

Welcome to Camp Disaster

An Echo Shaw Mystery

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Chapter 15

Things That Disappear

“Let us now read from the book of Psalms, chapter 61,” said the minister. There was a moment of silence, then the whisper of pages as, Echo presumed, though she couldn’t see, he turned to the correct spot in his Bible. An echoing rustle told her the attendees were following suit. The minister cleared his throat, the sound echoing in the microphone, and began to read.

“Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you...”

Echo crawled forward, past the baptistery, toward the high wooden folding screen. She leaned against it and pressed her face to one of the cracks between two of the hinged panels. Through the crack she saw the minister, garbed in a floor-length white robe with a heavy black tunic-type garment over it. The priest, she corrected herself, recalling that Anglican ministers were referred to as priests. The man had gray hair, but she could only see him from the back and could not tell how old he was, other than that he was old enough to have gray hair. He held the Bible very close to his face as he continued to read. “For you have heard my vows, O God; you have given me the heritage of those who fear your name...”

The priest stood only a few feet in front of the folding screen, on a stage, and past him, sitting upright in the pews, sat the mourners in a sea of black. Echo

squinted, looking for Rayna, but she couldn't make out a section of the front pew on the right, due to the fact that the priest's robe was in the way.

After concluding the psalm and offering a brief prayer, the priest began to talk again, and this time he began to gently pace across the stage as he spoke. With his robe out of the way and her line of sight to the front right pew now unobstructed, Echo saw what she'd been looking for – two heads of auburn hair, their owners about the same height, sitting closely together. Rayna and her mother. It was too far away for her to make out their expressions beyond the fact that both looked solemn. She could not tell if either were crying, but based on what she knew of the two, she bet not.

Only half listening to the priest's speech, catching comforting phrases here and there, Echo reviewed what had just happened in the tunnel below the church. Someone was using the tunnel as a hiding place for a large quantity of drugs – but who? The priest, perhaps? She listened to his voice more carefully for a moment, trying to gauge if he sounded high. His voice sounded steady. His movements, from what she could see, looked purposeful and not as if he were lurching around the stage. If those were his drugs, he certainly wasn't on them right now.

That left the possibility that someone else within the church was hiding the drugs. The gardener or janitor, if the church had one, seemed the most likely culprit, since Echo had found the secret passageway through the stone shed, and the key had been attached to the bottom of the mop cart. But what was a mop cart doing in a garden shed? That seemed wrong. She thought again about the neatness of the shed. The mop, she recalled, had been stiff and dry, certainly not recently used, the cleaning supplies full. Almost as if the supplies were there for show. And then there was the dog chow, leading her to believe that someone had recently been inside the shed. The janitor, feeding his dog a snack? Why?

The priest's voice snagged her attention. "And now some people who were close to Mayor Colt will share their memories of him. I'd like to first invite Jackson Sterry, a close personal friend of the family."

Echo's skin prickled. She pressed one eye to the crack so she could get as close as possible. A man rose from the front row and walked up onstage. Tall, with a stocky build, he wore a black suit. She spotted a dark goatee as he took the microphone from the pastor, and then he turned his back to her and she saw only his legs and torso.

"Phillip Colt was a great businessman, an entrepreneur, and most importantly, a great friend and colleague," began Jackson, in a deep voice that carried the hint of a flat Midwest accent. "He had one of the sharpest minds I've ever known. He was someone you always wanted to have on your side – and when he wasn't on your side, boy did you ever regret it." This statement elicited some feeble chuckles from the audience. "I remember the first day I met Phill. He was twenty and had just come onto Elan as an account executive for one of our biggest clients. I was to be his assistant. I was twenty-five at the time, I'd been working at Elan for three years and I was wondering 'Who is this twenty year old kid who's taking over this account?' Phill walked in, introduced himself, and said, 'I bet you're wondering who this twenty year old kid is who's taking over this account.'" Again, a few faint chuckles from the audience, who seemed afraid to laugh too loudly or heartily. "And he said, 'I'm Phillip Colt, and my middle name is Qualified, and my other middle name is Like It or Not.'" The audience responded with muffled laughter.

After sharing a few more memories of how Phillip Colt had progressed from being a young, cocky account executive to being one of the most sought-after businessmen in New York, Jackson said, "You know, a few years ago our friendship reached a new level. In a move symbolizing the trust we had in each

other, Phillip honored me by making me executor of his will. ‘Jackson,’ he said, ‘if anything happens I know I can count on you to do the right thing.’ That meant a lot to me. And I would hope it means a lot to Phillip’s family as well, and that they, too, will trust me to do the right thing by Phillip, because that’s how he wanted it. Thank you.”

As he handed off the microphone, Echo’s lips parted in shock. That was a pretty bold move on Jackson’s part, using the funeral as a platform to tell Rayna and her mother to back off. She wondered how they were taking that. But through the crack she couldn’t make out their facial expressions.

After a few more friends and relatives spoke, the priest said, “And finally, we’ll hear from Phillip’s daughter, Rayna Colt.”

Rayna got up and walked onstage. She took the microphone from the priest. Her voice sounded hoarse, but not shaky. “My father wasn’t always around as much as he could have been, but he was a good guy. I believe that no matter what mistakes he might have made in his life. There are some people out there who are trying to take what’s not theirs and other people who decided my father had to die. I just want to say this, I know who you are. Don’t screw with my family.”

The church exploded into murmurs. Well, Echo had to hand it to her. Rayna had just called out the members of Elan in the middle of her father’s funeral. It was probably dangerous. It was undeniably stupid. But it was ballsy. Through the crack in the folding screen, Echo saw Rayna walk back to her seat, chin in the air, haughty as ever.

The priest came forward and coughed into the microphone a few times.

“Well,” he said. “Thank you, uh, for sharing those words. I’d like to now close in prayer.”

He bowed his head. Through the crack, Echo saw Rayna defiantly keeping her head up and her eyes open. She wasn't praying. She almost seemed to be looking at Echo. Quickly, Echo ducked away.

Whereas his opening prayer had echoed over a sanctuary still as a grave, the priest's closing prayer boomed over muffled conversational storms. The instant he said amen, the group's voices rose several decibels in agitated conversation.

As people rose and swarmed toward the aisles, trying to get out of the packed church, Echo started to crawl out of the baptistery and then remembered the only way to go was back through the tunnel. She shivered and looked for another way out. There wasn't one, but after a minute she risked pushing on the hinged panel at the end of the wooden screen. It slid outward easily like a door, and she realized that's probably what it was for. The priest, packing up the microphone, looked greatly started to see her, but no one else seemed to notice her sudden appearance onstage. "Oh," she said, "uh, I was just looking around, great baptistery. I think Mayor Colt would have really liked it." And then she dashed offstage before he could reply.

She paused on the last step of the stage and searched the aisles for Rayna. She caught sight of her sometime enemy slipping down the right side aisle, weaving through the crowds as easily as a snake. Echo pushed her way past the other funeralgoers and followed. Catching up to her near the door into the foyer, she grabbed Rayna's elbow. The girl whipped around.

"Sorry," said Echo. "Didn't mean to –"

Rayna's face contorted into fierce frown. She threw off Echo's grasp, and instead grabbed her by both wrists and dragged her out into the foyer. The crowds had started trickling into the foyer.

"What the hell are you doing here?" whispered Rayna. "Are you stupid?"

"I wanted to ask you about the stuff you gave us."

“Shut up,” huffed Rayna. “He’ll hear you.”

“Who?” Echo looked over her shoulder.

“Jackson Sterry, genius, didn’t you hear him speaking up there, rambling on about how great my dad was when he was responsible for getting him killed? Or were you only eavesdropping on my little speech?”

“No. I heard most of the funeral,” admitted Echo.

“How did you – never mind, I don’t want to know. We shouldn’t even be talking.”

“But I need to ask you about it,” said Echo. “The will, and the emails. And I found – ”

“Echo,” said Rayna, her green eyes sparking with fear. “Get out of here.”

And then she turned and slipped away, through the crowds. Echo watched her go. This time she knew it was the last time she’d see Rayna.

She sighed and then, with a pang of guilt, remembered that she’d ditched Eric in traffic and had been hiding in a church for the past hour. He’d either called the police or given her up for dead and gone back to camp.

She hurried outside. The sun had broken through the clouds, and after the darkness of the tunnel and the relative dimness of the light behind the folding screen, the natural light seemed sharp. Blinking, she looked up and down the street and immediately let out a sigh of relief. Eric was trudging up the sidewalk toward the church.

“There you are!” he said as she barreled toward him. “What happened to you?”

“I’m sorry,” she gasped. “You didn’t call the police, did you?”

He laughed. “I did the shopping. I figured you got into the funeral somehow.” He casually tossed his car keys in the air and caught them again. “So what happened?”

In a rush she told him about the underground tunnel, the drugs, the funeral, and Jackson's and Rayna's speeches. Eric whistled. "We should call the cops," he said. "We could get a sweet reward for finding the drugs, I bet."

"We?" said Echo archly, but then stopped and locked Eric's arm in a death grip. Ignoring his startled "ow," she said, "That's him. Jackson Sterry." A tall stocky man was walking out of the church, talking with another much shorter guy. They walked right past Echo and Eric, not even noticing them as they strode down the sidewalk.

Echo didn't dare speak with the mayor's possible killer, or at least the guy who'd hired someone to kill him, in close proximity. She looked at Eric, then nodded at Jackson and his friend. She raised her eyebrows at Eric and made a motion like she was driving a car.

"No way," mouthed Eric.

She rolled her eyes and mouthed, "Wimp."

Eric narrowed his eyes at her and shook his head.

With a sigh as if she were giving in, Echo slumped against Eric with her head on his shoulder. He glanced down at her, startled by the gesture, and in that moment she snatched the keys out of his hand and started to run down the street.

She heard Eric yell her name. Of course, in moments, he caught up to her and tackled her, almost pulling both of them into the road. Jackson Sterry and his friend glanced over their shoulders at the wrestling pair, as did several other funeralgoers who walked by them with disdainful expressions.

The two righted themselves, and Echo defiantly clutched the keys. Eric's hand closed over her fist. "Give them back."

"Help me follow them."

They stared at each other.

“Fine,” he said. “But if we get killed, I’ll come back as a ghost and tell my mother it was all your fault.”

“Come on, chicken breath,” she said. “Let’s go!”

“Chicken breath?” he said. “Is that supposed to be insulting?”

She playfully smacked his arm. They started down the street, trying to look casual but moving quickly, working their way through the crowds, which fortunately were lighter now – they had beat most of the funeralgoers out of the church, although a fair number of locals still clogged the sidewalks, probably hoping to get a glimpse of the procession to the cemetery.

At the intersection of the street where he’d parked, Eric told Echo to stay put, he’d bring the car around, and for her to stand on the street corner so she could watch where Jackson and his buddy went. She took out her cell phone and pretended she was listening to messages, all the while watching as Jackson and his friend got smaller in perspective. Three blocks up, at a light, she saw them turn left.

Eric pulled up a minute later, and she jumped in the car and directed him where to go. He sped to the light and turned left, narrowly missing an oncoming car. The driver honked.

As they cruised down the street, a car going the other direction passed them. Echo saw two men in the car; the one in the passenger seat had a goatee.

“It’s him,” she said, twisting in her seat to watch the car as it retreated in view.

“Why don’t you be more obvious?” said Eric. “Maybe wave at them.”

“Turn around and follow them.”

Eric obligingly flicked his turn signal at the end of the block, and turned right.

“What are you doing?” said Echo. “Pull a U-turn.”

“They just turned left. We’ll catch them at the next block. A U-ey is too obvious.”

Eric sped around the corner and pulled up to the intersection at Main Street. Sure enough, the car sped past them. He turned left and fell into line behind a red car that in turn drove behind Jackson’s black sedan.

“We’re going to lose them,” worried Echo.

“It’s safer to follow them farther behind,” said Eric. “Don’t you watch movies? Do you want them to slam into us or try to force us off the road?”

“For crying out loud.”

They followed Jackson’s car down Main Street. After several more blocks, they reached the end of Main Street, where the road continued out of town to merge with the highway. The only other option was to turn left onto a residential road. Jackson’s car turned left. The red car continued on. “They’re turning!” squealed Echo.

“I got it,” said Eric tightly.

“Not so fast, not so fast,” she gasped, as Eric lurched around the corner, speeding to catch up to Jackson’s car. “I thought you were afraid of them running you off the road.”

He tapped the brakes. “Could you calm down, please? You’re giving me a headache.”

“Sorry.” She slouched in her seat, so far that only her forehead peeked above the dashboard.

Eric glanced at her. “What are you doing?”

“Keeping out of sight in case they recognize me.”

He shook his head. “Don’t take this the wrong way, kiddo, but you’re starting to sound paranoid here.”

“You’re the one who thinks they’re going to run us off the road. Drive.”

“Okay, okay.” He lifted one hand in a gesture of surrender.

A few blocks later, Jackson’s car took a right, and so did Eric. Glancing in the side passenger mirror as they turned, Echo noticed another black car pulling in behind them. She hoped Jackson didn’t have a lot of friends coming with him.

They followed the black sedan as its driver took a series of turns down side streets, leading them to the edge of town. As Eric took another right behind Jackson’s car, Echo checked the side mirror again. The black car was some distance behind them, but it was still there.

“Someone’s tailing us,” she said.

“Are you kidding?” said Eric.

“Check your mirror.”

He did so. “Shit! We’re stuck between two of them. What do we do now?”

“Keep driving. What else?”

“They could block us in. The guy behind us could rear-end us. Haven’t you ever seen any movies?”

“Eric, just keeping going,” she said impatiently. “We’re getting closer. We have to find out where Jackson’s going.”

“If we get killed –”

“I know, you’ll come back as a ghost. He’s speeding up!” she warned, as Jackson’s car quickly sped up, putting a good twenty or thirty feet of distance between itself and Eric’s truck.

“Oh, you think so, huh,” muttered Eric. “I hope you have your seatbelt on, Echo.”

The truck lurched forward and then settled into a growling high speed. Echo’s eyes widened as she jerked forward and her seatbelt temporarily locked into place, the safety feature proof of Eric’s crazy driving. They cruised down the

road after Jackson's car. Behind them, the other black car was keeping pace. Echo could still see it in the side mirror.

The road led out of town and wound up and around hills. It seemed to be leading into the mountains at first, but then, after a few minutes, the black car ahead of them peeled left so quickly that Eric almost missed the turn. He slammed on the brakes and careened around the curve. Not obvious at all, thought Echo wryly. The second black car fell in behind them.

After several more minutes, Echo started to recognize her surroundings. As the car took another right turn and they followed it, she realized they were turning onto the street where Mayor Colt had lived. A few houses down from the mayor's house, the black sedan pulled up to the curb. Eric drove past them. "What are they doing now?" he asked, as he slowed down but kept moving.

Echo risked a glance over her shoulder. "They're getting out of the car. It looks like they're walking back toward the mayor's house. The second car's there too."

"Great," he said. "They probably have our license plate number by now."

"It's not like they can have us arrested for following them."

"You're right," he said. "They can just hunt us down and murder us in the middle of the night."

"You watch too many movies."

"You don't watch enough." He sighed. "Back to camp, eh?"

"No," she said, almost panicking. "We have to call the police about the drugs."

"Make sure you ask them about a reward," he said, as she pulled out her cell phone.

Then she realized she didn't know how to call the police. She only knew how to call 9-1-1. With a shrug, she dialed and asked the dispatcher to put her

through to the police. A moment later, an officer answered and asked what her emergency was.

“I found a huge stash of drugs underneath St. Mark’s,” she blurted.

“A stash?” The officer’s tone sounded incredulous. “All right, ma’am, let me get a few details from you. Are you in a safe location?”

As Eric turned onto another street, she checked the mirror. No sign of either black car. “Basically.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I’m safe,” she said. “My name is Echo Shaw. I’m sixteen years old and I work at Camp Kootenay but I’m from Denver, Colorado, and my dad is Steve Shaw of the DEA and he’s been kidnapped, and anyway, I don’t have time to tell you how I know this but he’s working on a drug case that –”

“Ma’am, ma’am,” interrupted the officer. “I’m going to have to ask you to repeat all of that slowly. What is your name?”

Echo rolled her eyes at Eric and answered the officer’s questions, meanwhile indicating with a lot of hand gestures and mouthed instructions that Eric should go back to St. Mark’s. The officer ended up agreeing to send someone out to St. Mark’s to meet with Eric and Echo, saying he’d have someone there within twenty minutes.

The front of the church was now deserted, the cars gone. When she and Eric walked up the steps of St. Mark’s for the second time, Echo stopped in shock. The officer standing there was none other than the same guy who’d checked her name on his clipboard earlier. Great. He’d never believe information from someone he would quickly realize had lied to him.

As Officer Forrester introduced himself, he frowned. “Were you just at the funeral?” he asked Echo.

“Yeah.”

“Rachel Colt, right?” he said with a smirk.

“No, sir,” she said meekly. “Echo Shaw.”

“Hmm.” He studied her before turning his sharp gaze to Eric. “And what’s your name? Or should I just call you Bono?”

“Eric Pattioni.” He hesitated, then added, “Officer.”

“So what’s the story here?” said the officer, taking out a notepad.

Echo launched into the story of how she’d gotten into the stone shed, ignoring the officer’s deepening frown when she mentioned that she’d slipped inside to get away from him at the funeral. She described finding the key, exploring the tunnel, and finding the drugs. She also explained how her dad had presumably been kidnapped and how she thought there was some connection between his case and the mayor’s death.

“So these drugs? You think they’re connected too?” Officer Forrester looked skeptical.

“They could be.”

“Well, this is a pretty wild story, but let’s see what we can find.”

They first went into the stone shed, which was still unlocked. When Echo bent to get the key from under the mop cart, however, her fingers encountered only plastic. She knelt and peered under the cart, and even borrowed the officer’s flashlight to better see beneath the cart. But the key was definitely gone.

“It’s not here,” she said, frustrated, standing back up.

Officer Forrester tried the door, which was locked, as Echo had known it would be. “Well, you came out into the church, right?” he said. “Let’s try to get in from the other side.”

They found the front doors of the church still unlocked. In the sanctuary the priest was pacing back and forth onstage, reading aloud from a set of notes. He seemed to be practicing for his Sunday sermon. He stopped in the middle of

reading a Bible passage and looked greatly startled at the sight of a police officer and two teenagers tromping down the aisle. “I’m Father Wallace,” he said after a moment. Echo could now see that he was probably in his late fifties. “What can I do for you?”

After introducing himself, Officer Forrester explained the possible existence of an underground tunnel and asked permission to look around, which the priest granted. He claimed not to know anything about an underground tunnel, but said he wouldn’t be surprised if there was one. “The settlers who built Crystalvale were fur traders, and they lived in harmony here with the First Nations people,” he said. “But then a new wave of settlers arrived because they’d heard rumors of gold in the hills. This was in the late 1800’s. They got some of the original settlers on their side and drove the First Nations people out. It was a pretty bloody mess. It’s always been rumored that there are a series of underground tunnels in Crystalvale – built either by the First Nations people to escape the white settlers, or by the white settlers to hide from the First Nations people, depending on who you ask. But it was basically to have a place of refuge from the fighting.” He paused. “You know, could I come with you? If there’s a tunnel under my church I’d sure like to know about it.”

“Be my guest,” said Officer Forrester. They walked onstage, and Father Wallace led them behind the folding screen into the baptistery area. “This door leads down to the basement,” he said, indicating the door through which Echo had come, “but we don’t use the basement anymore. It’s been condemned, actually.”

“Who uses the shed?” Echo asked. “The little stone building out behind the church?”

“Oh, that? That’s just where our custodian keeps his cleaning and gardening supplies.”

“When was the last time you saw the custodian?” said Echo, ignoring the officer’s disapproving look.

“Al? He quit a couple of weeks ago, actually. I’ve had volunteers doing the custodial work until I can find someone to take his place. But with money tight like it is, they might be volunteering for a long time.” He smiled a bit sadly.

“Did you say Al?” Echo’s heartbeat quickened. “What’s his last name?”

“Corrigan, I think. Why, you know him?”

“Um, no, I don’t think so,” she said quickly, with a glance at Eric. Officer Forrester was practically scowling by now, and suddenly she didn’t feel like explaining how she thought Al might be connected to the mayor’s death, at least not until they found the drugs and the officer thought she was reliable.

The four of them trooped down the stairs into the musty basement. Once there, Echo led them toward the door through which she’d come. She jiggled the handle.

The door was locked.

“That’s the door that used to lead outside,” said Father Wallace. “No one uses it. I’m not surprised it’s locked.”

“Do you have a key?”

“I’m not sure – maybe – ” He pulled a lanyard from beneath his robe, on which hung several keys. After trying three, the fourth clicked in the lock. The door swung open to reveal the landing and the beginning of the dark staircase up which Echo had come.

“I told you,” she couldn’t help saying to Officer Forrester.

Father Wallace wore a look of absolute shock. “This – what – I – This is it! One of those tunnels! No one’s ever found one! Do you realize what a treasure this is?”

“Let’s see about your stash first,” muttered Officer Forrester. He brought out a larger flashlight and swung its beam down the staircase. After a moment, as if to satisfy himself it was safe, he led the way down the stairs.

Echo directed them to the closet in which she’d found the drugs. She opened the door, and once again, Father Wallace looked absolutely floored at the find. As he exclaimed over the wealth of hymnbooks, Echo pulled out the box from beneath the bottom shelf and lifted the top. The stacks of songbooks lay there, but this time, she could see immediately, they went all the way to the bottom of the box. Stunned, she lifted them all out just to be sure. The box was empty now. No plastic bags. Not even the faintest dusting of white powder to give away what had been there before.

“This is from 1885,” marveled Father Wallace, peering with absolute delight at a rotting hymnbook. “The wonders of the Lord never cease.”

“Nor do the imaginations of children,” said Officer Forrester sternly.

“I’m not making it up,” she snapped. “There were drugs here two hours ago.”

He shrugged. “Let’s see the rest of the tunnel.”

They walked the length of the passageway to the second staircase, which led them up into the stone garden shed, as Echo had predicted. Father Wallace stumbled out into the shed looking as if he might never recover from his surprise, and moreover as if he had just seen the face of God. “This is remarkable,” he said. “Remarkable. We’ve got to open this up to the public. The parishioners would love this –”

“They’ll have to wait,” said Officer Forrester bluntly. “I’ll need to come back and conduct a more thorough investigation. Until the investigation’s over, this tunnel stays a secret.”

Father Wallace’s face fell, but he nodded.

“I’ll need to have you come down to the station and take your formal statements,” he added to Eric and Echo. “And Father, I’ll need to interview you as well.”

“We have to get back to camp,” protested Echo.

“Would you like me to call your boss and tell him where you are?” said Officer Forrester.

“No,” she sighed. “We’ll call him.”

She called camp and got the main office secretary, who promised to give Steve the message that Eric had a flat tire and they were getting it fixed in town. Then she, Eric, and Father Wallace all followed Officer Forrester down to the only police station in Crystalvale, where it took two hours for them to give their statements. Echo’s took the longest because the officer had all kinds of questions about her dad, his work at the DEA, her theories about the mayor’s death, and how she had managed to learn such facts. She had to think fast to keep Rayna out of her story; even to the police she didn’t feel it was safe to let on who had given her the Colt family’s secrets.

By the time she and Eric got back to camp, it was early afternoon. Officer Forrester had promised to take the necessary steps to investigate what had happened to her dad, but somehow she didn’t feel any better. She only had the sense that time was running out, and fast.

After agreeing they’d round up Neil and Molly later that night at dinner for a conference about today’s events, Echo and Eric parted ways. Echo didn’t have her schedule with her, so she headed toward Kootenay Lodge to check the master schedule the secretary always kept in her office.

As she walked up to the double doors, she saw that Vince was waiting for her. His arms were crossed. And he didn’t look happy.

“Hi,” she said uncertainly. “Are you, like, the door guard today?”

Her weak joke didn't impress him. Through gritted teeth, he said softly,
"What the hell did you think you were doing today?"