

Welcome to Camp Disaster

An Echo Shaw Mystery

© 2008 Amy Alexander

Chapter 1

A Very Minor Change

Echo Shaw knew the dog had something to do with it.

She just didn't know what.

She scratched a few sentences on the back of the *United Airlines* magazine, digging her pen into the glossy white page partly because the ink wasn't taking, and partly out of frustration. She scanned the printed copy of her dad's email again, looking for clues she might have missed.

“Can I take this out of your way?”

Echo glanced up at the flight attendant, whose look could best be described as multi-generational hybrid. Her navy skirted suit and pumps looked 1940's; her tanned, lined face and gray-streaked blonde hair put her at roughly age 45; and she wore makeup best suited for clubbing with 18-year-olds. Echo didn't know whether to feel encouraged by the woman's toned figure because maybe she too would look that good at 45, depressed because it was 2007 and women were still working glorified waitressing jobs, or excited that eye glitter had apparently made a comeback.

The woman's hand, tipped with fake pink nails, hovered over the empty plastic cup and crumpled pretzel package that lay on the seat back tray.

Echo remembered the question. “Sure,” she said. “Thanks.”

The woman swept the garbage off the tray into a white plastic bag already bulging with trash. “Oh, honey, don’t write on that.” She tapped the magazine with one long acrylic nail. “We leave these in the seats for other passengers.”

The other passengers would hardly care about a few scribbles on the back of an already-mangled magazine, but Echo knew better than to argue with someone with nails that long. Her stepmother had those same nails, and Echo hadn’t won an argument with her yet. “Sorry,” she said, replacing the magazine in the seat pouch in front of her. “Could I have a few napkins, then?”

“Sure. Have a whole pile.” The attendant took an inch-thick stack off of her refreshment cart and dropped it onto the tray. “You let me know if you need anything else,” she added, in a tone of voice that pegged her clearly: middle-aged mother type. She smiled kindly before turning to the next passenger, and Echo suddenly ached for something she’d never had.

Not that her dad didn’t make a damn good effort. He’d single-parented Echo from the time she was three years old, when her mom walked out on them, until she turned 15 and he remarried. He’d taken her shopping countless times, given her the *your-body-will-soon-be-changing* and the *this-is-where-babies-come-from* talks without shame, and had patiently sat through Disney movies and chick flicks. Even now that he was remarried, her dad was still the one to drive her to school, to the doctor, to her hair appointment. He still took her out for ice cream once a month and made her pancakes on Saturdays.

In fact, not much had changed in their relationship aside from the fact that a 120-pound alien being with fake boobs now inhabited their house and slept with her dad. After one year, Echo still couldn’t get used to Miranda’s

presence, to how *different* she was. Miranda ran a high-profile event planning company in downtown Denver, where she put in long hours pulling off corporate parties and \$50,000 weddings. She wore brand-name everything and heels around the house, which made an annoying clacking sound on the hardwood floors. Her suits always showed leg and cleavage. She sported a fake tan, platinum blonde hair, and melon boobs too large for her slender frame. She readily admitted to the implants, as well as to regular Botox sessions. Before she broke into event planning, she'd explained to Echo, she'd been in the entertainment industry. It took Echo several hours of Googling to discover that "entertainment industry" meant Vegas showgirl. The best (or worst, depending on how you saw it) part? She was only 30. Echo's dad was 46. Legally she might be a Shaw, but mentally, spiritually, and emotionally, Miranda was almost certainly a Playboy bunny.

Echo still didn't get what her dad saw in Miranda. He was reserved and smart and liked to rock-climb. He read *The Economist* at breakfast. He cooked, for God's sake. Miranda could barely operate a can opener.

And unlike Miranda, who seemed to think having money created the necessity to spend it, her dad had always been cautious with the wealth his job provided. Growing up, Echo hadn't realized they were rich because her dad never flaunted it. They lived in a small split-level house in a modest neighborhood just outside downtown Denver, and her dad drove her to school in 1988 Nissan pickup. For the longest time, he wouldn't even let her look in Anthropologie because he didn't want her coveting \$150 tank tops.

Her dad worked as an Intelligence Research Specialist for the DEA, and though he was based out of Denver, he headed up large drug-busting operations that often required him to travel for weeks at a time. With no

relatives closer than three hours away, her dad had kept a full-time nanny on retainer – one of Echo’s early clues that they were not, in fact, poor.

Predictably, the nanny had been let go once her dad married Miranda. He’d explained to Echo that now that she was almost a junior in high school and Miranda would be around, plus they had such good friends among their neighbors, he didn’t think Echo needed a nanny.

She didn’t, but that wasn’t the point. It still irked her how he’d sandwiched Miranda in among his other reasons, like Echo didn’t know Miranda was the only reason for getting rid of the nanny. What he meant and didn’t say was, *You have a mother now.*

Well, she didn’t. She had a stepmother, which ranked right up there with having toenail fungus.

But at least she had her dad. Thinking about him now reminded Echo to look over the email once again.

He’d started this tradition of giving her riddles when Echo was five years old. He was leaving for a month-long trip to D.C., and Echo had been especially upset. So he drew her half a picture and told her that by the time he came back, she had to figure out what it was and draw the other half. If she did, he’d take her out for ice cream.

It didn’t take her long to figure out the picture was half a dog. She’d drawn the other half in unsteady purple crayon, and her nanny stuck it to the fridge. Every morning Echo ran downstairs to make sure the picture was still there. It felt like her dad’s promise that he would come home safely.

From then on, every time he went out of town, Echo’s dad gave her a riddle and rewarded her with ice cream when he returned. The riddles got progressively harder as she got older, and he always altered them a little bit

so she couldn't just look them up on the Internet. But this one had to be the most obscure puzzle yet.

Her dad had emailed it to her three days ago, the morning he landed in San Diego to lead a special operation he couldn't tell her anything about. *Sorry this is late, babe, he'd written. I meant to leave it on the fridge and forgot. Solve it by the time you're back from camp. Ice cream reward and all that, you know the drill.*

So here it is: A famous model is found dead in her Beverly Hills home. Police respond to a call from a neighbor claiming that she heard a dog barking, followed by a gunshot next door. They arrive and find the following. The gated entrance is unlocked, but there's no sign of forced entry. The model is found facedown in her kitchen with a bullet wound to the head and a gun in her hand. Several close friends confirm that the model was suicidal. Why did the police start looking for a murder suspect rather than declaring it a suicide?

P.S. It's a yes/no riddle.

Echo had been staring at this riddle for three solid days and she hadn't made even slight progress. The yes/no ones were always harder because the answers were less intuitive and her dad withheld key information, which she had to extract from him with precisely the right question. Since he only allowed her ten yes/no questions, she had to be judicious with them. Right now she couldn't think of a single question that would get her anywhere.

"Folks, if I could have your attention." The voice of the pilot crackled over the speakers. "In just a few minutes here we'll be starting our initial descent over Calgary. If you could please take this opportunity to buckle your seatbelts and put your tray tables in the upright position..."

Echo drew a defeated X on the top napkin in her stack and tucked them into the seat pouch. She folded up her tray table and leaned across the two empty seats next to her to glance out the window. Far below spread a flat green expanse dotted with a cluster of miniscule-looking buildings that had to be downtown Calgary. It always amazed Echo how insignificant large cities appeared from the air.

She heard the pilot say something about landing in half an hour and checked her watch. They would touch down at approximately eleven a.m., Denver time, and then she had a brief layover and another hour-long flight to Castlegar, B.C., followed by a 40-minute drive to Camp Kootenay, just outside the town of Crystalvale.

She found it slightly amusing that her dad was sending her to summer camp now, at 16, when she'd never gone before, but of course this was for a job. Echo had been bugging her dad for months now to let her get a summer job, mainly because the summer was often her dad's busiest time of year and she wanted to escape Miranda. One of his college friends now ran Camp Kootenay, so he'd pulled a few strings and arranged for Echo to work in the camp office. Her room and board would be paid for by the camp, and she'd receive a weekly stipend plus evenings and weekends off.

There wouldn't be anyone else her age working in the office, but Steve, her dad's friend, had assured her there would be plenty of opportunities to socialize. The camp staff consisted of three "tiers." Classes and activities were led by adult teachers who lived at camp twenty-four-seven. Senior counselors, 18 and over, mostly college students, were paired with junior counselors, 15 and up. Each senior-junior counselor pair lived in and supervised a cabin of up to ten children. They attended all classes, activities, and meals with their campers, but the adult teachers spelled them

during breaks and on their Friday nights off. Steve had told Echo that on any given Friday night, there would be counselors having barbecues, playing sand volleyball, swimming in Kootenay Lake, and venturing into town. He'd said she was welcome to join any and all activities.

It didn't hurt Echo's feelings to escape the Denver social scene for a summer. She had made two close friends at the private school she attended, and the three of them carefully avoided the rest of their peers. G. Shelton High School was like a microcosm of what Echo imagined Hollywood to be – clique-y and snobby, its attendees obsessed with money and parties and who was hooking up with whom. She'd miss Beth and Carrie, but she couldn't wait to meet some normal hippie girls. Not to mention a few older guys.

Her layover in Calgary lasted less than an hour, and she slept through most of the flight to Castlegar. Her dad had "arranged for" (Echo knew this meant paid) Steve to pick her up in Castlegar and drive her back to camp. At the end of camp, eight weeks from now, her dad would fly into Castlegar and personally drive to pick her up from Camp Kootenay.

Echo dug Steve's cell phone number out of her purse and dialed. He directed her where to wait outside the airport, and a few minutes later he'd picked her up and they were leaving the airport, on their way north to Camp Kootenay.

Echo hadn't seen Steve since Thanksgiving six years ago, when he'd stopped off in Denver on his way up to Canada, but he looked exactly like she remembered. Tall, bearded, and wearing sandals. "Wow, your beard's longer," she commented.

Steve laughed and checked his reflection in the rearview mirror. “I guess it kind of is.” His brown curly beard poofed out well past his shoulders. “The kids call me Santa.”

Echo laughed. “Do you put lumps of coal outside their cabins?”

“Only if they’re lucky.” Steve winked at her.

“It’s a good thing I don’t have a cabin then.” Echo would be living in staff quarters in the top floor of Kootenay Lodge. Steve had said it was nothing fancy, but Echo imagined it would be better than a cabin full of rowdy children.

“Actually, Echo, I need to talk to you about that.” Steve glanced at her, his expression serious, and Echo felt her heart plummet. She knew what he was going to say. He’d had to put her in a cabin after all.

“We’ve had a very minor change in staffing this year,” said Steve, “and if at all possible, I need you to fill in for one of the junior counselors.”

She’d expected a change of sleeping arrangements, but not this. “Fill in how?”

Steve sighed. “Well, it’s just a big mess. All of our counselors got to camp last week for training. This girl, she’s your age, she spent the whole week training and then found out she was pregnant. She decided to go home and, you know, deal with that whole situation. Her mother was yelling at her in the parking lot when she picked her up, I don’t even know – anyway. We’ve re-posted the position, but this girl left yesterday, and camp starts tomorrow. Even I can’t hire someone that fast. It’s going to be at least a couple of weeks before we find a replacement.”

“And the senior counselor can’t just take over by herself?” Echo tried to sound nonchalant instead of extremely irritated.

Steve shook his head. “Nope. For one thing, we promise parents a one-to-five ratio, and I stick by that. Also, it’s a liability issue. There are always two counselors to a cabin. You hate to think anything would happen, and we do extensive background checks, but we do live in the same world as Mary Kay Letourneau.”

Echo nodded. “So this is just for a couple of weeks then?”

“A couple of weeks,” Steve confirmed, “and then you’ll be in an air-conditioned office. I’m sorry I didn’t ask you earlier, but there wasn’t time.”

Echo fiddled with a hangnail and considered. She didn’t particularly love children, but she didn’t hate them, either. She’d babysat a few times for a neighbor, but in this case, she wouldn’t be able to give the kids back after a few hours. They would be hers, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week (minus Friday nights) until Steve found someone to replace her.

Of course, she’d also have the senior counselor helping her, and there’d be adults teaching the classes. Echo could finger-paint and help kids put on life jackets. She even knew CPR.

“I’m not going to get any sleep, am I?” she said.

“Probably not,” he said mildly. “But it’s a lot of fun, and very rewarding. Do you have CPR certification? You’re supposed to have it, but we’ll have to make an exception until we can get you certified.”

“I have it.” Echo fished through her wallet and extracted her CPR certification card, which she’d obtained for extra credit in health class last semester.

“That’s great. Echo, I know this is a big favor, and if you absolutely refuse I can work something else out, but this would be such a help.”

She found herself nodding. Steve was one of her dad's oldest friends, and both of them had done her a favor by arranging this job. She could survive two weeks of anything. "Okay."

"Thank you." Steve sounded enormously relieved.

For the next forty minutes, he gave her an extremely condensed orientation to being a counselor. The first batch of campers arrived today, with classes officially starting tomorrow. Campers stayed anywhere from one week to the entire summer. With few exceptions, they stayed with the same counselors for their entire stint at camp; so the campers never changed counselors, but the counselors were constantly getting new kids.

Steve talked about classes and mealtimes and schedules, curfew and safety and behavior management. He assured her numerous times she would love the other counselors and love the kids and said how great it was that she would get an inside look at camp before working in the office. She could tell he was trying overly hard to convince her, but she appreciated the optimism.

As they drove into Camp Kootenay, Echo forgot her apprehension. The Kootenay Mountains – the Canadian Rockies – rose in dark, tree-cloaked peaks in every direction. They passed an emerald-green pond surrounded by aspens. The manicured green of a soccer field bled into the peach-colored sand of a volleyball court. Several sleek brown and black horses grazed in a field. The cabins – girls' cabins on one side of camp, boys' cabins on another – were finished with rich cedar siding and each door was painted a different bright color. When Steve finally pulled into the gravel lot outside Kootenay Lodge, Echo just stared at the three-story log cabin, which featured stained-glass windows of mountain scenery. It looked more like a rustic hotel than a camp headquarters.

“Not bad, huh?” said Steve.

“Not bad at all. Has Dad seen this?”

“Not yet. I keep trying to convince him to come out here for a vacation, but he’s too busy busting drug dealers.” Steve grinned.

“Yeah, no kidding.” Echo remembered the riddle and wondered if Steve could help her with it. Surely after knowing her dad for so long he understood the man’s propensity for obscure puzzles.

Before she had a chance to bring it up, however, Steve had herded her into the lodge so she could meet her campers and her senior counselor. They walked through the enormous front double doors, down a hallway past the office where Echo would hopefully be working soon, and through another set of double doors into an expansive cafeteria. At one end of the cafeteria was a long stage with blue velvet curtains draped from its frame.

Steve informed Echo that it was currently snack time, which fell mid-morning and mid-afternoon. This meant all of the counselors had to shepherd their campers to the cafeteria a total of five times a day. Echo suspected that would not be easy.

She followed Steve to a table where a tall redheaded girl presided over a table full of cute girls in pigtails and braids. Steve introduced Rayna, who in turn rattled off the girls’ names. “I have to check on a few things,” said Steve, inching away from them, “but I’ll be back to help you take your bags to the cabin. Thanks again, Echo.”

“No problem.” As Steve walked off, Echo wedged herself onto the end of the bench next to one of the girls, so that she was sitting across from Rayna. She counted campers and frowned. “I thought everyone had ten campers?”

“We only have eight this week. It happens sometimes the first week. By the end of the summer all the cabins are at capacity.” Rayna picked up the clipboard that had been lying on the table and flipped through several pages attached to it.

“Is that our schedule?” Echo asked, seeing a printed list of upside-down times that looked like they might be associated with class names.

“Mm-hmm.” Rayna didn’t look up.

Echo glanced around the cafeteria. Dozens of other campers and counselors occupied the tables. They all seemed to be separated by gender – boys’ tables and girls’ tables. She wondered if that was camp policy or first-week nerves. “So when’s snack time over?”

“Ten minutes.” Rayna still hadn’t looked up, and she sounded terse. Echo raised her eyebrows. This would be fun.

A small pudgy hand tugged Echo’s arm urgently. She turned to the little girl next to her, a five-year-old whose name she’d already forgotten. Emily, maybe? Or Katie?

“Echo, Echo,” said Emily-Katie, who clearly had a better memory than her counselor. “Do you have a dog?”

“No, I don’t,” said Echo, wondering where that question had come from. “Do you?”

“I have a pet turtle,” said the girl. “His name is Turtle. Hey, Julie, do you have a turtle?” She turned to the girl next to her.

Echo didn’t hear Julie’s answer, because Emily-Katie’s question hung in her mind. She took her dad’s riddle out of her purse and re-read it.

“Do you have a pen?” she asked Rayna.

The girl sighed and unclipped a pen from her clipboard. She passed it across the table without looking up. “Don’t forget to return it.”

“I won’t.” Echo flattened the piece of paper against the Formica table and scrawled the first question she would ask her dad, as soon as she could get access to a computer.

Did the model own a dog?

© 2008 Amy Alexander