

# Welcome to Camp Disaster

## *An Echo Shaw Mystery*

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### Chapter 6

#### **Build Up the Walls**

Sleep did not come easily or immediately. Echo lay awake for a long time, running through a list of every person she knew at camp, trying to decipher if one of them might be the letter-writer, recalling conversations and off-hand remarks, looking for nuances that weren't there. She drifted off slowly and slept lightly, only aware of having fallen asleep when the siren alarm startled her awake at six a.m.

At breakfast, she toyed with her food and drank two cups of terrible black coffee. "You look tired," commented Molly.

"Yeah, I didn't sleep much." Echo poked her scrambled eggs with a fork. "Hey, you didn't collect my mail last night, did you?"

"No, why?"

"Oh, nothing. There was a note on my pillow and I thought maybe you put it there."

Molly's frown turned into a knowing smile. "Did Neil leave you a love note?"

"No!" Echo had to laugh at the thought of Neil creeping into their cabin. "Actually, it was creepy."

"A creepy note?"

Echo told her about the “I’m watching you” letters. “I thought Rayna was sending them, because the first day of camp she said she was watching me, but she’s not here anymore, so.”

Molly threw a glance at their girls, happily absorbed in eating breakfast, and leaned forward. She kept her voice low. “And you don’t have any idea who’s sending them? That’s like something out of a serial-killer movie. We should call the police or something.”

Echo shrugged. “There’s not much to go on, is there? No signature, regular white paper, standard size font, laser jet ink? Could have come from anyone’s computer.”

“Okay, Nancy Drew. Do you think it’s someone at camp?”

“Probably. How else would they get into my mailbox and our cabin?”

“That’s freaky. We should tell Steve.”

“I don’t know if –”

“Oh, he just walked in.” Molly stood up and waved frantically at Steve. He tipped his clipboard at her in acknowledgment, then jogged over to their table.

“What can I do for you ladies?” he said jovially.

Echo stood up too, and they formed a little huddle so their girls wouldn’t hear. “Someone broke into our cabin last night,” said Molly.

“You’re kidding,” said Steve. “When?”

“Sometime before curfew. We weren’t there at the time.”

“Anything stolen?”

“No.” She glanced at Echo. “Tell him.”

“It’s not a big deal,” said Echo. “It’s just I keep getting these notes in my mailbox.” She felt hesitant to tell Steve, because it almost sounded lame – an unsigned note that said the same thing every time, and no way to trace

it. Her letter-writer/psycho stalker/potential serial killer buddy could at least have had the courtesy to say something more original that would identify Him/Her. At this point, Steve had nothing to go on, just like the police would have nothing to go on if he called them.

“It is a big deal,” insisted Molly. “She’s getting these scary letters saying someone’s watching her.”

“They’re usually in my mailbox,” added Echo, “but last night there was one on my pillow. There was no sign of forced entry or anything, so I assume whoever it was had a key. Or they could have picked the lock. What?” she added, at Molly’s strange look. She was used to paying attention to details. It was how she solved her dad’s riddles.

“You need to change the locks on our cabin and call the police,” said Molly.

“Okay, okay, gotcha,” said Steve, nodding vigorously. He checked his watch. “Okay. I have one announcement before breakfast is over and then I’ll send the custodian out to change the locks.”

“What about the police?” said Molly.

“Tell you what, let’s hold off on that for the moment. We’ve had a lot of pranks around camp the last couple of weeks, and I have a few suspects, if you will. Let me talk to them before we step things up.” He checked his watch again. “Okay, ladies? I promise I’ll take care of this.”

“Wait,” said Echo, as he started to go. “I wanted to ask you about the office job.” Molly discreetly moved back to the table.

“Sure,” he said. “Quickly.”

“Well, I heard from Rayna that you gave her the job instead.”

“Yes, and I’m sorry I didn’t have time to talk to you about it. It seemed like a better punishment for her to work in the office away from her friends.”

“Right. It’s just that now that she’s not here –” She let the question hang in the air.

“Sure. You know, at this point it would be easier for me to find a replacement for the office job than for the counseling job. You’re just doing such a great job. Do you think you can stick it out?”

“For the rest of the summer?” she said.

“If you can. I know it’s a big favor, but it’s been a huge load off my mind having you here.”

He checked his watch again, and Echo realized that the instant she agreed to play counselor, she’d agreed to the entire summer. She should have known this would happen. He had her trapped now. “Um, I guess I could do that.”

“Great. Listen, I have to make this announcement now, I’m sorry. I’ll send the custodian out this morning.” He hurried toward the stage.

Echo sat down. Molly was watching Steve and not looking entirely satisfied. Over his announcement, she said, “If you get another note, Echo, you make him call the police.”

“I will. But he might be right. Maybe it’s a prank.”

“Pretty sick if it is,” she said darkly. “Sounds more like a stalker if you ask me.”

“That could be interesting. I’ve never had a stalker before.” At her look, Echo said, “I’m kidding.”

“It’s not funny. It’s totally screwed up.”

She picked at her breakfast. “So I guess I’m staying on as a counselor for the rest of the summer.”

“Oh,” said Molly in surprise. “Were you leaving early or something?”

“No, I – definitely not. Nope.” She’d forgotten Molly didn’t know she was supposed to have had the office job. Apparently she blended in so well that people just thought of her as a counselor, not as someone who didn’t belong. She guessed that was a compliment.

As Steve ended his announcement, the cafeteria erupted into noise and movement. Silverware clinked against plates and people swarmed toward the garbage cans. Breakfast was officially over.

Steve had the locks changed as promised, and no more notes appeared in Echo’s mailbox. The days passed in their usual busy blur. Echo still wasn’t happy about the permanent status of her job, but she only had several more weeks left and the way time was screaming by, she knew it would go quickly.

On Thursday morning she, Neil, and several other counselors skipped breakfast to help Steve set up for an outdoor play that the entire camp was seeing this afternoon. He’d hired a traveling children’s theater troupe to perform a musical parody of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. After they’d set up a portable stage and a sea of folding chairs, Steve announced that because the counselors had missed breakfast, they could have lunch to themselves. “If anyone complains, just send them to me,” he said with a grin.

Not only did Molly not complain, she wouldn’t even let Echo join her in walking the girls back to the cafeteria from art class. “Go now,” she said,

“before the lunch line gets crazy and Helen asks you to carry five hundred pounds of art supplies.”

Echo laughed. The art teacher was always holding either Molly or Echo back at the end of class, asking them to help her move something or clean something up. Inevitably, whichever of them had stayed behind would be at least ten minutes late to their next class.

In the cafeteria, the regular lunch line had already mushroomed. Echo slipped into the counselors’ line behind Neil, and they got their lunches in record time. Hardly able to believe the luck of a whole forty-five minutes off, they hurried into the staff lounge. They closed the doors, muffling the shouts and laughter in the cafeteria, and settled onto a leather couch.

“Thith awethome,” garbled Neil around what seemed to be half of his cheeseburger. He smiled self-consciously and wiped his mouth. In a clearer tone, he added, “How was your morning?”

“I got another letter.”

“When?”

“Last night.” She told him about finding the letter on her pillow, and how she and Molly had talked to Steve. “He hasn’t said if he found out who did it.”

“But you don’t think it’s a prank.”

“I don’t know.”

He took her hand. “Be careful.”

“I will.” She forced a smile. “So I heard back from my dad about the riddle, and he said the model had been taking antidepressants.”

“Written him back yet?”

“No, I’m still figuring out my next question.”

“I thought you were going to ask about an allergic reaction.”

“I’m still not sure it was an allergy. I mean, someone would have had to know her allergies in order to kill her with something she was allergic to, and that means it was probably her doctor, which brings up the question of why her doctor would want to kill her. Dad already said no one collected on her life insurance, so the doctor had nothing to gain by killing her. So why would he do it?”

Neil laughed. “You sound like this is a real case with a real person.”

“I have to think about all the details.”

“Just ask him if something in the antidepressants killed her. That’s broad enough, right?”

“No,” she said suddenly, realization dawning. “I haven’t asked him if the police found any antidepressants. Something tipped them off, remember? It doesn’t matter if she was taking them if the police didn’t find them.”

He whistled. “Your questions have to be that specific?”

“Dad’s picky.”

“Guess so.” He glanced at the empty computer stations. “You should email him while the computers are free. How many questions do we have left?”

“Five after this. And you’re just as bad as me.”

They migrated to one of the computer stations, and Neil pulled up an extra chair. He continued scarfing his burger and fries while Echo, in between bites of her grilled cheese sandwich, logged into her email.

“Ugh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” she said under her breath. She had four new emails from Miranda. Three were forwarded stories and thoughts-for-the-day, but one, titled merely “Hi,” appeared to be a personal note.

“What’s wrong?” said Neil.

“Just my stepmother keeps emailing me.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What does she want?”

“I don’t know,” she said, frustrated. “Most of it’s just spam, but there’s this.” She opened Miranda’s one personal email, and she and Neil read it together.

*Hi, Echo,*

*Just thought I would send a note to see how your week is going. How is camp? How is the weather up in Canada? I know B.C. is beautiful this time of year, so I bet you are getting plenty of sunshine.*

*Work has been crazy as usual. I have three weddings and a corporate party in the next two weeks. I’m not home much, but it’s pretty quiet without you and your dad around.*

*Hope all is well.*

*Love, Miranda*

“What is with her?” said Echo.

Neil frowned. “It kind of seems like she just wanted to say hi. I mean, given that the subject line of her email is ‘Hi.’”

“Ha, ha,” she said. “She sent me a card earlier and signed it ‘Love.’ Who does that?”

“People who love you?” he suggested.

“Not people who aren’t your real family.”

“She probably wants you to think of her as family.”

“Well, she’s not,” snapped Echo. “So she can stop trying.”

She closed Miranda's email with a forceful click of the mouse and looked expectantly at Neil. He was staring at her. "What?"

He shook his head. "I'm not sure I should say anything."

"What? What are you going to say?"

"What do you have against her? I mean, besides the fact that she's married to your dad?"

"She's fake. Fake nails, fake boobs, she even gets Botox. I shouldn't know this about her, but I do, because she's told me. She probably tells everyone she meets that she gets Botox." Echo ticked off the list of injustices, which she'd run through so many nights in her head over the past year. "She looks like a complete bimbo with her tight skirts and heels and her bleached-out hair. She's always caffeinated and perky, even at six o'clock in the morning when I'm trying to get ready for school and I just want to be quiet and read the paper. She's like a cheerleader on steroids."

"Wouldn't that cause facial hair?" put in Neil.

Echo shot him the look of death. "She never talks about politics or the economy or books or any of the things my dad is interested in. I don't even know what they have in common. She's so wrong for him. For us. Did I mention she's sixteen years younger than my dad?"

"How old, er, young?"

"He's forty-six and she's thirty. Thirty. It's like he's Hugh Hefner or something."

"Okay," he said. "Have you talked to your dad about any of this?"

"I can't," she said flatly. "He was nuts for Miranda the second he met her."

"Then maybe there's a reason."

"There's not. She's pretty and that's all."

After a long pause, he said, “I don’t know what to tell you then.”

The words sliced through her. He didn’t know what to tell her? He couldn’t think of a single helpful or comforting or sympathetic thing to say, like “I’m sorry” or “Your stepmother sounds like a total witch”? He had nothing to say in response to the litany of complaints she’d just made?

“I don’t know what to tell you either,” she retorted, “so maybe we should just stop talking.”

Neil looked stung. “What?”

“I think I’d like to be alone now.”

“Echo.”

“Please.”

He heaved a sigh that made her feel guilty, which only pissed her off more. He stood, tray in hand, mumbled, “Catch you later,” and walked out.

Facing the computer, Echo blinked back tears. Except for that one aberration after Rayna dunked her, she never cried and she wouldn’t start now. She logged out of her email and called her dad.

To her surprise, he answered. “Hi, babe.”

“Dad,” she said. “Aren’t you supposed to be on a case or something?”

“A guy has to eat.”

She laughed. “How’s San Diego? How are things going?”

“Fine. You know, same old same old. I can’t disclose the details –”

She rolled her eyes. “I know, Dad.”

“But it’s going well. We’re making significant progress.”

“That’s great.” She fiddled with the hem of her shorts.

“So have you talked to Miranda at all?” he said.

She tensed. “No, why?”

“She said she’d emailed you a few times and hadn’t heard back. I think she just wanted to know if you were doing okay.”

“Oh. Well, I am.”

Silence.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“I don’t know. You tell me.” His tone cooled slightly.

“I just – I don’t really –”

“Echo,” he said, “if you have something to say, maybe you’d better just say it. I already know this marriage has been hard on you, and it’s pretty clear you don’t love your stepmother, so why don’t you just get it out there.”

She hesitated. They had talked some before he got engaged to Miranda, about how Echo felt about having a stepmother, but only in the most general terms. Anyway, ultimately her feelings about Miranda hadn’t mattered, because it had come down to what her dad wanted. And if he was happy, then she had to be happy too, even if it killed her.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I guess – I guess I still don’t get why you married her. I mean, we were fine before, just the two of us.” So far, she wasn’t saying anything she hadn’t expressed before. This was safe, known territory. “I mean, I know you were lonely sometimes.”

“But?”

“Well, she’s so different from you.”

“You’ve said that before, but how is she different?”

“She doesn’t read.”

He chuckled. “What gave you that idea?”

“Because she never talks about books, Dad! She gets *Vogue* and *Martha Stewart Living* in the mail.”

“Because she’s an event planner, dear,” he said dryly. “She has to get ideas for all those corporate parties from somewhere. And by the way, she loves Amy Tan.”

“Fine, so she reads. What about her total lack of outdoorsiness? I’ve heard her go on and on about how much she hates heights and would never rock climb.”

“She runs,” he said. “She does yoga. Does she have to be exactly like me?”

“She has to have a brain. And I’m sorry, Dad, but a plastic surgery addict who used to work on the Vegas Strip is beneath you.” Echo heard the words come out of her mouth and she couldn’t stop them, even as she was simultaneously appalled by them. She’d kept these thoughts to herself for the last year. Had she really just said that? To her father?

“What did you say?”

“I’m sure you’ve looked beyond her past and all that, but it’s still there. I don’t know how you can be with someone who used to run around naked shaking her, uh, whatever for, you know, whoever.”

“Am I missing something really basic here?” he said. “You think Miranda used to work in Vegas?”

“Yeah.” It had never occurred to her that perhaps her dad didn’t know about Miranda’s seedy past. She hated to be the one to break the news, but if he actually didn’t know then he had every right to learn the truth. “She was a Vegas showgirl. She didn’t tell you?”

“What in the world gave you that idea?”

“I Googled her.” Duh. How else would she dig up dirt about her dad’s fiancée?

“Honey, I don’t know what you found online, but you’re wrong. Miranda was never a Vegas showgirl.”

“What? Miranda Collins, right?” Echo’s stomach started to sink. “She’s from L.A., isn’t she?”

“No, she’s from Nebraska. She went to school in L.A.”

“You told me she –” She stopped. “Well, what about the implants?”

“She was very young and she felt the pressure of living in L.A. She talks about it openly because she doesn’t want to be fake.”

“Even if her boobs are?” muttered Echo.

“So let me see if I have this correct. For the past year, you’ve not only been cold and distant to Miranda and haven’t given her a chance to prove herself, you’ve also been running around thinking she was one step above a prostitute?”

“Um,” she said. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“I’m – I don’t even know what to say. I can understand you not giving Miranda credit when she was a stranger, but I would have hoped you’d have a little more faith in me.”

“I.” She couldn’t formulate a sentence.

“I love you,” he said, “and I love Miranda, and someday I hope the two will be mutually compatible. Because I know she loves you.”

“I.”

“And she was Miss Nebraska. You need to get your facts straight before you solve a riddle. I thought I taught you that.”

“Dad.”

“Babe, I have to go.” The line went silent, in what might possibly have been her dad hanging up on her.

Echo flipped her cell phone shut and slumped in her chair. She felt like she might throw up.

All her life, she'd prided herself on her ability to figure out answers. If she paid attention to enough details, thought long enough and hard enough, she could solve any riddle her dad threw at her. Even his latest, she'd eventually crack.

She could read people, too. She could tell when girls at school were being fake because they wanted something or catty to each other. She could tell by the tone of her friend Beth's voice if she wanted a ride to school. She'd picked up on Rayna's dishonesty immediately. She knew that Neil was a straight-up guy, the kind that didn't come along often.

With Miranda, she thought she'd known. She'd taken a series of details – platinum hair, high heels, event planning career – and pieced them together to solve the puzzle of her stepmother. The Internet had been her partner, her provider of clues. Plug in the name and the hometown and presto, you have a showgirl. The perfect reason to hate the woman her dad had married.

Except she'd been wrong.

She was never wrong.

She opened up a new window, went to Google, and typed in "Miranda Collins" in quotes, then "L.A." and "career." This was how she'd finally found Miranda's apparently shady past after hours of missing the mark. Apparently there were a lot of Miranda Collinses out there, including a physics professor at Duke, a wedding photographer in Kent, Washington, and a third-grade teacher who'd won Missouri's Teacher of the Year.

The first hit was the now-familiar article called "Showgirls creating heat in 'Arabia.'" The story, on the web site of the Hotel Tropicana, profiled

three recently hired showgirls and boasted about their singing and dancing talents. “An L.A. implant, Miranda Collins shines in her role as a genie,” the article read. The accompanying photograph showed the three showgirls, all masked, posing mysteriously for the camera. Two of them were blonde, and the one on the right she’d thought was Miranda, but now that she looked at the picture it could have been anyone.

Echo opened up a fresh window and typed in “Miranda Collins” and then “Miss Nebraska.”

Several articles from the *Omaha World-Herald* and other Nebraska papers popped up. “Miranda Collins wins Miss Nebraska.” “Omaha’s own advances to Miss America contest.” “Miss Nebraska, Miranda Collins, raises money for children’s hospital.” “Voicing her concern for the environment.”

She clicked on the last one and read about how Miranda had attended a rally in Omaha for someone running for Nebraska senator. She’d been a keynote speaker, and the article praised her as “articulate and poised” as she “lobbied for alternative sources of fuel.” The accompanying picture clearly showed her. Yep, that was Miranda, in all her tight-skirted, high-heeled, bleached-blonde glory. Definitely the same person.

Echo closed all her browser windows, logged out of the computer, and stood up. The wall clock told her lunch was almost over. In five minutes she would have to go to class and encourage the kids and smile until her cheeks hurt.

She walked to her mailbox. Colorful papers and flyers filled it, as usual. She sifted through the stack. At the sight of a plain white envelope, her heartbeat quickened.

Though she already knew what was inside, she opened it up, withdrew the single sheet, and unfolded it in smooth motions, following the ritual. *I'm watching you*, she read.

She stared at the message for a moment. Then she pulled a pen out of her pocket and scribbled a note at the bottom:

*Who are you?*

She re-folded the page so her message would clearly show next time someone came to her mailbox, and slipped it back into the box. She knew whoever it was wouldn't answer, but it couldn't hurt to ask.

She wanted to ask herself the same question.