

Welcome to Camp Disaster

An Echo Shaw Mystery

© 2008 Amy Alexander

Chapter 13

Say Hi to Grandma

Whether it was the embarrassment of getting caught by Vince the night before, or the fact that the question of her relationship with Neil now had a one-month deadline, Echo felt herself building up a little bit of a wall in her heart. The next morning as she was sitting down to breakfast, Neil trotted over to their table. By habit she stood up, and he gave her a not-overly-friendly but definitely-warm hug. Normally she would have squeezed back but now, as if in a dream, she could barely move to hug him back.

“Everything okay?” he said, stepping back uncertainly.

She nodded and glanced at the wall clock. “I’m in a hurry.” It was sort of true. Their cabin had gotten to breakfast late because the girls had taken an especially long time to get ready and Julie had lost her favorite pair of socks, which Echo had spent ten minutes helping her locate.

“Have a good morning, then.” He fixed her with a questioning, and maybe slightly hurt, look before hurrying back to his table.

Her stomach twitched as she contemplated her scrambled eggs.

“Everything okay?” said Molly, glancing up from her breakfast.

“Why does everyone want to know that today?” Echo forced a laugh and made herself dig into her eggs. “Did you ever think about why eggs are yellow? It’s kind of a weird color, when you think about it.”

Molly, not fooled, didn’t respond. Echo concentrated very hard on sprinkling tabasco sauce over her eggs and forking off tiny little bites. Then she focused on a copy of their schedule that Molly had laid on the table. As she scanned the remaining days of the week and saw Friday’s schedule, it occurred to her that for the first time all summer she wasn’t looking forward to Friday night, their night off. She was dreading it. Because she might have to talk with Neil again, and what would she say? She had no answer for him.

Today, Wednesday, their first class was soccer with Vince. Her stomach twitched again. If she could time it right, she might be able to pull him aside after class, in the few minutes’ lull before the next group came onto the field, and ask what he knew about her dad.

She ran her plan by Molly, who said with a frown, “Are you sure he’s the PI? Because I heard he spent the last three years coaching in Scotland.”

“That’s a front,” said Echo, with more confidence than she felt. The only person who fit her dad’s clue at all was Vince. It had to be him.

After soccer class, as she’d hoped, the other cabin with whom they’d shared a class left in a rush, eager to get onto their swimming lesson. Molly corralled their girls and herded them off the field, while Echo hung back helping Vince to collect soccer balls and right cones that little feet had kicked over.

As she handed over the last ball, Vince smiled and said, “You’ll miss your next class.”

She took a deep breath. “I need to ask you something.”

“Oo-kay,” he said.

She glanced around the field, but saw no counselors or campers headed for the field. “It’s – you won’t tell anyone we talked, will you?” Of course he wouldn’t, she thought. He was a PI. Dumb question.

“No, but I gotta tell you, I have a girlfriend.”

Startled, she tried to gauge if he was kidding. He was smiling in a friendly and casual way, but he looked a little wary. With his muscular body and smoking dark eyes, he inspired quite a few crushes among the female counselors. Several of them had already probably confessed their undying love for him. “No, no,” she gasped. “I mean, no. I was wondering if you –” She tried to think how to phrase it. “Knew what my dad was doing.”

“I don’t believe I’ve met your dad.” He tossed the soccer ball into a large mesh bag.

She lowered her voice. “He’s in San Diego doing a special op. He sent me a message about a private investigator he’d hired.” Vince stared at her, his face showing only confusion. “It’s someone at camp. I’m pretty sure from the clue he gave me that it’s you.”

“Echo.” He shook his head. “I don’t know what your dad does, but I assure you, I’m not the person you’re looking for. I just spent three years coaching in Scotland. The most I investigate is the kicking technique of small children.” He slung the mesh bag over his shoulder.

“Look, I know you probably can’t talk about it here, but can you at least blink twice if you know what I’m talking about? My dad is Steve Shaw and he works for the DEA.”

“I’m sorry,” he said firmly. “You’re mistaken.” His expression hardened just a bit. At that moment the sound of chattering, laughing children wafted toward the field. The two of them glanced in the direction

of the sound and saw a rowdy group of boys approaching. “I’ve gotta get going. Hey, kiddos!” he yelled, and then jogged toward the group to meet them on the field.

Echo knew she’d been dismissed. She sighed and shuffled toward the path that led to the arts and crafts building.

She’d been so certain of herself – who else but Vince would be considered a football/soccer guide? He was the only soccer teacher. The camp didn’t teach American football. None of the teachers, as far as she knew, had a propensity for football trivia. It had to be Vince. Didn’t it?

But, as she well knew after the Miranda fiasco, she’d been wrong before.

At 10:30 that night came the familiar knock and the familiar call, “Head count!” One of the counselors was supposed to quickly count all of her campers, then answer the door and provide the number to whichever teacher was doing the head count that night. When the shout and the knock sounded, Molly groaned from the bunk above Echo.

“I’ve got it,” said Echo, getting up. She quickly counted ten girls – she knew there were ten, but she counted again because it was the rule – and answered the door. Vince stood there, clipboard in hand.

“Ten,” she said.

He noted the number on his clipboard. Under his breath, he said, “Come outside.”

Echo glanced over her shoulder, then stepped outside and shut the door behind her as quietly as possible. The air felt stuffy tonight – not humid, but still uncomfortably warm. The moon hung out somewhere low behind the mountains, hidden by their peaks, although thousands of stars lit

the sky as usual. Vince's flashlight cast a concentrated pool of white light on the ground.

"This stays between us," he said, putting a hand on Echo's shoulder. He searched her eyes with his. "I shouldn't even be here."

His face was so close to her, his eyes so intense, that if she hadn't known he was referring to their earlier conversation, she could almost have imagined he was a character in some cheesy romance about to kiss her. The thought struck her as hilarious, and she fought back a nervous giggle.

He dropped his hand. "This is the only time we'll ever have this conversation. Don't ever ask me again in public about your dad, his job, or anything to do with the DEA."

"You *are* the PI," she said.

He nodded. "Your dad hired me to keep an eye on you this summer."

"So you've been reporting back to him? Every week? Every day?"

"I've been keeping an eye on you," he repeated. "That's what I'm hired to do. You don't need the details."

She studied him, muscled arms crossed, soccer-player good looks capable of inspiring swoons among adolescent women everywhere. "Are you really a soccer coach?"

"I'm really one now." He paused. "I played in college."

"How long have you been a PI?"

"The less you know about me, the better," he said.

"Then why did you come to find me tonight?"

"So you'd know who I am in case – in case there's trouble."

Her ears perked up at the word, and her heartbeat quickened. "So you think I'm, like, in danger?"

“Like, in danger,” he said wryly. “Someone thinks you know too much.”

“About the mayor’s death?” she asked breathlessly. If someone thought she knew too much, then that meant some or all of her information was correct, didn’t it?

“That, or about your dad’s current case.”

“But I don’t know anything about his current case,” she said, disappointed. “I was hoping you could tell me.”

“And why’s that?”

“I think – I know – it’s got something to do with the mayor’s death.”

He frowned. “What makes you say that?”

“Well – because the mayor used to work for Elan Communications, who also owned the modeling agency my dad busted years ago for being involved with a drug ring. Plus the way one of the models died and the way the mayor died are kind of similar.”

“I see.”

“And I didn’t start getting letters saying I should be careful and my dad should watch out until I started looking into the mayor’s death.” She was pretty certain her dad had told Vince about the letters already, because he’d said he was going to get in touch with the PI, but not sure how much detail he’d been given, she added, “He told you about those letters, right?”

“Yeah. I’m working on those. No leads yet,” he said, before Echo could ask.

“What about –” She hesitated. “Is my dad really in San Diego?”

“I’m just the hired help, remember?” He chuckled, though it sounded tense. “If he told you he’s in San Diego, then I’m sure he is.”

“Oh.” Her shoulders slumped a little. “I thought maybe you knew – I thought maybe he was in B.C.”

“Because?”

“Just instinct, I guess.” It was more like semantics, but she didn’t feel like going into the reason behind her theory, which hinged on a mere preposition – her dad saying “over there” instead of “up there” when asking how things were going.

“So you don’t know anything about who might be sending those letters, any ideas at all?” she asked hopefully. “Because I really think it’s got something to do with Elan. They’re suing – I read an article, I heard they’re suing the family for the mayor’s estate.” She’d caught herself just in time. Even to Vince, the PI her dad had personally hired, she didn’t want to give away Rayna’s part in her sleuthing. She decided right then not to say anything about the will or the emails sent between Mayor Colt and Jackson Sterry. No way to explain where she’d gotten copies of those.

“Echo,” he said, “can I share something with you?”

She nodded eagerly.

“I’ve been in this business, investigation that is, for ten years. But one thing I’ve learned is to do your part and let the authorities do theirs. In this case, your dad’s part is to bust whatever drug ring he’s after, the part of the local police is to find out who killed the mayor, and your part is to not get into trouble. Do you get what I’m saying?”

“Sure.” Apparently when he’d asked to share something, he’d meant share advice. She’d been hoping for a clue or information. She should have known better. Because if *she’d* learned anything in her sixteen years of being a kid and then a teenager, it was that adults always kept information to themselves that they thought you shouldn’t have, when often it would be

better if you did. Like her dad not telling her anything about her mom, for example, because he thought it would hurt her – or because it would hurt him. Echo was running around constructing vague reasons why her mom had left, and she still had no solid answers. That wasn't doing anyone any good.

As always when she thought of her mom, she steeled herself against the thoughts that would only upset her. “I better get to sleep,” she said.

“I'm serious,” he said, backing away from the doorstep. “Lay low for awhile.”

But as she went inside the cabin, she knew that laying low was the last thing she would ever do.

The next day seemed to drag. She had no opportunities to further research the mayor's death or her dad's current case, and she didn't even know where to start. Things with Neil had stalled, too. Although she saw him from a distance en route to meals and classes, she only spoke to him once, at lunch. “Queen's Bay again tomorrow,” he said, balancing a tray. It was loaded with more food than she'd ever seen anyone eat in a single sitting – two cheeseburgers, three hot dogs, fruit salad, pasta salad, and cake.

“Where are you planning to store all of that exactly?” she asked, eyeing the feast.

He patted his stomach fondly. “Oh, there's room. So you in?”

“Isn't tomorrow the Arts in August festival in town? The one the mayor started?” She'd read about it in the paper. The festival started Friday morning and went through Sunday night. In honor of the mayor, there would be a special silent auction and fundraising dinner that would raise funds for the various charities to which he'd donated.

And then she remembered what Rayna had said earlier this week. “Actually, isn’t tomorrow morning the mayor’s funeral?”

Neil just looked at her for a moment, and then shook his head. “So, arts festival?”

“I was just saying,” she said defensively.

“I’ll meet you in the lounge tomorrow night around seven. That okay?”

She nodded. It was so easy to be with Neil. Now. But what would happen when she moved back to Denver and they were trying to do this from a thousand miles apart? There would be no regularity, no Friday nights, no meals together. She’d seen Carrie fall apart over a guy she’d met while on exchange in Spain last summer when it didn’t last past the summer. She didn’t want that to happen to her.

Neil said goodbye, his smile seeming just a little strained, and went on to his table. Echo stared at her tray and wondered if Neil wanted a third cheeseburger. Suddenly her stomach wasn’t feeling so good.

She excused herself to Molly, claiming she was going outside for some fresh air, and hurried out of the cafeteria. Outside, she leaned against the side of the building and took a deep breath. No point in panicking about anything. She’d figure out things with Neil, and as far as she knew her dad was still okay. Everything would work out.

Her shorts pocket started ringing, and she realized she hadn’t silenced her phone earlier. By now most of the counselors openly ignored Steve’s rule against cell phone use during the day; everyone had their phones out in between classes and at meals, and simply silenced them for classes. Steve still reprimanded people when he saw them on their phones, but even his admonitions to put them away seemed half-hearted. He was looking more

and more exhausted these days, the hectic summer seeming to have taken its toll. He ran around frantically most days with a clipboard in hand, shouting announcements and checking in with various counselors and teachers about a million details. Even his beard was getting crazier-looking.

Pulling out her phone, Echo checked the caller ID, which read Home. This could only be her stepmother calling. After a moment's hesitation, she answered. "Hello?"

"Oh, Echo, hi," said Miranda. "I'm sorry to bother you, I was just wondering if you'd heard from your dad lately?"

"Not since the weekend." Her heart started drumming hard. "Why?"

"I just haven't heard from him in a couple of days. I don't mean to worry you."

"Was he supposed to call you?"

"Well, you know how busy he is, but –"

"Miranda, what aren't you telling me?" Echo was losing patience with her stepmother. She hated when people hedged, especially when it concerned something important, like say, whether her dad was okay.

A sigh crackled over the phone, as if Miranda either really didn't want to give out this information, or was trying to collect herself first. "He was supposed to call me on Tuesday night and he didn't. And I haven't heard from him since. He just always calls when he says he will. I think one time he didn't and he called me the next day."

"You tried his cell phone?" She knew Miranda had, but she had to ask.

"It went to voice mail."

"You're sure he wasn't just working? Maybe they busted whoever it was? Maybe he was coordinating with the police on a big drug raid?"

“He could have been,” her stepmother said doubtfully. “But from what he said recently it sounded like they weren’t to that point yet. I mean, you know how your dad gets, that intensity in his tone – he didn’t sound like that.”

Echo did know, and she was impressed, actually, that Miranda had picked up on something that subtle. She was still having trouble adjusting to the reality of her stepmother as an intelligent human being, not some bimbo, which had been so much easier, in a way, to deal with.

They promised to call each other if they heard anything, and hung up. A sick feeling hung in Echo’s stomach, the feeling of acid churning. Her dad was a reliable communicator and if he said he was going to call Miranda, he would have. Unless, of course, he was in the middle of solving a case. But...

She ran to the lounge and checked her email. To her utter relief, her dad had emailed her, and it was timestamped earlier this afternoon. He must be okay then, she thought, opening the email, though it did seem a little odd he wouldn’t have called Miranda by now. But maybe he just hadn’t had time.

The email was brief:

Hi Echo,

I just wanted to check in and see how camp was going. No, I haven’t talked to Grandma yet, but I’ll tell her you say hi. Better get going. Catch you later.

Love,

Dad

Okay, this had to be the oddest email her dad had ever sent her. It sounded nothing like his usual emails, with those short and choppy sentences. She might have chalked that up to him being in a hurry, if not for the sentence about saying hi to Grandma. Both of her grandmothers were dead.

She called Miranda.

“He wrote me,” she said, when her stepmother picked up.

“Oh, thank God,” breathed Miranda. “What did he say?”

“It’s weird. It was really short, and he said something about saying hi to Grandma.” She started to add that she didn’t have a living grandmother, but Miranda interrupted her.

“Wait.” Her tone cracked with panic. “What exactly did he say? Read me the email.”

Echo frowned, but complied.

“Oh my God,” said Miranda. “Oh, no.”

“What? What?”

“He’s not okay.” Miranda sounded like she was about to cry. “You know how your dad’s work is – not that safe – we agreed that if he was ever in trouble he would say that about talking to Grandma. It’s because you don’t have any grandmothers living, we thought it would be obvious enough to us but not obvious to anyone else.”

“What?” Echo was shocked. She felt betrayed by this information. She was the one her dad solved puzzles with, she was the one he sent riddles to – how dare he have a private code sentence that he shared only with Miranda and not her? When she was the one most likely to solve any riddle he sent? “Are you sure? He sent this email to me, not you.”

“I’m positive. I don’t know why he didn’t write me, but maybe he couldn’t. Maybe he was made to write that email. Something’s wrong.”

“I’ve gotta talk to Vince,” muttered Echo.

“Who?”

“There’s someone up here that can help him. Maybe. If I can get a message to him.” She didn’t know how to do this without breaking Vince’s rule about talking to him in public regarding her dad. He seemed to think they were being watched 24/7, though she couldn’t imagine one of the campers was spying on them.

“I’m calling his office. They need to know about this.”

“Call Paul Hardy too. He’s dad’s partner, you know –”

“I know. I’ve got his number. There’s another agent he works with sometimes. I’ll call her too.” Miranda’s tone had hardened suddenly with determination, and suddenly Echo got a glimpse of why her stepmother was probably a very good event coordinator. She sounded completely in charge.

“Who are you going to talk to up there?”

“A private investigator Dad hired to watch me. He works at camp.”

“Good. Call me if you hear anything. Be careful.”

“You too.”

They hung up.

Suddenly Echo wished she had Miranda’s facility for organization. She had to mobilize, she had to find the best way to get Vince alone again so she could talk to him, or maybe she ought to write him a note and leave it in his mailbox, but that didn’t seem fast enough – maybe she could hand-deliver the letter to him after dinner –

She went to close her dad’s email. The letters glared at her, black on the white screen, a warning. She re-read the short sentences, imagining

without wanting to the circumstances under which her dad might have been forced to write this message.

And then she saw it, and she couldn't believe it. Had he really made things that simple?

The first letter of each sentence in the email combined to spell the message: IN B.C.

She'd been right. And if he'd had to go to all the trouble to cover up his special operation by pretending to be in San Diego, then whatever he was doing up here must be extra risky. Which meant, if Miranda was right about the code phrase, and there was no reason to believe she wasn't, that Echo's dad was in a lot of trouble right now.

It had finally happened, she thought. All these years she'd known even as a child that her dad's job was dangerous. His high-profile position put him in the position of being hated by some of the guys he brought down. But she'd never thought anything would actually happen to him. Sixteen years and he'd been safe, they'd been safe. Now the streak had been broken. She guessed your luck had to run out sometime.

But not if she could help it.