

Something's
at
Ash Lake
Fishy

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An Amber and Elliot Mystery



Chapter One

That Sinking Feeling

Eugene Sharkman, *a.k.a.* Jaws, hitched up his plaid shorts and surveyed the two dozen campers scattered around the computer lab. He recognized several of them from his classes at Ash Grove Junior High, including two of his grade seven students, Amber Mitchell and Liz Elliot.

“I’m pleased to see you’re enjoying your first afternoon at Ash Lake’s computer camp,” he called above the din. “But remember, the next two weeks aren’t going to be all fun and games. Programming starts tomorrow!”

A collective groan rose from the room.

“That’s it. I’m out of here.” Amber shut down the computerized quest they’d all been on and got up to leave.

“Hang on a minute,” Liz called, eyes firmly fixed on the screen in front of her. “I’m twelve hundred points ahead!”

Amber ran her fingers through her copper-red curls and grinned. “Too late, Elliot. Looks like you’ve just lost your last player.”

“Rats!” Liz cried in dismay, as a miniature warrior tumbled from sight. Logging off, she raced to catch up with her best friend and together they headed outside to explore their new surroundings.

The camp had been built years ago in the middle of a thick forest of pine, surrounded by stands of white ash that gave the lake its name. As the girls followed the well-worn dirt paths that criss-crossed through the trees connecting the various buildings and the beach, they could see the vibrant blue of Ash Lake shimmering ahead.

“I definitely like it here,” declared Liz, as they stepped from the shade into the full glare of the sun.

“Me too.” Amber pulled a tube of sunscreen from her pocket and slathered some of it on her nose. “I just wish my freckles would stop dividing and multiplying.”

“What do you think happened to Craig and Jonathan?” Liz tightened the elastic holding her dark hair in a ponytail as they plowed their way through the soft sand.

“Don’t worry, they’ll show. No one turns down an opportunity like this.”

Eastern Technology, one of the biggest high-tech firms in the country, owned the computer camp. And Craig’s father, Robert Nicholson, was one of the company vice-presidents.

“Craig’s probably giving Jonathan the royal tour.” Amber bent down and tested the cool water with her fingers. Tiny pebbles glistened invitingly beneath the surface. “Let’s go for a swim,” she suggested.

“Didn’t you see the sign?”

“What sign?”

“The one that says no unsupervised swimming.” Liz pointed to a white board with red lettering affixed to the base of the lifeguard’s chair.

“Does it say anything about boating?” Amber asked, her eyes on a small flotilla of colorful paddleboats bobbing gently at the dock nearby.

“Nope.”

“Then let’s go.”

Liz hesitated a moment. “Shouldn’t we have life jackets?”

“It’s only a paddleboat. What could possibly go wrong?”

Shrugging, Liz followed her friend onto the wooden dock. There were about a dozen paddleboats in all. Amber chose a yellow one and hopped aboard.

“How do you work these things, anyway?” Liz asked as she cautiously climbed onto the seat beside her friend.

“Easy, it’s like riding a bike. You just pedal and use this stick to steer.” Amber grabbed the rudder in her left hand. “Okay, go.”

The two girls pedaled furiously. The boat lurched forward and then stopped abruptly.

“Stupid thing must be broken,” muttered Amber, face flushed with exertion.

“Perhaps if we untied it...”

“Aagh!”

Amber climbed back onto the dock, released the boat from its mooring, and took a flying leap onto the seat beside Liz. “Okay. Now we’re ready.” They started pedaling again.

“Just like riding a bike, is it?” Liz demanded several minutes later. “Four feet and three crashed boats. I think we need training wheels.”

“Don’t worry,” Amber reassured her, “I’ve got the hang of it now.” She swung the rudder to the right, narrowly missing another sailboat.

Liz giggled and pedaled harder. They zigzagged past the roped off swimming area and headed for open water.

It was definitely cooler out on the lake. They stopped pedaling and put their feet up on the fiberglass prow. Amber closed her eyes and let the boat drift idly.

“This is the life,” sighed Liz.

“You said it,” Amber agreed. “No parents, no brothers, and no one to bother us.”

“And no cell phones,” Liz added.

“Don’t remind me. How am I going to stay connected?” Amber grumbled. “They advertise a technology camp, but don’t allow phones.”

“I’m definitely not going to miss them,” Liz said. “My mother’s on hers all the time.... What’s

that noise? Sounds like someone crying in the distance.”

“Probably a loon or something.”

Liz shielded her eyes from the late afternoon sun and peered across the sparkling lake. She could see a canoe about half a mile away, with two very familiar paddlers wearing bright orange and yellow life jackets.

“Hey, look! We’ve got company. It’s Craig and Jonathan, and they’re acting very strange.”

Amber opened her eyes and sat up. The two boys had raised their paddles and were gesturing wildly.

“I didn’t think they’d be *that* glad to see us here,” she commented. “They’re even turning around.”

Sure enough, the canoe had swung about and was heading towards them. Jonathan Weiss, straight up as usual, sat in the prow of the boat, with Craig Nicholson providing the muscle behind him.

“There’s a white thing in the water up ahead. Do you think that could be what they’re yelling about?” Liz pointed to a white plastic cone bobbing in the water a short distance away.

“It’s just a marker,” answered Amber. “Probably some underwater rocks there. We’ll steer around it.” She moved the rudder to the right and they began pedaling in a wide arc around the buoy.

“Amber, look out!”

Jagged rocks suddenly loomed beneath the surface just ahead of them. Amber viciously cranked the rudder.

“The brakes! Put on the brakes!”

“What brakes? Boats don’t have brakes.”

Crunch!

The fiberglass hull dragged slowly across the ragged submerged rocks. The boat lurched, came to a momentary stop, then gently drifted free.

Liz cleared her throat. “I think we have a problem.”

“No kidding.” Amber watched as the water slowly rose up the soles of her sneakers. “I have a sinking feeling we’re about to go down with the ship.”

“That’s not funny,” snapped Liz. “We’ve only been at this camp two hours and twenty-five minutes, and already we’re in trouble.”

“Some people might say that’s an improvement,” Amber retorted hotly.

They looked down at the water seeping in, looked up at each other, and then burst out laughing.

“Do you remember the time Lindsay Watson said she’d give you a quarter if you spit on Jane Dobbs’s shoes?” Liz chuckled.

“Yeah,” said Amber wistfully. “It was the high point of my primary school career.” She laughed. “I’ve never seen Dobbsie so mad. She’s such a snot-nose.”

“I’m just glad she’s not here to see this,” said Liz. “She’d be on our case about it the whole vacation.”

“Don’t you think there’s something fishy about this?” Amber swung her arm in the direction of the plastic cone. “The marker is over there, but the rocks are over here.”

Liz shrugged. “Maybe it drifted loose.”

“Ahoy there!” shouted Craig. “Having a little trouble?”

The sun had bleached Craig’s hair a pale blonde, while Jonathan’s dark curls had grown noticeably longer since the end of school.

“The dynamic duo strikes again,” called Jonathan as they drew closer.

“Yeah, a rock!” snickered Craig.

“You should have warned us!” Amber told them.

“What did you think we were waving and yelling for?” asked Jonathan, drawing his paddle from the water.

Amber stared down at her wet sneakers. Liz focused on the far shoreline.

“You know what I think, Jonathan,” Craig said mischievously. “*I* think that *they* think that we like them.”

“Listen, you idiot! While you’re having your little joke, we’re taking on water!”

“If we don’t get to shore in a hurry,” added Liz, “we’re going to sink.”

“You *can* swim, can’t you?”

“Of course we can swim,” said Amber through clenched braces. “Come on, Elliot, let’s head for the dock.”

“You guys don’t have a bailing can, do you?” Liz asked calmly.

“Elliot!”

“Just thought I’d ask.”

Amber turned the rudder and the girls began to pedal again, steering a wide, erratic course around the rocks. The water in the boat had risen past their ankles, making it harder and harder to pedal.

“This’ll be the shortest camp holiday on record,” huffed Liz. “I don’t think my allowance will cover a boat.”

“Then pedal harder! If this thing sinks, we might as well pack up and head for home.”

The boys slipped alongside in their canoe.

“Camp just wouldn’t be the same without you,” observed Craig. “Better, maybe.”

Both boys laughed. The girls stopped pedaling and glared at them.

“Still, the boat’s worth saving,” added Jonathan. “We’d better tow them to shore.”

The boys maneuvered in front of the laboring boat. Craig grabbed the mooring line and tied it to the stern of the canoe.

“You two keep pedaling and we’ll paddle,” he instructed.

At first they barely moved. Then as they gained momentum, the paddleboat wallowed after the green canoe.

“This is humiliating,” muttered Liz.

They had almost made it to shore when a young woman dressed in the camp T-shirt, khaki shorts, and a baseball cap walked onto the beach. She paused for a moment, staring out at the two boats and their occupants, then strode out onto the dock.

“Oh, no,” groaned Liz. “Who’s that?”

“Kelly Slemko, the athletic director,” said Craig over his shoulder.

“Is that good or bad?” asked Amber.

Jonathan shrugged. “She seemed okay to me.”

“What’s going on here?” demanded the director as the paddleboat bumped gently into the dock.

“We, uh, hit a rock,” Liz confessed. “Craig and Jonathan helped us in.”

“Are you all right?”

The girls nodded. “Shouldn’t those rocks be marked though?” asked Amber. “We could have really run into trouble.”

Kelly stared down at her in surprise. “All the dangerous rocks in the lake are marked.”

“Those ones weren’t.”

“That’s ridiculous. I checked them only yesterday.” The athletic director looked at Craig and Jonathan for verification.

“Amber’s right,” Jonathan told her as he and Craig put up their paddles and clambered onto the dock. “The buoys are all out of position.”

“We tried to warn them,” said Craig.

Kelly Slemko turned back to Amber and Liz. “Jonathan and Craig asked my permission to take

out the canoe,” she said pointedly, “but I don’t remember giving it to you two.”

“We, uh, didn’t know we needed permission,” offered Liz.

“Haven’t you read the camp handbook yet?”

“We just got here,” Amber protested.

“We were going to get to it tonight...” Liz faltered.

“What are your names, and what cabins are you in?”

“Amber Mitchell, Cabin Three.”

“Liz Elliot, Cabin Three, too.”

“Well, Amber and Liz, when you have read the handbook you’ll know that no boats are to be taken out without permission.” Kelly paused and looked each of them in the eyes in turn. “And *not* without life jackets.”

“Oh.”

Amber opened her mouth to protest, but thought better of it. The athletic director was right. Going without life jackets had been dumb.

The paddleboat was now almost completely immersed. Kelly pursed her lips. “Just get this boat out of the lake before it sinks, girls. And for your sakes, I hope the crack in the hull can be fixed.” She gave them a brisk nod and left the dock, heading up the path through the trees.

“I’d feel better if she had yelled at us,” said Liz.

“Me, too.” Amber stood up, water sloshing around her legs. “These boats probably cost a lot of money.”

The two girls slipped over the side and into the waist-high water. With the boys pulling on the paddleboat's mooring line, they managed to push it out of the water and up onto the beach.

Jonathan prodded the hull of the damaged boat with his foot. "It's not that bad. Fiberglass can be patched and repainted. Shouldn't cost too much."

"I hope not," Craig said. "My dad told me if the camp doesn't at least break even this year, the company will sell it." He bent down and fingered the jagged edge of the crack.

"But that's crazy," interjected Amber. "The camp's part of Eastern Technology's educational program. And we get a course credit for it."

"They still have to make money," Jonathan pointed out.

Liz pulled off her wet sneakers and tossed them onto the beach. "They wouldn't send us home for this, would they?"

Jonathan put his arm around her reassuringly. "I'm sure that as long as the vice-president of finance doesn't know about you two, it'll be okay, won't it, Craig?"

"Maybe if I put in a good word for them," drawled Craig. He straightened up just as Amber's water-logged sneaker flew across the prow of the paddleboat.

"I think it's time to go, Craig," advised Jonathan.

"Yeah, it must be almost dinnertime." Craig gave the girls a last salute, then the two boys trotted

across the beach in the direction of the cabins, leaving the girls fuming in their wake.

“Those guys really irritate me,” Amber grunted as she and Liz heaved the boat over. The water sloshed out and made brown sugar patterns before disappearing into the sand.

Liz leaned against the hull of the overturned boat and stared after the boys. “I think someone should take the wind out of their sails, don’t you, Amber?”

“The sooner the better.”

Liz gave her a brisk nod. “Agreed. Tonight after campfire.”

Amber retrieved her sneaker, and the two girls picked their way carefully back to the camp in their bare feet.

Chapter Two

Things That Go Bump In The Night

By the time Amber and Liz got back to their cabin, all the other bunks had been taken. Backpacks and sleeping bags lay every which way around the deserted room. The girls quickly changed their wet shorts and socks, then set out for the dining hall.

“I hope we meet the rest of our cabinmates at dinner,” Amber said.

“If they’re all as nice as Cathy Chung, we’re good.”

“Is she the girl whose score you were trying to beat?”

“Yeah...but I like her anyway,” said Liz.

They jogged down the dirt pathway to the clearing where the main wooden camp buildings stood. As they passed the new computer lab, they noticed a dark-haired man replacing a screen on one of the windows.

“Who’s he?”

Liz shrugged. “Probably maintenance.”

A larger building housed the kitchen, dining hall and camp offices. The fragrant aroma of Italian cooking filled the air around it.

Amber breathed in deeply. “Something sure smells good.”

They pounded eagerly up the steps and across the wide porch to join the other campers in the dining room’s noisy food line. Their cabin counselor, Michelle, was just ahead of them.

“Where have you two been?”

“Exploring,” said Amber. She sniffed appreciatively and picked up a tray and utensils. “Mmm, I thought camp food was supposed to be awful.”

“Not here,” said Michelle. “Mrs. Dainty’s a fantastic cook.”

“Hey, look at this,” Liz interjected. “There’s whipped cream on everything.”

“All right. Calorie city! I love it.”

“Tell Mrs. Dainty,” Michelle pointed down the line to where a short, very round woman was serving up platefuls of food to the campers ahead of them.

The girl behind Liz leaned forward. “Rumor has it that Mrs. Dainty used to be a cook on a cargo ship.”

“Really?”

The other camper nodded. “She even has a wrinkled old rose tattooed on her arm.”

Liz’s eyes shot to the front of the line. “Which arm?”

“Left.”

“Say when,” the cook ordered a moment later as she heaped Liz’s plate with lasagna.

But Liz didn’t hear a word. She was mesmerized by the tattoo just visible beneath the sleeve on the plump arm in front of her.

Mrs. Dainty paused. “Are you sure you’re going to eat this much, dear? You can always come back for seconds.”

“No...I mean, yes. I was daydreaming,” Liz stammered. The tattoo was so faded, she thought Mrs. Dainty must have had it for a long, long time.

“The first day is always confusing.” The cook smiled and handed Liz the plate. “Away you go.”

Liz nodded, then followed Amber to an empty table. They plunked their trays down and sat on the benches facing each other. Amber took a bite of her garlic bread and surveyed the scene.

“Anybody look familiar?” Liz asked.

Amber shook her head. “Just a few kids I saw this afternoon.”

They were halfway through their lasagna when Cathy Chung showed up. “Can we sit with you?”

“Sure, sit down,” Liz said. “Who’s we?”

Before Cathy could answer, an immaculate, dark-haired girl slid her tray onto the table.

“Amber, Liz, I’d like you to meet Jane Dobbs,” said Cathy. “She’s in our cabin.”

“Jane!” Amber’s freckles popped. “What are you doing here?”

“Nice to see you, too, Amber.” Jane sat down beside Liz. “Hi, Elliot. How are you doing?”

“You’re in Cabin Three? With us?” Liz squeaked.

Jane turned to Cathy. “I’m really glad you’re here, Cathy. When I found out that Amber and Liz were in my cabin, I was afraid I wouldn’t have anyone intelligent to talk to.”

Amber sputtered. Liz grabbed her arm. “Save it,” she hissed as Craig and Jonathan sauntered up to the table.

“Ladies,” Craig nodded to Amber and Liz, then leaned on the table facing Jane and Cathy. “Did the girls tell you about their little episode on the lake this afternoon?”

“They were just about to.” Jane locked eyes with Amber.

“It’s nothing you’d be interested in,” Amber muttered.

“Actually,” Jonathan cleared his throat, “we really came over to deliver a message.” He paused and looked almost apologetic.

“Well?” prompted Liz.

“Kelly Slemko had to tell the camp director about the boat. Mr. Kincaid wants to see you after dinner in his office.”

Jane delicately tore a piece off her garlic bread and popped it in her mouth. “You two just can’t stay out of trouble, can you?”

It was all Amber could do to keep from smearing her lemon meringue pie all over Jane's prissy face.

They dawdled over their dessert until the dining room was practically empty.

"I don't think we can put this off much longer, Amber."

Amber wiped the last crumbs of pie from her face and dropped her napkin on the tray. "Okay. Let's go."

They deposited their dishes on the trolley by the kitchen and crossed the hall to the camp office. *WALDO KINCAID - CAMP DIRECTOR* was stenciled on the frosted glass of the middle door. Amber knocked. No answer. She tried again.

"Now what do we do?" asked Liz when there was no reply.

Amber pushed on the door. It swung open.

"I don't know." She peeked into the room. Nobody was inside. "Hey, look, there's a map of Ash Lake." She pointed across the room.

Liz followed Amber inside. The director's office was sparsely furnished with a metal desk, two chairs, and a filing cabinet. A bulletin board with copies of camp schedules and a large calendar hung on one wall.

Directly in front of them, a colorful map of the lake and campground took up the whole wall. Blue pins marked the buildings; red and black pins stuck out in a random pattern across the map.

Amber crossed the room and jabbed her finger under a white pin on the blue lake. The white pins must be the markers.”

“We were right,” exclaimed Liz. She pinpointed the exact spot where they’d run afoul that afternoon. “There should have been a buoy right there.”

“Which is the only reason you haven’t been suspended from this camp!”

The girls whirled around.

A scrawny, slightly balding man stared at them from the office door. He wore a camp T-shirt, and his glasses hung from a string about his neck.

Amber disliked him on sight. “You must be Mr. Kincaid,” she said.

“That’s right.” He strode into the room. “And you’re Amber Mitchell and Liz Elliot. May I ask why you are in my office?”

“You sent for us.”

“But why are you *in* my office?”

“The, uh, door was open and we saw the map...”
Liz stammered.

“Next time, wait out in the hall.”

Amber was tempted to salute, but settled for a mumbled, “Yes, sir,” instead.

“Kids like you are all the same,” Kincaid barked. “You’re at *my* camp now, and I don’t have time for your amateur theatrics.”

“But what about the buoy?” persisted Amber. “Shouldn’t you find out who moved it?”

“That’s my business, not yours.” The camp director glared at her, then sniffed loudly. “What’s that smell?”

Liz flushed. “Our sneakers. They’re still wet.”

Kincaid closed his eyes momentarily and shook his head. “Elliot, Elliot, that name sounds familiar!”

“Her mother’s the mayor of Ash Grove,” Amber snapped.

“Really?” Kincaid looked at Liz with interest. “I wonder what she’d have to say about your behavior?”

Liz stared at him stonily.

“Yes, well, I’ll have our maintenance man take a look at the paddleboat in the morning,” said Kincaid. “In the meantime, your boating privileges are withdrawn.”

“But....”

“But what?”

Neither girl said anything.

“Then I suggest you join your cabinmates. The campfire is about to begin.”

Kelly Slemko held a match under the dry kindling. A moment later the campfire blazed and sparked upward into the starlit sky. The campers, sitting on logs around the bonfire, cheered loudly.

“You’ve all met your cabin counselors by now, so for the very few of you who haven’t wandered into the computer lab yet, I’d like to introduce our

technology director, Mr. Eugene Sharkman! Mr. Sharkman?”

Jaws stepped out of the shadows and into the light of the bonfire. He was wearing a glow-in-the-dark T-shirt. A loud cheer went up.

Kelly continued to make introductions. There were cheers for Mrs. Dainty, but only polite attention and a few subdued hoots for Mr. Kincaid’s welcome and rundown of camp rules.

“Each day’s schedule will be posted in the morning before breakfast,” he told the campers. “With twelve cabins and seventy-two campers, we can’t all take part in the same activity at the same time.” He paused and looked around the circle of faces. “There are also rules regarding your free time. For instance, there is to be no swimming or boating without permission.”

“Could he mean us?” Amber whispered to Liz.

“Shh!”

“The tuckshop,” Kincaid went on, “is operated by our own Mrs. Dainty. It will be open every afternoon between two and four. It has a fine selection of healthful snacks.” He flashed a thin smile around the campfire. “Are there any questions...? Okay, I’ll turn the ceremonies back to Kelly and we’ll have some fun.”

“Fun?” grumbled Amber. “The man doesn’t know the meaning of the word.”

“It’s in the book,” Liz told her. “Rule 5, subsection 12 – *Campers must enjoy themselves at all times.*”

The cabin counselors stepped forward, and for the next forty minutes entertained the campers with skits and a singsong.

“All right, everybody,” Kelly called out when the last warble had died down. “A special treat! Hot dogs and marshmallows.”

“Okay, Liz.” Amber’s eyes sparkled in the firelight. “It’s payback time. Everyone is busy eating.”

“Let’s go,” Liz agreed.

They glanced across the campfire to where Craig and Jonathan were roasting hot dogs with their cabinmates. Silently, Liz and Amber backed away until they were hidden in the deep shadows of the trees that surrounded the clearing.

Cathy Chung saw them leave as she reached for another hot dog. “Now what are they up to?”

“Who knows? They thrive on melodrama,” said Jane. Half a moment later she got up and made her way around the circle to where Craig and Jonathan were sitting with their friends.

“Sure is dark,” Liz murmured, stopping to take stock of their surroundings.

“Oomph,” Amber grunted as she banged into the other girl. “Warn me if you stop. I can’t see anything. This is you, isn’t it?”

Liz giggled. “Okay, what’s the plan?”

Amber leaned over and whispered in Liz’s ear.

“Oh, Amber! That’s so rotten – I love it!”

“There’s a light in the kitchen. Let’s go.” Giggling and stumbling, they headed towards the dining hall.

“Is anyone around?” Liz asked, peering into the shadows of the dimly lit building. She looked back at the campfire flickering against the night sky.

“Looks like the inside kitchen door is open,” Amber said softly. Cautiously, they inched along the side of the building. Amber reached out and tentatively pushed on the screen door.

“It must be latched from the inside,” Liz said.

“No problem.” Amber pulled out a Swiss Army knife from her pocket.

“Where’d you get that?”

“My dad gave it to me,” Amber explained as she opened the blade. “He figures we’re in the wilds or something. It even has a can opener – and a corkscrew. I wonder what he thinks I’ll use a corkscrew for?”

“Will you hurry up! What if Kincaid walks by?”

“Right.” Carefully, Amber slid the thin blade between the door and the frame and lifted the latch. She closed her camp knife and pushed on the door again.

Squeeeaaak!

Liz shivered involuntarily.

The steel counters and commercial appliances gleamed in the light of the overhead kitchen lamp. “The fridge,” Amber whispered, and pointed.

They hurried to the huge double refrigerator at the far end of the kitchen and yanked it open.

“There’s enough here to feed an army,” Liz said.

“Yes, but where’s the whipped cream?”

“There, behind the lettuce.” Liz lifted out one of several aerosol cans.

“Great.” Amber shut the door and they turned to go.

“*Amber!*” Liz clutched her friend’s arm. “Did you hear something?”

They stood perfectly still, ears straining, hearts thumping in the darkness. Suddenly, a harsh scrape came from the direction of Kincaid’s office.

“It’s Kincaid!” Liz hissed. “We’ve got to hide.”

“Quick, over there!” Amber pointed to a work table against the wall. They dove under and crouched in the shadows.

Several minutes dragged by. Then, “Amber,” whispered Liz, “Kincaid was still at the campfire when we left. How could he have gotten here before us?”

Amber frowned. “Then who’s in his office?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t care.”

“Elliot! What kind of attitude is that?”

“I call it my survivor instinct.”

Amber ignored her and began to crawl out from under the table.

“Wait!” Liz grabbed Amber’s shorts and hauled her back.

“Do you mind?”

“Shh!”

A shadow slipped across the floor. Soft footsteps sounded from the far side of the kitchen. The two girls cowered against the wall. They could see feet, then legs. Moonlight silhouetted a dark figure by the door.

Squeeeeeeaaak!

The prowler cursed softly as he slipped outside.

The girls' breath came in quiet gasps. “Let's get out of here,” Amber said frantically. They crawled out from under the table and headed for the door.

Squeeeeeeaaak! Bang!

Amber and Liz dove into the concealing shadows and leaned, panting, against a tree.

“Who do you think that was?”

“I don't know,” said Liz, grasping the whipped cream container tightly. “But whoever it was didn't want to be seen.”

The two girls stumbled through the trees, tripping over roots and snagging their shirts on branches.

“Revenge shouldn't be this difficult,” Liz grumbled. “Which cabin did you say they were in?”

Amber stopped and turned around. “I thought you knew.”

“Great!” said Liz. “We go to all this trouble and we don't even know which cabin they're in?”

“Cabin Seven,” said a male voice.

“Aagh!” Amber slumped against a tree. “I don't believe this. We're losing our touch.”

Craig and Jonathan appeared in the moonlight. Liz thrust the can of whipped cream behind her back.

“When we heard you’d left the campfire, it wasn’t hard to figure out you were up to something,” Craig told them. “Given your track record, we decided to investigate.”

“Good thing,” Jonathan added, “or you might be wandering around half the night looking for us.”

“I’d rather meet Bigfoot,” Amber muttered.

The next second, a branch cracked loudly in the brush beside them. Then a powerful flashlight snapped on, trapping their faces in a blinding beam.

“Hey!” Craig shouted. “Turn that off!” He made a grab for the light. Too late. The beam disappeared. Heavy footsteps crashed away through the brush.

Jonathan whistled softly. “What was that all about?”

None of them had the faintest idea.

As they headed back towards camp, the sound of a motorboat starting up drifted through the night air.

Chapter Three

Out On A Limb

The morning sun filtered through the leaves of an ash tree, casting a dappled pattern on the ground below. Amber shifted her weight and peered down at the deserted campsite.

“What time is it?” she whispered.

Liz checked her watch. “Nine forty-five. Cabin Seven should be finished helping in the kitchen any minute now.”

Amber patted the plastic bag full of water balloons. “Whoever said ‘revenge is sweet’ knew what they were talking about.”

Liz giggled. “I can’t wait to drop one right on Craig’s head. Three days of his smart cracks are all I can take.”

“Just don’t hit Irwin by mistake.”

“And cut off our candy supply? No way.”

Craig and Jonathan’s hefty new friend, Irwin Dexter, had a stash of chocolate bars under his bunk which he was willing to share – for a price.

“I wonder why the tuck shop only sells health food?” Liz puzzled. “If word of this gets out, no kid

in their right mind will come to this camp.”

“They’re not going to come anyway, when they hear about kitchen detail.”

The screen door of the dining hall slapped shut.

“Shh!” warned Liz. “Someone’s coming.”

“Good. One of these balloons is starting to leak.” A tiny stream of water had escaped and was forming a pool beside Amber’s leg.

“Oh, no! It’s Waldo!”

The camp director strode into the clearing, clipboard in hand.

“What’s he doing, Amber?”

“The box step, I think.”

Kincaid was taking long strides across the clearing, first one way, then another. At each turn he made a notation on his clipboard.

“No wonder everyone thinks he’s loonie,” declared Amber.

“Be quiet,” pleaded Liz. “He’s coming this way.”

Kincaid paced out the distance to their tree, stopped directly beneath them and took off his baseball cap. He was so close, Liz could practically count the thin red hairs on the top of his head. He added more figures to the notes on his clipboard, drew several rectangles, then studied them. From where Liz sat, it looked like a map of the campsite, only the buildings were in the wrong places.

She glanced at Amber to see what she made of the notes, but Amber was staring fascinated, as a

rivulet of water etched a path down her leg – on a direct course for Kincaid’s head!

The drop at the bottom got bigger and bigger. For a few agonizing seconds it hung in the air.

And then...*splat!*

Kincaid’s hand shot up and slapped the wet spot. “Darn birds,” he muttered, putting his hat back in place.

Liz held her breath. Amber clamped her free hand over her mouth and clung shaking to the tree. The water dripped slowly down the trunk. Finally, Kincaid finished writing on the clipboard and headed towards his office on the far side of the dining hall.

“Too bad it wasn’t really a bird.” Shaking with laughter, Liz collapsed back against the tree trunk.

“A giant bald eagle,” Amber hooted. “With diarrhea!”

“That’s gross!”

“Yeah, but you have to admit it’s hilarious.”

“Shh,” Liz said, “Here come the guys.”

Cabin Seven clomped down the steps of the dining hall past Kincaid and started across the clearing towards the computer lab.

“Okay, partner,” whispered Amber. “Do your stuff.” She passed over two full water balloons.

“Hey, Craig! Jonathan!” called Liz. “We need your help.”

The boys looked around.

“Where are you?” yelled Craig.

“Up here,” Liz wailed. “In the ash tree. I’m stuck...!”

The two boys broke away from their cabinmates and headed towards Liz’s voice.

“Is Amber with you?” Jonathan asked suspiciously.

Amber winked at Liz. “I’ve twisted my ankle,” she wailed.

The boys came closer.

“The suckers,” Amber whispered.

“If we rescue you again,” bartered Craig, “you have to take our next kitchen detail.”

“And do our laundry on Saturday,” added Jonathan. He stopped beneath the tree, arms folded over his chest.

“Over my dead body!” screamed Amber. She swung a balloon from behind her back and let fly. “*Hiiy ya!*”

The first balloon burst on Jonathan’s head. The second one landed in the dirt at his feet, splattering mud everywhere. Craig caught his in the face. Liz’s second balloon burst on his shoulder.

“We’ll get you!” he spluttered, scrubbing at his face.

But Amber and Liz had already swung down from the tree and were running as fast as they could for the computer lab.

“Good morning, girls,” Mr. Sharkman said as Amber and Liz slipped breathlessly into

the computer room. He was in his element, surrounded by an array of humming electronic equipment. Campers in Ash Lake Camp T-shirts were chatting and busily keying in their computer projects.

“Find yourself a place,” he instructed the late arrivals.

Amber and Liz sat down on either side of Cathy. “Did we miss anything?”

Cathy shook her head. “No. What did you do to Craig and Jonathan? They didn’t come in with the rest of the guys from Cabin Seven.”

“I think they’ll be a little late,” said Liz. “They had to go back to their cabin for some dry clothes.”

Cathy eyed her cabinmate. “Accident in the kitchen?”

“Not exactly.” Amber keyed in her password. “It was more like an ambush. Hey, what’s wrong with the computer?”

The room went deadly silent as one by one the monitors blinked out.

“Don’t panic, anyone,” said Mr. Sharkman. “It’s probably just a problem with the generator. Breaks down all the time.”

“And here I thought it was Liz and Amber’s fault,” muttered Jane to the boy beside her.