

Read an excerpt from Hell's Forge: In the Beginning' by Jeffrey LeBlanc

Hell's Forge

In the Beginning

I

Sometimes an Appalachian story is so humanistic, so brutal, and horrific, that its very existence is terrifying. We can't believe such a tale has been allowed to fester and erupt like a malignant, rotting boil. Yarns like the one I'm about to spin, are the hideous tales whispered in the shadows and taken to the grave. But sometimes the tale, like the undead, rise up to haunt us again, and again for all eternity. And some of us have just meager years left to be terrified in each of our own haunted worlds. Alas, cold in the ground with the Conqueror Worm our only friend, we may continue to be tormented by the ghosts—or demons—of our past.

But on the latter about the other side...who really knows?

One tale in particular has made many a mountain man shudder and a chill run up their spine. Usually, it's in the fall when the burnished leaves have become crisped and sere. But the evil on Cauldron Mountain ain't too picky about the seasons when it wants a soul. That's especially true when the storm clouds rise, the lightning arcs in a blaze of red and purple, and a deluge of silver rain washes over the mountain and the charred façade of Hell's Forge.

Well, what is Hell's Forge you may ask? Who owns such a terrifying looking place on that forested, dangerous mountain?

Hell's Forge was built by Thaddeus Forge after the poor Appalachian boy came into wealth as a musician in one of those devilish cities in the North. Nightmarish, twisted events that happened—happened damn you!—corrupted his soul and demanded he build the hellish monstrosity. But Lucifer's machinations didn't end with the building of the world's most terrifying house. No, the Devil one-upped himself molding and shaping Thaddeus Forge into his image at the end of his human life—that's right I said human life! What haunts Cauldron Mountain now is no longer a man. And the latter is what made him that legend I mentioned earlier.

But once he had been a child of God. He'd been a creature of the divine with a heart as golden as a shimmering stream in a midday sun. He walked unsteadily as if his long legs were the stilts of a scarecrow. He would stare on a butterfly wide-eyed with a child's innocence though his childhood had many summers passed. A swarm of twinkling yellow fireflies would have him giddy for days. A hopping rabbit made him hop around with the critter imitating it and all manner of wildlife like a modern Tarzan. And, always to the laughs and kisses of his beloved Ruby.

But Thad was no simpleton. His mind flowed endlessly on theories, concepts, and ideas. He spoke of some of these to a curly, brown-haired boy with hazel eyes. This buffoon was his

best friend Cletus Bartholemy. “Cletus, you see the way Cauldron Mountain holds the electricity sometimes. I think there’s something in the rocks that draws it there. This fellow I’m reading, Max Planck, says matter and light and energy have correlations. Heck, he even wrote some math equations on it. I just would have to figure out the squiggly lines in them.”

“Well, you go ahead and do that, moon doctor. You conjure them spells.” Cletus slugged his best friend and walked to the edge of the cliff . They had perched to look on the crystalline view of Lake Lanier that rippled up to the shores of Cauldron Mountain. The slightly pudgy boy took a deep breath and almost swooned as he edged close to the leap-off point of the cliff. Thad knew Cletus hated heights and this cliff edge always gave him the jitters.

Sighing and wiping sweat from his brow he turned back. “Are we swimming today?”

Cletus had glanced with his heart racing shifting his feet inch by inch. He narrowed his eyes and spied timidly down to the blue waters below. He gulped, hoping Thad hadn’t heard him. If he did, he knew his scarecrow-of-a-friend would tease him for sure.

A shadow flew past him! Cletus fell back near the outcropped cliff’s edge gripping a pine sapling for dear life. He watched the bean-pole blur jump off the granite cliff into the icy blue

waters below with a crashing splash. Cletus realized Thad had launched himself fearlessly out into the cool waters of Lake Lanier.

Huffing under his breath, Cletus screamed in outrage down to his best friend. “You take too many chances with your life Thaddeus Forge! You know, you only have one of them!”

He heard splashing and Thad’s heartfelt laughter in the clear, cool waters. “Come on in, cowboy! The water is freezing cold Cletus!”

Cletus moved back from the cliff’s edge and waddled and scrambled back to a nearby boulder. His plan was to waddle and scramble down to the water’s edge of the lake.

A red-haired girl with green eyes, freckled tanned skin, and slight curves walked up to Cletus with a slight limp—Ruby St. Clair. “One of these days that boy is going to get us all killed.” She shrugged and hobbled herself off the cliff into the chilled blue waters of Lake Lanier.

A boy not much older than Cletus with a rugged, muscular build moved up to him. The teenager with chestnut hair, and brown eyes shrugged at Cletus puzzled. “Hey Cletus, are you going to jump too?”

Three other teens—two identical twin boys with brilliant blonde hair and a older girl with raven hair awaited his reply.

Cletus pointed with a shaky hand to the granite outcrop. “Maybe, another time. My daddy told me to never jump off the outcrop into Lake Lanier. He said—”

“You’re just scared as always Cletus. Fraidy cat!” The two blonde-haired boys laughed and ran and jumped off the cliff into the lake’s chilled waters making two cannon ball splashes simultaneously. The brown-haired boy waived at Cletus and followed suit.

He and his friends that summer were oblivious to real evil. They had yet to feel the plague of that kind of black pain which struck out of nowhere leaving chaos in its wake. Hadn’t hate, and envy, and violence always swarmed humanity like buzzing flies. The depravity, the violence, and the degradation that always finds a way to snake into a good community and poison it. Those men and women that have no light shining in their black souls. Creatures Hellbent to destroy while lurking in the shadows of endless night.

Yes, Thad believed in monsters long before he became one. To him they were the clawed beast that needed their daily pound of flesh and gallons of blood from the endless wars they created for tribute or profit. They were the lurking maniacs that forced families to send their sons, fathers, and friends off to die in endless wars to line their pockets.

Cletus would point to a newspaper that would show a brave fighting man, a hero, and boast stupidly, “I want to fight in a war like this guy. You know I’m a crack shot with a rifle. I can plink a squirrel from fifty feet away. I’ll take out our enemies and show the world what an Appalachian man is made of.”

“More likely Cletus Bartholemy, you’d shame us all and trip in the first charge. Bayoneting yourself, you’d probably accidentally shoot your own men. You’d be the first soldier given a purple heart and their discharge—for utter stupidity.” Thad would laugh and tussle the baseball cap on Cletus’s head.

Thad had been the best and brightest friend to all who knew him. He had always been above the foolishness, violence, and depravity of mankind. He chose love—the fleeting gift—over such dreadful murderous ideology spouted by those...who never go to war. Thad chose not to pay attention to the endless wars that even plagued our time out in the roaring nineteen twenties. He would rather quote Lord Byron or Edgar Allan Poe out in the forest to his ailing leprous mother. He’d rather stand tall—not in a military formation—to enact plays based on Ambrose Bierce with me and my brother John to anyone who would watch and laugh.

Oh, how his fall from grace...broke all our hearts. When Thad fell to the darkness, the world seemed to shine a little darker and a lot colder.

In the days before the unspeakable tragedy killed the light in Thad, Thad was grounded on the path of peace. But, if ever the thought of retaliation to violence or faltering by not turning the other cheek, came into his head, his beloved fiancée—Ruby St. Clair--would be there to guide him back to the path of the righteous like the Morning Star.

Ruby would coax and plead in no uncertain terms, “Thad you could easily whip them in a fight. And they know it. But you would lose something if you did.”

“I know, I know. You would drop me on the spot for not following the good book. I ain’t no fool, Ruby.” Thad would clench his teeth and hands trying to control the rage inside him. Most of the time what set him off would be the rich boys of the town—banker’s sons Melvin and Dewey Dwyer, the lumberman’s cruel kid—Aleister Gordon, and their ilk—teasing and tormenting Ruby’s hobbled leg.

“No, I’d be mad at you. But you wouldn’t lose me, Thaddeus Forge.” She narrowed her green eyes and turned his chin to look at her with a glaring stare. “You would lose your soul. And that I won’t abide.”

Sobbing and heaving right now, I must pause a moment recalling in disgust this horrific tragedy. Even now as I wipe my guilty tears I'm remembering how Thad and Ruby must have loved each other beyond time and these mere words. I bite my fist torturing myself for my transgressions to both of them. Lord, help me to forgive myself for failing them.

The day I harken back to, was just like any other day in beautiful Pearl Ridge. It was a blue-sky day when Thad and his future bride walked toward the dusty market. They were headed to grab their monthly groceries of flour and molasses. It was the same day where I saw red storms brewing in the eyes of the vicious Aleister Gordon. That depraved degenerate had a hard-on for Thad from the day the boy had been born. As Thad smiled on with Ruby you could hear the envious outrage boiling from Aleister. You could feel the glaring heat of his fury as the man studied and gritted his teeth watching as a predator does. Like a rattlesnake, he never blinked watching the loving sight of Thad, and Ruby holding hands and casting smiling glances. The kind of stares of love seen in all young couples about to get hitched.

Then I saw another firing brewing in Aleister's eyes that caused my stomach to knot. I caught the dark light that I'd seen before in Aleister's bloodshot eyes. I watched him licking his lustful lips planning something...I wanted no part of.

When he spoke, all of us got the shudders. There had been talk, you see. Talk of girls not faring well around Aleister. So, when he clicked his tongue and pointed, “Gimp’s been a little too uppity with her marriage coming to the bean pole. Maybe, she should get knocked down a leg or two.” We all laughed at his jest. But I knew then, no good was coming from Aleister’s promise.

No one in the town really knew the demons hounding that scoundrel. No one knew—not even Aleister’s father—that the boy had perpetuated all manner of evil from beatings to rape, and even sadistic torture, on some of the local girls. And, the only reason I had a clue, was from his drunken bragging and boasting. But on the one murder he mentioned...I got warned I’d be the next if that one got out! Like I said I have always been a coward.

It’s my fault! I was a spineless chump back then. I ran for the hills when Aleister’s demons rose up to strike like the serpent in the good book. I could have told Aleister’s father. I could have warned Thad and Ruby to leave town. But I stuck hands in my yellow pockets and looked away minding my own business. I turned a blind eye and a deaf ear, and let the tragedy befall both.

Back, so long ago, I remember the flashes of blinding lightning that night on Cauldron Mountain. I recall hearing the guttural roars of a wounded animal. Then as I walked with my lantern extinguished by the rain, I heard the whimpering sobs of anguish in the darkness outside

of Devil's Cavern. I caught a glimpse of a silhouette illuminated by a red glow within the cavern! Shaking and fumbling with fear, I stumbled forward to the calamity. I kept my Sharp's rifle drawn. I almost dropped my gun and ran.

As Devil's Cavern erupted with a fiery crimson glow, I recoiled in terror witnessing a madman singing on both knees. The lightning flashed again overhead giving me a second moment's glance of this most dreadful sight. I heard and could feel thunder erupt shaking the very ground I stood shuddering my knees. Sheets of rain blanketed my eyes and soaked the pathetic figure before me.

Kneeling just feet in front of me, oblivious to my presence, the maniac—bathed in blood--let out a second inhuman scream!

I grip my hands tightly a lot these days and open my bible. I say my prayers out loud as the lightning crashes again across Hell's Forge. Gasping for air and trying to work my sandpaper dry tongue, I feel the hot sweat pouring as I pray Thaddeus Forge won't come for me tonight.

If he does, I pray God steadies my hand at allows me to kill myself. Better to risk fire and damnation and the lord's scorn than what Thaddeus Forge has planned for me. I'd rather be dead in Hell than be condemned to a living one.

The lightning crashes outside my door just as it did so long ago. There's the silhouette of a scarecrow just out past that knotty pine by the hogs. He's here!

My heart is racing chaotically, and my face and hands are numb. My chest is tightening, and sweat is dripping on my Bible as I pray. "Dear, dear, Lord! Protect your humble servant. Guide this evil back into its abyss."

II

On howling winds gusting down Cauldron Mountain, I caught a reply from my tormentor. I heard a rasping, reptilian voice that harbored no mercy toward me. “Why didn’t you pray then? Why didn’t you—brave Cletus Bartholemy—use your God to strengthen your resolve to stop him? You could have prevented all of it.”

Ruby St. Clair hummed a morning hymn as she walked in the emerald splendor of Cauldron Mountain. She took in the misted morning air that seemed to hover over the purple and yellow wildflowers like a funeral pall. Navigating the trail, she watched as shards of sunlight rounded and etched prismatic colors through the shadows of fog and trees. She walked on trying her best to keep her feet dry as Momma had told her. She certainly didn’t want to catch a cold up on the mountain. In her hands as she walked, Ruby carried her basket to harvest medicinal plants—yarrow, poke berry, and snake root--for Mrs. Edna and Mr. Lestor Baker. The woman

had took sick with the cough again and her husband had been bed bound two days with the gout. Both had responded well to the wild plants healing their ills.

After digging the roots and picking the blood-colored berries for Mrs. Edna, she scrambled and twisted to reach the wind-swept crags of Cauldron Mountain searching for Mr. Lestor's black mountain jelly for his burning gout tonic. After such a climb—nearly a mile up between the rattlesnake-infested boulders--she rested a spell before making her descent back to her village on the outskirts of Pearl Ridge. In the upper climes of Cauldron Mountain, she heard the sweet songbirds above her head lighting from branch to branch of an ancient hemlock. Ruby leaned back and took in the sounds of crashing water from the ever-raging waterfall of St. Michael's Creek. She watched its ageless flow of golden silts and sands as they twisted down into Devil's Cavern. On the latter she shuddered.

So many lost souls have entered that cave never to return. I wonder how many bones lay crystalized in its halls. They say the Devil himself lives in that cave after his fall from Heaven.

Ruby turned her emerald eyes away from staring down at the cave. Sitting upright on her lichen covered gray boulder, she put her hands out feeling the warmth of the rising sun. Then, with a smile as broad as the Toccoa River, she grinned joyously glancing at the wooden ring on her left hand.

Thaddeus worked for days carving my engagement ring. It's more precious to me than any gold one he could have bought. I guess it's because I know Thad thought of me the whole while he whittled and created it.

The sun had rounded the mountain, and the shadows in the ravines and valleys were growing long and cold. As she sighed watching everything darken, Ruby heard a rock pile fall to her left echoing behind a twisted gorge. Uneased, Ruby felt there was something different in the way the rocks had spilled. Then a large branch cracked startling the poor girl. In the moment, she recalled dreadfully how Cauldron Mountain held all sorts of dangers. Instinctually Ruby knew wandering out here alone for as long as she had, could conjure trouble. Wide-eyed, with her heart starting to quicken, Rudy decided it was time to bolt off. Ducking low in case there were predatory eyes out there, she moved like a wounded fawn from her sitting spot and began her treacherous slide down Cauldron Mountain. Using her left ring hand and walking stick to balance and guide her, Ruby used the winding St. Michael's Creek as a reference point to guide her to the trail home. The same raging creek that led to Devil's Cavern.

“Fancy, finding you here, Gimp!” A tall, lumberjack of a man with a pencil thin moustache came from around an ancient oak in her path. The gruff voice oozed sinister implications that ran an icy chill down Ruby's spine. She almost wet herself seeing the viper that hissed those words was none other than Aleister Gordon. The tormentor of her youth and beyond smiled wickedly as he leaned against the tree and locked his vulture eyes on Ruby.

Ruby lied trying her best to make the vicious predator go away. “I’m not alone. Thad and my daddy are collecting rocks for a fireplace.”

“I watched you come up her, Ruby St. Clair. No one else is up here but you, and me, I’m afraid.” Aleister unfolded his arms to move toward her.

“Get away from me! Help! Help, anyone!” Ruby jumped back near the raging creek’s edge and raised her stick to protect herself. The action froze Aleister in his tracks, and he raised his hands up apologetically.

Ruby eased just slightly but kept her walking stick raised to crack Aleister’s skull if he came any closer. She backed a little closer to jump of the rock ledge into the creek if Aleister tried anything. Ruby heard the splash of rocks falling into the swirls and cascades. Glancing to look at the creek, Ruby made a tragic mistake.

The vicious man leapt as a ravenous panther punching Ruby square in the face before she had time to swing her only weapon. She saw stars from the powerful man’s punch in her green eyes, She felt and saw blood running from her mouth, and nose. She felt the beast lift her stunned body out onto his sour smelling back and watched her blood and tears fall to the ground.

“Your alone. I’m alone. And it’s such a beautiful, lonely day.” Still dizzy from the blow, Ruby heard a cackle of evil laughter. She felt her head strike a river rock with a thud as Aleister tossed her against a sand embankment. It was a private place. It was a loud, noise-filled place where only the crashing water could be heard. With her head clearing, and panicked fear racing her heart to burst, Ruby heard a terrifying sound and screamed!

It was the jingle of a belt buckle.

“No! For the love of God, no!” Ruby screamed and kicked at Aleister in utter terror. She knew the man’s horrific, lustful intent. She heard his growls and ravenous howls as he tore at her. She countered with kick after kick at the raging monster’s groin. With him stunned and folded, she scrambled and ran. Grabbing a rock to strike Aleister and kill him if necessary she hobbled toward the lifesaving waters of St. Michael’s Creek.

She was diving into the waters when a granite fist cracked the left side of her face. She was knocked away from the splashing creek to the rocky ground. Landing in the amber rocks and yellow sand, Ruby felt the full force of pawing hands that clawed and ripped away her dress in tatters. She heaved and gasped for air as blood ran from her broken jaw. With her head pounding and again stunned, she writhed to make one last desperate escape from Aleister. All the while unable to move, Ruby’s pelvis eventually cracked as Aleister drooled and grunted raping her again and again.

Motionless as a corpse, pinned to the wet ground under the bulk of Aleister Gordon, Ruby prayed...for death.

Half an hour later, and a lifetime ago, Aleister rolled off the top of Ruby. She heard him laugh as he boasted, "Was it as good for you?"

Disgusted, senseless, and knowing if she did nothing she was dead, Ruby rolled feeling the knife-stabbing pain in her pelvis and reeked legs. She ignored the pain, and made a dying dash into the creek before Aleister could react. She knew if she hesitated, he'd most certainly finish her off.

Ruby heard his disbelief. She heard Aleister's raging order. "What the Hell? Get your ass back her, now, Ruby!" Ignoring all of it she leapt from the stone bluff into the raging waters of St. Michael's Creek.

Aleister lay covered in the sweat and fluids of his conquest on the shores of St. Michael's Creek.

I finally showed that uppity gimp and her man who swings the sharper axe. I think I broke something in her too on that third round. Hell, she's probably already dead or will be.

As he looked to a swaying white poplar with a gloating smile, he heard a strange noise. He looked up in disbelief as the gimp had somehow—miraculously some could argue—made it to a cliff edge over the creek. He screamed at her to stop. But the idiot had then jumped.

Aleister lifted himself up slowly and lumbered like an ogre to the water's edge. He narrowed his eyes and rubbed his chin as he studied the creek with its twists and turbulent turns. He expected to see a smashed corpse on the rocks. But in wide eyed disbelief he saw the gimp had survived the fall, "Well, don't that beat all."

He looked on to see if there were any way he could catch up to her. Aleister stomped his foot in disgust. Cursing with words to shame the Devil, he slammed his hand on a nearby pine. Then he turned, to figure out how he'd get money from his father once he left town.

There's no way I'm swinging from the gallows over a gimp!

Aleister had rebuttoned his pants and buckled hurriedly. He ran as a man possessed down the rocky trail adjacent to St. Michael's Creek. He picked up his hat along the way where he'd first punched Ruby in her arrogant freckled face. Dropping down thirty feet along the creek, Aleister felt blinding fire to his foot as he stubbed his toe on a jagged boulder of red quartz.

Hobbling, sending out more curses, he tripped and tumbled another ten feet over a nest of bramble and fallen branches. He wiped sweat with hands still covered in Ruby's blood as he lumbered further down Cauldron Mountain. His heart began to race with thoughts of the hangman's noose creaking and tightening around his neck on the Pearl Ridge gallows tree. The town would certainly see him hang for what he'd done to the crippled girl. Dark clouds rolled in with a blasting blaze of blue-storm lightning, just as the storm of dark thoughts--looming in his future--blazed his fears. Far away in the distance, he saw the creek trail intersect with the trail for Pearl Ridge.

He stopped and took a deep, excited breath. There was glimmer of hope as Aleister saw the trails before him carried no one.

She hasn't made it to the trail! I might still be able to fix this.

Aleister Gordon backtracked, putting his hands over his eyes to knock down the afternoon sun's glare. He methodically scanned both sides of the creek and even checked each gully or ravine in case Ruby had climbed out. If he was lucky, the girl would be long dead and all he'd have to do was dig a grave. Or, to avoid anyone catching him, Aleister had made up his mind to place her body in that old cave at the base of St. Michael's Creek. The cave all the fools were so superstitious about. Maybe some weird legend would spin out of the gimp's death if they found her corpse.

They'll think their haints or the boogey man in that hole killed her. And I'll laugh all the while as the town wails, makes up spooky tales, and carries on. That's if they ever find her body. I won't be leaving anything to chance.

Fifteen minutes later, something caught his eye. Aleister Gordon narrowed his wicked gaze on the fourth bend down the mountain near the mouth of Devil's Cavern. He grinned with a lecherous, maniacal smile. "I'll be damned."

The chilled waters of St. Michael's had cooled the blistering and burning pain to Ruby's pelvis, her insides, and her racked thighs. The scratches, and the smell of the disgusting swine-of-a-man had also washed away some. As she let the cold currents of St. Michael's Creek continue to chill her purple bruises and wash away some of the shame, Ruby realized she would need to exit the creek soon. And definitely before it tossed her downward into the shadowed abyss of Devil's Cavern. With no torch or lantern, the possibility of Ruby finding her way out if she exited deep within the river cavern, would be nightmarishly slim. And Ruby pushed back the terror in her mind of another possibility. The night creatures alleged to haunt and hunt in the recesses of the cavern's subterranean, abysmal voids.

III

She cried out as she twisted herself to dog paddle toward the adjacent shore near the trail to Pearl Ridge. As she scurried slowly with her legs rendered useless from her attack, Ruby recalled just where she was. It was where she and Momma often got well water when they first moved to the ridge. Looking up to the jagged, shimmering stalactites, Ruby felt some relief knowing where she might be. As light streams of water dripped from the cavern ceiling, Ruby gained more information on how far she had drifted on St. Michael's Creek into Devil's Cavern. If she waited any longer, it'd be too late.

As the cave rapids pushed faster and pushed the girl further inside the river cave, Ruby grit her teeth thinking,

I can't ride down into the darkness any further! It's now or never!

She reached out with white, numb hands and latched onto a large black rock. All the while in her jarring efforts she ignited the painful fires burning in her pelvis, legs, and loin. Ruby

climbed out and lay in a shallow pool for what seemed like an eternity. Crying uncontrollably at everything that happened, she sobbed and turned on her side into a fetal ball. She knew she needed to get up. Ruby knew she had to stand and walk forward and into the light near the entrance of Devil's Cavern. Her life depended on it! For there were things that took people in this cave. Hideous hellish creatures lay in predatory wait cloaked by the darkness of this watery cave.

Thinking another more chilling thought, Ruby halted abruptly fleeing the cave. Racked with icy shivers and shudders, a more unnerving terror had fastened itself like a clawed hand around her heart. She had recalled while in the grip of this fear that the other monster—Aleister Gordon—might be hiding and waiting to kill her outside the cave.

I'll wait another hour then move out at dusk. The darkness and the forest should keep me hidden from him. To run out now, Aleister will surely spot me and finish me off. It's better to hunker in here, rest, and clean up.

Ruby touched her right eye and ground her teeth in pain. She felt the sponginess of the eye and the tissues around it that were swollen shut. Trying to push air through her nose, Ruby groaned hearing a crunching noise. She knew by the noise her nose was broken. To make matters worse, blood clogged both nostrils making it impossible to breathe. She went slowly to her knees grunting, wanting to scream, but dared not. She couldn't anyway with her swollen, broken jaw. Staying on her knees she waddled quietly to a nearby river pool. From this knelt position she hunched over in the pool and used her hands to scoop the freezing water to her eye. Feeling

some relief from the icy water, Ruby made an attempt to freeze her nose with the water and then reset it with a painful, blinding crunch. As blood poured from the reset nose, she washed more clots out of the nares, out of her blinded eye, and below. All the while she winced and bit down with each icy wipe.

There was a wrenching, twisting, burning pain to the back of her head. Ruby felt a fiery burn to the base of her neck. It was followed with the warmest of sensations running down her breasts. The syrupy flow reminded her of hot molasses poured from a jug on a hot summer's day. Seconds later, Ruby St Clair felt no more pain. She felt nothing but an endless peace as she sunk into the long sleep that for all eternity outlasts love...and hate.

“Thaddeus Forge! You in there, boy?” Thad walked outside to a man in his mid-forties. The man had a tired, haggard face tanned by years of farming crops in the sun. As he rode up on his equally weary horse, Thad realized it was his future father-in-law--Herman St. Clair.

“How can I help you, Mr. St. Clair?” Thad walked out and noticed the furrowed brow of a concerned father. The man's demeanor—for rarely did Herman St. Clair ever leave his farm--gave Thad a sense of unease.

“My daughter is missing, Thad. I was praying she was here. Obviously, she’s not.” He turned his horse to leave Thad. “She went up early this morning on Cauldron Mountain. She was going get damn plants for them two old kooks the Bakers.”

“I’ll get my uncle’s horse. She never goes more than two hours out there.” Thad’s unease was growing as he went in and told Momma where he was headed. He grabbed both his dead daddy’s pistols, and rifle. Then hurried out to get Uncle Cain’s horse in the stable. Glancing back as he saddled the buckskin stallion--Jupiter, Thad saw Mr. St Clair with his eyes fixed on Cauldron Mountain.

They rode with gusts of wind blasting down off Cauldron Mountain. Each man’s heart racing faster with fear the longer they rode up into the forested elevations. At the trail head that split toward the creek and then up into the higher elevations, Mr. St Clair growled, “We need to split up. I’ll go up into the crags and bluffs and push my way down. You head from the mouth of Devil’s Cavern following St. Michael’s Creek. We’ll meet in the center. If you find her send off a shot!”

“I will.” Thad nodded and headed down toward the darkness of Devil’s Cavern.

Mr. St Clair turned back for just a moment with his orange lantern blazing. The old farm man yelled one more ominous warning as he nodded with his black cowboy hat and rode off. “You see anything peculiar, get out of there. If something calls out to you other than my Ruby while you are near that damned cave, you blast it with gunfire and bolt. Then ride out of there as if Hell itself was after you Thad. Remember, they call it the home of the Devil for a reason.”

Thad rode Jupiter cautiously near St. Michael’s Creek. The last thing he needed was to slip on the lichen covered river rock with his horse and both get injured. As they continued, Thad held his own lantern out in front of him and Jupiter ablaze. He glanced wide-eyed as the golden light illuminated the shifting shadows of both he and Jupiter in the darkness. He continued to hear the lonesome clop-clop-clop of his horse echoing as he neared the towering granite that made up the Devil’s Cavern. He saw the grandiose opening that literally--by lantern light--could have been the columns to a vast otherworldly gateway. On he rode studying the movement of clear water from the winding creek waters entering the fifty-foot high by thirty-foot-wide cavern. The young cowboy could easily have believed he was journeying with Perseus or Agamemnon down into the river Styx to fight a gorgon, rather than look for his beloved Ruby near St. Michael’s Creek.

Let’s hope we aren’t near here too long. There’s no way Ruby went inside that place alone.

At the entrance way to the cave, Thad had stopped briefly. Raising his lantern, he looked out across the moving creek’s shore for any sign of Ruby. He continued to slowly study the

shorelines of both sides of the cave praying for any sight of her. Billowing clouds of ghostly fog from deep within blanketed the entrance. But shining further inside, Thad caught glimpses of the shimmering stalactites Ruby had witnessed earlier. Onward he stared wide-eyed taking in the enormity of the vast river cavern's extensive cathedrals, and subterranean labyrinths that would make any search with even a thousand men a challenge—much less one sole searcher. For starter's visibility to spot Ruby was nigh impossible.

Shaking his head, he dismissed the possibility that Ruby was inside such a creepy place. He was certain that his beloved would have avoided Devil's Cavern at all costs. He sighed nervously and grimaced, then turned from the cave and headed up St. Michael's Creek. Shining his lantern as he heard a rumble of thunder in the distance, he peered out cautiously in front of him to insure the safety of Jupiter. As the two rode forward just twenty feet outside Devil's Cavern, Thad spotted something on the wet rocks.

A sickening feeling of dread rose up and almost caused Thad to retch. Chills up his spine and cold sweat on his brow alarmed him that something was indeed wrong. For what Thad had found, was Ruby's engagement ring. It was the wooden ring he had spent days carving for her in honor of their joyous day.

Ruby would never take that ring off. But maybe she dropped it by accident while washing plants by the creek.

“You don’t believe that Thaddeus Forge.” A hissing voice that seemed to circle Thad, wickedly cackled out in the fog-filled darkness. “Besides, I can show you where Ruby St Clair resides now.”

Thaddeus Forge had been warned by Mr. St Clair. He had been told to blast away and ride off. But hearing this stranger’s voice saying Ruby’s name, had frozen him. Forgetting the warning and his panicked fear, Thad dismounted and pleaded to the voice, “Please sir, tell me where she is. She’s my fiancé’ and we’re—”

“I’d better not.” The voice interrupted grimly. It circled around Thad so quickly that the young, gangly cowboy could’ve sworn the fog was the voice. “You should keep your happy memories of your beloved.”

“I don’t like the way you said that mister. In fact, all your stalking around me, and creeping behind me in all this fog is getting on my last nerve.” Thad pulled both his Colt .45 pistols with lightning-fast draws and cocked to blast away. “If there’s something you need to say to me about Ruby, then say it.” Thad forgetting where he was roared.

“No need to waste your bullets Thaddeus Forge, on me. I was trying to spare you anymore pain. Better to have loved and...lost.” Thad could have sworn the cave sighed as the

voice in the darkness lamented. “I can show the location of...Ruby. I can even tell you what happened to her.”

Thad narrowed his eyes and slightly lowered his lantern to try and make out the shape of the hissing voice. Then glancing right, then left again, he couldn't discern the shape of the voice nor any movement. Thad placated and thanked the mysterious voice nodding to the mists. “Thank you. She's a great girl. She's had a hard life with our town because of her leg. And I guess being in love with me.”

“Sometimes love can be blind in that regard.” The voice paused then reminded Thad. “Remember when you walk back there, I warned you.” The voice laughed as Thad watched wide-eyed, and mesmerized as a corner of the cave, over one hundred feet to his right, illuminated with a ghastly red, oozing glow. “I find it so amusing how much stock, and faith you people put in such a fleeting emotion as love. In fact, over the years, I've noticed to my amusement, all of those feelings—fear, envy, chastity, hate, and love—rot away like a dried out rose, once one of you beds down for the long sleep of Death...for all eternity.”

Thad ignored the lecherous voice's lecture. “I'm not concerned with your morbid philosophy whomever you are. However, I will be glad you helped point me in the right direction to find Ruby.” He took a deep, grateful sigh. “Where is she?”

“Why, where I just lit up the cave. In that glowing corner, you will find your precious jewel.” The hissing voice seemed to slither as a snake toward the red illuminated area as it beckoned Thad to follow. “Once you find her—take your time as I know reconnecting with a loved one after a tragedy is necessary—maybe we can discuss terms.”

“For helping me, you bet we can talk terms.” Thad nodded to the darkness and hurried into the Devil’s Cavern to find Ruby. He glanced back a moment to ask. “What’s your name by the way?”

“We can discuss my name and my terms when you return. I don’t expect that to be anytime soon.” The voice seemed to grow more guttural in its pitch. Then Thaddeus could have sworn he heard leathered flapping as the voice rose up into the cathedral ceiling of the shimmering quartz cave. As it left, the hissing serpent echoed to Thad some final words that made the cowboy’s stomach flip again. “After you and Ruby St Clair reconnect, you’ll want to know everything. I’ll be here for you, of course.”

Thad turned to flash his lantern where the red ooze still glowed. The flickering glow cast long shadows of himself and the rocks surrounding him. Onward he navigated through a maze of various boulders to the very spot where the ooze towered as a volcanic eruption over a rectangular pile of rounded large river stones. Thad recoiled from the pile noticing something pale beneath the stones.

Sweat poured off his brow, and his eyes went wild with unnerving terror and apprehension. He wanted to turn away and run from that pile of cryptic cairn stones. As he wiped his mouth with a silted hand, unhinged, and unaware of his actions, he paused and took a breath. He took another and sighed deeply. Then Thaddeus Forge placed the fiery lantern on a boulder near his right hand and began to pull away the stones. He pulled three stones away when he noticed his hands stained with something sticky and dark like molasses. He stopped and grabbed the lamp.

In the glowing orange and white light of the lantern, Thad saw that the molasses-black, sticky goo in the lantern light was crimson. It was blood! But who's blood could it be?

With his heart racing like thunderous hooves across a prairie, Thad raced to pull more rocks away from the pile of stones. After five more stones had been drawn his narrowed eyes fixed on a waxen, pale hand. Six more stones pulled back, and he made out the tattered dress. Eight more stones pulled he saw the battered face and the slashed throat of his beloved Ruby!

Thaddeus Forge threw his maddened arms around his murdered fiancé' and tried to pull her from the rocky grave. Insanely he put his hand through the lifeless red curls of her hair. His tears fell onto her gray eyes that once held the shimmer of emerald, green. He saw the mottling,

he saw the blood, and he saw the bruises. He saw all the carnage rent to her body, taking in every horrific detail of her murder.

Only when Thad had felt the full weight of Ruby's injuries--her rape, and of course, her torture before she was savagely killed--did he finally act again. He unleashed a hellish, bloodcurdling scream.

As Thaddeus Forge erupted his anguished cry, the glowing blood ooze-- in response to his pain-- set the whole of Devil's Cavern a light in a blinding blaze of red and the most frightening of wails. It was as if Hell itself had sent out its cries, dripped down its fiery tears, and followed with him...to mourn.

Thad walked the whole way down Cauldron Mountain carrying his beloved Ruby. At times he fell to the rocky ground. But not once did he let Ruby's corpse hit the earth. As the tears flowed like the winding creek of St. Michael, he would sob, look down at Ruby's beaten, lifeless face, and bawl some more. Finally, when his arms were racked with cramping and his fingers were long numb, he'd stopped to rest. Going to his aching knees, he made sure Ruby didn't fall. She'd been through enough today being beaten and murdered. Lowering his head and teetering on madness, Thad sang to his dead fiancé' her favorite ballad he had wrote. He had planned to surprise her and sing it to her in front of the whole town, at their wedding.

He let out a guttural groan like a wounded mountain lion. Then wailed, and screamed out again realizing that would never occur.

Listening to the lapping water near the trailhead, looking around at the fireflies, and seeing the moon rising in the swaying pines, Thaddeus Forge let the tears fall to the misted, damp ground as he took a haggard, sobbing breath. Then he murmured the words solemnly and at times incoherently as he sang his little ballad—Brilliant Star--to Ruby.

The wildflowers are her song,

They covet the ghostly dew of the mountain,

Reaching for the golden dawn,

That gleams as fire from the forest's fountain.

She has heard the whippoorwill cry,

Their songs under the mystical moon,

And there another haunts the night sky,

From Lake Lanier shores whistles the loon.

She will always be here—

Lover whose red fires forever burned!

You who wiped away my tear,

The ghostly shadow that I yearn.

Oh, she went forth through the mists,

Laying her heart before a heavenly altar,

And gave her soul in a kiss,

A brilliant star that knew not how to falter!

Never again to feel hate or scorn—

No wasting time wailing and weeping,

For only the proud have time to mourn,

Her soul lies peacefully in deathly sleeping.

He lifted Ruby, pushing back a curl of her red hair. Tears and strands of saliva fell from the grieving boy's mouth. Then he kissed his beloved and whispered, "I will love you always. One day we'll be together again."

“Thad?” Cletus’s voice called out in front of him in the darkness. Thad’s best friend raised his lantern and screamed. He ran and slid next to an exhausted and insane Thaddeus Forge. He tried and failed to remove Ruby’s battered body from Thad’s iron grip. When that failed, he helped Thad to his feet and together they carried the corpse of Ruby St. Clair into the village near Pearl Ridge.

Someone in the darkness along the way witnessed the macabre scene and cried out horrified. “Oh, dear lord!”

Maybe the someone, was a younger version...of me.