

# Welcome to Camp Disaster

*An Echo Shaw Mystery*

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## Chapter 8

### **Return of the Barking Dog**

Echo took the paper from Molly and scoured the article.

*Over his four-year career as mayor of Crystalvale, Phillip Colt rejoiced in the town's triumphs and mourned its losses. Now the entire community is grieving the loss of its mayor, who apparently committed suicide late last night.*

*Police initially responded to a neighbor's complaint about an incessantly barking dog near the mayor's residence. When they arrived and entered the home, they discovered Mayor Colt lying on the kitchen floor with his wrists slashed. He was unresponsive, and EMTS who were called to the scene declared the mayor dead.*

*An official cause of death is pending an autopsy, but police Chief Barton Graham said the autopsy was a formality and there were no indications of a cause other than suicide. There was no sign of forced entry in the residence, and no persons of interest have been identified in connection with the case.*

*The mayor's ex-wife and teenager daughter, who had been vacationing in Vancouver, were contacted last night and are on their way*

*back to Crystalvale to make funeral arrangements. A town-wide memorial service is also planned, though as of press time, a date and location had not yet been selected.*

*Mayor Colt's untimely death followed on the heels of a career that boosted Crystalvale's fiscal health and instilled a strong sense of community. Colt famously started the town's annual Arts in August Festival, which brought together street performers, artists, actors, musicians, and chefs from as far away as Vancouver, and he largely financed the festival himself. The mayor was also known for his "fairweather walks," in which he took a daily break, weather permitting, to stroll along the waterfront and get to know residents. "He really made you feel like he was interested in your life," said Sandy Moriarty, owner of Bookends Used Books.*

*Not bad for a man who didn't even become a Canadian citizen until 1996. Mayor Colt abandoned a lucrative career as a New York City consultant for a simpler, quieter life in the Kootenays...*

She stopped reading midsentence. Mayor Colt had been American? And clearly, a wealthy one, if he'd worked as a New York consultant and been able to finance an arts festival. No wonder Rayna had acted so superior. She'd probably had her own credit card since she was five.

"Poor Rayna," murmured Molly.

Echo felt a dual pang of guilt and sympathy – guilt for her previous thought about Rayna's credit card, and sympathy for the girl. No one should have to lose a parent at this age, though as Echo knew all too well, some people did. "It's awful," she agreed.

The four of them sat there in awkward silence, no one sure what to say. To fill the void, Echo skimmed the article again. As she did, her initial shock at the news wore off, and a couple of odd details came into focus.

“You guys,” she said. “Look, this is weird.” She pointed to the paragraph about the autopsy. “If this was a suicide, then why are they doing an autopsy?”

“The police chief said it was a formality,” pointed out Molly.

Echo shook her head. “An autopsy’s not a formality. My grandmother died last year and they didn’t do an autopsy on her.”

“This is Canada,” said Eric. “Maybe it’s different here.”

“It’s not that different here. And also, did you notice this? The barking dog?”

“Yeah.” Eric squinted slightly at the newspaper, as if it would reveal her meaning. “So?”

“Well, it’s so similar.”

“To what?” said Neil.

“My dad’s riddle.”

Her three friends looked skeptically at her.

“A barking dog followed by an apparent suicide,” she clarified. “Couldn’t they immediately see the resemblance?”

“That’s not anything like your dad’s riddle, actually,” said Neil. “You decided a long time ago the barking dog didn’t mean anything, and the model died from a gunshot wound to the head. Plus the riddle is *fiction*.”

She glared at him. “Thanks, I know that. I still think it’s weird.”

“You’ve been riddling too much.”

“Everything means something,” she said, raising an eyebrow defiantly. So her mind had been on overdrive trying to solve the riddle. It didn’t mean there wasn’t something odd about the mayor’s death.

“What’s that?” Neil asked, changing the subject with a touch to her hand. She unfurled her grasp and let him take the now slightly crumpled white envelope from her hand. She’d almost forgotten about it.

“You got another note?” Molly leaned in. “Let me see.”

Neil opened the envelope and took out a sheet of paper with a typed message. As he unfolded it, Echo anticipated the familiar words, *I’m watching you.*

Instead, the note read: *Your father needs to be careful.*

The change she felt was immediate. Her entire body went cold, and she began to shake, as if someone had just doused her with ice water. Extreme anxiety always affected her this way, but normally it happened during tests or before speeches. It had never happened outside of school before, because outside of school, she’d had nothing to fear. She’d been safe.

As a high-profile member of the DEA, her dad had always taken extra precautions to ensure that his only daughter would never be targeted. And except for one incident that Echo didn’t even remember when she was five, when one of the guys her dad had brought down had had them followed, nothing remotely bad or scary had ever happened to her. And that was in Colorado, where her dad was based. Of all the places in the world that would be considered safe and far away from her dad’s job, Camp Kootenay was the epitome. Nothing could be more remote or sheltered than a Canadian children’s camp.

Now that clearly was not the case. Whoever was sending these notes knew who Echo was – and worse, who her dad was. Even here, she wasn't safe.

Which meant her dad wasn't either.

"I have to make a phone call." She ran out of the cafeteria before her friends could even respond. Outside, she jogged around to the back of the lodge, where she could have some privacy.

The back door leading into the kitchen was shut. She remembered walking out of it with Neil not long ago, running into Rayna, the break-in, the pickle juice, proving Rayna's guilt. Had Rayna's stealing the money had anything at all to do with her father's death? Echo couldn't imagine the mayor committing suicide over his daughter being caught stealing or getting kicked out of camp, but maybe she'd been stealing the money for another reason. What if he'd actually needed the money to pay off a debt, say a gambling debt?

She tried to calm her brain, already straining to solve the mystery, already treating it like another one of her dad's riddles, even as she tried to remind herself that the suicide would probably remain inexplicable. She forced herself to clear her head enough to dial her dad's number.

It went straight to voicemail.

She swore under her breath before the tone sounded, and when it did beep, left a frantic message. "Dad, it's Echo, and you need to call me right away. I got an anonymous note today saying that you need to be careful. I don't think you're safe down there. Please call me as soon as possible." She hung up and swore several more times because she felt helpless and it was the only thing she could think of to do. Then she ran back into the lodge.

When she entered the cafeteria, Molly and Eric had gone, but she spotted Neil walking through the doors of the staff lounge back into the cafeteria. “Hey,” he called, and jogged over to her. “I was just looking for you. Molly went back to your cabin to see if you were there.”

“No, sorry, I had to call my dad.”

“Did you get ahold of him?”

She shook her head. Neil slid an arm around her and rubbed her shoulders, and with his free hand took one of hers and squeezed it. “Your hands are freezing.”

“We should go find Steve,” she said suddenly. “I have to tell him about the note.” Then she realized she hadn’t taken it with her when she left the cafeteria. “Do you still have it?”

“Right here.” Neil patted his front pocket. “Let’s go.”

The camp director could have been anywhere, and it could have taken them hours to locate Steve, as he always seemed to be on the go. But as it turned out, they found him upstairs in his office surrounded by the usual mound of paperwork. He was staring at his computer screen when they walked in, his face paler than usual, or maybe it was just the electronic glow of the screen reflecting on his skin.

“What do you need?” he said absently, not even looking at them.

“I got another of those letters,” began Echo, “only this one said –”

“Just a second,” muttered Steve. He clicked something with his mouse, consulted a notebook lying open on his desk, then typed something.

“Sorry,” he said, rubbing his forehead and finally looking at them.

“It’s been a weird morning. I guess you heard about the mayor’s death?”

“Yeah,” said Neil. “Pretty crazy.”

Steve nodded. “For a variety of reasons. Very sad. So what’s up?”

Echo told him about the note. “You know Dad’s on a big case right now. I just don’t know, I can’t imagine who up here would know about it, but –”

“Let me take a look.”

Neil handed Steve the note. He glanced at it, frowned, then set it on top of an obscenely large pile of paperwork. “Okay, I’m right in the middle of something here, but I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks,” said Echo uncertainly. Steve went back to typing and frowning, so she and Neil quietly let themselves out of the office.

“He seemed pretty distracted,” commented Neil, stating the obvious.

“And not helpful. My dad’s life could be in danger and so could mine. He didn’t even say if he was going to call the police.”

“Well, he doesn’t have much to go on,” said Neil. “It’s a typed unsigned note.” He sounded as if he were parroting her thoughts from earlier, when she’d decided the letters would provide no solid clues to the police. Continuing to mull over the letter, they walked through the cafeteria and out the door.

As she stepped outside, someone yelled, “There you are!” Molly jogged toward them, Eric in her wake.

“We talked to Steve,” said Neil as the two counselors pulled up to a breathless stop in front of them.

“And?” said Molly.

“He said he’d see what he could do.” Echo narrowed her eyes.

“What he could do is not ignore the fact that someone might be trying to hurt me.”

“Give the guy a break,” said Neil. “He just found out about Rayna’s dad.”

“Yeah, and my dad might be next,” she said.

“He should call the police right away,” said Molly. “We’ll have to do it ourselves if he won’t help us. Although to be fair, he did just find out that his main financial backer died.”

“What?” said Echo. She remembered people saying that Rayna’s father made a large contribution to camp each year, and that’s why the girl had worked at camp, but a charitable donation was different than supplying a critical part of the budget.

Molly lowered her voice. “Well, what I heard is that Rayna’s dad made it possible for camp to continue running. Steve went into a lot of debt opening up this camp, and if it weren’t for the mayor’s office he’d probably be in the hole.”

Something nagged at the back of Echo’s brain. It was as if she’d been handed an entirely new riddle to solve and had just noticed the first significant detail. The fact that the mayor had contributed so much to Camp Kootenay only reinforced what the article had hinted about his wealth. “We have to find out.”

“Find out what?” Neil looked wary, and so did Molly and Eric.

“We need to know how important the mayor’s contribution was. If he had that much money to give away, then...” She let her voice trail off, her eyes gazing at the trees in the distance but not really seeing them, as if she were searching there for an answer.

“Then what?” said Neil. “You think his suicide had something to do with his finances?”

“I’m not sure yet,” she said. “But we’re going to find out.”

“I like you,” whispered Neil late that night, “but this is an incredibly bad idea.”

“This is an incredibly brilliant idea,” scoffed Echo.

She and Neil were walking down the main trail that led through the woods toward the clearing where Kootenay Lodge stood. It was now two in the morning, and Steve and the teachers had gone to bed over an hour ago after doing a one a.m. head count. Echo and Neil had done the Queen’s Bay outing again tonight, but she hadn’t been able to enjoy it nearly as much because her mind had been on the mayor’s death.

Because they didn’t want to risk attracting attention to the fact that they were boldly breaking curfew, they’d decided not even to use the light from their cell phones to guide the way. The main path through the woods was fairly wide, but only its vague outline was distinguishable from the surrounding bushes. More than once Echo walked too close to the edge, veered into a bush, and jumped back in surprise at the tickle of a leaf or the claw of a branch. Overhead, the tree branches knit together, forming a tent that effectively filtered out the moonlight.

It reminded Echo of camping with her dad, the times she’d woken up in the middle of the night and had to traipse through the dark camp site to the restroom. At night she always felt more aware of her surroundings, and they seemed alive – there was a real sense that there was space behind you as well as in front of you, and she often had the sensation that someone or something was potentially just out of sight. It was kind of a creepy feeling, but kind of a cool one, too. Walking hand in hand with Neil warded off some of the sense of being watched, but still she felt that increased awareness and alertness, as if the forest itself were stalking them.

After several minutes, the trees began to thin and the silhouettes of trees and bushes had recognizable individual features – bark, trees, branches, leaves. Another twenty feet, and they’d left the woods and stepped into the clearing, where Kootenay Lodge rose, three stories of fat log walls. The unusually bright moon cast a white glow over the lodge and parking lot, and thousands of stars had joined it. It looked calm and beautiful and chased away any sense of danger that the woods might have induced.

They walked to the side door that led into the cafeteria, and after a quick look around to make certain no teachers, up for a late night stroll, could see them, Echo lifted a second lanyard off her neck and fitted a single key into the lock.

In addition to the teachers, Steve entrusted two senior counselors – one boy and one girl – with a master key to every building at camp. It was to be used strictly in emergencies, which was why he was very selective with his choice of the key-holders. Molly, responsible and organized, had earned that privilege the second week of camp. Echo had only discovered this earlier today, when Molly had let it slip. “You’d need a key,” she’d said, “and Tom and I are the only ones who have them.” The instant she saw Echo’s eyes light up in response to this information, she’d let out a groan.

It had taken a lot of convincing to get Molly to loan her the key, since, as Molly had pointed out, a serial killer invading camp qualified as an emergency, whereas a junior counselor’s whim to conduct some late-night research did not. But Echo finally managed to convince her, and now she and Neil were in the cafeteria.

They didn’t dare flick on the cafeteria lights, but they did open their cell phones now for a little bit of light. Echo locked the door behind them,

and they padded across the cafeteria toward the staff lounge. The tables and buffet took on strange shadows, looking lumpy and odd in the dark. Echo banged her shin on a bench. The smell of stale grease hung in the air.

They reached the staff lounge and slipped inside, shutting the door behind them. The ever-present bluish glow of the computer screens greeted them, casting a slightly stronger light on their surroundings.

Neil and Echo sat down at the first computer station, and Echo logged in and opened up an internet browser.

“Now what?” said Neil.

Echo wriggled her fingers over the keyboard. She’d gotten this far, which she could barely believe, because most of her schemes didn’t actually work to this point. The last time she, Carrie, and Beth had tried anything like this, it was breaking into Carrie’s mom’s makeup when they were ten, and that wasn’t hard because they just had to unzip her makeup case – and they still got caught.

“We need to find out about the mayor’s life,” she said. “How long he was the mayor, what he did before that in New York. Anything that might explain how he became wealthy.”

“I thought we were trying to find out how much he contributed to camp each year.”

“We are,” she said. “That’s later.”

She started by Googling the mayor’s name. The first few hits were from local papers, reiterating his death by suicide. She skipped these and moved on to other articles, from past years, about the mayor’s various activities, such as emceeding the annual Crystalvale Parade.

“Here’s something,” she said, clicking on an article from the Crystalvale Herald entitled “A Heart for Children.” It was an article from

2005 about how the mayor was financially and personally invested in Camp Kootenay. The article described how his only daughter worked at camp, and how the mayor helped finance the camp each year. *Although Mayor Colt would not disclose the amount of his annual contribution, director Steve Henley revealed that the mayor's generosity makes it possible for the camp to operate at its current level. "Without Mayor Colt," said Henley, "I probably couldn't offer half the activities to kids that I can, and Camp Kootenay wouldn't be as great as it is."*

Neil whistled. "Sounds like a big donation all right."

They continued to search. There were more articles about the mayor's activities, city council minutes where he was mentioned numerous times, and then on page three of her results, Echo struck gold.

"Here we go," she said, raising her voice in her excitement, and Neil had to shush her. "When he lived in New York, he worked for a consulting firm called Elan Communications."

"What does that tell us?"

Her shoulders slumped a little, her excitement deflating slightly. "I don't know. But it's something."

Neil kissed her cheek. "I'm sure it is." He wrapped his arms around her and tried to kiss her again.

"Don't patronize me," she protested lightly, squirming out of his grasp. "This is important. I'm absolutely positive there's something weird going on here. And I have very good instincts."

"Does it say what he did for the consulting firm?"

She shook her head. "Just that he worked for them. Let's try a new search." She did a search for Elan Communications and got several hits – several different firms apparently had the same name. After a couple of

dead ends, she found a sleek web site for Elan Communications, a “consulting and ideas” firm based in New York City.

The web site had the usual – products, services, clients, news, and contacts. She looked through all of the contact information, hoping to find information about the mayor, but of course he wasn’t a current member and wasn’t listed. A search of the site returned no results containing the mayor’s name, and the blurbs about their products and services did nothing for her. All of the descriptions were vague, like “We’ll help you shape your vision into a real, achievable plan” and “We offer a range of consulting and communication services based on the client’s need.”

“What do these people actually do?” she wondered.

Neil shrugged. “One of our family friends does consulting in New York and I still don’t know what he does. It’s like the blanket job title out there.”

“Well that doesn’t help.” Echo sighed. She tried a few more searches, but when nothing else turned up, she admitted defeat.

“Ready?” Neil looked around anxiously, as if he expected Steve to barge into the lounge at any moment and bust them.

“Almost. Hang on.” She chewed on her lip for a moment before typing “autopsy Canada” into the search box.

“Trying to find out how autopsies work in Canada?” guessed Neil. She nodded.

Her results didn’t seem to return anything pertaining to rules governing Canadian autopsies, but the title of the second hit caught her eye. She clicked on it. It was a report by a Canadian statistics agency entitled *Deaths subject to autopsy, Canada, provinces and territories, 2002*. A table charted the number of deaths that had occurred in each province in 2002,

compared to the number of deaths that had or had not been autopsied. Out of 28,883 deaths in British Columbia, only 2,383, or 8.3 percent, had been subject to autopsy.

“There,” she said, triumphant. “Look how few of them are autopsied. It can’t be a formality. Something’s up.”

“Maybe,” said Neil. “But maybe they just always do autopsies when a government official dies.”

Echo didn’t think so, but she didn’t have time to argue. “Let’s go,” she said, logging off.

Neil was very reluctant to enact this second part of their plan, but she reminded him he’d already agreed to help her and he couldn’t back out now. So the two of them trooped up the back stairs to the second floor, which housed the camp offices.

They used the master key to get into the office of Tanya Bell, the camp accountant. Despite the blinds covering the window, Echo didn’t dare turn on the lights. Instead she used the faint light from Tanya’s computer to help her search through the files and notebooks on the desk, carefully replacing each one after she did so.

“What are you looking for?” whispered Neil.

“Budget stuff,” she said. “She’s an accountant and I can’t find anything. Help me look.”

“Here, here, I found it,” he said after a moment, and handed her a slim binder with a cover that read “Budget Summer 2007.”

Echo opened it and flipped through it eagerly, but she was quickly disappointed. The notebook simply contained the camp’s operating budget, broken up into different categories of expenses, for the current year. There were some comparisons to last year’s budget and some line item breakdowns

of certain expenses, but nothing in there was shocking – except how much money the camp spent on electricity – and nothing was connected to the mayor.

“It’s not here.” Echo set down the notebook, then looked at the screen saver spinning on the computer screen. “Did she really?”

She wiggled the mouse. The screen saver dissolved, and resolved into a desktop with a photograph of camp as its wallpaper. “I can’t believe this,” she said, delighted. “She didn’t shut down her computer.”

“She probably stays logged on because no one else comes in here,” said Neil pointedly. “What are you going to look at?”

“I don’t know, but she’s gotta have something.”

“This is so illegal,” sighed Neil. He sat down at the desk and pulled her onto his lap. Together they illegally looked through Tanya’s files.

After a bit of searching, Echo found the mother lode – a big folder entitled “Budgets and Accounting.” A file called “Grants and Charitable Donations” looked promising, so she opened it. It turned out to be a multi-worksheet file with a separate sheet for each charitable donation or grant source, with information on how much they’d contributed this year compared to past years. And one of the worksheets was named “Phillip Colt.”

“He donated a million dollars?” gasped Echo. “What the hell was he doing in New York?”

“I don’t know, and I hate to kill off our Nancy Drew investigation,” said Neil, “but it’s three-thirty. We should go.”

Reluctantly she closed the file. She and Neil crept out of the office, locking it behind them, and hurried out of the lodge.

They hadn't gotten ten feet from the building when they were suddenly blinded by a flashlight. "What's going on?" said a familiar voice, which was attached to footsteps and a silhouette walking into the clearing.

Echo squinted and through the sudden after-imprint on her eyeballs, made out the familiar form of Vince, the soccer coach. "Oh," she said, sighing in relief. "It's Echo and Neil."

"I can see that." He sounded vaguely amused through a mask of sternness. "What are you doing out after curfew?"

"Uh," she said.

"It was kind of my fault," said Neil. "Actually it was totally my fault. I kinda convinced her to come out here and, you know..."

Echo stared at him.

Vince lowered his flashlight. "Now, I was young once too," he began.

"No," protested Echo, "we weren't – we were just talking –" Neil pinched her arm in a signal to shut up.

"I know how it is," said Vince. "Believe me. No explanations are necessary. Just get on back to your cabins right now, because I should really write you up for this."

"Don't punish her," said Neil. "It was my fault."

"I'll tell you what," said Vince. "If you get on back to your cabins right now I won't say anything about it to Steve. Okay? Deal?"

"Deal," said Echo and Neil together, and they thanked him.

Vince waved them off. Hand in hand, they raced down the path through the woods.

When they'd gotten a safe distance away, Echo sighed, "Dang it. I forgot about Late Sweep." Once a week, on a randomly selected night, Steve had two of the teachers conduct a Late Sweep where they patrolled the

camp grounds in the middle of the night. It was theoretically to shepherd any escaped campers back to their cabins, but everyone knew the real reason was to shepherd any escaped counselors who might have bright ideas about making out or pulling pranks or any of the other various kinds of mischief available to them.

“At least we got off with a warning,” said Neil.

“Yeah, thanks a lot for letting him think we were making out back there.” She elbowed him.

“It was the only thing I could think of!”

“Sure.”

They walked the rest of the way in silence. At Echo’s cabin, Neil said he’d see her in the morning, even though it was already morning.

She let herself in, tiptoeing, but Molly didn’t stir from her top bunk. Without the girls in their beds, the cabin felt oddly empty. She almost looked forward to the arrival of the new group of campers tomorrow afternoon.

She sank into her bunk, suddenly very tired, and decided to skip breakfast and sleep in. But after a few minutes, she found that she couldn’t fall asleep. She lay there with the moonlight creeping through one of the windows, casting a pale blue square on the floor, and she watched it and thought about the mayor, his past, and especially, his death.

And just as with her dad’s riddle, Echo knew the dog had something to do with it. She just didn’t know what.

Yet.