

Welcome to Camp Disaster

An Echo Shaw Mystery

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Chapter 10

Missing Pieces

“The thing is, I *don't* know anything,” said Echo during their first afternoon class on Tuesday. She'd puzzled over the latest letter for twenty-four hours before she'd finally shared it with Molly. She wanted to talk to Neil too, but their schedules had been insane and she hadn't seen him yet. “I'm tempted to write back and just say, ‘I give up.’”

“I wouldn't do that,” said Molly. “This person sounds like they mean business.”

“I'm kidding. Anyway, the last time I tried writing back nothing happened. The letter just disappeared.”

“Aren't you scared?”

“Not really,” said Echo. “Mostly it's just pissing me off. I want to know who this person is.”

They were paddling around tiny Diamond Bay, part of one of Kootenay Lake's three enormous arms, which touched camp property. Their girls were also paddling, two girls to each huge plastic canoe, while the teacher shouted out instructions about how to hold their paddles and when to turn. Right now they were practicing turning left. Most were going around in circles or veering from side to side. When they'd learned a few requisite skills there was going to be some kind of canoe race, but in the meantime,

Echo and Molly floated lazily through the water, watching to make sure no one fell out of their canoes.

“Do you think it’s whoever was sneaking around our cabin the other night?”

“Maybe.” Echo dipped her oar into the water, not for the purpose of turning the canoe but for the mere joy of flicking water droplets into the air. The water was so clear that she could stick her oar all the way in and still see its blurry outline below the green-blue surface of the lake. “But if it wasn’t the PI, then I don’t know who that would have been.”

“Yeah, and why would the PI send you notes,” pointed out Molly, exactly what Echo had been thinking. “Isn’t the whole point that they remain anonymous?”

“Exactly. And why would they threaten me? And here’s what’s bugging me. It’s gotta be someone with a key.”

“You mean because they broke into our cabin that one time?”

“Not just that,” she said. “The notes have been appearing overnight. I got back to our cabin Monday morning at 3:30 a.m. and I had another letter by 9:30 in the morning.”

“It could still be another counselor.”

“Yeah, but there’s still the time they broke into our cabin.”

“Then why hasn’t there been another letter in the cabin, if they have a key?” wondered Molly.

Echo shrugged. They stopped paddling altogether and drifted on the bay, bobbing up and down. She leaned back and stuck one hand into the cool water. Their girls were still turning awkward circles. “Maybe after we changed the locks they didn’t want to scare me that much again.”

“If they didn’t care about scaring you, then they wouldn’t have sent you a letter asking what you know,” pointed out Molly. “That’s pretty direct. And what do they mean, what do you know? About what?”

“Well, the other letter said my dad had to be careful. They probably mean about his case.”

“But you don’t know anything about that.”

She shook her head. “Just about a really old case. Unless the two cases are connected.” She didn’t see why they would be, because her dad had declared the case closed, and he wouldn’t have shared any information with her if it wasn’t, but maybe there was a connection somehow. Of course, what connection would that be? Hadn’t he ensured all the bad guys were put away?

But even the bad guys could get out on parole.

She shook off the thought. There were too many possibilities, and she was just speculating at this point. She needed more information. How she would get it she had no idea, but she would find out.

She’d already called her dad and told him about the note. He had sounded alarmed and said he would make some calls to Steve as well as to both the PI and the police, and for Echo not to worry. “Just make sure you stay with people at all times, okay?” he said. “Don’t be anywhere by yourself.” Her dad also advised her to absolutely not, under any circumstances, send any form of communication back to the letter writer. “That’s just playing with fire,” he said.

“Sure, Dad,” she said. “I won’t.”

The letter and a pen were currently burning a hole in her pocket. When canoeing class ended, she opted to take her fifteen-minute break in the

staff lounge. Settling into a plush chair, she pulled out the letter and pen. What could she say? She was stubborn.

I don't know anything, she scribbled, just below the mysterious message. *I don't know who you are and I don't know anything about my dad's work. I don't even know where he is right now. Who are you?* She considered saying “my dad’s case” but then thought even that was too much of a giveaway that she knew what he did. Better to play completely dumb. She put the note back in her mailbox and hoped the letter-writer would take it.

She didn't see Neil until dinner, when she finally had the chance to tell him and Eric about the riddle, its solution, the “ghost” from two nights ago, the letter, and the fact that the mayor had worked for Elan Communications, which had owned the modeling agency her dad had busted. “I have no idea what it all means,” she said, “but we’ll figure it out.”

“We?” Neil slid an arm around her. “Can’t you just follow your dad’s advice and lay low, Echo? I don’t think we should be poking into all of this. Do you notice you didn’t get these last couple of letters until we started doing research?”

“Yes, and that’s exactly why we have to continue.”

“And how are we going to do that?”

“We’re going to –” Echo’s thought died in her throat. She picked up today’s paper, which was sitting on the table, half buried under Neil’s tray, and stared at the front page. *Foul Play Now Suspected in Mayor’s Death*, read the headline.

“I was going to talk to you about that,” said Neil.

“Oh, dude, yeah, did you read that?” said Eric. “That is some crazy stuff.”

“Crazy how?” asked Echo, already beginning to skim the article.

“Dude, whoever killed the mayor made it look like a suicide and fooled the investigators.”

Echo read with a pounding heart.

Although Mayor Colt’s tragic death was initially ruled a suicide, investigators now believe he was the victim of foul play. “He had long vertical cuts on his arms consistent with suicide,” Police Chief Lopez was quoted as saying. “However, the medical examiner’s findings led us to believe it was a murder disguised as a suicide.”

And what findings they were. An examination revealed skin under the mayor’s fingernails, indicative of a struggle. DNA testing proved the skin samples did not belong to the mayor. The mayor’s body also displayed several bruises that suggested a violent struggle.

Police will not comment on whether they believe the murderer was someone from within the community of Crystalvale or an outsider. They are, however, working diligently to find that person. “We’re working on this case around the clock,” said the police chief, “and we’ve brought in a respected investigator from Vancouver to help us out. Whoever the killer was, we’ll bring him to justice.”

The article went on to detail the mayor’s brief biography – how he’d moved from New York and given up his high-powered career at Elan Communications, details Echo now knew, and had risen to prominence as a city council member and been elected mayor in 2003. He’d become mayor just about the time the Darkfire model was murdered.

“I told you guys,” she said. “The mayor’s death was made to look like a suicide. Just like the model in the riddle and my dad’s old case.”

“Except the slashes were vertical, not horizontal,” pointed out Neil.

“Maybe . . . they learned their lesson,” she said slowly.

“You think the same people who killed the model killed the mayor?”

When she raised her eyebrows, he said, “We’re drawing some pretty wild conclusions based off a few details. If your dad says the case is closed, then it’s closed, right?”

“I don’t know.” She stared at the paper. The article was accompanied by a picture of the mayor, smiling, shaking someone’s hand after a meeting. It had been taken just a few weeks ago. He looked so satisfied, so unaware that in just a few short weeks his life would be over. It was tragic.

And somehow connected to her dad.

“What are you doing Friday night?” she said to Neil.

He sighed. “I think the question is, what are *you* doing Friday night.”

“I’m going to visit the mayor’s house.”

“Dude,” said Eric. “Why would you do that?”

“Because the other article said his ex-wife and daughter are back in town, and where else would they be but at his house?”

“I thought you and Rayna hated each other,” said Neil. “Why do you want to talk to her?”

“I think she might know something,” said Echo softly.

On Friday night, Neil, Echo, Molly, and Eric gathered in the staff lounge for a night off that would be a very risky undertaking. For starters, they didn’t know where Mayor Colt and Rayna had lived. Their first job was figuring it out, which meant breaking into the office again to raid the staff files. By now Molly had fully resigned herself to giving over her keys for the good of Echo’s schemes.

Eric, who hadn't yet done any sneaking around, was elected to do the deed. He claimed he was great at BS and could find a good excuse if he got caught.

While Eric snuck upstairs, the other three squashed into one of the couches and pretended to be absorbed in the movie some of the other counselors were watching. Twenty-five agonizing minutes later, Eric reappeared in the lounge. He motioned with a jerk of his head that they should follow him, and they leapt up and hurried out of the lounge.

"What happened?" asked Echo.

Eric shook his head. He wouldn't speak until they'd clambered into Neil's car. Once inside, he let out a huge sigh. "Dude, I so almost got caught by Steve. He came out of his office like five seconds after I left the other office, and I had to make up this big story about how I was looking for him because I had an idea for a class."

"What class was that?" said Molly.

"A pirate class."

"Huh?"

"You know, a class about how to be a pirate. You'd learn how to dress like a pirate, say 'Arr matey' and stuff, and go on a treasure hunt. You'd like raid and pillage and stuff." When everyone stared, he added defensively, "It would be a simulation, okay?"

"I thought you were a good BS-er," moaned Echo. "What did Steve say?"

"Dude, he totally bought it. But now I have to do it. Mark and I are teaching the pirate class in two weeks."

They burst out laughing. "That's hysterical," said Molly. "I can't believe you got away with that."

“More than that.” He proudly produced a slip of paper. “This is Rayna’s, well, the mayor’s, address.”

“You’re brilliant,” said Echo. “Neil, do you know where this is?”

He shook his head. “Not offhand, but we’ll find it.”

When they arrived in town, it didn’t take long to find someone who could provide directions to Mayor Colt’s house. A guy working the counter of a fast-food joint looked at the address they’d written down and told them how to find it.

After a brief conference, they decided that only Echo and Neil should go, because too many people might be overwhelming and Rayna or her mother might not let them in.

“She might not let you in anyway,” pointed out Molly. “She does hate you.”

But they had to risk it.

While Molly and Eric went off to locate ice cream, Echo and Neil drove down Main Street. Following the directions the fast-food guy had provided, they took several turns that led them out of town and eventually turned onto a long, hilly driveway. The grass on either side of the drive was overgrown, but as the hill leveled out, they came into view of a street that was more out of upscale suburban Denver than the mountains of Canada. The manicured lawns bloomed with bright flowers and small aspens. A large three-story house with a porch loomed larger than the other houses, and it was marked number 419 – the mayor’s address. Two cars, a BMW and a Camry, were parked in the driveway.

“Wow,” said Neil, pulling up behind the BMW. “I should be the mayor of Crystalvale.”

“And get yourself killed?” said Echo. “No thanks. Come on.”

They got out of the car. As soon as Neil slammed the door, a small dog started yipping from inside the house. The barking dog from the article?

As they approached the porch, Echo saw that only the screen door was shut. “Quiet, Jupiter,” reprimanded a strident female voice.

The woman who could only be the mayor’s ex-wife appeared at the door just as Echo and Neil reached it. She had a deep tan, long auburn hair, and she looked exactly like Rayna. In her arms she held a fluffy little Pomeranian, who continued to yip his head off. She smoothed his hair out of his eyes. Over the yapping, she said curtly, “What can I do for you?”

“We’re, uh, friends of Rayna’s from camp,” said Echo loudly, “and we’re here to see her.”

“She’s not taking any visitors right now,” said the woman. “I’m sorry.” Without waiting for their concession, she shut the door in their faces. From inside, the muffled yaps continued.

Echo and Neil exchanged helpless glances. Echo lifted her hand to knock, and then a familiar voice behind them said, “What are you doing here?”

They turned around. Rayna stood on the bottom step. She wore her hair up in a ponytail, and judging by her workout clothes and shiny red face, she’d just come back from a run. She trudged up the steps to the porch and sank into a stretch. “Are you going to answer me or just stand there?”

“Uh.” Echo recovered her wits enough to reply. “We’re here to see you, actually.”

“Why?”

“We heard about your dad, and we’re really sorry,” began Neil.

“We were hoping you could tell us something about his death,” added Echo.

“He’s dead,” said Rayna flatly. “What else do you want to know?”

“I was hoping you could tell us something about his job in New York.”

“Why do you care about that?”

“Because I think it has something to do with a case my dad is working on.”

Rayna leaned into her stretch and didn’t answer. After a moment, Echo gave Neil a shrug indicating they should go. But at just that moment Rayna surprised them by getting to her feet and saying, “Come inside.”

Neil and Echo followed her in. The interior of the house was as beautiful as the outside, with hardwood floors, a crystal chandelier over the entry way, a staircase rising elegantly up to the second floor. Echo glimpsed a formal dining room with mahogany furniture.

Rayna led them through the living room, which was hung with rich green drapes and boasted Victorian style couches, into the kitchen, which featured stainless steel appliances and a marble island surrounded by barstools. Rayna’s mother sat at one of the barstools, sipping a glass of wine. The Pomeranian sat on his own barstool next to her. When he saw the three, he started barking again.

“Hush,” commanded Rayna’s mother. Her command did absolutely nothing to shut the dog up. “Rayna, do you know these people?”

“They’re from camp, Mom.” Rayna sounded tired. She got a glass of water from the filtered tap at the fridge, and asked Echo and Neil if they wanted anything. They shook their heads. Glass of water in hand, Rayna started out of the kitchen without looking back, expecting Neil and Echo to follow. They tripped out of the kitchen, feeling almost guilty as the dog yammered after them.

Upstairs, Rayna led them into an entertainment room of sorts with a pool table and soft couches. She sat on one couch, and Neil and Echo settled awkwardly onto the other.

As she sipped her water, Echo realized how tired Rayna looked. She seemed to have lost a little bit of weight, and dark circles shadowed her eyes. All of the fight seemed to have gone out of her. Only her eyes retained their sharpness. “So what do you want to know?”

Echo explained her dad’s job to Rayna. “I think there’s a connection between him and your dad, but I don’t know what.” She recounted the research she’d done indicating that the modeling agency her dad had busted was owned by the company Rayna’s dad had worked for.

“Yeah,” said Rayna. “I remember him talking about that.”

Echo was startled. “You do?”

“Yeah, that case was all over the U.S. papers. When Dad heard about it he kind of freaked out. I guess he was pretty good friends with one of the guys who was busted.”

“Is there anyone from that case who would have wanted your father dead?” she asked. “Did he, was he an informant, or anything?”

“Not that I know,” said Rayna, “but I’m sure he wouldn’t have told me if he was. He was going to have to testify at the guy’s trial but he got out of it somehow. I’m not sure how.”

“What exactly did your dad do for Elan Communications?”

“I don’t honestly know, exactly. He was a high level executive and he did a lot of crisis consulting. That’s when they spin things for companies when they have bad PR. You know, an oil spill happens and then the oil company speaks out apologizing and donates hundreds of thousands of dollars to an environmental group. But we moved to Canada when I was

little so I don't remember what he did in New York." She drained the last of her water. "How come you think my dad's death is connected to what your dad is doing now?"

"Because of the letters I've been getting." Echo told her about the notes. "I thought, uh, I sort of thought at first they were from you, but then you left camp and they kept coming, so obviously not."

Rayna half-smiled. "Why would you think it was me?"

"Because the first day of camp you said you were watching me."

"Oh. I guess that was kind of an unfortunate coincidence," she conceded. "But come on, do I look like a girl who would waste paper trying to push you around?"

"No," said Echo. "You have better ways." She said it teasingly, and Rayna took the jab surprisingly well. She nodded, conceding the point, and Echo knew they were both thinking of the dunking incident. It was almost like a truce.

"It's just that the model's death in my dad's old case was made to look like a suicide, and now your dad's death was too," said Echo. "It seems weird. Most murderers don't take so much trouble to disguise the killing."

"That's a long shot," said Rayna. "I doubt if it's the same person. But I'll tell you what, my mom isn't upset Dad's gone."

"Why not?"

"Well, you know they were divorced." Echo and Neil nodded. "And now she gets all his money. That's all she cares about. That's the only reason she came back, to see what was in his will."

"I don't mean to be rude," began Echo, "but –"

“He willed half his estate to me and half to my mom,” said Rayna bluntly. “Only Elan is threatening to take us to court because they claim my dad said he was willing part of his estate to them.”

“What? When is that happening?”

“I don’t know. These things can take years.” Rayna ran her finger around the rim of her empty glass. “Anyway, I don’t really care. I just want this to be over so Mom and I can sell the house.”

“You’re not staying in Crystalvale?” Echo asked, but she understood. She wouldn’t want to stay in the town where her dad was found dead, either.

They talked for a bit longer, but Rayna didn’t say anything that added to Echo’s understanding of the case. She hadn’t noticed her dad acting weird or strange or having odd conversations in the dead of night, anything that would indicate he was a man on the run.

“Hey,” said Echo suddenly. “What was up with you stealing the money from camp and trying to blame me for it?”

“I didn’t want to get caught,” she said, somewhat apologetically. “I just wanted enough money so I could move to L.A. You don’t make crap as a counselor.”

“You were going to run away from home?”

“Essentially.”

“To do what?”

“Be an actress. I’m still moving there as soon as Mom and I sell the house. I don’t care if she comes with me. She can go back to Vancouver if she wants.”

“Well, good luck with that,” said Echo.

After a bit more awkward conversation, she thanked Rayna for talking to them, and Rayna took them downstairs. As they passed through the

kitchen, the dog started yipping at them. “I hate that thing,” said Rayna when they had reached the door. “I hope she sells it when she sells the house.”

That reminded Echo of the barking dog. “The newspaper said one of your neighbors heard a barking dog the night your dad was killed. Was that it?”

“God knows he’s loud enough to wake the entire neighborhood, but no,” said Rayna. “The dog lives with Mom in Vancouver. We were in the San Juans when we heard about Dad, and the dog was with us. I tried to get her to leave that thing at home, but she wouldn’t do it.”

Echo remembered that from the article now, some mention that Rayna and her mother had been vacationing in the San Juans and were on their way home.

So if it hadn’t been the yippy little Pomeranian, then what dog had the neighbor heard?

“Do you know which neighbor it was?” she asked.

Rayna shook her head. “Haven’t got a clue.”

They said goodnight, and walked down the steps. As Neil started to get into the car, Echo said, “Wait.” She grabbed his hand and pulled him down the sidewalk, and he understood. They hurried up to the front door of the next house over.

Echo rang the bell. After a few seconds of delay, a middle-aged woman answered.

“Hi,” Echo said a little breathlessly. “I’m Echo Shaw and I’m doing a story on the mayor’s death? I’m a reporter for the uh, *Vancouver Times*.”

“I’m done talking to the media,” said the woman. “Sorry.”

She started to close the door.

“Wait!” said Echo. “Can you just tell me about the barking dog you heard?”

The woman paused, the door half-open. “Why do you care about that?”

“Because I’m doing research into the significance of animals’ ability to anticipate death,” she said, grasping wildly at the first idea that came into her mind. “And I need to know if this dog might have had an instinct about the mayor’s death.”

“I hardly think so,” said the woman. “I figured he recognized an intruder or something.”

“What did the barking sound like?”

“Really deep barks, like a big dog. Like a German Shepherd or something. I thought maybe he was an angel dog, sent to warn the mayor.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because no one on this street owns a dog,” said the woman.

She shut the door.