

Welcome to Camp Disaster

An Echo Shaw Mystery

© 2008 Amy Alexander

Chapter 16

A Second Saint

“What do you mean?” said Echo.

Vince shook his head. “Don’t play innocent, Nancy Drew. How did ‘let the authorities do their part’ translate to ‘follow Jackson Sterry’?”

She stared at him. “How did you know?” And then she remembered the second black car, the one that had pulled in behind them, seemingly out of nowhere. “You followed us.” Her cheeks heated as the embarrassment of getting caught started to sink in. “Do you think he figured it out?”

“I don’t know, let me think – you ripped around a corner in hot pursuit of his car, then rode his tail most of the way to the mayor’s house – yes, I think these facts might have tipped him off just a little.”

She recalled Vince’s car parking directly behind Jackson’s on the mayor’s street. “You stopped right behind Jackson. Didn’t he see you?”

“Yes.” Fear shot through her, but he went on, “You could say we’re acquaintances. Part of my cover. And I had to talk pretty fast to convince him you were just a couple of stupid teenagers out for a joyride. You could have gotten us both killed.”

Shame pitted in her stomach. She hated being scolded like a little kid. She hadn’t meant to put anyone in danger, at least, not anyone besides herself. Okay, and Eric, but he’d chosen to go along with her. Tailing Jackson had been pretty impulsive, but how else was she supposed to find her dad? The police and Vince

weren't moving fast enough. It almost seemed that they didn't realize the urgency of the situation. "Have you found out anything about my dad yet?"

"Just that he's here in B.C. Has he written you back?"

"Not since I checked this morning."

"Check again. And stay out of trouble." Vince's dark eyes narrowed at her.

"I will," she said softly.

He gave her a hard stare, as if reading her expression for any sign of rebellion. She tried to look appropriately repentant, and she really did feel guilty, but she had no intention of backing off. Vince obviously had no more information about her dad's whereabouts than she did. And she wasn't a girl who waited around for other people to get things done.

"I have to get to class," said Vince grimly, and hurried off.

Echo headed inside the lodge. She and Eric had left the supplies in Eric's truck, figuring they would unload everything later when Steve could tell them where to put it all. Since she hadn't yet seen Steve, and since she was already running so late to class, she figured a few more minutes wouldn't hurt. She needed to check her email to find out if her dad had written again.

In the staff lounge, as she signed into her email, her stomach clenched. She hated this sick feeling, the anxiety of waiting, instinct telling her there would be no message, but hope telling her there might be one anyway, there could be one...

She had one message. From Steve Shaw.

"Thank you," she whispered, clicking on the subject line – the blessed word "Hello" that meant her dad was, if not safe, still alive.

Like the last message, this one was short and cryptic.

*Hi Echo,
Just checking in. Hope all is going well at camp. Keep working hard, my
little “teenage bur.”
Love,
Dad*

“My little teenage bur?” What kind of backhanded term of endearment was that? She pictured herself as a small, prickly plant, a spiny sphere with a face, clinging to someone’s pant leg, and despite her fear, she laughed.

Okay, focus, she told herself. Time to decode this one. She realized immediately that unlike her dad’s last email, the first letters of each sentence did not create a message. “JHK” meant nothing, unless the letters referred to someone’s initials, but she found that unlikely as they didn’t instantly bring anyone’s name to mind. But she also knew that her dad, if he were really in trouble, would never waste an email just to say hello. There had to be something else here.

Was his admonition to keep working hard a clue, or simply his way of confirming that the email did indeed contain information? And why had he set off the words “teenage bur” in quotes? That meant something.

She scribbled TEENAGE BUR on a piece of scrap paper, then logged off. On her way to class, she called Miranda. “He wrote me again,” she said. “There’s some kind of clue in his email, but I don’t know what it is yet. I’m working on it.”

“Thank God,” sighed her stepmother. “I still haven’t heard from him.”

She remembered that Miranda had planned to contact the DEA and her dad’s partner. “Did you get ahold of Paul?”

“Not exactly. Sad news.” Miranda paused. “Paul’s dead.”

“What?” gasped Echo. Paul and her dad had worked together closely for ten years; she’d talked to him several times and he’d even been over for dinner once or twice. Despite the stress that his prematurely gray hair and deeply etched wrinkles suggested, he had a jovial sense of humor and a steadiness about him. He didn’t seem like the kind of person who *could* be dead. “Did the DEA say what happened?”

“Only the information that’s been released to the public already. His body washed up on a La Jolla beach a couple days ago. Some UCSD students found him. The authorities haven’t released the cause of death, but he didn’t drown. Someone killed him. I told the DEA you’d heard from your dad, and they wouldn’t say anything, of course, but I think they know he’s in trouble.”

Through her shock over Paul’s death, Echo started to absorb its implications. “Wait. Paul was actually in San Diego?”

“Yes. What do you mean, ‘actually’? That’s where the special op was based.”

“Not all of it.” She’d been so consumed by worry about her dad, not to mention the mayor’s funeral and discovering the drugs, that she hadn’t yet told Miranda what her dad’s first email had conveyed. She explained the coded message now, then added, “But I guess the DEA already knows if he’s in B.C.”

“It’s not that I don’t believe you,” said Miranda slowly. “You know your father better than I do in many ways. It just seems strange he’d be separated from Paul.”

“I know,” agreed Echo. Paul had been a special agent for the DEA, and he did most of the “handcuffing and hauling away of the bad guys,” as her dad liked to say, while her dad backed Paul up by gathering intelligence. He often managed an entire team of other research specialists and agents, and sometimes coordinated the logistics of drug busts as well, but he didn’t normally barge into someone’s

house with a warrant and a gun. Given his longtime partnership with Paul, it did seem odd that the two would be separated. Of course, the DEA wasn't obligated to pair Paul and her dad, but he'd stated before he left that he and Paul were both heading down to San Diego. So if they had been working on the same assignment, then this special operation had stretched from B.C. to San Diego. This might mean U.S. criminals were exporting drugs to Canada, or it might mean an international drug ring encompassing Canada and the U.S. and possibly, given San Diego's proximity to it, Mexico. That would explain why her dad, who didn't normally work outside of the U.S., had gone to B.C. – he'd needed to gather information from Canadian law enforcement.

She and Miranda said goodbye. Echo had to admit she was impressed with how her stepmother was handling this situation. She would have expected Miranda to break down and cry and huddle in a corner, and instead she had a steely strength in her voice, a determination to find Echo's dad – the same way Echo felt.

When she finally got to art class, she found Molly helping their girls construct African tribal masks out of poster board, paint, and glitter. Molly shot her a wide-eyed look as Echo sat down heavily in the child-sized seat next to her. Molly was swirling white glue in spiral patterns on one of the masks. After drizzling a final spiral, she handed the mask back to little Rachel. The girl dumped about ten pounds of blue glitter all over it, then gleefully shook off the excess, showering glitter down on the table. Molly coughed and wiped her nose. "Not so much next time," she cautioned, sputtering. To Echo she whispered, "What happened?"

Echo grabbed a blank mask cutout and began to draw so that it would look like she was doing something productive. She told Molly everything, from her trek through the underground passageway at St. Mark's to Miranda's news about the Paul's death.

Molly fell silent for a few moments. Echo glanced down at the haphazard doodles she'd produced and started to erase them.

“So your dad sent you another clue, right?” said Molly. Echo nodded. “Okay, I think there are three possibilities as to what it means. If this is an international drug ring, then they obviously have more dropoff locations than St. Mark's. So it could be the location of another hiding place. Or, it could be a clue to where he's being held. Or it could be a clue to the name of a person who's involved with the drug ring. Which do you think is the most likely?”

“One or two, probably,” said Echo with a shrug, “but I haven't figured out the clue yet. Here.” She pulled the piece of scrap paper out of her pocket and flattened it out on the table. She'd had some additional time to think it over on the walk to the arts and crafts building. “I think it might be an anagram.”

“Wait, don't tell me,” said Molly. “That's where every letter stands for something?”

“No, that's an acronym.”

“Is it where the word or phrase reads the same backwards or forwards?”

“That's a palindrome.”

“I fail,” sighed Molly.

“It's where the letters are scrambled and rearranged to spell something else. You just have to unscramble them.”

“Oh, is that all,” said Molly dryly.

While their girls worked on, content to cover their masks and themselves in paint and glitter, Echo and Molly puzzled over the words TEENAGE BUR. On the back side of her mask, Echo wrote down the possibilities. After awhile, the list had grown fairly long, and it included such winners as:

GREAT EBUN

A TUBE GENRE
 A BEGUN TREE
 BETA NEE RUG
 BEATEN URGE
 EATER BE GUN
 AGE BURN TEE
 ABET ERE GNU
 A BEER EN GUT

“You don’t know anyone with a beer gut, do you?” asked Molly hopefully.

“No.” Echo sighed.

“What about the word ‘get’? We haven’t used that yet.”

They tried additional variations:

GET A RUNE BE
 GET BEN A RUNE
 GET ARE BUEN
 RUN BEN TEGE

“And I suppose you don’t know anyone named Ben Tege, either,” said Molly.

“No, but wait.” Echo looked at the phrase “GET ARE BUEN.” Get a r...wasn’t there a word that started with R, the name of some sandwich?

She wrote:

GET A REUBEN

Then she double-checked that she'd used all the letters in TEENAGE BUR and no additional ones. Yep, GET A REUBEN worked.

“Get a Reuben?” said Molly. “As in the sandwich? What does that mean?”

“I have no idea,” said Echo. “But it’s better than a beer gut, isn’t it?”

“I guess,” said Molly doubtfully. “Where do you get a Reuben? Why would your dad tell you to do that?”

“I don’t know. Leah?” said Echo, turning to the art teacher. “Is there anywhere in town you can get a Reuben?”

The woman looked up from where she was helping Julie carefully layer pink glitter over purple paint. “Sure,” she said. “Martha’s, on Eighth. Only place in town that serves them. Best Reubens in B.C. Except maybe my uncle’s deli in Victoria.”

“Seriously? This place is famous or something?” said Echo.

“You could say that. Why, you got a craving for a Reuben? Sick of the cafeteria food?”

“Friday night off, you know,” said Echo quickly, shooting Molly a look. “A bunch of us are going out for a late dinner. We were trying to think of something different.”

“Martha’s is a good one, then. The sauerkraut is a special in-house recipe. To die for.”

“Mmm,” said Echo. She wasn’t crazy about sauerkraut, but she did want to know why her dad had told her to get a Reuben. It was the only message that made any sense at all, especially given what Leah had just said about Martha’s.

That evening, Echo, Molly, Neil, and Eric piled into Neil’s car and they drove to Crystalvale in search of Martha’s. On the way Echo filled Neil in on the latest details, and the four of them debated whether or not Jackson himself had

killed the mayor, or whether the mysterious Al, possibly affiliated with St. Mark's, had done it.

They found Martha's on the corner of Eighth Street and Woodland Avenue. As she got out of the car, Echo studied the striped green and white awning, which shaded sidewalk tables in front of a brick building that looked every bit a New York deli. Above the awning, a large white sign with green lettering read St. Martha's Cafe.

"*Saint* Martha's?" she said, as they walked inside.

"She's considered the patron saint of waitresses," said the smiling hostess, who had heard Echo's comment. "Four of you?"

She picked up four menus and led them to a booth. Echo followed in a daze. First St. Mark's, now St. Martha's. She suddenly wished she had a stronger religious upbringing to help her understand this one. Her dad only took her to church twice a year, at Christmas and Easter. They usually spent Easter with her dad's sister in Phoenix and attended services at her church, a huge evangelical church that seated two thousand in its carpeted auditorium. On Christmas, they did a candlelight service at the local Episcopal parish, a tiny building with stained glass windows, attended mostly by retirees. It was at the Episcopal church, she now remembered, that she'd learned Anglican ministers were called priests; she'd once picked up an informational brochure in the lobby that talked about the Episcopal tradition and how it constituted the American branch of Anglicanism. Regardless, she had no education about the saints. She couldn't remember anyone at either church mentioning them.

As her friends studied their menus, Echo folded and unfolded hers, playing with the edges. She already planned to order a Reuben; she wasn't going to risk missing anything by not following her dad's instructions to the letter, even if he'd

only meant to direct her to St. Martha's Café. "You guys know anything about Saint Martha?"

"I do," volunteered Molly. "I grew up Catholic."

"No way," said Eric, "did you go to Catholic school?"

"For grade school, yeah, I'm at the public high school now. Anyway, Saint Martha was Mary's sister. You know the story of Mary and Martha, right?"

Echo shook her head.

"Mary and Martha were sisters and they invited Jesus over to their house for dinner. Mary sat at Jesus' feet —"

"Why his feet?" put in Eric. "Weren't they all dusty and stuff?"

"I don't know, that's just what the Bible says." Molly shook her head, her expression as long-suffering as a saint's. "Anyway, Mary hung out with Jesus the whole time talking to him, and Martha got upset because she was doing all the work getting ready for dinner and stuff. But Jesus basically told Martha she should stop stressing and just chill."

"Ah yes," said Neil. "'Just chill,' that is one of the more famous quotes of Christ."

"Oh, hush," said Molly. "You know what I mean. Anyway, the hostess was right, Saint Martha's the patron saint of waitresses and food service and stuff. I guess because she was so service-oriented."

"It's just weird," said Echo. "There were drugs under St. Mark's and now my dad sends me to St. Martha's."

"You think there are drugs here too?" said Eric eagerly. Somehow she suspected he was thinking about that reward that had eluded them this morning.

"I don't know. I sure don't see anything around here that looks like the entrance to another secret tunnel." Echo glanced around the room. A low brick ledge, decorated with a series of glass vases containing a single silk flower each,

ran the perimeter of the room. Booths butted up against this wall, while round tables with cushioned chairs covered the middle of the room. Large windows provided a view of the buildings across the street and the mountains in the distance. At the front, where they'd entered, stood the hostess station topped with a cash register. Toward the back, a sign for restrooms hung between two doors. To their left, swinging double doors apparently led into the kitchen; Echo saw a waiter, his arms piled with plates of food, back cautiously through the doors. But that was it.

After a few minutes, the waitress arrived to take their orders. Everyone ordered Reubens; Neil asked for two. "And a chocolate milkshake," he added. The waitress smiled and scribbled it down.

As the waitress walked off, Echo saw the front door open. A short balding guy walked in and approached the hostess. He said something to her that Echo couldn't hear, and she smiled and nodded. She turned and headed toward the kitchen. The man checked his watch. He looked incredibly familiar, and as he glanced around impatiently, Echo realized why she recognized him – he'd driven Jackson Sterry's car this morning.

She slid down in her seat, even though she was facing toward the front of the room and had nowhere to hide from the man's gaze if he should happen to look her way. "Eric, don't turn around," she said quietly. "The guy who drove Jackson's car this morning is here."

Eric paled. Following suit, he slid down in his seat and leaned against Molly's shoulder, hiding behind her. "Save me," he joked, but his eyes looked wide and wary.

With one hand shielding her face, Echo peered between her fingers at Jackson's driver. He checked his watch again and crossed his arms. Definitely in a hurry, she thought.

The hostess returned a minute later with two large white carryout boxes, each in a translucent plastic bag. She handed them to the man, then said something that was inaudible because of the music and conversation, and expectantly put a hand on the cash register. The man said something in response. He set down the bags, took out his wallet, and handed the hostess a slip of paper. She laughed and waved her hand. The man smiled back. He picked up the two bags again and walked out the door.

When the door had swung shut, Echo slowly pulled herself upright. Eric continued to huddle against Molly. “Why didn’t he pay for that stuff?”

“He had a coupon?” suggested Neil lightly. “Come on, you don’t think they’re hauling drugs around in takeout boxes.”

“Yes,” she said. “I do.”

She slid out of the booth.

“Where are you going?” said Molly.

Echo didn’t answer. She hurried up to the hostess.

“Can I help you?” said the woman.

Echo’s heart pounded. “Uh, that guy who just came in? The one who picked up takeout?”

“Yes?” said the hostess.

“You, uh, you do takeout, right?”

She frowned. “Of course we do.”

“Great,” said Echo. “So I was wondering if I could get takeout. I mean, the Reuben’s great, I just want a little something to go, you know?”

“Certainly,” said the hostess, her expression clearing of confusion. “What would you like to order?”

“Uh, the same thing that guy had.”

“I’ll need you to be more specific,” she said. “We only write customers’ names on the takeout boxes, we don’t write down what they order, so I have no idea what he got.”

“Oh. Uh, well, is the manager here?”

“Yes, he is.” The hostess looked wary again.

“Could you just tell him – ” Echo paused. “Tell him I’m picking up Jackson’s usual? He’ll know what I’m talking about.” Oh, God, what was she doing? She had no idea if this would work. What if the manager wanted her ID or something?

“Certainly.” The woman frowned at Echo, obviously not quite trusting her, before turning and walking toward the kitchen.

The instant the hostess disappeared through the double doors, Echo dashed back to her booth. “What are you doing?” whispered Neil.

“No time to explain.” Her mind raced. “Look, here’s the plan. If the hostess comes back with the takeout boxes, I’ll leave and meet you guys at the car. If she won’t give them to me, then when she comes back, Molly, act like you’re choking, and Eric, call for help. Try to get everyone out of the kitchen. Then Neil, run back into the kitchen and look for more takeout boxes. Grab a couple if you can.”

Her friends stared at her. “You are certifiable, girl,” said Molly.

“I know, but just do it, okay?” Echo jogged back to the register. She’d no sooner gotten there than the kitchen doors swung open, and the hostess re-emerged with a large man in tow. Oh crap. She had brought the manager with her.

Tall with a pot belly, the man had thinning hair and beady pale blue eyes. As he approached, he wiped his large, meaty hands on his apron. “I’m Pete,” he said, his tone abrupt. “What can I do for you?”

Echo shot a quick glance at her booth. Molly, Eric, and Neil sat frozen, watching her. “Uh, yeah, hi,” she said with a bright smile, extending a hand. The manager didn’t take it, and she dropped it abruptly. “I’m here to pick up some takeout for Jackson.”

“I see.” He looked her up and down in a way that made her shiver – not as if he were checking her out but as if he were looking for holes in her statement, trying to see through her, or perhaps as if he were memorizing her every feature so he’d be able to find her later and chop her into little pieces. “And your name is?”

“He told me to give you no more information than that. I’m sorry,” she said firmly, casting a glance at her friends. *This is your cue to start faking a crisis, guys, get on it!*

“Well, we have a small problem then,” said the manager. “Because Jackson didn’t schedule anything to be picked up.”

Damn. Echo stared at him, wondering what she was going to say now. Her mind went blank.

“Help!” yelled Eric suddenly. “Help, she’s choking!”

Every head in the restaurant turned toward them. Molly was doing a believable imitation of choking, grasping her throat and gesticulating wildly to indicate she couldn’t breathe. “Someone!” yelled Eric. “Does anyone know the Heimlich?”

The manager swore and hurried over to the booth, followed by the hostess and Echo. As a crowd of diners gathered, Neil ran toward the kitchen, threw open the doors, and yelled, “Someone help, there’s a girl choking out here!”

“I’m calling 9-1-1,” yelled one of the diners, whipping out a cell phone. Oh, no. Echo hadn’t even thought that someone might call an ambulance. But then again, the more commotion, the bigger the distraction.

Two cooks in white aprons barreled through the kitchen doors, and Echo saw Neil slip inside.

Meanwhile, Eric and several other diners had surrounded Molly. One, a woman, was saying, “Can you cough it out, honey? Can you just go like this?” and pounded on her own chest a few times to demonstrate. Molly shook her head. Her face was actually turning red, and for a second Echo wondered if her friend was really choking.

“Excuse me!” yelled one of the cooks, a burly guy, pushing through the crowd. He pulled Molly to her feet, slid his arms around her waist, locked his hands together, and thrust them inward and upward. Molly let out a forceful gasp and spit out a piece of sandwich that she must have been holding in her mouth. Then she sank to her knees, gasping, tears rolling down her cheeks. The woman patted her hand sympathetically, obviously not realizing that Molly was crying from the painful Heimlich and not from the experience of having almost choked to death.

As Eric shook the cook’s hand and thanked him profusely, Neil hurried out of the kitchen. In the commotion, no one noticed. He rushed over to the group and made a big show of hugging Molly and being very grateful that she hadn’t died.

It took a couple of minutes for the restaurant to calm down. People congratulated the cook and asked Molly if she was really okay. Pete got sidetracked trying to usher diners back to their seats, and Echo hoped he would forget about their little conversation from before. Neil nodded at her significantly, meaning he had found something, and her heart leaped.

The next second, it leaped out of her throat as Pete lumbered back over to their booth. He frowned deeply at her. “Now. What’s all this about Jackson?”

“Oh, right,” said Echo. “So, uh, you’re sure you have no takeout for Jackson Smith?”

“You said Smith?”

“Yeah, he told me not to give you any more information because he thought his wife would find out. It’s a surprise for her birthday. They sent me to pick up the takeout. I’m their nanny.” This story made no sense, but it seemed to suitably confuse Pete.

“What did you say he ordered?”

“Oh, two Reubens and a, uh, chocolate cake,” she improvised.

“We don’t sell chocolate cake,” he said, staring hard at her.

“Oh, geez, I’m sorry. He was probably mistaken. Thanks anyway.”

“Wait a second,” said Pete, grabbing her arm. In her ear, he said, “I don’t know what you’re playing at, but may I kindly suggest you get the hell out of here.”

“Right,” said Echo, tugging her arm free. “Thanks. Hey guys?” she said to her friends, raising her eyebrows significantly. “We gotta jet. Now.”

“Okay, great, thanks again,” said Eric to the crowd in general. The diners began to disperse.

In the distance, a siren wailed. Echo grabbed Neil’s hand, and the four of them rushed out of the restaurant, with Pete and the hostess watching them go.

Outside, they ran for Neil’s car. As they peeled away from the curb, Echo saw an ambulance pull around the corner. Just in time. The EMTs would have wanted to verify Molly was okay, giving Pete additional time to ask Echo questions she couldn’t answer.

Neil took a few rapid turns, then slowed to a normal pace as he continued driving along one of the side streets. “I found something in the kitchen,” he announced. “They had a whole shelf of takeout boxes. I looked in a couple and they were filled with bags of white powder.”

“Why didn’t you grab one?” Echo demanded.

“Oh, I don’t know, because they might have noticed me leaving with a box full of their drugs. There wasn’t time.”

She pulled out her cell phone. “We have to call the police.”

“Should I stop?” Neil slowed.

“No, keep driving,” she said. “We don’t know if someone’s following us.”

Once connected to a police officer, she gave her name and reported what she and her friends had discovered. “The guy left with two large takeout boxes and he didn’t pay for them. And then my friend Neil went back into the kitchen and there were more drugs there in takeout boxes.”

There was a pause. “I’m sorry,” said the officer. “Did you say the drugs were in *takeout boxes*?”

“Yes.” Was that so hard to believe?

“Just a minute, ma’am,” said the officer.

Echo heard a click, then cheesy elevator music crackled down the line. She pulled her phone away from her ear in surprise. “I’m on hold! With the police. They can’t put you on hold. What if someone was robbing me?”

“But they’re not,” said Molly reasonably. “I’m sure they don’t put you on hold in an actual emergency.”

A minute later, the officer picked up again. “It appears from our records that you recently made a previous report about finding drugs in another location?”

“Yes, St. Mark’s,” said Echo impatiently.

“Our report states that the officer was unable to locate the narcotics.”

“Yes, but they were *there*,” she said. “Just not when he got there. Someone moved them.”

“I see. Ma’am, let me ask you, do you know anyone who works at St. Martha’s Café?”

“No, I don’t see –”

“Anyone you might have something against?”

“You think I’m doing this to get them in trouble? Are you even legally allowed to ask me that?”

“Ma’am, we simply have to have reasonable suspicion to conduct a search of the premises. An inappropriate search – ”

“I’ll tell you what’s inappropriate,” she sputtered. “It’s you accusing me of lying. You’re obligated as an officer of the law to check out any suspicious activity regardless of your personal feelings about it. That’s your duty to the queen. So get your Mountie uniform out here because I’m telling you, there’s a drug operation going down at St. Martha’s.”

A moment later, she hung up. “We’re meeting an officer down at the café in half an hour.”

“Duty to the queen?” teased Neil. “Where’d you come up with that line?”

“I had to say something to guilt trip him, didn’t I?”

Not wanting to risk running into Pete or the ambulance crew, they drove around for twenty-five minutes before heading back to the café. They met the officer outside, and he talked to them for a few minutes to verify the details of their story. He seemed less sure, now that four people were telling him the same thing, that Echo had been lying.

“All right,” he said. “Please wait in your car. I’ll want to take your statements afterwards.”

“Should we come with you?” said Echo eagerly.

“Absolutely not,” he said. “Do not get out of your car for any reason. Drugs make people very unstable. You don’t know who’s in there or what they’re on.”

Disappointed, Echo followed her friends back to Neil’s car, where they waited in tense silence until the officer finally emerged. He walked over to the car,

and Neil rolled down the window. “Meet me down at the station,” the officer said simply, and gave Neil directions from the cafe.

At the station, the officer gathered the four of them in a room. Its harsh fluorescent lights and long table made Echo think of interrogation scenes she’d watched on TV. The officer fanned a stack of forms out on the table and studied them for a minute, like a hand of cards. Then he told them he’d found no narcotics at St. Martha’s – simply a collection of takeout boxes containing various meals, labeled with customers’ names. “I don’t know what you saw,” he said, “but I think you were mistaken.”

“We weren’t,” said Echo firmly.

“I’ll take your statements now. Please think very carefully if there is anything you’d like to amend. Any details you might have been wrong about.”

“You don’t believe us,” she said.

He looked weary. “Ma’am, I’m simply telling you what I found. And I should point out that since you” – he glanced at Neil – “went poking around in the kitchen, technically, the manager has cause for complaint, not the other way around.”

An hour later, the officer finished taking their statements, and they drove back to camp. In the back seat, Molly and Eric were quiet. Echo leaned against the passenger-side window, defeated. They’d been so close to finding something, and now any progress they might have made had been cancelled out by the drugs disappearing again. She knew Neil probably couldn’t have escaped with a takeout box, but she still wished he’d tried, because the hard evidence would have sold their story. And now the drugs had been moved to who knew where, with many more hiding spots potentially out there – perhaps even named after saints – and she had no way to find her dad and she didn’t know how long his kidnappers would keep him alive.

“You know what’s weird,” said Neil suddenly. “The takeout boxes I saw were blank. They didn’t have names.”

Echo lifted her head. “Why didn’t you tell the police that?”

“Because the guy didn’t believe us anyway. I don’t see what difference it would have made.”

“How did they know the police were coming?” said Eric from the back seat. “Both times we’ve called the police the drugs have been gone by the time they got there.”

“We were acting kind of suspicious,” pointed out Molly. “They probably realized something was up and moved the drugs out.”

Echo leaned against the window again, watching how the trees and bushes by the side of the road seemed to flash by while the mountains in the distance never appeared to get any closer. Their behavior tonight might have tipped off Pete and prompted him to move the drugs out, but that didn’t explain how someone else had known to move the drugs out of St. Mark’s. And, she realized, it had only taken them five minutes to drive down to the police station from the cafe. Why had the officer waited a half hour to send someone out? Granted, Crystalvale probably only had a few full-time officers, but it wasn’t exactly rife with criminal activity either. She would have understood if the officer had had to secure a warrant first, but she hadn’t seen a piece of paper in his hand. Not that he would have shown her a warrant – but she recalled the other officer simply asking the priest for permission to search the church – and this time the officer had gotten there almost *too* fast to have been doing a bunch of preliminary paperwork.

What if the police and the drug ring were working together?

“We have to set a trap,” declared Echo.

Neil shot her a worried look, but she ignored it and, turning to face the back seat, told her friends her plan.