

The Echo Shaw Mystery Series
Welcome to Camp Disaster
By Amy Alexander

Chapter 18:
Reference Check

Echo stared from the note to Vince back to the note. He waited, arms crossed, face stoic. Finally she said, “What do we do?”

“Exactly what the note says. The DEA has authorized me to go in with \$500,000 and try to negotiate your father’s release. Or rather, they’ve authorized you. You’re going to take them the money and then I’ll send in backup to rescue your father.”

Echo pictured herself holding a suitcase full of money, facing off against a room full of suited, Uzi-toting drug lords while her helpless father sat tied to a chair with someone holding a gun to his head. “How much backup?”

“Enough,” he said.

“But how will you know when to come in? Because honestly, if you’re in a van a few blocks away, I’m pretty sure you won’t be able to hear me scream.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “We’ve got it covered. Don’t worry about the details. I’ll explain your part tomorrow night on the way to the mayor’s house.”

“What about Steve?”

“He already knows everything, and he’s agreed to let you off work. Come on, let’s get back inside.” Vince opened the door for her.

“I don’t suppose the DEA has authorized me to carry a weapon,” she muttered, walking past him.

“Trust me,” he said. “You’ll be safe.”

Back in the cafeteria, Vince headed off to talk to one of the other teachers, while Echo picked her way over clumps of feet, legs, and bodies toward the back of the room. Half the kids were asleep. She found her friends again, dropped down next to them, and told them about the latest note and Vince’s plan for rescuing her dad.

“Dude,” said Eric. “This is crazy. It’s like you’re on *24* or something.”

She smiled tightly.

“Nervous?” said Neil.

“Yeah, and I wish I could figure out my dad’s riddle.”

“Why?” said Molly. “You know where he is now.”

“I don’t think the mayor’s house fits the riddle. Which means there’s something else my dad wants me to know.”

“Whatever it is, you can ask him tomorrow night, right?” pointed out Molly. As if it were that easy, thought Echo, as if they’d be able to just waltz in and rescue her dad. What if something went wrong?

“Still got the riddle with you?” said Neil. He seemed to read the distress she felt.

She pulled the page out of her pocket. It was wrinkled now, the letters starting to crease in places. She spread it out on her lap, and Neil leaned in to read. His lips moved as he studied the message.

“Okay,” he said quietly, so as not to wake the kids sleeping around them or disturb those still watching the movie. “The end of sickness and the beginning of sorrow. What fits besides a gravestone?”

“Molly said death earlier,” said Echo, “but that doesn’t fit with a lot of it.

Like how could death be in risk but not in danger?”

“Okay, what else. A vaccine?”

“How is a vaccine found in the sun and never out of darkness?”

“It’s the end of sickness, at least,” he said defensively. “This is like Pictionary, you just have to throw out all of your guesses until you get it right. Don’t judge them.”

“Fine,” she said, “I won’t judge. Morphine.”

“A morgue. It’s the end of sickness because people die, and the darkness part fits, right, with all those dead bodies in those big metal filing cabinets?”

“If my dad is telling me he’s in a morgue, then I have bigger problems than this riddle. What about courage? The line about crosses makes me think of trials, and you have to have courage to take a risk.”

“Crosses. What about nails? Thorns? Or Jesus? It fits with the saints thing.”

“You think the answer to this riddle is *Jesus*? Jesus can be found in the sun but is never out of darkness, seriously? Although, vampires, now that would work. Never out of darkness – in the midst of crosses? Don’t people wear crosses to ward off vampires? Or is that garlic?”

Neil shook his head. “And you made fun of me for suggesting Jesus.”

“Okay. How about the two sides of people’s consciences.”

“Like the angel and devil on your shoulder?”

“Sure. All the contrasting images make more sense that way. Sun, darkness, crosses, happiness.”

“What about – what about –” Neil sighed. “Ugh.”

“What’s the beginning of sorrow and the end of sickness?”

He shrugged. “The letter S?”

She gaped. “That’s it!”

“What?”

“It’s the letter S! Look! Beginning of sorrow, end of sickness...in risk but never in danger...”

“No way.” He laughed. “That’s too easy. So what does the S stand for?”

“Steve?” she said.

“Our camp director? Why would your dad send you a message about him?”

She looked at the email again. “Maybe I can’t trust him.”

The next morning, Echo woke up feeling like she hadn’t slept at all. Every so often she’d sink into bouts of semi-consciousness that were half dream and half anxious thought, so that when she fully awoke it took her a few minutes to figure out what was real and what she’d dreamed.

She had lain awake for a good part of the night, thinking about the riddle and what it meant. Could she trust Steve or not? And if not, why not – did that mean he was in on the drug ring too? Did he know who had kidnapped her dad? She couldn’t picture the gentle, harried hippie camp director snorting lines of coke, but it would explain his general jitteriness. And as for his paranoid attention to rules and children’s safety, well, maybe he was just a really good actor.

As she got ready in the cabin bathroom, surrounded by chattering girls, something else occurred to her. Early on, Steve had promised to contact the police about the letters. But if the police were involved with the drug ring, well, of course they wouldn’t respond. In fact, how did she know he’d even contacted the police at all? It would explain why neither Steve nor the police seemed to have done

anything about it.

She tried to think of other suspicious events. Her very first day of camp Steve had stopped to deliver the first creepy letter in the cafeteria. He'd said they didn't have a mailbox for her yet, but if they'd been expecting her since May, when her dad arranged this job, then of course they already had a mailbox set up for her. This meant Steve had been lying and had needed an excuse to personally deliver the first letter, to make certain she got it, that she was scared.

He could even *be* the letter-writer, she realized. He had access to the lodge, of course he had keys, and he could get in anytime he wanted. No one would ever think it odd if the camp director stopped by his own office late at night to do a little work. She remembered that game of Capture the Flag on Wilderness Survival Night and how the mysterious figure had walked into the lodge, and then the next morning boom, another letter. It wasn't a counselor she'd seen – it was Steve.

She set down her toothbrush and crossed to the shower stall on the end, which she knew Molly had claimed. "It's Steve!" she yelled.

A yelp of surprise emitted from the stall. Moments later, Molly's soapy head peeked out from behind the flimsy white shower curtain. "Where? What's he doing in our cabin?"

"No, he's the letter-writer." Echo told her about the solution to her dad's riddle and explained why Steve fit the parameters for the letter-writer.

Molly wiped a drip of soap that was threatening her left eye. "What do we do now? We can't have him around these kids, he might hurt them. We have to call the –"

"The police are in on it and we can't trust them," said Echo. "I'm going to talk to Vince at breakfast and see if he can get the DEA involved."

On the walk from their cabin to the cafeteria, Echo brought up the end of the line. She took out her cell phone and dialed.

Miranda answered, sounding far too awake for this hour of the morning. Echo suspected she'd already downed at least one cup of coffee.

"Echo? Did you hear from your dad again?"

"No. Better and worse. I heard from his kidnappers. They left a ransom note asking me to meet them tonight with \$500,000."

"What?" said Miranda. "Well – should I call the DEA? Have they been notified?"

"Yeah, Vince, you know the PI Dad hired, he's going with me tonight to meet these guys and I guess he has DEA agents coming with him. We're going to act like I'm giving them the money and then they'll go in there and rescue Dad and me."

"That's the most insane thing I've ever heard," sputtered Miranda. "They can't use you as *bait*. You're a civilian and you're only 16!"

"It's what we have to do to get Dad back," she said. "You'd do the same."

"Of course I would." Miranda's voice softened and she sounded tired. "But your dad would never agree to them putting you in danger like that."

"I don't think he has a choice. Oh. And I think Steve is in on the drug ring." She explained about her dad's latest email.

Instead of reacting with shock, as Echo had expected, her stepmother said slowly, "Steve used to be a DEA agent. You know that, right?"

"What? No, Dad never told me." Again she couldn't help feeling slightly betrayed. Here was another piece of knowledge her dad had shared with Miranda and not with his only daughter.

“That’s why he sent you up to Camp Kootenay.”

“I thought it’s because it was far away and safe.”

“I did too, thought apparently not if your dad was working in B.C. But it was also because of Steve. He knew Steve still has contacts in the DEA and if something happened, he could help you.”

“What about Vince?”

“Him too. Your dad thought you’d need someone else watching you who wasn’t also running a camp.”

“So they were both keeping an eye on me?” Sheesh, didn’t her dad trust her? Or had his job just been that dangerous?

“Vince more than Steve, but yes. I know he trusts Steve with his life. He could be wrong, I know, but your dad’s a pretty darn good judge of character.”

“More than I am,” she agreed, thinking again of how she’d mistaken Miranda’s past.

After they’d hung up, Echo hurried to the front of the line and caught up to Molly. She told her what Miranda had said.

“So you think your dad was wrong about Steve?” said Molly. “Or you were?”

“I don’t know.”

When they got to breakfast and joined the crowded line, Echo looked around the dining hall. She didn’t see Vince. But she did spot Steve, clipboard in hand, talking to a group of campers and laughing at something they were saying. His beard had grown even wilder and he looked worried, even while he laughed. She’d always attributed his perma-stressed state solely to his job, but now she would find out for sure.

“I’ll be right back,” she told Molly. “I’m going to talk to Steve.”

Her friend grabbed her arm. “Echo, no, he’s totally crazy.”

“Don’t worry, he won’t do anything to me in a roomful of kids.” She slipped her arm free and marched toward Steve.

“Well, sure, I had a pet elephant once,” Steve was saying as she approached.

The little kids he was talking to giggled with the glee of children who know an adult is teasing them. “You did not,” challenged a chubby-cheeked boy.

“Sure. His name was Hippo.”

The kids exploded into laughter again. “No!”

“I need to talk to you,” said Echo. “It’s urgent.”

Steve’s frown lines deepened. “Should we go to my office?”

“No,” she said quickly. “We can talk by the stage.” She wanted them to have a little privacy, but not enough privacy that he could kill her.

Promising the kids he’d be right back, Steve followed Echo towards the stage. They hopped up onto its edge – well, Steve hopped; Echo had to hoist herself onto the three-foot-high platform – and her boss shifted his clipboard from one hand to the other. He checked his watch, as if he thought breakfast might end at any moment even though it had just started. “What’s going on?”

Crap. She had no idea what to say to him – call him out? Try to catch him in a lie about something? Ask him about the letters? She just needed something that would clinch her suspicion. “Well.”

Then she recalled Vince saying Steve knew about their plan to rescue her dad. She could mention that – maybe he’d react in a guilty way.

She switched her whole demeanor from serious to saccharine sweet. “I just wanted to thank you. I really appreciate what you’re doing for me.”

“Oh.” He looked confused. “Well, yeah, I appreciate you working for me here at camp, too, especially because I roped you into being a counselor.”

“Not that. I mean tonight. At the mayor’s house?”

“Huh?”

“Just the fact that you were willing to let me off work for something that important.”

“I – what? I let you off work?”

“It’s okay,” she said. “Vince told me he talked to you.”

“About what? What the hell are you talking about?”

“You said hell!” piped a little girl, who’d obviously been one of the first in line, walking past them with a heaping tray of pancakes. “We don’t curse at camp.”

“I’m sorry, Jill,” said Steve. “I won’t do it again.”

“You owe me a quarter,” she said. “That’s what Allison charges us if we swear.”

“Really. Tell you what, I’ll bring you a quarter in five minutes.”

The little girl nodded, satisfied, and continued toward her table.

“Great, now I’ve got counselors extorting money from seven-year-olds,” muttered Steve. “Okay, now what’s all of this about? You’re going to have to be more specific, because I haven’t the foggiest idea what you’re talking about.”

“I suppose you don’t,” she said, forgetting to act subtle. “I suppose you have no idea who wrote me those creepy letters, either.”

“No, I don’t.” He looked genuinely confused, and she felt her doubts grow a little, but her fear and the need to know who she could trust won out.

“You don’t have to act so innocent,” she said. “Pretending to be shocked

when I gave those letters to you, sneaking around camp at night leaving more in my mailbox, trying to scare me, pretending to get the police involved. I don't know what you know about my dad, but if you know what's good for you, you'll tell me right now because I'll remind you, he *is* in the DEA and –"

"Whoa, whoa." He held up a hand. "You think *I* wrote those letters?"

"Well," she said, losing steam. "Yeah."

"I don't know what to tell you." He shrugged. "Except I've known your dad for 20 years, and I'd never do anything to compromise that friendship. Least of all hurt his daughter. I've talked to the police every single time you've given me a letter but I've always been told they have nothing to go on and no information. I tried to do a little investigating on my own, but I just couldn't figure out who was sending them."

"But one of the first times I asked you, you told me they were probably just a prank."

He sighed. "I have a few contacts at the DEA. I don't know if your dad told you this, but we used to work together. I don't really advertise it. Anyway, I talked to one of the guys I know and he said the less you knew and the less scared you were, the better. I know he was working on it too, trying to figure out if anyone who has a grudge against your dad lives around here, but the only people connected to your dad are suspects from his current case and of course we don't know who they are."

"So he told you he was working in B.C.?"

"Yeah. We talked a few times. He wanted me to make sure you were safe."

Echo looked at her boss, his long bushy beard poofing out in all directions like some Old Testament prophet, his face creased with stress, his eyes kind and

almost sad. She believed him. She didn't know why, but her instincts said she could trust Steve.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just – my dad's in trouble and I don't know what's going to happen to him, and –"

"I know," he said. "The DEA called me to ask if I'd seen or heard from your dad recently. They didn't say why, but let's face it, they don't make those calls unless something's wrong. I'm sorry I didn't tell you, but again, they said you were safer if you didn't know."

What was it with adults thinking the less kids knew, the better? "Well, at least it'll all be over tonight."

"Okay, explain that part to me again. What does Vince have to do with your dad?"

So she explained the whole thing, starting with Vince being the PI, up to his plan to ransom her father. When she'd finished, he shook his head. "Are you sure? I mean, your dad did say he'd hired a PI – he wouldn't tell me who – but that doesn't sound like DEA protocol to me. They don't usually send in civilians."

When Miranda had expressed this worry, it had sounded like – she couldn't believe she was thinking this about her stepmother – a typical mom-type fear. But the same concern coming from Steve seemed more legit, maybe because she now knew he'd worked for the DEA. "I'm sure they don't, but the ransom note specifically asked for me."

"And Vince is going to get you in touch with the DEA agents before they send you in? They're briefing you first, giving you specific instructions? Do you have a bullet-proof vest?"

"I guess. He said we'd talk in the car on the way over."

“I don’t want to alarm you,” said Steve, “but that just doesn’t sound right to me.”

“What do you know about Vince?” she said thoughtfully. “I mean, you did do a background check on him, right?” Suspicion nagged at the edge of her mind again, but she didn’t want to face it, she couldn’t, because of what it would mean –

“We fingerprint and do a criminal background check on everyone. His results came back fine. That doesn’t necessarily mean anything.”

She bit her lip. “Was there anything weird about his interview? Did he seem, I don’t know, like a soccer coach?”

“He was knowledgeable. We couldn’t get ahold of one of his references.”

“Which one?”

He hesitated. “It’s technically confidential information.”

“My dad is technically about to be killed. Steve, which reference?”

“The one in Scotland. The head coach of the university where he worked.”

“And the others checked out fine?” When he nodded, she said, “I need to see his file.”

“That’s patently illegal.”

“Steve,” she said. “There is a crapload of patently illegal stuff going on in Crystalvale. My dad was investigating a huge drug ring and I think they might be connected to whoever killed Mayor Colt. Oh, and the police are in on the drug ring, did I mention that? My dad is going to die if I don’t find him, and now the guy I thought I could trust, someone who’s supposed to be protecting me, might not be safe. I need to find out for sure before I get into a car with him tonight and he drags me out in the middle of nowhere and decapitates me, okay?”

“The police are in on it?” Steve’s voice cracked.

“I can’t trust Vince unless I see his file. Please.”

He sighed. “Better go now before breakfast is over.”

She caught Molly’s eye – her friend was herding the girls through the buffet line – and signaled she’d be right back. Molly’s eyes widened and she shook her head frantically and made wild hand gestures indicating to stop. Echo shook her head, pointed to Steve, and gave Molly a huge thumbs-up. Molly mouthed, “Really?” Echo nodded and gave another thumbs-up just as Steve turned around to see what had held her up.

“I take it Molly also thinks I’m a vindictive drug lord,” he said dryly, as Echo hurried to catch up with him.

“Not anymore, don’t worry,” she said cheerfully.

Upstairs in Steve’s office, he extracted a file folder from a file cabinet drawer and turned around, clutching it to his chest. “You have to promise me you won’t tell anyone I showed you this. Especially Vince.”

“Please. It’s not like I’m going to sue you for breach of confidentiality.”

She took the file from him and looked through it. There was Vince’s handwritten application, followed by his resume, then paperwork from his interview with notes about how he’d answered each question, then copies of his hiring paperwork and tax information. There was also a sheet of paper titled “Reference Check” with the names and phone numbers of his three references written in black, and in the same handwriting at the bottom, his signature underneath a paragraph authorizing Camp Kootenay to contact his references. In a different color pen and different handwriting were comments by the person who’d actually contacted the references. “So you call all of the references personally?” said Echo, wondering how Steve had time to do that.

“Mona – you remember her, she’s the HR person you talked to in May – helps me. But yes, we call everyone. Can’t be too careful.”

“And you called Vince’s references,” she said, noticing Steve’s signature at the bottom.

He nodded. “What are you looking for?”

“I’m not sure.” She read his comments. The first reference was a Carson McConnell, supervisor at a phone company where Vince had apparently worked from – she checked his resume – 2001-2004. Steve had written, *Supervisor said Vince was good with customers, record sales. Self motivated, strong work ethic. On time. No reservations.*

The second reference was the Glasgow University head soccer coach. *Could not reach*, Steve had written, along with the dates and times he’d tried to call.

“So how come you hired him without talking to the reference that had to do with his soccer experience?” said Echo.

“I feel like I’m being interrogated.” Steve smiled weakly. “That was part of his interview, actually. We made him teach a mini soccer lesson to the interview team, and he was great.”

The last reference was a personal one – a college roommate, Andrew Gally, from Boston University. Steve’s comments read, *Known for 10 years. Good guy, morals, likes kids, volunteered with kids on weekends. No reservations.*

It all seemed on the up and up. Echo looked at Vince’s resume again. No holes. MBA from Boston University earned in 2001. Another job in computer sales before that from 1997-2000. Earned his BA in business from University of Maryland in 1997.

She frowned. He’d earned his MBA at Boston U in 2001, and since he’d

been working in computer sales prior to that, this meant his MBA had been a year-long program, so he'd started at Boston U in 2000. That was seven years ago. But Steve's comments from the roommate had said they'd known each other for ten years, which would have been 1997 – when Vince was still at the University of Maryland.

Apparently Vince hadn't majored in math.

"This is wrong," she said. "His roommate told you they've known each other for ten years. He was at Boston U only seven years ago." She picked up the phone. "I'm calling this Andrew Gally person."

"That is a really bad idea," said Steve, moving toward her.

She held the phone away from his grasp. "Don't worry, I'm not going to get you in trouble. I'm just calling to be sure. We'll be done before breakfast is over."

"Echo," he said in exasperation, but she was already dialing.

"I need your long distance code," she said, when the phone beeped at her insistently.

"I can't believe this," muttered Steve, as he punched in a code for her.

The phone rang once. Twice. On the third ring, a gruff male voice said, "Al here."

Echo went suddenly cold. She couldn't speak.

"Hello? Who is this?" demanded the voice.

She hung up.

"Wrong number?" said Steve.

"You could say that. It wasn't Andrew Gally." Al? What if – she remembered the emails between Mayor Colt and Jackson Sterry, remembered Father Wallace's comment about Al quitting. Could this be the same guy?

“It’s official,” she said. “I can’t trust Vince.”

“No, you can’t, and I’d better find him now,” said Steve.

“What? No!” She stood up. “If you confront him, who knows what he’ll do. He might try to kidnap me, or he might hurt you. The best thing you can do today is pretend nothing’s wrong.”

“I don’t like the idea of him around our kids.”

“He’s been around them all summer. Look, he’s not going to hurt a five-year-old. If he’s been lying to me and he’s somehow connected to the drug ring, then the only person he wants to hurt is –” Her stomach wrenched with the realization. “Me.”

“I’m calling the police in Nelson,” said Steve. “If the Crystalvale police can’t help us, someone else can.”

“Good idea. Can you do me a favor? I need the day off from work.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I need to get to Mayor Colt’s and rescue my dad. Now, before Vince gets there.”

Steve moved quickly to block her exit. “Nelson is ten minutes from Crystalvale and the police could be here in less than an hour. You’re safe here. Stay. I’ll get them out here and have them arrest Vince.”

“I know I’m safe,” she said. “But my dad’s not.”

“For God’s sake, Echo, don’t be stupid. We can have the police go in and rescue your dad too. Stay here. Go to class. We’ll find him.”

She paused, looked down, and picked at a hangnail. “I should go to breakfast then.”

“Thank you.” Steve heaved a sigh and sat down at his desk. “I’m calling

the police. I'll be right down."

She left the office, shutting the door quietly behind her. She hurried downstairs and into the cacophony of laughter, chatter, and clattering silverware of the cafeteria.

Spotting Neil, she rushed over to his table. He looked up, mouth full of food, cheeks puffing out like a chipmunk, and raised his eyebrows in the question he couldn't ask. She bent down and whispered with her lips against his ear, "Can I borrow your car?"