

Welcome to Camp Disaster

An Echo Shaw Mystery

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Chapter 17

The Final Riddle

At seven-thirty Saturday evening, the sun began to drop behind the mountains, leaving the sky a pale blue that transitioned into pink and gold. Dinner had ended half an hour ago, and campers and counselors had moved outside to play and enjoy the fresh air. Campers spread out across the soccer field for two games, each game taking up half the field. Other campers lined up on the sidelines, cheering on their friends and waiting for their turn. The shouts of a nearby sand volleyball game echoed through the trees, and a few campers and counselors trickled by on an evening walk.

Echo stood on the sidelines, her voice rooting for her girls as they played against another cabin, while her mind wandered to Crystalvale. Somewhere on Seventh Street, Eric was hiding out, waiting for the moment when a phone call from Echo would send the police to check out possible criminal activity at a local pub. She checked her watch. She would make the call in four minutes.

At first it had been difficult to convince her friends of her plan, which they'd deemed insane. But eventually she'd convinced them that the only way to find her dad was to obtain solid evidence of a drug ring operating in and around Crystalvale. And they needed to know whether they could trust the police or not.

Last night, when they'd returned to camp, the four friends had researched businesses in Crystalvale, looking for anything connected to the names of saints. Only St. Mark's and St. Martha's had turned up, but after awhile, Neil had located

a pub on Seventh Street called the Monk's Habit. It seemed saintly enough to be a possible hiding place for drugs.

This time, they'd decided that only one of them would go into town to investigate the pub. On a Saturday night, Steve would certainly notice if four counselors disappeared, not to mention the two abandoned cabins. They'd elected Eric because he was 19, the legal drinking age in Canada, and was the only one who could actually go inside the pub.

So, during dinner tonight, against all rules, Eric had sneaked out of the cafeteria and driven into Crystalvale. At 7:35, Echo would call the police to report suspicious activity and possible drug use at the pub. Eric, who'd synchronized his watch with hers, planned to watch the pub staff to see if they would begin moving any merchandise out of the pub – theoretically, drugs.

He would also note a description of the officer who eventually arrived to investigate the report. So far Echo had personally encountered three police officers – the two who'd guarded the church doors at the mayor's funeral, one of whom had later come back to investigate the tunnel at St. Mark's; and the officer who'd come to check out St. Martha's last night. Searching the Nelson Police Department's web site last night, she'd learned that a total of eight officers and one police chief were stationed in Crystalvale, so the number of suspects within the department was fairly limited. She doubted that all nine officers were involved in the drug ring, but it was possible.

At 7:34, Echo left the soccer field, followed the trail into the woods about twenty feet for privacy, and pulled out her cell phone. When her watch read 7:35, she dialed. She'd gotten the police department's number off the web site, so she no longer needed to call 9-1-1. Her call went straight through.

“Crystalvale Police, Officer Chambers speaking,” said a gruff male voice. She didn't recognize the voice or the name.

“Yes.” She cleared her throat and tried to deepen her voice just a bit so she’d sound older. “My friend and I just left the Monk’s Habit Pub on Seventh Street, and we saw something strange that I feel I should report. We were just coming out of the women’s bathroom and we saw a man standing by the men’s bathroom. He was wiping his nose and putting something back into his coat pocket that looked like a little bag of white powder.” She and Molly had concocted this story together. They’d decided that reporting a single drug user would make it less likely that the police would tie this story to Echo’s previous reports, and also, they hadn’t wanted to get the pub in trouble in case the bartenders were innocent.

“What did the man look like?” asked the officer.

“He was Caucasian. Short and balding. Pudgy with dark eyes,” she said, using the description she and Molly had decided on.

“And did this man say anything to you or do anything else?”

“No, he just glared at us and went back to the bar. My friend and I left. We didn’t feel comfortable sticking around.”

The officer gathered a few more details. Echo gave him her fake name, Katie Thomas, and told the officer she and her girlfriend went to college at Oregon State University and had come up for a weekend vacation. When he asked her address, she was ready with the address of a residential street in Corvallis near Oregon State that she and Molly had pulled from an online map. She’d had to make up the house number, but she didn’t think the officer would check her story that closely. She gave her real cell phone number in case the police department had caller ID or could trace phone calls, and prayed they wouldn’t take the trouble to find out Steve Shaw owned the cell phone.

“All right,” said the officer finally. “We’ll call you if we have further questions.”

“Are you sending someone down there?” she said, almost panicking.

“We’ll look into it, ma’am. Thank you for calling,” he said, politely but firmly.

Echo hung up in surprise. The officer hadn’t stated when the police would arrive at the pub, nor had he asked to meet her there. Of course, she’d previously reported seeing a stash of drugs in a particular location, and at St. Mark’s she’d needed to be present to show the officer the entrance to the secret tunnel. A simple description of a person was easier to investigate, and the officer could always ask her to point out the suspect in a lineup later on. The police probably liked to keep innocent witnesses away from the scene of a crime.

In fact, now that she thought about it, it seemed odd that both times previously, the police had asked to meet her and her friends at the locations where they’d reported seeing the drugs. Surely they could have gathered enough details from her phone report to secure a warrant and go search St. Mark’s and St. Martha’s alone. Yet in the case of St. Mark’s, the officer hadn’t asked enough questions over the phone to figure out where the secret tunnel was. But, Echo felt now, he should have.

So why the big show of meeting her in person and, at St. Mark’s, actually taking her along to look for drugs that were no longer there?

Unless the police had wanted her to doubt what she and Neil had seen. And unless they’d wanted to prove that they were the good guys. This theory made sense if the police and the drug ring were working together.

Echo pocketed her phone. She’d done her part. Now came the difficult task of waiting for Eric to come back to camp.

Instead of heading back to the soccer field, she continued down the trail, toward the staff lounge. This morning when she’d checked her email, her dad

hadn't written her back, but she thought he might have by now. She prayed he would. Anything he could say to tell her he was still alive meant the world to her.

Fifteen minutes later, she logged into her email, and her heart leaped when she saw a note in her inbox from Steve Shaw. She clicked on the email and read his most confusing message yet:

Echo,

Here's your final riddle:

I am the beginning of sorrow, and the end of sickness. You cannot express happiness without me, yet I am in the midst of crosses. I am always in risk, yet never in danger. You may find me in the sun, but I am never out of darkness.

Saints protect you,

Dad

Okay. The closing, "saints protect you," seemed obvious enough – a clue that the names of the saints signaled various drug dropoff locations. And since he'd mentioned this for the second time (the first being his previous email sending her to St. Martha's Cafe), she wondered if he were being held captive at one of those locations.

But the rest of it? She had no idea. And what did he mean by her final riddle? Was he not allowed to write her again? Was he about to be killed?

She printed out the email and folded up the piece of paper, then tucked it into her pocket. She patted her pocket gently. Then she hurried back to the soccer game.

On the sidelines, she spotted Molly talking to Neil. Their girls were still playing despite the setting sun, and his boys had joined a second soccer game. She hurried up to her friends, pulling to a stop so suddenly that she almost stumbled into both of them. “He wrote me,” she said, out of breath. She took the printed email from her pocket and unfolded it to show them. Molly and Neil bent their heads close to hers, reading the note.

“I don’t mean to scare you,” said Molly, “but this sounds kind of bad.”

Echo nodded. “We have to figure out what it means. Because if anyone’s going to rescue my dad, I think it’s going to have to be us.”

“Us?” said Molly incredulously.

“Well, the police sure aren’t doing anything about it, and if one of them is in on the drug ring, I don’t want them helping. Whoever’s got him might just kill him faster.”

“You really think they’d kill him?” said Neil.

Echo glanced down. “He has a lot of information about this drug ring. I don’t see why they’d let him go.”

“Then why are they keeping him alive?” said Neil. “I don’t mean to sound harsh, Echo, but if they wanted to just kill him, they would have already done it. He must know something he isn’t telling them.”

She hadn’t thought of it that way, but it made sense. She nodded. “I just hope he keeps not telling them.” She didn’t want to consider the methods that a drug ring might use to extract information from a DEA agent.

“Okay, let’s figure this out,” she said, turning her attention to the piece of paper in her hands. “The beginning of sorrow and the end of sickness. It sounds like...” She didn’t want to say it.

But Molly voiced it for her. “Death.”

“How can you not express happiness without death?” said Neil, pointing to the next sentence.

“Maybe because sorrow’s the opposite of happiness?” suggested Echo. “You know, the whole idea that you can’t appreciate the good without the bad. And ‘in the midst of crosses’ – doesn’t that sound like a cemetery? A cemetery goes with the saints theme, close enough anyway. Maybe they’re holding him at a cemetery. Or maybe they’re using a cemetery as another drug dropoff point.”

“Eww, they could be using coffins,” groaned Molly. “Like burying coffins with drugs in them and then digging them up later.”

“I don’t know,” said Neil thoughtfully. “The next part doesn’t really fit with the cemetery idea. How is a cemetery always in risk and never in danger? And what about the sun-darkness part?”

“It’s the headstone on a grave!” said Echo. “The beginning of sorrow – obviously a grave marks the death of someone, which makes a person sorrowful. The end of sickness – gravestones say how people died.”

“What about the happiness part?” said Neil.

“I’m getting to that. Gravestones have, what are they called? Epitaphs. Nice sayings about people, you know, ‘beloved mother’ or whatever. You can’t express those happy thoughts without the gravestone because you have to etch the words onto them. Being in the midst of crosses is pretty obvious. I’m not sure about the risk-danger part, except maybe that gravestones are at risk of being dug up, like if there are grave robbers, but they’re not in any actual danger because they’re just pieces of stone. And the sun can shine on them, but they’re always partially in darkness because they’re partially buried in the earth.”

Molly and Neil exchanged glances. “I don’t know,” said Neil. “It seems like a stretch.”

“It has to be,” said Echo, hearing the desperation in her own voice. “The drug ring is either using headstones as a dropoff location or they’re holding my dad at a cemetery. And I think what he’s saying is that he’s going to be killed soon if we don’t do something about it.” Her vision blurred.

“Okay,” said Molly gently, putting her arm around Echo. “Let’s think about this. We need to find a cemetery, and there can’t be many of them in town. Was there a cemetery next to St. Mark’s?”

“I didn’t see one.” She swiped at her eyes.

“Let’s go to the staff lounge and take a look online. Neil, you can watch our kids for a minute, right?” At least a dozen other counselors and two teachers also stood on the sidelines, supervising. Anyone who saw Molly and Echo leave would think they were merely heading to the nearest bathroom.

“Sure.” Neil squeezed Echo’s hand. “I don’t think this game is ending anytime soon.”

Molly kept her arm around Echo the entire walk to the staff lounge. “You know,” she said on the way, “that guy really cares about you.”

“Neil? I know.” Echo felt herself choke up again. “I don’t know what to do.”

“About Neil?”

“About any of it. My dad’s in danger and nobody seems like they’re able to help me. I don’t even know if Vince is doing anything. The DEA isn’t going to help, they have their own ways of investigating these things, but they’re sure as hell not going to tell me how to find my dad. And Neil wants an answer about the distance thing. And I still don’t know who was sending me those creepy letters,” she added, almost as an afterthought. Her issue with Neil was obviously very small in comparison to her dad’s life being in danger, but her worries had all jumbled up together, like a giant knot.

“Did Vince ever tell you who was sending them?”

Echo shrugged. “He said he was working on it. I haven’t gotten one recently, which is weird.”

“Isn’t that good?”

“It is, but it’s also strange. They were pretty regular and now they’ve just stopped. That has to mean something.”

“Echo,” said Molly, squeezing her shoulders. “You’re good at solving riddles, so you look for meaning in everything. But don’t you think that sometimes things just happen randomly?”

“No,” she said stubbornly. “Maybe in general, but not when it comes to this. Not when it comes to my dad.”

She heard Molly’s barely audible sigh, and suspected her friend was slightly frustrated, trying to think of what to say. But no one could persuade Echo not to look for the connections between all of these strange incidents. Molly was right – she did look for patterns. She liked the logic of riddles. They made sense, while people didn’t follow any particular logic – like her mom abandoning her. Where was the logic in that? So Echo clung to the riddles because they made sense. And in this case, understanding them might mean the difference between life and death.

In the staff lounge, the girls did an internet search for cemeteries in Crystalvale. It took them less than a minute to find a listing for the only one – the Crystalvale Cemetery and Mortuary on Aspen Lane. Mapping out the location online, they discovered it lay about a mile outside of the city limits.

“Okay,” said Echo. “How can we convince Steve to let us go into town?”

“Tonight?” said Molly. “Curfew’s in a couple hours, and if Eric’s not back soon, we’ll already be in huge trouble.”

Echo studied the online map again. Just a straight shot into town, turn right on Aspen. She could do that. She turned to Molly. “Can you please do me a huge favor? Can I please, please borrow your car?”

“What, now?”

“Well, if I don’t go now, you’re right, it’ll be curfew and it’ll be too late.”

“By yourself?”

“You sound like a parent,” sighed Echo. “I have to. We can’t both leave our girls. I’m sorry to stick you with all of the supervision, but –”

“Oh, no,” said Molly. “Believe me, I’d rather stay here with ten wild children than go to a cemetery by myself. But Echo, you can’t go. It’s dangerous. You don’t know who might be following you. If these people are really as crazy as we think they are –”

“I have to,” she said. “Please.”

They stared each other down for a moment. Finally, Molly sighed. “I know you’re worried about your dad.” She reached into her pocket and fished out her keys. “It’s the only orange VW bug in the parking lot. Take your cell phone. If you see anyone at all, call the police.”

“I can’t in case they’re in on the drug ring.”

“Then call my cell phone, at least.”

“I will.” Echo hugged her. She leaped out of her chair and hurried toward the doors.

“If you’re not back by curfew,” called Molly, “I’m telling Steve where you went and I don’t care how much trouble you get into.”

Echo glanced back at her. “Deal.”

After detouring past the garden shed behind the lodge, she hurried out to the parking lot, found Molly’s car easily, and hopped in. On the way into town, she checked her rearview mirrors obsessively, remembering how Vince had followed

her last time. But no black car appeared on her tail, and she only passed one other car going the opposite direction on the highway. In town, she briefly panicked when a white car pulled in behind her on Main Street, but it turned off at Fifth and she continued on alone.

Aspen Lane evolved from a residential street into a narrow country road that wound into the hills. A little past eight o'clock, she reached the mortuary. Dusk had turned the sky indigo deepening to cobalt, and hundreds of stars had begun to fade into existence. It would be completely dark within minutes.

She drove past the mortuary, a small brick building with a little paved lot that was, thankfully, completely empty. Beyond the building, a low white fence bordered the cemetery. She pulled over onto the shoulder of the road and turned off the car. She grabbed the small shovel and flashlight she'd borrowed from the garden shed, then got out of the car.

She crouched next to the car for a moment, shovel in hand, waiting to see if any cars would drive by. When after a few minutes she'd seen no lights from either direction and heard no sounds, she got to her feet. She climbed over the white fence and into the cemetery itself. Grass swept a flat expanse and then up a gentle slope. Headstones of various sizes rose from the ground, the near-darkness throwing the stone orchard into silhouette.

Oddly enough, even though the idea of a cemetery freaked Echo out a little, the reality of one didn't. Reading a scary book or watching a horror movie made it easy to imagine ghosts and ghouls of all varieties lurking among the shadows of the dead. Standing in an actual cemetery was surprisingly peaceful, even in the dark. This was, after all, just a resting place for those who'd died, and a spot for those left behind to visit and reflect.

Echo switched on the flashlight and panned it across the rows of headstones. There must be hundreds of them. She wondered how she would find the right place in which to dig.

She glanced over her shoulder again, then started walking among the rows of graves. Some of the headstones were fairly ornate, carved with leaves and vines or scalloped around the edges. Some were topped with crosses or other sculptures. Some were enormous. Others were only a foot high. She read the inscriptions with interest. *Beloved husband and father...Sweetest wife, patient in strife, now the Savior holds your life...Courage is not the absence of fear, but its mastery...* She saw stones inscribed as early as 1892 and noted that the older stones had more symbols on them – hour glasses and skulls, as opposed to the modern ones, which seemed more like stone Hallmark cards. Some of the older stones had begun to crack or the inscriptions had worn down. She walked by one large grave marked by something more like a crypt than a headstone – it was a long rectangular stone structure with a lid that had cracked and had a large hole in it, showing only blackness. She shivered at that and walked on.

After awhile, she stopped at a group of five gravestones. In the center stood a large stone with a large Celtic cross on the top, and on each side of it was a much smaller headstone topped with a small Celtic cross. She bent to read the inscriptions. The large one read: *Lucy Baird, 1899 – 1924. Taken too soon and remembered with love.* The surrounding ones were inscribed Richland, Thomas, Emmaline, and Elizabeth, all with the last name of Baird. It was a whole family. She calculated the ages and realized that Lucy Baird had been only 25, and the other Bairds had ranged in age from 2 to 7 when they'd died. She wondered what had happened to them. Some kind of epidemic? Had they drowned, or maybe frozen in a blizzard in these mountains?

It occurred to her that the large headstone was definitely “in the midst of crosses.” So far she hadn’t noticed any other unusual group of crosses – rows, yes, and pairs marking spouses, but nothing connected in a striking way. Well, it seemed as good a guess as any.

She knelt by Lucy Baird’s headstone and began to dig.

As her shovel pierced the earth and she pulled away the first clod of grass and dirt, she felt a pang of guilt. She was scarring the perfectly maintained ground, destroying the work that had gone into setting up this stone in the first place. Not to mention probably committing a crime. But her fear for her dad’s life overshadowed any compunction she felt about digging up a tombstone.

She dug a careful, shallow trough all the way around the stone. Every few shovelfuls, she stopped to reach into the ground and pat the tombstone, feeling for anything suspicious – a plastic bag, a pouch, a box, anything that might contain drugs or money.

When she’d dug several inches down, she stopped. She’d created a moat of sorts around the stone, and had hit nothing but the solid base of the stone itself. Which only meant that if someone had buried something, they hadn’t left it next to the headstone.

It could be in the grave itself, of course. She got up, ready to dig up the grave if that’s what she had to do on this mission her dad had sent her on. But as she knelt in front of the headstone and ran her fingers over the grass, she realized the grass was perfectly trimmed. In the white light of her flashlight, she could see that the earth hadn’t been disturbed in years.

The only person who’d done any digging in this cemetery recently, she realized, was her.

She piled the dirt back into the trough around the stone and patted it down as best she could. With the tip of her shovel, she attempted to smooth out the dirt so

it was level. There was nothing she could do about the grass. It would just have to grow back.

Molly's words came back to her. Maybe she did look for meaning that wasn't there. She looked down at her dirt-covered self, and the telltale dirt patch around Lucy Baird's headstone.

Well, so much for her future career in forensics. She couldn't even decode a riddle.

She hurried back to the car and drove back to camp. Eric would probably be back by now. She hoped he knew something more than she did.

Back at camp, she put the shovel and flashlight away. She found the majority of the campers hanging out in the cafeteria, watching a movie projected onto a large screen. Molly, her girls, and Eric and Neil and their cabin sat near the back of the room.

"Thank goodness," said Molly as Echo joined them. "He wouldn't tell us anything until you got back." She glared at Eric.

"Where did you go?" demanded Julie.

"To the bathroom."

Julie raised her eyebrows in a very adult, knowing look. "That is a *long* trip to the bathroom. You really need to see a doctor."

Echo covered her snort and turned to Molly, Eric, and Neil.

"So?" said Molly.

Echo shook her head. "I was wrong. There's nothing in the cemetery. What'd you find out?" she added quickly to Eric, so she wouldn't have to talk anymore about what a failure she was as a detective.

"Dude," said Eric. The other three huddled in as if anticipating a ghost story. "So I was hanging out in the pub talking to these two girls, right."

“What girls?” said Molly sharply.

“Just some chicks. It looks suspicious if I’m just in a bar by myself, right? Either that or really pathetic. Anyway, about 7:40, the two bartenders went into the back and this other bartender took their place. I thought that was kind of weird, right, so I kept an eye on them. They never came out. So after about five minutes I went outside and went around to the back. The bartenders were totally taking crates out to this big van. The crates were all marked like they were full of beer, but I bet you anything they weren’t.” He paused. “So then they get into the van and drive off. Oh. I wrote down the license plate. The paper’s in my wallet. Anyway, then about twenty minutes after that the police show up, right. So it’s like eight o’clock at that point. It took them half an hour to send someone down there. Just like last time.”

“And what did the police do?” said Echo.

“Oh, yeah. I went back into the bar after the dudes left in their van, so I was there when the police showed. It was totally the same dude that came out to St. Martha’s so I had to pretend I was really interested in the girls so he wouldn’t notice me.” Echo felt Molly stiffen next to her. “Anyway, he just talked to the bartender, who said he hadn’t seen anyone matching that description, and then he asked a few other people if they’d noticed a dude snorting powder and they said they hadn’t, and then he wrote a few things down and that was it and he left.”

“And that’s all that happened?”

“That’s it.”

“So they had drugs there,” said Echo. “Right?”

“It looks like they did,” he said. “It’s too bad we can’t track down the van, but at least I have their license plate.”

“In case we just happen to spot them again?” said Molly dryly.

“Hey,” he said defensively. “You never know.”

“So now what?” said Neil.

Echo thought for a moment. “Okay, we know the police are probably in on the drug ring at this point. I think they warned the bartenders that someone was coming down there.”

“Right,” he said.

“We’re pretty sure someone from Elan killed the mayor. Jackson or Al, probably.”

“Check.”

“And I’d be willing to bet Elan was somehow mixed up in the drug ring. I mean, given their history.” She gnawed on her lower lip for a moment, thinking. “I’m pretty sure this drug ring is the one my dad was investigating. So we need to solve the riddle he sent me.”

“And then?” said Neil.

“Then we’re going to rescue my dad.”

“We?” he said. “Uh, Echo.”

“We have to,” she began. “Don’t you realize –”

“Shut up,” whispered Eric. “Your bodyguard’s coming over.”

Echo looked up in alarm. Vince was making his way towards their group, squeezing past the clumps of children and counselors. He caught Echo’s eye and motioned that she should follow him. He held something in his hand.

She cast her friends a worried glance and wound her way towards Vince. He didn’t say anything. Instead he led her out of the cafeteria and outside the lodge. Her heart thumped.

Once outside, he turned to her and said abruptly, “You got another letter.”

“You’re kidding.” Her heart pounded. “What does it say?”

He handed her a white envelope. “I found it in your mailbox. Read it yourself.”

She opened the envelope and pulled out a typed letter that read:

Your father is being held at Mayor Colt's house. Show up with \$500,000 tomorrow night at eight o'clock, and we'll talk. If you're lucky, we'll let him go. If you're really lucky, he'll still be alive when we do.