

AN INFINITE PORTAL VAULT PRODUCTION

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THE COLD CASE FILES

Investigation Frameworks for Solo Horror & Mystery Roleplaying

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FREE SAMPLER

"Every cold case was once someone's nightmare.

Now it's yours to solve."

FROM THE VAULT



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FRONT MATTER

How to Use This Book

THE CASE FILES

Case 001: The Drowning Season *Cosmic Horror*

Case 002: The Burning Quilt *Folk Horror*

Case 003: The Hargrove Memorandum *Urban Conspiracy*

Case 004: Unit 7B *Supernatural Haunting*

Case 005: The Eighth Choir *Occult/Cult Activity*

CUSTOMIZATION TABLES

Victim Backgrounds (d20)

Suspect Archetypes (d20)

Hidden Motives (d20)

Location Modifiers (d12)

Evidence Types (d12)

Conspiracy Seeds (d10)

Ticking Clock Triggers (d8)

BACK MATTER

Blank Case File Template

Quick Reference Card

The Investigator's Oracle

Credits and Legal

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

"You are holding a casebook. Five investigations, fully assembled, waiting for you to walk through the door."

WHAT A CASE FILE IS

A case file is a complete investigation framework. Not a scenario in the traditional sense; there is no predetermined sequence of events, no script, no correct path from the first clue to the final revelation. A case file gives you the raw architecture of a mystery: the victim, the suspects, the locations, the evidence, and the conspiracy hiding beneath all of it. You provide the investigation.

Think of each case file as a crime board pinned to your wall. The photographs are there. The red thread is in your hand. The connections are yours to draw.

Each case file contains nine sections, always in the same order:

Case Briefing. The setup. How the case reaches you, what you know at the start, and the immediate question that demands an answer.

Victim Profile. Who is missing, dead, or in danger. Their background, personality, relationships, habits, and the one detail that matters more than the others.

The Suspect Web. Four to six individuals connected to the case. Each has a visible role, an apparent motive, a secret they are keeping, and a pressure point you can exploit.

Key Locations. Four to six places central to the investigation. Each has a layered description and an event table for when you visit.

Evidence and Clue Trail. Eight to twelve pieces of evidence, each with a discovery condition and connections to suspects and other clues.

The Conspiracy Layer. The truth beneath the surface mystery. Every case has one.

The Ticking Clock. A countdown. Something is coming, and if you do not act in time, the consequences are permanent.

Investigator Complications. A d10 table of problems that target you personally.

Genre Sidebar. A short note on the horror subgenre and recommended game systems.

PAIRING WITH AN ORACLE

These case files provide structure. They do not provide resolution. When you need to know whether the witness talks, whether the lock opens, whether the evidence is where you think it is, you need an oracle.

The Investigator's Oracle (from Infinite Portal Vault) was designed as a companion to this book. Its Yes/No Oracle, Likelihood Modifier, Twist/Interrupt Table, Scene Tone, and Pacing Push tables provide the mechanical engine that drives the investigation forward.

But these case files are compatible with any solo oracle system. Mythic GME, MUNE, Bivius, or any yes/no resolution mechanic will serve. The requirements are simple:

- 1. A yes/no oracle.** You need a way to ask questions and receive answers on a spectrum from catastrophic failure to extraordinary success.
- 2. A twist or interrupt mechanic.** Something that injects the unexpected. Investigations that proceed in a straight line are not investigations.
- 3. A way to set the scene.** Mood, atmosphere, the feeling of a room when you walk in.

HOW THE TICKING CLOCK WORKS

Every case file includes a countdown with numbered stages. Each stage describes an escalation. The final stage describes what happens if you run out of time.

Advance the clock when:

- **The oracle tells you to.** A failed roll, a twist result, or a pacing push can all trigger advancement.
- **You spend significant time.** If your character sleeps, travels, or waits, the clock moves.
- **The case file tells you to.** Some events explicitly advance the clock.

Do not advance the clock on every roll. It is a pressure tool, not a metronome. Let the clock breathe. It will still kill you.

◆ *The case went cold seventeen years ago. The evidence didn't.* ◆

CASE FILE 002



THE BURNING QUILT

Folk Horror

"The patterns remember what the town forgot.

Thread by thread, the binding frays."

CASE BRIEFING

You find the posting on a message board for independent researchers, buried between a request for genealogy help and a warning about black mold in county archives. The post is three days old. It reads:

"Seeking investigator with experience in missing persons and/or folk art documentation. Young woman (29, graduate student, University of Virginia) disappeared while conducting fieldwork in a rural Appalachian community in West Virginia. Local authorities have classified her as a voluntary departure. She did not depart voluntarily. Her research materials were shipped to her academic advisor. The materials are disturbing. The community is not cooperating. I will pay travel expenses and a reasonable fee. Time-sensitive: the community's annual festival begins in three days. If there are answers, they will surface during the festival or not at all. Contact: Dr. Alice Yun, Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, UVA."

You call Dr. Yun. Her voice is controlled, precise, academic. She tells you about Maren Calloway, her doctoral student. Maren went to Harlan Hollow, West Virginia, in late October to document the Stitching Festival, an annual folk art gathering where the women of the community create and display quilts using traditional patterns passed down through generations. Maren was there for two weeks. Her check-in emails were enthusiastic, then strange, then stopped. The last email, sent at 1:14 AM on a Tuesday, contained no text. Only three photographs of quilt patterns and a single line: "The symbols match. All three burial sites. Alice, the symbols match."

Maren's belongings were packed and shipped by the Hollow's postmistress. Her car was found at the trailhead for Backbone Ridge, keys in the ignition, a half-eaten granola bar on the passenger seat. The sheriff's office in McDowell County investigated for four days and concluded that Maren had gone hiking and gotten lost. The terrain is rugged. People disappear in these mountains. Case closed.

Dr. Yun does not believe this. Neither do you, once you see the photographs.

The quilt patterns are geometric, intricate, and old. They are also, unmistakably, the same symbols found carved into stone at three separate burial sites in the hills surrounding Harlan Hollow. Burial sites that predate European settlement by centuries. Maren was not documenting folk art. She was documenting a language. And someone in Harlan Hollow noticed.

The Stitching Festival begins in three days. The drive from Charlottesville to Harlan Hollow takes six hours on roads that get worse with every mile. The last fifteen miles are unpaved. Your phone signal dies at the county line.

Go.

◆ *Dust settles on everything except guilt.* ◆

VICTIM PROFILE

Name: Maren Calloway

Age: 29

Occupation: Doctoral candidate, Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology, University of Virginia. Dissertation topic: "Encoded Ritual Practice in Appalachian Textile Traditions."

Background: Maren grew up in Roanoke, Virginia, close enough to Appalachia to respect it and far enough to romanticize it in the way educated outsiders sometimes do. She corrected this tendency in herself ruthlessly, which is part of what made her good at fieldwork. She learned to listen before she spoke, to ask permission before she recorded, and to eat whatever was put in front of her without comment. Communities opened to her because she earned it. She was patient, genuine, and slow to judge. These qualities made her an excellent researcher. They also made her slow to recognize danger when it wore a familiar face.

Personality: Warm but precise. She laughs easily and takes notes constantly. Her field journals are meticulous: dated entries, sketched maps, transcribed conversations with timestamps. She carries a 35mm film camera in addition to her digital equipment because she believes the act of manual photography forces closer observation. She drinks sweet tea without irony and can identify seventeen varieties of Appalachian wildflower by sight. She is braver than she knows and more stubborn than she admits.

Relationships:

Dr. Alice Yun (academic advisor): Mentor and the closest thing Maren has to a professional mother. Alice pushed Maren toward the Harlan Hollow fieldwork. She feels responsible.

Jessamine "Jess" Harlan: The woman who hosted Maren during her stay, a quilter herself, and a direct descendant of the family that founded the Hollow. They became close quickly. Maren's field notes describe Jess as "the key informant I didn't know I was looking for."

Luann Boggs: The eldest active quilter in the Hollow, eighty-three years old. She taught Maren several stitching patterns and told her stories about the old ways. She also, according to Maren's notes, "went completely silent when I asked about the Backbone Ridge patterns. Just stopped talking mid-sentence and looked at me like I'd said something profane."

Ray Calloway: Maren's father. Retired schoolteacher in Roanoke. He has called the sheriff's office every day since Maren disappeared. They have stopped returning his calls.

Known Habits: Maren documented everything. Her field kit included two cameras, a digital audio recorder, three notebooks, and an encrypted laptop. She emailed Dr. Yun at least every other day during fieldwork. She kept a personal journal separate from her research notes. She hiked regularly and knew how to navigate mountain terrain. She did not get lost on Backbone Ridge. She was not the type.

The Detail That Matters: Maren's shipped belongings included all her equipment except the 35mm camera and one of the three notebooks (the smallest, a pocket-sized Moleskine she kept in her jacket). Her digital files were intact but incomplete: the photo folders jump from October 28th to a single batch on November 4th (the three quilt-

pattern photos sent to Dr. Yun) with nothing in between. Six days of photographs, gone. Not deleted; the file numbers skip entirely, as though the images were never transferred from the camera. The camera, the pocket notebook, and six days of documentation are missing. Someone curated what was sent back and what was kept.

Last Known Sighting: November 5th, 8:30 AM. Maren was seen by Glenn Farley (who runs the general store) walking east on the Backbone Ridge trail. She was carrying her daypack and the 35mm camera. She waved. He waved back. The trail leads to three places: the ridge summit, the old Harlan cemetery, and (if you know where to leave the marked path) the burial sites in the hills.

◆ *Cold cases don't close. They just stop screaming for a while.* ◆

Jessamine "Jess" Harlan

Quilter, beekeeper, unofficial historian of Harlan Hollow

Description: Early thirties, strong hands, dark hair tied back with a faded bandana. She has the lean, unhurried build of someone who works outdoors and the direct gaze of someone who has never needed to look away from anything. Her house is the largest in the Hollow, a white clapboard farmhouse at the base of Backbone Ridge that has been in the Harlan family since the 1790s. She is respected, liked, and very slightly feared. She does not seem to notice the fear. Or she is accustomed to it.

Relationship: Maren's host and primary informant. Jess offered her home and her knowledge freely. Maren's field notes describe their relationship as collaborative, even intimate in the way that deep fieldwork relationships sometimes become: long evenings of conversation, shared meals, a trust that built quickly because both women recognized something real in the other. Jess taught Maren patterns that, according to other quilters in the Hollow, "aren't usually shown to outsiders."

Apparent Motive: Loyalty to the community. If Maren discovered something the Hollow wants kept hidden, Jess is the most likely person to have noticed and the most likely to have acted. She is the gatekeeper. She decides who sees what. She decided to show Maren more than the community was comfortable with. If that decision led to Maren's disappearance, Jess carries the weight of it.

Secret: Jess is the current keeper of the binding quilt. Every generation of Harlan women produces one: a single, large quilt stitched with the complete pattern sequence that maintains the imprisonment of something beneath Backbone Ridge. Jess has been working on hers for three years. It is nearly finished. The pattern is not in any book. It is taught orally, mother to daughter, stitcher to stitcher, in a chain that stretches back to before the Hollow had a name. Jess showed Maren the historical patterns, the ones displayed at the festival, because she believed Maren would document them respectfully and leave. She did not show Maren the binding pattern. Maren found it anyway, in the burial site carvings. And Jess realized too late that Maren understood what she was looking at.

Pressure Point: Guilt. Jess liked Maren. Genuinely. She invited Maren into her home and then watched the community close around her like a fist. If Maren is alive (and Jess believes she is), Jess wants her found. But she cannot betray the Hollow to do it. The tension is tearing her apart. Push on the guilt. She will crack, but what comes through the crack may be something she has been desperate to tell someone.

What are they doing when you find them? (Roll 1d6)

ROLL	ACTIVITY
1	Quilting on the porch of the farmhouse, working a pattern you do not recognize. Her stitches are fast, urgent. She is not making art. She is making something necessary. She covers it when she sees you.
2	Arguing with Luann Boggs in the yard behind the general store. The argument is in low voices, but the body language is furious. Luann grabs Jess's wrist. Jess pulls free. When they see you, both women smile and the smiles are identical: warm, welcoming, and completely false.
3	Hiking the Backbone Ridge trail at dusk, carrying a lantern and a canvas sack. She is moving fast and does not want company. The sack is heavy and something inside it shifts with the rhythm of her steps.
4	Sitting in the Harlan family cemetery behind the farmhouse, at a grave marked only with a smooth river stone. She is talking softly. The grave is old. The conversation is not.
5	Cleaning the room where Maren stayed. The room has been cleaned before. The sheets are fresh, the surfaces are bare. But Jess is on her knees checking under the floorboards, methodically, as though looking for something Maren might have hidden.
6	Standing at the edge of her property where the yard meets the tree line, staring at Backbone Ridge. The ridge is dark against the sky. She does not look like a woman enjoying the view. She looks like a woman standing guard.

◆ *The file had been reopened so many times the folder was soft.* ◆

Luann Boggs

Elder quilter, community matriarch

Description: Eighty-three years old, small and bent but not fragile. Her hands are gnarled and her eyes are sharp as broken glass. She has been quilting since she was six years old. She has buried two husbands, raised five children, and outlived every woman of her generation in the Hollow. She speaks when she chooses to speak, and what she says carries the weight of law in this community. Not because anyone elected her. Because no one has earned the right to disagree.

Relationship: Luann was Maren's secondary informant and the community member who provided the deepest historical context. She told Maren stories about the founding families, the old ways of stitching, and the significance of pattern repetition in Appalachian quilt traditions. She also drew a line. When Maren asked about the Backbone Ridge carvings, Luann shut down. That silence was a warning. Maren did not heed it.

Apparent Motive: Protection of tradition. Luann has spent her entire life guarding the knowledge that the quilting tradition encodes. She is not sentimental about it. She is practical. The binding must hold. The patterns must continue. If an outsider threatened to expose or disrupt the tradition, Luann would act. Not with violence (she is too old and too smart for that), but with the quiet, implacable authority of a woman who has been making decisions for this community longer than most of its residents have been alive.

Secret: Luann ordered Maren's removal. Not her death. Her removal. When Jess reported that Maren had connected the quilt patterns to the burial site carvings, Luann convened the quilting circle (the inner circle, the six women who know the full truth) and made the decision: Maren would be taken to the ridge, shown the chamber beneath the binding stone, and given a choice. Join the circle and carry the knowledge, or forget. The forgetting is not a figure of speech. The chamber does something to memory. It always has. Maren was taken to the chamber. What happened after that is where Luann's story stops, because what happened after that is not what Luann planned.

Pressure Point: Legacy. Luann is eighty-three. She will not live to see another Stitching Festival after this one. The binding quilt must be completed and displayed. If the tradition breaks on her watch, everything her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother protected dies with her. She will not let that happen. But she is running out of options and running out of time. If you can convince her that you are a tool she can use rather than a threat she must manage, she will use you.

What are they doing when you find them? (Roll 1d6)

ROLL	ACTIVITY
1	Teaching a quilting class in the community hall. Four young women, needles and frames, working a pattern that you notice is subtly different from the ones displayed on the walls. Luann watches their hands, not their faces. She corrects a stitch without speaking, guiding the girl's fingers with her own.
2	Sitting on the porch of her cabin , shelling beans into a metal bowl. She sees you coming from a hundred yards out. By the time you reach her, she has decided what she will and will not tell you. The decision is already made. Your questions are a formality.
3	At the community cemetery on the hill above the Hollow, tending graves. Not the marked graves. The older ones, back where the trees start, where the stones are rough and the names are worn away. She is pulling weeds and speaking names aloud. She does not stop when you approach.
4	In heated conversation with Glenn Farley at the general store. Glenn looks uncomfortable. Luann looks implacable. The word "outsider" reaches you before they notice your presence. Glenn leaves quickly. Luann watches him go with an expression that is not quite contempt but is certainly not approval.
5	Examining a quilt spread across the table in the community hall. The quilt is old, faded, and large enough to cover a wall. She is tracing the pattern with her finger, comparing it to a hand-drawn diagram on yellowed paper. Something about the comparison worries her. The lines do not match.

ROLL ACTIVITY

- 6** **Walking the tree line** behind her cabin at dusk, placing small bundles at the base of certain trees. The bundles are wrapped in cloth scraps, tied with red thread. She places them deliberately, at measured intervals, murmuring words you cannot hear. It is not gardening. It is maintenance.

◆ *Seventeen years of silence is not the same as seventeen years of nothing.* ◆

Glenn Farley

Owner, Farley's General Store; unofficial postmaster

Description: Late forties, thin, nervous hands that never quite stop moving. He runs the only store in the Hollow, which makes him the nexus of every transaction, conversation, and piece of gossip in the community. He knows who buys what, who visits whom, and who receives mail from outside. He is cooperative, even eager, in a way that reads as helpful until you realize he is steering every conversation toward conclusions that protect the community.

Relationship: Glenn was the last person to see Maren before she disappeared. He saw her walking the ridge trail and waved. He also packed and shipped her belongings to Dr. Yun on Luann Boggs's instructions. He handled the equipment. He chose what went into the boxes and what did not. The missing camera and notebook did not ship themselves.

Apparent Motive: Community loyalty and self-preservation. Glenn is not a decision-maker. He is an executor. He does what Luann and the older families tell him to do because that is how things work in the Hollow and because his livelihood depends on community goodwill. A store with forty-seven customers cannot afford to lose any of them.

Secret: Glenn kept the camera and the notebook. Not on instructions. On impulse. He opened the camera, looked at the film canister, and decided that whatever was on it should not go to a university in Virginia. He has not developed the film. He has not read the notebook. Both are hidden in the crawlspace beneath his store. He tells himself he is protecting the community. The truth is simpler: he is afraid of what the photographs show, and he is more afraid of what Luann would do if she knew he had kept them instead of destroying them as she ordered.

Pressure Point: Fear. Glenn is not brave. He is a decent man in an indecent situation, and he is terrified of every possible outcome. Threaten exposure and he will fold. Promise protection and he will fold faster. He wants someone to take the camera and the notebook off his hands so the decision is no longer his.

What are they doing when you find them? (Roll 1d6)

ROLL	ACTIVITY
1	Stocking shelves in the store, alone, listening to a country radio station that barely comes through the static. He startles when the bell over the door rings. He has been jumping at sounds all week.
2	On the phone behind the counter, speaking quietly. He hangs up when you enter. He says it was a supplier. Suppliers do not make him look like that.
3	Sweeping the porch of the store, watching the road. He is not expecting a delivery. He is watching for someone. When he sees you, the relief on his face lasts exactly one second before he replaces it with the polite shopkeeper expression.
4	In the crawlspace beneath the store. You hear him through the floorboards. The sound of something being moved, rearranged, hidden more carefully. When he comes up, his knees are dirty and his hands are shaking.
5	Talking with a pair of hikers who have stopped for supplies. He is friendly, helpful, and aggressively normal. He gives them directions that will take them nowhere near Backbone Ridge. The hikers do not notice the detour. You do.
6	Burning trash in the barrel behind the store at an hour when no one burns trash. The fire is too hot for garbage. He is feeding it something specific. You arrive in time to see him hesitate over a small canvas bag before putting it back in his coat pocket. He does not add it to the fire. Not yet.

◆ *Old evidence speaks in a dialect you have to learn to hear.* ◆

Ezra Thorn

Pastor, Harlan Hollow Community Church

Description: Early fifties, tall, lean, with a preacher's voice and a skeptic's eyes. He came to the Hollow fifteen years ago as a circuit minister serving three communities. He stayed because the Hollow needed him, or because the Hollow would not let him leave. He is not sure which, and the distinction has stopped mattering. He preaches a quiet, practical Christianity that emphasizes community, endurance, and the obligation to protect what God has placed in your care. He does not speak about the quilts. He does not attend the Stitching Festival.

Relationship: Ezra met Maren twice. Once at the store, a brief introduction. Once at the church, where Maren came to ask about the community's history. Ezra gave her the sanitized version: hardscrabble settlers, coal economy, decline, survival. He did not mention the quilts. He did not mention the burial sites. He watched her leave with the distinct and uncomfortable certainty that she already knew more than he had told her.

Apparent Motive: Spiritual authority. Ezra occupies an awkward position. He is the community's moral center, but the community's oldest traditions predate his faith by centuries. The quilting circle operates outside his influence. The binding ritual is not Christian. It is older. Ezra has made his peace with this by not examining it closely. Maren's presence threatened that peace by examining it very closely indeed.

Secret: Ezra has been inside the chamber beneath the binding stone. Once, five years ago, when Luann decided he needed to understand what the community was protecting. What he saw there broke something in his faith and rebuilt it in a shape he does not recognize. The thing beneath Backbone Ridge is real. It is imprisoned. The quilts hold the prison together. Ezra cannot reconcile this with his theology, but he cannot deny it either. He prays for guidance and receives silence. He preaches on Sundays and tends the church garden and does not go near the ridge. He is a good man trapped in a situation that does not accommodate goodness.

Pressure Point: His conscience. Ezra believes Maren is alive. He believes the chamber took something from her (memory, will, clarity) but did not kill her. He believes she may be on the ridge still, in the old places, caught between what she was and what the chamber made her. He wants to help. He does not know how. If you give him a way, he will take it, and he will face whatever Luann throws at him afterward.

What are they doing when you find them? (Roll 1d6)

ROLL	ACTIVITY
1	Preparing a sermon at his desk in the small church office. The Bible is open but he is not reading it. He is staring at a topographic map of Backbone Ridge pinned to the wall. There are marks on the map in red ink. They correspond to the burial sites.
2	Chopping wood behind the church with a methodical fury that has nothing to do with heating needs. The woodpile is already stacked to the eaves. He is working something out of his system. He does not stop when you approach. He talks easier this way.
3	Walking the road between the church and the Hollow at night, carrying a flashlight and a walking stick. He says he is checking on parishioners. He is checking on the ridge. The tree line is visible from the road, and tonight the trees are moving in a wind you cannot feel.
4	In quiet conversation with Jess Harlan at the church. Their voices are low and urgent. Jess is crying, which strikes you as a thing she does not do often. Ezra has his hand on her shoulder. They separate when they hear you. Jess wipes her face and leaves without speaking.
5	Kneeling at the altar in the empty church. Not praying. Listening. The church is quiet but the quiet has a quality to it, a pressure, as though the building is straining to contain a sound just below hearing. Ezra's eyes are closed. His hands are flat on the floor.

ROLL ACTIVITY

- 6 Digging** at the edge of the church cemetery, near the oldest section. He has unearthed a stone slab that does not match the local granite. The slab is carved. The carvings are the same patterns that appear on the quilts. He is not surprised to find it. He is surprised that it has surfaced. It was deeper last time he checked.

◆ *The case was archived. The dread was not.* ◆

Cora Whitley

Quilter, herbalist, midwife

Description: Mid-forties, broad-shouldered, with calloused hands and a face that weathers every expression with the same steady patience. She is the Hollow's practical healer: she sets bones, delivers babies, treats fevers with tinctures brewed from plants she grows in a garden that runs up the hillside behind her cabin. She speaks little and observes everything. The other quilters defer to Luann on tradition, but they defer to Cora on matters of the body and the earth. She knows the mountain the way a surgeon knows the body on the table.

Relationship: Cora taught Maren about the connection between quilting patterns and the natural landscape: how certain patterns map to plant growth cycles, seasonal markers, and terrain features. Maren was fascinated. Cora was careful, feeding information in measured doses. She liked Maren but did not trust what Maren would do with what she learned. She was right not to.

Apparent Motive: Pragmatic protection. Cora is not ideological about the binding tradition. She does not revere it the way Luann does. She maintains it the way she maintains her garden: because the consequences of neglect are real and immediate. If Maren's research threatened the binding, Cora would act to neutralize the threat. Not with malice. With the same brisk efficiency she brings to pulling a thorn from a child's foot.

Secret: Cora administered the forgetting. In the chamber beneath the binding stone, there is a process (not a drug, not a spell, something older and less classifiable) that strips specific memories from the mind. Cora has performed it three times in her life: once on a hiker who stumbled onto the binding stone in 2008, once on a county surveyor in 2014, and once on Maren. The process is not perfect. It takes what it is aimed at, but it leaves damage around the edges: confusion, disorientation, gaps in the person's sense of self. The hiker and the surveyor recovered within days and left the Hollow with no memory of what they had seen. Maren did not recover. Something went wrong. Cora does not know what. The chamber took more than it should have, and Maren walked out of it and into the woods and has not come back. Cora is terrified that she broke Maren's mind, and more terrified of what Maren might be carrying in the pieces that remain.

Pressure Point: Responsibility. Cora is a healer. She has spent her life fixing things. She broke Maren, and she cannot fix what she broke because Maren is gone and the mountain is vast and the festival is in three days and the binding quilt is not finished. Approach her as a healer, not a suspect. Ask her to fix what she damaged. She will resist, then she will tell you everything, because the weight of it is killing her.

What are they doing when you find them? (Roll 1d6)

ROLL	ACTIVITY
1	In her garden, harvesting plants by lantern light. The plants she is cutting do not look like the medicinal herbs you can identify. They are darker, with leaves that curl in a way that suggests they are responding to the knife. She bundles them in cloth strips cut from a quilt.
2	At the community hall, preparing supplies for the Stitching Festival. Thread, needles, frames. She is counting, recounting. She is short of something. Her expression says the shortage matters more than a missing spool of thread should.
3	Treating a patient in her cabin. A woman from the Hollow, mid-twenties, pale, lying on Cora's kitchen table. The woman's eyes are open but unfocused. Cora is holding a compress to her forehead and speaking in a low, rhythmic cadence that is not English. The woman's lips move in sync.
4	Hiking the ridge trail at dawn, carrying a basket. She stops at specific points along the trail and examines the ground, the bark of trees, the way moss grows on certain rocks. She is reading the mountain. Something in what she reads makes her quicken her pace.
5	In heated disagreement with Luann at Luann's cabin. You hear Cora's voice, uncharacteristically loud: "She is still up there and you know it." Luann's response is inaudible. Cora leaves the cabin and does not look at you as she passes.

ROLL ACTIVITY

- 6** **Sitting alone** in the church pew, long after services have ended. She is not praying. She is holding a small object in her closed fist, turning it over and over. When she opens her hand to look at it, the object is a button. Maren's jacket had buttons like that.

◆ *Time doesn't heal cold cases. It composites them.* ◆

Dale Harlan

Jess's older brother; timber worker; keeper of the ridge trails

Description: Late thirties, silent, strong, with the watchful economy of movement that comes from working in dense forest where one wrong step costs you a limb. He lives alone in a cabin on the lower slope of Backbone Ridge. He maintains the trails, clears deadfall, and knows every path, game trail, and drainage on the mountain. If something moves on Backbone Ridge, Dale knows about it. If someone goes missing on Backbone Ridge, Dale is the first person who should have found them.

Relationship: Minimal direct contact. Dale met Maren at dinner in Jess's farmhouse. He was polite, distant, and left early. Maren's field notes mention him once: "Jess's brother. Quiet. Watches the tree line the way a dog watches a fence it knows something is on the other side of."

Apparent Motive: Family and community loyalty. Dale is a Harlan. The ridge is Harlan land. If the quilting circle decided that Maren needed to be managed, Dale is the one who would have managed the logistics: the walk up the ridge, the path to the binding stone, the chamber. He is the muscle, not the mind. He follows his sister and Luann because that is the order of things.

Secret: Dale found Maren. Three days after the forgetting, wandering the upper ridge trails in a state that he describes as "sleepwalking, but with her eyes open." She did not recognize him. She did not speak. She followed when he led and stopped when he stopped. He brought her to a line cabin on the upper ridge that nobody uses anymore and left her there with food, water, and a blanket. He has been going back every day. She is still there. She eats, she drinks, she stares at the walls. Sometimes she draws on the wood with a piece of charcoal she found in the stove. The drawings are quilt patterns. The patterns she draws are ones that Dale has never seen before, and he grew up watching his mother and grandmother stitch. Maren is producing new patterns. The mountain is speaking through her. Dale does not know what to do. He has told no one.

Pressure Point: His sister. Dale will do anything Jess asks. If you reach Jess first and earn her trust, she can bring Dale in. Approach Dale directly and he will stonewall you or disappear into the woods where you cannot follow. He is not hostile. He is overwhelmed by a situation he has no framework for, and the only response he knows is to stand watch and wait for someone who does.

What are they doing when you find them? (Roll 1d6)

ROLL	ACTIVITY
1	Splitting wood outside his cabin at first light. He has already split enough for a month. The rhythm is mechanical, dissociative. He does not notice you until you speak. When he looks up, his eyes are red from sleeplessness.
2	Coming down the ridge trail with an empty pack. The pack was full when he went up. He will say he was checking traps. There are no traps on this section of the ridge. He has been feeding someone.
3	Talking with Jess at the farmhouse, their heads close together. When you approach, Dale stands and walks away without a word. Jess watches him go with an expression that is equal parts love and fear.
4	At Farley's General Store , buying supplies. More food than a man living alone would need. Canned goods, crackers, bottled water. Glenn watches him load the bag and says nothing. Both men know what the supplies are for.
5	Standing at the edge of the tree line where his property meets the ridge, staring uphill. He is listening. You listen too. From somewhere up the ridge, carried on the wind, a sound that might be humming. A tune with no melody, rising and falling like a needle pulling thread through cloth. Dale's face, when he turns to you, is the face of a man who has been hearing that sound for days and cannot make it stop.

ROLL ACTIVITY

- 6** **Carrying a canvas roll** from his truck to his cabin. The roll is long, narrow, and heavy. Inside it, if you could see, is a quilt. Not one he owns. One he found draped over Maren in the line cabin, a quilt she could not have made because there is no frame, no needle, no thread in the cabin. It appeared overnight. The stitching is perfect. The pattern is one he has never seen. He is bringing it to Jess because he does not know who else to bring it to.

◆ *The original detective's notes stopped mid-sentence on page forty-one.* ◆



CUSTOMIZATION TABLES

*"No two investigations follow the same path.
These tables ensure yours never will."*

Table C.1: Victim Backgrounds

Roll 1d20. Every victim had a life before they became a case number.

ROLL	BACKGROUND
1	Investigative journalist. They were working a story that someone wanted killed. The story survived them. It is in a notebook, a hard drive, a safety deposit box. Finding it is the first step.
2	Retired law enforcement. Twenty years on the force, then a quiet retirement that was not quiet at all. They never stopped working cases. The last one caught up with them.
3	Graduate student. Young, brilliant, underfunded, and willing to cut corners to get results. Their thesis advisor does not want to discuss the final chapter.
4	Small business owner. Pillar of the community. Everyone liked them. Everyone says this. The financial records tell a more complicated story.
5	Traveling nurse. Moved from town to town, saw the insides of homes and institutions that outsiders never see. Kept a journal. The journal entries for this town are missing.
6	Archivist or librarian. Spent their career cataloguing other people's histories. Found something in the collection that was not supposed to be found. Reported it to the wrong person.
7	Construction worker. On a crew that broke ground at a site with a history. What they unearthed was not in the geological survey. They told their foreman. Their foreman told someone else.
8	Local politician. Minor office, major ambition. They discovered that the person above them on the ladder was dirty. They made the mistake of saying so out loud.
9	Artist or musician. Their recent work changed. Darker themes, obsessive repetition of specific images or phrases. The work itself suggests something was being communicated.
10	Social worker. Assigned to a case involving a family that everyone in town treats with careful deference. The social worker asked too many questions about the children.
11	Drifter or transient. No permanent address, few connections, the kind of person who vanishes without headlines. But someone noticed. Someone always notices.
12	Clergy. A priest, minister, rabbi, or imam who heard a confession they could not keep. The confession involved people with the means and motive to ensure silence.
13	Medical examiner or coroner. Their last autopsy report contradicts the official cause of death. The report was filed. Then it was unfiled. The examiner is no longer returning calls.
14	Teacher. Beloved by students, tolerated by administration. They noticed a pattern in the absences and behavioral changes of certain children.
15	Real estate agent. They sold a property with a history. The new owners found something in the walls, the basement, the attic, the land. The agent knew it was there.
16	Military veteran. Discharged under circumstances that remain classified. Came to this town for a reason they shared with nobody.
17	Hiker or outdoors enthusiast. They went into terrain that locals avoid. They came back different. Then they did not come back at all.
18	Accountant or bookkeeper. Numbers do not lie, but the people who hire accountants sometimes do. The victim found a discrepancy. The discrepancy had a body count.

ROLL BACKGROUND

- 19 Photographer or documentarian.** Their camera captured something in the background of an unrelated project. They did not notice it until they were reviewing footage at home.
- 20 Newcomer with no apparent history.** Arrived in town six months ago. No family, no visible employment, no explanation. Now they are gone, and the room they rented contains things that raise more questions than the disappearance itself.

- ◆ **How to Use:** Roll when creating a new victim for a custom case file, or to replace the victim background in an existing case. The background shapes the investigation: it determines who the victim knew, what they had access to, and why someone wanted them silenced.

"Not everyone who vanishes was innocent. But everyone who vanishes deserves an answer."

Table C.6: Conspiracy Seeds

Roll 1d10. The truth is always organized. The question is: by whom?

ROLL	SEED
1	A generational pact. Families in this community made an agreement decades or centuries ago. The original purpose has been forgotten, but the obligations remain.
2	Institutional corruption. A respected organization is rotten at its core. The rot is not incompetence; it is policy. The organization functions exactly as designed.
3	A feeding cycle. Something requires sustenance on a regular schedule. The community, knowingly or unknowingly, provides it.
4	An experiment in progress. Someone is conducting research that crosses ethical, legal, or natural boundaries. The victims are subjects.
5	A cover-up chain. The original crime was small. Each subsequent crime was committed to conceal the previous one.
6	Economic parasitism. The community's prosperity depends on something that would destroy it if made public. Silence is the town's primary industry.
7	A gateway. Something has been opened: a door, a passage, a frequency, a wound in the fabric of things. It cannot be closed by conventional means.
8	Replacement. People in the community are being replaced, altered, or overwritten. Slowly. One at a time. The replaced individuals function normally.
9	A debt to something inhuman. The community owes a debt to an entity that does not think in human terms. Payment is demanded in forms that human morality cannot accommodate.
10	Weaponized belief. A group has discovered that collective belief, focused and sustained, produces tangible effects. The reshaping requires sacrifice.

- ◆ **How to Use:** Roll when building a custom case file and you need the conspiracy at its center. The seed provides the structure; you provide the specific names, locations, and evidence.

"The truth is always organized. The question is: by whom?"



BACK MATTER

*"The investigation never really ends.
You just run out of questions you're willing to ask."*

BLANK CASE FILE TEMPLATE

"Your case. Your investigation. Your rules. The template is a skeleton. You provide the flesh."

Use this template to construct custom case files. Fill in each section following the patterns established in the five cases in the full book. Roll on the Customization Tables for inspiration, or build from your own ideas.

CASE FILE ____

Genre: _____

Epigraph: _____

CASE BRIEFING

How does the case reach the investigator? What is known at the start? What is the immediate question? (2-4 paragraphs)

VICTIM PROFILE

Name: _____

Age: ____

Occupation: _____

Background: (2-3 sentences)

Personality: (2-3 sentences)

Relationships: (3-5 connections)

Known Habits: _____

The Detail That Matters: _____

Last Known Sighting: _____

THE SUSPECT WEB

Create 4-6 suspects. For each:

Name and Title: _____

Description: (2-3 sentences)

Relationship to Victim: _____

Apparent Motive: _____

Secret: (What they are actually hiding)

Pressure Point: (What breaks them open)

Activity Table: (d6, what are they doing when found?)

KEY LOCATIONS

Create 4-6 locations. For each:

Name: _____

Description: (2-3 sentences)

Obvious: (What you see on arrival)

Thorough Search: (What careful examination reveals)

Hidden: (What requires special knowledge to find)

Event Table: (d6, what happens here?)

EVIDENCE AND CLUE TRAIL

List 8-12 clues. For each:

Clue: _____

Discovery Condition: (How/where is this found?)

Connects to Suspect(s): _____

Connects to Clue(s): _____

Red Herring? Yes / No / Partially misleading

THE CONSPIRACY LAYER

1-2 paragraphs: What is actually happening? Who is responsible? What is the mechanism? What is the goal?

THE TICKING CLOCK

Clock Type: _____

Trigger: _____

6 escalation stages, plus final deadline.

INVESTIGATOR COMPLICATIONS

d10 table of personal problems targeting the investigator.

GENRE SIDEBAR

2-3 paragraphs on horror subgenre and recommended systems.

◆ Budget cuts closed the investigation. The budget was not actually cut. ◆

GET THE FULL CASE FILES

"You have seen the shape of the investigation. Now open the rest of the file."

THE COLD CASE FILES

This sampler contains a fraction of what awaits. The full product includes:

- **Five complete case files** spanning cosmic horror, folk horror, urban conspiracy, supernatural haunting, and occult activity
- **Full investigation material** for each case: suspects, locations, evidence trails, conspiracy layers, ticking clocks, and complications
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"Roll the dice. Follow the evidence. Find the truth."

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