

A Mammoth Cave guide finds the two researchers he was escorting dead. After the only other witness disappears, the FBI focuses on Bob as their prime suspect. The guide, a fellow guide and his supervisor search the cave for clues.

A Dark too Far

By Lance S. Barron

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Lance S. Barron

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Also by Lance S. Barron:

Dark Are the Steps of Time

Dark Goes the Stage

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Prologue..... | xi |
| One: Rocks Don't Fall in Mammoth Cave..... | 1 |
| Two: Keven's Grand Avenue Tour | 4 |
| Three: The Vigil..... | 10 |
| Four: The Rangers Arrive | 19 |
| Five: The Coroner Takes a Look | 26 |
| Six: A Scene of Wild Accusations | 36 |
| Seven: Not a Confession | 46 |
| Eight: The Neffs Bring Supper | 50 |
| Nine: Catching Up..... | 60 |
| Ten: Morning Consulting..... | 66 |
| Eleven: The Kaemper Map..... | 73 |
| Twelve: Boone's Avenue | 85 |
| Thirteen: Cleaveland Avenue..... | 91 |
| Fourteen: The Person in Black | 94 |
| Fifteen: Another Ranger Meeting | 104 |
| Sixteen: Another Ranger Meeting Part Two | 111 |
| Seventeen: Photographs..... | 121 |
| Eighteen: Fire | 129 |
| Nineteen: Sheriff's Office | 137 |
| Twenty: Making the Rounds..... | 143 |
| Twenty-one: Wild Cave Route | 148 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Twenty-two: Morgan..... | 157 |
| Twenty-three: Calling in the Troops | 166 |
| Twenty-four: FBI on the Scene..... | 174 |
| Twenty-five: Dead at the Scene | 181 |
| Twenty-six: Carry out the Dead..... | 186 |
| Twenty-seven: X-ray Extraction..... | 191 |
| Twenty-eight: Dinner and Debrief..... | 200 |
| Twenty-nine: Getting in Early | 208 |
| Thirty: Tracking Success..... | 213 |
| Thirty-one: Realization | 221 |
| Thirty-two: Final Briefing..... | 232 |
| Thirty-three: Deployment | 245 |
| Thirty-four: Two Pints | 250 |
| Thirty-five: What It Takes..... | 257 |
| Thirty-six: Rangers to the Rescue..... | 263 |
| Thirty-seven: Round Two | 266 |
| Thirty-eight: Out from under a Cloud..... | 277 |
| Epilogue | 285 |

One:

Rocks Don't Fall in Mammoth Cave

Elevated and twisted at an unnatural angle, a booted foot jutted beyond the limestone ledge. Dust sifted through the light from a lantern shielded by a large boulder. A boulder that had not been there before. A ladder lay across a body on the cave trail below the ledge. No one moved. No sound.

The commingled odors of blood and other bodily fluids overwhelmed the clean, natural odor of the cave.

Bob Cetera yelled up to the ledge, “Kalli! Are you all right?” No answer from the scientist. *What the hell?* He kneeled beside the other scientist under the ladder. “Rena. Are you OK?” He felt for a pulse at her neck. Nothing. *Had the fifty-four degree air of the cave cooled her already?* Worried he missed the pulse, he bent over and put his ear to her nose and mouth. He recoiled when he saw the pool of blood on the clay. *Calm down, Cetera. Mammoth Cave guides don't get sick. Breathe.*

He tried again to detect breath, then pulse again. Nothing.

“Rena, what happened?” No answer.

“Kalli!” Again at the ledge. No sound. He didn't want to move the ladder, but he needed to check on Kalli, the senior scientist on the project. *Please don't let her be dead, too.* He also needed to walk back to the Forks of the Cave—the nearest phone on the Grand Avenue tour in Mammoth Cave—and call it in. *Take a deep breath. Calm down. First things first. This is*

not your first dead body in the cave. OK. First one on your own.

If I move the ladder—which I need to do—I’ll disturb the scene. What’s the priority? Can I do anything to help, even if Kalli is alive?

Well, he had a camera, so he could take—what would you call them—crime-scene photographs. Unpleasant thought. No, they would be accident photographs. Images.

It had to be an accident. How did this happen? How did this happen so quickly?

“Kalli! Answer me.”

With his high-end digital SLR camera, he started in close, and captured the ladder over Rena’s face. Her eyes stared straight at the ceiling.

“Sorry, Rena.”

He recorded an image of the right side of her head that included the pool of dark blood. Then, a close-up of the fingers of her right hand against the rung of the ladder. Then one farther back that showed her position near the top when the ladder had toppled. *Had the boulder pushed the ladder so hard she hadn’t turned loose?* A few shots of the general location, and he finished with Rena’s hard hat across the trail against the passage wall.

“Kalli, can you hear me?” The silence of the cave. No answer.

With a grunt, he lifted the ladder. It slipped without resistance from the cool fingers of the woman dead on the ground. *Wasn’t she supposed to hold it in a death grip? Was that a real thing?*

“Ah, damn.” He looked at the foot of the ladder and settled it back onto Rena. Her hand did not grab the rung.

He photographed the feet of the ladder and how they lay at the edge of the original indentations. After he verified the images on the small screen, he grabbed the ladder and pivoted it into the original footprints and leaned it against the ledge.

Kalli’s foot fit right against the second rung. *When the boulder rolled over on Kalli, her foot must have kicked the ladder.* He swung the ladder side to side until her foot slid between the rungs.

“Kalli!” As he said it, Bob realized he was delaying the inevitable and climbed the ladder.

At the top, he leaned away to avoid the foot.

“Oh, Kalli.” From the middle of her thighs upward, Kalli lay under the limestone boulder. It compared in size to the one that had rolled over the Adena man over two thousand years ago. Kalli’s hardhat with headlamp askew but still attached lay to the right of the boulder. Chin strap broken.

Bob put his two fingers under the blue-jean leg on the calf and slid them inside her boot.

“Sorry, Kalli.” Under the sock and boot, the skin felt warm, but no pulse. He withdrew his fingers in slow motion. He took two images of the swollen legs protruding from beneath the boulder and two of her hard hat. After he gagged from the odors, he eased down the ladder on shaky legs. He took another image from the bottom and one from the side that showed Kalli’s foot and ankle through the rungs.

“Get a grip, Cetera. Move.”

He turned down the trail toward the Forks of the Cave.

Two: Keven's Grand Avenue Tour

Keven Neff seldom experienced greater happiness than when he guided a group of visitors through Mammoth Cave of Kentucky. From the late nineteen sixties, he had been part of the guide force at the second oldest tourist attraction in the country. Cave tours started in 1816. There, at the head of forty-five visitors, he walked at the guide's pace. For the visitors up front, the pace seemed too slow, but too fast to the people at the rear. The ones at the back with the trailer would swear the guide at the front was running.

Three twelve-year-olds right behind Keven talked about dragons, trolls, dwarves, and other common inhabitants of fantasy underground environments. During their break at the Snowball Room, Keven had shown them a tricolor bat. The three boys had laughed at the small bat. What they had wanted to see were giant, glow-in-the-dark, vampire bats. Bats big enough to carry away children smaller than them.

Keven led the way through the narrow keyhole canyon of Boone's Avenue, an oval passage at the top and a narrow slot canyon that dropped forty feet to the trail. They walked at the bottom of the slot, headed toward Rose's Pass and through that even narrower passage to the Forks of the Cave.

Keven liked Boone's Avenue because it displayed a time of rapid change in the cave's development. Water—the agent of growth of cave passages—had cut this canyon more quickly than the meandering lazy stream that had dissolved out

Cleveland Avenue, the oval-shaped passage through which the tour had sauntered on its way to the Snowball Room. Water had cut the canyon deeper as it dissolved and eroded the limestone to a new, lower level. Keven could see it all like a movie in his mind. A giant, 3D movie speeded up to cover the eons required to make this special passage.

Ella's Grotto. He hadn't run a tour up into that dead-end passage in quite some time. Just the thing, and he could let the three kids behind him lead the way. His perpetual smile broadened as he stepped off the yards to Rose's Pass.

One of the venerable guides had presented Mammoth Cave to his visitors in a delightful, high-spirited jaunt no other guide could match. He originated the maneuver at Ella's. After his trailer had spilled the beans, almost every guide who heard about it—and who had a group small enough to make it work—used it.

Keven didn't pause as he followed the trail up and to the right into the more narrow, single-file-walking, and twisted passage of Rose's Pass. Boone's Avenue had turned left and down behind him. A chain across the trail and the lack of electric lights were all that kept any *spelunkers* in the group from wandering off. Every trailer shined their flashlight back down that passage just to make sure.

After a few minutes, Keven stopped and faced the group behind him.

“Roger, are we all here?” Keven said to his trailer. Roger flashed his light. “This is Ella's Grotto, a neat little side passage. You three guys here.” Keven pointed to his three bird dogs. “You get to lead everyone into the grotto. Can you do

it?” Three eager heads bobbed like they were on springs in the back of a heavy road car with terrible shocks. “OK. Great. Everyone, follow the three musketeers up into the grotto.”

Everyone headed up the slight incline of the short passage. “Hey, Keven, it’s a dead end!”

“*So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen,*” said Keven. “Are you folks ready to be up front for a while?” He turned, and they followed him on toward the Forks of the Cave. Mumbles from the rear projected forward to Keven’s delight.

Rose’s Pass disgorged into the wide room of the Forks. A prominent face of limestone protruded into the center and separated Grand Avenue on the left, and the way of the tour route, from an enormous pile of break down on the right. Another dead-end passage.

Keven hopped up on the rock and faced the group. He took off his flat-brimmed straw hat and held it in his hands as he prepared to *fill their buckets*. Guide lingo for telling the visitors all they want to know about the cave. And often, more. The Forks of the Cave presented a good place to talk about life in the cave because cave crickets crawled along the walls where the guide could point them out in a flashlight beam.

“Welcome to the Forks of the Cave,” said Keven. “We’re through with the narrow passages. Did you notice the walls of the canyon stuck out at different levels? Different layers of limestone resisted the erosion and dissolving action of the water as it cut the passage down through the rock.”

“Hey, Keven, that was a dirty trick you pulled on us back there,” came a voice from the rear. One of the twelve-year-olds.

“No, not a trick. In caving, that’s known as a rinky-dink. You send someone unfamiliar with the layout on the long way around while the guide takes the shortcut. Guide’s use rinky-dinks for their own entertainment, but I bet some of you folks enjoyed it, too.” Applause erupted from the front of the group.

“Good.” Keven put his hat back on as he segued into the second part of his talk and found a camel-backed cave cricket on the wall behind him, handy to light up with his flashlight.

“We’re ready to continue along the passage that early guides named Grand Avenue, the name of our tour. We’re headed toward Mount McKinley. And what will we find on top of Mount McKinley?”

The group responded with enthusiasm, “Restrooms.”

“Right. Up ahead, Grand Avenue’s walls are more closely related to our first passage on the way into the Snowball Room, in that gypsum coats them, but more of a tan crust than white stalks and flowers. The passage is broader and taller, but dry. We’ll pass by an ancient flowstone formation on the right called Margaret’s Fountain, which is direct evidence water once dripped and flowed in this area of the cave. Enough to form those travertine formations that are now dry and dusty.”

“Mount McKinley is a steep, switch-backed climb, but not all that long. Take your time and move along as you can. We all have to get to the top, and there is no escalator. Roger, are we ready? He’ll be available to help with the climb if you need it.”

Keven switched on the next section of lights and led them along the broad trail where the colors changed to orangish brown. The visitors relaxed for a moment or two before the idea of the restrooms at Mount McKinley overtook their thoughts.

About five minutes down the trail, Keven saw someone with a flashlight who approached at a semi-brisk walk. Not the usual stroll of the maintenance person for this section.

“Keven, is that you?”

“Bob. What are you doing here? Are you alone?”

Bob stopped in front of Keven and puffed to catch his breath.

“I have to get to the phone at the Forks. We have an emergency.”

“What?” said Keven, and he turned toward his visitors. “Folks, we’re going to stop here before we move on. Just take a minute.” He turned back to Bob. “Let’s move up the trail a little.”

“Sure,” said Bob. They walked away from the group about twenty feet. “I’m in here with two mineralogists as liaison, photographer, and tour wrangler. I came back here while they were getting ready. About twenty minutes ago when I returned, they were both dead.”

“Dead? How?”

“The one on the ledge has a five-ton boulder on her.”

“Like Lost John?”

“Sure seems so. The other one looks like she fell and hit her head.”

“Fell? Fell from what?”

“Kalli was working on a ledge, and they used an extension ladder to get to it. Rena had the ladder on top of her where she landed on one of the rocks along the trail. I have to go call this in. But you can’t take the tour that way. Did you meet anyone on your way here?”

“You mean one of them is lying right across the trail with her head busted open?”

“Yes, exactly. What are you going to do?”

“What do you mean ‘meet anyone?’”

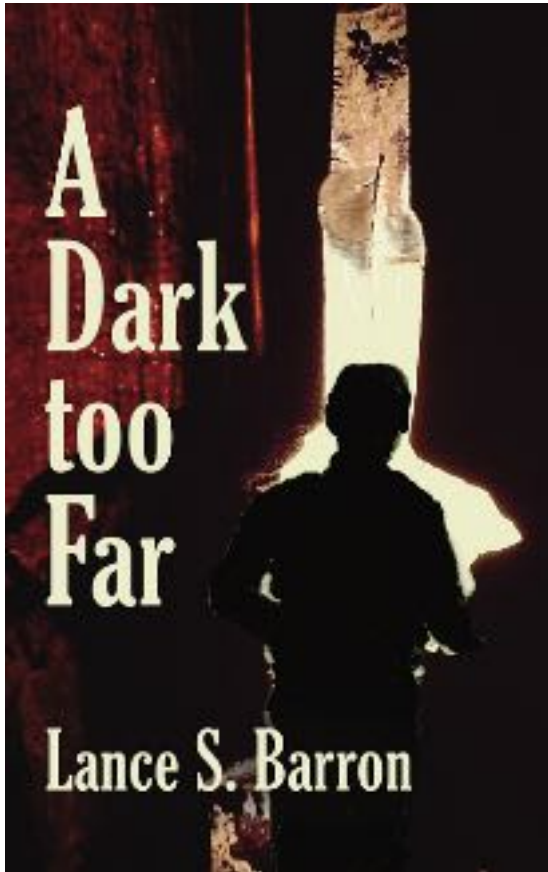
“Did you meet anyone? Maintenance, Kentucky Cave Studies Group? Anyone?”

“No. We haven’t seen anyone since Snowball.”

“You’ll have to turn them around, won’t you?”

“I’ve never taken an entire tour up the elevator.”

“What else is there? I have to go call,” Bob said, and he turned to push through the visitors. “Excuse me, please.”



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