

**OUR
LAST
ECHOES**

We have retrieved the following file from Dr. Andrew Ashford. As before, audio and visual content has been transcribed, as original materials could not be removed without raising further suspicion.

Be aware that Dr. Ashford is aware of the interest in his work, though we do not believe that he has identified either you or our agent. Proceed with caution.

THE ASHFORD FILES

File #77

"The Disappearances
at Bitter Rock"

Bitter Rock, Alaska

June 2018

PART ONE

**THE FOLLY
OF THIS
ISLAND**

EXHIBIT A

Final Radio Broadcasts of the Ladontown Residents

From the island of Bitter Rock, Alaska

12:48 PM, SEPTEMBER 9, 1973

UNKNOWN: . . . if anyone's hearing this. This is [indistinct] of the Ladontown Fellowship on Bitter Rock. Our phone is out. The winds and rain are violent. Mist everywhere. Can't [indistinct] evacuate. Everyone on Belaya Skala has taken shelter in the church. I—

3:45 PM, September 9, 1973

UNKNOWN: Storm is continuing. Flooding is becoming a concern. We don't know if—

<Transmission cuts out. It resumes a few seconds later.>

UNKNOWN: We thought we were alone, but—

5:34 PM, September 9, 1973

UNKNOWN: There are figures in the mist. They're everywhere. Can anyone hear me? Is anyone there? You need to come for us.

<A long pause is interrupted by a distant rumbling.>

UNKNOWN: They have our voices.

12:03 AM, September 10, 1973

UNKNOWN: If anyone can hear me, do not come to Bitter Rock. Do not come to Belaya Skala. Do you hear? Don't come! Don't—

<Frantic voices shout in the background. There is a loud crack, like splitting wood.>

UNKNOWN: He's here. God help us. God help us, he's here!

1:13 AM, September 10, 1973

<At first there is only the sound of static crackling. And then labored breathing. A voice—perhaps the same one, but strained almost beyond recognition, speaks slowly.>

UNKNOWN: There is no salvation.

Note: Landontown was located on the island of Bitter Rock, Alaska. Thirty-one residents were present on September 7, 1973. Only Theresa Landon, wife of founder Cole Landon, was absent. Multiple attempts were made to respond to the final radio calls of the residents, but none of these attempts appear to have succeeded.

All 31 residents vanished without a trace. No further communication was received. No bodies were ever recovered.

They were not the first.

They would not be the last.

INTERVIEW

Sophia Novak

SEPTEMBER 2, 2018

The camera is positioned to one side of a study. Bookshelves line the walls; a heavy wooden desk in the center of the room is covered in orderly but prolific stacks of folders, books, and papers. A photograph on the desk shows Dr. Andrew Ashford standing with Miranda and Abigail Ryder, his wards, in front of a sycamore tree.

In the chair in front of the desk sits a young white woman: Sophia Novak. She is blonde, in her late teens. Her features are solemn, her skin sun-weathered. Dr. Ashford appears from behind the camera and sits opposite her, in the chair behind the desk.

ASHFORD: There we go. Ms. Novak, was it? Is it Sophie or Sophia?

SOPHIA: Either one is fine.

ASHFORD: I see. Thank you for coming all this way.

SOPHIA: I thought I should. Abby said—she talked about you a lot.

ASHFORD: The file Ms. Ryder compiled is incomplete. Her notes are fragmentary and I'm having trouble piecing to-

gether exactly what occurred. I hoped you could fill in the blanks.

Sophia seems to have expected this. She reaches down to a backpack beside her chair and pulls out a spiral-bound notebook.

SOPHIA: I wrote it all down. Abby asked me to, but I didn't get the chance to give it to her.

She slides it across the table to him. Ashford rests his hand over it but doesn't open it yet.

ASHFORD: What happened on Bitter Rock, Ms. Novak?
What did you two find there?

Sophia smiles a little, almost sadly.

SOPHIA: Nothing but echoes.

SOPHIA NOVAK

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

1

MY EARLIEST MEMORY is of drowning.

I only remember bits and pieces. The darkness of the water; the thick, briny taste of it; the way it burned down my throat when I gasped. I remember the cold, and I remember hands, impossibly strong, pushing me under. And I remember my mother lifting me free. Her voice and her arms wrapping around me before the warmth of her slipped away.

But I've never been to the ocean. Never choked on saltwater. So I have been told all my life. My mother died in Montana, hundreds of miles from any ocean. The water, the darkness, the cold—they're nightmares, nothing more.

Or so I thought, until Abby Ryder asked me what I knew about Bitter Rock.

The first tendrils of mist seethed past on the wind as the boat bucked. Droplets trembled on the few strands of hair that had escaped my tight braid.

“It’s just ahead,” Mr. Nguyen shouted unnecessarily: there was no way to miss the island, as grim and foreboding as the name Bitter Rock suggested. But I would have known we were approaching the shore even with my eyes closed. The sea had been a constant since we left the shore; the water had sloshed, sucked, and slapped at the sides of the boat. But now a new sound reached us: a sibilant crashing of water meeting rock.

The engine thrummed through me, singing in my bones. I knew this place. I knew those sounds, even though I shouldn’t. The thought sent a shiver through my core, but I couldn’t tell if it was fear—or relief. I knew this place. There had to be a reason—an explanation. An *answer*. In my pocket, my hand closed tightly around the small wooden bird that was all I had left of my mother. *We’re here*, I thought.

Mr. Nguyen piloted us past sharp black rocks to a tongue of weathered wood—a dock, but not much of one. The engine pattered, then cut out, and Mr. Nguyen leapt to the dock with a nimbleness that didn’t match the ash-gray patches in his hair. He didn’t bother to tie the boat off. He wouldn’t be staying. He hadn’t even wanted to bring me in, not with the storm threatening to sweep down and cut off the island from the mainland, but I’d talked him into it.

“You’re sure this is where you want to be?” he asked.

Was I sure? Was I sure that I should be here, three thousand

miles from home, chasing the memory of dark water? Tracing the footsteps of a dead woman?

Yes.

"I'll be fine," I told Mr. Nguyen. "Will you be okay getting back? That storm looks bad."

"I'd rather face the storm than stay here." He helped me off the boat, catching my elbow when my foot skidded on the wet boards.

"Thanks," I told him, pulling away. "I've got it from here."

He gave me a long, unblinking look. Like he was trying to decide whether to talk me out of it. But he'd tried on the mainland and he'd tried on the way over. I guess he decided he'd done all he could. "Be careful," he said at last. "Nothing good happens here."

I could have told him, *I know*. I could have told him, *That's why I've come*.

Instead I only nodded and turned away.

I didn't have directions to the house where I would be staying, but it wasn't like there were many options. The beach led to a road, and the road led in two directions: west, to the Landon Avian Research Center; or east, where the few houses on the island were located. It was after hours, so no one would be at the Center. I turned east.

The island was equal parts rock and clinging grass. The wind made the grass hiss, like the island already disapproved of my presence. I kept my head down. The strap of my bag dug into my shoulder and across my chest.

If I hurried back, I could still catch Mr. Nguyen. I could tell him that I'd made a mistake. I could go home—except there was no home to go back to. Now that I'd graduated high school, I was officially aged out of the foster system. The only thing I had left was a ghost, and this was the only place I knew to look for her.

I remembered almost nothing about my mother. A blue jacket. Her hand cupping the back of my head as I pressed my face against her thigh. Her voice barely hiding a laugh. *Come on, little bird. Bye-bye, little bird. Good night, little bird.*

Joy Novak died in an accident, fifteen years ago. I was three years old, and I didn't remember any of it. I only knew what they told me in foster care, and it wasn't like my foster parents knew any details. I wasn't able to find any either, when I went looking. One dead woman didn't make a ripple in a world where worse things happened every day, and I'd started to accept a future in which I never knew what her last moments had been like, or what kind of accident had claimed her.

And then I'd gotten a phone call. The girl on the other end had asked what I knew about my mother's disappearance. The word had been so unexpected that at first I hadn't heard it at all. I assumed she was asking about her *death*. So when Abby asked me about what my mother been doing in Bitter Rock, Alaska, I'd told her she'd made a mistake. *My mother died in Montana*, I'd told her. *I don't think she'd ever been to Alaska.*

So you believe she's dead, then?

That's when I realized what she'd said. *Disappearance.*

I still didn't believe her. Not until she sent me the photo: my mother and three-year-old me on a beach.

Turns out there were answers. I was just looking in the wrong place.

Gravel crunched under my feet. A pale bird winged toward me. The splash of red at its throat was vivid as fresh blood. A red-throated tern—the bird Bitter Rock was famous for, in certain scientific circles. It was a perfect match to the wooden bird in my pocket, its wings barred with black and white. The colors flashed at me as it flew overhead, and I tracked its progress.

The western point of the island rose in a hill, and at its top crouched a blocky gray building—the Landon Avian Research Center, or LARC for short. It was the only reason anyone came to Bitter Rock. It was the reason my mother had been here, at least according to Abby, and so I'd lied and wheedled my way into a summer job interning for one of the lead researchers.

The tern flew over the hill and disappeared northward. Heading, I assumed, toward Belaya Skala—Bitter Rock's headland, connected to the main island by an unnavigable isthmus of sheer rock and home only to birds. Though that hadn't always been the case. At least three times before, people had tried to gain footholds of one kind or another on that side of the island.

Every time, it ended in disaster. Disaster that left not corpses, but questions—which had never been answered. This island had swallowed up dozens of people. Now I was here, alone and unsure of what I was facing.

Suddenly it crashed over me, the immensity of what I was doing stopping me in my tracks. My mother was just one name among many, and these islands had eaten them all, and left behind nothing—not even bones. Who was I against that?

I turned on the road, a plea on my tongue— *Wait, I've changed my mind*. But Mr. Nguyen was a blot on the sea, too far for my voice to reach. I dug my fingers into the strap of my bag, sick with the sudden conviction that this had all been a mistake. There was a strange vibration in the air that seemed to settle in my chest and radiate out through my limbs. It made me queasy, like I stood on the lurching deck of a boat with the rumble of the motor beneath me.

I blinked. Mr. Nguyen's boat was gone. I searched the horizon for him—he couldn't have gotten far enough to vanish, not yet. Fear skittered over my skin. I gritted my teeth. It was fine. I wasn't leaving anyway. I was letting my nerves get the better of me, that was all.

My eye caught against a shape jutting up from the waves.

It was a man standing in the water. He was up to his thighs in cold surf, facing away from me. He wore an old-fashioned army jacket that flapped in the wind. He stood canted to one side, like he had a bad leg, with his arms dangling into the water. His head hung forward.

That water had to be freezing. What was he doing? I stood rooted for a moment, torn between concern and caution. I drew forward haltingly. That buzzing in my bones was almost an ache. I licked my lips, wanting to call out, but afraid to. "Hello?" I managed at last, still far away, lifting my voice above the crash of the surf.

His shoulders jerked back. His head snapped up. He started to turn.

I knew immediately I'd made a mistake. I scrambled backward, a yell lodged in my chest, desperately wanting to steal back that word, to stop him from turning, because I was sure, in a way that I could not explain or defend, that I did not want him to turn.

Rough hands seized my arm and yanked me around, and now I did yell. A huge man loomed over me, his hand gripping the meat of my upper arm. His face was half hidden behind a huge gray beard, an orange knit cap jammed down over his blunt forehead.

“You,” he growled, brow knit. “What are you doing out here?” His voice was thick with a Russian accent. He smelled of damp, salty sea spray and stale cigarette smoke. Drops of moisture jeweled the bristles of his beard. A half-healed blister balanced at the edge of his bottom lip. One of his eyes was almost entirely white, the skin around it ropy with a starburst of scarring.

“I—I—” I stammered. Fear surged through me, and my breath caught in my throat.

But fear wasn’t useful. Not now. I shoved it away—not just repressing it, but flinging it away from me, into the void—the other-place that was always waiting. It bled away in a rush, and I gave a small shudder of relief.

“Get your hand off my arm,” I said, cold and flat.

He peered at me through his good eye. “Do you know me?” he asked.

“No,” I said, bewildered.

He let go abruptly and took a half step back. I just stared at him. I wasn’t afraid, and there would be a price for that later, but for now I needed the calm. The empty. I did know him, though—didn’t I? It was like I remembered him from a dream. Or maybe a nightmare. “What were you looking at?” he asked, brusque and demanding.

“I saw—” I twisted back toward the water. The man was gone. In his place was a tree that must have been uprooted on some other

shore and dragged here by the tides, blackened by the water and pitching as the waves rolled it. Out in the distance, Mr. Nguyen's boat continued its steady retreat. Not vanished at all. The tree—I'd seen the tree, and somehow I'd thought it was a man.

The explanation leapt into my mind, comfortable and reassuring and false. I swallowed. No. I knew what I'd seen.

"Hey," someone called.

The speaker was a young man—I blinked in surprise. I hadn't expected to find anyone my age here, but he was eighteen or nineteen at the most, with black, tousled hair and a lip ring. His skin was light brown, his frame borderline scrawny; he wore a T-shirt printed with a caffeine molecule over a long-sleeved shirt. He loped up the road and slowed as he approached, the slight laboring of his breath suggesting he'd run a fair distance. When he spoke, it was with a British accent. I didn't know enough to tell what kind, but it made him sound a lot more refined than he looked in this state.

"Everything okay here?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, tearing my eyes away from the ocean. If I said anything about a man in the water, they'd think I was delusional.

"You're all right?" the boy pressed, looking between me and the big man, who still stood closer to me than I liked. "I heard a shout."

"I'm fine." True enough, with my fear neatly excised. But that glassy calm made people nervous, and the young man's eyes were uncertain as he looked me up and down. I forced myself not to glance over my shoulder. Not to wonder if someone was behind me. "It was just a misunderstanding."

The big man's eyes tracked out past me, at the driftwood tree,

and he gave me a narrow look. “You two, you should get inside. The mist is coming. It’s very dangerous.”

“Yeah, we’ll do that,” the boy said. The big man muttered something under his breath and walked past us, heading down the road. The boy waited for him to get a good distance away before he turned to me. “You’re the intern, then. Sophia Hayes.”

Sophia Hayes. I’m Sophia Hayes. I’d practiced it in front of a mirror until it felt natural. One of many lies I’d have to tell. “Yeah,” I said. Empty of fear, I could tilt my lips in a faint smile. “How’d you guess?”

“It’s not exactly a huge deductive leap,” he said, smiling back. It made his lip ring click against his teeth. “I’m Liam. Liam Kapoor. My mother’s your evil overlord.” Liam stepped forward with his hand outstretched and I took it. His skin was cool, his palm lightly callused. The motion pulled his sleeve up at his wrist, baring the edge of a bandage taped down over the back of his arm.

“You mean Dr. Kapoor?” I asked. She was one of the two senior staff members who ran the LARC, and the one who’d hired me.

“That’s the one. I’m spending the summer out here with her as punishment for a few minor transgressions.”

“Poor you,” I said. I wondered if those transgressions had anything to do with the bandage. “That guy . . .”

“Mikhail? He’s the caretaker. Or groundskeeper. Or something,” Liam said. “Wanders around the island with a shovel, glaring at people. He’s not what I’d call friendly, but I’ve never seen him accost anyone like that.”

“I think he just—wasn’t sure who I was,” I suggested.

“There’s a way of saying hello without coming off like a total

creeper, and that wasn't it," Liam said, eyeing me with an uncertain look. Like he was wondering if he needed to be more forceful, more comforting, or something else entirely. "You're sure you're okay?"

"I'm totally sure. Completely sure. Absolutely—"

"Got it," he said with a laugh. I crafted a smile, false and crooked.

"Although I am exhausted," I confessed. It wasn't a lie—I'd been traveling for more than thirty-six hours, crammed on planes, jostled on buses, and pitched around in Mr. Nguyen's little boat. "Dr. Kapoor's instructions said to head down the road until I reached Mrs. Popova's house."

"You're on the right track. Dr. Kapoor's place is right up there." He pointed in the direction he had come from. "I was out for a walk when I heard you. Mikhail's place is by the water nearer the LARC, and Mrs. Popova's is straight that way, at the eastern end of the island. Come on, I'll walk you there."

I nodded. I didn't look at the water, at the tree, at Mr. Nguyen retreating. I kept my eyes fixed on the gravel road, and on the sky ahead, where a dozen birds wheeled and cried.

I'd done my research before I came here. I knew my mother wasn't the first to disappear from Bitter Rock. There was the *Krachka*. Landontown. And, in 1943, there was a tiny army outpost. Thirteen men, an airstrip, and a few planes.

Like my mother, they had come to Bitter Rock.

Like my mother, they had vanished.

I kept my eyes on the road, and I wondered—what if they weren't gone at all?

EXHIBIT B

Post on Akrou & Bone video game fan forum

*“Off Topic: Urban Legends & Paranormal Activity”
sub-forum*

JUNE 3, 2016

My grandpa was in the air force during World War II. He always said that the scariest story he had wasn't from his days dodging German Messerschmitts over Europe, but on our own home turf. Early in the war, he was stationed at an airstrip on a tiny Alaskan island. They dubbed it “Fort Bird Shit.” It was a boring assignment. The Japanese threat was farther west, so the biggest problem they had to deal with was the saltwater in the air corroding the metal on the planes.

Some weird things happened, but nothing that couldn't be chalked up to men being drunk, bored, and isolated. Seeing people who weren't there, hearing weird noises, that sort of thing. One man insisted that someone was speaking Russian to him whenever he started drifting off to sleep. Then one day my grandpa gets the job of taking the ranking officer back to the mainland.

There was a thick mist that night. They headed back the next day—and everyone was gone. *Everyone.*

Whatever happened, it was just after dinner, because the dishes were being washed. They were abandoned in the tubs. Some boots and rifles were missing, but not all of them, which meant that some of the men were barefoot and unarmed. One of the planes was crashed in a ditch, like someone had tried to take off. A wall nearby was riddled with bullet holes.

They never found out what happened. The official report said a storm killed everyone, but Grandpa insisted the night was calm. Not even a breeze. Just fog.

I would say he was pulling my leg, but I have to be honest—my grandpa didn't have a sense of humor. At all. And when he told me the story, he seemed terrified. Whatever happened, he was still scared seventy years later.

2

LIAM GAVE ME an amused look as we started off toward Mrs. Popova's. "So you must really love birds," he said.

"I guess," I replied, then cursed myself silently. If I wasn't careful, I was going to give myself away before I ever stepped foot in the LARC. And then I'd get sent home without finding out anything about my mother.

"Is there another reason you'd want to fly out to the edge of the world for an entire summer? Because if you came for the nightlife, you are going to be deeply disappointed," he said, his tone teasing. "And according to Dr. Kapoor, you were *extremely* persistent. I don't think I've ever met someone who could wear her down before."

"'Persistent' is one word for it," I said. My teachers tended to go with "stubborn." My last foster mother had preferred "goddamn pig-headed." I'd been emailing Dr. Kapoor for months,

trying to convince her to let me work for the LARC over the summer. Nobody just visited Bitter Rock. I needed a reason to be here. But I couldn't tell Liam any of that, and he was still looking at me like he was waiting for an explanation. "So you call your mom Dr. Kapoor?"

"Since I was five," he said. "She's never seen fit to correct me."

"Should I check in with her? Before I turn in?" I asked.

"She and Dr. Hardcastle are over on Belaya Skala doing their science . . . stuff," he said, waving a hand vaguely. "Dr. Kapoor meant to be back to greet 'our wayward intern,' but then we heard the storm warning, and we *assumed* you'd be delayed." He raised an eyebrow, like it was a downright supernatural phenomenon that had ushered me here in defiance of bad weather.

"I talked Mr. Nguyen into it," I said with a half shrug.

"That would be why I'm staring at you. Mr. Nguyen's from the mainland. And nobody from the mainland comes out here if they can avoid it when there *isn't* a storm." He looked like he was going to say something more, but then the radio at his belt crackled to life.

"Liam?" it was a woman's voice, distorted by static.

Liam held up a finger to ask me to wait as he replied. "Here."

"That storm's staying offshore, but the mist's coming in quick. Where are you?"

"Walking toward Mrs. Popova's. The intern got here. Sophia."

I wasn't sure if I should say hello, but the voice continued without giving me the chance. "Get yourselves back to Mrs. Popova's and stay there. I don't want you to get caught out in the mist trying to get back to the house on your own."

“What about you?”

“We’ll be fine. I’ll see you in the morning.” There was a finality to the clipped words.

“You heard the boss lady. Mist’s coming,” he said. “Best hurry.”

“What’s the big deal?” I asked. “Can’t you just walk home?”

“Nobody goes out in the mist. There are so many sharp drops and rocky hills around here, even just walking around when the mist is up is dangerous. Driving is worse, given the quality of the roads. Driving in the mist in the dark is suicidal.”

“It doesn’t get dark this time of year,” I pointed out.

“Then we may yet survive our journey,” he told me, mock-dramatic. I chuckled, amusement cracking through my tension for a moment, at least.

I was actually relieved that I’d beaten Dr. Kapoor back to Bitter Rock. My exchanges with her had all been over email, but even in text you could feel her glaring at you. I had to keep fooling her into thinking I was just a bird-obsessed teenager trying to “get some real-world experience.” I’d already slipped up with Liam. I had to be more careful.

We trudged down the gravelly, pockmarked road, the only one that wound along the length of Bitter Rock’s main landmass. There were no trees on the island, but the rocks and hills hid our destination from view until we were almost on top of it. “This is it,” Liam said as we approached. In another setting, the cottage-style house might have looked cute, but the salt had stripped its paint until what left hung in tattered strips from gaunt gray boards, and the roof shingles were patchy. Not even the floral curtains in the windows could rescue it from looking on the brink of ruin.

“The Bitter Rock Chalet, aka Mrs. Popova’s house. Everyone from the LARC stays here. Except Dr. Kapoor, who has her own house, and Dr. Hardcastle, who claims to have a cot in his office but I’m pretty sure sleeps upside down in the closet like a vampire.”

“I think vampires sleep in coffins,” I said.

“He might have one of those in one of the storage rooms, actually,” Liam said. “The only people who ever come here are LARC researchers or really, really dedicated bird-watchers. The only place to stay is Mrs. Popova’s. So it doesn’t need a sign or anything.”

The front door opened, and a sprig of a woman, gray-haired and with glasses that took up half her face, stepped out and crossed her arms. Her tan cardigan hung to her knees, emphasizing her thin build. Her face was creased and wrinkled, her skin light brown and decorated with liver spots. “Liam Kapoor,” she declared as we approached. “What are you doing out with the mist coming in?”

“Fetching lost interns,” Liam said. “I’m thinking of starting a collection. Mrs. Popova, Sophia. Sophia, this is Mrs. Popova.”

“I knew a Sophie once,” she said. There was something odd in her voice—almost grief and almost anger. Sophie—I hadn’t gone by that since I was little, and there was something unsettling about hearing it now.

“It’s a pretty common name,” I replied. In the top fifty the year I was born, a fact I had confirmed before deciding to keep my first name for this deception. It was too hard to train myself to react properly to a fake one.

“Wait, you mean the girl in the boat?” Liam said, sounding startled.

"Who's the girl in the boat?" I asked.

"It's nothing," Mrs. Popova said with a sigh.

"It's sort of like a ghost story," Liam said.

"And not a pleasant one," Mrs. Popova added, in a tone that precluded any further discussion. She waved both of us toward the house, eyeing the mist with more wariness than I thought was warranted. "Best get inside quickly, before this gets any worse. I'll make cocoa."

I followed Mrs. Popova inside. *A ghost story. The girl in the boat.* So the memories haunting me had a name.

A clatter of voices greeted us in the entryway. By the time I'd stripped off my shoes, I'd sorted them into two speakers, one male and one female.

Mrs. Popova ushered me farther in. The kitchen was a mix of weathered practicality and grandma flourishes, much like the exterior. A rifle sat propped against the back door; every cup and kettle had a lace doily to rest on.

Two people sat at the kitchen table. The first was a tiny white woman, a brunette with hair that stuck up in a way that made her look perpetually surprised. Even indoors she wore a puffy blue coat that seemed on the verge of swallowing her up and digesting her. The man, who had East Asian features, was short and solidly built, the sides of his head shaved and the rest of his hair swept back in a startled swoop.

"Hey, you found the fledgling," the man said. He had a Midwestern accent that charmed me instantly.

"Is the queen back in her castle?" the woman asked. Her chirpy voice held hidden barbs.

"She's up at the LARC by now," Liam said. "She said they'd stay there for the night, and I'm stuck with you lot."

"Poor thing," the woman tutted, and laughed.

"I'm making cocoa for anyone who wants it," Mrs. Popova declared. "And tell the poor girl your names."

"Kenny Lee," the guy said. "We had a bet going on whether you'd show up, you know. Figured it was even odds you were a prank."

"I'm Lily," the woman said.

"Lily Clark, right?" I asked.

"That's right." She stuck out her hand and I had to step up to take it. Her skin was startlingly cold, her handshake firm enough you knew she'd practiced it. "How'd you know?"

"Your pictures are all up on the website." Except for Liam's; he'd surprised me. And I didn't like surprises, not right now.

"We have a website?" Kenny asked. "Why didn't I know about that?"

"Because Will had me put it together without telling Dr. Kapoor. Something about dragging her kicking and screaming into the modern era," Lily said.

"What picture did you use?" Kenny asked suspiciously.

"Just one I grabbed from Facebook," Lily said.

"They're nice photos," I supplied.

"Probably not very accurate then," Kenny said with a laugh. "We're usually bedraggled, muddy, exhausted, or all three at once. You can identify a LARC employee by the dark circles under our eyes and the stray feathers tucked in odd places." He leaned back in his chair and waved at us to take our seats. The chair creaked

alarmingly under me, but held up. “This is great, you know. I don’t have to be the new guy anymore. You get all the abuse.”

“Nah, she’s just a kid,” Lily said. “I’ll be nice to her.” Kenny groaned good-naturedly.

“How long have you been at the LARC?” I asked him.

“Two summers, but I got here a week after Lily. I’ve been ‘new guy’ ever since,” he said. “It’ll be great having some extra company, at least. Especially since Liam’s leaving.”

“What?” I asked, startled and, I had to admit, a bit disappointed.

Liam gave a too-casual shrug, slouching in that boneless, expansive way that only tall, skinny guys can manage. “My mum—my other mum—didn’t precisely check with Dr. Kapoor before she put me on a flight to Anchorage. The only reason I’ve been here this long is that Mum took off for a research trip to Morocco for a book, and my grandparents are visiting my cousins in Delhi and can’t get a flight back until next week. I think Mum was trying to force us into some quality time together, but Dr. Kapoor’s busy with her feathered children. And I know better than to compete with them for her affection.”

Mrs. Popova whisked the cocoa and pursed her lips, shaking her head as if in regret.

“I’m sure your mom loves you more than birds,” Kenny said awkwardly.

“More than any one of them, to be sure,” Liam said. “But in the aggregate, sometimes I wonder.” He smiled that easy smile to take the edge off his comment.

The silence threatened to get truly excruciating, and I cleared my throat. “You mentioned a ghost story?”

"A ghost story?" Kenny asked, perking up.

"I said it was *like* a ghost story," Liam hedged.

Mrs. Popova clicked her tongue. "All stories turn into ghost stories if you wait long enough," she said. She paused in the midst of stirring the cocoa, looking out the kitchen window at the gray of the mist. "No, she wasn't a ghost. She was just a child."

"The girl in the boat?" Kenny guessed.

Mrs. Popova sighed. "It's not a story I care to tell or hear without a bit of whiskey in me, and I haven't got any. So if you'll excuse me, I'll get myself to bed. Enjoy your cocoa. Lock the doors. And—"

"Don't go outside," Kenny and Lily chorused. They laughed, but my skin prickled.

Once Mrs. Popova was in her room, I turned my gaze on Liam. "So. The girl in the boat," I said, ready to shake him by the shoulders until he explained what the hell he was talking about.

"You're not saying it right," he informed me.

"How am I supposed to say it?" I asked.

"Like this: the Girl in the Boat," he intoned. Like a title. Like a figure from myth. Like, I thought, a ghost story.

"It's kind of LARC legend," Kenny said. "Passed down to the new grad students and post-docs."

Liam nodded. "I heard it from one of my mom's students at the University of Alaska when I was a kid. It's been around a while. There are a few different versions."

"And what version would you tell me?" I asked.

"The spooky version, of course," Liam said, and grinned. He sat up, leaning forward a bit and holding up his hands as if fram-

ing the scene. "A fisherman is out on the ocean. No one for miles around, as far as he knows, and fog all around him, so thick he can't see. And he starts to hear this bird. Like a loon, maybe. Mournful, sad. This broken cry calling out again and again. He tries to ignore it. It's just a bird, and he has a catch to haul in. The cry starts to fade. Like it's getting weak. And he doesn't quite know why, but he starts heading toward it."

I shivered. The cadence of Liam's voice had changed. It was low and haunting, his eyes fixed on mine as he spoke. Kenny and Lily seemed just as spellbound, leaning forward in their seats, even though they knew the story.

"Then he can't hear it anymore. And he can't see anything through the fog. So he cuts the engine. All he can hear is the water against the hull of his boat, and his own heavy breath." He let the silence hang, leaving us to imagine that eerie stillness. When he spoke again, it was softly. "And then . . . he sees it. Emerging from the fog. A low shape on the water. A boat. Just a rowboat, but it hasn't got any oars. He draws up alongside it and looks inside. And he sees a little girl, curled in the bottom of the boat. So cold and so tired and so hungry that she's lost even the strength to cry. He takes her back to shore, and bundles her up, and gets her help. If he hadn't come upon her then, she would have died."

"But she didn't," I said. My mouth was dry. I struggled to keep my voice even, the normal level of curious. "So it isn't a ghost story after all."

"I don't know," Liam said. His head tilted. "Maybe you don't have to die to be a ghost."

I couldn't tell if he was joking. And I didn't know what my

answer might be if he wasn't. Was that what I was? A ghost? "Did it really happen?" I asked.

"Maybe?" Kenny said, but Liam looked thoughtful.

"There was this thing," he said. "When I was little, Dr. Kapoor was a postdoc, and she was spending the summer here. When she got back, she was really . . . withdrawn, I guess? I was too little to know why, but I heard her talking with Mum once. I remember something about a girl, and I remember having the impression something bad had happened to her. That would have been . . . 2003?"

"That's the year that storm happened," Lily said.

"What storm?" I asked. As if I didn't know.

"It was this awful accident," Lily said. "Some idiots went out on the water during the mist, and the weather turned. The boat sank, or something? Three people died. They never even found the bodies. But I don't remember there being a kid involved."

"No one really talks about it," Kenny pointed out. "Could be we don't have all the details. The only people around from back then are Hardcastle and Kapoor, and good luck getting anything out of *them* about it."

"Ah," I said, as if that satisfied my curiosity, as if it didn't really matter to me at all. A storm. Three people dead. Just a number, some faceless figures. But I knew their names. Joy Novak. Martin Carreau. Carolyn Baker. The coverage was obscure, the records thin, but I knew they'd been here. And then . . . they weren't.

"Are you all right?" Liam asked.

"I thought we agreed you wouldn't ask me that," I replied. I wasn't all right. My nerves jangled, and a familiar vertigo swept

over me, the prelude to the crash that always came after I pulled my little trick with unwanted emotions. I was out of time. "I'm just tired. I think I should get some rest," I said. Was my voice too loud, too frantic? Liam frowned slightly, but the others looked unconcerned.

"You're the third door on the left," Lily informed me. "Bathroom's at the end of the hall."

"Thanks." I stumbled as I stood, but I hoped they'd just pass it off as weariness from a long trip. I offered an anemic wave and hurried down the carpeted hallway, hearing my breath too loudly in my ears.

I barely got the door closed behind me before my knees went out. I sagged and slid, letting my bag fall to the ground beside me, as the fear I'd pushed away less than an hour ago slammed back into me.

I screwed my eyes shut. I shoved one hand into my pocket and wrapped it tight around my mother's wooden bird, letting the sharp points of the wings bite into my palm. I sucked in breath after breath through my nose, and told myself I was safe, that there was no reason for this surge of adrenaline, this racing pulse, this wild, untamed fear.

I counted breaths. Fifteen. Thirty.

By forty-five, I was something approaching calm. I relaxed my hands, opened my eyes, and let my head loll against the door. That hadn't been so bad. I hadn't felt like I was dying. I hadn't thrown up. And no one had seen.

I stood up shakily. The window threw my reflection back at me—hollow eyes, hair like a mass of briars around my face. I

looked away quickly. I hated seeing my reflection. Especially after one of my crashes—that emotional collapse that inevitably followed after I’d shoved away fear or sorrow into that empty void-space. Though sometimes the blinding fear or anger or rending sadness rushed over me like a wave with no reason at all. I was lucky this time. I’d had warning and somewhere private to ride it out.

I dropped my bag on the bed and sat next to it. I pulled out my clothes, stacking them side by side on the bed to store later, and reached to the bottom of the bag, to the most important object I carried with me: a printout of a scanned photograph.

The phone call had come late at night, when I was leaving my shift at the burger place near my school, walking back to my foster home. It was short-term placement—three months left and I’d be out on my own, eighteen and done with high school. I never answered unknown numbers, but for some reason I picked up.

What do you know about Bitter Rock?

I was sure Abby had the wrong person. Or that it was some kind of prank. And then she texted the scan to me: a photo, front and back.

The photo showed my mother and me. I was maybe three. Small, but I always have been. I was pressed against her side, grinning up at her. I’d had brown hair as a kid; it had only lightened to blonde as a teenager. The same as hers, which was pulled back in a braid, the same way I wore mine now. A close-mouthed smile made her look like she had a secret and wanted you to know it. Her hands were in the pockets of a puffy vest; her gaze was fixed squarely on the camera. Behind her was the sky, and scrub

grass, and a rocky cliffside. And in the corner of the photo was the edge of a sign. *Landon Avian Res*—

That's all you could read. There was a date scrawled on the back of the photo, next to our names. August 10, 2003. Days before she died. She looked happy. She looked well. She looked a world away from dying in a Montana hospital.

I lay down on the bed, holding the small wooden bird between my thumb and forefinger. Now that I'd seen one in person, there was no mistaking that it was a red-throated tern. A bird that only came from one island.

I knew a Sophie once, Mrs. Popova had said. Who else could she mean? I didn't remember her. Did I? I shut my eyes and summoned up an image of Mrs. Popova's face, and something kicked hard at my gut, the same not-quite-memory that I'd gotten looking at Mikhail.

Abby, the girl who called me, had told me about 2003, the summer when my mother, Martin Carreau, and Carolyn Baker went missing. Their deaths—or disappearances—were strange enough on their own, she said, but it wasn't the first time it had happened.

She didn't tell me more than that, so I found it on my own. The disappearances weren't tied to Bitter Rock directly, not overtly, but you could make the connection if you knew what you were looking for. A small island. People missing. Investigations that petered out far too soon.

The *Krachka* first—a fishing boat. The crew missing and an entire village with it. An airbase in World War II abandoned without explanation. A back-to-the-land commune wiped off the map.

And three vanished ornithologists in 2003.

Abby wasn't the first to put the pieces together and see the pattern. I'd found other theories—internet forums teemed with posts suggesting the missing were the victims of aliens, government experiments, the Rapture in miniature. And then the voices of reason always chimed in: *coincidence*. It was a dangerous part of the ocean. Lots of storms and lots of rocks. It was too remote for emergency services or search crews to get out there, increasing the chances of bodies going unrecovered. And, of course, some of it could be made up or exaggerated. It was the obvious explanation. The one that didn't require you to believe in the impossible.

But I already believed in impossible things.

Because I was one of them.

EXHIBIT C

Video recording posted to Facebook
by Angela Esau

POSTED OCTOBER 18, 2013, 9:43 AM

Caption reads: what a FREAK

The video is from a high angle, a phone lifted above the heads of a crowd of middle school students. They're shouting, some of them laughing, most of it unintelligible or profane. They've formed a tight ring in a hallway lined with blue-gray lockers, and in the center of the ring, a girl is on her knees. She hunches, screaming and tearing at her wheat-colored hair, pulling it free of the braid that hangs to the middle of her back.

STUDENT 1: What's wrong with her?

STUDENT 2: Someone get help!

STUDENT 3: Holy shit! She's going crazy!

The girl turns her face toward the camera. It is Sophia Novak, age thirteen. Her face is raked with red lines where her nails

have dug into her cheeks. Her lips are skinned back in a rictus of fear and rage, and the whites of her eyes show as her gaze roves blindly over the students. And then she lunges. Not at the students, though they lurch back in a wave to get away, but straight into the bank of lockers.

She rams her head against them, and then her fists, pounding the metal.

TEACHER: Move! Get out of the way!

The male teacher pulls her away from the lockers. The locker doors are dented, smeared with blood. She wrenches away from him and then stops.

She freezes, the rage falling from her face like a mask cast to the floor. She blinks, looking dazed. She spreads her hands and looks down at them.

TEACHER: Sophia?

She turns and walks calmly away from him. The crowd of students parts hastily to give her room.

The video ends.