

Welcome to Camp Disaster

An Echo Shaw Mystery

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Chapter 9

The Geometry of Suicide

The dog barked and the model was shot. The dog barked and the mayor committed suicide. The dog barked and the model was shot. The dog barked and the mayor committed suicide.

Echo fell asleep repeating those sentences. By the next morning, they seemed ingrained in her subconscious. All through breakfast, they played across her mind like a recording on infinite loop. She picked at her food and puzzled over the odd comparison between the real and the fictitious, but no matter how many times she repeated it she couldn't see why the similarity bothered her. It just did.

As breakfast neared its chaotic end, with campers and counselors mobbing the garbage cans, Echo slipped her cell phone out of her pocket and turned it on. The familiar little icon of a person's silhouette and accompanying beep told her she had a message. She dialed, praying it would be her dad. It was – and he wanted her to call him back as soon as possible.

"I'm sorry, but I *have* to call my dad back," she said to Molly, who nodded and waved her off in the direction of the staff lounge.

Echo hurried toward the lounge, where she would actually be able to hear over the noise of trays clattering, counselors yelling directions, and

campers squealing. Heart pounding, she dialed. He answered on the second ring.

“Everything okay over there?” he said. “Your message sounded urgent.”

“It was.” She told him about the letters she’d been receiving since camp started, and the message on the most recent one. “I’m worried about you, Dad. You need to be careful.”

“More importantly, *you* do,” he said. “Don’t try to contact whoever’s writing these letters, tell Steve –”

“I did.”

“– and have him call the police if he hasn’t already. I’ll talk to my contact out there and make sure they step up your protection.”

The phrases “my contact” and “your protection” set off a red flag for Echo. “What are you talking about?”

“Well,” he said, clearing his throat. “I don’t know how much I should tell you. It’s probably safer if you don’t know very much.”

“Dad, come on, what, you have a PI trailing me or something?” He didn’t answer. “You *do* have a PI trailing me?”

“He’s someone I trust,” her dad said, “and I’ve asked him to keep an eye out for you.”

“Dad!” She couldn’t believe this. What was she, the President’s daughter, who needed to be monitored by the Secret Service? She couldn’t believe her dad was having her followed. Who knew what he’d seen over the last few weeks or how closely he’d been watching her. He might be reporting back her every move to her dad, including the fact that his only daughter was kissing boys.

Of course, now that she'd received the latest note, a private investigator tailing her might not be such a bad thing. Her curiosity overcame her temporary humiliation. "Is he someone at camp?"

"I really can't say who he is," her dad said. "But he's keeping an eye out for you. He lets me know that you're safe."

So he'd almost definitely reported back on her relationship with Neil. Great.

"If anything else happens," he said, "call me right away."

"Wait," she said quickly, recognizing his cue that he was about to get off the phone. "There's another thing." She explained about the mayor's death. "It sounds a lot like the riddle you sent me. Well, kind of, with the barking dog. I'm sure it's just coincidence, but –" She paused, not knowing exactly what she wanted to ask.

"That's definitely coincidence," he agreed. "For one thing, I threw the barking dog into the riddle to throw you off."

"Dad!" It was just like him to do something that underhanded. For years now, he'd been sending her riddles containing interesting but completely irrelevant details, red herrings meant to throw her off the scent of the real clues.

"For another thing," he went on, completely ignoring her mild reprimand, "the riddle's based on an old case I worked on three years ago. And before you start thinking the same people could be involved, the case was closed."

"Really?" Her heart beat faster. To her knowledge, he'd never given her riddles based on old cases before. Or if he had, she wouldn't know it. She started wondering what other riddles she'd solved over the years that

had some basis in reality. It gave her hope for a future as a forensic scientist or crime scene investigator.

“I’m telling you this only because we closed the case and prosecuted the people involved,” he said. “A modeling agency in New York turned out to be a front for a drug ring. The models and agents were helping launder drug money, and getting a nice commission in the process. One of the models was killed, and it was her murder that helped us break open the case.”

“How did she die?” Echo said.

“I can’t tell you that, because then you’ll have the answer to the riddle.”

She sighed and thought for a moment. “So the antidepressants had nothing to do with it.”

“No.”

“Were there cuts on her wrist?” she asked, searching vaguely for other signs of suicidal behavior.

“Yes.”

“Did she make them herself?” she asked, suddenly getting an idea.

“Uh-uh,” he said. “One question per conversation. You’ll have to email me your second question.”

“You’re so picky.”

“I know. I have to go, babe, but call me if anything happens, please, and be extra careful.”

“You too.” They said goodbye and hung up.

Back in the cafeteria, she found the campers lining up behind their counselors, ready to march out – though marching was more like group skipping – for their first class. She waved to Molly that she’d be there in a

second and jogged over to Neil, who was bringing up the tail end of his skewed line of ten boys.

From the front of the line, Eric was going over some announcements. “Hey,” she said to Neil. “I just talked to my dad.” In hushed tones, she recapped the conversation. Neil’s eyes widened when she explained the riddle had been based on an actual case, but he went pale when she mentioned the PI. “Jeez,” he said. “I’m never kissing *you* again.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I can’t believe he’s having me tailed.”

“Except now you’re being followed by some crazy person,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, except for that.” She sighed. “I don’t know. I wish I could find out who this PI was. I’d like to talk to him. See what he knows about my dad’s current case.”

“Why?”

“Don’t you think it’s weird that I got that note right after the mayor died?”

“Not really. I think it’s coincidence. Like the barking dog.”

“Oh, right. He admitted he just threw that in to confuse me. But he did tell me there were cuts on the model’s wrists. He wouldn’t say over the phone if she made them herself or not.”

“I’m confused,” he said. “Are we talking about the riddle, or the real life case?”

“The riddle,” she said, but she didn’t know anymore which one she was talking about, or what was real.

The rest of the day was filled with activity, but Echo did manage to fill Molly in on the details of her conversation with her dad. Once again,

Molly deemed the barking dog similarity a coincidence and said that Echo was fixated. She seemed relieved, however, to know that Echo was being tailed by a PI. “At least you won’t die without someone knowing about it.”

“Thanks a lot,” said Echo. “It’s helpful knowing you think I’m going to die. So can I borrow your master key again?”

Molly clapped her hand over her lanyard protectively. “For what?”

“To do more research.” She felt slightly annoyed that Molly would even have to ask. “I have to find out more about my dad’s old case.”

“Why?”

“Because it might help me solve the riddle.”

“Shouldn’t you be trying to figure out who the PI is? Or maybe just figure out how to stay away from whoever’s sending you those creepy letters?”

“There’s nothing I can do about that,” pointed out Echo. “I don’t have any clues to go on. All I have is the riddle.”

“Fine,” sighed Molly. “But if you get caught, I swear, I know nothing. Nothing.”

“Deal.”

Echo caught up with Neil again at dinner, expecting he would be all for a second late-night excursion now that they’d done it once and gotten away with it. Instead, he refused to help her. “No, absolutely, not happening,” he said stubbornly, when Echo suggested they do a little research.

“So you’re just going to leave me to wander the woods by myself?” she said, trying to guilt trip him into helping her. “What if whoever wants to hurt my dad follows me and kidnaps me, or kills me? It’ll be all your fault because you weren’t there to protect me.”

“No, it won’t be, because it’s not going to happen, because you’re not going,” he said. “Period.”

“I’m not your kid,” she said. “You can’t just order me around.”

“Echo.” He grabbed both of her hands and looked pleadingly at her with his huge brown puppy eyes. It was almost enough to make her want to listen. “Please don’t do this.”

“I’ll think about it,” she said softly, pulling her gaze from his.

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

Before he could have a chance to see the stubbornness etched into her face, she hurried back to her table. She knew already what her decision would be, but she assuaged her temporary guilt by telling herself she hadn’t really lied to Neil. She’d promised to think about it, and she did. All through dinner, she debated whether she would be putting herself in danger by venturing out alone late at night. Ultimately, though, she reasoned that whoever was leaving the notes didn’t wish to harm her, because He/She had walked into her cabin and left the one note on her pillow, and if He/She knew where Echo slept, then He/She could have just waited for her to get back and killed her in person. How else would you kill someone besides in person, she thought wryly. But the letter-writer definitely seemed interested in scaring her, not attacking her. She could live with that. She didn’t like it, but she could deal.

So at midnight, an hour after curfew, she slipped Molly’s lanyard around her neck and snuck out of the cabin. As she stepped out the door, she shivered a little. A light wind whispered through the trees, rattling leaves and brushing branches. The woods now looked darker and a little more forbidding without someone else to walk through them with her. But

she was an outdoorsy girl. She was from Colorado. She'd camped in bear country with her dad. So she took a deep breath and set out along the path.

Along the way, Echo distracted herself from her pounding heart and the strange noises she heard about every five seconds by thinking about the three puzzles which were intertwined in her mind. She had her dad's riddle, which she was on the verge of solving. His old case on which it was based, which apparently held the key. And the mayor's death, the detail of the barking dog very similar to her dad's riddle.

So it all came back to her dad's riddle. Somewhere in there was one thread which, if pulled, would unravel the whole mess and reveal something. She didn't know what, but she felt in her gut that the three cases were linked.

Something snapped behind her. It sounded like a twig someone had stepped on, and that made her think of someone following her. Heedless of the attention she might draw, she shrieked and started running down the path. She couldn't tell if anyone or anything was following her, because she herself was making so much noise, not to mention the wind overhead.

She emerged from the woods a few minutes later and dashed across the clearing toward Kootenay Lodge. Flattening her back against the wall, she stared across the clearing at the woods, waiting for someone – a bear, the PI, the letter writer, a serial killer with a claw for a hand – to lurch out of the woods toward her. No one did. She waited. The wind calmed, and the moon and stars soothed her with their gentle light.

After a few minutes, she unlocked the side cafeteria door, opened it, and took a deep breath. She still had to face the gauntlet of the dark cafeteria and then the eerie lounge. With the many cafeteria windows, she couldn't afford to turn on any lights.

“You can do this,” she whispered. “It’s just the stupid cafeteria. You’ve eaten here a hundred times.”

She shut the door behind her. Flipping open her cell phone for a little bit of light, she began to cross the dark room. The tiny pool of bluish light fell on ordinary-looking bits of fake tiled floor and brown Formica tabletop. But beyond the weak light, everything took on ominous silhouettes and faded into total darkness, turning the greasy cafeteria into a cavernous void.

Somewhere in the building, something creaked. The wind, she told herself, just the wind. She started power-walking and humming the first song she could think of. It was “Jingle Bells.”

She made it to the staff lounge and shut the doors behind her with a bang. Then she crossed to the computers. Though the electronic blue glow provided a little bit of comfort and normalcy to the room, it felt creepy sitting by herself with her back turned to the doors. What if someone burst in? But her curiosity was stronger than her fear.

She went to Google and began to search for an article about her dad’s old case. Surely a modeling agency fronting for a drug ring would have been big enough news to make the papers, though she didn’t remember reading anything about it – and she’d been reading the paper since she was eight. But maybe the DEA had kept it away from the media somehow, or maybe her dad had just hidden that particular edition of the *Denver Post*.

After several tries, she located a *New York Times* article from 2003 announcing that a drug ring had been busted. A New York modeling agency, Darkfire, was forced to close when police arrested several of its models and agents, who were accused of various felonies related to their alleged involvement with a drug ring. Her dad hadn’t told her the whole story; it wasn’t just money-laundering, a couple of the agents and models

were also accused of racketeering and drug trafficking. A 2004 article announced that all parties had been found guilty and sentenced to various terms in prison, except one model who had somehow plea-bargained her way into hefty fines, mandatory rehab, and community service. Both articles referenced the death of another Darkfire model, “whose murder helped alert authorities to the presence of the drug ring,” but didn’t say how she died.

Echo searched again and located another article about the model’s death. *Suicide turns to murder in Darkfire model’s case*, it was titled. As she read the article, her pulse quickened. The model’s death, which had first been ruled a suicide, had been declared a murder after an autopsy revealed skin under her fingernails that didn’t match her own DNA, and the medical examiner pointed out that the cuts on the model’s wrist were only superficial and not indicative of suicide. “They were closer to what a cutter or self-mutilator would do,” an investigator was quoted as saying, “not what someone who was truly suicidal would probably do, which is to slash her wrists vertically.”

“That’s it,” gasped Echo. The cuts on the model’s wrists hadn’t been made by her – and what tipped off the police is they were the wrong kind of cuts. It was just the kind of detail her dad would glom onto and use to confuse her.

She found yet another article, written just after the Darkfire group’s arrest, which noted that DNA from skin samples under the dead model’s fingernails had been linked to someone at the agency. This article also mentioned that Darkfire was owned by City First Consultants, a subsidiary of Elan Communications.

“Wait a minute,” she whispered. Elan Communications was the company the mayor had worked for.

She did another half hour of research trying to find out how the two companies were connected, but nothing else turned up. At one point she found links to the web sites for Darkfire Models and City First Consultants, but the links were broken. *Page not found*. When she searched for these companies on the Elan Communications web site, there was no mention of them. Apparently Elan Communications had distanced itself as far as possible from the debacle.

She’d been right, Echo thought as she logged out of the computer. Her dad’s old case and the mayor’s death had to be connected – somehow. Her friends would tell her the agency being owned by the same company was just a coincidence, but maybe from too many years of solving her dad’s riddles, she no longer believed in coincidence.

She snuck out of the lounge, crept through the cafeteria, and dashed down the path through the woods. She’d never been so glad to reach her cabin.

As she lay down to sleep, Echo thought she saw a shadow pass by one of the small windows. She sat up in alarm, but it wasn’t there.

Crossing to the window, she looked out onto the little clearing around the cabin. Nothing. She even stepped outside and walked all the way around the cabin. There was absolutely nothing there. Her imagination, no doubt from one too many trips through the woods. She lay back down and fell asleep.

The next morning at breakfast, Julie asked casually, “Did you see the ghost?”

Echo stopped with her fork halfway to her mouth. “What ghost, honey?”

“The ghost,” said Julie, as if there couldn’t possibly be any other ghost and Echo should know which ghost she was talking about. “The one that was walking around our cabin.”

“Oh, no, that was me,” said Echo, relieved to have found a logical explanation. “I was walking around the cabin.”

“Not you, silly,” said Julie. “It was after you came back.”

“From the bathroom,” supplied Echo. “I went to the bathroom.” She glanced at Molly, who was thankfully absorbed in drizzling syrup over another camper’s pancakes. If Molly heard this conversation, she’d know immediately where Echo had really been.

The little girl shook her head. “You were in the bathroom a *long* time.”

Echo quickly changed the subject off her late night excursion. “So there was a ghost?”

“Yeah, he walked by our window,” said Julie, not seeming at all scared.

“Like how many times?”

The little girl shrugged.

“Well what did he look like?”

“I couldn’t see, it was too dark. I could just see his head.” She meant his silhouette, Echo figured.

“Weren’t you scared?”

“Oh, no,” said Julie. “I talk to ghosts all the time. My grandma’s a ghost.”

“Uh-huh,” said Echo, vaguely worried about the little girl, but also worried about the shadow she’d seen pass by the window. So it hadn’t been her imagination, not unless she and Julie were having the exact same hallucination at the same time.

After breakfast, she asked Molly about it. “Did you see anyone?”

“No.” Molly looked scared. “I was out like a light. Echo, what if he’d gotten in?”

“He wouldn’t,” Echo assured her. “Those windows are small.” But she was thinking the same thing.

During morning soccer class, she stood on the sidelines, watching but not absorbing any of the skills her girls were learning. She kept thinking about everything. There was the mysterious “ghost” from last night – whoever that was. The letter writer would be her first guess, but why would He/She just skulk around the cabin instead of dropping a note? It seemed uncharacteristic. Of course, it could have been the PI, checking in on her. That seemed likely, actually, and the thought relaxed her a little.

Then there was the riddle. She knew how the model had died now. But it was the real model who’d died, or rather her modeling agency, that now bugged Echo. Its connection to Elan Communications seemed too odd to be chance.

She pondered several theories, all based purely on speculation and the premise that the mayor’s death was connected to the Darkfire case. Was it possible the mayor had committed suicide because he was one of the money launderers, but he got away with it and felt so guilty he killed himself? No. He hadn’t been mentioned in the articles, and everyone except the model had been convicted, so unless he’d somehow wormed his way out of an arrest, that theory was out.

Maybe someone he knew at Darkfire or City First Consultants had gone to jail. Maybe he had been a really high profile executive and had provided inside information to the police or the DEA. Maybe this information helped bust the case open and he felt so bad about sending one of his friends or colleagues to jail that he killed himself...? No. Why would he have gone on to a career as the much-loved mayor of Crystalvale? A suicidal person didn't do that. And that was another problem. Judging by the article in the *Crystalvale Herald*, the mayor had lived a full life, completely at odds with suicidal tendencies.

It was possible, of course, that his suicide had nothing to do with Elan Communications. In fact, it was more than likely. Who knew, maybe the happy-mayor thing was all a façade for the deep sadness he felt at midlife following his divorce from Rayna's mom. But she couldn't let go of the possible connection, if only because she wanted the two cases to be connected. She'd been solving fake mysteries all her life. Now she had a chance for a real mystery to happen, and it was just out of her grasp because she couldn't piece the details together. Or she didn't have enough information to do so.

She also still thought it was odd that she'd gotten the note right after the mayor's death. And if his death was connected to Elan Communications and to her dad's old case, that meant in a strange way, his death was also connected to her dad. Maybe that's what confused her the most. Why would the letter writer suggest her dad needed to be careful? He was in San Diego, not in B.C.

Wasn't he?

"Oh, no," she whispered.

Everything okay over there? he'd asked her on the phone. A small detail, but he should have said *up there* because San Diego was so far south of B.C. Unless her dad wasn't really in San Diego. What if that was just a front because the operation was so dangerous that he had to cover up his whereabouts?

If that was the case, then her dad had to be very careful indeed.

And so did she.

She didn't know what to make of any of it. But a trip to her mailbox at lunch almost pushed all thoughts of the "ghost," the riddle, the model, and Elan Communications from Echo's mind.

Another typed, unsigned letter waited in her mailbox. This one read, *What do you know?*