

February 8, 2019

Dear early reader,

With accolades from the likes of *The New York Times* and *Entertainment Weekly* for her debut, *I Am Still Alive*, under her belt, Kate Alice Marshall is ready to take the YA world by storm with her latest thrilling venture, *Rules for Vanishing*.

Sara's sister Becca disappeared one year ago and Sara is the only one who knows where she is: trapped on the road to find the ghost of Lucy Gallows. Every year, a mysterious path appears in the woods, with Lucy beckoning at the other end. To save her sister, Sara and her friends will face forces along the road darker than they ever could have imagined . . . and the only way out of the game is to win. Can Sara find Becca—or Lucy Gallows—before something more sinister finds her?

In the faux-documentary style of *The Blair Witch Project* comes the story of a girl and her friends who will stop at nothing—not ghosts, not bone-crunching or soul-sucking monsters—to rescue one of their own. Kate Alice Marshall has the science of jump scares down to a tee, thoughtfully balanced by intrepid, snarky, and always loyal characters you will root for until the end.

I hope you'll join me and play Lucy's game, but a word to the wise: read this one with the lights on.

All my best,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Rosenthal', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Maggie Rosenthal
Associate Editor
Viking Children's Books

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Once a year, a road appears in the forest.
Once a year, those brave enough walk the mysterious path.
Once a year, the ghost of Lucy Gallows beckons.

Lucy's game isn't for the faint of heart. If you win, you escape with your life. But if you lose. . . .

When Sara and her skeptical friends enter the Cartwright forest in the dead of night, the road to Lucy appears before them. Hardly believing their eyes, they lock hands and step into the pitch black. The world as they know it slips away and the rules of the road replace it. Sara is determined to find her sister, who has been trapped on the road for a year, but she and her friends will face terrors they've only seen in their nightmares.

A ghost is the least of Sara's problems when faceless figures haunt the way, wrong steps summon monsters as tall as buildings, and unfortunate souls who wander the path are stuck somewhere between life and death. Loyalties will be tested, realities questioned, and confidences broken. There are more horrors in this world than things that go bump in the night.

And at the end of the road, Lucy is waiting.

Kate Alice Marshall started writing before she could hold a pen properly, and never stopped. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with a chaotic menagerie of pets and family members, and ventures out in the summer to kayak and camp along the Puget Sound. Visit her online at katemarshallbooks.com and follow her on Twitter @kmarshallarts.

RULES FOR VANISHING

KATE ALICE MARSHALL



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

TK



As requested, we have obtained access to the files of Dr. Andrew Ashford, specifically those concerning the incident in Briar Glen, MA.

We were unable to remove primary documents and materials from Dr. Ashford's possession without detection, but we have provided transcripts and descriptions of all relevant materials, as well as a number of supplemental items not included in the file, which you may find helpful in providing context.

To our knowledge, Dr. Ashford remains unaware of your interest.



THE ASHFORD FILES

File #74

"THE MASSACHUSSETS GHOST ROAD"

Briar Glen, MA, April–May 2017



PART ONE

THE GAME



INTERVIEW

SARA DONOGHUE

May 9, 2017

ASHFORD: I'm starting the recording now. This is the first interview with Sara Donoghue concerning the disappearances in Briar Glen, Massachusetts. Today is May 9, 2017. Present are Sara Donoghue and myself, Andrew Ashford. Thank you for joining us today, Miss Donoghue.

SARA: You're welcome. I guess. I don't know what you expect me to tell you.

ASHFORD: The truth, Miss Donoghue. I think you'll find we are some of the few people who are willing to hear it.

SARA: So you believe me, then?

ASHFORD: Is there a reason I shouldn't?

Sara begins to laugh, a low sound that croaks in the back of her throat.

ASHFORD: Miss Donoghue—

Sara's laughter continues, her shoulders shaking. Her hands cover her face.

?: Pay attention.¹

<Recording ends.>

.....
¹ Transcriptionist's note: Unable to identify the third voice. It is heavily distorted with static, and a droning sound appears on the recording simultaneously with the voice.

EXHIBIT A

*Text message received by all Briar Glen High
School students on Monday, April 17, 2017*

DO YOU WANT TO KNOW WHERE LUCY WENT?

SHE WENT TO PLAY THE GAME.

YOU CAN PLAY, TOO.

FIND A PARTNER.

FIND A KEY.

FIND THE ROAD.

YOU HAVE TWO DAYS.

SARA DONOGHUE

WRITTEN TESTIMONY

1

THE MESSAGE ARRIVES overnight, and by Monday morning it's all anyone is talking about. People cluster around their phones, as if by reading the text again, comparing the identical messages, they might reveal some new clue about who sent them.

"Hey, Sara! Do you want to play the game?" Tyler Martinez asks, lunging toward me as I walk inside, the warning bell ringing. He waggles his eyebrows at me and swings away, laughing at his own joke. I cross my arms over my ribs and lean forward, as if pushing against a current.

Whispers of *Lucy* are everywhere. And *the game*. People in clots, heads leaned together.

I've timed things so that I arrive just before the bell, and the hallway is emptying out as the threat of tardy slips overwhelms the urge to gossip. A few stragglers give me odd looks. Odder than usual. *I bet she sent it*, I imagine them whispering. *She's* obsessed.

The game. Lucy Gallows. And Wednesday is the anniversary.

It doesn't take a genius. I'd probably blame me, too.

I slide into first period and take my seat, as close to the back corner as I can get.

"Hey. Sara." Trina sits at the group table in front of mine, and she has to twist around in her seat and lean to talk to me. Her blue eyes are piercing in their exquisite concern, her blonde hair swept up in a casual ponytail that looks more glamorous than anything I've managed since the days when she would sit behind me for hours, coercing my mousy hair into french braids and fishtails. "How are you doing?"

"Fine," I mutter. I can't look her in the eye. Her expression is too painfully sympathetic. It would be one thing if it was a performance, but it's genuine. And it's there every time she looks at me, like she's worried that I'm going to crumple under the strain of my personal tragedies at any moment.

"I don't think you did it," she says, leaning closer. Which means that people are already saying that I did.

"I didn't."

She nods slowly. "Don't let anyone give you crap for it," she says.

"How do you suggest I stop them?" I ask. She flinches back a little, but she's spared the need to answer by the second bell, marking the beginning of class. She straightens in her seat. I slouch down as Mr. Vincent launches into his daily preamble, complete with the terrible joke he inflicts on us every day.

"—and he says, 'Me? I'm a giant heavy metal fan,'" he wraps up just as the door opens. Anthony Beck steps into the room to the sound of groans, and slaps a hand to his forehead.

"I missed the joke of the day?" he asks in exaggerated despair. He flashes a smile, his dimples deep, his brown eyes bright and half-hidden by his wavy black hair. Back when we were younger, when we were friends, he was skinny as a rail, all elbows and knees, his smile too big for his body. The last year or two he's started to add muscle, and the nerd who tripped over his own feet is co-captain of the lacrosse and soccer teams, an athletic scholarship waiting for him at Northeastern. He got his ear pierced over break, and the silver stud winks.

"I hope you have a good reason for missing out on my effervescent wit," Mr. Vincent says.

"It took me all morning to text the entire school. My thumbs are cramping like you wouldn't believe," Anthony says with a joker's grin. "Sorry, Mr. V. Won't happen again." His gaze roves around the room, and his grin wobbles a moment when he sees me. We're assigned to the same small group for our current project, which means we've been sitting together for the past couple weeks, but we've managed not to exchange more than a dozen words. He's been responsible for eleven of them.

He slings himself into the chair beside me. It's much too cramped for his tall frame, and I shrink farther back into the corner, away from him. Mr. Vincent shakes his head.

Anthony sneaks a glance at me. I duck over my notebook, trying to ignore him. It isn't easy.

Anthony Beck and Trina Jeffries used to be two of my best friends. There were six of us—seven when we let Trina's little brother Kyle hang out—a roving gang of miscreants who stuck together from first grade until high school. We even had a stupid

group name. The Wildcats. It was the Unicorn Wildcats until fifth grade, a compromise that Trina had worked out when the vote was split down the middle—my sister, Becca, and I on opposite sides of the debate, as usual. I was pulling for the Unicorns, of course. Back then my aesthetic was 70 percent glitter, before the severe color allergy I developed in middle school. Becca, though? She was fierce from the start.

We all linked hands, crossing our arms to grab the person on the opposite side, and shook on it. *We are the Unicorn Wildcats. Friends forever and ever. No matter what.*

To a bunch of first graders, it felt like an unbreakable bond. Forever felt possible. It felt inevitable. But now Becca is gone, and I haven't spoken to any of them about more than the Cold War or sine and cosine for almost a year.

Mr. Vincent is starting to outline the day's agenda when a hand shoots up in the second row. He pauses, rhythm disrupted. The corner of his mouth tightens, but that's the only sign of irritation. "Vanessa. If you need help with your current project, we can talk during check-in."

"It's not about my w-work," Vanessa says. "It's about the t-t-text message we all g-got."

"Yes. I saw that. And obviously, it's intriguing," Mr. Vincent says. He settles back against his desk. "But I'm not sure how it's relevant to the Industrial Revolution."

"But it's r-relevant to history. Local history," Vanessa says, pushing her round glasses up her nose.

From my angle I can only see the curve of her cheek and the back of her head, but like most of the people in the room, I've

known Vanessa Han since kindergarten, and I can imagine the familiar expression of intense interest she must have fixed on Mr. Vincent. She wears thick-framed glasses and leggings with wild, colorful patterns, a look both bold and self-assuredly nerdy, much like Vanessa herself.

"Local history," Mr. Vincent echoes. "You mean the reference to Lucy? Meaning Lucy Gallows." He rubs his chin. "All right. It has nothing to do with nineteenth-century methods of production and their impact on the idea of the nuclear family, but what the hell. All right, who can tell me the story of Lucy Gallows?"

Half a dozen hands go up. He points. Jenny Stewart speaks up first. "Wasn't she, like, this girl from a hundred years ago? Her brother killed her and buried her body in the woods, and now the woods are haunted."

Vanessa gives her a withering look. "Th-that's not—" The next word tangles itself up in her mouth, and she falls silent for a beat before continuing in a firm, steady tone. "That's not true."

"Now that's an interesting thought," Mr. Vincent says. "What's true, and what isn't? And how do we determine the difference? Let's set aside the supernatural for the moment. Whether or not there's a ghost in the woods of Briar Glen, it's part of local legend, and it must have come from somewhere. So was that somewhere a complete fiction, concocted by some creative soul and embellished over the years? Or does it have a seed of truth?"

I shut my eyes. No one knows what *really* happened to her. Which is probably why she's stuck around in the town's memory for so long.

"Sara."

My eyes snap open. Mr. Vincent is looking at me.

"Last semester, when we were doing the project on assessing unusual historical sources, you used the legend of Lucy Gallows for your paper, didn't you?"

"I don't—" My mouth is dry. I lick my lips. I was hoping he wouldn't remember. Not that anyone is likely to have forgotten, when I spent months burying myself in stories of Lucy and making no attempt to hide it. "Yes," I say.

"And what did you find out?"

All eyes are on me, heads swiveling, bodies turning in their cramped seats. Except for Anthony, looking off into the distance conspicuously. Trina catches my eye and smiles a little, encouraging. I clear my throat. If there's anyone left who doesn't suspect me already, they will now. "There wasn't a girl named Lucy Gallows. But there was a girl named Lucy Callow, and she did go missing in the forest," I say, haltingly.

"And her ghost kidnapped your sister, right?" Jeremy Polk says. Attention snaps to him. Anthony makes a sound in the back of his throat a little like a growl, glaring daggers at his best friend and co-captain. Jeremy's smile flicks off like a light. "Sorry," he mutters.

"What the fuck, Jeremy?" Anthony says.

Mr. Vincent pushes off from the desk, his voice pitched low and level. "Jeremy, I know that you're aware that's an inappropriate comment. We'll talk about it after class. And Anthony? Let's all try to keep things civil."

Jeremy ducks his head, muttering another apology and rubbing his neck just under where one of his hearing aids sits, a habit

he's had as long as I've known him. My heart pounds in my chest, my mouth dry as the surface of Mars. *Do you want to know where Lucy went?*

Yes.

Because Becca went there, too.

"Sara is right," Mr. Vincent says, redirecting with hardly a hitch. "Lucy Callow was fifteen in April of 1953, when she went missing. The name change came later, as the ghost story evolved. In cases like this, it's important to go back to official, contemporary records as much as possible. With Lucy Callow, there's still a great deal we don't know, but many of the popular stories are easily disproved. But even if those stories aren't factually true, they can help teach us about the people who told them. What was important to them, what scared them. Ghost stories are a vibrant, essential part of local culture."

He keeps going, prompting students to supply other ghost stories and urban legends, coming up with ideas for how to track down their origins.

I hardly hear it. All I hear are the last words my sister spoke, muttering into her phone. On April 18, one year ago.

We know where the road is. We've got the keys. That's all we need to find her. I'm not backing down now. Not after everything we've done to get this close.

And then she turned and saw me. Slammed her bedroom door closed.

The next morning she was gone, and she never came home.

EXHIBIT B

"The Legend of Lucy Gallows"

Excerpted from Local Lore:
Stories of Briar Glen by Jason Sweet

It was a Sunday—April 19, 1953—and Lucy Gallows's sister was getting married on a sprawling property at the edge of the Briar Glen Woods. Little Lucy, age twelve, was the flower girl. But following an argument with her mother, she ran away into the woods in her crisp white dress with its blue ribbon around the waist. Everyone expected she'd be back in a minute or two, as soon as she calmed down, but ten minutes later she hadn't returned—and then twenty minutes, and then half an hour.

Lucy's brother, Billy, was sent to fetch his sister. He walked into the woods. The only way forward was a narrow track, a deer trail through the trees. He called her name—*Lucy! Lucy!*—but received no answer except the calling of crows.

And then he saw it: the road. There were roads here and there in the woods, the remnants of the original settlement of Briar Glen, which had burned down

in 1863. These roads were often nothing more than a stretch of trees planted in too straight of a line to spring from nature, or one stone pressed up against another where all the rest had long since been knocked astray. At first this road was like that, a dimple in the underbrush and a few scattered stones marked with the tools of men. But as Billy chased it, the road widened, and the stones knocked up against each other, beginning to form a smooth path through the thick forest.

He was certain that Lucy had followed the road, though he couldn't explain the strength of the conviction to anyone who had asked afterward. And yet for all that conviction, every step he took seemed to be more difficult than the one before. As the road grew easier, his way grew harder, as if he was laboring against an invisible force.

His feet got heavier and heavier. The air seemed to push against him. It became almost unbearable, and then—there was Lucy. He could see her ahead of him, around a slight bend in the road. She was talking to someone—a man in a patchy brown suit and a wide-brimmed hat. Billy called her name. She didn't turn. The man bent slightly to talk to her, smiling. He put out his hand.

Billy screamed his sister's name and thrashed toward her. But Lucy didn't seem to hear him. She took the stranger's hand, and together they walked down the road. They moved swiftly, not burdened as Billy

was, and the road seemed to follow, vanishing beneath Billy's feet. In moments the road and the man and little Lucy Gallows were gone.

Townsppeople searched the woods for weeks, but no sign of Lucy was ever found. But every so often, someone stumbles across the road, winding through the woods, and sees a girl running down it, dressed in a white dress with a blue ribbon. You can never catch up with her, they say, and you will find yourself alone in the bewildering woods, with no sign of a road or a girl or a clear way home.

So be careful what roads you take, and be careful who you follow down them.

INTERVIEW

SARA DONOGHUE

May 9, 2017

Sara Donoghue sits in the interview room. It is hard to tell what sort of building it might belong to. The walls are cinderblock, painted a dingy white. An empty metal bookshelf stands against one wall; the table in the center is a cheap folding picnic table.

Dr. Andrew Ashford enters the room and settles into the chair opposite Sara Donoghue once again. Ashford is black, dark skinned, hair silver. A dark web of scars puckers the skin on the back of one hand. He carries a briefcase, which he sets beside him on the floor. Sara Donoghue, in contrast, is a slight girl with medium brown hair and a pale complexion. She wears black jeans, a black tank top, and a black sweater that has slipped off one shoulder, baring a freckled shoulder. She seems tucked in on herself and tense with nervous energy.

ASHFORD: I'm sorry about that. Our equipment is usually reliable, but we occasionally encounter technical difficulties around these sorts of events.

Sara looks to the side, as if uninterested.

ASHFORD: Tell me about your sister.

SARA: Becca?

ASHFORD: Do you have another sister?

SARA: No, it's just—what do you want to know? There's a lot in the reports. Official records.

ASHFORD: I want to know about your sister from your perspective. Before her disappearance. What was she like? Did she have a lot of friends?

Sara hesitates. She speaks carefully, as if worried Ashford will get the wrong impression.

SARA: She had us. The five of us.

ASHFORD: The "Wildcats"?

SARA: Yeah. But by the time she disappeared, we weren't really hanging out together anymore. We hit high school, and Anthony and Trina got involved with sports. Mel started spending all her time with the theater kids, and Becca . . . I don't really know what happened with Becca.

ASHFORD: Did she have other friends?

SARA: She was friendly with almost everyone. But she didn't have close friends, other than us.

ASHFORD: She didn't meet anyone new she clicked with?

SARA: You mean her boyfriend? I guess. But she was never serious about him.

ASHFORD: What makes you say that?

SARA: She liked him because he listened to her. But they didn't belong together.

Sara chews on her thumbnail.

SARA: You always got the sense she didn't belong here at all.

ASHFORD: Did that have anything to do with the fact that she was adopted?

SARA: What? No. I mean, it wasn't always easy for her, I guess. Briar Glen's about as white as you can get, and people can be pretty racist even if they don't mean to be, but at least at home, that was never a problem. It wasn't about *not* belonging, I guess. More like she deserved to belong somewhere . . . bigger. Better.

ASHFORD: Like where?

SARA: New York. L.A. Paris. Someplace where her art could really take off.

ASHFORD: I've seen some of her photographs.

Ashford opens a folder on the table and spreads out several glossy photos. The top photo shows six preteens. A printed label has been affixed to the front, identifying each of the children. Becca and Sara stand at the center, arms around each other, Becca's outline slightly blurred as if she's barely managed to dash back into the frame. Despite their different ethnicities—Sara white, Becca Asian—there is something about their stances that marks them as obviously related. Anthony Beck and Nicholas Dessen stand to the left of the sisters, Anthony with his chin tilted up in a too-cool pose he hasn't grown into and Nick, a skinny, pale kid in an oversize windbreaker, mimicking him. On the right, Trina Jeffries breaks the mood with a smile, her hand lifted to tuck her hair behind her ear, and Melanie Whittaker, a black girl in a denim jacket covered in iron-on patches, curls the corner of her mouth like she can't quite take herself seriously.

Ashford slides this photograph to the side, baring another. Sara

frowns, a faint line of confusion between her brows. He taps the new photo, an image of a young man with his face in blank shadow. The light is odd at his shoulders, as if his outline is fracturing.

ASHFORD: What do you know about this photograph?

SARA: I haven't seen that one before.

ASHFORD: What can you tell me about Nick Dessen?

SARA: Aren't you going to ask about the other photo?

ASHFORD: Which one? This one?

He moves aside the photo of Nick Dessen and places another on the center of the table. It shows Sara, her hair damp and hanging limply around her face, standing next to a young woman wearing a white dress with a slash of blue ribbon across her waist. The girl has extended her hand; Sara has begun to lift her own, as if to take it.

ASHFORD: You find this photo remarkable?

SARA: Don't you?

ASHFORD: Not particularly. Two girls. About to hold hands.

SARA: But she's . . .

ASHFORD: She's Lucy Callow? She does bear a resemblance to the photos we have, but existing photos of Lucy Callow aren't high quality. This could be anyone. *[Pause]* But it isn't, is it? It is Lucy. You found her.

Sara meets Ashford's eyes. She's silent for a moment. Then she lets out a quick, choked-off laugh.

SARA: No. We didn't find Lucy.

ASHFORD: Then—

SARA: She found us.

2

BECCA TOOK PHOTOS for the yearbook every year, and you could always tell which ones were hers. Most of the other photos were posed or awkward, the lighting flat, the students interchangeable. Becca's photos were different. She captured the longing of unrequited love in the way a girl stared across the classroom, her chin resting on her fist as she slumped over her desk. In the long, lean line of Anthony's body, stretched out along the ground, the arc of the soccer ball unmistakable even in the still frame as he dove to meet it, she captured exultation and concentration. Becca had a way of making everyone feel seen.

It was remarkable, then, how little time anyone spent looking for her.

The official story is that she ran off with a boy. Zachary Kent. Bad news, according to my parents. He was older than her. My parents tried to forbid her from dating him—hated his pierced lip and dyed hair, the music he played, the car he drove. I only met him once, when I nearly ran into him and Becca coming out of the Half Moon Diner, his arm slung over Becca's shoulders. Becca

introduced him, but all he said to me was “Hey” before they got into his car and drove away. I saw the way she looked at him, and I saw the photo she took of him. One ankle over his knee, a notebook propped on his leg, his eyes squinting off into the distance.

It was the kind of photograph Becca loved the most. Peeling back the layers of a person bit by bit. Making a study of them. There was curiosity in that photo, but not love. No wild abandon. She might have left home, but it wouldn’t have been for him.

Yet they disappeared, and they disappeared together, and there had been all the fights with Mom and Dad—months of them, Becca alternating between giving them the silent treatment and screaming at them for being too controlling, while they managed to find fault in everything she did: hang out with Zachary, drop out of choir, steal away on her mysterious late-night trips she would never explain to any of us. So when she vanished, they looked for her, but not too hard; they didn’t think she wanted to be found.

I tried to tell them about the conversation I’d heard. And my mother told one of her friends, and her friend’s daughter overheard, and suddenly the whole school seemed to know. That was how the rumor started—half rumor, half joke. The kind of nervous cruelty that kids spit out without thinking, to cover up their own uneasiness.

Lucy Gallows took Becca Donoghue into the woods, and never let her out again.

No one believed it, of course. It was all just a morbid joke. But Becca wasn’t the sort for jokes or urban legends. She believed. And that meant that either my sister was losing it, or I had to believe, too.

And so I started searching. For the road. For Lucy. For my sister. It never got me anywhere.

Until now.

By lunchtime the novelty of the messages has started to fade, but the whispers still drive me out of the cafeteria to the back steps, where I sit with my packed lunch, staring out over the back lot at the looming trees. A single crow sits in the high branches, riding the swaying of the wind.

The door behind me opens. The bird takes off. I shift to the side of the damp concrete steps so whoever it is can get past, but they stay at the top of the steps. I turn, squinting. Vanessa stands there, her phone gripped in her hand, her backpack dangling off one shoulder. "Th-there you are," she says.

"Um. Hi," I say eloquently. "Can I help you with something?"

"Maybe," she says. "Are you going to do it?"

"Do what?" I ask.

"P-play the game," she says. "The whole thing. The road, and the k-key, and finding a p-p-partner." Her stutter is pronounced, but she doesn't fight it like she used to when we were younger, and it has its own relaxed flow to it. She likes to tell people it's worth the wait to hear what she has to say.

"Why would I?"

"Because of Becca."

She says *Becca* and not just *your sister*, and I think that's the only reason I don't leave right away. So few people say her name anymore. Like it's bad luck. "You don't really believe that stupid

joke, do you? That Lucy Gallows took my sister?"

"No. But you must be wondering if the t-texts have anything to do with her. With Becca."

"Of course," I snap. Her cheeks go red and she pushes up her glasses, which has the effect of half hiding her face behind her sweater sleeve. "Why do you care, anyway?"

"I d-don't believe in ghosts," Vanessa says. "But I like history. And mysteries. I want to know who wrote these. And what it's supposed to mean. I thought, since you d-did all that research, you might know."

"Oh." There's something wrong with me, since Becca vanished. If anyone so much as hints at what happened, I react like they're attacking me. Even with my friends. Which is why I don't have any left. "Here, sit down," I say, gesturing for Vanessa to join me on the steps. She perches on the top step, a little above me.

"So, Lucy Gallows," I say. "Real name Lucy Callow. Disappeared on April 19th, 1953. Wednesday's the anniversary. Her brother was arrested for her murder, but since they never found the body, they couldn't really make a case and he was released. She was fifteen, not twelve, and she was a bridesmaid, not a flower girl, but otherwise the story's pretty much what they say."

"And the game is that stupid thing everyone played when we were little kids," Vanessa says.

"Not exactly," I say. "You've played it?"

"Sure. When I was, l-like, eight," she says.

"Me too," I say. With Anthony. Standing at the end of the road into the woods, on either side of the median line. *Hold hands. Close your eyes. Take thirteen steps.* Supposedly, this

summons the specter of Lucy Gallows to walk beside you.

"Did anything happen?" Vanessa asks, leaning forward.

"Of course not." There are two ways the game "works": either you're young and imaginative enough that you conjure the brush of a breeze into the brush of Lucy Gallows's hand, the skittering of leaves into her footsteps, the creak of trees into her spectral cries—or you have friends sneaking up behind you to mess with you. Similarly, there are two kinds of people who play the game: kids young enough to still believe in magic, and teenagers trying to impress crushes.

"But you said n-not exactly."

"There's an older version," I say. "Or a different one, at least. It's not about summoning Lucy. It's about finding the road. The road has seven gates. If you get through them all, you get—something. Like a wish. That story is older than the Lucy Gallows story—older than Lucy Callow. Some people say she might have known the story, and that's why she got on the road when it appeared."

"Some people?" Vanessa asks, eyebrows raised.

"Ms. Evans," I clarify. The town librarian was the same age as Lucy when she went missing, and she was my best source for all game-related lore. For a while, a seventy-eight-year-old woman was the person I talked to the most.

"I've never heard of that part of the g-game," Vanessa says, pushing up her glasses with the side of her thumb.

"It got dropped at some point, I guess," I say. "Maybe in the eighties when those kids went missing?"

"I thought that was a rumor," Vanessa says. "Satanic p-p-panic and stuff. Those kids just ran away."

"That's what everyone decided," I reply, voice flat. Vanessa bites her lip, her eyes dancing away from mine. I guess I'm officially Trauma Girl, with the black clothes and the antisocial reputation to match. I've gotten used to that particular reaction, since I refused to politely pretend Becca never existed.

Vanessa clears her throat. "So you need a partner," she says. "And a key?"

That's the part that made my stomach lurch, when I saw the message. Because I've never mentioned the keys. I've never heard anyone but Becca talk about them. The only place I've seen them mentioned, other than that overheard conversation, is her notebook, left behind when she vanished. "The keys open the gates. They have to be your keys. They connect you to the gates—to the road. I think." Becca's notes were vague on that front.

"So all that's left is finding the road," Vanessa says. "The one just off Cartwright?"

"That's where people play the game, but the spot where Lucy's brother claimed he saw her was actually, like, five miles west of there," I say.

"Is there a road there?"

"Well, no," I say, shrugging. "But there wouldn't be, if it was a ghostly apparition, would there? Except when Lucy's out haunting." I keep my voice casual, like there isn't a hand tightening around my throat with every word. Because if I was normal, if I had *moved on* and *let go of this fanciful coping strategy*, as my mother once suggested, none of this would bother me.

"I don't believe in ghosts," Vanessa reminds me. "Do you?"

I pick at the crust of my sandwich. I want to say no, but it isn't exactly true anymore. I have reasons to believe. Because of Becca, and because—

It's just not a simple answer anymore.

She tucks her hands under her thighs on either side. "I want to t-try. The g-game and the road and everything."

"Why?" I ask. "If you don't believe in any of it?"

"I want to know for sure."

"Are you asking me if I'll be your partner?" I ask, half hoping she is.

"N-no. I already have one. Sorry," she says, cheeks beet red now. "Thanks for your help."

"Yeah," I say as she hurriedly stands up. "No problem."

She's already disappearing back inside.

I take my phone out of my backpack and unlock it. The text message is already on the screen, waiting for me. A road, a partner, a key. And two days to find them, if you want to play.

Do I?

I remember that door slamming shut, Becca's unreadable expression. I knew something was wrong, but I didn't say anything. Not for days. Not until it was obvious that she wasn't coming home.

The casual answer I gave Vanessa was true—there isn't a road at that spot in the forest. What I didn't say was that I went there a dozen times in the months after Becca disappeared. I've wandered through the woods and called her name. Lucy's, too. No one has ever answered.

But what if I just had the wrong day? Becca went missing in April. It's April again now.

I don't believe in ghosts, not exactly. But I don't believe Becca is dead, either. Which means she's out there, and no one is looking for her but me.

3

SOME PARENTS, WHEN their child is missing, keep their room as a shrine, exactly the same as when they left it. As if by some sympathetic magic it will summon them back from wherever they've wandered to.

My parents aren't like that. Three days after Becca went missing, my mother went into her room and tidied it up. She did all of Becca's laundry, wiped down her desk, changed the linens on her bed, decluttered everything. Closed the door. Didn't go back in for eight months.

When she did, it was to box everything up. Thirteen boxes. Ten went to thrift shops or the dump. Three went to the attic, tucked next to the boxes of elementary-school projects and macaroni art: artifacts of things long gone. The bed and the desk went out to the thrift shop, too. It would have somehow been less painful if she'd gotten rid of all the furniture, purged the house of Becca's presence, but she kept the bookshelf and the chair, moving them into the living room. It was as if Becca was so thoroughly forgotten they didn't even provoke painful memories.

I didn't argue. My parents didn't blame me for Becca's disappearance, but they resented me for my part in what followed. The strange rumors, the ridicule. My refusal to admit that my sister abandoned us for a boy she'd only known for three months.

I didn't argue, but I sneaked in while my mother was in the bathroom and took the box from under my sister's bed where she kept her most treasured possessions. A few early photos, too embarrassingly amateurish to show anyone else, but full of the promise of talent to come; her journal—not diary—in which she jotted scattered thoughts and philosophical musings; a handful of trinkets from our infrequent travels; and our grandmother's wedding ring, saved for when Becca got married.

It was inside the cover of the journal that I found the inscription.
FIND THE ROAD. FIND THE GATES. FIND THE GIRL.

I'm sitting on my bed now with the journal open in my lap, turning the pages. Most of it is notes on photos she's taken, critiquing her own work or recording ideas for shots. In between are scraps of poetry, meandering bits of song lyrics. She wrote a few songs with Zachary, and his handwriting is scrawled next to hers, crowding it in. I resent every letter, every word.

But the last bit of poetry, or song lyrics, or whatever—they stop me dead every time.

*I saw it again / Out of the corner of my eye. / Doesn't matter
where I am / Doesn't matter how hard I try / To get away.*

*It's waiting / Waiting for me
And so is she.*

After that, the journal changes. In big, blocky letters, traced

over and over again until they blurred and grayed, it says THE ROAD. And under that, Becca has written:

Don't leave the road.

When it's dark, don't let go.

There are other roads. Don't follow them.

The pages after are dense with notes about Lucy Gallows and the game—about the keys, the forest, and a city Becca never names. In between the pages, she's tucked photos of the forest. Zachary is in some of them. There's even a photo of Lucy's tombstone—not that there's a body in that grave.

Eventually the neat, bulleted notes devolve. They turn into odd nonsense. Scraps of phrases, unsettling drawings of eyes and hands and a figure that seems stretched, legs and arms too long—a man's body, but with the head of another beast, triangular, antlers branching out and out, sometimes filling the whole page. I've read every word.

the birds come after the dark

seven gates

follow the rules

keep moving

And on and on. Many of the phrases read like instructions, but there are others that don't have any clear imperative, like the one written in a spiral bursting across a page. *In the house in the town in the woods on the road are the halls that breathe. The singing will lure you the smoke will infest you the words will unmake you the woman will hate you.*

I've spent hours paging through that notebook again and again, but no secrets have unlocked themselves for me. I've gone to the

place in the forest where Lucy Callow disappeared, in daylight and in the dark, on the full moon, in a white dress, whatever any legend says.

Because I don't believe in ghosts, but I want to. I know Becca didn't run away. That leaves one possibility and one impossibility, and I long for the impossible. Because if she isn't dead, if she's only been *taken*, she can be brought back.

The front door opens, and I hear the familiar sequence of sounds that mark my mother's arrival home: keys clattering in the dish inside the door, shoes thumping haphazardly into the corner, quick steps to the kitchen and the *poik* of a cork popped from a half-full bottle. She must know about the text by now. She must have heard. It's a small town.

I shut the journal back in the box and shove it under my bed. I pull my feet up and tuck them under me on the bed, a thousand versions of the coming conversation playing through my head, a thousand versions of how I'll convince my mother not to worry about anything.

My mother's footsteps come up the stairs, and she knocks lightly on my door before swinging it open. "How was school?" she asks.

So she wants to build up to it. "Fine," I say.

She pauses. She seems to search my face, as if looking for an answer—but to what question? Does she want to know if the text upset me? Does she want to know if I was the one that sent it out?

"Good," she says. I blink. "I'm thinking of ordering out for dinner. Pizza okay?" Apparently we aren't going to talk about it at all.

"Yeah," I say.

"Or Chinese."

"Uh-huh," I say. Briar Glen's only Chinese restaurant is owned by an Italian man named Aurelio, so it isn't exactly authentic cuisine, but it's tasty. Henry Lin's parents run the pizzeria in a bit of gastronomical symmetry, and we order from one or the other most nights—and most of the rest, we subsist on the leftovers.

My parents aren't divorced, officially. But even before Becca, things were strained between them. Dad stuck around for three months after. Took a job in New York, and while he says he isn't seeing anyone, one of his coworkers keeps tagging him in joint selfies at "work events" with a borderline psychotic number of emojis. He still pays a private detective to look for Becca, gets updates every couple weeks—always another promising lead, never anything solid. Even if he's given up, he isn't willing to stop looking. Not yet.

Unlike Mom. She isn't going to ask about the text, because it would mean, inevitably, talking about Becca. And that is one thing we can never do.

When I lost my sister, I lost my whole family. I don't know if I can ever get them back. But I can find Becca.

Or at least I can try.

I thought I wouldn't be able to sleep, but it seems like the moment I shut my eyes, I'm dreaming. I stand on a road—a normal road, white line down the median, asphalt shimmering with heat. I'm walking down the median line, and another girl is walking with

me. I've never seen her before. She's my age, with long, dark hair and a tattoo of a feather on the inside of her left wrist. Five crows wheel overhead, calling.

"Is this it?" I ask.

"The road?" she guesses, and smiles. She has a dimple in just one cheek. "No. Just *a* road. A safe one, for now."

"I need to find the other one," I say.

"Less safe," she observes. I nod, the whole situation perfectly normal in the way that dreams are. "It'll find you. As long as you're all together and you're looking for it, it'll be there."

"You're sure?" I ask.

"I try not to be sure of too much," she says. Then she nods ahead. The horizon is growing dark—no, a darkness is growing, swelling, surging over the distant hills, the trees, rushing toward us like a tsunami. She reaches out her hand and I start to reach back.

And then I wake. I stare at the ceiling for a few minutes, waiting for my frantic heartbeat to slow down, and then I sit up. I check the time. Barely past ten, but if that's what's waiting for me, I'm not going to try to get back to sleep.

I take Becca's notebook and her old camera and sneak out the back door. It doesn't take much sneaking—Mom takes sleeping pills most nights. Since Becca.

I'm not sure where I'm going until I'm already walking that direction. There's a park on Galveston and Grand. A creek runs through the center of it, trees growing along the banks. It's as far from the wilderness as you can get and keep the green, but to the Wildcats, it has been Narnia and Middle-earth and the Amazon jungle.

We would always meet at the bridge. It's five feet across, with dull wood planks and handrails that would drive splinters into your palms if you tried to run your hands down them. Becca and I were almost always the first ones to arrive, and we'd sit chucking sticks into the water and watching them rush away from us. I lean on the railing, trying to feel her presence next to me. The way she always stood, elbows on the rail, spinning the ring around her thumb.

I thought that when you lost someone, you lost the details first, but details are what I still have—the crinkle at the corners of her eyes when she made fun of me, the way she'd chew on her thumbnail when she was really focused. It's the big things that are slipping away. Her face. Her voice. The way it felt to be around her.

Becca was—is—six months older than me. My parents tried to have a child for five years with no luck, so they went through the long, arduous process of adoption. They had one birth mother change her mind in the delivery room before they adopted Becca, tiny and perfect and theirs.

It was less than a month later that they found out about me. They'd always wanted two kids. They shrugged and laughed and told themselves they wouldn't treat us any differently. Mostly, they managed it—but you could always sense how hard they were working at it: second-guessing themselves, overcompensating for any hint that they might not be treating Becca the same as me by lavishing her with just a little too much attention and praise to be genuine. Maybe that's why her relationship with them fell apart so much when she hit high school. Or maybe something else was at the root of her silences, her long absences, her strange moods.

Long before high school, though, I was always chasing after Becca. The week she stood on her own, I started trying to pull myself upright. I walked within a month of her. Anything she touched, I had to have. My first word was my sister's name, and I'd shriek it at night until my parents put me in her crib to sleep.

I always thought the two of us were the center of gravity around which the rest of the group orbited, but I was wrong. Becca was. She kept us together. She was the one who pulled away from the group first. And after she vanished, we fractured for good.

I lift her camera and snap a photo. The flash goes off. I look at the screen. The water is a confusion of reflected light, the trees indistinct shadows. I'm not nearly the photographer my sister was. Is.

Was.

"Sara?" I'm not completely surprised to hear Anthony's voice, but I'm not sure I'm happy, either. I don't turn as his footsteps crunch closer, then turn hollow as he steps onto the bridge.

"Hey," he says. He leans against the guardrail next to me, looking down at the water. The park lights lend just enough illumination to glimmer on the water's surface, the delicate folds where it runs over the rocks. "I kind of thought you'd be here. Or in the woods."

"No point going out there yet," I say. "It won't be tonight."

"You're sure?"

"It's on the anniversary. Wednesday. Two days from the time the messages were sent is just past midnight, Wednesday morning."

His hands tighten on the handrail, and the hinge of his jaw

flares out as he clenches his teeth. "Yeah. I know." He glances at me quickly.

"You think I did it," I say. My voice is flat, but the betrayal slices through me. "You think I sent the message."

"I don't think that. Maybe I did for a moment. But only a moment," he says.

"Everyone else thinks it was me," I say. I scuff my foot against the bridge, knocking a pebble off into the water with a barely audible *plink*. Anthony nudges my shoulder with his, startling me with a moment of friendly intimacy I thought was long behind us.

"Only the idiots," he assures me.

"You said you thought I'd done it, for a moment."

"And I was momentarily an idiot," Anthony says, grinning that grin that is impossible not to echo, for a fleeting second. "Trina doesn't think so."

"You talked to her about it?"

He shrugs. "She's worried about you."

"So you mean you talked to each other about *me*," I say.

Anthony makes a frustrated sound. He turns to face me, but I stay stubbornly put, looking straight out at the water. "Come on, Sara. We'd have talked to you if you'd say more than three words to any of us."

"What, it's all my fault?" I ask, turning my head to glare at him.

"We all loved Becca," he says. *Some of us more than others*, I don't tell him, because I'm not supposed to know.

"It doesn't matter," I whisper. "It doesn't matter now."

"No. It doesn't," Anthony says. "Because whatever happened then, I'm here for you now. I don't know if this is a prank or a trap

or if there's really something hiding out in the woods, but I'm not letting you go alone."

I stare at him. I feel off balance, like I've lurched forward and haven't gotten my feet under me. For a moment, my body pulses with gratitude and relief—he's doing this for me, he's still my friend, he still cares. And then I draw back, feral anger scrabbling up my spine.

"You're not *letting* me?" I repeat.

"I mean I'm going with you," he says. "I'll be your partner, like the thing said."

"I didn't ask you to go with me," I say.

"But you are going."

"Of course."

He nods, like this settles things. "Then I'm going with you."

"You're just assuming that I don't have anyone else? That I want you to come with me?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Really? Let's look." I pull my phone out of my pocket, open up the messages. Scroll back and back and back, until I find the thread with Anthony's name on it.

The most recent message is five months old. It's a birthday cake emoji. The one before that is nearly a year old. *You ok?* it reads.

I hold it out to him. "Two messages in a year. My sister vanishes and you don't even bother to text."

He grabs my phone from my hand. I squawk, but he turns his shoulder to keep me from grabbing it back and taps the screen a few times. Pulls up Trina's messages.

All of Trina's messages. Once a month or so now, links to in-

teresting news stories, funny pictures. Before that, a sparse series of texts telling me that she was around, when I was ready. And around the time that Becca disappeared? Dozens of messages. Maybe hundreds. Telling me she was worried about me. Sending me stupid memes to distract me. Asking me to come hang out. Complaining about her jackass stepfather, our homework, the weather. I answered maybe a half dozen times. Never more than a few words.

He switches to Mel's messages. Mel didn't say as much. She gave up earlier. But they're there. I'd never answered Trina because her kindness hurt too much. I'd never answered Mel because she wanted to be there as my friend, and I'd stopped being able to pretend that was all I wanted, too. And so I'd let both of them—all of them—slip into absence and disconnection.

Anthony hands my phone back to me. I cradle it, thumbing the screen off, and look away from him. "You never answered their texts. So I figured there wasn't any point trying. Which is why I came over. Your mom always told me you were sick."

I was sick. Sick with dread and with sorrow, curled on my bed with a fist against my stomach and nausea making me shudder. I survived the next few weeks and months in a haze. If my mom hadn't been reminding me to eat and shower and go to school, I would have just stayed in bed. Waiting for Becca to come home.

"I didn't want to respond to 'you ok' when you hadn't even bothered to sit by me at lunch for a year," I snap. "Look, I get it. We were friends when we were kids. High school's different. You've got new friends, and you don't need a weird loser hanging around."

"You're not weird."

"You're in the minority with that opinion."

"Oh, come on, Sara. You can't blame people for thinking it. You barely talk to anyone anymore. You don't wear anything but black. Everyone knows that you go out in the woods by yourself all the time, and you're obsessed with the whole Lucy Gallows thing."

"I don't care what anyone thinks about how I dress. And I only care about Lucy Gallows because Becca did. She was looking for her."

"I know," Anthony says. The bitterness in his voice surprises me. He looks away. "She wanted me to help. She said—she said she could hear her. Lucy. She said she was dreaming about her, but I didn't believe her. I told her they were just dreams."

"Zach believed her," I say, understanding something that's never clicked before. Like why Becca picked Zach, when it was obvious who she belonged with. "That's why she didn't tell anyone else," I say. "That's why she didn't tell me. Because you didn't believe her, and—"

Anthony glares at me. "You know what, Sara? You think people avoid you because you're weird. Did you ever stop to think that maybe they avoid you because you're a jerk?"

The breath goes out of my words. "Not being warm and fuzzy isn't the same thing as being a jerk."

"When you won't even talk to your friends, it gets hard to tell the difference," he says. He shakes his head. "Fine. If you have another partner, you have another partner. I can't force you to go

with me. But I'm going to be there. Because I still care about you, even if I've sucked at showing it lately."

"You don't even know where to go."

"I'm sure I can figure it out," he says, and shoves off from the railing. It's started to rain; it patters against my shoulders and sneaks down the nape of my neck. Still I stand for a long while, watching Anthony stride back toward the street, his hands jammed in his pockets. My hands are shaking. I curl my fingers into fists.

Anthony abandoned me, when I needed his friendship the most. Even if maybe I did abandon him first.

I can't pretend that the others didn't reach out. Trina is still doing her best, and it isn't like I've made that easy. Even Mel, not exactly Miss Sentimental, tried to help, and I turned my back on both of them. I kept my grief wrapped tight around me. I kept them at a distance.

And now I might have the chance to get Becca back, and Anthony is right. I need his help. Because I need a partner, and I don't have anyone else to ask.

EXHIBIT C

Group chat transcript

April 18, 2017

TRINA (4:07 pm): Hey guys

NICK (4:08 pm): Sup

MEL (4:08 pm): I didn't even know I still had this app installed

TRINA (4:10 pm): I thought we should talk

MEL (4:11 pm): Are you sure it's safe? It might ruin your reputation.

NICK (4:12 pm): You only wish you were that edgy, Mel.

MEL (4:14 pm): I meant if she gets caught talking to you, nerd squad.

NICK (4:14 pm): Can you have a nerd squad of one?

MEL (4:14 pm): You are nerdy enough to count as four point seven nerds for the purpose of squads. Basic science.

TRINA (4:15 pm): Guys.

NICK (4:15 pm): Um, Trina, "guys" is a sexist term created by the patriarchy to imply that maleness overrules femaleness in a group setting

MEL (4:15 pm): Shut up I don't sound like that

NICK (4:16 pm): a) yes you do and b) you know I dig it

MEL (4:17 pm): Were I but heterosexual my friend

NICK (4:17 pm): You know you'd be all over me

MEL (4:17 pm): Hell yeah. my pasty-white love stallion.

TRINA (4:17 pm): As glad as I am that you two are still friends . . .

TRINA (4:18 pm): WHAT GROSS MEL WHY

MEL (4:18 pm): Where's Anthony?

MEL (4:18 pm): And sorry, I regret everything

NICK (4:18 pm): I don't

ANTHONY (4:18 pm): I'm watching you two reverse-flirt or whatever it is you're doing. Can't talk much. Hiding my phone during "family time."

ANTHONY (4:19 pm): Sorry, answering your question, Mel.

MEL (4:19 pm): We know how chats work. How's the rev

ANTHONY (4:19 pm): She's fine thanks. Wants to see you in church more.

MEL (4:20 pm): That's just bc she loves me more than you

ANTHONY (4:20 pm): Why isn't Sara in the chat?

MEL (4:20 pm): Oh snap

NICK (4:20 pm): Wait, what?

MEL (4:20 pm): Like she'd answer anyway

ANTHONY (4:21 pm): She wasn't at school today, either.

TRINA (4:21 pm): I left Sara off because we need to talk about what to do and I don't want her shutting us down.

TRINA (4:24 pm): So . . . what are we going to do?

ANTHONY (4:25 pm): I'm going. Whatever anyone else decides.

TRINA (4:25 pm): Me too.

NICK (4:25 pm): I was already planning on it. Vanessa wants to go. Going out for dinner in a few minutes, then out ghost hunting.

MEL (4:26 pm): Sorry, have to—NICKY HAS A GIIIIRL-FRIEEEEEND.

NICK (4:26 pm): Is there a middle finger emoji? Wait. Found it. [redacted]

MEL (4:27 pm): I don't see what the point is. It's not like anything is going to happen. And besides, I have a date.

NICK (4:28 pm): MELANIE HAS A GIIIIIRLFRIEEEEEND.

MEL (4:28 pm): [redacted] [redacted] [redacted]

MEL (4:28 pm): [redacted]

TRINA (4:29 pm): Does anyone know if Sara's going?

MEL (4:29 pm): [redacted]

ANTHONY (4:30 pm): Yeah. She is. She told me.

TRINA (4:30 pm): You talked to her? Is she okay?

ANTHONY (4:31 pm): Yes. Last night. And no. I don't know.
She's the way she's been.

MEL (4:32 pm): Someone should be there if she's going but
we don't all have to be. This isn't an intervention. She just
needs someone so she doesn't slit her wrists in the woods or
something.

TRINA (4:33 pm): That's insensitive and crass.

MEL (4:33 pm): Insensitive and crass is basically my brand
so

PRIVATE MESSAGE: MEL/NICK

NICK (4:33 pm): Oh no this is perfect you show up and save
Sara from herself and she's so grateful she swoons into your
firm yet supple embrace

MEL (4:33 pm): You know I will cut you if you say the word
supple in any context ever again and also shut up.

PRIVATE MESSAGE: ANTHONY/MEL

ANTHONY (4:34 pm): Mel. Cut it out.

MEL (4:34 pm): It was a joke.

ANTHONY (4:34 pm): Kyle tried to kill himself a couple
months ago.

MEL (4:35 pm): Fuck

MEL (4:35 pm): Really?

MEL (4:35 pm): KYLE?? That's why he wasn't in school? I
thought he had the flu.

ANTHONY (4:35 pm): He's okay-ish. I think. Just lay off the
jokes.

MAIN CHANNEL

MEL (4:35 pm): Sorry

ANTHONY (4:36 pm) There's always a chance she doesn't
show.

TRINA (4:36 pm): Then it's on us.

MEL (4:36 pm): Uh. What's on us.

TRINA (4:37 pm): The game.

MEL (4:38 pm): IT'S NOT REAL

ANTHONY (4:38 pm): I'm bringing someone in case Sara doesn't show. Unless you want to partner up, Trina.

TRINA (4:38 pm): I already agreed to go with someone.

PRIVATE MESSAGE: ANTHONY/TRINA

TRINA (4:39 pm): There's something else I need to talk to you about.

ANTHONY (4:39 pm): What's up?

MAIN CHANNEL

NICK (4:39 pm): Cool. That settles it, then. Midnight in the woods, yeah?

TRINA (4:40 pm): I don't actually know where to go.

NICK (4:40 pm): Vanessa got the GPS coordinates. I'll text you guys.

NICK (4:41 pm): I mean INDIVIDUALS OF VARIOUS GENDER IDENTITIES.

MEL (4:44 pm): Don't bother. I'm not going. BECAUSE NONE OF IT IS REAL. Becca's gone. She's dead or she's shooting up in a flophouse or whatever, but she's not in the woods and she's not the prisoner of some stupid ghost from an old urban legend. You're all delusional if you think she is for even a moment. You should do yourselves a favor and admit that so you can move on.

<MEL has left the chat>

TRINA (4:45 pm): See you guys tonight?

ANTHONY (4:46 pm): Yeah. See you.

NICK (4:46 pm): I'll be there. Ciao, bitches.

<NICK has left the chat>

PRIVATE MESSAGE: ANTHONY/TRINA

ANTHONY (4:47 pm): Trina, what did you need to talk about?

TRINA (4:47 pm): I

TRINA (4:47 pm): Fuck I really don't know how to say this

ANTHONY (4:48 pm): Are you okay? What's going on?

TRINA (4:48 pm): I found out something and I don't really know what to do

ANTHONY (4:49 pm): Do you want to call? Or come over?

TRINA (4:49 pm): No. I don't know.

TRINA (4:50 pm): I have to go

ANTHONY (4:51 pm): Wait

TRINA (4:52 pm): I have to go. Chris² is home.

<TRINA has left the chat>

.....
2 Refers to Christopher Mauldin, stepfather of Kyle and Trina Jeffries.

4

What do you wear when you go to meet a ghost? What do you bring?

Every time I went into the woods before, I didn't bring anything more than a flashlight or a granola bar. I never had any hope of finding a sign of Becca. It was more about getting away from home, from town, from every other living soul. I never thought about what would happen if it was all real. If there was a road to walk down. Rationally, I still don't believe in ghosts, in roads that vanish. But I've begun to operate as if it is true, and that is close enough to believing.

In the end I dress warmly, with layers, and pack a lunch box, some water bottles, and a bunch of protein bars. I bring along my heaviest flashlight and extra batteries, Becca's camera, a change of clothes, and the notebook. And, of course, a key. I wait until I'm sure my mom is asleep, leave the note I've written on the kitchen table, and walk out.

If I vanish, I want her to know exactly why. Not like with Becca. Maybe it'll help. Maybe it won't. But at least she'll know why I've gone.

The duffel bag digs into my shoulder as I beeline for the forest. It's a cold night, though at least it isn't raining anymore. The sidewalk gleams under the streetlamps, and I think of black ice, surfaces that look solid until they plunge you into the depths. You could fall forever through darkness like that.

My phone buzzes with a message notification. I hold it face-down for a moment, convinced it's Anthony telling me he's staying home, destroying my chance at this before I even get to the woods. I flip the phone over in my hand and thumb the button to bring the screen to life. And nearly drop it.

One message, it says. From Becca.

I unlock the phone with shaking hands. And stare. The message is from a year ago.

Hey. Going to be out late. Don't worry. See you soon.

She sent that a few days before she disappeared, some night she was out with Zach. Why am I getting a notification for it now?

The phone buzzes. And buzzes again. The same notification popping up over and over until I feel dizzy, like my feet don't quite connect with the ground. I jam my thumb over the power button. The phone keeps buzzing, quick staccato pulses that writhe into the bones of my hand until the power shuts off at last.

My heart beats quick as a hummingbird's. The skin on my arms prickles with goose bumps, and I shake myself a little, trying to pull free of my one, endlessly looped thought—*this is impossible, this is impossible*.

I take a deep breath. It was just some quirk of technology. A coincidence. A fluke.

I turn the phone back on. For a moment I brace myself, certain the buzzing is going to start up again. Nothing. And then—

I'm here.

Not from Becca. From Anthony. He's waiting.

I let out a sound more like a sob than I want to admit and stuff a hand against my mouth. He's waiting for me. It's time to go.

I bury my phone deep in the duffel, where I can't hear it if it buzzes again, and set off at a jog.

EXHIBIT D

Transcript of 911 call

Placed from unknown number, 10:23 p.m., April 18, 2017

Briar Glen, MA

OPERATOR: 911, what's the address of your emergency?

UNKNOWN CALLER: [Indistinct]

OPERATOR: Hello? What's your emergency?

UNKNOWNCALLER:[Indistinct]him[indistinct]notmoving.³

OPERATOR: Hello, ma'am? Are you hurt?

UNKNOWN CALLER: No. Not me.

OPERATOR: Is someone hurt?

UNKNOWN CALLER: I think you need to send someone. I
think he's dead. I think I . . .

OPERATOR: What is your address, ma'am? Where are you
located?

UNKNOWN CALLER: I think . . .

<Call ends.>

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³ Voice is female, young. Words are difficult to make out; the caller seems to be crying.