

Welcome to Camp Disaster

An Echo Shaw Mystery

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Chapter 14

Visiting St. Mark's

The next morning dawned overcast and humid. The low-hanging clouds looked darkly metallic, almost charcoal in places, and heavy and puffy. For the first time all summer, the threat of a thunderstorm loomed. At breakfast, Steve announced an alternate schedule in case of a storm or rain. Since this alternate schedule involved cramming most of the campers and counselors into the cafeteria and the gym, Echo sincerely hoped it wouldn't come to that.

At breakfast, she only half-listened to the girls' chattering. She'd managed to pull Vince aside for a few moments last night at dinner, just long enough to blurt out the story about her dad's email. He'd nodded gruffly and said he'd begin working on it. He'd encouraged her to write back to her dad, try to keep the communication going, and she had, but so far her inbox was empty. It was making her sick thinking about what might be happening to her dad right now. He was tough, so if someone had kidnapped him, the other side must be tougher.

Molly patted her arm sympathetically. She'd listened to Echo analyze her fears long into the night, and they'd gone over endless ideas about where her dad might be, just speculation, but it had helped to have someone to talk to. "He'll be okay," she said gently.

Echo nodded and, to distract herself, picked up this morning's paper. As she glanced through it, she spotted a short item announcing the mayor's funeral, planned for this morning at nine a.m. at St. Mark's, Crystalvale's Anglican Church. A public memorial service had apparently been held yesterday evening.

Her mind raced. Somehow she felt it was very important that she get to the funeral. Because Jackson Sterry, the executor of the mayor's will, might also be there, and where better to get a good look at him – maybe even find a way to talk to him? At the very least, anyway, she could talk to Rayna again, compare thoughts on the will and the emails, and what all of it meant. Even if Jackson Sterry didn't show, Rayna would probably be able to tell her something about him. She felt very strongly that the mayor's death had something to do with her dad's case, and the more she knew, the faster she might be able to find her dad.

There were only two hitches in this plan: one, Echo had a job that she couldn't ditch on a whim. And two, she didn't have a car.

She considered her options. She could beg Molly to let her off for the morning, but after having borrowed Molly's keys so many times to sneak around, she had a feeling her grace period might be over.

She could fake illness and pretend to go back to the cabin, then sneak into town. But someone might notice her healthy self leaving camp, and even if she did make it off the premises without getting caught, she still had the problem of no transportation.

For that, she could ask Neil to drive her, but then he'd have to sneak out too, and she didn't know if he'd break the rules for her again after Vince had already caught them. Come to think of it, Vince would probably notice if Echo snuck out. Crap.

Just as breakfast was ending, Steve made a final announcement. “I need your help here, guys,” he said. “I’ve got a big list of supplies we need – art supplies, stuff for the office, a few things for the kitchen. We’re running out fast, and neither I nor the teaching staff has the time to make a shopping trip today. If one of you with a vehicle would be willing to go into town for this stuff, I’d really –” Before he could finish the sentence, hands shot up across the cafeteria. Everyone loved the idea of escaping their daily routine. Surveying the surplus of volunteers, he added weakly, “Uh, why don’t I just close my eyes and point to someone.” He shut his eyes, spun a halfhearted circle, and pointed a finger at the center of the room.

Eric stood up from his table and punched his fist in the air, while the other counselors groaned and lowered their hands. Steve waved the shopping list at Eric, like a flag of surrender.

Echo saw her chance. She waved her hand frantically and yelled for Steve’s attention. When he called on her, looking confused, she blurted, “I’ll help him!”

“Hey, no fair!” someone yelled.

Steve stroked his bushy beard. After a moment, he shrugged. “Probably wouldn’t hurt.” Several counselors booed this decision. Steve waved a hand, dismissing everyone to their first classes, and the cafeteria erupted into small stampedes of counselors and children.

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with the mayor’s funeral, would it?” asked Molly slyly as she placed Echo’s tray on top of her own.

Echo gave her a quick hug in reply, then hurried toward Steve. As Eric ambled over, Echo spotted Neil herding their campers into the semblance of a line. He caught her eye and gave her a funny look. She suspected he knew what she was up to.

Steve handed them the shopping list, provided directions to the various stores they would need to visit, and then took them to the kitchen safe to get out some cash. After signing for the cash and tucking it into his wallet, Eric led the way through the parking lot to his beat-up truck.

On the way into town, Echo decided to spring her plan on him. “Did you know Mayor Colt’s funeral is this morning?”

“Oh yeah?” he said. “Sucks for Rayna.”

“I think we should go.”

“What? Dude, why would we crash the mayor’s funeral?”

“Neil told you about my dad maybe getting kidnapped, right?”

“Yeah, and I’m totally sorry about that, but what does that have to do with – ”

“He caught you up on the stuff Rayna gave us, right? The will and stuff? Because I think my dad’s case has something to do with Elan. And I think they killed the mayor. *And* there’s a chance one of them might be there.”

“Dude,” said Eric. “Isn’t Steve gonna notice if we take hours to get back?”

“No. It’s eight now. It takes twenty minutes to get into town. Twenty-five if it’s slow, and the same time to get back. This shopping list will take us at least an hour. The funeral’s at nine. It’ll be over by ten, max. We can be back at camp by eleven-thirty no problem.”

“I dunno, Echo.” Eric bit his lip. “It kinda sounds risky to me.”

“Steve’s so stressed, he’s not even going to think about how long it takes us.” She added, “Please.”

He shrugged. “All right. I guess I’m in. Why not.”

Echo's prediction of twenty to twenty-five minutes would normally have been correct, but a good quarter-mile outside of Crystalvale, the normally empty highway leading onto Main Street slowed to a crawl with unusual traffic. "Crap," said Echo. "Funeral traffic." Apparently the mayor's funeral had drawn quite a turnout.

At 8:45, they had just crossed Sixth Street and sat a total halt behind a long line of cars, none of which were moving down Main Street. The church, Echo had read, was on Main and First. "Shoot," said Eric. "I dunno if we're even gonna get five more blocks by nine, much less find a place to park."

Echo unlocked her door. "I'm getting out," she said. "Find a spot and meet me at the church."

"Oh, sure, just leave me stranded in traffic, thanks a lot."

She rolled her eyes at him and jumped out. Slamming the door, she forced her way down the street. The sidewalks were nearly as crowded as the road, with people streaming in throngs toward the church – it looked like the whole town was determined to attend, despite this being a theoretically private service – but at least she was moving.

When she reached the church, her heart sank. A crowd stood outside the tall building, whose grey stone, arched doorway, and gabled roof set it starkly apart from the rest of the buildings in Crystalvale. At the double doors, two Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers stood guard, their uniforms crisp and their expressions stern. She watched a group of five people approach them, engage in a short conversation, and turn away looking upset. They were keeping the townspeople out of the church. Now what?

Well, she might as well try. As she approached the doors, she put on her best perky smile. Then she realized maybe a perky smile wasn't appropriate for a funeral and tried to adjust her expression to downcast. "Um, hi," she said quietly. "I'm here for Phillip's funeral?" She hoped saying the mayor's first name would lead the officers to think she was a relative.

One of the officers nodded and consulted a clipboard, which she hadn't noticed before because he was keeping it tucked under his arm. "Name, please?"

"There's a *list*?" she said. What was this, a Hollywood after-party? The officer frowned at her. "Uh, Rachel," she improvised.

"Rachel what?" He scanned the list and frowned.

"Colt?"

"Sorry," said the officer, shaking his head. "Nice try."

"Are you kidding?"

"Nope."

She sighed and turned away. Okay, so the direct approach wasn't going to work.

She glanced around, but saw no sign of Eric. He must still be looking for parking. Checking her cell phone, she realized she had only seven minutes left before the funeral started.

She'd have to try something else. Walking around to the back of the building, she tried various doors. They were all locked. Beneath elegant arches, tall stained-glass windows depicted various religious figures. She spotted no regular windows that could be pried open. The only way in seemed to be the front doors, guarded by the none-too-friendly officers.

As she paused to consider her options, she noticed that the back of the church faced a large yard that contained what appeared to be an unkempt garden and patchy grass. A low fence, more for show than for any kind of real barrier, surrounded the yard. About thirty feet away, near the back of the yard, stood a small stone building, not much larger than a big garden shed. Echo jogged across the scraggly grass.

Breathless in the humid mountain air, she stopped in front of the building. She tried the door, which opened.

At that moment, she heard a voice calling, "I've got it, Billy, I'm checking." Looking over her shoulder, she saw one of the RCMP officers rounding the corner of the church, and her heart jumped.

She slipped inside the building and shut the door behind her.

The interior was pitch black. Swearing under her breath, not so much from fear as from annoyance at her stupidity in not first checking for a light switch, Echo pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and flipped it open. As she flicked it across her surroundings, the weak blue light illuminated a simple square room with nothing in it but a few cleaning supplies – a mop on a cart; another cart with paper towels and cleaning spray; a broom; a rake. The light also pointed out a string dangling from the ceiling; the string turned out to be attached to a bare bulb. Since there were no windows in the shed, Echo yanked the string without worrying about someone noticing the light.

A stark white glow filled the room. She saw that the cleaning supplies stood in front of some type of closet door. The floor was made of wooden boards, bare and clean except for a few little round brown things that lay scattered in one corner. Curious because the rest of the place was so tidy, she bent to examine them.

They were about the size of trail mix, but they looked like – she picked one up and sniffed it. A faintly meaty smell came from it. Animal chow.

Maybe dog food?

Her skin prickled, and she dropped the piece of chow and looked over her shoulder, even though she would have definitely heard and noticed someone coming in the door from two feet away.

She crossed to the closet door and pushed the cleaning supplies and mop cart out of the way. When she tried the handle, she found it locked.

Although she knew it was a long shot, but she looked around the room for where a key might be hidden. There were no rugs or clay pots or shoes to hide it under. The floorboards didn't sound hollow when she stamped on them. She looked under all the cleaning supplies on the cart. She even looked in the fronds of the mop. And then, desperate, she bent and felt underneath the mop cart.

Her fingers brushed something metallic against the plastic bottom. Getting down on her stomach, she squinted to see underneath the cart. Yep, that was a key. She worked it free after a moment – it was simply attached to a little hook on the bottom of the cart – and tried it in the door. The lock clicked.

As she opened the door, she saw that the space was definitely not a closet, but the landing of a staircase that descended into darkness. She propped open the door with the mop cart then quickly replaced the key on its little hook under the cart. For a few seconds, she debated whether or not to lock the door behind her, but decided that in case the police checked out the shed on a whim, it would be safer if they couldn't get into the closet. Not that they might not also find the key, but at least the locked door might deter

them. She pocketed her phone, shoved the mop cart out of the way, and shut the door behind her. In the sudden darkness she felt for the lock and turned it with a soft click. It wasn't as if she couldn't get back out, she told herself, trying to ignore the panicked sensation that she was locking herself in.

She pulled out her trusty cell phone again and shone its little light over the area. She stood at the top of a steep and narrow staircase, with stone steps winding down into a void. It looked like just the kind of staircase that, in a horror movie, might have ghosts or vampires come shrieking up it at any moment. This thought made her remember the movie she'd seen with Carrie shortly before she left for the summer – *Haunted Heart*, a supernatural thriller in which every time someone got their heart broken a portal opened up to Hades, allowing a ghost back in to wreak havoc on the person who'd done the breaking up. The premise was laughable, but the special effects were decent, and since the movie consisted mostly of people wandering into dark spaces and then suddenly having evil-looking ghosts with melting-wax faces rush at them screeching, it had been pretty freaky. Just what she wanted to think about while walking down a poorly lit staircase. Dark open spaces like the woods she could handle – somewhat – but dark enclosed spaces were another thing.

“It's just a stupid movie,” she reprimanded herself. As she had while sneaking around the cafeteria, she started singing the first song she could think of. This time it was “Oh Susannah.” Her voice echoed as she started down the staircase. The musty air felt cool and damp.

Because the staircase turned a neat spiral around the stone, she couldn't tell where it was going to end, and she feared its progression into the earth might be endless. But then, after only twenty-three steps, she came out onto level ground – to the start of a long tunnel that, fortunately for her,

did not seem to have any scary poorly lit side passages where vengeful ghosts from Hades might be hiding out.

Forcing herself to walk at a normal pace, instead of a) creeping along clinging to the wall like a spider, or b) running for her life, both of which seemed appealing, she made her way down the passage. The floor was earth. Here and there, fuzzy green moss flecked the stone walls. No sounds. No ghosts.

The passage turned a couple of sharp corners that momentarily took her breath away, but always continued as a single hallway, never veering off with the chance she might get lost. It wasn't scary, she told herself. It was simple. *Just keep walking. If you don't get somewhere soon, you can always turn around.*

She walked for what felt like hours, but must have been only minutes. She'd visited caves before, with her dad, and it amazed her how time seemed to fall away underground. As if it didn't exist, or had frozen. Above ground things were always changing and moving – traffic, people, events; below the earth they changed at a much slower rate, like the slow formation of a stalagmite, giving the impression that nothing was changing, and therefore that time was irrelevant.

She shivered in the coolness. She'd started to get that slightly claustrophobic sense that she might never get out of here, even though she knew that logically, there was no reason she wouldn't.

And then she came to her first and hopefully only choice. She rounded another corner. Straight in front of her, the passage continued a little ways before stopping dead-end at a door. To her right, it winged off to meet – she saw as she aimed her cell phone at it – another staircase.

Her instinct called for the staircase, but her curiosity claimed the door. She twisted the knob and opened it.

A closet. That's all it was. A narrow closet with shelves full of tall, thin spiral-bound books, some sagging with age. Feeling disappointed, Echo took out one of the books and flipped through it. Hymns. Church music. She shone her cell phone on each shelf in turn. It was all music.

Beneath the bottom shelf lay two cardboard boxes, one labeled "Songbooks" and the other labeled "More songbooks." Out of the need to be thorough, she slid them out from beneath the shelf and lifted the lid off the one labeled Songbooks. A haphazard collection of hymnbooks and songbooks of all sizes filled it. She capped the box, then turned to the one labeled More Songbooks.

This one was much more organized. It contained only wide, thin spiral-bound songbooks in two neat stacks. As she moved the box closer to herself, the stacks wobbled slightly, which seemed odd.

Curious, she lifted the stacks of songbooks out of the box and set them on the floor. With her cell phone turned on its side on the floor, the light did not illuminate the box fully, but she felt something soft and pillowy at the bottom. She picked up her phone and shone it on the box.

Lining the bottom were eight large plastic bags, flattened as much as they could be, filled with white powder.

Echo stared, hardly believing what she saw. She did not dare open the bags and touch or sniff the substance inside. She knew what was in them. Or at least she had an approximate guess. Cocaine, heroin, meth, take your pick. Her dad had educated her about drugs at a young age, but she didn't know enough to distinguish them from one another on sight, especially not

by the light of a cell phone. Her dad probably would have been able to identify the drug immediately. The thought sent a pang through her chest.

And then it occurred to her that if someone had left this here – even if it was just the local minister with a really bad habit – then that meant someone was coming back for it at some point. Which meant she shouldn't be here.

She packed up the songbooks as neatly as possible, stacking them with shaking hands. She slid both boxes back into their resting spots under the shelf, and shut the closet door. The click of the lock made her jump even though she knew what it was. She turned to the right and raced up the staircase.

At the top of the stairs, she stopped in front of another door. She dreaded seeing what was behind door number three. More drugs? The mob? A serial killer with a claw for a hand?

She opened the door a few inches and peeked out into another empty, carpeted hallway that smelled, if possible, mustier than the entire stone passageway had. She stepped into it and shut the door behind her. Her cell phone caught a dark stain on the ceiling that she hoped was just water.

She crept down this new hallway. At its end was another staircase. The only way to go was up. Taking a deep breath, she started up the carpeted stairs. One of them creaked under her feet.

The top of the staircase brought her out into a small alcove bounded by walls on three sides, and by a sort of wooden wall, hinged in places, on the side directly opposite her. Whereas the plaster walls rose up to meet the ceiling, the wooden wall did not, revealing beyond it the much higher vaulted ceiling of a sanctuary. Bright lights coming from somewhere in the sanctuary faintly illuminated the area in which she stood. Echo saw

something resembling a rectangular hot tub set into the floor in front of her, and realized she stood in a baptistery. The wooden wall was more like a giant folding screen designed to hide the baptistery from view when it wasn't being used.

She'd made it into St. Mark's.

She heard a man speaking, his voice booming through a microphone – “God does not intend us to be free of pain in this life, but to turn to Him and to each other when we are confronted by pain. For only through community can we experience the grace of God. Phillip Colt was a man who not only believed in this principle, he lived it.”

Although the wooden folding screen was higher than her head, Echo crouched behind it, at the edge of the baptistery, and settled in to listen to the mayor's funeral.