

Welcome to Camp Disaster

An Echo Shaw Mystery

© 2008 Amy Alexander

Chapter 7

Shadows

Once every summer, the children attending Camp Kootenay during a certain week felt very special – almost as special as the kids who’d lucked out with July Carnival. Once every summer, without warning, the campers showed up for breakfast and discovered that instead of the usual pancakes, runny eggs, and greasy bacon, the cafeteria was serving strawberry crepes. Mounds of them, fluffy and light, with heaps of sweet juicy red berries. And as they got in line, they felt the glorious luck of being chosen to eat the meal that no one else at camp, any other week, would eat.

Crepe Day was supposed to be a surprise, anyway, but this year everyone knew about it because that night – the evening of Echo’s confrontation with Neil and her dad – Eric spotted crates of strawberries being hauled into the kitchen and spread the word. When Echo, Molly, and their girls arrived at the cafeteria at six-fifteen the next morning, the line was already out the door, even though breakfast didn’t begin until seven.

“These crepes better be amazing,” said Echo, leaning against the side of the lodge and yawning.

“They are, trust me,” said Eric’s voice behind her. She turned around and saw him, Neil, and their ten boys falling into line. Neil hovered near the back of the group, talking with three of the kids. He had them laughing

about something as he waved his arms in wild gestures. He didn't even look up to acknowledge that Echo was there.

“Really good, huh?” She forced a smile.

“Oh, man, the best. They make like hundreds of ‘em, which is good, because I can eat at least two dozen. Definitely more than that guy,” he added, raising his voice to get Neil’s attention.

“Yeah, we’ll see about that,” shot back Neil. This time, he glanced at Echo, but she couldn’t read his expression.

“We’re having an eating contest,” explained Eric.

“Delightful,” said Molly dryly. “What are the stakes?”

“Ten bucks.”

“You’d risk puking up crepes for ten bucks?”

“Totally worth it.”

The friendly banter continued while they waited in line – Molly, Eric, and Neil, the conversation like a current flowing around Echo, but not including her. The sense of distance in a crowd was familiar – she felt it at school all the time when she wasn’t with Carrie and Beth, that sense of separation from her peers – but she hadn’t felt it at camp before. Not even when she was working with Rayna. She’d always had allies in Neil’s eye-rolling at Rayna’s antics, in the friendly smiles of other counselors they passed on the way, in Steve’s harried yet cheerful greetings. For the first time this summer, she felt truly alone.

The line started moving at 7:05, to cheers and applause. The crepes looked amazing, but Echo’s stomach had started to churn, and she only took two, while Eric and Neil piled their plates into crepe pyramids. Their cabin claimed the table next to Echo and Molly’s. Normally she would have enjoyed this fact, but this morning Neil’s presence only reminded her that he

was taking her request not to talk to her very seriously. Dammit, didn't he realize she said things she didn't mean sometimes?

"Three!" counted down the campers, drawing the attention of the surrounding tables. "Two! One!" Eric and Neil shoveled crepes into their mouths as fast as possible, while everyone cheered. Steve wandered by to see what all the commotion was about, and simply rolled his eyes.

Neil finished seconds ahead of Neil and shot to his feet, fists in the air like a triumphant boxer. "That's only round one!" said Eric around a mouthful of crepes.

"You two disgust me," said Molly, but she was laughing.

Neil leaned down to grin at her, displaying his strawberry stained teeth, and she groaned and playfully shoved him away. He collected his plate and dashed to get in line for more crepes.

"I'll be right back," said Echo under her breath, a comment Molly didn't hear or respond to.

She hurried into the staff lounge. No one at breakfast would even miss her, and she had a good forty-five minutes before breakfast ended. Right now she just needed to be alone.

She logged into her email. As it loaded she willed her dad, Carrie, or Beth to have written her, but they hadn't. Only Miranda's slew of daily forwarded emails crowded her inbox.

Though she usually relegated them straight to the trash, this time Echo clicked on one of the emails. She skimmed a semi-humorous story about a dog show disaster, then hit "Reply." Resting her fingers against the keyboard, she stared at Miranda's email address in the address bar.

She felt like she ought to write something, a quick note, a hello, but where would she start? *Hope you're having a good week, and sorry for*

thinking you were a hooker for the past year? Her shame at having been mistaken was too great. She couldn't do it.

Echo closed that email and opened up a new one, this one to her dad. She started with her next riddle question – *Were antidepressants found at the scene of the crime?* Then, after some thought, she added an apology for being so wrong about Miranda. She sent it off, feeling better, albeit only slightly.

She logged out and stood up. She didn't really feel like going back into the cafeteria, not quite yet.

The bank of mailboxes waited across from the computers, their shelves stuffed with brightly colored flyers, expectant, waiting for someone to come and retrieve them. When she'd checked her mail late last night, her note to the letter-writer was still there. She hadn't checked her mail yet this morning, though. Had the writer responded?

She crossed to her mailbox and pulled out what seemed to be half a ream of paper. She dug through it eagerly, almost frantically, searching for the familiar white envelope.

There was none. Not only was there not an envelope, but the note she'd left was gone. She sorted through her mail a second, then a third time to be certain. No response. Just gone.

If she hadn't been one hundred percent sure the letter writer lived at camp, that seemed to confirm it. It would be very difficult for an outsider to sneak onto camp grounds sometime between last night and tonight, because Steve and the other staff patrolled the grounds until half an hour past curfew, and Steve locked Kootenay Lodge when evening ceremonies ended. This either meant someone was very good at picking locks, or someone had a key.

She leaned against the counter and mentally ran through the list of people at camp who had a key. Steve, of course, and the other teachers. The custodians and the cooks. The office manager, for whom Echo would never work. Was that it? She frowned. She thought a couple of senior counselors might have master keys – she’d heard Molly say something about that – but she couldn’t be sure.

Glancing at the clock again, she decided to stop hiding in the lounge and go back out to the cafeteria. It wasn’t that a great deal of time had passed, so much as that she felt conspicuous in the lounge by herself. If she went back now, she could tell Molly she’d just taken a really long bathroom break. Because Echo didn’t want to admit to anyone, least of all herself, that the reason she’d most wanted to leave is that she couldn’t stand the sight of Neil smiling and laughing at anyone else besides her.

On Monday, another e-mail from her dad and another anonymous letter both arrived.

Echo got the email first, during her morning break. It said simply, *I know it’s been hard for you...maybe when you and I get back to Denver we can take a little trip with Miranda and try to reconnect. And yes, antidepressants were found at the scene.*

She tried not to react by thinking that the only trip she wanted Miranda to take was off the edge of a cliff, because she still felt that sort of nauseated feeling whenever she thought about her stepmother. Why did “stepmother” even have to have the word “mother” in it? It was the idea of a substitute mother, especially when Echo’s own mom hadn’t even cared enough to stick around, that bothered her. Why couldn’t the title be “pseudo-authority figure” or something more appropriate? But she could

tell it meant a lot to her dad for them to become a family of three, so she supposed she'd have to try when she got back to Denver.

The fact that antidepressants had been found at the scene of the crime was promising, however. The antidepressants could definitely have killed the model, if someone had exchanged them for lethal drugs. She didn't really have to determine who or why – not that she wasn't dying for a logical reason and a backstory for why anyone would try to kill a model with prescription drugs. But it could be the answer.

Did the antidepressants have something in them that killed the model? she wrote back. She decided not to respond to her dad's suggestion of a family vacation. Better to leave the subject of Miranda alone for now, so she couldn't do further damage.

Next, she retrieved her mail. As soon as she pulled out the stack of paper, her heart began beating wildly. There on top of the pile lay a plain white envelope. There was no name on the front this time, but she knew what would be inside.

The single, typed sheet of paper read:

When are you going to start talking to me again?

What kind of a question was that? When was she going to start talking to her possible stalker, who kept leaving her threatening and creepy messages? Um, never? Apparently the person had really enjoyed her response. Did this mean that he/she wanted another note? Should she leave one? Maybe she should just call the police.

“There you are,” said Neil.

She looked up. He hovered in the doorway, and when their eyes met he took that as a signal to enter the room. “Oh,” she said. “Hi.” It was the first time they'd spoken in a few days. Stopping in front of her, he shoved

his hands into his pockets and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He sported scruff, and his thick hair clumped together and stuck up in patches.

After a minute he said, “So you got my note?”

“Your note?” She held up the sheet of paper. “This was from you?”

“Yeah.” He took his hands out of his pockets, then seemed to think better of it and put them back. “I was hoping you’d break your vow of silence sometime soon so we could actually have a conversation about, uh, our other conversation.”

“How come you typed it?”

“Typing’s faster?”

“Why didn’t you sign it?”

“I figured you’d know who it was from. Why, you have other guys you aren’t talking to also?”

“Ha, ha,” she said. “This is exactly what those other letters look like, you know, the ‘I’m watching you’ ones.”

“Ohhh,” he said. “Oh jeez, Echo, sorry, I didn’t even think about that.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She took her time folding the piece of paper and stuffing it back into the envelope. “I’m sorry too. About what I said the other day.”

“It’s okay,” he said. “You were upset. I shouldn’t have tried to tell you what to do or how to feel about your stepmom.”

“Yeah, well, I feel worse now.” She told him about her conversation with her dad, and finding out that Miranda was actually a human being who read books and cared about the environment, and whose worst crime was

being a former pageant winner. “Dad wasn’t too happy when I told him my theory about her being a showgirl.”

He rubbed her shoulders and said affectionately, “We can’t all be amazing riddle-solvers a hundred percent of the time.”

“No.” She brightened. “Oh, but I think I’m a lot closer to solving my dad’s riddle. He said there were antidepressants found at the scene, so I just wrote back and asked him if they contained lethal drugs.”

“Really, that’s great,” said Neil. “You’ve almost earned your ice cream.” He moved behind her, slid an arm around her waist, and leaned his chin on her shoulder. With his free hand, he lifted a full-color flier from her stack of mail. *Wilderness Survival Event FRIDAY!!!* it read. “You ready for this?”

“Ready to stay up all night with a bunch of little kids? Sure.”

At yesterday morning’s staff meeting, Steve had announced that this coming week there would be an all-camp “Wilderness Survival Event” that would begin late Friday night and end Saturday morning. July Carnival, Crepe Day, and now this – Echo was starting to wonder if he came up with a unique feature for every week of camp so all the kids could feel special.

Actually, the only thing relating to wilderness or survival with this event was the title. Instead of sleeping in their cabins, the kids and counselors would be camping out on the soccer field in their sleeping bags. They’d be given various “night challenges” to complete around camp, including a scavenger hunt, a treasure hunt, and a game of Capture the Flag. The event would culminate in the campers making and serving breakfast for the counselors, the idea being to demonstrate their survival skills and self-sufficiency by cooking. Of course, the counselors would be doing most of the actual cooking to ensure no kids got burned or splashed, so that was kind

of a crock too. But the kids had nonetheless been extremely geared up when Steve announced it at breakfast this morning.

Echo was excited about sleeping outside too, even if it was on a soccer field. She liked the feeling of being close to nature. But an even better part was that the Saturday morning breakfast would conclude this week of camp. Campers' parents were arriving to take them home and the last child should be gone by noon, while the handful of kids who were staying on for the next week would be entertained by the teaching staff. The counselors would have the whole of Saturday afternoon and evening, as well as part of Sunday before the next round of campers arrived, to do whatever they wanted. There was already talk of barbecues, swimming excursions, and sand volleyball tournaments.

“So,” said Neil, stepping back to face her, and sliding his arm around her waist.

Echo touched his arm. “So,” she said.

They smiled. And that was all they needed to say.

Wilderness Survival Night began with a bang.

“On your marks!” cried Steve. “Get set! Go!”

He fired a cap gun in the air, and the little pop was like a match sparking a fire. The campers and counselors, who'd been crammed onto the soccer field, raced off in all directions down the various paths.

They were kicking off the evening with a scavenger hunt, and for the event, Molly and Echo's cabin had been paired up with another girls' cabin. They had a huge list in their hands and a large canvas bag with which to carry everything.

Echo looked at the first item on the list. “Something blue,” she read. “Sounds like a wedding.”

“No kidding,” said Molly.

“I have, I have, I have something blue!” cried Julie. She waved something in the air. Echo took a closer look. It was a ragged ribbon that Julie had found in art class last week and had been wearing around her wrist as a bracelet ever since. It was dirty and fraying, but definitely blue.

“Perfect,” she declared, taking the ribbon from Julie and putting it into the bag. “We promise to give it back. Okay, what’s next?”

One of Steve’s rules was that within groups they could not split up the list – the four counselors and twenty girls had to travel together. So they all trooped toward Kootenay Lodge, where they snatched a packet of sugar off the coffee bar in the cafeteria before continuing on to the sand volleyball court to collect a plastic baggie of sand.

They made it back to the soccer field with their 25 items in tow just as Neil and Eric’s group appeared on the edge of the field. “Run!” shouted Echo. Their group careened toward Steve like a herd of lemmings.

“Okay, whoa, whoa,” he said, laughing, as twenty screaming girls and four enthusiastically yelling counselors surrounded him. “You’re first, I get it!”

“Dang it!” yelled Eric, as their group arrived on the scene just a second too late. “You better have gotten something wrong.”

“Nope,” said Echo, triumphant. “We got it all.”

Steve examined the contents of their canvas bag and checked them against the scavenger hunt list. He almost didn’t accept their sheaf of mail as representing item 15, Camp Spirit, but when Echo and Molly insisted all of the mail they received daily was not only perfectly representative of how

many events and happenings there were each week but also that the bright colors represented the diversity of the campers, Steve bought it. He awarded their group first prize, a hundred points to both their cabins. That was another aspect of Wilderness Survival Event – cabins were competing for points and whoever came in first won a prize. Neil and Eric protested loudly that the Camp Spirit item was B.S., but Steve waved them off. They took second.

A treasure hunt followed, then other games. Around four a.m., Steve divided them into two teams and sent them to opposite sides of camp to begin Capture the Flag. The game would end at six a.m. or when a flag was captured, whichever came first. After that would be the cooking of breakfast and the awarding of prizes.

An hour in, no flags had been captured. Echo, Julie, and two other girls were hiding behind some cars in the gravel parking lot, trying to figure out how to make their way through the woods to the sand volleyball court, where they knew the other team's flag was. They knew because Molly had run screaming back into safe territory reporting the flag's location and also lamenting that fifteen people on their team had been captured.

"We should go up the trees and then jump into the sand," whispered Julie, proud of what seemed to her to be an obvious solution.

"We can't do that," said Echo. "We'll get hurt." She played with the flashlight in her hand, fingering the switch. As soon as they left the parking lot they were in enemy territory, and she knew some counselors were hiding in the bushes around Kootenay Lodge because she could hear them giggling. The flashlight would kill their chances of getting past the lodge.

"We should make a disaction," whispered one of the other girls, Keeley.

“You mean a distraction?” whispered Echo.

Keeley, seven, nodded wisely. “A disaction. Me and Ruth can make noise and get captured and then you and Julie can run and get the flag.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” said Echo. Keeley and Ruth could use the flashlight to make it obvious someone was running into enemy territory. Maybe the two of them could divert attention long enough for Echo and Julie to reach the woods.

“Okay,” she said. “Here’s the plan. Keeley, you take the flashlight. When I say go, you walk towards the lodge. Don’t run. Make it look like you’re trying to sneak around so you can trick the other team. Julie and I will run into the woods.”

“Are we, are we, are we going to try and get the flag?” whispered Julie.

“You bet,” said Echo. “Okay, ready, one, two, three, go!”

Keeley and Ruth slunk out from behind the cars and crept toward the lodge. Keeley swung the flashlight. It only took seconds before three counselors jumped out from behind some bushes and yelled, “Get them!” Keeley and Ruth ran screaming away from the lodge, leaving a perfect opening for Echo and Julie to scramble out from behind the cars, dash past the lodge, and take cover in the woods.

She heard Keeley and Ruth screaming with delight behind them as they were captured by the enemy. Just as she was about to forge ahead, she heard a crunching noise and spotted someone coming from about thirty feet away. “Duck,” she whispered, pulling Julie with her down behind a tree that was heavily guarded by thick bushes. They waited in the dark, hearts pounding. She could hear the little girl’s quick breath, in and out, beside her, as footsteps crunched through the undergrowth.

As the figure neared, Echo crouched down as far as possible, rolling herself into a tight little ball. Julie had clapped her hands over her own mouth as if to prevent herself from screaming. Echo didn't dare look up as the person passed by only five feet from their hiding place. She listened to the retreating footsteps and waited until they sounded farther away before looking up again.

It was one of the guy counselors – or so she assumed, as the teachers weren't playing – walking at a leisurely pace toward Kootenay Lodge. Obviously he was on the enemy's side or he wouldn't be striding around so confidently. She watched, willing him to keep moving toward the parking lot so she and Julie could sneak away. The woods were too close to Kootenay Lodge for them to get away without making noise.

But instead of running or sneaking, the counselor just opened the cafeteria door and walked into the lodge. The door clanged shut behind him. It was against the rules to use any buildings for cover, so technically the guy was cheating. But since he'd disappeared, she wasn't going to worry about it.

With Julie clinging to her hand, she hurried through the woods. They stuck to the edge of the path, periodically ducking behind trees or bushes when they heard a noise, slipping like shadows through the forest. For some reason no one seemed to be around. Maybe they were all hanging around the sand volleyball court, guarding the flag. Steve had said it was illegal to have more than five people guarding the flag at once, but she wouldn't put it past the enemy team. They had some really competitive people, like Eric and Neil, on their team.

After taking a side path toward the volleyball court, they finally reached the edge of the woods. They ducked behind some thick bushes.

Through the branches Echo could see the sand volleyball court. As she'd suspected, there appeared to be at least twenty counselors and campers guarding the flag. Totally unfair.

"Okay," she whispered to Julie. "I'm going to run in there and get them to chase me, and then you sneak in and steal the flag." She knew it probably wouldn't work, but now that they'd come this far, they had to try. And she wanted Julie to have the slim chance of playing hero.

"Remember, all you have to do is run out of the sand volleyball court and get back onto the soccer field." The soccer field was their team's home base and it lay a mere twenty feet from the court, separated only by a dirt path and some overgrown grass. Its proximity was their one hope for success.

Leaving Julie to hide at the edge of the woods, Echo slunk onto the sand volleyball court.

"Oh, we've got one!" yelled Eric, materializing out of the pre-dawn as he turned a flashlight on Echo.

She screamed at the top of her lungs and darted off the court, drawing several people toward her. The others turned to watch. It was just enough time for Julie to dash onto the court, grab the flag, and start running.

"She's got the flag!" screamed a little girl.

"Go Julie go!" yelled Echo, even as Neil caught her in a bear hug and then slung her over his shoulder like a potato sack. She kicked and writhed, while Julie streamed down the path to the soccer field, a herd of the enemy running after her. She just managed to escape the grasp of one of the boys, who'd started running too late to catch up to her, and fell onto the soccer field in triumph. Echo watched from a distance, smiling, as Julie's teammates surrounded her and cheered.

The excitement over, Steve called an end to the game and declared the start of breakfast. He and the other staff members cleared the volleyball nets and dragged portable griddles onto the enormous sand court. True to the spirit of wilderness survival, the entire meal would be prepped outside.

While the counselors hauled out tables on which to prepare the meal, the cooks rolled out carts containing eggs, bacon, flour, buttermilk, and fruit. Within minutes, the older campers were chopping cantaloupe and strawberries while the younger ones helped the counselors mix pancake batter.

Breakfast tasted wonderfully un-burnt, and everyone lounged on the court and surrounding fields in happy exhausted groups, eating and telling stories. By nine a.m. the chatter had died, with campers and counselors alike falling asleep sitting up. Steve roused them when the parents arrived. By noon, the last camper had gone home and the remaining kids had gone to the staff lounge to watch a movie with the teachers.

Neil was all gung ho to hang out, but Echo could barely keep her eyes open, so she told him she'd see him at dinner. On her way back to her cabin, she stopped at her mailbox out of habit. She had another white envelope among her mail, and this one was definitely not from Neil. As always, her name was typed on the front.

She thought of the shadowy figure they'd seen sneaking into Kootenay Lodge earlier this morning. Suddenly she had to find Neil.

She hurried into the cafeteria, where she'd left Neil with a cup of coffee and the morning newspaper, the little *Crystalvale Daily News*.

She found Neil, Molly, and Eric huddled around the paper, looks of shock on their faces.

“I thought you were taking a nap,” Neil said absently, barely glancing up.

“I was going to, but I – what’s wrong?” she said. “You all look like someone died.”

“Someone did,” said Molly softly. “Rayna’s father.”

“What?” gasped Echo.

She leaned over Neil’s shoulder and read the headline:

Mayor of Crystalvale Commits Suicide.