

The Isle of Alaska Mystery
by
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Chapter 1 He's Leaving Home, Bye, Bye

Summer vacation is supposed to be the best time of the year. Any other June would be, Jake Benveniste thought. All except this one. This is the summer he moves to Seattle, Washington. The land of rain and fog. Away from everything familiar in Rivercity, California. Away from the best friends anyone ever had; Steve, Art, and Ray.

They'd been inseparable since eighth grade. That was true all the way up to, and through, junior year at Rivercity High. It started with school orchestra. That's where they met.

Actually, they met at the Principal's office. Someone, and the music teacher, Mr. Broyers, never found out who, purposely tossed a book on the floor. In other classes that wasn't subject to any more than a stern look from the teacher.

The difference with Mr. Broyers' class was that he had served with an infantry unit (in Texas) during the Korean War. The army taught him to "duck and cover" anytime a loud "BANG!" went off and he had never been able to forget it. Everyone in school knew about it. Tossing a book on the floor to make him dive was considered the traditional thing to do the first class of every semester.

Jake, Ray, Art, and Steve laughed the loudest this particular year so Mr. Broyers picked on them. It was the beginning of a wonderful friendship. During sophomore year they started a band. Jake played guitar, figured out the songs, and wrote some original tunes too. The other guys filled in on bass, drums, and saxophone.

Now, Jake has to finish his senior year alone in a city he knows he is going to hate. He won't know anybody. And, to make matters worse, they have to move at the best time of year and he won't be able to hang out with his buddies.

What is there to do for a 17 year old guy in a city where everyone is a stranger? "You've got three months to find out," is what Mom says. What does she know? She gets to go to work

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and do something. More like three months to do nothing, Jake thinks.

"You could get a job," said Mrs. Benveniste.

"A job? Doing what? Working at Mickey Dees for spare change? My idea of a fun time during the summer doesn't include the local burger palace."

"You're going to need some money for when you start college."

That was a subject Jake didn't want to get into. He had no intention of going to college when he graduated high school. He would rather spend the year on his father's farm in Kansas than go to school. "Why can't I go stay with Dad this summer?"

That was a subject Mrs. Benveniste would rather avoid.
"Because."

"Because why?"

"Because the Department of Agriculture has him traveling all over the country inspecting crops."

"So?"

"Jake, we've gone into this before. You're not going to stay with your father. Now, what about getting a job when we get to Seattle?"

"Doesn't it rain there all the time?"

"Only during the rainy season," his mother tried patiently to reply. This was a topic Jake had tortured her with at dinner for the past two weeks.

"Rainy season? Rainy season? When's that? From January to December? What's a rainy season?"

Everybody knows about the weather in Washington. They don't call it the Pacific "Northwet" for nothing. At least, that is all the Benveniste's heard following their decision to leave California for the "land of fog and rain."

In reality, the weather in Washington isn't as bad or deserving as its reputation. The Seattle area is definitely moist, but there are wetter regions in northern California and along the Oregon coast.

The trade off would be exciting though. The Benveniste's were leaving a semi-desert where the summer temperatures frequently hover in the 100 degree range. Trees are rare, unless watered constantly. Green is not a color that comes easily to Rivercity.

Seattle, and all of the northwest for that matter, is made of many shades of color. There are the deep hues of red-cedar, the dark forests of hemlock, and the pea-green of the ubiquitous Douglas-fir. Ferns and mosses clothe the forest floor.

There are three lakes right in the middle of the city; Union, Washington, and Green. Puget Sound forms the western boundary of Seattle. The high peaks of the Olympic and Cascade Mountains are a near drive.

For someone as interested in the outdoors, plants, and animals as Jake, Seattle and all of Washington was going to be a

wonderful place to live. Ellen Benveniste knew it, but Jake could be stubborn, like his father.

"What is there to say that I haven't already told you, dear?"

Jake had heard it a dozen times by now. They were moving because Mom's company was transferring her. There wasn't enough work in aeronautical electronics around Rivercity anymore. When his parents had first moved here, right out of college, there was plenty of work for Mom in computer assisted airplane design while Dad worked at the University's entomology department designing new bug sprays.

All that had changed when his parents divorced two years ago. Dad moved back to Kansas to manage Grandpa's farm and to work for the Agriculture Department monitoring pesticide use.

"Couldn't you get another job, Mom? Geeze, you didn't even try."

Mrs. Benveniste tried not to snap at her son. It was getting harder and harder for them to get along without any friction and this move wasn't helping at all. She knew it wasn't easy for a teenager to pull up stakes and move out of town a year before graduation. There hadn't been any choice. The truth was that in 12 months or so, all the other families would be facing the same bitter truth confronting the Benveniste's now.

The McDowell plant was going to shut down sooner, not later. When that happened, most of the workers would have to leave or

face unemployment. School enrollment would decline and teachers would be laid off. As the tax base of the county eroded, local government would be curtailed. People working in the service economy would have no one left to service. Rivercity would become the same sleepy little town it had been 20 years ago when Ellen and Bob Benveniste had first moved there. Better to get out now while there was still a chance.

Instead of saying all this, she repeated what she always said. "This is a good chance for me to learn some new skills and for you to experience a new place. You can't live in one town your whole life. Besides, in a year, you'll be in college."

Jake cut her off. "College! Who needs college when you don't know anybody? There's more important things than college." Jake sulked and played with his peas. Mrs. Benveniste sighed but said nothing.

After dinner, Jake rode off on his bike to visit his friends while Ellen finished packing. Tomorrow the moving van would come and they would begin the long drive north. She wasn't looking forward to five days in a car with a brooding teenager. Especially one who couldn't drive.

Last month, Jake had been arrested with Art Huck, the drummer in the band they all belonged to. They were caught "joy riding" in the car belonging to their old music teacher. Their only excuse was that the "keys were in it." Fortunately, no harm was done and the boys only had their licenses suspended. She

tried to not be too upset, telling herself Jake was only going through "a phase" and would grow out of it soon.

Ellen wasn't particularly fond of this move either. She couldn't afford to admit it to herself, much less, Jake. She looked around the house, at all the boxes of books and clothes and things that people can accumulate when they sit still for so many years. This had been home for such a long time.

Why shouldn't Jake spend the summer with his father? Even if Bob wasn't around that much, Jake's grandfather surely would be. No, that wouldn't do either. Bob, senior, was a problem in himself. He would probably get Jake arrested at some environmental demonstration.

Ellen sighed, and spoke aloud, "I could use a hug." She looked across the crowded living room which seemed furnished with cardboard cartons. "But it doesn't look like I'm going to get one."

Ellen Benveniste knew why McDowell Aeronautical was transferring her to Seattle. It looked good for their government contracts if they had a female senior engineer and computer programmer on staff.

There was also the reason that she could design a circuit so that it worked simply and worked fast. She had taken that same knack for simplicity into computer programming and became the company software whiz..

There didn't seem to be any glitches in the programs that Ellen Benveniste couldn't figure out. People like her were indispensable to companies like McDowell. That was why they were giving her a transfer. Most of her coworkers, and that meant the parents of Jake's friends, weren't going to be so lucky when the plant closed down.

Ellen Benveniste took a deep breath and looked around the cluttered apartment. She had spent her entire life, it seemed, in this town. Everything was familiar; her job, the streets, the people, the stores. It would be hard breaking in a new routine. It wouldn't be easy, at first, for either of them in Seattle.