

The Isle of Alaska Mystery

by

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Chapter 3 Dead Fish

The drive went smoothly, and quickly. Jake seemed to accept the move now that they were on their way. They stopped in some bookstores in San Francisco and bought Jake some natural history field guides to supplement the few he had been able to buy in Rivercity.

Jake's interest in "weeds, critters, and bugs," as Mrs. Benveniste liked to call it, started with camping in Boy Scouts. After leaving the dry and sterile flatland of Rivercity for the mountains, the young boy had fallen in love with anything green

or moving. Only an average student in school, Jake's knowledge of natural history was nearly all self-taught.

His parents wanted Jake to go on to college when he graduated high school. Jake wasn't so sure. He didn't hate school so much as he couldn't see any reason to go. Most of his classes put him to sleep. He would come home at the end of the day and not remember a thing that had gone on. He couldn't imagine college being any different. Mention of the subject invariably lead to an argument.

As they drove, Jake regaled his mother with the geology and natural history of the areas they passed through. Like previous trips, when they were a complete family, Jake and his mother settled in to debating about what music to play on the car stereo as the scenery sped by.

The contrast in colors as they moved north was dramatic. Rivercity is a dirt brown. Late spring in the Sacramento Valley is green. The northwest coast of California is almost tropically lush with tall, dark green conifers. The ocean, away from the influence of cities and shipping is deep blue and the gulls that fly over it, glaringly bright white.

Jake's interest in the changing scenery at times seemed to consume him. He wanted to get out of the car whenever he saw something fresh. That included flocks of migrating dragonflies in Sacramento, Redwood trees in Eureka, a River otter in Gold Beach, a Bald eagle in Willapa...

They spent one night camping in a small town on the southern coast of Washington. In the morning, Jake walked to the campground "trading post" to examine the wooden Indian sculpture and the plaster model of a lumberjack on the front porch. Inside, he found the store to be a rustic version of the Rivercity Minit-Mart.

Jake felt amazed that a store in such an out of the way place could sell the same items "real" stores had at home. While he looked around comparing prices, Jake listened to two fellow customers talk.

The men were in their early twenties and peppered their speech with a list of technical terms Jake didn't understand. The Blond-haired Man with the ponytail was bearded and his black skinned companion had a huge afro. Both wore work clothes; long sleeved cotton shirts, blue jeans, and heavy boots. They smelled like they had last bathed in March.

The conversation had something to do with illegal dumping of toxic wastes in Puget Sound. Since that was to be his new home, Jake paid close attention. Evidently the two young men did some sort of work that had something to do with fish and marine mammals.

They were talking, with concern, about dead salmon and other fish washing up along the beaches of the San Juan Islands. Residents were upset and demanding for something to be done. The

young men were deliberating what action could be taken if scientists didn't know where the dumping occurred.

Jake excused himself and asked, "How do you know there is illegal dumping going on and that it's connected to the dead fish?"

The two researchers paused in their conversation and were silent for a moment. The man with the ponytail looked at Jake as if "sizing him up." When he spoke, there was none of the condescending tone Jake normally heard from adults when explaining things to teenagers. Jake appreciated the man's considerations and liked him for it.

"That's a good question. When dead fish start appearing on the beaches, most people are only interested in getting rid of them before they begin to smell. That isn't such a big deal if it's only one or two.

"But when the numbers run into the hundreds, we know something is fishy." He and his buddy smiled. "Pun intended."

Jake smiled too and waited for the man to go on.

"Someone from the National Marine Fisheries Department, that's who we work for, goes out and takes a sample of tissue from the fish. They take it back to the lab and subject it to a series of tests."

"Like an autopsy?"

"Exactly. Good analogy." Jake smiled inwardly and felt pleased. "In this case, the analysis showed that the fish had

croaked from TBT, tributyl-tin, pentachlorophenol, and a concentration of heavy metals like copper, zinc, and lead. Copper and zinc are used as pigments and lead-based paints were pretty common years ago before we learned you could get lead poisoning from them. TBT is used solely as boat bottom paint."

"What's this penta..?"

"Penta-chloro-phenol," he pronounced slowly. "It's found in wood preservatives and contains dioxin. Extreme nastiness as far as the environment is concerned."

"Do you know where the stuff came from?"

"We have some guesses. The problem is that you have to determine if the dumping is coming from the manufacturer or any one of the thousands of consumers who buy and use the stuff. Our enforcement branch is small and underfunded. It could take years to find the culprit and by then the guy is long gone."

His companion continued the story. "It looks like the main source of these pollutants would be from paints used in preserving wooden ships from salt spray. We think the investigators should be talking to the navy, marinas, drydocks, and boatyards."

"I can understand boatyards, and stuff, but why the navy?"

"There's a big naval shipyard in Bremerton, on the west side of the Sound. Its been there since Moses was a small child. TBT hasn't been used for years. It was very popular for bottom paints ten years ago but it's hardly used anymore. They must

have tons of stuff hanging around since the beginning of time. At least, that's what my father says, and he should know because he runs the place."

The man with the pony-tail picked up the narrative again. "All of these chemicals are considered hazardous and the law says it's illegal to eliminate it anywhere but in federally designated toxic waste disposal sites. I can promise you that Puget Sound will never be such a designated site."

"It doesn't look like there is much chance of finding out who's breaking the law."

"Hey, don't look so glum! We'll catch the guy sooner or later. Right now there's a team trying to pinpoint the highest concentration of the toxics."

"So you can find out where they're dumping the bad stuff to begin with?"

"You got it! Well, we've got to go. Nice talking to you. Don't worry, we'll get them."

Jake returned to the campsite. The car was all loaded and his mother impatiently waiting for him. It was less than a half day's drive to Seattle. In the excitement of arriving at their new home, Jake forgot all about the two researchers.