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Escapism through Alternate Worlds, Monsters, and Environment in Fiction

A Thesis Submitted

by

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Abstract

This thesis began with the idea of horror and science fiction novel's ability to provide readers with a sense of escape in exploring alternative worlds through descriptions of scary monsters and brooding environments. The location of my manuscript takes place in real-life hiking area in Connecticut called Case Mountain, which I have been hiking in since I was a child. Throughout my life, I have always had a fascination with the folklore and ghost stories surrounding Connecticut, and much of my writing has always had a focus on sharing these tales and providing readers with the ability to escape their everyday lives by building on these stories and creating alternate worlds of dark landscapes and mysterious creatures. The critical theory paper examines the ability for horror and science fiction novels to create escapism for readers through the building of these alternate worlds and encounters with dense landscapes and fictitious monsters. My manuscript titled, *The Case Mountain Cases*, delves into humanity's need to escape in these alternate worlds while also illustrating how the power of love and human connection can overcome the dangers of the natural environment.

Artist Statement

INTRODUCTION TO THE MANUSCRIPT

The Case Mountain Cases is a mystery science fiction novel based on the landscapes and legends of a hiking area called Case Mountain. The story is written in the first person, and follows protagonist Kristina Ledger whose fiancé went missing while hiking in Case Mountain. A year after the police and search party found no evidence involving his disappearance, Kristina finds a box of notes and historical documents that her fiancé had been working on that dives into the history of Case Mountain, and provides a possible explanation as to why so many people have gone missing while hiking there, including her fiancé. While exploring her fiancé's research into the strange happenings surrounding Case Mountain, Kristina decides to set back out to Case Mountain, using the research and findings that her fiancé, Steven Bock, had left behind. As Kristina explores the mysteries behind Case Mountain, she struggles with her own identity and perceptions of the world and reality as a whole as she finds herself exploring an alternate plane of existence known as "The Rift." Further, *The Case Mountain Cases* illustrates the lengths that Kristina will go to in order to save the person she loves, and shows how love can surmount any boundary and even cross between worlds and planes of existence.

The Case Mountain Cases attempts to identify our fascination with the unknown and our desire to look for answers and explanations. Creating an alternate world for Kristina to explore while encountering the myths and monsters that have surrounded her Connecticut town also enables readers an opportunity to escape from their everyday lives in a search for discovery. Since the disappearance of her fiancé, Kristina has also lost herself and cannot find place or purpose in the world she lives in. In her town of Forestville, Connecticut, there have been dozens

of cases of people who went hiking in Case Mountain, but have never returned. Despite the town's efforts to find all of the missing people, the town rejects the ghost stories that attempt to explain these disappearances, and is blind to the idea that there may be something otherworldly that could explain the strange occurrences surrounding Case Mountain.

My desire to write this story focuses on our fascination to search for answers in things that cannot be explained. It is human nature to question the unknown and desire answers to the things in life that cannot be explained, and Kristina's story focuses on what causes us to search for these answers and to create mythical stories in an attempt to explain the things that we do not know. Throughout Kristina's exploration of the environment, she encounters multiple twists, turns, and horrors that will help her in discovering the secrets behind Case Mountain. The further Kristina traverses through this mysterious environment, the more she must wrestle with these secrets and truths that she uncovers about the world.

Writing this story in the first person enables the readers to connect with Kristina and feel all the emotions and horrors that she experiences throughout her traversing Case Mountain. To emphasize this, many of the chapters within the novel will also be in the form of voice-recordings that Kristina makes to document her discoveries and help piece together the mountain's mysteries. Kristina also intends to use these recordings to create a podcast that documents her journey, which she calls "The Case Mountain Cases." Throughout this manuscript, there will be many instances in which Kristina is exposed to horrific circumstances and scary monsters that she must overcome. The purpose of writing this manuscript through Kristina's point of view is to enable the reader to mirror all the emotions that Kristina's feels and place the reader closer to the dangers of the mountain, which will effectively allow the readers the ability to escape into this alternate world with dark secrets and strange beasts.

PROCESS FOR THE WORK

Ever since my dad would tell me of various ghost stories and legends surrounding Connecticut, I have always been fascinated with mysteries and writing horror stories with cautionary tales. At twenty-nine-years-old, I began publishing stories in a horror anthology podcast called “Creepy.” Of these stories, one of the most successful publications focused on a real town in Connecticut called Dudleytown. Throughout my childhood, I used to hear various ghost stories surrounding Dudleytown, which all stemmed from the history of the town’s settlement and eventual abandonment. The story I wrote, titled “I Decided to Enter Dudleytown at Night,” was based on a female protagonist who did not believe in any of the legends, and wanted to dispel all of the ghost stories that surrounded the area. When the character entered Dudleytown, she began to learn of the town’s history.

The urban legends surrounding the area of Dudleytown, Connecticut had become so popular that Andi Rierden, a Fairfield University adjunct professor and *New York Times* journalist on urban issues, had even written an article on the rumors and legends surrounding the area known as Dudleytown. In the article, Rierden explains that one of the biggest tales surrounding Dudleytown was that the land was cursed due to the founder of the town fleeing from execution in England, and that the cause of all their crops failing and livestock dying was a result of the curse (Rierden). As the crops continued to fail, many of the people there left and made the area mostly deserted. Rierden’s article shows that regardless of what people believe in terms of the afterlife, there has always been a fascination with ghosts and legends throughout history. In *The Case Mountain Cases*, Kristina’s fiancé Steven will attend a meeting led by the cultist group “The Keepers of The Rift,” where he will take from them a collection of old maps

which used to belong to Mr. Dudley, who was also looking into opening The Rift. While this part of history would be fictional, I still wanted to find a way to tie in local Connecticut folklore stories to make the work feel more authentic to the area.

What fascinated me the most with these different legends and stories was in learning how they came into existence to try and explain what causes hardship. Throughout history, people have created these fictitious stories to try and explain or validate these hardships, and even provide a reason as to why something happened that was beyond their control. Due to the mysterious nature and enticing grip that this story has had on me, especially while taking my frequent hikes to Kent Falls, which cuts a mere quarter-mile south of the Dudleytown forest, that I wanted to write a novel that continued to focus on legends and the impact of New England environments in Connecticut.

Another project that I had been working on when I turned thirty was a creative non-fiction book on hiking, where I would create an interactive hiking book for readers that both promoted the benefits of hiking and also sharing the history behind these hiking areas. Hiking has always been a therapeutic way for me to deal with hardship and persevere through grief and, because of this, I wanted to write a book where the protagonist grew as a character and found her identity through her overcoming the environment. Reading prominent horror writers such as H.P. Lovecraft, Mary Shelley, and Bram Stoker showed me that a strong, descriptive depiction of the surrounding environment helps immerse the reader deeper into the story, and causes the reader to mirror the emotions felt by the characters. The creative nonfiction book I started writing about hiking helped me in my descriptions of Kristina traversing through Case Mountain and also helped me build a more immersive environment which significantly impacts the characters.

When creating the characters for this manuscript, I knew that I wanted the protagonist of the story to be a young, strong female lead that must overcome her fears to find truth. Kristina is introduced to the readers as being quiet, safe, and skeptical, which is the exact opposite of her missing fiancé. Kristina's eventual discovery that her fiancé might still be alive somewhere in Case Mountain sets her off on a journey where she will grow as a character and find both courage to overcome her fears of the woods and a desire to find answers to the unexplained mysteries within these woods. As Kristina battles with the environment and the monsters that she encounters along the way, Kristina grows as a character and becomes determined to uncover the mysteries and secrets that The Rift holds for her, such as what happens when we die.

After Kristina sets off into Case Mountain, she finds additional clues through the collection of documents that Steven had gathered and hid away in the attic. Of these clues, Kristina finds a geocaching bin tucked away inside a hole in a tree. The act of geocaching is a way for hikers to track and locate small hidden containers that are typically located within forests by using latitude and longitude coordinates. Once locating the geocaching bin, there is traditionally a pen and paper inside the bin, where the person can sign their name and date the day they found it. The interactive hiking book that I had been working on used this idea by adding in specific GPS coordinates of hidden Easter-eggs that the readers would have a chance to discover. Additionally, as an avid hiker, I started participating in geocaching when I was in college at the University of Connecticut. I would find out where these bins were through a Connecticut webpage on hiking, and I was always fascinated by the idea of stamping one's name into a log while hiking.

I knew that I eventually wanted to incorporate geocaching into a horror story, and writing my first novel gave me the opportunity to do that. Within the geocaching bin, Kristina also finds

a voice recorder, which holds the secret for Kristina to enter the alternate universe. This also proves to be significant because the recorder that she finds is the same exact one that she has used in the past to record her thoughts as a child.

When Kristina finds this geocaching bin in *The Case Mountain Cases*, she discovers that her fiancé Steven had signed and dated his name three days after he was reported missing. This signature log in the geocaching bin also has a long list of other names, all of which are suspiciously crossed out. Within the documents that Kristina had found in the attic, she also finds printed out pages from a Reddit page that includes first-person accounts of other townspeople within Forestville, Connecticut of going missing in Case Mountain. When Kristina discovers and enters The Rift into the other dimension, she meets these characters, Mel and Tom, and ultimately learns about how their stories will tie into Steven's disappearance. As Kristina continues her search, she finds additional clues left by Steven on how she can find him and how to solve the mysteries of Case Mountain.

The idea to use an alternate world or different plane of existence came from listening to a podcast last year called "The Left Right Game." In this fictional podcast, host and author Tessa Thompson writes a first-person story where a journalist discovers a mysterious game where taking consecutive left and right turns, no matter where the characters are geographically located, always leads to a tunnel. Once through the tunnel, they discover a world that is somewhat similar to their own, but different in a number of horrific ways. I was completely enthralled by this podcast. The main character in this story is a journalist named Alice, who referred to this different world as a stray thread of yarn that time and life had forgotten (Thompson ep. 3). When exploring this new world, Alice encounters multiple horrors which she has to overcome, and also keeps a voice journal documenting the strange new world. At the end of the podcast, Alice must

choose to keep going on the road, discovering the secrets of life along the way, or to turn back, and forever wonder what answers were waiting for her at the end of the road. Additionally, Thompson writes the story in a way that makes the environment as a destructive, manipulating force that the characters must overcome. This is an element that I will also look to use in *The Case Mountain Cases*, where the mountain and landscapes that Kristina has to traverse acts as an opposing force throughout her journey.

This story captivated me because it shows the classic struggle with our desire to uncover universal questions such as “why are we here?” and “what is our purpose?” along with the potential dangers of what knowing that information could bring. *The Case Mountain Cases* is similar to “The Left Right Game” in the sense that both of the main characters are looking for answers and trying to find something that is greater than themselves. Humans will always ask questions and will always look to uncover answers of the unknown. When Kristina enters The Rift, she will also uncover secrets of the world such as the existence of alternate worlds, and find purpose in discovering the meaning of living and her existence. The other Kristina, as the readers will learn, is determined to swap lives with the Kristina in our plane of existence, due to the grief that she had experienced in her world.

When I began writing this manuscript during my Writing Fiction and Fiction Workshop classes at Liberty University, my professor and peers provided me with tons of ideas, critiques, and encouragement to strengthen the story and provide more background into the motivations and desires of the characters. Additionally, I knew that I wanted to write this manuscript in the format of Kristina making a podcast documenting her journey, but the execution of this was difficult and hard to achieve. One of the issues that my peers had pointed out was that it was hard to follow the timeline, and to differentiate when Kristina was recording her thoughts versus her

inner monologue. To help with this, one of my peers suggested that I break down the events into days, and to label and number each of her voice recordings. This proved to be extremely helpful in structuring the plot of the novel and strengthening Kristina as a character.

In the first 10,000 words of the manuscript that I've written thus far, Kristina has very little interaction with anyone, which made it difficult to write the story with such little dialogue. My professor recommended that I use more flashbacks within the story to both add dialogue and to give the readers a better understanding of the real world before setting up the fantasy world which Kristina will enter. This also served as greatly beneficial advice and provided the readers with more depth and understanding of Kristina as a character, and her relationship with her fiancé Steven. Adding flashbacks also provided me with a better opportunity to delve into the history of Case Mountain to show the impact that the hiking area has had on the town. This further enables me to portray the environment as a force which Kristina must overcome to break the hold which it has over the town through their refusal to acknowledge the fact that the mountain is causing these disappearances.

Despite the lack of dialogue within the first act of the novel, Kristina's voice recordings help add to the spoken word and further connects the reader with the protagonist. By making some chapters only consist of Kristina's voice recordings, it further helps the reader feel that they are right there with Kristina in the woods. Having there be hiking-specific acts such as geocaching builds onto the believability that Kristina is out there, exploring the woods, and that something sinister and otherworldly is present. Kristina's voice recordings are a way for her to document her own fear and help her determine what is really going on at Case Mountain.

VISION FOR THE WORK

The purpose of *The Case Mountain Cases* is to explore our need as humans to search for answers in the world that help explain our existence. Along with this, the manuscript is also meant to evoke a sense of fear from the readers by mirroring the emotions felt by Kristina and to also make the reader hungry for answers. This would effectively help achieve my overall goal of the novel, which is to enable readers to be completely immersed in the story and provide a means of escape from their everyday lives, while also allowing my readers to ask critical questions on life and the possibility that other worlds can exist. Each chapter within the novel will multiple twists, cliffhangers, and clues that will keep the reader hooked and make them feel as if they are right there with Kristina, exploring the horrors of the mountain alongside her. Writing this story in the first person helps connect the reader to Kristina and forces the reader to face the monsters and obstacles that she encounters. Another way in which I can immerse the reader into the story is through strong descriptions of Kristina's surrounding environment.

By reading past works of horror fiction that have built a sense of fear for their reader through craft elements such as characterization, atmosphere, and conflict through monsters, authors such as H.P. Lovecraft, Stephen King, and Bram Stoker have been able to write strong, first-person novels and stories that allow their readers to become fully immersed into their respective worlds that they built. *The Case Mountain Cases* will look to emulate these fiction stories by creating a detailed description of the woods surrounding Kristina and showing how her environment manipulates her decisions. Lastly, studying these authors helped me convey a sense of fear and terror within my characters as they explore an alternate world that is both visible and believable to the readers. Learning of how these authors successfully built alternate worlds within their stories helps me build out The Rift that Kristina will enter, and what similarities and differences exist within this alternate world.

This story is also meant to show the internal struggle with grief and overcoming one's fears and anxieties, which is exemplified when Kristina has to battle with her own self, as she is looking to swap her existence with our protagonist's existence due to the traumas that she has faced in her own world. The Rift is meant to further take readers into a new world in a search for these answers to questions that cannot be easily explained by science or nature, such as why we are here or what else exists out there.

Kristina has always been a skeptical person and does not believe in things that are not physical and tangible. Kristina is a scientist who does not believe in religion or the existence of heaven or hell, and often mocks the town's belief that something supernatural could be going on in Case Mountain that would explain all of the people who have gone missing there. Throughout the history of the fictitious town of Forestville, Connecticut, dozens of hikers have vanished while traversing Case Mountain. The town would rather ignore this issue and pretend as if nothing supernatural could be causing these disappearances, while parents tell stories to their children to get them to avoid going there. In researching ghost stories and urban legends in America, I found that many of the stories stem from precautionary tales that prevent others from getting into danger. My vision for *The Case Mountain Cases* is to explore how these stories intertwine with society, while also creating an alternate world with a descriptive, brooding environment for my readers to escape into.

LITERARY CONTEXT FOR THE WORK

The main inspiration for wanting to write a novel about a strange, newly discovered world or plane of existence was after listening to "The Left Right Game podcast." The story captivated me because it let the listeners ask universal questions of life through the exploration

of a supernatural world. In the story, the characters constantly question reality and even their own existence, which leads to the main character Alice left to determine if she wants to go back to her old life, or if she wants to continue to explore this supernatural world.

Another fictional work that helped in my writing of *The Case Mountain Cases* is the podcast and novel, *Welcome to Night Vale*. Nominated for the best science fiction novel in 2015, *Goodreads* summarizes the effectiveness of the story through the novel's immersive mystery filled with multiple mysteries, and the fictional worlds also act as a metaphor to help both the characters and readers to find an identity (*Welcome to Night Vale #1*). My goal is to emulate the success of this novel and use the supernatural world of The Rift in *The Case Mountain Cases* to let readers ask universal questions and attempt to find themselves through Kristina's journey to find her own identity along with her fiancé.

Another work of fiction that I am basing the literary context of this work on is Stephen King's "The Mist." In King's short story, he examines a town's inability to communicate with each other and the exploration of relationships when faced with the unknown. Like in "The Mist," there are supernatural creatures that escape from The Rift and enter our world from their world, which makes us question our own existence and place in the world. This reflects my overall vision for *The Case Mountain Cases* because I want readers to question their own reality and purpose through Kristina's uncovering of the supernatural and her battle with the environment. One quote that always sticks out to me from "The Mist" is when King writes the following: "Nothing in nature is that even; man is the inventor of straight edges" (King 18). This quote relates to my manuscript because it questions our impact on the world versus our relationship with nature. Within my manuscript, an alternate world will be tearing down both Kristina and the readers' past perceptions of the world and our existence within it. Case

Mountain is meant to be a looming and physical presence that Kristina must overcome to find both herself and her fiancé.

Because the goal of the novel is to evoke fear through describing a horrific and overbearing environment, it is also crucial to look at past horror fiction stories that successfully instill fear through the creation of a descriptive and terrifying environment. H.P. Lovecraft's collection of short stories titled *Necronomicon* is a great literary reference to see how authors are able to build fear and suspense through strong portrayals of the characters' surrounding environment. In his short story "The Lurking Fear," for example, Lovecraft writes, "There can be nothing normal in the mind of one who, knowing what I knew of the horrors of Tempest Mountain, would seek alone for the fear that lurked there" (Lovecraft 78). This passage shows the impact that the environment has on the character, by making him think he is out of his mind for going back to that place. Much of the research in the preparation of writing *The Case Mountain Cases* involves examining how authors are able to create a sense of escapism for their readers through building alternate worlds and realities.

Lastly, one of the most popular science fiction novels today is Frank Herbert's *Dune*. This book takes place on a fictional planet where the characters are in search of a sacred spice that has the possibility to expand human consciousness. The reason *Dune* has become so popular is the author's ability to create such an in-depth world to immerse the readers in, while also reflecting and questioning the meaning and purpose of life. One of my main goals in *The Case Mountain Cases* is to describe the alternate plane of existence known as The Rift in great detail to achieve what Herbert accomplished in *Dune*, where readers are able to escape from the stresses of their everyday to explore a new and exciting world for entertainment. Additionally, the answers that Kristina is trying to find will emulate the idea of human's ability to expand their consciousness, as The Rift offers secrets to the universe that are not known to anyone else.

Throughout her exploration of *The Rift*, Kristina will struggle to accept these answers and questions whether or not humans should learn any of the forbidden knowledge that Kristina believes she has learned. Examining these successful novels and short stories has shown me the importance for building descriptive and believable fictional worlds while incorporating unique and creative monsters.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC AS A CHRISTIAN SCHOLAR

While this novel is a mystery, science fiction story which involves an alternate reality, there are Christian themes that are analyzed throughout the novel, such as the studying of our search for knowledge as humans. In Matthew 7:7-12 (New International Version), it says: “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (New International Version, 7:7-12). This quote from the Bible is significant to the theme and message of my story because it states the benefit to ask questions and to search for answers.

To me, the purpose of life is to learn, explore the world, and discover our relationship within the world and our environment. *The Case Mountain Cases* focuses on Kristina’s desire to ask questions and discover unknown truths of the world in an attempt to find her own identity and place within the world. The struggle between humans and nature has always existed and will always exist, which makes a main focal point of my novel to be Kristina’s battle with Case Mountain, its dangers, and the secrets that it contains. The goal of writing *The Case Mountain Cases* is to both immerse readers in a captivating, mysterious journey, allowing them to escape from the struggles and fears of everyday life, while also motivating the readers to want to overcome their obstacles and to always be on the hunt for knowledge.

Creating Horror through Characterization, Atmosphere, and Creatures

Since I began writing fiction, I have always been fascinated with writing horror stories that can evoke fear and suspense with the written word. All of the horror stories that I've written so far, however, have been short stories with only a brief glimpse into the protagonist's world. While *The Case Mountain Cases* is not strictly horror, I do intend on utilizing craft elements of horror-writing such as writing in Kristina's point of view to connect the reader with Kristina's struggles and emotions, creating a dark atmosphere to create a sense of unease, and creating conflict through monsters which Kristina must face and overcome.

In building this fictional world of *The Rift* in my manuscript, an alternate plane of existence in where various monsters and creatures exist, I wanted to study how these elements that popular authors use can create a sense of fear for their readers. Horror in fiction-writing can be an effective genre that allows readers to escape from their everyday lives and be immersed in a story that builds tension and suspense through elements of fear and the unknown. Examining how past works of horror literature use the craft elements of atmosphere, characterization through point of view, and creating conflict through monsters will enable me to implement these elements into *The Case Mountain Cases* through building the environment of *The Rift*, and by also getting readers to connect with Kristina through showing her internal struggles, motivations, and flaws. This critical paper examines how popular horror authors are able to create dark, ominous atmospheres in their stories through language and description, how they're able to connect readers with the characters through characterization and narration techniques, and lastly, how these authors create conflict through encounters with monsters.

THE FASCINATION BEHIND HORROR FICTION

In writing horror, it is critical to understand the psychology behind horror as genre and determining *why* the audience has a desire to be frightened. Despite the fact that being terrified of something seems negative, the popularity of horror as a genre continues to remain wildly popular within our culture, with authors such as Stephen King producing multiple best-selling horror novels. In Stephen King's 1981 nonfiction autobiography titled *Danse Macabre*, he explains why horror fiction is so popular and widely consumed by readers by first saying, "I recognize terror as the finest emotion" (King 25). King also argues that consumers of horror have an increased sense of imagination than others, with an understanding that, "we [the reader] take refuge in make-believe terrors so the real ones don't overwhelm us, freezing us in place and making it impossible for us to function in our day-to-day lives" (King xii-xiii). King writes that the reason readers want to be scared when consuming horror fiction is to escape and feel immersed in this fictional world to distract them from the real terrors that exist in their everyday lives (King xiii).

In the book *On Writing Horror: A Handbook by the Horror Writers*, editor Mort Castle explains horror's popularity for the ability for the genre to confront both humanity's and nature's darkest secrets in a way that other genres cannot. Horror-writing enables the reader to identify evil within the text and then feel suspense for how that evil is going to be vanquished (Castle 6). To write effective horror, Castle also states that writers must implement new and creative ways to depict this evil that does not follow overused horror clichés, by stating the following:

Writing about evil is a moral act, and it won't do to recycle definitions of evil – to take them on trust. Horror fiction frequently presents the idea of evil in such a shorthand form as essentially meaningless – something vague out there that causes folk to commit terrible acts, something other than ourselves, nothing to do with us. (Castle 24)

Castle writes that despite the readers of the horror genre being constantly exposed to evils, these evils are vague, unrealistic and meaningless within the context of our day-to-day struggles. By showing this dichotomy, Castle explains how horror as a genre can take people away from those everyday stressors and be immersed in a fictional evil.

It is critical in writing horror fiction to enable your readers to relate to the characters while not falling into overused horror tropes that are not true to the reader. While *The Case Mountain Cases* will utilize some of these common tropes found in horror fiction, the story will also look to reject some of these tropes to keep the reader guessing. Tropes within horror are commonly used themes, descriptions, or actions that frequently appear within the genre. Examples of tropes within horror include characters tripping while running away from a villain or monster, a car not starting when trying to escape their attacker, or having premarital sex which leads to the character's death.

Another horror trope, as explained by author and Bridgewater State University student Majdoulin Almwaka in the article, "Complex Female Agency, the Final Girl trope, and the Subversion and Reaffirmation of Patriarchy: The Cases of Western and MENA Horror Films," is the "final girl" trope, where the protagonist in horror is often a female character that represents purity and vanquishes the evil of the antagonist (Almwaka 1). Almwaka writes this to show how the rise in popularity of using the final girl trope had also created a predictability within the genre, whether it be novels or movies (Almwaka 3). Studying the popularity of these tropes and examining their functionality within the story can further enable me to both utilize these tropes as well as break away from there to create tension and surprise.

As the main protagonist in *The Case Mountain Cases*, Kristina Ledger initially falls into this trope where she is constantly running from dangers within the mountain and is seen as the

main opposing force of the present evil. Toward the end of the novel, however, it breaks away from this trope by having the antagonist of this story also be herself, from a different plane of existence. By getting readers to initially believe that this novel is following the final girl trope, the twist of having Kristina battle herself as the presence of evil from an alternate plane of existence would become more impactful and less expected. My decision to write this story using a female protagonist stems on my desire to build on the final girl trope through the growth and journey of Kristina Ledger as a character. Kristina's journey through Case Mountain will highlight the internal, psychological struggle that she faces throughout her battle with the environment. While many of the "final girls" in horror movies are mostly celebrated for the physical abilities to overcome their villains, the goal with Kristina is to build on the final girl trope by showing her overcoming her own mental struggles as well, with the environment acting as a metaphor to her internal struggles.

Castle exemplifies that there needs to be a reason for the presence of this evil, and that there also must be a significance to the characters in the story attempting to overcome this evil in order for readers to make psychological connections and interpretations to the writing. Kristina's exploration of the new, unknown world of The Rift causes her to both feel fear and also feel a wanting to know answers to the questions of the unknown. Throughout Kristina's journey, it will be critical to avoid these clichés that would take the exposure of evil away from the readers and prevent them from connecting to Kristina and cause the reader to be disinterested in finding out the answers that she is searching for as well.

Dr. Noel Carroll, a philosopher of Art and Aesthetics, explains the paradox of horror in a *Youtube* interview titled, "The Philosophy of Horror: Dr. Noel Carroll Interview (Halloween Edition, 2021)". In the video, Carroll says, "The paradox of horror is why do we [the readers]

take pleasure in reading these fictions about creatures that are fearsome and disgusting, which if we were to encounter in everyday life, we'd head in the opposite direction?" (Carroll). Despite the fact that readers would not want to intentionally place themselves in the situations of these characters within these works of horror fiction, there is still a desire to read about these horrific tales, where the reader feels the same sense of terror felt by the characters. The desire to be afraid through horror fiction, as Dr. Carroll explains, stems from the need to both escape from the monotony of everyday life and to also explore the unknown through the presence of monsters and understanding our own existence through these fictional, dangerous creatures (Carroll). By understanding how these fictional creatures are able to take the reader away from the fears of their everyday life, I can better learn how to create these monsters and craft their interactions with the characters.

BUILDING FEAR THROUGH CHARACTERIZATION AND POINT OF VIEW

Dr. Noel Carroll further examines fear and elements of horror in fiction through his article published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* titled "The Nature of Horror." In the article, Carroll examines past works of horror literature and how authors are able to create a sense of fear through a specific aesthetic. Dr. Carroll states that horror literature is predominantly focused on knowledge as a key theme within its stories, and is also distinguished from other genres through "the attitude of the characters in the story to the monsters they chance upon" (Carroll 52). In *The Case Mountain Cases*, Kristina becomes obsessed with The Rift's ability to help her learn secrets of her own world, including universal questions such as why we exist or what happens after death. This illustrates Kristina's desire for unknown knowledge and will act as a key theme within the manuscript.

The desire to obtain forbidden knowledge is a popular theme that is often used in horror literature. According to Dr. Noel Carroll: “[T]he two most frequent plot structures in horror narrative are the discovery plot and the overreacher plot” (Carroll 57). In the overreacher plot, a central figure embarks on a journey to obtain “hidden, unholy, or forbidden knowledge” (Carroll 57). Throughout Kristina’s journey in *The Rift*, the environment will be luring her deeper into the woods by playing on her desire to find answers.

One example of a horror author using this plot is in Robert Louis Stevenson’s novella, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. This story follows a crazed doctor who uses the unholy knowledge he obtained to bring humans dead back to life from the dead. *The Case Mountain Cases* will also follow this plot structure. When Kristina enters *The Rift*, she begins to crave the secrets and forbidden knowledge about the world and our existence.

Characters in horror novels regard creatures and the unknown as something that is a disturbance to the natural order. Further, Dr. Carroll states that horror-writing should also have the “emotive responses of the audience run parallel to the emotions of characters” (Carroll 52). In order to elicit a response or emotion of fear within the readers, Dr. Carroll argues that the reader must first identify with the characters in the writing and mirror their emotional responses to the monsters that they face within the story that cause a disruption to the natural order (Carroll 52). One way in which horror writers can cause readers to be frightened is through illustrating both the physical and emotional responses that the characters express when exposed to the monster. When writing *The Case Mountain Cases*, one of the biggest things that I make sure to capture is the physical and emotional responses that Kristina experiences when exposed to the terrors of *Case Mountain* and *The Rift*. Stressing on physical cues such as toes curling or feeling nauseous can heighten the impact that the monster has on both the characters and the readers.

The language chosen by horror authors to convey the emotions of their characters adds to the overall atmosphere of the novel. Dr. Carroll describes some of the physical responses and agitations as “muscular contractions, tension, cringing, shuttering, recoiling, tingling, frozenness, momentary arrests, paralysis, trembling, perhaps involuntary screaming, and so on” (Carroll 54). Carroll examines Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* as an example of this, where Jonathan Harker writes in his journal that “[A]s the Count leaned over me and his hands touched me, I could not repress a shudder” (qtd. in Carroll 52). Through this physical representation of disgust toward the monster, the author can then evoke an emotional response that the monster is a threat, and that the character is in danger. In *The Case Mountain Cases*, there will be multiple instances where Kristina is faced with various monsters, and to successfully elicit a response of fear within the readers, it is critical that Kristina shows her disgust toward these monsters by having such physical responses of shuddering or screaming to show her emotional response that she is in danger.

Through characterization and writing the story in Kristina’s point of view, the reader is able to identify with her more and better understand her inner thoughts and struggles. Like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, *The Case Mountain Cases* will also look to delve into the characters inner thoughts through Kristina’s journal entries. In the novel, Kristina uses these journal entries as a way for her to look through the clues of what is happening at Case Mountain to piece together what happened to her fiancé. Having characters convey their emotions through journal entries is an effective craft element that successful horror authors have used that I look to emulate in my manuscript.

One of the authors that has had the biggest impact on my horror-writing is H.P. Lovecraft, whose short stories and novels are often written in the first person, giving detailed

accounts of humans encountering unnatural beasts with vivid, detailed descriptions of their surrounding ominous environment. In the short story “The Lurking Fear,” Lovecraft highlights the physical and emotional responses of the protagonist through describing his encounters with these unknown beasts. When the protagonist sees the unknown monsters, he describes his emotional response by saying, “Then, in spite of my daze of fright and disgust, my morbid curiosity triumphed; and as the last of the monstrosities oozed up alone from that nether world of unknown nightmare, I drew my automatic pistol and shot it under the cover of the thunder” (81).

In this passage, Lovecraft’s writing emulates Dr. Carroll’s article, “The Nature of Horror,” by having the character be dazed in fright and disgust. Additionally, Lovecraft also stresses the unknown of the monsters, coming from unknown worlds of nightmares, which adds to the fear that the character is experiencing. This effectively enables the reader to mirror the protagonist’s feelings of disgust toward the creatures and evoke a sense of fear. In H.P. Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulu,” the story immediately begins with the fearful notion of the unknown, with the opening passage of the story reading:

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far... but some days the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace of safety of a new dark age. (Lovecraft 201)

The opening of this story beginning as a journal passage further emphasizes how popular horror writers have used journal logs as a point of view and narrative technique to further connect the reader with the character. This opening is also striking because it suggests that we might go mad

from seeing through the veils and into the true vistas of reality. This concept mirrors what Kristina will be feeling when she uncovers secrets such as alternate planes of existences, and whether she should walk away from that knowledge, or try and use it for her own gain.

Again, Lovecraft creates fear through the exploration of the unknown, and how humanity would go mad through acquiring the knowledge of things that they aren't supposed to ever know or see. Additionally, the fear of the character acquiring this knowledge would cause them to go mad as an emotional response. This opening immediately sets up the story by showing foreshadowing the emotional responses that the characters will face when meeting their monsters. Moreover, Lovecraft tells the reader that this story is being presented through the findings of Francis Wayland Thurston's journal entries, which further shows how point of view and narration is a craft element that helps connect the readers with the characters in the story.

In *The Case Mountain Cases*, Kristina discovers journal pages from past people who had went missing while hiking in the mountain, and will eventually encounter these characters once she enters The Rift. Introducing these characters through their journal entries enables the reader to both experience what those characters experienced before they went missing and allows the reader to form a connection with these characters before meeting them later on.

The word choice that Lovecraft uses in this passage adds to the overwhelming sense of fear felt by the characters. By using descriptions of the environment such as "black seas of infinity," and "terrifying vistas of reality" (201), Lovecraft builds on the feeling that the character is in imminent danger through descriptive, dark language of exploring the unknown.

The Case Mountain Cases will also include dark, atmospheric descriptions where Kristina struggles to learn the dark secrets of the unknown world which she is exploring. With *The Case Mountain Cases* also being written in the first person, this enables the readers to

directly feel and mirror the emotions and thoughts that Kristina is feeling as she encounters these monsters in *The Rift*.

In Lovecraft's writing, his characters constantly evoke strong, visceral emotion responses when they first discover the existence of these unknown monsters. In "The Call of Cthulu," Lovecraft describes the characters initial response to seeing the creature by writing, "I now felt gnawing at my vitals that dark terror which will never leave me" (Lovecraft 221). Again, Lovecraft chooses his language to evoke a sense of overwhelming despair. The monsters that the characters face will forever change their way of life through the disruption of the natural order of our world with other worldly beasts and creatures. Lovecraft uses the element of conflict through the characters' interactions with these indescribable monsters that creates a greater fear of the unknown.

Many of Lovecraft's horror stories encompass not just monsters, but also monstrous acts that are viewed as disgusting or taboo for readers. Author and book critic Mitch Frye published an article in *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* titled "The Refinement of 'Crude Allegory': Eugenic Themes and Genotypic Horror in the Weird Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft," which analyzes the fear that is felt from the readers through Lovecraft's writing. Frye states that one of the ways Lovecraft is able to achieve this is through how he often goes against societal norms and breaks human morality (Frye 249). In *The Case Mountain Cases*, one of the ways in which I intend to evoke a sense of fear in the reader is through breaking some of our societal norms. By understanding How Lovecraft was able to accomplish this, I can better implement these techniques into my own manuscript.

Frye further analyzes Lovecraft's "The Shadow of Innsmouth," through studying the actions of the villagers, who would often commit immoral acts such as partaking in strange

rituals and human sacrifice (Frye 250). In analyzing Lovecraft's decision to do this, Frye wrote, "Viewed through the lens of the Christian faith, the village's religious conversion is nothing short of outright blasphemy" (Frye 250). This shows that one of the reasons for the fear in reading this story at the time was because it went against traditional societal norms.

Despite this, however, Frye also explains that "The Shadow of Innsmouth" acts as a much deeper metaphor that analyzes the American melting pot, and that "[T]he villagers ideological shift is simply a symbolic gesture, a comment on how foreign elements erode the culture of a country's majority" (Frye 250). This also expresses a fear of the unknown, where Lovecraft utilizes the story as a metaphor to analyze the potential dangers within society through change and loss of identity. "The Shadow of Innsmouth" was written in 1936, a period in America where there was massive immigration into the country.

When Kristina enters The Rift in *The Case Mountain Cases*, she will meet other people who are from that alternate reality, thereby making Kristina feel like an outsider and an alien once she enters this alternate world. This is juxtaposed from the creatures within The Rift entering our own world, where we fear them due to the unknown behind the other. In Stephen Asma's article "Monsters on the Brain: An Evolutionary Epistemology of Horror," Asma writes the following:

Lovecraft suggests that all humans have an instinctual awareness (some more refined than others) of the paltry state of human understanding – especially when compared with the almost limitless domain of the strange and unfamiliar. That sense of fragility and vulnerability is a major aspect of the "cosmic fear" that horror triggers in us. (Asma 956)

This exemplifies our instinct as humans to feel fear when faced with danger or the unknown. Further, when explaining monsters in horror fiction, Asma argues that the depictions of

imaginary monsters help train readers to survive in our hostile world, and that monsters in horror can also act as a metaphor for the Other.

CREATING FEAR THROUGH BUILDING DARK ATMOSPHERE AND MONSTERS

Author Maurice Levy has written multiple reviews and articles on Lovecraft. In Levy's book, *Lovecraft, a Study in the Fantastic*, Levy illustrates how Lovecraft is able to use the dark surrounding atmosphere as a way to build on the horror felt by the characters in the stories and readers alike. In horror fiction, the environment and surrounding landscapes that the characters must navigate can also be viewed as a monstrous force which they have to navigate and overcome. In many of Lovecraft's works of fiction, the landscapes often feature vast forests, seas, or classic New England style castles and homes. Levy writes, "New England, with its deep forests, its marvelous landscapes, its wild mountains, its rugged coasts gouged with gulfs, is certainly a place with a potential for adventure and mystery" (Levy 36). Further, according to Lovecraft, using these New England landscapes in his horror-writing enables his readers to "cross time and space as if penetrating a picture hung on the wall, to settle into the inadmissible; nowhere else is it possible so strongly to sense the presence of the bizarre, the sinister, the unholy, the macabre" (36). Within Lovecraft's horror writing, there is an intentional focus on using these New England landscapes to pit man against the horrors of nature. The rich (and sometimes dark) history of New England lends itself to the genre of horror through the exploration of nature's impact on characters as they navigate through these landscapes. In New England, for example, one common trope for horror films and novels set in this area feature a cabin in the woods, where evil awaits. In *The Case Mountain Cases*, I intend to play on this trope

by having there be a cabin in the woods that Kristina finds which ends up being a cabin that her and her fiancé had once stayed at.

The Case Mountain Cases also takes place in New England, with fictitious tales and legends surrounding a real hiking area in Connecticut called Case Mountain. Despite using a real location in Connecticut for the setting of my manuscript, Kristina's eventual exploration of The Rift takes her into an alternate reality within the real geographical area. This is similar to Lovecraft's method of writing the fantastical in his fiction writing. Levy writes, "[T]hese imaginary places form, in the real topography of New England, a zone of shadow, a zone of mystery, a *dream zone*... the familiarity of places is blurred, leaving the weird to take its place" (Levy 37). This reflects the overall intention that I have for writing *The Case Mountain Cases*. Kristina first must venture through the known landscape of Case Mountain, before ultimately having to explore an alternate version of Case Mountain that is outside of the known and reality.

Finally, Levy writes that "the picturesque landscapes of New England are degraded, corrupted by the mysterious forces from beyond" (Levy 37). In *The Case Mountain Cases*, Kristina's struggle with the unknown will look to evoke a sense of horror by breaking down the area which she thought she knew, and introducing fantastical creatures and monsters within The Rift that will disrupt this landscape and natural order.

In creating these creatures and monsters which Kristina must encounter in the manuscript, it is critical to understand the psychological response to our reactions of feeling fear toward these monsters. Jonathan Thurston, writer for *Human Ecology Review* published an article titled, "The Face of the Beast: Bestial Descriptions and Psychological Response in Horror Literature," which analyzes our fear of various beasts and predators. Thurston writes, "When we understand the psyche of fear response toward predators, we can apply that knowledge more

confidently to anatomical descriptions of predators in horror literature” (Thurston 38). In other words, by identifying what it is about beasts that make us fear them, horror writers can better implement these characteristics into their writing and can more effectively create a sense of fear for their readers.

One explanation of our fear that stems from these beasts is through evolution, where we instinctively fear predators that present danger. The paradox within this, however, is that we still feel beasts or monsters that either don’t exist or haven’t existed during our lifetime as humans. In the movie *Jurassic Park*, for example, Thurston analyzes the paradox of the audience being afraid of dinosaurs, despite the fact that we have never, and would never, have to face a dinosaur in real life. Thurston explains this contrast through “the combination of real predatory features and the metaphorical dangers of the unknown that keeps the monsters terrifying” (Thurston 39).

By understanding what about these predators and beasts make us fear them, horror writers can then tap into “the genetic coding of humans’ predator recognition. When describing the predators that Kristina will encounter in *The Case Mountain Cases*, it is critical that I create anatomical characteristics of these monsters that will elicit an emotion of fear in the readers. By making the reader be afraid of these creatures, they would further relate, emphasize, and relate to Kristina as a character, and more effectively place the reader into Kristina’s shoes.

Bram Stoker’s novel *Dracula*, one of the most prolific and renowned novels in horror literature, also does an effective job in creating a sense of horror and dread through vivid descriptions of environments and landscapes, and how those landscapes have an effect on the characters. When Jonathan Harker first sees Dracula’s castle, he describes the physical presence of the castle by writing in his journal that “[T]he driver was in the act of pulling up the horses in the courtyard of a vast ruined castle, from whose tall black windows came no ray of light”

(Stoker 15). Writing that no rays of light were coming from the tall black windows adds a dark, ominous presence that the castle has over him.

Further, Stoker also elicits an emotional response in the character when saying, “[T]he time I waited seemed endless, and I felt doubts and fears crowding upon me. What sort of place had I come to, and among what kind of people? What sort of grim adventure was it on which I had embarked?” (Stoker 16). Stoker immediately elicits both a physical and emotional response of fear from Harker when he sees the castle, as Harker reflects upon what evils await him, and fearing the unknown of what is inside this dark and boding landscape. Through Harker’s interactions with the landscape, Stoker is then able to connect the reader with the psychological emotions and fears that Harker feels through his navigation of this landscape.

In Jonathan Harker’s first night at Dracula’s castle, he writes in his journal, “I am all in a sea of wonders. I doubt; I fear; I think strange things, which I dare not confess to my own soul” (Stoker 20). This passage shows the deep psychological presence that the castle has had on Harker. This exemplifies the internal struggle which this character feels through his exploration of the unknown, which causes him to strip away the safety that lies within knowledge and face his fears. This also shows that Harker is so terrified of Dracula that he is even unable to face his own thoughts, and does not want to think about the possibility that evil may be present, and that there are things beyond our understanding of the world that we do not know. The potential realization of this horrifies Harker, as it acts as a disruption to the natural order of the world and everything that he had once known and thought to be true of the world.

Author Brad Tabas, who published an article in the journal *Expressions of Environment in Euroamerican Culture / Antique Bodies in Nineteenth Century British Literature and Culture*, titled “Dark Places: Ecology, Place, and the Metaphysics of Horror Fiction,” affirms the notion

that horror fiction stories are heavily rooted in place, ambiance, and the surrounding environment. Tabas writes, “[T]he genius of horror and the supernatural precisely lies in its refusal to accept the Natural as ultimate or identical with reality. The very condition of possibility supernatural horror is the acknowledgement of a gap between the real and the Natural or naturalized” (Tabas 3). In *The Case Mountain Cases*, this gap is expressed through the existence of The Rift, an alternate plane of reality that shares some similarities with our own environment, while also creating a new, unexplored world that houses an otherworldly ecosystem. The manuscript leans heavily into describing Case Mountain as a dangerous presence, where the town of Forestville, Connecticut is ravaged by multiple people disappearing within the surrounding environment. Further, Tabas analyzes Lovecraft’s usage of typography and environment in his horror-writing as being “dedicated to disrupting our normal sense of being at home in the world” (Tabas 7). My goal in *The Case Mountain Cases* is to emulate this idea, and evoke fear through the readers leaving the comfort of their own world and joining Kristina in exploring an unknown world filled with strange creatures and dangerous landscapes.

BUILDING FICTIONAL WORLDS IN HORROR

Before writing about The Rift in *The Case Mountain Cases*, it is first important to understand how to successfully build fictional worlds that provide both fear and believability for the readers. The Rift first intends to mimic much of our own world before tearing away those perceptions and brings the reader to an unknown world which they must explore. In the book *Building Worlds*, author Paolo Bertetti has a chapter titled, “Building Science Fiction Worlds,” where Bertelli attempts to identify the ways in which writers can create alternate realities that are both immersive and believable for the reader. For example, Bertetti writes the following:

Many of the elements that form fictional worlds (and even imaginary worlds) are common to the Actual World and, as such, are often not explicitly described in the text...we should pay attention to the presence of ‘estranged’ elements that characterize these fictional worlds and that are ‘not mimetic’ of empirical reality. (Bertetti 55)

This passage highlights the ability for writers to attach meaning to fictional objects within their writing. Moreover, Bertetti’s states that it is important for the reader to find these connections through the estranged elements. In *The Case Mountain Cases*, I will also have various similarities between the real world and The Rift, and Kristina will spend much of her time investigating the area by documenting the strange flora and fauna that she sees along her journey.

One example of this that I plan to create in *The Case Mountain Cases* is to have trees, plants, and other ecological organisms be different colors than they are in our world, such as the leaves on maple trees being pitch black. Bertetti further emphasizes the importance of creating differences between the actual world and the fictional world, but only after a period of perceived normalcy. Bertetti writes, “The Fictional World is structurally different from the beginning, but this difference is not immediately clear to the viewer or reader due to an information delay” (par. 18). The Rift in *The Case Mountain Cases* will emulate this tactic, where there are only minor differences within the worlds at first, and Kristina feels uncertain if she is believing what she is seeing, and slowly begins to realize that she is in an alternate plane of existence.

In writing about alternate worlds, it is also crucial to maintain a suspension of disbelief for the readers. In *The Journal of Philosophical Logic* author Diane Proudfoot published “Possible Worlds Semantics and Fiction,” to further examine the semantics of possible worlds within contemporary fiction. Proudfoot writes, “While possible worlds are (naturally) possible, many fictions transcend the possible” (Proudfoot 13). In *The Case Mountain Cases*, the intention

is to make the other world known as The Rift seem like something that could actually exist. Within the manuscript, there are specific instructions left by her fiancé and others that are currently inside the other world that teach Kristina how to enter this alternate reality. This explains why this possible world has not been discovered before; as people did not know how and where to access this other world.

Similarly, another author in the field of possible worlds and world building in fiction is Marie-Laure Ryan. In her article published in *Poetics Today* titled, “Possible Worlds and Accessibility Relations: A Semantic Typology of Fiction,” Ryan attempts to explain and define the depictions of alternate worlds through a cognitive reframing of the concept of possible worlds. Ryan states the following:

While it may be objectively the case that only one exists independently of the human mind, we can through certain mental acts depart from this world, select another world as actual, and create through further mental acts a network of alternate possible worlds around the new center...and it constitutes the fundamental gesture of narrative fiction.

(Ryan 554)

Ryan illustrates how we as humans have an ability to shift our perceptions on reality in order to depart from the normal world. When writing about the alternate reality in *The Case Mountain Cases*, the text must enable readers to change their thoughts and beliefs to effectively transfer them from our world into The Rift.

Through studying the craft elements within the horror genre and examining how past horror authors were able to successfully create a sense of fear in their works of literature, I can use these techniques to add an element of suspense and horror into the manuscript. Studying how authors such as H.P. Lovecraft and Bram Stoker use vivid language and descriptions to build on

the brooding atmospheres they've created for their characters to navigate will help me write Kristina navigate through The Rift. Through studying the craft elements of characterization through point of view, building a dark, overbearing atmosphere, and creating conflict through battling other worldly monsters, the readers of *The Case Mountain Cases* will feel more connected to Kristina and more immersed in the fictional world.

The Case Mountain Cases

One:

About a year ago, my fiancé went missing. Steven Bock. I was to be Mrs. Kristina freaking Bock. The wedding would have been this past Saturday, no less. October 4th. What a perfect New England day, *right?* And trust me, it was. It was almost 70 degrees out last Saturday without a cloud in the whole damn sky. The leaves had just begun to turn beautiful shades of yellows and reds that would have reflected so perfectly off the lake behind Steve and Me while we'd kiss under the glowing altar. I'm sure God had originally planned a hurricane that day but when He found out my Steve was... geez, I still don't even know what to call it... gone?

Anyways, that He with His almighty powers had simply evaporated the storm with ease and replaced it with this perfect day simply to spite me. Just as He had evaporated Steve. Simply vanished, without a trace. Nothing. I guess I just really wish I had been with him that day in Case Mountain. I was in Texas for a work conference our accounting firm has every year, leaving that Friday and returning Sunday evening. I remember asking him how he was going to spend that weekend without me.

"I don't know, go for a hike, maybe," he said as he shrugged his shoulders. I remember that making me smile. He was always so... spontaneous. I always envied that about him. Then, that Sunday morning, as I stood at the boarding gate, I texted him. "Have a good hike, if you end up going!"

"Thanks, heading to Case Mountain soon! Love you."

And then I boarded the plane. And that was the last text he ever sent to me. When I got home, it was late in the evening, and eerily quiet. When I looked around the house, he wasn't there. I tried calling him, but it went straight to voicemail. I then tried his friends, but they

hadn't seen him either. When I drove over to the area where I thought he went hiking, Case Mountain, his white Wrangler was still there, tucked away in a small cut-off to the right of a tall tree. I immediately called the police, and they told me to wait for them by his vehicle before I did anything else. I listened, though, I really, *really* wish I hadn't. That was over twenty minutes extra I could have been trying to find him. That could have made all the difference.

When they finally pulled into the parking area, I noticed that they didn't even have their lights or sirens on. Officer Colin Bradshaw was the first one to step out of the police cruiser as I ran over to them with my arms flailing over my head trying to flag them down. Colin and I were in the same grade and had been friends all throughout high school, despite him always wanting something more. It wasn't a shock to see him, though, since I heard from a friend that he became a police officer here in Forestville after graduating.

Our graduating class was only something like sixty people; it was a small town. In tenth grade, Colin had even written a poem about me that he presented in English class where he went on and on about my blonde hair and blue eyes. He had even compared my hair to a blanket that he'd wrap around himself, whatever the hell that meant. I distinctly recall squirming in my seat and my eyes swelling up with tears in the sheer embarrassment of it all. I hated being the center of attention. I'll never forget the look on his face as he got out of the car and adjusted his vest -- it was the same defeated and dejected look he had when I turned him down to junior prom all those years ago, with his eyes stuck to his shoes and his lips sucked into his teeth. It was as if he'd taken that call a hundred times before, and he already knew what the outcome would be. Before even speaking to me, Colin shined his flashlight over to Steve's Wrangler, opened the unlock driver-side door, and began rummaging around.

The second officer then slowly got out of the passenger seat. He rested his crossed arms on the door as he lazily shined his flashlight over at the tree line, as if he would somehow instantly find him. He was a short, older man with an obnoxiously curled and unkempt grey mustache who introduced himself as Officer Stone. He sighed and walked over to me as he pulled out a small, crinkled notepad from his breast pocket, and began rattling off a long list of questions in a somewhat robotic tone, as if he'd recited those questions hundreds of times before. His calmness and lackadaisical demeanor was a smack to my disheveled, snot-dripping face. "When did you last see Steven, Kristina?"

"Umm, The fourteenth of October. It was a Friday. I left for a work conference and he told me he was going hiking here shortly after I left for the airport."

"Work conference, huh?" Officer Stone flinched his mustache and clicked his pen as he began scribbling away in his notepad. "Do you have a co-worker or supervisor there that can confirm that?"

I was in shock. "Wh...what? Yes, of course I do. Does that really matter? Can we just start looking for him?"

Then, Colin circled around the police car and joined Officer Stone in front of me. He looked at Officer Stone before calmly saying, "Nothing in the vehicle, sir."

He then turned his attention to me. I watched him look me up and down, stopping for a prolonged stop at my chest as a grin grew across his face. "You became an accountant or something, right? I do remember you always being a math whiz in school. We were in the same class, remember?"

Colin and Officer Stone looked at each other and each smirked. Colin's lips parted to reveal a rotten, yellowed smile from years of chewing tobacco staining his teeth.

“Yes, I remember you, Colin.” I spat back. Now can we please start looking for him? I mean, what are we even doing right now? This is bullshit!”

I realized that my shout was a lot louder than I had intended, as my voice echoed and shook through the night. Colin and Officer Stone’s sleazy smiles disappeared instantly, as they each took a half step back and motioned their right hands toward their holsters.

“You need to calm down right now, ma’am,” said Officer Stone.

“I’m sorry, but my fiancé is missing! His car is here, so obviously that means he’s here, somewhere, and I really, *really* just want to go find him. Please!”

They looked at each other again, their faces dropped as if I had just asked them to take out the garbage or something. Officer Stone flipped his little notepad closed, and sighed.

“Alright, alright. God, do I hate going in these woods. That fiancé of yours should’ve known better. Ain’t like he didn’t know what happens to people when they come up here.”

As the three of us set off into the woods, Officer Stone took the lead, darting his flashlight around for footprints or disturbed branches along the main dirt trail, which was about six feet wide, and completely encompassed in towering trees and wildly overgrown shrubs and bushes. An owl hoo’d softly in the distance as Officer Stone started inspecting the tree line as Colin continued to question me. He asked me what I thought Steve doing there, where in Case Mountain he typically hiked, what was he wearing the day he went hiking, and what his emotional state was when he went hiking.

“Happy, I think,” I said. “He was always happy. But, why does that matter?”

Colin shifted his belt and police vest as he reached in his pocket and pulled out a green, circular tin of dip and shoved a golf ball-sized chunk of tobacco under his black-spotted lip.

“Well, you know the stories, Kris. You know how many suicides happen every year

here in Case Mountain? Shit, I think we're already up to seven, or eight this year, maybe. I figure we head over to the bottom of Jones Point first and see if he jumped. That's what most people do, anyways."

"No. That's impossible, Colin. We were planning a wedding, weekend trips, he was even making his lesson plan for next week."

"Your fiancé is a teacher?" he asked.

I nodded. "A professor, at Northern Connecticut University. He teaches calculus, mostly."

Colin scrunched his chin and spat a slimy rope of spit and tobacco onto the dirt in front of us. "NCU, huh? Good school. Hell, I could never get into that school, let alone teach there. Guess you did pretty good for yourself, after all."

My knees nearly gave out from under me, dumbfounded by Colin seemingly trying to make small talk with me while I'm here doing everything I can to find my future husband. I felt my face flush red in anger as a strong, cold wind howled about the rustling and swaying trees. "So, what do we do next, if we can't find anything?"

Colin shrugged and made a disgusting guttural heaving sound as he spit another wad of dip onto the ground. "Well, it still been under forty-eight hours since the time you said he got to the mountain, but if we don't see anything don't you worry none. By tomorrow we'll have the report out and can start setting up the search parties. I'm sure we can get plenty of volunteers to help out, we're all pretty used to the routine around here anytime someone winds up missing up... hold on, what the hell is that?"

Colin stopped talking and shined his flashlight toward the dirt off to the right edge of the trail before calling for Officer Stone. As I walked over to see what had caught his

attention, I made out what looked to be a shoeprint illuminated in the beam of Colin's flashlight. As I got closer, though, I realized that it wasn't a shoeprint, but a footprint. I knelt down beside Colin who was pulling out his phone to take a picture. The print was perfectly pressed into the dirt, as if the person who made it was standing there for minutes, trying to get it perfect. I also noticed that the footprint was far too small to have been Steve's, as it couldn't have been any longer than four or five inches.

"What do you make of it?" I asked Colin.

Colin took a few different photos of the print from various angles before shoving his phone back in his pocket and shook his head. "Well, I think it means that some poor kid out here lost their shoes," he said dryly.

"Look, there's more of them over here," Officer Stone called out, motioning us forward.

"These footprints are all spaced like four feet apart from each other," Colin said. "How could someone that small take such long strides?"

Stone raised an eyebrow and twirled the oily edges of his mustache in thought between his thick, sausage-like fingers. "Well, they're recent, anyways, and from the look of things, it looks like they keep going down that way."

Stone raised his chin up toward a smaller, descending path over to the left, which in this darkness looked like going that way meant stepping off the edge of the earth.

Colin stood up and turned his head to follow Stone's flashlight. "Ain't the bottom of Jones Point that way, anyways?"

Stone nodded as a woman's voice suddenly came blaring over the walkie-talkie attached to his chest, causing me to audibly shriek and jump back. The voice was near intelligible, but from the few words I could make out, it sounded like someone had mutilated a bunch of goats

at Foster's Family Farm. Stone and Colin exchanged concern glances while Stone muttered under his breath, "Damn Keepers of the Rift, at it again. He then angrily pulled the radio off his vest before turning his back to Colin and me, and whispered something back I wasn't able to hear.

Colin brushed the dirt off of his pants and spit out the rest of his dip before opening his mouth to speak. "Alright, Kristina. We're going to go check out the bottom of the overlook now, but after that we need to call it for tonight. We'll go back to the station, put the report in, and then in the morning we can gather up a search party and keep looking if we don't find nothing. I'd recommend you start reaching out to people as well, the townfolk might be willing to help. As I said already, people around here know the drill – we're all pretty much expert searchers, at this point. Now did you already contact your fiancé's family?"

I shook my head. "No. his only family is his mom, but they haven't spoken in years."

Colin slowly nodded in understanding as Officer Stone began walking down the steep hill that led to the bottom of the Jones Point. As I followed them, we walked the rest of the way in silence, with Stone fixated on the footprints that continued on down the mountain while Bradshaw and I each darting our heads around at any slight disturbance we'd hear in the surrounding woods, from cracking twigs to rustling leaves. Colin balled up his two hands in front of his mouth and blew feverishly into them, before rubbing them together to try and warm them up. I couldn't feel the cold. In fact, I didn't feel much of anything during that walk. As much as I knew that Steven could never, *would* never, think about taking his own life, I couldn't help but imagine getting to the bottom of that overlook and finding him lying there in a small crater, with his limbs bent all kinds of horrific ways and blood everywhere.

As we neared the bottom of the overlook, the three of us were becoming increasingly

freaked out with how consistent the small footprints were. Every four feet, we'd see another, then another, all perfectly formed and preserved as if the child who made them had just done so moments ago. Then, once we finally reached the bottom of the overlook, they suddenly stopped. Officer Stone pulled out his notepad again and scribbled something down while Colin took another picture of the last footprint before they vanished. What also wasn't at the bottom of that overlook, though, was Steve. I remember walking over to lean on a tall tree and began sobbing into my palms.

Despite how un-invested Stone and Bradshaw seemed that night, the police did everything they could, in our search for Steve. The search parties I helped organize did everything we could, and Steve was not the type of person who would just... I mean, we were engaged. There was nothing going on that would have caused him to leave. We never fight (or "fought" I guess I should say), had sex often, and quite literally spent just about every minute of every day together. Even from our very first date together at Hogan's Cider Mill, we shared everything about ourselves.

We had no secrets. Or, at least so I thought. We met on a dating app just over two years ago. He was thirty-four, I was twenty-five. He helped me feel more like me than I ever had before, if that makes sense. Even from day one.

It was hot and dry afternoon in late August. After commenting "OMG where did you get that?!" on one of Steve's profile pictures of him holding an apple cider drink topped with a massive donut smothered in whipped cream, we agreed that our first date had to be at the cider mill so I could try one. We both arrived fifteen minutes early, but neither of us had any idea until we looked over and saw each other sitting in our parked cars. We both awkwardly laughed as the tall, handsome stranger climbed out of his white Jeep and made his way

toward me with an outstretched hand. I gave him instant points for his politeness.

“I’m so sorry, I got here a little early and didn’t see you there!” he said with a laugh.

“No worries, I did the exact same thing!” I said back with a chuckle. He had one of those laughs that instantly made you smile and feel better.

“How excited are you to try this apple cider donut drink?” he asked.

I fanned my hand over my face to create any kind of breeze in the sweltering hot and instantly regretted my decision to wear jean shorts instead of a sundress. “Oh my God, I’m so excited! Definitely need at least two of those drinks and a water and some shade!”

We laughed as we made our way toward the entrance. I loved the way he scrunched his eyes up and that crinkle in the bridge of his nose when he laughed. I was shocked at how safe he already seemed to make me feel, despite only having known him for all of thirty seconds.

After getting our drinks and finding a maroon picnic table under a large blue umbrella on the second-floor patio, we began asking each other the standard interview-style questions one asks another on a first date -- what you do for work, favorite hobbies, favorite travel destinations, and etcetera. As he spoke about his job as a math professor at Northern Connecticut University, I was feeling myself becoming lost in his lively, hazel eyes, and dirty blonde hair that he brushed off his forehead every couple of minutes. He was incredibly handsome, but what I found the most attractive was the kindness that his face gave off.

As we continued to talk, and laugh, and drink, we discovered that we were both coming out of long term relationships where our significant others cheated on us with our friend. When he told me about his ex, my mouth dropped and I slammed my hand against the table. “I literally had the EXACT same thing happen to me!” I shouted gleefully.

He smiled and shook his head. “No, no way! You’re definitely just lying to try and make me feel better about my story!” he said as he leaned closer in. I leaned in as well.

“I swear! And you’re lucky because I don’t usually bring that up on a first date since it’s too dark!”

Steve’s eyes widened as he nearly spit out his jalapeno flavored hard apple cider. “Same!”

We couldn’t stop laughing, and soon enough Steve had moved from the opposite side of the picnic table to sitting right beside me. Our hands found their way to each other as our fingers naturally and instinctively intertwined. As a thick blanket of storm clouds swept across the sky, the sound of live music started coming from behind us. We both turned to see an older, skinny man with long white hair down to his shoulders sitting on a stool, playing an acoustic guitar and singing softly into the microphone. To the left of him was the cutest married couple I had ever seen. They were both easily in their seventies, but they danced together cheek-to-cheek, swaying calmly to the music. The man wore a pair of light blue jean shorts held up by a pair of suspenders above a white-collared shirt with a fedora to match. The woman wore a beautiful white and blue floral patterned dress. Her arms and cheeks were weathered in long, deep wrinkles, but she wore it well. Her pearl-white hair was wrapped neatly in a bun and had on beautiful pearl earrings that distracted the eye from her large skin-toned hearing aids. Their eyes were locked on each other the entire time they danced. I smiled and squeezed Steve’s hand as I spoke.

“They are *so* adorable! I love that they can still just have fun and ignore everything else! I want that to be me, one day.”

Then, I felt Steve tug on my hand as he finished the last of his drink and stood up.

“Why not right now?” he said as he bowed, slightly.

I was never really a public dancer, but with Steve, I honestly didn't feel shy or anxious about what others would think. I stood up, and Steve led me over to a spot about five feet next to the older couple. I placed my hands over his strong shoulders, and Steve placed his hands gently on my hips. As we twirled to the music, me and the lady's eyes met as she smiled and winked at me. Steve lifted my arm and I twirled underneath it as a crash of thunder opened up the sky and began down-pouring on us, but instead of stopping and running to take shelter, we continued dancing in the rain, laughing wildly the entire time. The older couple didn't stop, either. After a couple minutes, the man finished his song, and we all clapped. Steve then walked over to the older gentlemen and asked him what the secret was. The man let out a wide grin, revealing his drooping gums before he responded by saying, “It looks like you already know the secret!”

We laughed and exchanged a few more pleasantries with them before we split the tab and walked out to our cars, each soaking wet. We hugged each other in the pouring rain and were already discussing plans to see each other again. As we continued to see each other, it was obvious that we both knew something was there. We talked about our future together without any of reservations. It was amazing. Even after just a few months of dating, we were talking and semi-joking about when we were going to get married. I'd never felt anything like that before. Never will. And then, just like that, it was gone. The police, the search parties, the signs and social media posts, but none of it helped find him.

The leading theory, which is the theory that I had believed up until now, is that Steve fell victim to the environment. It was pouring on a Saturday morning when the Forestville chief of police invited me for a coffee at the town diner which nearly the whole town

frequented every weekend for their famous pancake special. His name was Chief Jeffers. He was a stern man with a resting “I’m not buying it” face. He towered over the red and blue glittered booth as he slugged down his black coffee and wiped his white mustache off with his wrist.

“I’m going to be honest with you, Kristina. The police have spent a lot of time and resources into finding your fiancé over these past four months, but unfortunately we’ve found nothing, and we need to start putting those resources into other cases.”

His eyes didn’t leave the center of my forehead for his entire speech. It sounded like he knew the whole script by heart, able to recite it word-for-word, sifting out any emotion attached to the words that he must have recited dozens of times by now. I tried my best to act calm about it. I tried my best to take a sip of my coffee but my hand was shaking so violently I spilt nearly half of it on my lap. Chief Jeffers then reached out and put his large hand on my forearm, and encouraged me to continue leading the search parties on my own, and to not give up hope, then raised his hand up in the air to signal over the waitress to bring the check. He took one last sip of his coffee before leaning over and grabbing his wallet out of his back pocket and pulled out a ten dollar bill. “And, as you know, Kristina, this is Case Mountain we’re dealing with. Ghosts or no ghosts, Case Mountain is a dangerous place, even for the most experienced of hikers.”

As experienced a hiker as Steve was, Case Mountain was dangerous. *Is*, dangerous. It is over 1400 acres of mountain and cliffs and dense forest, accompanied with an enormous black pond which is surrounded by an even bigger marsh. I’ve now trekked every inch of that marsh. Twice.

After about six months of relentless, unsuccessful searching, the police had completely

moved on from the case, and had simply chalked it up as yet another unsolved Case Mountain disappearance. Not me, though. I didn't need Chief Jeffers to tell me to continue with the search. With every ounce of free time that I had in my life, I kept looking. The last search I had done was a couple of months after that, thinking there might have still been something out there, something that we might have missed. My friends and co-workers would invite me out to meaningless activities like dinners or bowling or things like that, but I always told them that I didn't have time. I hadn't realized how messed up I had become from it all until six of my friends and co-workers showed up at my house one night with three bottles of wine and the movie *The Wedding Singer*, which we never even got to watch because of how long my intervention took. It was that night, while I sobbed uncontrollably into twelve different shirt sleeves, that I realized how bad things had gotten. That after Steve's disappearance, I would find myself thinking more about how I would end my life than how I would live it.

It's been almost a year since then, and I was finally beginning to heal, and move on. The therapy helped immensely, but really it was time that was the biggest healer of all. The pain in my chest that had taken residence in my ribs began to fade. Honestly, I don't even know if I should be happy or sad that I was so close to finally moving on. The nightmares where Steve is being dragged through the dark forest as trees watched intently with black, blinking eyes had finally gone away. At least, up until last night. But last night's dream was different; I wasn't drowning in the pond or having a hand in the marsh grab my ankle and pull me under. This time, I was in the house. Steve was there. He was walking up the attic stairs with a box that had a strange symbol scribbled on the side in Sharpie. It was like an upside-down V, with a curved line going horizontally through it just below the point. I had no idea what to think of the nightmare, but I couldn't stop thinking about it.

The last time I was in the attic must have been over six months ago, albeit that was only to throw a couple bins of clothes up there and close the hatch as soon as possible. But after about an hour of restless sleep trying to shake the hold that vision had on me, I couldn't take it anymore, and I went up to the attic.

I brushed aside the cobwebs and crept over a couple of mouse traps, there it was, nestled in the corner, sitting lightly on a fluffy pile of pink insulation. When I brought it down into the sunlight of the kitchen and opened it, I couldn't believe what I saw – pages upon pages of frantically scribbled notes and circles on maps, labeled in Steve's distinct handwriting at the top – Case Mountain.

Two

I admit, when I first saw that box, my mind jumped right to the old horror cliché of finding a mysterious, cursed container in the attic that the owner decides to foolishly open. After waking up from that nightmare, covered in sweat, I tried to tell myself that it stemmed from the stray fragments of a dumb horror movie that Steve made me watch with him years ago. But as the day went on, I still could not shake the image of that box, and this heavy feeling accompanied with it. The only reason I went up there in the first place was just to prove to myself that there was no possessed box in the attic. But there it was, in all its horrific clichéd glory, staring at me in the face. My cheeks started to burn and my tongue shriveled up in my mouth. I must have seen this box before. Not a stray fragment of fiction, but a faded memory pushed aside to make room for ones that mattered more, at the time. Either way, there *I* was, the foolish owner, who decided to open it, with its contents now scattered across the sunny island counter where we used to eat breakfast.

Before I get into what's inside, I first want to note that Steve is, *was*, a math professor

and, as far as I know, had absolutely no interest in geography or the study of maps. So when the first thing I saw when opening the box were pages upon pages of maps, I knew it wasn't anything work-related. All the maps were of Case Mountain, and they were all heavily marked in red Sharpie. Some were trail maps, taken right from the welcome sign, no doubt, but some of the other maps in here looked much older, and historical, even.

I slowly placed each map on the table, and stared inquisitively at them, as if arranging them in a specific order would reveal some secret clue, like in the movies. I then thought that maybe putting them in chronological order would do something. It didn't. But then I noticed one connection all six of these maps had in common. Each map had the location "Turtle Cove" circled boldly in red Sharpie.

I know Turtle Cove. We all searched it multiple times, and in fact that was the very first place the police looked. Turtle Cove is a cliff-jumping spot that a lot of the high school kids like to visit to hang out and smoke during the summer. The Forestville river rushes quickly through the deeper part of the swimming hole, where a white, rumbling waterfall gave challenge to any hopeful swimmers trying to fight the current to reach it. There was even a kid in high school that drowned trying to do just that named Brian Andrews. Apparently, he tried to swim underwater the six-or-so feet it took to get to the base of the small, violent waterfall, and the current sucked him under.

Apart from all of the stray socks, underwear, and scattered crushed beer cans and empty alcohol containers, the swimming hole was tattooed in red and black graffiti. On the tallest, flattest face of the cliff-jumping rock, someone had even spray-painted a large, elaborate face of the devil. I took pictures of it once for a school project I did in middle school. Its eyes were solid, distorted circles of solid black, with only half of its large, open

jaw drawn in, to make it appear as if the bottom of the devils jaw was somewhere underneath the surface of the murky, cloudy water. Its red tongue swirled across the jagged edges of the rock and its red, spiked horns stretched all the way to the top of the rock, roughly thirty feet above the water.

There's a second area to jump into the water that isn't nearly as high, only about a fifteen-foot drop down to the oval-shaped swimming hole. But in either of these spots, the jumper needs to know exactly where to jump. If someone were to jump too far to the left, they would hit a giant rock that sat only a few inches beneath the surface. Two broken legs if they jumped in feet first, or a cracked skull and death if they wanted to look cool and dive in. That's why if you grew up anywhere within a couple hundred miles of Forestville, Connecticut, there's a good chance you'd heard some of the ghost stories surrounding Turtle Cove.

Of these stories, the most popular legend is that the spirits of those who fell victim to Turtle Cove now sit patiently at the bottom of the water, amongst the bottle caps and eels, waiting for a foot to come splashing through the stillness to strike. Some people say they've seen the devil himself bathing in that cove at night. Another legend claims that these spirits will even shove sharp sticks into the bottom of the water, so that they stick out and pierce anyone that would jump in. That *did* actually happen there, although it was just crazy people who did that, not ghosts.

But why did Steve have all these maps in the first place? What could he have possibly been researching, and perhaps an even better question is, for how long has he been researching this? *Talk to me, Steve!*

As I looked over the surrounding area within each map of Turtle Cove, there was something on the older, tattered map that caught my eye that wasn't on any of the other maps,

just to the right of a small blotch of water. It read “Satan’s Cave.” There were no caves in Case Mountain, were there? No, not in all the hours spent trudging that mountain did anyone come across a cave. I examined each of the other, newer maps, and found that not a single one had Satan’s Cave anywhere on it as a landmark. What I did find odd, however, was that the body of water displayed on the old map, now known as Turtle Cove, was instead called “The Rift.” And that throughout each map in this box, it had been moving, slinking and winding its way over the now possibly submerged cave that this historic map states is there. But is it?

When I turned the last map over, I also noticed a small line of writing on the bottom-right of the page that read, “Keepers of The Rift.” Underneath the maps was a black notebook, its corners disheveled and curling inwards as if they had been turned over thousands of times. The front cardboard cover was half torn off the bent and flattened spiral rings. What was most disturbing about the cover of this notebook, however, were the following words, all capitalized, and underlined:

WATCH OUT FOR YOUR SELF.

Not yourself, but *your*, and *self*, separately. A simple grammatical mistake made while writing too quickly? Or was this elaborately long space between *your* and *self* there for a reason? If there’s one thing I know about Steve, it’s that he always had a reason for everything.

When I opened the notebook, all I saw were pages upon pages of numbers and equations, nothing that I could really understand. While it wasn’t odd for Steve to be writing out math problems, what did freak me out was just how frantically they were all written, and not just one page, but every page and every margin.

The one equation that I did recognize was the classic A^2 plus B^2 equals C^2 equation, it

was the Pythagorean theorem. Steve talked about Pythagoras before. I remember him going on about... gosh, what was it, triangles, and triples, and I think even sound chords? I really wish I had been paying more attention at the time. When Steve gets interested in something, he dives all in. I remember when his friend Ted first introduced him to the game *Dungeons and Dragons*, Steve spent every Friday night for three months straight in our garage with a six pack of beer and a cardboard sword. I guess I thought it was silly at first, although I do sometimes wish that he asked me to play with them.

I remember this one night specifically, where Steve came tiptoeing up to the bedroom at three in the morning and had what looked to be black soot all over his face. I jumped up in the bed and screamed, thinking he was a burglar. When I turned the light on and realized it was him, I busted out laughing. Somehow, he wasn't even aware that his entire face was caked in a black, chalky dirt. I remember gasping loudly and asking him, "Steven, what the hell is all over your face?!"

Steve ran his fingers down his cheeks and his eyes lit up in surprise.

"Oh, you know what this might be? We were doing a castle raid and we used our fog machine for some added ambiance."

"In the garage?! Did you at least have the door cracked open, or anything?"

He shook his head and walked over to the bathroom, before pumping nearly half the bottle of soap onto his hands. "I guess we didn't really think of that!" he yelled over the rushing faucet. I wanted to be mad at him, especially since I had to work in the morning, but all I could do was laugh at the craziness. Sorry, I'm not trying to fill the story with too many minute, dispensable details, as we still have what is perhaps the most disturbing thing I have seen in my whole life. It was located on the bottom of the box.

A manila envelope. I almost didn't even see it, as if it had disguised itself as a false bottom. There was no writing on the front, unlike the tattered black notebook with the line "Watch out for your self" written so intensely on the front cover that the sentiment bled onto the first eight or so pages. There were no equations on it, nor any kind of sign of use at all. What I could see, however, were a few sheets of white leaf paper sticking out from the label edge.

Up to this point, I feel as if I've kept my cool in writing about this whole scenario, trying to break it down as I go, perhaps writing myself into a breakthrough that connects these Pythagorean equations with a moving cave thing with whatever the hell was in this creepy envelope. But when I reached my hand down that box and closer to that pristine manila envelope, I hesitated. More than that, I couldn't move. There was suddenly a sharp, burning pain in my right arm which seemed to get worse the closer I got to the envelope. For the first time ever, I think I was *afraid* of Steve, even though he'd been gone a year now. It took everything in me to open that manila envelope and, as objective and scientific as I had been in picking apart the contents of this box, I was terrified to open that envelope.

Three:

By the time I picked up the envelope, tears were streaming down my cheeks. In the two years Steve and I had been dating, I truly thought I knew every detail there was to know about him. Steve was, above all else, a man of unrelenting logic. He didn't believe in ghosts or God or any of the monsters that supposedly stalked Case Mountain. But this? It was almost like he had been sucked into some bottomless rabbit hole, and for whatever reason he opted to not speak a word of any of this. With my heart beating through my chest, I opened the envelope.

There were three sheets of paper inside, each a printed-out screenshot of various Reddit

posts, all of which were from profiles with deleted accounts. As I skimmed through the posts, I realized that each one was a first-person account of people who had supposedly gone missing at Case Mountain. But that didn't make any sense, *how can a missing person write a first-person account of their own disappearance?* They'd be found instantly, right? Unless, of course, all these stories were entirely fiction, just some made-up reality that is easier to cope with than our own. That's what Steve would say, anyways. So then why go through the trouble of printing these out and keeping them in an envelope in a box? Either way, I knew I had to read them, which I did. And to be honest, I'm not quite sure what to make of them. There are quite literally hundreds of stories and legends of people going missing or seeing monsters at Case Mountain, so why were these so special that Steve had to pick them out? I figured that if maybe I re-wrote them, I could find something that I had originally missed. As I jotted down various lists and charts that I could feel each letter pulling me deeper and deeper into this inexplicable, depthless void.

Reddit Post One - Tom's Story

"If there is one thing that the hobby of bird-watching has taught me, it's how to do nothing. My watch reads 6:47 a.m. and there are no birds in sight other than a couple of Red-shouldered Hawks drawing circles in the sky. Beautiful birds, no doubt, but that box had already been checked off in my book. I drove the two hours to Case Mountain to see something much less common.

A couple weeks ago, some guy in a bird-watching forum I follow reported that he had spotted a large male Anhinga, a.k.a. "the devil bird" bathing on the southern banks of Case Mountain Lake. The Anhinga is a large, black bird with a long, pointed yellow beak and long black feathers flowing from its four-foot wingspan. What this bird is most famous for,

however, is how it utilizes its long black neck when swimming to mimic a snake slithering through the water. When it nears a fish, the Anhinga will dive underwater and use its sharp beak to pierce through its prey before devouring it down in a single swallow.

I pressed my binoculars around my eyes as I scanned over the water, looking for any ripples. Towards the middle of the lake, I could see a man fishing by himself. I assumed he was out there this early because he enjoyed the same peace and quiet that the mornings bring with them. Then, coming from behind me, I heard what I thought to be a woodpecker drilling its beak into the bark of a tall oak. As harmless as woodpeckers are, there's a famous old tale that likens a woodpecker to Satan, and suggests that the presence of a woodpecker means that something terrible is coming. Turning around on the bench, I shuffled through my backpack and pulled out my sketchbook. It was Edna's idea that I draw the birds I see. If she were still with us, she'd be shocked to learn that I've kept that up.

It took a moment to find it, but when I did, I could instantly tell that it was not a woodpecker. No, it was far too big, but what puzzled me the most was that I had never seen a bird of this size try and forage for small wood mites. It wasn't hunting for food at all... instead it seemed to be carving something into the tree. It was a symbol, of sorts, almost looking like a mountain cap, or a capitalized "A."

I looked down at my sketchbook as I began penciling in the mysterious bird's outline, with its wings spreading across the entire page. When I looked back up to examine its head, it was no longer perched on the tree, but instead flying at me, with black tentacles swinging violently off its wings.

A bird with tentacles? Steve would never believe a story like that. So why did he feel the need to print out this random Reddit comment written by a now deleted profile, in a

subreddit called “r/casemountaincases”?

There was one connection, though. The strange mountain symbol that the bird had supposedly carved onto the tree with its beak was the same exact symbol drawn on the box. At first, I thought it might have been some massive, revealing clue that would crack this whole thing open, but I suppose it does make more sense that Steve had simply scribbled that symbol onto the box after reading this post he found. And, honestly, I was ready to completely dismiss it from being anything of use to me, until I read the other story that Steve had printed out. It’s called “Mel’s Story.” I’m going to read it to you now, unaltered. Maybe then you will understand why I’m going to do what I am about to do, and just how high up this whole thing really goes.

Reddit Post Two - Mel’s Story

“When I got to the top of the mountain, I took my jacket off and walked towards the edge of the cliff to enjoy the sunset. There were a couple of other people already there, sitting on rocks and dangling their feet over the edge and smoking. Wanting to have my own spot for the sunset, I kept walking back through the trees to find a lesser-known spot. When I started walking further up the woods, however, I saw a man ahead of me placing a small metal box into a hole in a tree. He must have seen how confused I was, because the second he saw me his elbows sucked into his waist and immediately began fumbling over his words as he explained to me what geocaching was. As dumb a hobby as it sounds, the man’s good looks and awkward charm did make it sound rather interesting. But still, just randomly placing boxes in the forest and giving out its coordinates for people to sign the page folded away inside?

Steve, he said his name was. He was tall, close to six feet, with black-rimmed glasses that perfectly complemented his blue eyes and a beard just short enough for me to see the

dimple on his chin as we spoke. After I foolishly asked him what his relationship status was (he's engaged, if you're wondering), he told me he had to go, but before he walked away, he turned and said to me, "Be careful, out here." It sounded weird, but I assumed he was just awkward.

After he left, I decided that I would sign my name in that geocaching log too. The box was so deep inside the tree cavity that I had to stand on my tiptoes to reach, but when I finally pulled it out, it was much heavier than I expected. I also noticed what looked like the letter "A" etched on the side, only the horizontal dash curved upwards and outwards of the lines. I opened the bin and removed the folded-up log where people sign their name and then date it, as Steve had explained. At the very top of the page were the coordinates "41.756N, 72.484W." When I looked down at the list, there was his name, written in poor handwriting on the bottom. Steve Bock, October 14, 2022.

But besides him and some other guy named Tom Olson who also signed it today, everyone else's name was completely scribbled out. I remember thinking how weird it was for someone to even do that that. I had to jostle the pen a few times before any ink came out, but I signed my name right below Steve's, and folded the paper back up.

Before closing the lid, I noticed something else in the metal bin. Beneath where the paper once sat lay a black tape recorder. When I hit play, the only thing I heard was this weird, terrifying sound. Like, this deep, clashing, vibrating bell sound that's almost being echoed off itself and getting louder and louder, and ever since I turned it off, I still can't stop hearing it, and recently I've even been seeing shadows and...

That's it. That's the last word written on the post.

Listen, I don't know if this is some kind of sick joke or if I'm losing my mind or what

but clearly something is very wrong here and I am going to figure out what that is. So, before I lose any more sleep, I am writing all this to say that when I wake up tomorrow morning, I am going back into Case Mountain with these maps and a tent, and I am not leaving until I find out something. *Anything.*

Four:

I was not able to sleep at all last night. If it seems like I haven't processed this yet, it's because I haven't. In one fell swoop, everything I thought I knew about what had happened a year ago came crashing down on me, as the scattered fragments of what I thought were reality are now surrounded in a hazy static. The only logical explanation that I could come up with while tossing and turning in bed last night was that someone had read about Steve's disappearance at Case Mountain and decided to alter it, to add gasoline to the wildfire spreading like a sickness that is Case Mountain. *No, that doesn't make any sense either. How could Steve see that post and print it out, after having gone missing?*

For the last eleven months, I was entirely convinced that Steve either died while hiking in Case Mountain or was killed by a complete stranger, without any motive, who just happened to be walking by Steve at the mountain that day. But now? Now I am questioning every second of every minute we spent together during the last few months before he went missing. Whatever this is, this *thing* that Steve might have been searching for, it's clear that it was premeditated, and at the very least, thoroughly researched.

After hours of contemplating that chilling Reddit post, I ultimately decided to go back to the *r/casemountaincases* subreddit to look for more. In the shock of finding Steve's name in that story, I realized that I had not looked through the rest of the reddit page. But when I did, it wasn't just Tom's story and Mel's story where the original poster deleted their profiles after, it

was all of them. Every single post within this reddit page was submitted by a profile with a now deleted account. Even more, each comment under every post was also removed. I then noticed that there were only two people in the entire world browsing this page right now, with one of those being myself. And as it turns out, you aren't allowed to view who is online. I don't know, I thought maybe they might know something, whoever they are.

Despite all of this new evidence that I discovered about what happened to Steve, I ultimately decided not to tell the police. I still might. Just... not yet. During the weeks of the search and investigation the police were always quick to rule out anything dealing with the paranormal. So did I. But the fact is, we now potentially have a physical piece of evidence that connects Steve to Case Mountain in that geocaching log that the post suggests Steve had supposedly signed his name in. Whether this box exists or not remains to be seen, but if it is, if *somehow* it is, what I essentially have is a stamp, placing Steve at those exact coordinates, at that exact moment. Maybe this all wouldn't be enough for the police to look into anything, but it was more than enough for me. I laid there, eyes affixed to the blinds over the windows, waiting patiently yet intensely for the first morning's light to seep through. And just as it did, I got up, finished packing, and set off to Case Mountain with a tent, a sleeping bag, and a few nights worth of supplies.

When I got to Case Mountain, I decided to park at the same spot I had seen Steve's white Wrangler. The late September air clung to its last legs as lone leaves began their slow tumble to the dirt. As I entered the GPS coordinates into my phone that Mel's story had mentioned, I noticed two hawks circling in unison through the clear blue sky. No tentacles, though.

Despite having only been to Case Mountain a handful of times, I knew from the details

of the story that getting there would be quite the trek. One thing was certain, though.

Whoever had written those Reddit posts knew the mountain well.

It took about a minute for my phone to load the route, but when the coordinates finally loaded it looked to be roughly twelve miles to that tree from where I parked. Just as the reddit post suggested, the tree looked to be slightly west of the lake. The police dredged that entire lake until they could see the entire bottom. No Steve, and no lake monsters were found.

Twelve miles. I took a breath and began walking back into a place I swore I'd never go back to. And I knew that once I took that first step on that trail, there would be no turning back. Not now.

Five:

It's surprisingly cool out, for a late September evening. I was just able to get my tent up before the sun went down and I did my best to make a fire in a small hole I had dug out. Walking along the towering pines and oaks in search for sticks I could use for the fire I looked straight up at the sky and realized how small I was, compared to the soaring branches that had nearly enclosed out from the world, and into the woods. None of the sticks I found were very impressive in their ability to be burned. Some fallen branches I picked up had even crumpled at my touch with all the termite rot. Other sticks were noticeably wet when I picked them up, which I didn't think made any sense because it hadn't rained in days. On top of that, I had no intention of straying too far from the tent, so I gathered up the few sticks I was able to collect along with a couple piles of leaves, and made a small, struggling fire that lasted all of twenty minute.

I longed for Steve's smug way of telling me I did a great job before he'd assemble the logs in such a way that the flames peaked over the top of the surrounding trees. At least I was able to set up the tent, with minimal issues.

I hiked just under nine miles today before I set up camp. Steve would have been proud. No, Steve *will* be proud, once I find him. Honestly, it was really, *really* weird, hiking these mountains again. Alone, no less.

In my rush to get here, I realized shortly after setting up camp that I hadn't really packed anything warm for this search. The wind slapped against the thin nylon of my tent as I burrowed deeper into this sleeping bag I hadn't used in years. On top of that, there's a hole at the top of my tent about the size of a quarter, which is allowing a single ray of moonlight to come flooding through like a bright, beaming searchlight. After reading all those horrifying Case Mountain stories of giant tentacle birds, the devil's cave, and evil tape recorders, that tiny little rip in the tent might as well have been a tear in the whole night sky. It felt like the entire woods was watching me through it. Whether it's from my severe lack of sleep or perhaps just a strong case of apophenia, I couldn't shake this feeling that my every move was being tracked, and my every thought listened to. And I know that's just what the woods does to people. That every twig snapping is a shadow darting through the trees, or every rustling leaf a sharp-fanged beast crawling toward with. But Case Mountain felt different than that.

There's a root under my sleeping bag that won't stop digging into my right shoulder blade, and the ground is just uneven enough for my lower back to twist and strain with each and every direction I turn. I scooted a few inches toward the center until I could see the full moon clearly through the tear in the roof and couldn't help but wonder why it looked so off. *Where are the craters?* It's the mountain. It's...getting to me.

A couple miles up from where I parked I saw the beginning of the trailhead that leads to Turtle Cove, a six-mile trek that hugs steep crumbling cliffs comprised of loose and jagged rocks. My mind drifted back to when Steve's brother Caleb slipped and fell while leading one of

the search parties for him, breaking both legs in the process. Turtle Cove was definitely going to be my next stop, as soon as I find this geocaching box that Steve had possibly signed and dated in Mel's story. There had to be some significance to all of these maps of Turtle Cove that Steve had accumulated and feverishly marked up, which now lay scattered beside me on the cool, unforgiving ground.

There are only a few more miles until I reach the coordinates of the tree that supposedly contains the geocaching box at the degrees of "41.756N, and 72.484W." I was close. But, to tell you the truth, as badly as I want to stick my hand down that tree and find that this box exists, I also can't help but think of the relief I'd feel if I were to reach into that hole and feel nothing. Then none of this would be real, and I could go back to the idea that Steve is resting in peace, and all the haunting stories that constrict and plague the town of Forestville, Connecticut remain just that. Stories. Otherwise, everything that we all thought we knew about the world and our existence within it would never be the same. I mean, how could it?

I turned over in my tent and checked my phone to look at the time and noticed I had 66% battery life. I did remember to pack two separate portable chargers, just in case. While I knew I wouldn't get any service up here, I did have this idea of recording myself as I go over everything again, hoping it could lead me to a breakthrough. Or, I at least thought it might be nice just to hear a voice, even if it's just my own. In fear of speaking too loudly, I nestled even further into my sleeping bag, opened the app on my phone, and hit record.

Voice Recording One

My name is Kristina. It's... it's almost four a.m. now. I haven't slept at all yet, which I guess makes it two nights in a row without sleep. I'm in Case Mountain because my fiancé went missing here about a year ago, and two days ago I found a box in the attic which belonged to

him. Steve was researching the mountain, as if he were trying to figure out what happened to all of the people who went missing here. I am here to finish what he started. There's a woodpecker gnawing away at a tree just outside of my tent, which of course makes me think of what Tom said about a woodpecker's presence meaning that something terrible is coming. What's strange, though, is that I didn't think woodpeckers hunted during the night.

But then I switched off my recorder, as I thought about something else. What if this wasn't a woodpecker at all? It dawned on me that it was not a woodpecker that Tom described seeing in that Reddit post, but instead a large black-winged creature with long tentacles protruding from its back. And it wasn't hunting for food, either; it was carving things into the trees. That couldn't have been real. *It can't be!*

The pecking started growing louder, and more violent. My skin tightened as a cold jolt of electricity came shooting up my spine. The feverish *tap tap tapping* of the bird's beak echoed in sets of threes throughout the forest until I somehow could no longer tell which direction they were coming from. At first, I thought they were coming from the right of me. Then, the left. *Tap tap tap. Tap tap tap. TAP TAP TAP!* Oh God, that one sounded right outside of my tent! Like a howling wind, the tapping picked up in pace and grew into a fierce, whipping tornado of deafening noise that battered against the nylon walls of my tent, now caught helplessly in the eye of a storm. It sounded like tens of thousands of pens all being incessantly clicked and clicked and clicked at the same time, piercing through every inch of my body until the clicking became so fast that it turned to a constant, vibrating hum. My palms were pressed so hard against my ears I was afraid my head was about to burst.

That's when I heard it. Not the clicking, nor a bird pecking into a tree, but chilling, unfamiliar voice, which came from so close to me that I can still feel the warm breath brush

against the back of my neck as something whispered softly, “Help me.” I let out a shrieking scream which didn’t deter the clicking which continued around my tent like a million swarming cicadas. The sound pierced through my ears and was vibrating throughout my bones. That was the last thing I remembered.

Six:

I packed up the tent as quickly as I could and threw my crumpled, sweat soaked clothes into my backpack. How could it already be three p.m.? There’s no way I could have slept that long. I tossed the rest of my gear into my pack and plugged in the coordinates of the geocaching tree before heading out. My voice cracked and fluttered as I pressed record and tried to speak.

Voice Recording Two

Hi. I’m Kristina Ledger, and these are the Case Mountain Cases. I am currently heading to the tree from Mel’s story, which looks to be about another four miles up the mountain. It’s three, somehow. I actually just woke up a few minutes ago, though I still don’t know how that’s possible. Despite it being a perfectly sunny Saturday afternoon there, doesn’t seem to be any other hikers anywhere. Maybe for the deeper parts of Case Mountain that would be normal, but I’m still only a few hours from the main parking area. Despite all of the horror stories surrounding these dangerous woods, people would still come here, especially now, as the leaves are starting to turn bright shades of orange and red. It’s odd but, for now, I am definitely more focused on trying to figure out what happened to me last night, or how I could have possibly slept so long.

Last night, I kept hearing what I thought was a woodpecker, pecking away at a tree. What’s strange, though, is I could have sworn that I recorded the whole thing on my phone, but when I pulled up the audio file just a few moments ago, all I could hear was my own crackling

voice crying out for help over and over again. I don't know why I'm having such a hard time recollecting anything, but I faintly remember hearing this crazy loud noise coming from all ar... oh God. Oh my God!! Okay, there's, there's, oh wow.”

I had to stop recording for a second to gather myself. Right behind where I had set up camp last night, toward the very top of the tallest tree, was a symbol carved into the bark. It was unmistakably the same symbol that had been showing up everywhere – the upside down V with a curved line running through it. I took a picture of it and zoomed in on it as far as my phone could. It didn't look at all like someone (or something) had just made that last night. It looked much older, as if it had been carved decades ago. The bark curled inward back in toward the dull wood. Could that really have already been there before I set up camp for the night? But if it was, how could I have missed it? While I still have no idea what that symbol means, or what it has to do with Steve or any of the others who have gone missing in this mountain, what I have now is physical evidence, something *real*, that I can point to and say, “See? Here is actual proof that something is happening at Case Mountain besides just accidents and ghost stories, and this symbol could be at the center of all of it.” Whatever this symbol was, or whatever it meant, Steve knew its significance too, and had been researching it just days before he went missing. It's connected, I know it.

Seven

People have often said that the air feels different, in Case Mountain. Not so much like a simple elevation change, but more like the air is pulsating, or even flexing around you. When we began our initial two-week search for Steve last year, a few of the search party members described something similar. They said the air was heavy, and even felt like they were walking through some invisible, dense mist that permeated through the thick green forest. Others stated

that they could detect an odd smell at times, almost like the low-tide smell of the ocean, despite the closest ocean being hundreds of miles away. I just thought they were letting the ghost stories surrounding Case Mountain get into their heads. Apophenia, I'd tell them. Inherently trying to connect dots that aren't really there to somehow make sense of all the things we can't easily understand.

Steve's brother breaking his legs during the search wasn't the only thing that happened during those two weeks. Richard Pacheco was a colleague of Steve's while they taught at the Northern Connecticut University. When Steve went missing, Mr. Pacheco was among the first to call me and offer his help. He brought his twelve-year-old son Danny with him to help us look and comb through the 1400 acres of dense woods. It was only a few hours into the first day when I heard him frantically screaming out his son's name. Danny was gone.

Apparently, Mr. Pacheco had stepped away for a moment to pee and told Danny to wait for him, but when he came back, Danny had vanished. Everyone stopped looking for Steve and immediately gathered together to help find Danny. It wasn't until after dark when someone found him. He was standing at the exact same spot where he was told to wait. Mr. Pacheco sprinted over to him and scooped Danny up in his arms and held his head against his chest, running his hand feverishly down Danny's long blonde hair, sobbing and thanking God that he found him. Danny then asked his dad why it had taken him so long to come back, and argued that he had been waiting in that spot for him the entire time. Danny was cold. His lips were blue and his teeth were chattering, but other than that, he looked completely unharmed. Calm, even.

Understandably so, Richard did not join any of the other subsequent searches for Steve. A couple months after that, though, Richard Pacheco was arrested after the police discovered poor Danny starving and chained by the wrists to his own bed. While nobody really knows for sure,

it's believed that Richard Pacheco thought his son had... changed, after that night. It's also rumored that Richard had even told the police that his son would spend the nights awake, violently scratching at his eyes, as if trying to pick them out of his own head. I don't know, he seemed fine to me. Danny, that is. As did Richard, for that matter.

The locals in Forestville also said that before the arrest, Richard would complain to whoever listened that the smell of the ocean would flood his house at night, and that the smell was so overwhelming he could even feel a salty film latch onto his skin. One day when I was buying groceries at the Parkville Market, I saw Richard rapidly approaching me from the other end of the aisle. He was wearing a pair of white pajama pants with blue stripes, along with the matching pajama top and a long grey robe which went all the way down to his brown slippers. I tried to act like I didn't see him, and instead turned my attention to the ingredients on the back of a jar of pasta sauce, but then I heard him call out to me.

“Ledger!”

He came up so close to me that I nearly became nauseous from the stench of alcohol on his breath. I stammered back, and clutched my shopping cart.

“Richard, hi. Sorry, you scared me.”

“You should be glad your little boyfriend didn't come back, Ledger.”

I lost my breath. I didn't know what to say. Part of me wanted to slap him, and I almost wish I had, but instead I just furrowed my brow and took a slow step back before responding.

“Yeah? And what's that supposed to mean, Richard?”

Richard snarled and leaned in so close I could feel his long, greasy hair brush up against my ear. My back was completely pinned back to the shelf as he brought his face to mine to meet my eyes.

“When they come back, they’re not the same. They’re not the same! They’re not the same!”

What started out as a whisper turned into a frantic scene, with Richard’s cries echoing across the entire market. Everyone in the store rushed over to our aisle as I turned my cart and bolted toward the farthest possible checkout. As I hurried out of the store, nearly in tears, I was also overcome with the fact that Richard’s hair and clothes smelled distinctly of the beach.

And the only reason I bring any of this up, I guess, is because as I am coming up on the location of this geocaching tree, I swear that I am beginning to detect the faint, unmistakable odor of saltwater and clay. Apophenia, right? Am I still just jumping to connections because I want those connections to be there?

Voice Recording Three

The woods are beginning to grow thicker. The trees, taller. The sun doesn’t bleed through the leaves as much this deep into the mountain. The air feels colder, and less inviting. In Mel’s Reddit story, she had mentioned seeing a small group of people hanging out and smoking by the side of the cliff before venturing deeper in the woods toward the large oak which housed the secret metal bin. Well, I’ve been hiking toward this damn tree for hours now and I haven’t seen a single soul. But that hasn’t stopped me from feeling that I am being watched constantly. These are dangerous woods.

My body is starting to ache. My feet are throbbing and my stomach is beginning to cramp. And, of course, I forgot tampons. Shit.

According to my GPS, the tree should be just about a quarter-mile up ah... wait, that’s weird. My phone battery is at 75%. How is that possible? Just last night it was definitely lower than that, and I haven’t even charged it. That doesn’t make any sense.

I have no idea how my phone is more charged now than it was yesterday. Maybe I somehow charged it with the battery pack when I fell asleep last night, I don't know. Hang on, if I can just get my backpack off I can check. Oh wow, that feels better. My back is seriously killing me right now. I don't think I've had any water today, actually. The ground is... it's starting to spin. It feels like my head is leaving my body. Oh no, I think might pass...

Eight

I did pass out, and almost a whole hour went by after I woke up. The first thing I did was chug a giant sip of water, which seemed to help. I had never really fainted before. It was scary. It felt like my mind was seeping through and melting out of every pore in my body, and being replaced by something darker. I then remembered why I had bent down in the first place, to check the portable batteries. They were unused. Even now, as I make my way up a steep rock-face, trying to make sense of the dream I had, my phone is up to 85%. Maybe the woods here somehow emits some kind of electro-magnetic field, or something? I don't know. But it certainly wasn't charging me any. It's almost as if my phone is sucking all of the energy out of me to power itself. If Steve were here, he'd tell me how crazy that sounded. At least, I thought he would have, but now, who really knows what Steve believes now. Hopefully, this geocaching tin had some answers. *It has to.* Time to get up and keep recording, Kris. You were dehydrated and you passed out. That's it. So, I hit record again on my voice recorder, and kept going, my breath sputtering as I ascended the steep steps carved in the mountainous rock. The cold air certainly wasn't helping my breathing as I seemed to struggle on every word.

Voice Recording Four

When I passed out, I had this really horrific nightmare that I can't stop from replaying in my head. I was walking through the woods; these woods, when I saw a deer up ahead. It was just

standing there at first, quiet and still. Then it noticed me. Not only that, it saw me – like it knew exactly what I was doing there. Like it knew my thoughts, even. I tried to approach it because I thought it wanted to show me something. But when I took a step forward, the deer let out an echoing shriek and began hopping away. That's when I started to feel the earth beneath me shake. There were more of them. Hundreds of them coming now, and they were all running and stampeding in front of me, weaving through the thick trees like tiny twigs. I chased after them, determined to find out where they were running to. But somehow I already knew that they were all running toward Turtle Cove.

Remember when I had mentioned about Turtle Cove, and how one day, some idiots shoved sharpened sticks into the bottom of the water so that when people went cliff-jumping there they'd get pierced by them? Again, that wasn't just a legend; that actually happened.

In my dream, all of the deer sprinted toward the edge of the cliff and jumped off into the water thirty feet below, with each one getting impaled by those jagged spears. Some of the sticks had even started to accumulate more than one, like stacking a kebab skewer, as their entrails bobbed viciously on top of the crimson red water. I remember being able to smell a strong tinge of copper in the air. And the sounds that they made, the bolstering squeals when they hit the sloshing water and the sticks cut through their flesh, it petrified me. When I got to the ledge myself, I could do nothing but watch helplessly as hundreds of deer jumped to their death.

I tried to call out to them to stop, in the dream, but my mouth made no sound when it opened. Then I noticed that one of the deer stopped short of the ledge and looked down, scared. It didn't want to jump with the others. I motioned toward it and when it looked over at me I saw its eyes. Blue eyes... Steve's eyes. It started to back away from the cliff but before it could

another deer crashed into it and they both went tumbling down into pit of sticks below. That's when I jumped in after him, and woke up.

Nine

Voice Recording Five

It's starting to get really cold and windy out, and even worse, it looks like it might start to rain soon judging from the charcoal-colored sky. I packed plenty of rain gear for the trip, so I'm not too worried about that, but I am concerned about that hole I discovered in the roof of my tent. This is all so much harder than I thought it would be, and I really didn't expect for my entire body to be *this* sore, this quickly. And then there's the lack of people. At first, I was glad to not see any other hikers here, but now it's getting... weird, for lack of a better word. These are, in fact, dangerous woods, but I would have at least expected to have seen *somebody* by now, right?

I'm finally coming up on the location of the tree from Mel's Reddit post that supposedly contains the geocaching tin, the same tin which is also supposed to hold a log sheet which Steve had allegedly signed and dated the day he went missing.

As I mentioned earlier, in that Reddit post, the writer described seeing a tall, attractive man placing a small metal tin into a circular hole inside a tree. That man's name turned out to be Steven Bock, my fiancé. After Mel described their awkward conversation, which included her getting denied a date, Steve supposedly left the area while Mel went over to also sign her name in the geocaching bin, which she did, right below Steve's signature and another man named Tom Arnold, who both signed on the same day, October 14, 2022.

Mel described taking the paper out of the bin. She said that all the names above Steve and Tom's had been harshly scribbled out. Lastly, and perhaps the most disturbing part of the whole thing, is that Mel had also mentioned seeing a tape recorder in the bin as well. When she played

what was on the recorder, she described hearing a terrifying shrieking sound, which she continued to hear even after having turned the voice recorder off. Would Steve have played that voice recorder, too? I'm sure he would have; he never saw a button that he didn't instantly feel the need to press, but if so, did he also hear that horrifying noise even after the tape had stopped?

Another strange aspect of the post was that it just cut out mid-sentence, as if something had gotten to her right as she had hit send. How could the person writing that post, whether that be Mel or someone else, be describing their own disappearance as it was actually happening? It still doesn't make any sense, but the printout of that Reddit story remains the main piece of evidence which led me back here, to Case Mountain. The last thread that... oh my God, there it is! That's the tree! It's right where the coordinates said, and sure enough, there's a large hole right in the center, about five feet up from the ground. I can't believe it! Okay, I'm going to stop the recording for now to check this out.

As much as I wanted that tree to be there, when I finally saw it in front of me, I froze. It felt as if an entanglement of roots came twisting up from out of the ground and wrapped around my feet. I became consumed with terrible thoughts of what could have happened to Steve after he signed his name on that crumpled sheet of paper. I had to stop recording as I stood there, eyes locked onto the dark, hallowed out knot, wondering what would be waiting for me when I reached my hand in. Part of me thought that the hole would've viciously slammed shut on my arm, cutting it off and devouring it as a snack. But after a few deep breaths, I finally mustered up the strength to approach the hollow in the tree and stick my hand in, going all the way down to the armpit.

The first thing I felt in there was cold, and metal. It was the bin, with the same strange symbol of the upside-down V with a curved line going through it. The second thing I felt in

there, though, I was not expecting. It was a large plastic Ziploc bag, with something inside it. When I pulled it out, I saw a clean manilla envelope placed inside the dirt covered plastic bag, with the words “Steve’s Story,” written in red Sharpie, across the front.

Ten

Nearly every night before bed, Steve used to lean over to me, give me a kiss goodnight on the forehead, and tell me he loved me. As a running joke, I would always respond by asking him, “How much?” Most times, he would just respond with something silly, like saying that he loved me an indescribable amount, or that his love for me was immeasurable. One night, though, after we had spent hours painstakingly combing through an endless list of DJ’s for our wedding, Steve kissed me goodnight and told me he loved me, and when I asked him how much, he looked at me with a deep intent in his eyes and said, “Kris, you are each and every one of my senses. Every sound I hear reminds me of your laugh, every smell reminds me of your hair, every sight, sound, touch... everything, is you. That is how much I love you.” That was the last night we were together.

His words stuck with me. In fact, I can still hear them over and over again in my head, constantly. Even now, as I’m sitting in front of this dwindling, pathetic fire that I made after setting up camp for the night, I can still hear his voice in the slow, crackling embers. I can still feel his gentle touch brush against my cheek in the breeze. In that dream I had, where that deer didn’t want join the others in jumping to their death in Turtle Cove, I saw Steve in that deer, and it was telling me something. It was telling me that Steve was alive, and that he was somehow still here, in these woods. Finding the envelope marked “Steve’s story” in that tree affirmed that belief.

After finding the geocaching bin and the envelope in that tree, I took them both with me and set up camp for the night before opening them, but to be honest it was incredibly hard not to tear them open and go through it all right then and there. To think that the key to finding Steve is sitting there, inches away from me, as I set up my tattered tent. And before I get into the contents of that envelope, I first need to get into what I had found inside the geocaching bin, with the strange, familiar symbol scratched into the side.

The first thing I saw when I opened the tin was the folded piece of paper. When I unfolded it, there was over a dozen names on that sheet, but I couldn't read any of them, as every single one had been scribbled out, except for one. The name that wasn't scribbled out... was my name. You'd think I'd be used to being rattled by this point, but I wasn't, and I'm not. I don't know what my name is doing on that list, except for the fact that my name was to be crossed off next, by whomever, or whatever, is in these woods.

Underneath that piece of paper was a picture. It was a picture of me and Steve, only, it wasn't. The picture was a five-by-seven photo of us standing in front of a cliff. Jones Point, to be exact. I'm sure because in the photo we were standing directly in front of a brown sign with faded yellow lettering. Jones Point is a lookout area on the north side of Case Mountain. We've been there before, and we did take a picture almost exactly like the picture in this geocaching box, but I didn't own those clothes that I was wearing in this photo. I remember that day well, because it was raining. I wore a teal windbreaker and Steve wore his favorite blue raincoat. That was the only time we'd ever been there. So, how come in this photo it was sunny, and I was wearing yoga shorts and a pink tank-top? And Steve was shirtless, with a large black tattoo spanning across his chest of what looked to be some kind of bird. Steve didn't have a tattoo. Unless we both had identical twins that neither of us knew about, this photo shouldn't exist.

The last thing in the geocaching bin was that black tape recorder. I haven't played it yet. I will, I think, but the last person that supposedly hit play on this tape recorder had something really, really bad happen to them, before presumably going missing. But the fact that this tape recorder was even in that tree suggests that either everything in those Reddit stories are real, or someone is really, *really* going out of their way to terrify me.

When I opened the envelope marked "Steve's story," I found maps marked up in Sharpie along with long, specific sets of written instructions. On the bottom of the maps were the familiar words, "Keepers of The Rift." Just as the box I found in my attic, these notes were all without a doubt Steve's messy, near illegible handwriting. The...

"Hello?! Is anyone there?"

I... I just heard a laugh from outside my tent. Oh my God, there it is again!

"Hello?"

I shut off my lantern and held my breath in the darkness. The laugh that cut through the silence of the woods like an axe was seemingly that of a young boy, gleeful, high-pitched, and just a little bit maniacal -- something that you'd expect to hear at a crowded playground on a bright, sunny day with the sun glinting off a red spiral slide while moms would sit on gather round a bench and gossip. A sound that Steve and I had once yearned for, accompanied with flashing images of pregnancy tests, soccer practices, and scraped knees. A sound that is as now a distant, deafening reminder of what will never be.

The nylon fabric of my bulky magenta sleeping bag made muffled whooshing noises as I reached over to the corner of the tent for my dirt-crusting hiking boots and slipped them on, just in case I needed to run. I truly had no idea what I was thinking, coming up here alone, hellbent on taking on the whole damn world that, over the past year, had turned its back on me. It sees me

now, anyways. I gently reached over and grabbed onto the cold black zipper, ready to make a run for it, if needed.

I remained still as I closed my eyes and focused my attention onto my breathing. It was silent. No rustling leaves, nor cracking branches or echoing cricket chirps, just complete and utter, silence. Was he gone? Was he ever even there, or could this just be another case of apophenia, where I want to believe something so bad that I turned some normal, nocturnal animal call into a creepy childish chuckle? For my entire life, I refused to believe any of these Case Mountain ghost and monster stories. But now? Now it's the last thread of hope that tells me that Steve might be alive, somewhere, caught up in whatever the hell all of this is.

It had been almost twenty minutes since I heard anything other than my own slowed breathing, and I was too eager to find out what was inside that folder to wait any longer. I turned on my flashlight and reached over to the corner of the tent where--

“Shit!”

The voice recorder that was in the geocaching box suddenly turned on as a deafening, high-pitched static broke through the silence. I leapt toward the recorder and grabbed it, fumbling with it in my shaking hands and frantically began pressing all the buttons to try and shut it off, but the blaring static didn't stop. I tried to muffle the noise by throwing my pillow over the recorder and sitting on it, but it had only made it louder. I'd have to try and break it. Then I remembered the hammer that I had packed to drive in the tent stakes. As I reached for my backpack, though, the roaring static stopped, and was replaced by a woman's voice. It was *my*, voice.

“Hi. I'm Kristina Ledger, and these are the Case Mountain Cases. It's almost four a.m. now. I haven't slept at all yet, which I guess makes it two nights in a row without sleep. I'm here

in Case Mountain because my fiancé went missing here about a year ago, and two days ago I found a box in the attic which belonged to him. Steve was researching the mountain, as if he were trying to figure out what happened to all of the people who went missing here. I am here to finish what he started. What he started. What he started.”

It replayed those final words on a loop, somehow. I looked at the voice recorder in a dazed horror, trying to comprehend how it was possible for my own voice recording which I had taken yesterday could wind up inside of a tree for me to find. It wasn't possible.

I grabbed my backpack and shook it upside down, as Q-tips, toothpaste, headphones, and a hammer fell onto the sleeping bag. I gripped the hammer and threw the pillow aside that was over the recorder and raised my arm up, determined to smash whatever the hell this was into little, tiny pieces. Just before I swung the hammer down, the voice recorder fell silent for a moment, and then a different voice, a darker voice, whispered, “You'll never find him.”

The hammer made clean contact with the center of the voice recorder. Black shards of plastic flung into the air as I struck it a second time, then a third, then over and over again until all that was left of the recorder was a pile of shattered remains. I turned my flashlight off and sat back into my sleeping bag and whispered to myself to try and stop the world from spinning around me.

“It's okay. It's okay. It's not possible. Shhhhh.”

Every breath I tried to take got caught in my lungs as I tried to calm myself down when suddenly the tent began ferociously whapping back and forth as if people from all directions were shaking and pounding their fists into the walls. I let out a piercing shriek, and with the hammer still clutched in my hand, I turned on my flashlight and sprinted out of my tent and into the inexplicable, enveloping blackness of the haunting woods.

Eleven

When I got outside my tent, I thought I was going to see a horde of creatures circling and clawing away at the walls of the tent, but there was nothing. The beam of my flashlight darted across the forest and fixed upon every surrounding tree, expecting to see a shadowy figure creeping behind the cover, but there was nothing. A cold breeze shook the surrounding leaves and swept away the visible stream of breath escaping my chattering lips. A creeping blanket of mist floated just above the ground, parted by the endless rows of thin trees. I hugged my arms up into my chest and rubbed my hands against my cold skin as I listened intently to the silence. Then I heard the slight crack of a stick behind me which might as well have been a whole tree crashing down. I whipped around and saw – something, standing there, watching me. Oh God, what is that?!

About twenty feet in front of me, I began to make out what looked to be a small figure, slumped over and unbothered by the shaking ray of light fixed upon its spiny, crooked pale back, covered in bloody scratches and caked-in dirt.

It was a child. A young boy no older than eleven or twelve wearing nothing but a pair of tattered shorts while he feverishly worked on something on the ground as he huddled shrewdly over a spot in front of him. My stomach dropped along with my jaw and my chin quivered in horror as I wrestled with the decision to either call out to the child or to run away from this place and keep running until I make it back home. I thought about how foolish I had been, in my rash decision to come back here, alone, without telling a soul where I was going or what I had found about Steve. I thought about how lightly I packed, blinded by the thought that I would simply just walk into these dangerous woods, solve a mystery that has plagued this town my entire life

find Steve, and then be back home by the end of the weekend to feed my cat. I thought about how by tomorrow evening, I would already be almost entirely out of food.

Maybe deep down, this is what I had wanted all along -- for Case Mountain to finish the job and take me too, or at least whatever was left of me after it took Steve. I took a step forward and kept the flashlight locked onto him, and I began to hear a faint gargling sound accompanied with crumpling leaves and cracking sticks. My crusted lips curled around my chattering teeth as before I realized what was happening, I called out to him.

“H...hello?”

The figure stopped what it had been working on in front of him and froze. I took a step back.

“Hello?”

The figure slowly raised from its crouched position and stood there with its back to me, with the sharp outline of his ribs pressing into his skin with each deep breath. He was gingerly holding a small stick in his right hand, dripping something onto the ground. I tightened my grip on the hammer until my knuckles ached.

“Are you okay?” I whimpered.

The boy said nothing, and instead cocked his neck slightly to the left, and slowly turned to face me. His face... what had he done to his face? The flashlight glared into the deep, empty caverns where the boy's eyes used to be, now empty. The boy had used the stick to pluck out his own eyes. My stomach churned and cold a cold sweat swept across my skin. As foreign and horrid as the boy had looked, he also had a familiarity to him, and then I thought back to the search party that we had conducted for Steve. It was Danny Pacheco, the boy who we had lost during the search for Steve. The same boy that his father had chained his wrists to his own bed to

prevent him from scratching his own eyes out. At least, it *looked* like it was him. Danny began letting the bloody, puss covered stick that he clutched in his hand sway back and forth like a pendulum as he took a step toward me. His voice was low, booming, and unfitting of that of a child.

“He’s alive, you know.”

I took a big step back, trying my best to keep the shaking flashlight on the boy’s figure without looking at his empty eye sockets. My voice cracked and sputtered as I hesitantly responded to him.

“D...Danny?”

Globs of blood and a thick, yellow puss glooped out from his empty eye sockets and slowly trickled down his face. Despite not having any eyes, Danny reacted to my beaming the flashlight on him, lifting his battered hands up to shield his face. I knew with everything in me that I should run away, that whatever this thing was, it couldn’t have been Danny. But the longer I stood there watching him, the more it looked like he was in pain, and scared. His boney hands shook uncontrollably against his side and he was so skinny I could count his ribs. Maybe it *was* Danny.

“We can get you help, Danny. Let me help get you out of here, okay?”

Danny stood there motionless in the shallow beam of my fading flashlight, as if contemplating what to say next. The forest once again fell eerily, impossibly silent. Behind Danny, I began to make out large shadows moving along the tree-line behind him. They were tall, impossibly large shadows, as if entire mountains were moving behind him. I began to feel a light thrumming vibration in the soles of my feet accompanied with a constant, distant hum that reverberated through the leaf-covered ground.

“Danny,” I cried out. “Please tell me what is happening. Please. I can help you, okay?”

Just then, Danny’s mouth dropped all the way open like a snake dislocating its jaw for a plump rat, his mouth now resembling the holes in his eye sockets. Without moving his lips, or tongue, or anything at all, Danny’s voice echoed clearly and deeply throughout the forest.

“Open The Rift. Open The Rift. Open The Rift.”

The words came out of Danny’s still, gawking mouth like a broken record player as he began taking slow, prolonged steps toward me. I looked on in unimaginable terror as my eyes locked onto Danny’s empty, dripping sockets. The flashlight shook violently in my hands which made it appear as if Danny’s body was jolting back and forth through the air.

“W..what do you mean?” I asked while taking steps back. “What is The Rift?”

“It knows you’re coming,” he said. Then my flashlight turned off, and though I could no longer see Danny’s body, I could suddenly hear the frantic shuffling of feet pick up steam. He was running directly toward me.

I turned around and started running through thick blackness of the forest toward the frail, thin safety of my nylon tent. I ran for a long time. Too long, in fact. The tent should be here. No, where’d it go?!

I smacked the handle of my flashlight against my palm until the flickering light sputtered to life. As I darted the light around the clearing in the forest, I instantly knew that my tent should have been in that exact spot, but it wasn’t. Then I heard the noise of thundering footsteps approach me from behind. I let out a scream and out of sheer instinct, I swung the hammer that I was still holding at nothing but air, as the momentum caused my body to swing fully around and fall over. That’s where I saw my tent, right where it wasn’t, just a minute ago. That was it. I was done, and I was going home.

The door to the tent was still unzipped as I stumbled in, ready to throw everything I could carry haphazardly into my backpack and content in leaving the rest. As I reached for my pillow, though, I discovered a black tape recorder sitting on top of it, fully intact and in one piece. Next to the recorder was the envelope titled “Steve’s story.” It had been opened, with its contents now scattered across the ground and the corners of the tent. It was about time I read his story, desperately hoping to find any sort of answer. I opened up the envelope, and read the following text, in perhaps what might be the key and pivotal clue to uncovering hundreds of years of strange mysteries and disappearances that loom over Case Mountain like a curse.

Twelve

Steve’s Story

We’ve all heard the legends, growing up in the small town of Forestville. Stay far, clear, and away from Case Mountain or else the ghosts will get you. That if you stay there past dark, the people in white robes come out and take you away. As kids growing up where we did, it seemed to be all people would ever talk about. And while that might have scared me to all hell enough to listen, those myths and legends had always fascinated my older brother Scottie.

One evening at the dinner table, Scottie asked Dad if he had ever been to the mountain before and seen any of these ghosts or supposed monsters in person. Dad furrowed his brow and pushed his thick-rimmed glasses up over his nose as he shot a glance over at mom who was staring down at her plate, swirling around a few loopy strands of her famous spaghetti and meatballs in her fork.

“Oh, yes. I’ve seen them. That’s why I know they’re there, and why you and Steven aren’t ever allowed to go there.”

Mom popped up quickly from her chair and started taking our plates over to the sink, pinching dad's arm on the way.

"What did you see, Dad?" Scottie asked.

Dad leaned back in his chair and sighed before he reached in his paint-covered jeans and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, sticking one in his mouth before he spoke. "Maybe I'll tell you when you're older," he said as he lit his cigarette.

"But dad,"

"Your father said no, Scott," Mom snapped from across the room as she turned on the kitchen faucet. "You're going to give your brother nightmares again if you keep it up. Now come help me with the dishes, please."

Scottie huffed as he stood up and pushed his chair in. I was glad Dad didn't go on about what he had supposedly seen there, because anytime I heard about the witches or monsters that lived there, it *did* give me nightmares. It was always the same one, too. I'd be walking in the woods by myself, down a narrow dirt path on the way to somewhere, but I didn't know where. It was always a hot, sunny day in the dream, but there'd be no leaves on any of the trees. Instead, the woods were covered in silk-like purple twirling ribbons floating around like long purple eels swimming in the air. As I continued walking down the path, I would always see a static figure of a woman whose face I could never make out. Sometimes, in the dream, it would feel like I'd be walking for hours until she appeared. Other times, she'd appear after only a few steps. But she always said the same thing, though, when I approached her shadowy figure. She'd always repeat the same thing over and over again. She'd scream, "Open The Rift. Open The Rift."

I never knew what that meant, but Scottie had always thought that it might've had something to do with all of the people who disappeared there. I didn't know what to think, but

those nightmares only made Scottie more and more intrigued by the mystery behind the mountain. And as I'd lay awake in bed at night, too frightened to fall asleep, Scottie would peak down at me from the top of the bunk bed and tell me that he was going to be the one to solve that mystery and free the whole town of the hold the mountain seemed to have over us.

He'd often say things like, "We're gonna be famous, for finding out what's really going on at Case Mountain. We're gonna even bring a camera and be the first ones ever to catch a ghost or monster or something on video. We'll be legends!"

Scottie was the kind of kid that if you told him not to do something, you better believe that he was already conjuring up a hundred different ways to do it in his head. One summer when I was nine and Scottie was eleven, for example, our dad caught us trying to climb the oak tree in our backyard and warned us that, if we kept doing it, we'd end up in the hospital with a broken neck or leg. Sure enough, the very next day I watched Scottie fall from the tallest branch of that tree and come screaming and crashing down on his arm. But even that big old bulky cast didn't stop him from doing whatever we'd been told not to do.

Everything changed when we went to Case Mountain that following year in the late spring. The weather was finally starting to warm up, melting away the last of the remaining snow and the trees were just beginning to blossom, including Dad's precious Eastern Redbud that he went out and took pictures of yesterday. Being able to ride our bikes again without needing our winter coats was somewhat of a meaningful day for Scottie and me, so naturally were both excited to be able to play outside in the sun again. It was after school and, as we unlocked our bikes from the rack, Scottie told me we weren't going home just yet and to follow his lead.

"Come on, Steve, follow me! We're going somewhere. We'll be back before supper," he said.

He never needed to tell me to follow him, though. I always followed Scottie's lead, even though more often than not it led to trouble. Scottie was taller than me, better at baseball, better at any of the video games we played, and way faster on his bike. But he never made me feel bad about any of that. He'd just tell me that it was cus' he was older than I was, and that was just the way it was supposed to be.

I hadn't the slightest idea where we were going until I saw the big green sign for Case Mountain. When we got there, my legs felt like logs from all the peddling.

"Come on, Scottie, let's turn back or we're going to be late for supper and be grounded!" I said in-between breaths.

Scottie said nothing back, and instead shrugged me off and continued deeper into the mountain.

As we biked over a few rocky hills and winding turns, we both noticed that everything seemed normal. We didn't see any of the giant monsters or evil ghosts that the other kids at school said they saw when they'd brag to the class about coming up here alone. The trees were covered in vibrant green leaves and there was no sign of floating purple ribbons anywhere like I'd see in my dreams of this place. Scottie slammed on his brakes and made a long, spectacular skid mark in the ground, kicking up a cloud of dirt and dust in the process.

"It's all just a bunch of bullcrap, Steve! Look! Ain't nothing even here!"

I looked back at my smaller, less impressive skid line before turning back to him, nodding in agreement. "I don't get it," I said. "Why would they lie and make up all these things, then?"

Scottie frowned as he popped off his helmet and used his hand to comb away his dirty blonde hair over his bewildered, blue eyes. "I dunno. Maybe they come here to do like super-

secret stuff or somethin' and all the parents tell us to stay away from here so we don't catch them."

"Nah, that don't make no sense neither," I said. "How does that explain any of the dozens of kids who went missing here?"

Scottie looked around the woods as if to make sure nobody was listening to us, then he leaned in toward me and lowered his voice as he spoke again. "Maybe that's all part of it. Like a kid-sacrifice type thing or something. Take our neighbor, Mr. Jeffers, for example. Remember when his daughter, that older girl Anna, went missing? He was outside mowing his lawn whistling the very next day like that ain't never even happened! Maybe it's him!"

"Nuh-uh, no way!" I responded.

"Well, do you see any monsters, Steve? There ain't nothing here!"

"Not yet, I don't," I snapped back. "But I sure as heck ain't trying to see one anyhow! Now can we go back before we get grounded, please?"

Scottie shook his head as he shoved his helmet back on and buckled the thin black strap under his chin. "I just want to see what's around this bend up here, okay? Then we can turn around, if you're too chicken."

"I never s..s..said I was scared, Scottie." My stutter would always come back when I was nervous.

"Come on, it'll just take a minute," Scottie said as he began peddling again.

I was reluctant to follow him this time, but I did anyways. Peddling faster than we were before, we made it around the bend in no time, and once again, there was nothing there but more woods, more trees, and nothing else, except for a man with a big green backpack on walking toward us. "Great day for a stroll," the man said with a smile.

He was younger than Dad, maybe in his thirties, I guessed, as I sat there on my bike and cautiously looked him over. He wore light grey cargo shorts and a tight-fitting white long-sleeved shirt covered in random splotches of sweat.

“Y... Yes, sir,” I replied.

The man smiled back at us again, this time a much bigger smile where the sides of his lips curled so far up his head it seemed impossible. “Well, you boys be careful out there,” he said with that same improbable smile before turning around and walking back the way he came, whistling some tune I’d never heard before.

I looked over at Scottie, who uncharacteristically hadn’t said a word the whole time.

“Come on, let’s get back,” he murmured, with his wide eyes still locked on the man. I could tell that he could see it too, that the man’s smile was too big. Too impossible to have been real. We waited there until we could no longer see the man before we finally turned back around and headed home.

It was only a minute or two of peddling before Scottie saw it. I nearly crashed into the back of Scottie’s bike, not realizing he had stopped, before I had seen it too. Right there, in the middle of the thick, empty forest, stood a small, dilapidated, windowless log cabin.

“W... Was that there before, Scottie?”

Scottie took his helmet back off and simply shook his head in disbelief. “No. No it wasn’t, Stevie.”

“What do you think is inside it?” I asked.

Scottie slowly placed his black and green striped helmet on the side of his handlebar as he suddenly began an all-out sprint toward the front door. “Only one way to find out!” He yelled, calling back to me.

I cursed as I threw off my helmet and began chasing after him. Scottie swung open the unlocked door and let out a laugh before I lost sight of him. Each of the three steps leading up to the porch cracked and groaned violently as I followed.

When I entered the cabin, the first thing I realized was just how big it was. It was way, way too big. The ceiling must have been fifty feet high above the floor, which didn't make any sense, looking at the cabin from the outside. The room I was in looked like the size of our house's living room and kitchen combined, or I don't know, maybe it just looked bigger because it was empty. The next immediate thing I noticed was the foul, crippling smell of saltwater and copper which ran up my nose and made my eyes swell up something fierce and made it almost impossible to breathe without pulling my shirt over my face. But I didn't have any time to think about it or look around. I started calling out for Scottie, who was still nowhere to be found. "Scottie! Scottie, are you in here?" No response.

There was a small, skinny hallway at the end of the room that led to another thick wooden door which was cracked open. As I made my way to the door, I noticed a large, strange symbol carved on it, like a triangle with a half circle going through it. I approached the door and called out to Scottie through the crack in the door, and this time, I heard him call back to me.

"Scottie? Is that you in there?"

"I'm in here, Steve! Come on, you gotta see this!"

When I opened the door, the smell got even stronger, which nearly knocked me off my feet as I leaned on one of the sides of the wall, trying to navigate my way through the pitch blackness of the hallway.

"Where is *here*?!" I yelled.

"Down here!" was all he said back.

I continued my way down the dark hallway, which again was far too long to be possible for the size of the cabin and I still couldn't even see my own hand right in front of my face. As my right hand continued to run across the wall, I felt a corner, and the hallway turned to the right to another hallway but, at the end of this one I could make out, another door some ten feet ahead of me, with an orange flicker of light like a campfire coming through the bottom of the door. As I approached the door, all I remember is my heart pounding out of my chest and me struggling to catch my breath.

“Scottie? You in there?”

“In here! Come check this out!”

His voice seemed far away, but somehow the echoes of his voice sounded like they were getting louder, not softer.

I wanted nothing more than to turn back and never step foot on this mountain again, for Scottie to come crashing through the door laughing in another one of his attempts to try and prank and scare me like he had done all those times before.

“Scottie, if you come out and try and scare me in there, I swear I ain't ever talking to you again!” I yelled. No response.

As I opened the door, my heart stopped pounding and dropped to my feet. It was an empty, square room, with dozens of lit torches hanging off ancient-looking sconces lining each of the four walls. I immediately saw her. Right there, in the center of the room, stood a smudged, cloudy-looking figure of a woman, her long, wet black hair jetting down to her knees. I instantly knew that she was the woman I had seen in my nightmares. Her face was a violent pale grey covered in weathered cracks and tears across her leathered skin. As her shadowy figure shifted in and out of focus, I could make out the dirt-covered and ripped grey robe that hung loosely off of

her frail figure. In front of her, I saw a blue and black pulsating ball of light like something you'd see in one of those late-night science fiction movies on TV we weren't allowed to watch but did anyways. My stomach churned like a washing machine, and my mouth filled with a sour-tasting mixture of saliva and bile that I wasn't able to swallow as it trickled down my chin and spilled onto my faded green Hartford Whaler's shirt.

I was frozen in terror as I watched the glowing ball grow bigger at the lady's feet. I... I couldn't take my eyes off it. Jolts of electricity and blue waves danced frantically around it as it began filling up the room and swallowing the flickering light of the flames. Then, the figure began to make its way toward me, her feet hovering inches above the ground as she approached with an orange ball of light glowing through her open mouth. Her lips didn't move as she spoke to me.

“Open The Rift! Open The Rift!”

I let out a bellowing shriek and turned away, sprinting out through the door and back down the impossibly long hallway, and didn't stop until I was back outside. When I finally got out of the cabin, I looked in awe around the woods in a dazed horror as I noticed that not one of the trees had any leaves on it anymore, and thousands of those purple ribbon-like things were floating in the air. Tears were pouring down my face as I reached my bike and peddled faster than I ever had before out of this place. I didn't even stop to wonder why Scottie's bike wasn't there, right next to mine where he had left it.

It's funny, how the mind is able to remember certain things, but not others. To this day, I have no memory of that bike ride home. The next thing I remember, it was dark out. Our quiet cul-de-sac neighborhood was lit in a soft yellow haze under the glow of the towering street lights as I threw my bike down in the front yard and stormed into the house in an unintelligible frenzy.

Dad was the first one to see me. He grabbed me by the shoulders and scanned me over from head to toe before speaking to me in a stern tone. “My God, Steven, where have you been?”

“W...W...We were in C...Case Mountain, and, and, we found this cabin, and, and, something took Scottie. Something took Scottie, Dad!”

Dad tilted his head to the side and scrunched his nose as Mom came rushing over in her red and white plaid apron and stood behind Dad with a look of anger and concern stretching across her face. What Dad said to me next, I am still trying to understand to this day.

“Who is Scottie, bud?”

Thirteen

Steve’s Story (cont.)

I didn’t know which was worse, losing my big brother and best friend, or realizing that I seemed to be the only person in the world who still had any memory of him. To this day, I can still see the look on Dad’s face when I told him about Scottie burned into the back of my brain. Those scrunched, searching eyes and that blank, empty stare as if he was trying to remember where he had placed his car keys. It didn’t make any sense. Just a few days ago, Scottie and I were playing football with him. Dad was Tom Brady, as he always was, and Scottie had called dibs on being Randy Moss, as he always did. And then nothing. I lost it, that night.

“Scottie, Dad! WHAT DO YOU MEAN?! SCOTTIE! MY BROTHER!”

Mom stood behind Dad with the same look she’d give me when I’d tell her that I was sick and couldn’t go to school. Concerned, but not entirely convinced.

“YOU HAVE TO REMEMBER HIM! YOU HAVE TO!”

I slammed my closed fists into his shoulders and screamed and sobbed. Scottie was the one who had told me not to cry. But he was gone, and it was my fault for running away. Had I

faced that woman from my nightmares, maybe I would've found him, and my parents would still remember him. Dad pulled me closer and hugged me tightly as mom knelt down and did the same. I can still smell the overpowering cigar smoke emanating off his clothes and mouth as he told me to take a few deep breaths and slowly try to explain to them exactly what the hell happened.

Snot began to drip out of my nose as I struggled to find the breath to speak. Even his tight grip on my shoulders couldn't stop my body from shaking. "W..We went to Case Mountain, and there was this cabin, and Scottie ran inside, and, and, and I ran in after him, but I couldn't find him – and then there was this lady, and, and, and she took him somewhere!"

Dad put his hands on my arms and hugged me, then pushed me away to look at me. His face turned from a look of confusion and concern to a look of realization and sympathy.

"Do you not like being an only child, Steven? Would you like a baby brother or baby sister?"

"DAD, I HAVE A BROTHER! STOP SAYING THAT! PLEASE, DAD! PLEASE!"

Dad said nothing, and instead just looked up over his shoulder at Mom, whose skin was noticeably pale, and her nose scrunched up like it'd do whenever she'd get upset, like the time she found Scottie trying to sled down the creaky wooden stairs in an old laundry basket.

"Sweetie," Mom said as she lowered herself next to Dad, "There is no cabin in Case Mountain. Now you need to tell us exactly where you were so we can try and figure out what happened, okay?"

"I'm not lying, Mom! I saw it! We both did! Here, come look at our bedroom, you'll see his stuff!"

As I bolted up the stairs using both my arms and legs to sprint up the steps like Tarzan, a flash of doubt crept into the back of my mind, terrified to think of what would happen if I were to open that door and there would be nothing there belonging to him. Then I noticed a family picture that had had been up on the wall for years, only this time, the picture was missing Scottie.

As I swung open the door, I immediately noticed that our “KEEP OUT: SECRET LAIR” sign wasn’t taped crudely onto the front like it had been for forever. Inside the room was clean. Too clean, it seemed. Scottie’s clothes didn’t pile onto the grey carpet like they usually had along with bins full of emptied out toys and Pokémon cards.

“WHAT DID YOU DO WITH ALL OF HIS STUFF?” I screamed as I continued rummaging through dressers and drawers. But I found nothing. Then, I heard my parents step through the doorway behind me, as Dad’s voice cut through the room like a knife.

“Steven, you need to tell us what happened, okay? Enough of this brother talk already, sweetie. “You’re getting too old for that stuff. We’re not mad, but we need you to stop making up stories and tell us the truth so we can help you.”

I remember standing there, unable to speak. Unable to move. Unable to think. It was supposed to all just be a dream, some overlapping opaque curtain swaying through the breeze. A small leak from the fantasies and horrors of my nightmares that stained its way into the fabrics of reality. Who knows, maybe this whole damn thing is still just part of that same old dream? What did seem real, however, were the therapy sessions. The waiting rooms and the CT scans. The medications. Those damn, medications.

My therapist told me that she believed I was suffering from something called, “acute schizophrenia.” During our very first session together, she’d ask me questions like, “Have you

ever pretended to be someone else, for fun?" They ended up putting me on some pill called Quetiapine, which is supposedly for people with schizophrenia.

My parents held me out of school the day after the incident. Mom made me pancakes which I refused to eat and told me we had to go to the doctors. I loved Mom's pancakes. That day, I believe she had even mixed in my favorite m&m's. She had set up the table all nice, with plates of bacon, and sausage. Dad didn't even have the paper out at the table, for a change.

As I sat there at the table, Mom placed a large stack of pancakes covered in syrup and whipped cream in front of me and sat down, both her and Dad shooting me concerned smiles. I pushed the plate away, making sure it made a loud scraping noise as it moved across the table, and angrily told them that I was never going to eat again. I was just so, so angry at them. I was still convinced that somehow, they had to be lying. That they, through some kind of supposed paranormal or spiritualistic capabilities, knew the instant that Scottie had been taken away from this earth and into wherever he is now, which tipped them off into getting rid of all of his stuff before I got home.

But then they'd have to get the whole town involved. When I finally did return to school, there wasn't one kid there who remembered me having an older brother, despite how much I would always talk about him. No announcements or assemblies. No nothing. It reminded me of old Mr. Jeffers, mowing his lawn and whistling the very next day after his daughter Anna had been rumored to go missing there too. If it *was* some kind of massive cover-up from the family along with the entire town of Forestville, Connecticut, then they did a damn near perfect job in hiding all of the evidence. But there was one thing that they didn't catch to wipe clean of his memory. That night I lost Scottie when I went up into the room to show my parents all his stuff, one of the first things I noticed was that the bunk bed was still there. I remember asking them

why I would have a bunk bed if I didn't have a brother, to which Dad had said something along the lines of "You told us that you wanted a bunk bed in case you'd ever get one, and that you wanted to sleep in a top bunk so no monsters are able to reach you from under the bed."

And I might have believed them, had it not been for what I had seen etched into the mustard-stained wood from underneath the beam on the top bunk. It was a note, written in blue pen over and over again until the message became carved deeply into the wood. It read "S & S, 4 EVER." Scottie had written that. I knew that was absolutely and undoubtedly true for two reasons. First, it was written upside down, meaning that the one who wrote it must have been leaning over from the top bunk. And Scottie never allowed me in the top bunk. Secondly, and more importantly, is that the "4" in the message is written with the two lines making the top of the four connecting, which was Scottie's way of writing the number four. Mine was always the "L" with a straight line next to it, where the lines didn't connect on top. That was more than enough for me to know that Scottie was real, that I wasn't the crazy one.

But what didn't make sense was that there were others time at school when students *would* remember someone that had supposedly went missing there. Just about a month after Scottie went missing, Mr. Arnold's son Tommy Junior was a sixth grader who drowned in Case Mountain Lake when he tried to take one of the place's kayaks out and fish off of it. That very same week at school, we had some big giant remembrance thing and everything. God, I was so mad that day, sitting there in my fold-up style, faded auditorium chair while everyone gathered around and hugged Tommy's younger brother Patrick. Instead of hugging me, they would just look at me like I was crazy, like I didn't belong anywhere near the presence or deserve any type of space in society. I sometimes wish I had just played along with their evil conspiracy from the

get-go. At least that way it wouldn't have felt like I had vanished from the world too, that fateful day.

But as the months went on, I realized that the less that I brought Scottie up, the easier things got for me. The therapy sessions had slowed down in frequency and got much less intense, and I also didn't have to take nearly as many pills I had been. With that, the side effects lessened, too. I swear, some nights after taking that pill, when I'm lying in bed and my head would start to float and buzz, I could hear him call out to me from the top bunk. That continued to happen for around a week after I stopped taking them, but eventually, as time went on, that went away.

And as the months turned into years, I still remembered everything there was to know about my brother Scottie. I still remembered the hiker with the all-too-big, impossible smile. I still remembered that crooked tall lady in the torn-up gown from my nightmares that had black holes for eyes and spoke through her hanging, dislocated jaw. And I still remembered "S & S 4 EVER." And I made an oath to myself that I would figure out what happened to him, to find that cabin or whatever that pulsing and flashing black and blue orb was and take it head-on to go after him.

My searches of Case Mountain became much easier in senior year of high school when I could finally afford a car. A two-door white Wrangler. So three times a week, I would go into Case Mountain and take notes, and I started to see patterns. Like that hiker, for example, the one that me and Scottie had seen that day who said to us, "Great day for a stroll." The funny thing about that is, that man was always there at that specific turn, at that specific time, saying the same exact thing. "Great day for a stroll," followed by one good outcome and one very, very bad outcome. DO NOT pick the bad outcome.

The very first time I saw him again was actually on my eighteenth birthday. Not like I had anything or anyone to celebrate with anyway. My mom was locked away in her room, and the only decoration that was put up was a small “happy birthday” letter, written on a sticky note. It was on the path leading to Turtle Cove, I learned from my recent map and trail studying. When I saw him, he was walking toward me at a high-speed pace. It was a sunny day, and there will thousands of little beams of sunlight peaking through the spring leaves. As he moved robotically down the trail, arms pumping at perfect ninety-degree angles and chest-high knees, he avoided any eye contact with me until he was right beside me along the trail, when he stopped, locked his piercing, black eyes on me, and said those words. “Great day for a stroll.”

At the time, I didn’t know that things as miniscule as what I’d say during these scenarios would have an impact on the outcome. But there I was, seeing that man with the impossible smile yet again, his baseball-sized eyes gleamed in a wild excitement as the corners of his mouth once again eclipsed the top of his ears. I didn’t know I was supposed to say that it was a good day for a stroll, for this all to work yet. To get the cabin. So instead, I let the shock and horror of that reunion with him overcome me.

“No. Now tell me where my brother is!” I snapped back at him, trying to match his dominating presence.

The hiker’s eyes turned from as big as baseballs to as vicious-looking like two big vertical crescent moons, and instead of a smile, the hiker frowned, which grew down past his jawline and down toward his shoulders. Then he started to walk toward me, like a snake slowly hunting down its prey. Then he began to remove something out of his backpack.

“I mean, Yes, sir! Yes, sir, it is!” I cried out.

Then he stopped, and his frown turned back into a smile, and he said, “Well, you boys be careful out there,” and strolled happily away. I noticed that his response to me was also exactly what he had said last time. Even so that he said “boys” as if he were addressing the both of us, like he had done the first time. That was yet another affirmation to me that proved Scottie’s existence, and that night wasn’t just a dream that bled over onto reality.

That wasn’t the first time I heard that hiker say those words to me, but it was the last time I had had anything other than, “Yes, sir,” because every time I did, I’d find the cabin, tucked away just above the bank of Turtle Cove.

The first times I checked out the cabin, there was nothing inside. It was just an empty, termite-riddled, falling apart cabin. Further, the cabin had normal-looking dimensions, unlike the cabin from the day when Scottie went missing with the inexplicably high ceilings and long, winding hallways. The magic behind it was gone. I wondered if maybe Scottie had inadvertently fell into the pattern, the same way we had done before with the hiker, by saying or doing something while in the cabin to unlock it.

What I did find, however, was a spot of black soot and burned logs over in the corner of the cabin by the broken window. Scattered around those ashes were singed and burned pictures of people’s portraits and close-ups of their faces. Someone had been there recently, doing something. Some kind of ritual? I realized that there was more to it than what I had already known up to that point.

I started searching through the internet to try and see if any more of these types of patterns existed. I scoured internet forums, discord channels, hell, even a little bit of the dark web. But the biggest clue that I found, was in a subreddit page titled “r/casemountaincases.”

Someone had recently posted in there, eighteen hours ago, making it one a.m. at the time of their posting, which was titled, “Keepers of The Rift – Meeting Now. Gather All.”

I knew it *had* to be connected. That this post was talking about that cabin as the gathering place. That this was their fire, from the other night, even. I knew that somehow, they had to know something about what this is all really is, especially if they’re going to dedicate a whole damn cult to this Rift thing. The way I saw it, I had two options. The first was to wait until they posted again. To watch this subreddit like a hawk and then spy on them once they announced when their next meeting would be.

But that would risk me getting caught. I had no idea what these “Keepers of The Rift” people were capable of. The second option was to take a more direct approach, and post a comment in this post, saying that I have been to their spot where they gather, and that I was interested in attending their next meeting and becoming a fellow “Keeper.” I figured if I pretended like I wanted to join the cult, then they could tell me how to figure out the cabin, and how to bring the long hallway back that led to the room with the tall, crooked woman with the glowing orb in front of her that I believe to be The Rift. And that’s the option I did.

I created a burner account in Reddit called “Rift-Seeker” and commented in the post by saying, *“I’ve seen the room at the end of the long tunnel. Looking to join the next gathering for more.”*

Within a minute of me posting that comment, maybe less even, the original post had been deleted. I sat in on my bed and stared at my phone blankly, fearing I had lost yet another chance to prove Scottie had existed and may be still be alive somewhere, when suddenly a private message request popped up across my screen. I looked nervously around my room from the top

of the same bunk bed I've had since Scottie and I were kids and accepted in the request. When the chat page opened, I read the following messages from a person with the username of "Mel."

"We are impressed the hiker has granted you safe passage. If you want to know more, meet us at the gathering place at midnight, tonight."

It worked. I was finally going to get some answers to what happened to my brother or all of the other people who go missing and get taken and end up dead in the miserable Case Mountain. Or maybe a least try and figure out why some people get remembered, and why others don't. Anything that would help me understand and make sense of what happened that day.

I laid there in bed for hours, going over the All-Trails app on my phone, making sure I could memorize the trailheads and shortcuts and ways to escape, if needed. I rehearsed my conversation with the hiker. "Yes, sir." That's it. Then he smiles his crazy, horrific impossible smile and walks by me. Then cabin. It sounded simple enough.

I dressed in all black that night before I left, black jeans and a black sweatshirt. I also decided I would bring along a black tape recorder that I had, in case there was a spell I'd have to remember and repeat back or something. I had never met the hiker at night before. I wasn't even sure if he would be in the same spot at that time, even. As I drove to the Case Mountain entrance, I thought about what I would say to whomever the cult leader was, whether that was Mel or someone bigger. I thought it would be best to hide my intentions of trying to find out what happened to my brother, and just focus on saying that I was fascinated by The Rift and greatly desired to learn more about its secrets. Which, honestly, wasn't entirely untrue, either. Could there really be some separate world out there like in those late-night science fiction movies that Scottie is stuck in? What is that black and blue electric ball – some kind of black hole, or

something? I wasn't worried about having to fake my excitement for my desire to know more about what The Rift is.

It was around 11:30 p.m. when I parked my Jeep at the entrance closest to Turtle Cove at Case Mountain. As I flung my backpack over my shoulders, containing a water bottle, a collection of Case Mountain maps, and a switchblade, I switched on the flashlight I had brought and looked on in fear at how grim and overbearing the mountain looked at night. The tall cliffs that provided hikers with panoramic overlooks of the mountain and town below stood out like jagged teeth and the black silhouettes of trees visibly swayed around a constant breeze. I shined my flashlight over a massive spider web, with an array of shaking cocoons from trapped flies and other insects. A thick bush covered in wild thorns rustled off to my right. I started on into the trail, my flashlight thinking every stick was a snake, looking to pounce.

It didn't take long before the hiker found me. A few minutes after walking along the trail, there he was, walking in his determined pace, ever-so eager to tell me how beautiful of a day it was for stroll. I smiled in return to his, usually impossible smile. "Yes sir, it is."

"You boys be careful out there, Stevie." That was the first time the hiker used my name. I had no idea if I needed to change the pattern or say anything else back to him. I kept walking as he smiled his malevolent smile and carried along. Then I saw the cabin, the glowing orange of a fire glinting out of the shattered window. They were there.

Fourteen

Steve's Story (cont.)

One of the things about the cabin is that it doesn't always appear in the same place. Wherever and whenever one meets that hiker, the cabin could either appear a couple hundred feet away from him, or other times well over a couple miles. That part wasn't clear to me, but in

my top-secret quest to find my supposed non-existent brother, I continued to notice these types of patterns. I'd been walking for about twenty minutes at that point, through the rustling of the nocturnal creatures in the night. As the trail grew thinner due to the over-brush stretching out into the path, I began to hear the faint rushing of water off to my right. Leaping over a downed log, the trail twisted down and to the right toward the slowly trickling river, no deeper than a few inches. As I shined my flashlight into the water, I could see schools of mosquitos and tadpoles bobbing up and down the water to consume. I crossed the river by hopping on a few large rocks, making sure each was steady before leaping onto the next.

I was slightly annoyed with the fact that this secret cult meeting was happening on a Saturday night. Jared was having a party that Mike had invited me to. I should have been there, living out the last few months of high school like a normal teenager, getting wasted off of Smirnoff Ice's. But instead I was by myself, in the middle of the woods, walking toward a mysterious cabin that would at some point simply appear out of thin air. The loneliness wasn't a new feeling, though. How could it be, when you're the only person in the whole world who knows something to be true? To know that someone you loved had existed when nobody else believes it? I wondered if there were others, like me. How many people's brothers and sisters did I used to know, before they vanished from existence into the inexplicable black void of Case Mountain?

I looked at my phone to see that it was already fifteen minutes after midnight as I picked up my pace, worried they'd start without me. I figured it was going to be at least three in the morning by the time I'd get back, not that my mom would even care. Ever since Dad died two years ago, I don't think she's ever asked where I was going to be or when I was coming home. Not once. Even at the house, she just seemed completely dejected. Just the other day, I had made

a frozen pizza for us for dinner, and when I asked her if she wanted to eat together at the table, she didn't say a word and instead shrugged her heavy shoulders and brought two slices of burnt pizzas up to her bedroom. That ended up starting a fight.

“God forbid you make the pizza or do anything yourself, mom,” I said as she was halfway of the stairs. She turned around, threw her plate of pizza against the wall, smashing the porcelain into pieces and covering the wall in red sauce like blood-splatter, and stormed back over to me.

“You listen here, I don't care how mad you are at me, you don't talk to me that way, I'm your mother.” She waved her pointed index finger in my face as saliva flung off her lips and splashed against my cheeks. “Do you understand me?”

After all this time, I've learned that it's best if I just kept my mouth shut, and not fight back. She tells me that she doesn't blame me for what happened to Dad, but every time she'd look at me, her face would say otherwise. Dad suffered a cardiac arrest while doing yard work and collapsed into the bushes in the front of the house - the same wild and overgrown bushes that Mom and Dad had repeatedly asked me trim for weeks. But I never did. Instead, I came here, to Case Mountain chasing ghosts and memories that the world tells me aren't even real. The paramedics had said his death was more than likely instant and painless, as if that would make it any better. It didn't. Nothing did.

Maybe that had been why I ultimately became so obsessed with this place -- it felt more like home to me than my own house. That was the main reason I was struggling with the two college acceptance letters sitting on my desk. One of them was a local state school. Northern Connecticut University. The other, a college way out in northern California, just about as far

away from Connecticut as possible. While I wanted nothing more than to leave this place and never look back, when I was in those woods, I swear I could still feel Scottie's presence all around me like some invisible force. During the drive up here, I told myself that if this was just another loose string that led nowhere, that if I ran into yet another dead end on figuring out what the hell this place is or what happened to my brother that day, that I would be done with it, and that I'd burn the Connecticut State University application and forget about all this. And to be honest, I wasn't sure which outcome I wanted more.

I couldn't picture what these "Keepers of The Rift" cultist people would look like, or even how many of them there would be. I imagined they'd be fully covered in blood red robes with that weird symbol etched across the shiny fabric. I hoped they would be around my age, and that maybe one or more of them were going through what I was. Or maybe they would actually know something about how to find the past people who have gone missing in those woods?

It was cold out, for a night in late April. I started to see my breath smoke out through my lungs as I quickened my pace as I began drawing up a backstory on what to tell them when I got there. I couldn't just simply tell them that I was looking to get into The Rift to find my brother and then shut down whatever hold it has over Case Mountain, could I? Then I thought that I probably should just avoid telling them my real name or anything about me altogether, just in case they were thinking about following me after.

If their intention when picking a name for their cult or group or whatever was to scare people off, they definitely succeeded. The name "Keepers," just screamed evil, didn't it? I thought about what Mel would look like, and what she'd say to me, or even worse, what they would do to me. The same insecure-filled thoughts came rushing back to me. That I wasn't tall enough. That I wasn't strong enough. If things were to go bad here, there'd really be nothing I

could do to defend myself. I was slow and clumsy, despite my slender frame suggesting that I was a cross-country runner. Instead of going out and playing sports, I simply stayed in my room, scouring the internet and any other resources I could find that might lead me to an answer. I didn't even want to think about how messed up it was that this suspicious cult meeting was going to be the most social interaction that I've had since group sessions.

During those restless nights in my room researching Case Mountain, one of the things I learned was that there actually *was* a cabin that resided in Case Mountain, at one point in time. That day Scottie went missing, my parents told me there had never been a cabin there. Did they know? And, if so, why lie?

According to various semi-reliable sources I stumbled upon on the internet, the cabin was owned by a logging family named the Dudleys that was built in 1896, and ultimately demolished in 1934 during the Great Depression after multiple reports of children who went missing in the area. One article I found even said that upon inspecting the Dudley's cabin during a search for a missing child, they discovered that the walls of the cabin were lined with children's clothes nailed onto the walls. There was even an old, black and white photo that showed the walls cluttered with frilly dresses and rows of tattered shirts and trousers. When I zoomed in on the eerie, pixelated image, I could make out the nails. Hundreds of shiny nails were hammered halfway into the walls, reminding me of that Plinko game from "Price is Right." The second black and white photo I found online showed the outside of the structure, and it was undoubtedly the same cabin that Scottie and I had discovered that day. I didn't know what that meant, but I knew that it *had* to be connected somehow to whatever was happening here.

I must have been walking for well over a mile now without any sight of the creepy, teleporting cabin anywhere. Nothing but rows upon rows of closely packed trees along the thin,

up-hill trail. As I darted the flashlight around the woods looking for the dilapidated silhouette of the cabin, I swear I could see black shadows and cloaked figures tracking me along the path and ducking behind the trees for cover. Were they watching me?

Once speaking with the hiker with the giant smile, there always seems to be some kind of shift in the environment, where you can start to notice subtle differences in how certain things are supposed to be. Like the birds, for example. I've seen birds after talking to the hiker, but none of them were flying around ever, and instead all just hopped around on the ground. The air always felt different afterwards, too. Like it was flexing or something. Like being right in front of the jumbo speakers at a rock concert or something and being blown back by soundwaves. Only in here, it's usually dead quiet. That was the strongest I had felt the air shaking like that, up to that point.

The soft, sudden coo of an owl echoed off to my left. Up about another quarter-mile is the cliff-jumping spot where the jocks go to hang out, the same place where Marshall once jumped in and a sharpened stick that was sticking out of the bottom stabbed through his entire leg. We all remembered that, at least.

As the trail finally began to even out, I began to detect a faint orange glow emanating out of the darkness of the forest like a beacon. After a few more steps toward it, I could make out what looked to be a small clearing in the trees where the glow was coming from along with the outline of the cabin's evil, crooked roof. The Keepers of The Rift must have started whatever it was they were doing in there if they already made a fire. I started to run toward the cabin as memories of Scottie jumping up the front steps and bolting through the door and into non-existence came racing back to me.

Those same uneven steps creaked and groaned as I made my way to the door, hunching over and placing my hands on my knees to catch my breath. I pressed my ear to the door to see if I could hear anything before entering. I half expected to hear some kind of demonic chanting or blood-curdling screams, but I didn't hear any of that. It was quiet. I tried to think back to if there had been any others cars in the lot I parked at and started to wonder if they were even here at all. Or even *real*, for that matter. Maybe this Mel person was just some bald guy in his basement who got his rocks by tricking internet strangers into the woods. I could feel my heartbeat from the back of my throat as I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and opened the door.

Stepping inside that cabin after losing Scottie always felt as if I was walking into a float tank the size of an entire room, stripping me of all my senses as if I had to check them at the door. Even with this being my sixth time here (seventh?), I never got used to that feeling of being deprived of my senses, forcing me to face the demons who dwell in the dark crevices of my subconscious. The last time I'd been here, I prayed that the static lady would be in the room at the end of the long hallway. I was going to plead with her to take me the same way she took Scottie. I also remember walking out of there hours later with no voice left after I had been screaming for her to come back and take me. I begged for her to come back into my nightmares and haunt me again so I could even confront her in my dreams, but she never did, and I hated her for that.

The entryway of the cabin was the same as it had been every time I had found it. As was the small living area. Termites and ants swarmed around in armies along the curling wood floor as I stepped quietly toward the long hall room. As it always was, the inside dimensions of the cabin didn't make any possible nor mathematical sense. The ceiling still loomed heavy overhead, almost fifty feet above me despite its smaller external appearance. Then I entered into the long

hallway and a sour and rotten taste filled my mouth, as all of my senses suddenly came back to me. At the end of the long hallway I could begin to make out to roaring hue of flames dancing on the slanted walls. I could hear some sort of low, escalating vibration coming from around the corner. It sounded like... *chanting*, some low, guttural “ohm” sound.

I turned the corner and faced the cracked-open door into the room where the static lady from my nightmares took Scottie, somehow using that freaky, black and blue pulsating ball of light that was in front of her. I opened the door, and couldn't believe what I saw.

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