family as we can. As he stepped into the huge living room and saw the Voice of Music stereo sitting on the small table, he picked up Mr. Rezoff's note again and finally started to cry. Will Rezoff, Kayah Hansen—why are people taken away right as they seem to be doing the most good? His soul seemed to be all questions and no answers, his chest a pincushion of pain. When he had come back to himself, Judson cleaned up the bedrooms, got their junk off the spare beds, and found some blankets and sheets that his dad could use for the couch. He wondered if the couch was a 'fold away' type. It was. He unfolded it, made the bed as best he could, and left it open. He knew his dad would not complain about the uncomfortable fold away. This was a time to focus on the hurting ones. Suddenly the people around him were going through what he and his dad went through. He stopped that thought with a shudder and an involuntary sob, unwilling to cry just then.

Judson looked in the pantry at all the cans and bags of dry beans, noodles, and rice, and shook his head, trying hard to focus. Not a thing was coming to mind to make for dinner. He picked up a can opener and stared at it in a kind of stupor. Just then came a knock at the door, and Mrs. Selivanoff and Marla stepped into the room. Between them, they had brought two large pots and a shopping bag. Soon the ladies created a dinner of spaghetti, pouring the sauce into the noodles, in the

largest pot in the kitchen. They slid the pot to the "back of the stove," the far right of the thick steel stovetop, at the end farthest from the oil stove's always burning firepot. It would keep a soup pot or a teakettle perfectly warm all day if necessary. Then Marla spread margarine and garlic salt on a loaf of white bread from their freezer, and placed the slices on a cookie sheet she found on a shelf in the pantry. "We'll put this in the oven as soon as the Rezoffs get here," she said.

The Lindseth jeep growled outside, and in walked Mrs. Lindseth holding Laura by the arm, and Mr. Lindseth walking beside Herman. Judson didn't see Barbara, so he glanced out the window to see Truck Brother Danny's red Ford outside, and Danny lifting Barbara down. "She asked to ride with me... told me she needed someone who smiled right now," Danny explained a little later, shaking his head, "so I smiled, and told her some of the happy things I remembered about Will. I believe that was the hardest thing I've ever done!" He turned away, and Judson could tell he was now weeping. But he quickly shook himself back to functional.

Once everyone was inside, Mr. Hansen and Mr. Faltrip appeared from the direction of Faltrip's apartment at the end of the building. Mr. Faltrip was carrying a large manila envelope, and appeared to have been crying. Mr. Hansen was carrying a D & A shopping bag. He had his arm around Owen, and the man did not seem to object. Once they were all inside, Mr. Hansen spoke up. "If anybody has a problem with the Rezoffs staying here with us, we could make some other arrangements..."

Mrs. Selivanoff stepped forward, and looked straight at Mr. Hansen. "My daughter tells me you are a perfect gentleman to the ladies, and nobody around here is gonna talk. At all. Not today." The authoritative voice of a village woman, thought Judson. Her words had come out as a command, a statement of established fact – not as a mere comment. I bet they *won't* talk, either, he mused. "We all appreciate what you've done here, Mr. Hansen," she concluded. Then equally authoritatively, she stated, "Well, we need to get back. Come along, Marla." She insisted on leaving, even though Mr. Hansen thanked her and asked her to stay. Marla seemed reluctant to leave, and looked a bit embarrassed at suddenly being treated as though she were a toddler. But off she went. Judson smiled and waved at her as she left, and made a note to catch her up on the proceedings when he saw her next time. With Mr. Faltrip here, and his strange statement that he and Laura needed to talk soon, he knew it was going to be an important evening.

Moments after Marla and her mom left, Sandy Ann and Jake rushed up the stairs. The Rezoffs, the Hansens, the Lindseths, and both Truck Brothers pulled up chairs and a couple of Blazo boxes from the kellydoor in the back, and ate the meal provided by Mrs. Selivanoff. It was truly 'comfort food'—village style—in the most practical sense. In spite of the strangeness of the situation, all of them had a strong appetite once they began eating, and they all felt better for it afterwards. The last to arrive had been Truck Brother Jake, who ate a little, pushed his plate away, and told everyone he needed to talk. In a very strained voice interrupted by pauses as he fought for control of his emotions, he informed the group that the Troopers had inspected the site, concurred with the circumstances of the accident, and had taken the body to town. Once it was released back to the family, the casket would be

flown back to the island for burial. Since nobody knew when that would be, the family had decided to hold a memorial service this Saturday in the mess hall. Mr. Smith had already agreed to come and do the service. The older Jake formally called him "Reverend Smith" this time. "Laura has a site in mind for the burial, but she needs to ask permission first." He did not elaborate.

Suddenly "bandage man" Jakob could hold back no longer, and he was in tears. He kept sobbing and repeating, "It's my fault... we thought we'd checked... I should have tested it one more time..." Mr. Faltrip, tears in his eyes, rose to his feet and walked over, putting his arm around Jakob. "Mr. Pedersen, when you mix bad wiring, mislabeled circuits, two hundred twenty volts, and a leaky roof, you end up with an accident. There was water in the walls and a mislabeled throw switch. It was an *accident*. It was as much my fault as anyone, I'm afraid, because I put a lot of pressure on you guys. I should have just gutted that damn building and started over!" Mr. Faltrip sounded angry and disgusted. Now Mr. Hansen tried to give some words of comfort. Without rising or moving, Mr. Hansen stated, "Everyone, you need to realize just how much this man has done to try to keep you all here, to keep your *community* alive. I doubt if there would even be a Sokroshera Cove anymore without him. And he'll explain the reasons why. If you would, please, Owen. Now's as good a time as any."

Mr. Faltrip looked at Jeffrey Hansen and nodded, then sat back down. "Laura, I need to explain to you that you're the beneficiary of a \$20,000 accidental death policy. That's partly why I needed the State Troopers out here, for legal reasons. I insured Will in case anything happened, so that you would be taken care of." Laura Rezoff looked more puzzled than shocked. Finally, she found her words. "That is not necessary, Mr. Faltrip. We'll figure out a way to get by. But why bother—with us? I mean, why *us*?" "Well," Mr. Faltrip said, "The Truck Brothers and Mr. Lindseth have much smaller policies too, taken out in their behalf as part of their workplace benefits, since I depend on them first. But you Rezoffs have one more thing: when I die, you will own a quarter of the Pacific Endeavor Seafoods company. That would be unusual for any old employee, but it is perfectly appropriate for..." he was having trouble continuing, "...the brother... the only living sibling... of my son. Pariscovia Rezoff was the love of my life, and I didn't discover that we had a son together until after they both had died. So I promised that I would always look out for her other child, and that's why I've always tried to keep you Rezoffs close by."

"Well I'll be *damned*," said Danny. "Holy shit, Momma, did you even *know*?" Herman blurted out, in probably the first words he'd said since back at school that afternoon, back when life was different. She shook her head, and wept quietly. Barbara asked a question in Laura's ear, and her mom nodded and hugged her. Then, clear eyed and focused, Barbara walked calmly up to Mr. Faltrip and said, in her impeccable logic, "You are my *grandpa*!" She gave him a hug. At that point, everyone else cried and laughed, too. Out came the stories, the remembrances of the silly and the fun times, and of the acts of kindness, that defined Will for all of them.

When everyone had finally fell silent and calm, Judson spoke, controlling his voice as best he could. "It's about damn time, Mr. Fat Lip. I was about to explode if you didn't tell your secret!" He cleared his throat and continued before anyone else could comment. "Apparently Mr. Smith knows, too, because I promised him I wouldn't say anything." Owen stared at young Judson. "Mr. Smith has known my secret since 1956, and I'm sure *he* didn't tell you anything. But you knew? *How?*" He held up his hand to ward off any response for the moment. "Oh, well, I'm not surprised, 'cause you've been pretty nosy since you got here." Owen Faltrip looked at Judson for a moment, and changed his mind. "Nevertheless, *how* did you figure this out?" Herman was now staring intently at his friend, and so was everyone else.

Judson tried to explain what had triggered his sudden insight. "Mr. Rezoff had a binder with some old records in them, and inside it said, 'To the Swan from the Scrapper,' or something like that, but I thought I recognized your printing after seeing it everywhere in the cannery. Will also said that one song was her favorite... *It's Not a Mistake*... shoot, I can never remember, and when I heard that song, I knew." Sandy Ann interrupted. "*It Can't Be Wrong!*" Sandy Ann corrected him, eyes shining. She looked at Mr. Faltrip and added, "And remember, sir, you played that one for us several times, and each time you looked like you were going to melt or something." Sandy Ann was getting even more misty-eyed. But she suddenly turned toward Judson. "You didn't *tell* me, Jay-Jay!" Hope she forgives me for not letting on, Judson thought. Mr. Faltrip turned to Sandy Ann and said, "He made a promise to Norm Smith that he *wouldn't* tell, remember?" She nodded quietly, satisfied.

Owen Faltrip looked back at Judson with a wry smile, "Amazing, young man, simply amazing, how you connected all those details. And here I thought I was being so secretive! But it's good this is out now," he said. He paused a long moment as the group let him collect his thoughts. At last, he turned toward Laura and sighed. "You know, today marked twenty years since the night I said goodbye to Pariscovia. It is sad beyond... explaining, beyond words, to have us lose her son on that same day. I came up to Sokroshera Island looking for her, but she'd already passed away. I wrote her at least once a week for a long time, but the letters were never delivered." Mr. Faltrip retrieved the shopping bag from Mr. Hansen. "Here are all my letters to her." He shrugged, and said, "It's a long story. But it turns out she wrote to me, too, not knowing where I was. She sent them care of ol' Penny Ardet, who built the cannery. His family found the letters in his home office after he passed away, and sent them to me... I guess he forgot about the letters, or knew she was already dead and didn't want to hurt me again. But he kept the letters—I would *much* rather have known. That's the only thing he ever did I could ever disagree with. But of course, he's the one who convinced me to insure everything, and that's bound to help you now. That indemnity instinct came from his accountant days, I'm sure."

Owen was looking off at nothing in particular at this point. He suddenly shook his head, and then looked back at Laura. "But you should read these, now that you know." He handed her two bundles of letters in wrinkled, yellowing envelopes, both bundles still tied with string. In answer to her unasked question, he said, "You can read them for me and pick out a couple of good ones for me to read. It's all part of

your story now." Laura rose to her feet, crossed the floor, and met him, giving the older man a good, strong hug. Struggling to speak through her tears, she said, "You always acted like a father to me, and that's all the more wonderful knowing that all this time, you kinda *were*. So thanks, Daddy!" She leaned up and gave him a kiss on the cheek. He sat down and put his head in his hands, and the others kept their voices down as he grieved. But when he raised his head a few minutes later, his eyes were clear, and he had the look of a man who was finally at peace, thought Judson. A short time later, Mr. Faltrip sighed, headed toward the door, and told everyone goodnight. He stopped at Judson's chair. "You're a good man, Jay-Jay. Your daddy raised you right!" Owen patted Judson on the shoulder, opened the door, and headed down the long porch toward his apartment.

Amid all the stories being shared that evening, Judson still had questions. How had the secret of Owen and Pariscovia remained hidden for all these years? Why hadn't the elder Selivanoff told Anicia when he found out, when he started receiving the letters? Why didn't Will or Laura recognize Owen's writing on that note in the record binder? Judson asked his father, and then looked at the other adults. Mr. Hansen replied, "I think things often stay hidden if we are not expecting them. Owen told you more through his jukebox than he ever told the adults here." Laura nodded, and observed, "I know his writing better than anyone. But soldiers aren't known for their penmanship. The things Pender Ardet wrote aren't much prettier. We weren't expecting to find out who it was, or that he might have returned here. A lot of soldiers came and went during the War."

Danny chimed in, "I think I know why Mr. Selivanoff Sr. kept his mouth shut. We know Billy Sr. was afraid of Owen and what he could do. After all, he fired him from that store job. And Owen was the one who assigned the cannery seiners to the families in town. I think Billy Sr. was afraid that he'd lose their seiner, or maybe a few teeth, if Owen's secret ever got out. But he got his revenge by stashing the letters where Owen would find them." Judson nodded; it all made sense. They talked long into the night, until Danny left and Betty sent everyone to bed. There were teardrops on many pillows, followed by fitful sleep.