

High Pocket

(a novel)

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Preface

This is a true story as far as I can tell. The manuscript was mailed to me by a professor friend of mine, whose name I promised not to reveal. He was born in Lead, South Dakota, where the Homestake Gold Mine is and where the incidents of this story take place. Of course, the Homestake is closed now, has been for nearly twenty years. In 1976, though, it was celebrating its 100th anniversary as the nation's largest and most successful gold mine, having hauled out over 40 million ounces of gold. Just go ahead and figure out how much money that is at today's prices for gold.

Not everyone got rich from the gold of that mine, not by a long shot. Most miners made a modest living at best. Some of them died broke and exhausted, old beaten-up men, trembling in their wheelchairs from years of operating rock drills and blasting granite into smithereens. Others lost their lives as young men, or were badly maimed in the accidents that take place commonly in the dangerous underground tunnels, caverns, and stopes that make up a gold mine. Some of these accidents were reported in the Lead Daily Call. Some weren't. Sometimes the truth of these accidents was told completely, sometimes a lot got left out.

This story is about one of the accidents that didn't make it fully into the light of day, sort of speak. It's a story that should've been told completely as an honor to the men who lost their lives that day underground, and to the family and friends they left behind. That's why I decided to go ahead and publish this manuscript once I read it and verified as much of it as I could by checking through old Homestake files I still have access to, by talking to men who worked at the mine then, and by looking myself in the mirror and facing up to my own role in it as a mining inspector at the Homestake Gold Mine during the time these events took place.

If this story isn't true, I'd like to think that it is. I'd like to think that the heroes of this story (and no better word for them comes to my mind) had the heart and courage to go after what they believed was rightfully theirs, not just for themselves, but for all the men and some women, too, who spent time in the dark far underground with danger around every corner and death just a whisper away.

Chapter 1

I don't know if I'll ever finish this story or not, but I want to. I want my family to know why I left without a word. You could say this is a letter home to them. It's going to be a long one, I know that. But, hell, it's been a long time now since I've seen or talked to them; and even though I told my dad that I would be leaving and not to think I was dead or something, I never told him why.

Sure, my dad knew about Sandy. He thought he was a crazy son-of-a-bitch. He warned me to stay away from him. But I couldn't do that, and not just because I fell in love with his daughter, Mary. Of course, that's why I started up with Sandy in the first place. But there was more to it than that. I came to see that what was driving Sandy crazy was something I had to face up to. I guess it's something everybody comes up against one time or another, and I just couldn't run away from it.

And that's another reason why I hope I see this thing through. I sort of feel responsible to Sandy and to what he did. I don't want it to be forgotten. I want people to know about it now that it is over.

You're probably wondering by now what the "it" is, and I guess I'm getting this story out of order already. I better slow down some and get to the beginning. I've done a lot of thinking about that, and I'm pretty sure the best place to start is with Sandy's nightmares.

Mary was the first one to tell me about her dad's bad dreams, long before I heard them from Sandy, himself. They were real bad. He would wake up in the middle of the night screaming and sweating like a ten year-old kid. Mary would come running from her bedroom and find him sitting bolt upright and trembling in the dark. I should tell you that Mary's mother died in childbirth and that she had no brothers or sisters. It was just the two of them, and his screaming would scare her half to death.

She would turn on the light, and he'd be kind of dazed by it for a minute, like he didn't know where he was. I never saw him like that myself or heard him screaming in the middle of the night, but it must have been pretty awful. He looked straight ahead like he was blind, with his old cap pulled way down on the left side of his head, so that it nearly covered his left eye, and his scruffy beard would be all matted down with sweat. The cap, by the way, wasn't a nightcap. He wore it all the time, and I mean all the time. Nobody ever saw him without it on, and nobody seemed to think it was strange. I remember I didn't when I first saw him. The cap was as much a part of him as the Pall Mall hanging from the corner of his mouth. It was knitted wool, dull green like a army watch cap.

Anyway, he would sit there and stare for quite awhile before he said anything. Mary had been through it enough times to be patient. She once told me it was hard for

her to remember a time when he didn't have the nightmares. She told me that when she was little girl, she got so frightened when she heard him scream that she didn't dare go out of her bedroom or even out of her bed. She would just lay there, saying Hail Mary's as fast as she could until she finally fell back to sleep.

Now, she sat next to him and waited until it passed. He reached over to the table near the bed for a cigarette. He took a deep drag and turned to her saying, "It's all right, Mary. Just a bad dream. I'll be okay, now. You go on back to bed." She nodded, holding his hand, and then sat awhile longer before going back to her room.

She never knew for sure what the nightmares were about. I guess she was too scared to ask, and he sure didn't volunteer anything. But she had a pretty good idea they were about the accident he had years before at the Homestake Gold Mine. She knew that's why he wore the cap all the time. He had something under there he said he didn't want her to see. I always thought it was something that he didn't want to look at either.

The accident happened a long time before I had ever went down the mine. But I'd known about it all my life. It was a part of the town's history, you could say, a part a lot of them wanted to forget. Most people didn't remember all the details, and the younger miners didn't even know who it happened to. But no one forgot the accident on the 3,800 level of the mine, where four miners were crushed to death. It seemed burned into everyone's mind forever. There were even some cruel songs we kids made up about it that I can still recall. Yeah, we all knew how many were killed, all right, but I'll be damned if most of us ever heard about the miner who came out alive.

I never would have known that it was Sandy, and that his limp and his crushed hand, not to mention whatever it was that was under his cap, happened in that cave-in, if I hadn't fallen in love with Mary. And if I hadn't fallen in love with her, I never would have heard Sandy's crazy ideas or ended up going back down to the 3,800 with him. But I did fall in love with her, and that's really where this whole story begins.

Chapter 2

I met Mary on the Fourth of July in front of the Homestake Club while I was watching the Gold Diggers march up Main Street. The Fourth is still a big deal in Lead. Everyone was there, probably the whole town. The Gold Diggers--that's the high school band--leads the parade, then come the glee clubs and drill team and cheerleaders. When I was in high school, even the football team was in the parade, waving their helmets to their parents. The shopkeepers along Main Street open their doors and bring out chairs for kids to stand on, and the Silver Star Bar serves beer for a dime a glass all day long. You could say Lead still has the spirit.

After living there all my life and knowing every inch of it by heart, it's hard for me to imagine someone who hasn't even heard of it. When I try to think of the best way to describe it, for some reason I keep thinking of the toy model I made for my sixth grade science fair. It wasn't that good really, but I did get an Honorable Mention.

What I did was take a 4' x 8' piece of half inch plywood as my base and hammered two 3' x 6' pieces of pine onto it at forty-five degree angles, forming a kind of valley. Then right down the middle of the valley, I painted a black strip for Main

Street. On the sides of the valley, I hammered some cubes I cut from redwood, and they were my houses. I hammered larger cubes along the black strip that were supposed to be the businesses that line Main. I even painted some of the names of the stores on the front of the cubes. That was all pretty usual stuff. But what I think got me the Honorable Mention was what I did for the Homestake Gold Mine, which is important because without it Lead wouldn't exist today or ever.

I built a three-foot high, flat-topped cone out of papier mache' and wire, and put it at the east end of the town. For the top of the cone, I got two toy-train watering tanks and painted "Yates" on one and "Ross" on the other, and they were my head frames for the two shafts that go into the mine. They actually worked, too. You could lower a little cage I made from popsicle sticks three feet down into the cone, which was the mine shaft, and back up again. I had to compromise some, and ended up putting army men in the cage because I couldn't find any toy miners to use.

Mr. Purdue, my science teacher at the time, walked up to my booth in the auditorium on awards day and shook my hand.

"Good work, Jake," he said, "very clever, indeed." And he gave me the ribbon.

When I think about Lead, that toy model is the first thing I see. Fact is, it was pretty damned accurate. Lead is just about nothing else but the gold mine, Main Street, and houses built on the hills. They're the Black Hills of South Dakota where the Indians once buried their dead and worshipped the earth. As kids, we'd go arrowhead hunting all the time and find them pretty often, too. My oldest friend, Tom

Furgis, once found the blade for a tomahawk just north of the Washington District, still inside of the city limits.

It was a great place to grow up and pretty as hell. And it's still beautiful country all around the town. When you leave Lead in any direction, it's like driving into a State Park. There's pine, spruce, and birch, and Spearfish Canyon and Deerfield Lake. It's hard to believe anyone lives nearby, let alone that the world's second largest gold mine is just a mile or so away. I guess you can tell I'm homesick. I could probably go on talking about the land forever. But I want to tell you first about Mary.

Mary Joy Stennis. That's her full name. She was standing by the curb, watching the band and talking to her girlfriends. I didn't actually know her, but I'm sure I must have seen her before because there are only six thousand people in all of Lead. You might not know everyone by name, but everyone looks familiar. I never saw her like this before, though. She seemed like a stranger in town. Hell, I'm not good at explaining things like this. You could say I fell in love with her on the spot.

I was with Tom and Joe Basset, another friend of mine. They both saw me staring at her and started razzing me.

"Hey Jake, got a snake jumping in your pants?"

Joe could be pretty crude, especially after drinking ten cent beer all day.

"Knock it off," I said, and I shoved him into Tom.

"Hey, what are you getting so jumpy about?"

"Nothing. Just cut it, will you?"

I must have yelled that last little bit because Mary turned around and looked at me. Then she turned back to her friends, and they started giggling. She looked back a couple of more times before they all started following the Gold Diggers up Main Street.

"You know who she is?" I asked Tom.

"Who?" said Joe.

"C'mon. Do you know her?"

"Never seen her before."

"How 'bout you. D'ya know her?"

"Don't know her," Joe said, "but I think her name's Mary something. I picked up my kid-sister from a party awhile back, and she was there."

"Mary what?"

"No idea. Why the big interest? Are you in love?" Tom laughed. .

I felt like smacking him in the mouth. It was crazy. He was my best friend. We contracted together at the mine, played football together in high school, were kids together. But right then, the way he said "love" made me want to punch him in the teeth.

I walked passed them both, started up the sidewalk behind Mary, past J&E's Hardware and up to Siever Street. Joe and Tom didn't say a word more to me. I forgot they were even there. Pretty soon they weren't. I just kept looking ahead of me at Mary.

She was real young looking. I found out later she had just turned eighteen, and I was twenty-eight at the time. God, she was beautiful Long brown hair, curled down the middle of her back, and she was wearing a checkerboard red and white cowgirl shirt, with blue jeans and a pair of Fryes. Her skin was dark, like an Indian's, and I wondered if she was one. Families who'd lived here a long time could pretty much be certain there was Sioux in them somewhere.

When the girls got to Taylor's Barber Shop, they stopped and started talking and giggling again. I guess she knew I was following her, but she didn't turn around. Don Taylor was sitting with some friends in front of his shop, and the whole bunch of them got up from their chairs and had Mary and her friends sit down. Sitting there, they were kind of a roadblock, so I just stopped and stood in front of the Homestake General Offices watching her.

I don't know how long I would have waited there, or what I was waiting for (I guess for them to move again, so I could move again) but suddenly, Mary turned around and looked right at me. She knew exactly where I was. We only caught eyes for a second, then she turned back.

I don't exactly remember walking up to her, but the next thing I knew I was standing behind her chair. One of her friends shook her knee. When she turned around, I just stood there, mute as nail. She looked up at me. Her girlfriends were probably giggling and the band must have been playing, but I didn't hear any of it. I could have been anywhere or nowhere and it wouldn't have made a bit of difference. I

was looking at Mary and that's all I saw and heard. I just stood there like a sick cow. Finally, I got something out. I remember exactly my first words to her.

“Do you like the Gold Diggers?” Of course, by that time they were way up the street. It was a nothing first line.

“The band, you mean?” she said.

“Yeah, you like ‘em?”

“No. Not much. Do you?”

“Not much. No.”

There was a long silence after that great start, and I didn't know what to say to make it end. Luckily she thought of something or we would probably still be standing there.

“What's your name?”

“Jake. Jake Garnes.”

“Mine's Mary Stennis.” Then she introduced her friends.

I can remember only one of their names. It was Nancy something, Nancy Krooce or Krootz. I wasn't really listening to what Mary said so much as to her voice. It was a real low voice. It surprised me coming from her delicate face. She looked like a little girl up close, but she didn't sound anything like a little girl. She seemed a whole lot older with that voice, all grown up somehow. I said my "Please-to-meet-you's" to her friends and settled back into my silence.

I couldn't think of anything else to say until Nancy started to get up and I realized I had better say something quick before she walked away and left me

standing there. So I asked Mary if she was planning on walking up to the Gardens. She said she was. Her friends drifted ahead of us and we were walking alone, alone that is except for everybody else who was packed onto Main Street.

The Sinking Gardens used to be the business district and the center of Lead years ago, until the businesses started sinking into the mine below. It's called "subsidence." Since nearly the whole town sits on hundreds of miles of tunnels and drifts and crosscuts, as winding and turning as the roots of some huge tree, you can bet some part of the surface is going to cave in sometime. I remember there was a woman who stepped out of her back door one morning and found her yard twenty-five feet lower than it was supposed to be. It made the front page of the Lead Daily Call, and the Homestake sent engineers out to pump in backfill dirt until the yard was level again. Up at the Gardens, though, the subsidence was too widespread and too dangerous to keep the businesses there. So they tore them down, planted some trees, and put up some benches and bar-b-que pits, and made park of the place. I think it's pretty clear how it got it's name.

By the time we got there, the Gardens were overflowing with people. You could hear the band, but you couldn't see it. I swear, with the whole town packed in the Gardens like that, I thought the place was suddenly going to drop out of sight. Everyone was standing up, trying to see the Gold Diggers, so Mary and I sat on one of the benches and started talking. It's weird, but suddenly it was as easy as could be to talk to her.

She told me she was nearly nineteen, but still had a half a year to go at Lead High because when she was a kid she'd taken a year off to be with her dad.

“He was real sick. And since my mom died when I was born, there was no one else to stay with him.”

“No brothers or sisters, huh?”

“Just me and my dad.”

I wanted to ask what he was sick with, but she seemed kind of secretive about it, so I just kept quiet.

“Are you a miner?” she asked me.

“Sure am. I'm a contractor on the 6,500 level. Me and my buddy, Tom, are drifters. You know what drifting is?”

She looked offended when I said that.

“Anyone in Lead knows that. Besides, my dad did some drifting when he was younger.”

That brought our talking to a quick stop. The band was playing "America the Beautiful," and most people were singing or humming along. As I sat there next to Mary, with the sun going down at the other end of Main, shooting its last beams on the park like a spotlight, and the soft, echoing voices of everybody singing, I felt very happy and a little sad at the same time. It was like I was going away somewhere and this was my send-off. Strange, looking back on it now, like I knew what was on the road up ahead. I was both excited and sad about it. I looked at Mary and she turned toward me, and I knew she was feeling something like the same thing. We stayed

looking at each other for a long moment, and I was about to lean in and kiss her when a girl came running over yelling Mary's name, breaking up the whole picture in my head.

“Mary. Hi ya. I thought I saw you sitting over here.”

“Sue. Hi.”

Mary introduced me to her friend, and Sue sat down and started jabbering about a camping trip she'd been on with her folks. I felt like an old man suddenly, like I was at the park and these were my kids. Mary seemed so much older when we were talking together. Now she seemed like a teenager again, like the high school girl she was.

Thank God for parents I thought when Sue's dad came over and fetched her to go home. The band had stopped playing by then and was marching west on Main Street. Pretty soon the Gardens were empty.

"Have you ever been to Rapid City?" I asked her.

“Sure. Mostly with the Glee Club, though, for tournaments and exhibitions.”

“There's a nice restaurant there called the Black Hills Room. Ever been there?”

“No. I don't think so.”

“Maybe I could take you there for dinner next weekend, if you want go.”

“I'd like that. I'd like to go.”

“You could ask your dad.”

"No way. My dad wouldn't let me go to Rapid City with a man, especially a miner."

She got up from the bench.

"What do you mean 'specially a miner'? What has he got against miners?"

"He's just not wild about mining."

"Well I can't say I'm 'wild' about mining, myself. What's he doing in Lead if he doesn't like miners?"

I was getting righteous, now. I was mad. I didn't know who he was, but I didn't like him already.

"I guess he has his reasons. But it's not snobbery or anything like that. He still works at the mine. You probably know him." She stopped for a moment then said, "I won't ask him about dinner, but I will go with you next weekend. What time?"

"We could leave here about six. It'll take about an hour to get there. Say six o'clock next Saturday?"

"Okay. I'll be ready at six."

She got up to leave.

"Hey wait a minute," I said. "Where do you live?"

"I'll meet you outside Carr's Pizza at six."

"Jesus, your dad must really hate miners. What's he do at the mine, anyway?"

"He's the bitman. His name is Sandy," she said, and ran off down Main Street.

Chapter 3

When my clock radio went off the next day, I was already awake. I had been for hours. It wasn't dreaming of Mary that kept me up, nothing that romantic, though I did think about her as I laid there in the dark. The reason I couldn't sleep was that my shift had just changed. At the Homestake, everybody works two weeks of day shift and two weeks of night shift. When you change back from night to day or from day to night, it's hard to get adjusted. It takes a couple of days just to get back on a toilet schedule. It's a crazy system, but it keeps the mine open twenty-four hours a day all year long. Hell, there's lots of things crazier than shifts about mining when you think about it.

Like I told you earlier, my buddy Tom and me contracted together at the mine, and today was my turn to drive. On the way to his house, I kept thinking about Sandy. That bastard has a gorgeous girl like Mary for a daughter. Jesus, I'd never figure he could get close enough to anyone to have anything at all.

That sounds cruel, maybe, but you'd have to know him to understand what I mean. Boy, I was curious as hell to see him today. I wondered if he'd look any different to me now that I knew his Mary.

It was a beautiful day. One of those summer mornings that make you wish you were a kid again. The sky's the one thing that doesn't change. When you look up, it could be any day, any year, or any country for that matter. It's just blue and open and forever.

Tom was waiting outside his house when I drove up, sitting on the front porch drinking his coffee as usual. He got in the car, and I was waiting to hear about the Fourth and Mary and all. But he didn't say a word. He acted like nothing happened, or like it didn't mean a thing. I was glad about that. We turned up Mill Street and stopped at Prouse's grocery at the top of the hill for some coffee and cigarettes. Mill Street's the way to the mine for most miners whether they work down the Yates or the Ross shaft. It's a steep climb up out of the valley of Lead.

From the top of Mill, I looked out over the city, across to the open cut where the Manual Brothers first found gold lying only a few inches below the surface. They started digging deeper and deeper, and pretty soon the mountain they were on turned into a canyon. Not all in one day, of course, and they had plenty of help to follow the vein underground, but now the Homestake Mine goes down nearly two miles where men are still chasing after that thin river of gold. Practically every morning I'd stare out at the open cut like this and wonder what it must have been like being the first to find gold lying there right at your feet, chunks of it waiting for you to pick up.

Tom and I worked down the Yates, so we took a left turn at the top of Mill.

"How 'bout doing a little fishing tonight at Pactola?" he asked, taking a deep drag on his morning smoke.

"Sure, straight from work or you want me to come pick you up?"

"Naw. Let's say 5:30. You come and get me. The dam should be jumping by then."

We drove on in silence, the Yates headframe looming closer and closer.

Arriving at the mine is like arriving at no other job I can think of. If you're not used to it, it can be eerie to think you're about to go underground where it's noisy and dark and dangerous to work down there all day in some places no bigger than a bathroom. And it's hot, too. Deep in the ground where I work, it can be over 120 degrees and even hotter. When I was kid and my dad would tell me about the mine, I kept picturing digging to the center of the earth and seeing molten rock suddenly bursting from a seam. After working all day in that place, you get a pretty good idea of what Hell could be like.

The surface of the Homestake isn't so inviting either. There's a railroad that winds around the mountain and goes through most of the big buildings that process the ore we miners bring up into gold. The buildings are ugly and most of the work that goes on in them is loud and dirty. The top of the mountain has been blasted off. They leveled it, and made it the parking lot. On a cold and rainy day, it gets windy as hell up there, the cold blasts from Canada blowing through the Black Hills.

Everything is gray, and the thought of getting in the cage, which is like an elevator that takes you down into the mine, and going to work could make you wish you'd called in sick.

We got out of the car and headed for the dry, which is a huge place, like a giant locker room where you change into your working clothes. I don't know why they call it the dry, maybe because your sweat-soaked clothes are supposed to dry overnight in your locker. Believe me, they don't. When you open your locker, the stench is so bad that it takes guts to put those wet and grimy clothes back on, especially early in the morning in winter. They make you shiver and jump around as you haul them up over your butt.

"Someone's been sleeping in my pants," Tom said in a kid's voice that reminded me of the three bears. "And they shit all over them."

He held his pants up, and they were stiff as a board with caked mud and sludge all down the front and back. He lifted them above his head and brought them down hard on the low bench between the lockers. Mud chips splattered everywhere. A guy next to us got pissed off and started swearing and tossed his socks and shoes at Tom. A game of push and tug started. Hank Cradashaw, a big, burly guy, who's an electrician, got carried away as usual and threw a pair of pliers that damned near hit me but bounced off my locker and landed near my big toe. I swear, the place is exactly like a high school gym class with the smell, the towels, and the grab-ass stuff in the showers.

We finished getting dressed and headed down the stairs to a concrete surface tunnel that looks like the entrance to a baseball stadium. It's called the ramp. Besides getting you from the dry to the Yates Shaft, the ramp is where you pick up the gear you need to have underground. The first place you stop is the oil window to get your canister of oil. You have to use it right on your equipment or you'll run out before the shift is over, and there's no coming back up for more. Next there's the brass board where you put on your brass. The brass is a coin with your name and social security number on it. Whenever you go in the mine, you hang it on the board. When you come out again, you take it off. And you better remember to take it off because the foreman of your shift checks that board after every shift to see if he's got any men left underground. If the brass is still there, and the shift's over, it means somebody didn't come out. That can scare the crap out of him and he'll check the dry. If you're there and forgot to take your brass, you'll catch hell for it. If you're not in the dry, a search gets going quick to find the missing man or men. Mining is still pretty tricky business. Anything can happen to you down there, and the brass hanging on the board is a good sign that something has.

There are other things to pick up as you move past the stations on the ramp, closer and closer to the shaft. If you just think back to checking out a ball at the school playground through a split-door, you'll get a pretty good idea of what the stations are like. They're usually tended by someone who's either too old to mine or who's been injured bad enough that he can't work anywhere else. The Homestake's good that way. They try to keep their dedicated guys on the payroll. Hell, I figure it's

the least they can do for a man who's been mining all his life, pulling out gold for the Company, losing a leg or arm or worse for his trouble.

Anyway, the reason I'm telling you any of this stuff is that's where Sandy worked. He was the bitman, last window before the shaft. The bitman gives out the drill steel at the beginning of the shift and takes it back at the end. He wheels the bits down the rails to the drill shop to be sharpened for the next day's work. And he never smiled. Never. He didn't say hello, either, at least not to me. He just called out the number of my bits and handed them to me.

Tom and me made up lots of war stories to explain the way he was. Accidents of any kind. Most of them could fit, too. First off, he limped real bad. When you handed him your bits, he would drag his left leg to the back of the bit room and hang them up on a peg. We figured he got that leg "riding pile" in a stope, that it got crushed when the bottom of the pile gave way. And his right hand was nearly paralyzed, too, gnarled like a claw. And we knew his green cap, which he wore all the time, must have been hiding something pretty awful. Tom was sure a rock had dropped on his head and the cap was holding in his brains. Anyway you figured it, something happened to him underground.

He was in his fifties or sixties it was hard to tell, and he always had a day or two gray stubble on his chin. He smoked constantly; and between puffs, he chugged like an old train. I said a minute ago that he never spoke to me. But come to think of it, he did once. I handed him my bits one night, and he looked up at me for a second

and mumbled something like, "beat to shit." I didn't think it was worth a fight, so I let it pass. But it burned me up some because I'm careful with my tools.

If he wasn't such a bastard, you could feel sorry for him. After all, he'd been in that bit room for who knows how long, all the time I worked at the mine, probably long before that, and he sure wasn't going to be moving up. It's the last stop for miners before they leave the Homestake. Some work there until they drop dead. Tom's dad did. He ran the battery room after his emphysema got so bad he couldn't go underground anymore. Then one morning he couldn't get out of bed. Two days later he was dead. I guess if you look at it that way, the ramp is like death row in a prison.

But it's much busier than any prison could be. Miners are coming out of the shaft and dropping their gear off on the way to the dry, and the shift that's coming on is picking up and moving down to the shaft, waiting for the cage to take them underground to work. I suppose it's kind of like subways in New York City, and with the cement walls and the low ceiling, it can sound like a roaring train in there. In fact, from the moment you walk into the dry, until you get back into your car at the end of your shift, you're going to be in a lot of noise one way or the other. Underground, it gets unbearable.

Anyway, I was moving through all the men and getting nearer to the bit room. I have to admit it, I was getting nervous as I got closer. I don't remember now if I planned on saying something or not, but that doesn't matter much because before I got a chance to see Sandy, nine bells went off signaling an accident underground, and the place went wild.

This time it was one man, Red Kentner. I knew him, but he wasn't a close friend or anything. Still, when someone gets hurt bad you know it'll affect the whole mine. Everyone gets cautious and a little scared until it wears off. Tom and me moved to the side of the ramp with everyone else to clear the aisle.

"Where ya think it is?" Tom asked.

"It's deep. That's all I know." I could hear the cage still dropping. "Below the 6500', I'll bet."

"Stope," Tom said, "barring down. Got to be bad anyway."

And it was bad. When the cage finally reached the surface, and the doors clanged open and they wheeled Red out, he was dead, long dead. Don Mech, his partner, was hurrying alongside the stretcher, tears coming down. Red was covered with a blanket, but still the blood was everywhere, dripping onto the floor.

"Get out of the way! God damn it! Get out of the fucking way!" Don kept yelling over and over. But no one was in the way, and there was no need to hurry anymore.

Tom was right about what happened. Red was in a stope on the 6,800' level, and part of the back gave way under his barring rod. Of all the things that happen in a mine, barring accidents happen the most. When you're in a stope that's as dark and wet a somebody's basement, you're working your way to the level above you. Most people think of mining as mining down. Usually, though, you mine upwards, not down. The levels in the mine are 150 feet apart. You mine up to the level above you eleven feet at a time. Most of what you mine out gets filled back up with milled ore

and ground rock, called backfill. Then they pump in a cement layer on top of that about six inches thick. That layer becomes the new floor you stand on to drill the next eleven feet up and so on until you break through to the level above you, 150 feet away. There's more to it than that, of course, but you get the idea.

Anyway, since you're drilling into the roof, what they call the "back," you want to get down any loose looking rock that may be hanging there so it won't drop on you when you start drilling again. You do that with a 12 foot pole, and it's heavy as hell. It has to be that long, though, to keep you away from the rock you're prying loose. So you start tapping around until you hear a hollow spot, then you forced down any of it that's loose. That's called barring down. Sometimes, though, which is what happened to Red Kentner, more rock comes down than you figured on. Usually, you can hear the rock talking and working and moving, and you run like the devil from a church. Sometimes, though, you don't get out from under it before it collapses.

If it's large enough, it can kill you when it falls. Whole crews of four or five men have been killed when a piece of the back big enough to be the foundation for a four bedroom house collapsed on them. Most miners don't like barring down at all. But if you're going to be a miner, especially if you're contracting and making money by how much rock you pull out, you do it whether you like it or not.

As the stretcher passed, men started filling in behind it and talking about what happened and the way Red looked. You could hear the ambulance arriving and later you could hear the siren as it raced for the hospital. I turned to say something to Tom, and I found myself staring directly into Sandy's eyes. He was leaning on the counter

top of the split door to the bit room. He was glaring at me. He looked angry. I just stared back at him.

I don't know how long it was before I looked away, but when I turned back, he wasn't there anymore. I guess I was curious more than anything else, so I walked over to the bit room. He was standing completely still, staring out the window that looks over Lead. His back was to me. Without the split door supporting him, he was smaller and kind of pathetic to come up on. His green cap had a pack of Pall Malls tucked in the fold at the back; his black boots were squashed into his dirty, gray construction pants at the cuffs. He seemed like a cutout of a wooden figure, planted in that greasy room. I was about to move away. Then he turned around.

"Good day to be outside, and stay there," he said, but not like he was talking to me.

I said, "Yeah, it sure is."

His eyes focused on me and he came forward.

"It's going to be hard on Red's family," I said because I had to say something about what happened. I was trying to talk to him. But he didn't want any part of it.

"What the hell do you expect, you go digging underground, riches? There's no riches down there for a miner."

He was spitting his words out so hard he began to cough a little.

"I guess lots of jobs are dangerous. It's a job, good pay, that's all."

I was standing there defending the Company without even thinking of what I was saying. It was stupid. But the way he came on, it kind of shook me. He turned,

dragged himself to the back of the room, got my bits, and handed them to me without another word.

There was something in his voice that shook me up, something deep inside him that was burning hot, fueling the anger in his eyes. When I found out what it was, everything about him suddenly made sense. Fact is, if I'd known the fire had been raging since the accident on the 3800', I might have turned away. But by the time it all came out, I knew there was no turning back.

I took my bits and walked over to where Tom was sitting, and we waited for the cage to take us down into the ground.

Chapter 4

Sitting in my truck in front of Carr's Pizza on Friday night made me feel like a high school kid again. Our whole crowd used to go there after football games, drinking cokes for hours and while we ate pizza by the piece. We used to have mushroom stacking contests that my buddy Tom usually won by cheating and leaving the cheese from his pizza on the mushrooms. They would stick together better that way. If I remember right, the record was thirty-eight mushrooms leaning like a tower of Pisa. We'd guzzle down cokes in under five seconds, and we'd end up by spitting and coughing the bubbles all over the tables and each other's face. We were the typical high school goofs with nowhere else to go.

From the cab of my truck waiting for Mary, I could see that nothing much had changed. A bunch of kids were laughing and jostling each other at one of the tables, and I could hear the jukebox blaring out the latest song. Mr. Carr was standing behind the counter like always, and his wife was clearing off one of the front tables. She looked up and caught me watching her. I waved and she waved back with a big smile

on her face. I turned away when I heard a knock on the passenger window. It was Mary. I opened the door and she got in.

"I hope you haven't been waiting long," she said.

"Didn't see you walk up. You came from behind. You must live off of Alert Street, huh?"

"Well, not really," she said, embarrassed.

"Not really?" I laughed.

"I live on McQuillan. I told my dad I was going over to Sally's, a friend of mine. She lives on Highland near Alert, so I walked that way."

"You thought he'd follow you? Is he really that bad?"

"No. No," she said, trying to laugh the whole thing off.

I let it slide, started the truck, made a U-turn and headed out on Main for Rapid City.

It's about an hour's drive from Lead. We left at 5:30; and I made reservations at the Black Hills Room for 7:00, so I figured on a smooth easy drive there. And it was. I wanted her to talk about herself and how she lived with her dad all alone. It was still hard to believe that Sandy was her dad. I wondered what he told her about Red Kentner dying just the other day. The whole town had been talking all week. Services were held on Thursday and the school band played. Maybe I wasn't asking the right way, but Mary didn't say much of anything when I asked how her dad was feeling. She said he was fine, same as always, then changed the subject. I let that go, too. I guess I wanted her to like me.

She sure was pretty and grown up again seen all by herself. Her black hair was curled up a little bit and she was wearing a light blue dress and perfume and a dark blue scarf around her neck. I wondered what Sandy thought she was doing over at Sally's dressed like that. She turned the questions on me. Where did I live? On High Street. Alone? Yes. How long? About two years. Did I go to college? For a little while. Where did my folks live? Over on Grand Avenue. All that kind of stuff. We were talking real easy. Then she asked me what I planned on doing the rest of my life.

"You're kidding, right?" I said.

"No. Really. I'm serious. You don't have to answer or even tell the truth." That made me laugh.

"Well, shit. I don't know. Mining. I guess. Well, not mining exactly, not just what I'm doing now. But probably mining somehow."

"Mining at the Homestake?" she said, like it was hard to believe.

"Why not? It's good pay. I know I could transfer to Uranium in Arizona and make much more, but I just don't trust it."

"What do you mean?"

"That nuclear stuff and radiation gives me the creeps."

"Me too."

"You know when you ask me what I'll be doing the rest of my life, hell, I don't know. Who does? Now that I think of it, I don't see myself mining forever. My dad is, though. But not digging mining. I mean he's an official at the Homestake, out of the pit and behind a desk."

"Would you want to do that?"

"Become a stiff-shirt with a belly? Not me. I'm not putting my dad down. He seems to like it."

I let that rest a moment, then turned to her.

"What do you want to do with the rest of your life?"

She didn't answer right at first. She took the question very serious. Finally, she looked over at me and said, "I guess I should get out of Lead and find out." She waited a minute and then said, "That's what my dad says anyway."

"You mean go to college out of state or something?"

"No. Not exactly. Or maybe that. But anyway not while my dad's alive. I wouldn't leave him."

Before I could ask her anything else, we crossed into Rapid City and she got off the subject by oohing and ahing about the place. I knew she hadn't been here before, even though she told me she had. I was glad. I wanted to impress her, and she seemed impressed all right.

Most people out of state have heard of Rapid City only if they traveled to see Mt. Rushmore. They call the city the "Gateway to the Black Hills." To everyone in Lead, though, it's the Big City. It's also the home of the Mining College. If you want to move up at the Homestake or get a job topside, you go to school there and learn mineralogy or surveying or something like that. It's supposed to be a good school, best there is, but I wouldn't know first hand.

The Black Hills Room is a nice place, maybe the nicest place in Rapid City. It's coat and tie and they park your car for you. They have the place lit up with colored lights hidden in the bushes surrounding a fountain that's in the shape of the Black Hills themselves. The fountain comes out of the center of the tallest peak and runs down the sides like a river. At the bottom is a pool, and people make their wishes and toss in a penny. I guess some people need more than one wish and toss in a nickel or a dime, and there's even a quarter or two from the really desperate.

We drove up and got out of the truck and headed for the front door. I could see Mary was taking it all in and she took hold of my arm as we walked in the door. We found out our reservations weren't ready yet, naturally, so we took a seat at the bar and I ordered a beer and a coke for Mary. I'm sure she could have passed for twenty-one, but she asked for a coke when the bartender came over to us. I lit up a smoke and found out she didn't smoke either, but didn't mind if I did. I guess not, considering Sandy puffed on one every minute of the day.

The place was crowded, it being Friday, and we waited a good twenty minutes. Mary didn't mind in the least. She liked watching people and then making up some story about them. It wasn't a nasty comment or a put down or anything like that. She just liked making up a life for them.

A couple of women were sitting behind us at a table a foot or two from the bar. One of them had on a pearl necklace and earrings to match. She was fat as could be with a bright pink face. She talked real low, and then would put her head back and laugh loud as hell. She must have been laughing at her own jokes since her partner,

who had red hair and lots of diamonds, didn't seem to be saying a word. Mary thought they were tourists and that their husbands were off playing cards somewhere and that the ladies decided to go out by themselves. But that turned out not to be so when their men walked in completely sloshed and joined them at the table. A funny thing happened then. The fat one stopped talking and laughing, and the redhead began making all sorts of conversation. The two guys laughed at everything she said and damn near fell off their chairs. It started to get a little loud. Finally, the maître d' came over and either showed them to their tables, or threw them out. We didn't hear or see them again.

I was on my second beer and Mary was still sipping her coke. I was glancing around the room, looking into the dining section when I saw my dad, sitting with Sylvia McFelan. I knew it was him right away, but I looked past him, like I was pretending to myself that I'd made a mistake. I looked around the room a little more and came back to the table where he was, and now he was holding her hand and just backing away from a kiss. McFelan's wife. Jesus! I couldn't believe it. It's crazy that I thought of her first. How could a superintendent's wife be doing this? I suppose you might think that I thought it was okay for a man and not a woman. But that's not it at all. It's just that I didn't think of him right then. I didn't want to.

It's an old story, I know; but when you see your own "pop" out there with someone else's wife, it feels like no one has ever done it before. That rotten bastard, I thought. I looked away real quick then. I didn't want him to see me.

"Who were you staring at?" Mary asked.

"No one. I just wish they'd seat us already. I'm starved."

"I'm getting a little hungry myself."

I didn't want to get seated. I even thought about making up some excuse to get out of there. Seeing him was bad enough. But if he saw me, I didn't know what I'd do. I couldn't ignore him if he looked my way. What would I do? I began to panic a little. Then I thought about my mother. What would she do when she found out. Would she scream at him, throw things? Nah, probably. She wasn't the type. She always stayed cool no matter what was happening.

I'll never forget when I broke my ankle during a Friday night football game and they carried me off on a stretcher. Nobody in the stands knew what happened to me, including my mother and father who were at every game. I could have broken my neck. When they got me to the locker room, my mom and dad were standing there. My dad's hand was shaking when he touched my shoulder. My mom came up cool as could be and kissed me and told me everything was going to be fine. And then everything was fine. I knew I didn't have to worry about her or make excuses for myself or the game I wanted to keep playing.

She probably wouldn't cry either. But she would hurt something awful. I knew she loved him, really loved him. And she was proud as hell of what he'd become. When I started at the mine on my very first day, she told me that before long I would be moving out of the pit and on up to the top. "Look at your dad," she said, "never even finished high school and now look at him."

Thinking of that, I looked over at him again, but he wasn't at the table. Maybe I dreamed the whole thing up. I looked around fast hoping I wouldn't see him. But there he was, walking to the cash register. Sylvia was standing next to him. Both of them were turned away from me, and just then they called out our reservations. "Jake Garnes. Party of two. Garnes, party of two."

I froze in my seat.

'That's us, Jake.'

'Yeah, sure.' I turned back to the bar. "Just let me finish this off."

I gulped down my beer, got off the stool, and glanced his way. He was gone. If you're wondering if he saw me or not, or if he was even paying attention when they called out my name, I was wondering the same thing. Mary and me walked over to the maître d', and he took us to our table.

When we sat down I ordered a stiff drink and decided not to think any more about it. I realized I hadn't said much to Mary for quite a while. She probably thought I was a jerk, so I started talking.

"Order anything you like. Anything that looks good to you, order it."

"Everything looks good to me. You've been here before. Give me some help."

"Well, you like fish? Or do you want to eat steak?"

"Oh, that's no help. I like them both."

"Take your time. I'll order an appetizer and we won't worry about dinner just yet."

She finally decided on the stuffed trout, which is caught fresh daily just outside of the city limits. I had a good old New York steak with a baked potato. The appetizer came, and the waiter divided the shrimp cocktail between us.

"Would you like another drink?" he asked.

I said no and Mary shook her head and left us alone. We were sitting near the corner of the room at a pretty good table. I mean, they weren't walking past us to go to the bathroom or kitchen or anything. I was starting to feel I could still have a pretty good time even with what happened. There was soft music in the place and Mary was pretty and happy and things looked like they might be all right.

"Boy, if my dad could see me now. I don't know what he'd do," she said.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Being here, that's all. Eating shrimp cocktail in Rapid City with a man. He would never guess I'd be doing this."

"What's wrong with it? You're eighteen. You're allowed."

"I know that," she kind of snapped at me.

"What then?"

"Hard to say."

"The miner business?"

"I could tell you were upset when I said he didn't like miners."

"Wouldn't you be? I mean, hell, he lives next to the second largest gold mine in the world? Probably gonna be miners around."

She made a sound in her throat, like she was sorry we got on the subject.

"I don't know," she started, then stopped again. "He's just afraid of losing me I guess."

"I can understand that. He's not the friendliest person I've met. No offense or anything. You're probably all he's got."

"Yeah, I'm sure it's partly that, but something else, too."

Then she stopped and looked away, like she just told me a secret she promised never to tell.

We didn't say much through dinner, a word or two about the food. When the waiter came and cleared off the table, we both were too full for dessert, but I ordered coffee. As I reached for the cream, I bumped over the salt shaker..

"That's bad luck," she said quickly. "You've got to throw it over your shoulder," now trying to laugh.

"I've heard that before." But I wasn't about to do that right then and there. I stood the shaker back up.

"Really. It's bad luck," she said again, insistent like.

Then without saying another word, she shook some salt into the palm of her hand and threw it over her shoulder. She did it nicely, and I don't think anyone saw her doing it. She put the shaker back down and smiled.

"You have to take every chance to be lucky. There's enough bad luck around not to miss any chance you get."

"Your dad's philosophy again? I asked.

"Yes, but I believe it. I'm not saying I believe in the superstition part. But just doing it shows you're willing to take a chance."

"Wait a minute. You lost me there. Take a chance on what?"

"Anything. Take a chance on anything. On life, I guess."

"Throwing salt over your shoulder says you're willing to take a chance on life?"

"Sure. It shows you believe there's a good side to every bad thing that might happen."

"Now that I believe in. But that can't be Sandy talking."

"Why not?" she said, like she was challenging me.

"Well he doesn't act like there's a good side to anything. I don't think I've ever seen him smile."

She looked down, and I felt like a heel. He might be a pain in the ass to me, but he was her dad after all. She knew I was right, though. She looked up slowly and nearly whispered, "He used to. When I was little. Before he got hurt."

"You mean sick? When you stayed out of school?"

"He wasn't sick. He was in an accident at the mine. He was nearly killed. It was a long time ago."

"So that's what happened to him," I said nearly under my breath.

"I sat up with him for days. He was unconscious for more than a week and there was nobody else. His best friend was killed in the same accident, and the family moved away after that."

"How old were you?"

"I had just turned seven the Friday before. The accident happened on the following Monday."

"Jesus. There wasn't anyone to help you?"

"The Homestake sent a nurse over when my dad first got home from the hospital. That was about two and half months later. I lived with the Reverend Bucher's family while he was in the hospital. But the nurse was only there during the day, and my dad wouldn't even talk to her. Before long she just stopped coming at all. He only wanted me around, so I ended up staying home most of the time. That's why I was dropped back a grade at school."

I pictured her as a little kid taking care of Sandy by herself, and figured it was why she seemed grown up for her age. When she started talking again, she sounded more like Sandy's wife than his daughter.

"It was nearly a year before he could walk again. And when he started, he limped so badly that he couldn't keep his balance. I used to help him get up from his bed. We started by walking to the living room, and he would just drop onto the couch from exhaustion when we got there. He was sweating and trembling from the strain of getting that far. He didn't take it very well, being an invalid made him pretty nasty sometimes.

"When he could hobble around by himself, I started back at school. When I'd get home he'd be in the kitchen, leaning on the stove or against the sink to help support himself while he made dinner for the two of us. I didn't say anything to him,

but sometimes, I would cry at night thinking about how much pain he was going through, and how he would never be the same."

"It must have been rough," I said, but part of me wasn't listening.

It's not that I wasn't interested. I was. It's just that my own father kept coming into my mind. I felt lost in the sight of it, not angry anymore. I was sad. That's about all there was to it. I missed him already, you could say. I missed thinking of him the way I thought he was. I made myself come back to her conversation.

"How long was it before he could go back to work?"

"About two years. He never went back to drifting. He could never do that again with his injuries. Well, you know how he is, his right hand and limp and all that. He started back where he is today, the bit room."

"So he was drifting when he got hurt?"

"Yeah, a cave-in while he was working up a new production area. The 3800'. He and four others were in the accident. Only he came out alive."

"You know, I hear of lots of accidents. Just look at what happened to Red Kentner last week. But you never think it'll ever happen to you. Oh, you know all the time that it could happen. You don't believe it, though. And if you come to believe, won't be long before you have to quit the mine. I'm surprised Sandy can work there at all."

"At first, all I wanted was to move away from here, to pretend nothing had happened. But where could we go? And what would my dad do for a job, especially

how he is? I know he wants me to get out of Lead. He makes that very clear. But not while he's alive, not that I would ever leave him."

I thought there was more to it than she was saying, or maybe more that she knew about. But I kept it to myself. It was damn clear to me that Sandy didn't like what he was doing. I don't think I would be hanging around Lead if I was him. It's not like he had any friends or relatives. No, there was something else that made him stay, I thought. But I wasn't about to start guessing what it was.

The waiter came with the check. I guess they needed the table or something. We got up and started over to the cashier.

While I paid, Mary went to the bathroom, and without her for a moment I thought about both of our dads. I couldn't make sense out of either of them. They were both different than they seemed. I saw what my dad was hiding, and I wondered what secret Sandy had stored away. Why the hell did he stay in Lead when you could tell he hated everything about mining and miners? I couldn't figure him out.

Mary came back, and we walked out the door to the parking lot. I searched for my parking stub but couldn't find it and ended up describing the Bronco to the guy. He ran off to get it.

"Let's make a wish," Mary said and turned around to the fountain. The pool at the bottom of the mountain was pink with the colored lights. The river that flowed into it was blue.

I reached into my pocket and gave her a penny and took one out for myself. She closed her eyes and tossed it in real quick, but I couldn't think of anything to wish for.

"Come on," she said. "Make a wish."

I tossed my penny into the pool without really having a wish in mind. It's funny now, all this time later, to look back on the wish I finally came up with, which was that everything would turn out okay. I guess I meant with my dad and my mom, but I might as well have been wishing for me and Mary, and especially for Sandy and the dreams he had on his mind.

Chapter 5

My dad followed his dad into the mine when he was just sixteen years old. A few years later, he married my mom about 1950 and bought a house on Grand Avenue, which is the steepest street coming off of Main. It's so steep the sidewalks are stepped so you can walk up them in the wintertime. There's an old story that's supposed to be true about a man who died there. He was drunk and walking up the steps in the sidewalk during the middle of winter. He fell over and rolled part way down the hill. When he tried to get up, he fell again and again, rolling farther down each time. Finally, he just laid where he fell last, exhausted, and froze to death. It was near spring before he was found when some kid saw a hand sticking up through the melting snow.

When I pulled up to their house for Sunday dinner, two weeks after the blackest day in my life when I saw my dad snuggling with goddamn Sylvia McFelan, I didn't know what I might do when I got face to face with him. So I was happy not to see his car in the driveway. My brother Ben and his wife, Gena, and their kids were just pulling up. His eldest is Dwayne, and he's got a set of twins.

Ben and I shared a bedroom as kids, which was great because we could plot and scheme our mischief together and talk late into the night. We were alike in most ways, the same friends and favorite sports and heroes, but Ben always was a better student than me. He sometimes did my homework, not because I couldn't do it, I could. It's just that I didn't want to. What for? I knew I was going to be a miner since the age of ten. What I needed to know, I would learn at the mine, not in some school book. I paid him back by standing up for him in any fight he might get into, and blocking when he ran the end sweep in our football games.

As I was getting out of my car, Dwayne jumped out of their Jeep Renegade damn near before it was stopped and came running and hopped in my arms. He was four years old and looked exactly like his mother. He had black, wavy hair and blue eyes. Ben, like me, was blond and fair. Dwayne said I was his favorite uncle. Since Gena had only sisters, three of them, I was his only uncle. Whether he knew that or not, I don't know.

"Hi, Uncle Jake!" he screamed in my ear. "You want to know what I did yesterday?"

"Sure."

"I went fishing over at Pactola Dam and I caught the biggest trout ever. Three of them."

"Did you eat them?"

I guess he thought I meant raw because his mouth twisted like he'd eaten a lemon.

"Heck, no!" he squealed, jumping down to join his brother and sister who were racing to the front door.

Gena was Italian and pretty. Even after three kids and putting on some weight, her face was still an eye catcher. Ben met her at school, college that is, where he went for almost two years. Her father owned a clothing store over in Deadwood. He was the high-brow type with fancy clothes all over him, but why not since they were free? He wasn't pleased his daughter was marrying into a mining family.

At the time, though, Ben wasn't a miner. He was just fed up with college and didn't know what he wanted to do. At school, he took some classes in philosophy and history and English and what not, "useless" as my dad said. After two years of it, he wasn't much better for wear. He was smarter, sure, but it wasn't the kind of smart you could cash in on, not in Lead anyway. So when he married Gena, he ended up going to work for the mine and pretty soon became a motorman, pulling man cars and ore cars to the skips.

"Hey Jake, how are you doing?"

He came up and shook my hand, and Gena gave me a peck on the cheek.

"Doing fine," I said."

Ben was smaller than me by a good three inches, which put him at about 5' 10". He was well-built, taking after my dad in that way, short and strong.

"How's the brood of kids? I asked.

My brother just chuckled, and Gena said they were all well, except for Robert one of the twins, who had a couple of stitches put in his back when he crashed his tricycle into a tree.

We headed up to the house, and you could hear my mom fussing over the kids inside, giving each one a kiss and one of her special Sunday cookies before they ran off to the backyard to play.

"I don't see dad's car," Ben said. "Is he here?"

"I don't know. Maybe he went for a couple of six-paks."

"Don't worry, boys," Gena said teasing. "You can start watching the game without him."

My mom hugged Gena at the door and put her hands out to me and Ben as we kissed her on the cheek.

"Dad's go on up to the mine for a meeting about that horrible accident a couple weeks back," she said. "He should be back by dinner."

My dad was a Safety Manager so it made sense that he'd gone in, but still I was suspicious. Was he with Sylvia? Or was he staying away because he knew I saw him?

My mother was standing in front of me, and I wanted to hug her and tell her that he was a no good son of a bitch. She was fifty-seven years old at the time I'm writing about, and her hair was just beginning to go gray around the edges. She was still a good looking woman. When my dad and her got dressed up for a party or Homestake function, she looked as good as any of the higher officials wives. She was

proud to go with him, proud that he'd worked his way up out of the pit and into an office above ground.

Ben and me got a couple of beers and turned on the game.

"So, how's the train treating you?"

"Can't complain. It wouldn't do much good if I did, right? But there are times, whoa shit, they are times."

"You got a time in mind?" I asked, joking.

"Nah. Just the same old stuff. 'Down in the dungeon, dark and dirty. Down in the dungeon without a light..' How's the rest of that go?"

"Hell, I don't remember that much of it," I said.

It was a kid's rhyme he was reciting. We used to chant it and pretend we were miners rescuing another miner trapped below in the "dungeon" as we called it back then. Ben didn't like mining when he started five years ago, and he didn't like it much better now. To razz him sometimes, I'd say that was because he went to college and got soft.

"Nobody in their right minds," he'd say, "would want to spend their life in a black, hot hole, digging in the dark and hoping every minute the roof didn't cave in and bring tons of rock down on their thick head."

"Then how come you're working there?" I'd ask.

"That's plain as paste," he'd say "I'm not in my right mind," he'd laugh.

But he was serious today, and had been for awhile now. He kept at the mine because it was the best money he could make and because he had a family to support. But that didn't stop him from being a little afraid of it.

The Homestake brings in lots of new guys to apprentice as miners every year. Most of them quit before a month is out. Some of them don't like the hard work, and believe me it's a hard way to make a dollar, especially if you're working in the lower levels, say below 6,200 feet. It hot down there, maybe 120 to 130. The humidity's real high, too. Even with the ventilation, there are days when it's hard to catch to find your breath. Others quit not liking to be "closed up" all day. Claustrophobia they call it. Once the cage drops you to your level, you're down there to stay for the full eight hours. There's no coming up for lunch or anything, not unless you're injured or dead.

The reason most guys quit is they get spooked by the place. They start picturing it caving in on them, or them getting hurt somehow and trapped in a place where no one will ever find them. The truth is, with over two-hundred miles of drifts and crosscuts and tunnels, it's damn easy to get lost down there. I know people it's happened to. If they had stayed at their stations like they were supposed to, they would've been all right.

All right, it's true that people get killed or badly injured, like Sandy did, but you can't think about those things and keep doing a good job. And if you can't work as best you can, you won't make the money you could otherwise since most get paid by the rock they break out. So maybe they're better off quitting. I know most miners who stay past a year stay for the rest of their lives. The pay's damn good, best you can

make in any mine. If you are going to stay in Lead, what else is there to do? Nothing, that's what else.

But something was bugging Ben today. When I told him I didn't remember the rhyme, he snapped at me.

"Yeah, I bet you don't. You probably never think of it. Do you!"

"What for?" I said.

"Not for anything, Jake, but because I can't get it out of my head. 'Down in the dungeon, dark and dirty, down in the dungeon without a light.' You don't know how many times that goes through my head in a single shift?"

He sat back in his chair after that and didn't say anything for a minute. My mom came in with more beer and cookies and asked us who was winning. We had no idea.

"You're all the time watching and too busy talking," she teased. "If I dared to turn it off, though, you'd be hollering like the devil."

She walked back into the kitchen, and I looked over at Ben.

"I'm not cut out to do it," he said. "I never was. I don't think I ever will be."

It sounded like a decision he'd come to after a lot of thinking.

"What are you talking about? You're good at it. You've got a lot of respect as a motorman."

But I knew what he was talking about. And I knew that kid's rhyme he recited. It was about dying in a mine shaft and never being brought up. The rescue team in the

rhyme never reaches the guys who are trapped. They are lost in the dungeon forever, dead in the dungeon darkness.

"Jake," he finally said. "You've been mining a lot longer than I have, and you like it, right?"

I shrugged.

"And dad, well, shit, he's not even down there much now. Besides, I could never get him to see it any other way than he sees it. He's a miner and his dad was before that. Hell, he lives at the mine just about, can't even make it to Sunday dinner because he's an official now."

I wanted to tell him about McFelan's wife, to say he might be there. But I kept my mouth shut on that.

"Let me ask you something, Jake," he said. "Did you see Red Kentner when they pulled him out? Actually see him with your own eyes? I know you heard of it, everybody heard of it. But did you see him?"

So that was it, I thought. He'd gotten scared some after an accident like that. You can let it get to you if you think about it too much. You can let it work into your mind.

"Yeah, Ben. I saw him," I said quickly. "I was coming onto shift with Tom when they brought him out..."

"Well I saw him, too," he cut me off. "I motored him to the cage. I was on the fucking 6,800' that day! The whole back of his head was bashed in, clear down into his neck. His shoulders were nothing but bloody mush."

He was getting loud now, and nearly up out of his chair.

"Cool it!" I said to him. "You're going to get mom and Gena in here if you keep it up." I stopped for a second, then I said softly. "Accidents go with the job. If you're careful, you can work a lifetime without them."

"Bullshit!" he said, hard under his breath. "Red was a very careful guy. You know that. So don't shit me. He even took static from some guys for being too careful."

"So what happened, then?" I was kind of taunting him.

"What happened?" he said. "Money, that's what happened."

"What are you talking about?"

"Gold goes up, right? Goes up by leaps and bounds. Shit, it could hit \$400.00 tomorrow. Who knows? And what's that mean?"

"You're the college boy. You tell me what it means."

I couldn't help that crack. He was starting to get to me. He kept right on going though.

"It means they want the gold out now while the profits are bigger. They don't give a shit how. They're not down in the pit digging it up."

"You saying he Red got reckless for bonus on tonnage?"

"Ain't that difficult to figure out, is it?" he smirked.

"What the fuck, man? That's how mining works. Nobody gets rich digging for the Homestake. So just forget about that shit."

As soon as I said that, I could hear Sandy in the back of my head saying just about the same thing to me that day in the bit room when Red came out on a stretcher.

"Fine, fine," Ben said in a whisper. "I just don't want to die down there making some other bastard rich, that's all."

I stared into the TV without seeing it. To me, mining had always been just a job. You worked hard and you got paid. I wasn't scared of it like Ben. And I wasn't beat-up by it, like Sandy. Who was to blame for his accident? Shit, I don't know. I couldn't get it straight in my mind just then how I felt about the Homestake.

The phone ring in the kitchen, and I knew it was my dad when she called him "Robbie."

She came into the living room and said he wasn't going to get home in time to eat. No surprise to me.

As a kid, I used to picture my dad working underground. In those days, I dreamed about being a miner like him, working hard and taking pride in it. To be known in Lead as a good contractor, pulling out more tons of gold-flecked rock than another guy was a fine ambition. The mine had been there forever. It kept the town going. With it, everybody was taken care of. Without it, you had nothing. That was a kid's idea, sure. But I realized that Sunday, that I still looked on the mine the same way. Pretty stupid of me when you come to think about it.

Chapter 6

It was two weeks before I saw the mine again after that Sunday because I decided to take a vacation I had coming to me. I saw a lot of Mary, nearly everyday, and we had a great time together. But I couldn't stop thinking about my dad and McFelan's wife, and about her dad, too, Sandy. If me and Mary kept on like this, I knew I was going to come to butting heads with him before too long.

I know I already told you about the dry and the ramp and all, but if you haven't ever been in a cage and ridden it thousands of feet down, into the dark, deep under the ground then I'm not sure I can really tell you what it's like. But I'll try. Hell, on my first day back, I felt I had never seen the place before. And what Ben had said at my mom's kept going round and round in my head.

When I drove up with Tom, the parking lot was already full. By the time I got to the end of the ramp after dressing and picking up my stuff, and was sitting with my shift boss and the rest of the miners on my level, all of us waiting for the cage to take us down, the outside world already seemed a long way away.

It doesn't matter if you are on night shift or day, inside it could be anytime at all. You can hear the cage coming from way down in the shaft. It's a low, dull whine at first, that gets higher pitched and louder as it gets closer to the surface. The cage, or elevator, is hauled up and down on huge cables and pulleys driven by two gigantic, electric powered motors that roll the cable up on tumblers that look like fishing reels for a giant or something. They're really monsters, those machines. They have to be because fully loaded, the cage and cable probably weigh over twenty tons.

The cage is large, about 8'x30', and it has metal gates on two sides that open to get men on and off, and to load and unload the different machines used underground. The other two sides are wire-mesh, so basically it's an open room. You can look out of it, even stick your arm out if you are stupid enough to and want to get it cut off because the cage clears the shaft walls by only a few inches. And when the cage is dropping, it's dropping faster than any roller coaster or elevator in the world, and your ears start popping like crazy. You have to remember that sometimes it's headed as deep as 6,800 feet, well over a mile into the ground. If you don't want to spend most of the day riding to work, you have to get down there fast. Once the cage starts falling, you better hold on and stand still.

Inside the main shaft, and every shaft or winze in the mine for that matter, there's a metal ladder built up against the shaft wall, set back so that it clears the cage. It's there just in case you had to get out quick, say a fire broke out or something, and the cage broke down. Of course, I don't think anyone could climb straight up for

6,800 feet no matter what they were running from. But it's there if anyone wanted to try.

So you sit on the bench waiting for the cage to come up and drop off the shift before you and take you down. Me and Tom were waiting for our particular level to come up. By that I mean, the cage has to make lots of trips to get everyone down to their different levels, so you wait your turn.

Tom started talking to me about the day ahead, mostly technical stuff about rail extending. I couldn't pay attention, though. I was thinking about the cage for some reason, I even felt a couple of butterflies in my stomach. It was pretty crazy. I mean, I'd been a miner for years and never felt this way. I guess once you start thinking about something, it can get to you a little. It was the drop down and the idea of not being able to come up for seven hours that bugged me most. Never thought about that before, never considered it. But now it bothered me some. Goddamn Ben for spooking me. I stood up from the bench and shook the idea from my head.

"Did you see where they're going to close down the Cyanide 2 in the Call?" Tom asked.

"No. What for?"

"To add on to it or something."

"I didn't see it," I said, but I wasn't really interested.

"Making it a 'super-plant' they call it. Sounds like an airplane if you ask me."

"I guess they plan on upping production, with gold going up and all," I said.

"That's it, old buddy. No one talks about it ever going down. I'm glad I got some stock in this place after all," he said with a laugh.

Most of the miners had stock, and it seemed like it always went up. Lately, though, with gold zooming you could watch it go up nearly everyday.

The bell went off and the cage filled the shaft opening a couple of seconds later. The gates clanged as they were pushed apart. Tom and me headed over to it. I prefer riding on the edge of the cage, not only because it gets crowded and smelly in the center, with all the men and the dirty clothes everyone has on, but I like to watch the blue lights go whizzing by. The lights are set at each level, at 150 foot intervals. When the cage is at the top and stopped, you can look right down the shaft and the lights form one straight line of blue, disappearing into a black pit. The shaft is perfectly straight, and I mean perfectly. Once, another one of the shafts got off-center by a 1/2 inch or so. Every miner who went down it was vomiting by the time he reached the bottom. It has something to do with the inner ear being off balance if you don't drop straight.

When the gates closed, the bell went off signaling that we were ready to drop. I took hold of the bars. As we started falling, the lights started to blur together like always. By the time we reached full speed-- which is only a couple of seconds-- the lights looked like they were about an inch apart. Hell, the complete trip down to the bottom of the mine doesn't take more than a couple of minutes.

As the cage picked up speed, I could feel the vibration go through my hands. At full tilt, the ride is pretty smooth, just a humming going through you. It isn't quiet,

though, and not just because of the men talking and joking. Since the cage is all metal, our gear on the floor rattles and sends a weird echo around you. But most of the noise is the air rushing by you. There's also water that constantly runs down the shaft to keep the timbers from dry rotting. If you are listening for it, like I was that day, the shaft sounds like a river in a windstorm. You can get wet if you are near the edge and you don't look out. It's not a soft spray, either. The drops of water are like little lead pellets when you're moving that fast. The more I thought about it, it seemed like one hell of a way to be getting to work.

I think I told you before, me and Tom are high-ball drifters working on our own contract. We open up new tunnels to the vein of ore, and we get paid by how many feet of tunnel we can dig in a day. Since we're always leading the way, sort of speak, to new production areas, we're always at the deepest part of the mine. At the time I'm writing about, we were working on the 8,000 foot level, as deep as the Homestake went then. Since the main shaft only goes to the 6,800, we get off there and wait for a man-car to take us to our winze, which is a shaft that starts inside the mine, and we ride that down to the 8,000 level.

Waiting for the man-car was one thing I always hated about the job. And it was worse today. Sitting there waiting for the motorman to come and get you is dead time. You're deep in the mine, looking for the train to come out of the dark. Creepy, to say the least.

The train is electric powered and runs on rails. Like most other vein mines, the Homestake has everything on rails. Since you're following a small vein of ore and not

mining the whole area, like salt or talc, the tunnels and crosscuts are much smaller, say, about seven foot square, and there's no way to get a large rubber-tired truck down there.

I could feel and hear the cage slowing down. I was waiting for the creaking that comes when the cage settles on the platform at the 6800'. It's a soft landing considering how fast you've been dropping. Everyone turned on their cap lamp, and I could hear the boards creak as we settled. The cage doors slide open, echoing down the drift. We all walked across the tracks and sat down on a small bench that's there.

Your cap lamp is about all the light there is in most of the mine. It's like a flashlight in a sewer or something. I mean, the place is dark. You can only see in the direction you turn your head. You can forget about seeing things on the side of you. I looked down the tracks in the direction the train would be coming. I couldn't see a thing out there except the track shining for about twenty feet out. I looked up for a second and could see the pipes for air and water and ventilation above me. I felt like I was in the crawl space under a house and looking up at the plumbing.

There are usually about 15-20 of us waiting for the train. But today about a half of the guys were off, and the sandmen were backfilling their stopes for the next eleven foot cut. Tom came over and stood in front of me.

"That asshole's always late." He meant the motorman. "We could have two feet mucked up in the time it takes him to get here."

"I think I hear him," I said.

It's hard to tell sometimes what you're hearing down there or imagining. Even on a main level like the 6,800 where there's no blasting and drilling being done, at least not near the shaft, the place is noisy. You can hear the cage flying back up to the top and the water falling down, and the ventilation system makes a kind of hum like thunder somewhere off in the distance. It rumbles and hums at the same time. I put my foot on the track, waiting to feel the vibration from the train coming through it. But there was nothing. Damn, I thought I had heard something.

"Guess not," I said.

Tom started talking about the hunting trip he wanted to take in December. A couple of other guys came over, Nick and Dave, who also were planning a trip when the season opened. They started talking about rifles, and Tom said he was going to buy a new Remington 30.06 and that his old one was up for sale.

"Oh, yeah?" said Nick. "That's a pretty piece if I remember right."

"Damn good rifle," said Tom.

"Hold on," I said. "You hear that? Listen. That. Did you hear that?"

They all stopped talking and listened; then shook their heads. I could swear I was hearing something, like rock talking. A dull, rumbling sound, that will suddenly crack in the middle of the rumble, then rumble again. It usually means nothing. Whenever you disturb rock that's under pressure, and it's always under pressure underground, it naturally makes some noise. It doesn't stop giving and shifting right away, either. There is enough pressure this deep under the ground to keep the rock talking for years.

Most times the rock will talk and nothing will happen. Sometimes, though, talking rock can be a sign of rock about ready to move. That's what worried me. I swore I could hear it talking. Damn Ben, I almost said out loud, I don't ever think about this kind of stuff, and here I am thinking about it.

"Nothing," said Tom.

"I don't hear a thing out of the ordinary," said Dave.

"Me neither," said Nick, and the rest of the guys just shook their heads and started talking to each other again.

I put the noise out of my head the best I could. I think anybody could hear just about anything they wanted to down in a mine. It just depends on what you're expecting to hear. And damn it all, a couple of minutes later I heard it again. I kept it to myself this time, and a second after that I saw a light far down the tunnel, which meant the train was coming. I put my foot back on the track and felt it getting closer.

A train coming at you in the mine is a tricky thing all by itself. It's hard to judge how far away it is. There's so much humidity in the air that the train light seems almost like it's behind a fog bank. And the reflections of the light make it hard to tell what's really the train and what's not. The other dangerous thing is that since it's dark all around you and around the train, there's no real markers to let you know what it's passed and what it's got left to go. So when you see a light coming down the track at you, you just clear out of the way until it passes or stops right in front of you.

There are lots of war stories I've been told and told again myself about miners who didn't get out of the way for one reason or another and who ended up dead or damn sorry they weren't. A train running into you can do more than a little damage.

The train, or man-car as we call it, pulled up in front of us and stopped. We all climbed in and yelled to the motorman that we were ready to go. He nodded without turning around; I just saw his yellow cap go up and down and we took off. Riding the train through any tunnel in the Homestake is like being on a dark ride at an amusement park. You can hear the wheels running over the track, but you can't really see where you're going. Of course you do it everyday so you know what to expect, but still you're traveling into darkness. The light on the train, like I said before, doesn't go very far or wide, and the train is usually moving at a good clip so you come up on things before you can get a chance to tell they're there. It's best to kept your head down in case a low pipe or board is sticking up along the track and gives you a bump you won't forget for awhile.

Tom and Nick were talking pretty seriously about the rifle, and I was listening for that noise again. I couldn't get it out of my head. I looked up at the back, the ceiling that is, and expected it to fall on me at any minute. On the sides of the tunnel there are colored markers every so often to let you know your direction, depth and so on. I didn't hear the noise again, but at each marker we passed, I felt like I was getting closer to some kind of danger. It was stupid and I felt like a greenhorn kid, but I couldn't shake it.

We got off the train and headed over to the number 4 winze to take us all the way down. It's much smaller, naturally, than the main shaft so that even just the few of us made it crowded. I backed into the corner and held on as we dropped still deeper into the mine. Almost right away I could feel the temperature change when we got below the 7,000 level. It was sticky and wetter and started to warm up real fast. I unbuttoned my shirt and took off my cap for a minute. Even doing that, the way I'd been thinking all day, worried me some. I mean, you should never take your cap off at any time you're underground. Anything can fall on your head when you least expect it. I put it back on and felt disgusted with myself for the things I was coming up with to scare myself.

"I think he's going to buy it," Tom said to me in a kind of whisper, meaning the rifle.

"He hasn't even seen it. Has he?"

"That's why I think he's going to buy it," he laughed. "I'll make the deal 'sight unseen,' so that when he sees it, though I got nothing to hide, he won't be able to say no."

The cage stopped at a couple of other levels before letting me and Tom out at the 8,000 level. When the gate slid back, the heat hit me like a furnace. It's funny, but when you first walk out, you think that you won't be able to work in heat and humidity like that. Your skin starts crawling and itching and the dirty coveralls stick to you and sting. I felt like taking everything off and hosing myself down with one of the drill lines. But, damn, before you know it, your body gets used to it. Well, not

really used to it, but you can put up with it and you go on to work. Then, for no reason at all, the temperature will hit you fresh all over again. That can happen a couple three times a day. It's like your body has been adjusting and cooling all along and then breaks down for a minute or two and then catches itself and starts cooling and adjusting all over again. It's a crazy thing. There is a ventilation system down there, there has to be, and air-conditioning, too. You can hear them droning the minute you step off the cage. But at nearly two miles down in the earth and no breeze or fresh air of any sort, they just keep the temperature down to 120 degrees and the humidity at 90.

For me and Tom it's only a short five minute ride to our drift from where the winze lets us off. All told, if you figure that nothing goes wrong on the way, it takes about a half an hour from the ramp to our drift. Most times you never give the trip a second thought; you think of it like a "drive" you'd have to make to any job. But today it seemed to me like a hell of a way to be getting to anywhere and a hell of a place to call your "office," if you know what I mean.

The first thing we do when we get to the production face, after wetting down the pile of rock to hold back some of the dust, is to start barring down. Now some drifters I know muck up a little of the rock around the edge of the pile and try to clear some off the top so they can get farther in to put up their bar. Not me. Red Kentner was no rare accident, and I want to get any of the loose rock down before I muck up a shovelful. I don't want to take a chance on the ceiling falling in on me and flattening my head. It's a good thing me and Tom see eye to eye on that. As contractors we get

paid like a private company; we buy our own blasting powder and other tools and work our own time, and the less we disagree, the more money we make. And we make pretty good money.

By the time we finish the barring, and I already told you that it's done with a twelve foot heavy bar, we're completely wet with sweat. You could wring out quarts from your coveralls and they would be soaked again before you got them buttoned up. You're working wet from head to toe all day, and once you start mucking, you're covered in a film of dirt and grit. You look like the bogey man or something.

I took my glasses off, wiped them, and lit up a cigarette. The drift was in shadow by the cap lamp and when I lit the match, I saw the flame dance on the rock face. The rock in the Homestake Mine is hard rock, mostly quartz and different types of iron and a little chlorite here and there which is a green colored talc. With your cap lamp shining on an open face, the drift is swirled with different veins of the colored rock. It's almost pretty if you don't think about having to drill and blast it. I mean it's tougher than the granite they cut Rushmore out of.

The one ore you don't ever see is the gold you're digging for. It's so fine grained most of the time and locked in the other ores that it's not really visible. Sometimes, though, you might be in a really rich vein area and you might catch a sight of a flake or two glistening in the rock around you. That always gave me a strange feeling, seeing the gold right in front of me. It's like the Homestake was one big geode, cruddy and plain on the outside, but inside sparkling and surprising. At the

bottom of the mine in the muck and dust and dark, a sparkle of gold is a near miracle to see.

"They went more than eight feet," said Tom, referring to the shift before us. "That's a good goddamn night's work."

Drifting is a four part system. You drill, blast, muck up what you blasted, and haul it away. Then you start all over again. I would add another one to that list which is extending the rails and air lines and pipes and electric the eight feet distance that you've cleared out. Tom went ahead and got the power shovel ready. It scoops up the blasted rock and dumps it into an ore car behind. If you picture taking a shovelful of dirt and throwing it over your shoulder into a wheel barrow, you'll get a pretty good idea of what a power shovel looks like. You keep at it until the pile of blasted rock is gone and then a motorman hooks up to the ore cars you filled and pulls them to be hauled up to the surface for processing the gold out.

When Tom turned on the shovel, the whole drift started echoing and vibrating like we were inside a jet engine. You can't talk over a noise like that. Hand signals is all that works. The shovel churns up dust and shoots chips of rock every which way. You have to stay close to it, too, even though that's the last thing you want to do. If you don't, the shovel will start backing away from the pile and jump back if it hits a large rock. It gets a mind of its own and it could knock you over. Any rock that's too big to get in the bin you load by hand. Some of them can weigh over a hundred pounds and you strain and pry and get the rock in the car after mashing your finger or foot a little. It's back-breaking work that has to be done before noon so that you have

time to extend the rails and all the other stuff and blast out eight more feet for the night crew to muck up.

We were making pretty good time and had most of the pile up when the shovel jammed. It had a chunk of quartz stuck between the bin and the car and was blocking the way for the shovel to release the rest of its load. I shut off the shovel quickly. That is a safety rule anytime you get a jam in any type of equipment. I tried to get a crowbar between the rock and the shovel arms and pry it loose. But I couldn't get it to move an inch. Tom came over with a 16 pound sledge to hit and force it through the arms that were cradling it.

"Wait! Don't hit it!" I yelled. But it was too late.

The effect of him hitting that jammed rock with the sledge was like someone cutting the rope on a stuck catapult. Not only did the rock let go, but 20 or 30 chunks of rock weighing from 5 to 10 pounds each exploded up into the air, clear over the ore car behind us. I jumped back against the drift wall and covered my head with my hands. The rocks landed all around me and crashed into the side of the ore car like someone was shooting cannon balls at us.

Luckily, not one rock hit us. A 10 pound rock falling on you from just 7 feet could end your day, maybe your life. And then I thought to myself just how small a 10 pound rock was when you considered you were nearly two miles deep in the mine, with nothing but solid rock above you. The obvious, real danger I was in sizzled through me. I suddenly felt like running to some sort of safety. But safety was a long way away, and the cage wouldn't be back for us for hours.

"You all right?" Tom came over to me.

"Shit, man! I told you not to hit it!"

"Jesus. That was a stupid move, I guess. But, hell, I didn't see the tension it built up. Sorry."

"Yeah. Forget it." I said, trying to shake it off.

I wasn't about to forget it, though. I could hear Mary's voice telling me about the cave-in that nearly killed her dad. I mean, accidents happen all the time. You can make one slip, just one, and that could be it. But the worst part was that you could do everything right and still have the place come down on you. Knock it off, I said to myself. Just cut it out.

I wondered if the noise I thought I heard earlier was a warning or something. There's all sorts of superstitions that go into mining. They say a phantom noise is the way the mine talks to you and that it's trying to tell you something that you better listen to. Well I don't go in for superstition much. But when the rock had been raining down on me a few moments ago, it did cross my mind that maybe the Homestake was trying to tell me something.

Chapter 7

It took us about half an hour to clear away the debris and rock that the power shovel threw all over the place. We'd have to catch up for the lost time, so we could get the drilling done and blast another eight feet before quitting time. I could see the new tracks we'd put in shining and then disappearing into the dark. With the back only 7 feet high and walls the same distance apart, the place seemed like the dungeon we used to sing about as kids. The idea of loading it up with explosives and blasting suddenly seemed crazy to me.

But that was our job.

We set up the jackleg drill that looks like a telescope sitting on a tripod with connections for the air hose that powers it and some other lines for lubrication and cooling. We were set to drill 20 holes, each about 8 feet deep and then load them with ANFO, which is the explosive. We started out with six bits each of drill steel and by the time the round was done, all twelve bits were dull, but we made pretty good time. I pushed the jackleg out of the drift and Tom brought up a car full of the ANFO. It's a

kind of diesel fuel mixed with fertilizer; that's all it is but man does it go off if you pack it good and tight and set your caps right.

We headed out of the drift and around the corner into the cove where we had lunch. We put in our ear plugs which you have to do if you don't want your ears to be ringing for days afterwards. I opened my mouth to help absorb the shock waves that come from any blast in the mine. All the blasting that goes on underground you do at the end of a shift so that the air can clear some before the next crew comes on and starts the cycle all over again. As I was about to push the detonator, I could hear other blasting going on in the mine; then I pushed it.

I expected to see the back coming down on my head or to watch the walls crumbling in front of me, but they didn't. Everything was fine. Except my hands, they were trembling, trembling bad. Tom saw it, but he didn't say anything. He just got up quick and headed to the train pick-up. It got there on time for once, and we got in and headed back to the winze to take us up.

We changed to the main shaft on the 6,800 and the cage was packed. Tom wanted to wait for it to come back down again with less men on it. Not me, though, I wanted to get out quick. Full as it was, there weren't going to be any stops on the way up, and we just about flew to the surface in no time at all.

Tom had checked out my bits for me when we came on the shift since we were running late, so I hadn't seen Sandy yet today. I thought about him a lot over the vacation seeing so much of Mary. Man I was sick of running around behind his back

and meeting her on side streets. But that's the way she wanted it, and I said I'd wait to meet him until she was ready.

There were lots of miners in front of the bit room when I walked up. It didn't matter to Sandy, though, he never hurried. You'd be trying to get your gear turned in as fast as you could while there was some hot water left in the showers, and he'd be moving at a snail's pace, limping along. He could only handle one set of bits at a time in his good hand; the other hand just hung by his side.

"That son-of-a-bitch is too goddamn slow," I heard a couple of miners say. "They ought to do something about him."

'Course no one but me knew how he got hurt. I have to be honest with you, though, even knowing about it didn't help much.

It probably wasn't more than ten minutes, but it seemed like thirty by the time I got up to the split window. I was the last one from my cage drop-off, and Sandy had his back to me hanging up bits. He shuffled back up to the front without even looking up and took the drill steal out of my hands.

"Garnes," I said, "8,000 level."

He had turned to the back of the room by the time I said that, but then he turned around quicker than I think I'd ever seen him move.

Jesus, you should have seen his face. It was frozen, just staring right into my eyes. He had a cigarette in his mouth that he pushed out with his tongue and stepped on as he walked up to me. He set my bits on the counter top without looking away from me. He was practically leaning out of the room, close to my face. He might have

been pissed because I called out my name like he didn't know whose bit were whose. Maybe he thought I was trying to hurry him or something. But then I knew what it was, what it had to be.

"You think I'm a dumb son-of-a-bitch," he said, but he wasn't asking a question. "You think I'm blind or some fucking thing."

For just a second I thought maybe I was right, maybe he was pissed off for me calling out my name like that.

"What the fuck you think you're doing? Going on behind my back. Thinking I wouldn't know. What kind of asshole you think I am, Mr. Jake Garnes?"

When he said 'Mr. Jake 'Garnes,' like that, I could feel the hair on the back of my neck bristling. I didn't want to say anything; I wanted to hit him. It was like he was daring me to do it. I would have, too, if it hadn't been for Mary.

"What are you talking about?"

I didn't think before I said that. It just came out. It was stupid, a kid's answer when he gets caught red-handed.

"You gonna play that shit with me? You know what I'm talking about, Mr. Garnes?"

"Yeah, I know what you're talking about," I fired back at him, madder than hell now. "I'm dating your daughter."

"No you ain't 'dating' my daughter. You're chasing after her ass. 'Dating' is getting my permission to see her. Which I would never give."

I started to say something, but he cut me off.

"Well, you ain't chasing her no more. You hear me!"

He was practically spitting in my face.

"She ain't seeing you again, not ever."

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"You like saying that, don't you? 'What are you talking about?' I guess you're a dumb one, huh? I'll say it real slow this time, so you get it. And you listen good to me Garnes, because I won't say it again."

When he spoke this time he talked slow, like each word was meant to strike me down.

"Don't you ever see my Mary or call or talk to her again. I mean never. Don't you try it. You got that?"

"She's eighteen. There's no law against it."

He yanked my bits off the counter, and I jumped back. I thought he was going to hit me with them. Instead, he glared at me.

"I don't need no law, Mr. Garnes. You think I need a law?"

He turned then, spit on the ground, and went to the back of the bit room.

He didn't say anything else or look at me again. He left me standing there not knowing what to say. Finally, I had to walk away.

I'd seen Sandy plenty mad before, sure, hundred's of times. He got mad before the day began. That was nothing. But it was something much more than mad that I saw in his glare. There was a kind of desperation mixed in with the anger, desperate like a trapped animal protecting its cub. He was ready to do whatever it took to keep

her for himself, and to keep me away from her. At the bottom of him, I think he knew he wouldn't be able to do either.

Chapter 8

All the way back to the Dry, I kept wondering what Mary told Sandy about us that might have set him off like that. She must have said something. We were together at Latchstring Inn, our clothes coming off faster than our kissing and tugging at each other. What did she tell him? Did she tell him about her reaching for my shoulder and seeing the scar there? “What happened?” she said, putting her finger on it, rubbing it gently like it was a fresh wound. But it wasn’t a fresh wound by a long shot.

“Car accident,” I said, hoping to hold off any more questions, pulling my shirt down to hide it from her. And it worked. She didn’t ask another thing. But did she realize what it meant to me?

We were at Latchstring during my vacation last week. And when I said I loved her, I surprised myself. I’d never said it to a girl before. I said it right after we’d been, you know, been in bed together, and she was crying. I didn’t know why she was crying, and I didn’t say I loved her to try and stop her. I said it because I meant it.

"Don't say that, Jake," she said.

“Why not? You don’t have to say it back.”

"It's not that," she leaned her head down away from my eyes.

"Then what?"

She slowed her crying, so I waited.

"I knew the day would come," she said finally. "I guess he knew it, too."

"What do you mean? Who?"

"My falling in love."

Then I realized what she was getting at.

"You're talking about your dad, aren't you?"

She lifted her head up and half nodded.

"Mary, I know what you said he thinks about miners. But this is different. I love you. Tell him that, go on tell him that. I mean I love you for good and all. He can't do anything about that."

"That's what I mean, Jake. He's said it a million times, made me promise never to get mixed up with a miner. He said he'd never stand for me ending up with a man like him."

She started crying hard again. I tried to calm her.

"He can't mean it. And I ain't like him," I put my arm around her. "He may have said stuff like that, sure, but not if it means losing you. You're all he's got. You know that."

Then I shut up because I suddenly knew what she was really crying about. It wasn't so much that she feared he might disown her or something crazy like that. It was about her...she was saying good-bye to him. She was making the choice away

from him to me. I understood more about the importance of that choice after I got to know Sandy better and learned what the two of them meant to each other. I'm talking about his accident and her taking care of him. All those years of him holding a grudge, and the two of them alone, forming a stronghold against the town and the mine, especially the mine.

He depended on Mary to believe he was right to hate the Homestake for what it did to him. He depended on her to stay by him, even to think like him no matter what happened. Yeah, he was deadly afraid to lose her and what she meant to him. Mary knew now that he couldn't stop what was happening between us no matter how hard he tried, and believe me he would try plenty, like he was fighting for his life. And in a way, you could say he was.

We left the subject of Sandy just lay where it was on the bed there at the Latchstring Inn. But she must have told him about us. And when I started back to work the next week, I wasn't sure what I'd do about Sandy. Then, hell, when he threatened me at the bit room counter, I had no choice now but to have it out with him and damn the consequences.

I drove over to his house after I got cleaned up early evening that same day. The porch light was on. It was a yellow, bug-lite, and I felt like a bug standing there staring at it. I was stalling because I didn't know exactly what I was going to say. It all depended on what Sandy said after I told him we were going to go on seeing each other and he could like it or not, whatever, but that didn't change the fact that we were going to do it.

Since it was hot and humid like always in the summer in Lead, the front door was open, and through the screen I could see the living room. There was a couch and a chair and a standing lamp next to it. I could hear the TV on in the background. I couldn't see anyone inside. The porch, itself, was pretty small, nothing like at my folk's. He had a chair set out here and a basket with a bunch of newspapers in it, not much room for anything else. I took a step closer to the screen to look deeper into the house.

It still strikes me strange thinking back on this part of the story that if I'd just turned around and walked away, no one would have been the wiser. Doing that would have changed my whole life, all three of our lives. It's strange how one thing, like not knocking on the door, could mean so much. But it's no good thinking that way because I did knock on the door, and the TV went down, and I heard footsteps coming my way.

I knew it was Sandy by the sound of his one foot dragging behind him. He was coming in from the kitchen and taking his sweet time about it. At least it seemed like a long time to me, waiting there and wondering what he would do when he saw my face through the screen. I saw him come into view midway through the living room. There was more light inside than out on the porch; and because of the angle, I don't think he could see who it was at his door.

He was looking my way when he yelled out a sharp, "Yeah?" like whoever it was, he wasn't interested.

When I didn't answer, he kept on coming. Suddenly, he recognized me, and he reacted like he was looking at a ghost. For a second or two, neither of us said a thing. He came up close to the door, practically putting his nose to the little squares of the screen. His voice was as mean as he could muster.

"What the hell do you want? You don't hear so good?"

"Is Mary here?" I asked.

"No. And if she was, she ain't here for you."

When he said no, I felt a little relieved. Maybe we could straighten things out before she got back. After what happened next, though, I knew it wasn't going to be so easy.

He pushed open the screen door and sort of puffed himself up. I had to about jump out of the way of the screen or it would've hit me in the face.

"I don't think you got what I'm saying, Mr. Garnes. Either you're a dumb sonofabitch or you're deaf. So I'm going to make it crystal clear this time."

He was using his hands to explain as well as his words, like some kind of sign language, pointing me off the porch and into my car. It would have been funny except that he was red in the face, spitting the words out, looking ready to kill me.

"I don't want you the fuck around here or near my Mary anywhere. Ever! You got that? Do you understand me!"

He was a small man, maybe 5'8", and being crippled, he wasn't much of a threat. But you should have heard the way he said the last words. He left me no room

to go from there. I thought about just decking him on the spot and then carrying him into the house to talk it over.

But, hell, I couldn't hit him. Even if he hit me first, I wasn't sure that I could hit him back. He was standing in a pair of old shorts, and he had on brown slippers and no socks; and with the watch cap pulled all the way down as usual, he was kind of pathetic. He was a little dog with a big bark as far as I could see.

"Now wait a Goddamn minute," I said. "You don't know my intentions. I got..."

"Don't give me your bullshit 'intentions'," he cut me off. "I don't give a piss about your intentions!"

I could see the sweat running down his face, into his eyes, onto his lips.

"You think you're Mister Big Man Drifter, don't you? You no good bastard keep away from my little girl!"

He lunged forward, "Get the fuck off of here!"

I don't remember doing it, but I must have backed away from him because we'd been toe to toe before. Then he pushed me in the chest with his good hand and was swearing some more. He went to push me again, and I grabbed his hand or he would have pushed me off the porch. He surprised me how strong he was just with one arm. I had to hold onto it with both hands as he tried to pull it away.

We were struggling on the porch, and he was yelling all the while, and I was trying to hold onto his arm and not hurt him at the same time. He stopped trying to get free all of a sudden, and I let up some on my hold. Then he gave one big jerk that

caught me off balance, and I fell into him and he lost his balance. We both went headlong, tearing right through the screen door like it wasn't there, and I landed on top of him on the living room floor.

We landed pretty hard with an ugly thud, but he didn't seem hurt. The fact is, he was hollering and fighting harder than ever. He had his good arm free now, and he smacked me with it on the side of my head, straight on the ear and it hurt like hell. I just reacted then and thumped him in the chest good and hard. He gave a deep growl as the air came out of him. That slowed him for a bit.

"Now cut it out, man," I said looking down on his sweaty face. I'll let you up, but don't fuck around!"

He nodded in agreement, so I let go of his arms, and damn if he didn't shove me and buck me quick and high enough to knock me off of him. Then he jumped on my back like an idiot kid riding his dad for a bronco. I was about to throw him off and really let him have it when I heard Mary screaming at the top of her lungs.

"Stop it! Stop! Daddy. Stop it you two! Jake, my God, stop!"

She'd come in the door without either of us hearing, and she was standing over the two of us like a mother breaking up fighting kids. Sandy slid off my back, plopping next to me, leaning back on his hand and looking up at her. He was panting pretty hard. I know I felt like an ass and I'm sure he did, too. We didn't look at each other, two mutes. Mary had a bag of groceries in her hand, and she set it down.

"I saw the door ripped up like that, I didn't know what to think. When I heard the yelling..."

She stopped there. Sandy managed to haul himself up and straighten his cap. I got up, too, brushed myself off.

"I don't want you seeing him no more," he huffed. "I don't want it," he said in a rough voice, but it was almost like he was asking, not telling her anymore.

"Daddy, you don't know him, he's..."

"I know him. I know all of them! Drifters, slushers, stopers, millers. The hell I don't know him. I know every miner that ever lived."

He looked at me then, and I looked right back at him.

"Now you get the hell out of here," he said to me, glancing at Mary like she was supposed to back him up.

She didn't say a word. Sandy walked over to the busted door and pushed it open.

"Out! Get out now!" he said, glaring at me.

It was a hopeless gesture, and he said it loud and fast like it was a simple command I should follow. I felt bad for him now and looked away.

"Tell him to leave, Mary," his voice was nearly a whisper. "Tell him you want him out of here and not to come back."

For a long while she didn't say anything. She looked at me and then over to Sandy, and she began to cry a little.

"Don't daddy," she said at last, "Don't do this."

"Tell him, Mary. Go on. I'm asking you, honey. Tell him to leave us alone."

I'm sure you've heard stories about people who are just about drowned who say their whole life came to them, every bit of what they'd ever done went before their eyes. I believe it because there seemed like enough time had passed before Mary spoke again for my whole life to pass before me. It seemed to be hours, standing there in silence. Sandy looking at her and she staring straight down at the floor. I could hear the refrigerator working and gurgling in the kitchen it was so damned quiet. Sandy was standing there, holding the door with the screen busted in and the yellow light falling on him. He was still and alone as a man could be.

Mary was trembling, not crying anymore or making any noise. And, hell, I don't know what I looked like, but it couldn't have been anything too good. I didn't know what to expect. It was up to her now.

She wiped her eyes, turned my way.

"Sit down, Jake," she said.

I hesitated and caught Sandy's eye.

"Go on," she said again but no harder, "Sit down."

She dropped onto the couch herself then, and covered her face in her hands.

I heard the screen slam shut; and when I looked up, Sandy had already walked out.

Chapter 9

We sat there a while, neither of us speaking until finally Mary dried her eyes and straightened up.

"It had to happen," she said calmly. I knew it was going to someday."

"I'm sure he knew you were in love already, and there was nothing to be done about it."

She looked toward the door, "What's he going to do without me?"

"Mary," I said as comforting as I could, "He still has you, he'll realize that. Let him cool down. Then he'll see things the way they are."

I don't think she believed it. The truth is, I didn't believe it myself. I sure couldn't see the three of us there sitting around having a big friendly chat. Sandy wasn't the type.

"Let's take a drive somewhere," I said.

"I'm going to wait. I want to be here when he comes back. You go on home."

"We'll stay together."

We sat there and waited and there wasn't a lot to say. I wondered how long we'd sit there. Until dawn? I guess so. But it turned out not to be very long at all. Inside of half an hour, the screen door opened and Sandy came in.

He looked pretty bad, like he'd been crying himself, though I doubt it. Mary got up, took his hand, and walked him to his chair.

"Mary, honey, I want you to leave me and him alone. I want to talk to him."

"I'm not going to do that, daddy. Whatever you're going to say, I have a right to hear it."

"If you say it to me, you're saying it to her anyway," I said. "What you got against me or any miner for that matter? You work at the Homestake yourself. "

"Listen, you, Mr. Garnes," he was still sarcastic as hell.

"Don't go calling me that no more. My name's Jake."

"Please, you two, if you are going to start this way..."

She stopped there, and said she was going to fix coffee. Me and Sandy both lit up cigarettes and paid a hell of a lot of attention to smoking for a minute or two.

"How long you been at the Homestake?" Sandy asked me.

"Near ten years."

"Ten years. That ain't long."

"Depends on how you look at it."

"It'll be 23 years this November for me. But I only count the first 11."

"Okay, why?"

"I been in that goddamn bit room for the past twelve. That sure as hell ain't mining. Or do you think it is?"

He was quick to be nasty. I stayed quiet.

"Mining's risking your ass for peanuts and getting it kicked in most likely."

Mary brought the coffee in and we fixed ourselves cups and sat there drinking it for minute.

"Where do you suppose I got my limp from?" he said all of a sudden.

"I know, Mary told me."

"Yeah, course she did."

He took a sip of his coffee, put out one cigarette and lit another.

"Shit, I'm not going to tell you nothing about mining you don't already know."

It was the first half-nice thing he said to me.

"Jake won't be mining all his life," Mary said.

"You gonna marry my daughter and take her away from all of this? What are you going do for money?"

"There's other jobs," I said without sincerity.

He went quiet for a bit, then started in a different tone.

"Why do you think I've stayed in Lead all these years, dragging my ass around the bit room making peanuts?"

He had something to tell me, and I didn't like being toyed with.

"What are you getting at?" I said looking at Mary, who seemed confused by him as well.

"I'm going to tell you two something, something you won't maybe believe, but can't help yourself from wanting to believe."

"What are you talking about, daddy?" Mary asked, "Course I'll believe you whatever it is."

"Well, we'll see, but you're going to know now why we stayed in Lead and why I can't leave it yet."

Mary and I exchanged a glance, and Sandy stood up, pacing the room, talking faster than I'd ever heard him, talking about the history of the Homestake Mine, names, dates, the whole works. How Horatio Ross was a scout for General Custer, and how he first found gold nuggets and then how the Manual Brothers found the "lead" of gold and started digging underground for it. He went on to Hearst and his "gang" as he called them and how they bought the claim from the Brothers and really got it going. It was a history both of us knew, but we didn't stop him.

Finally, tired out I guess, he sat down and poured himself another cup of coffee, lit up another Pall Mall and looked over at the two of us.

"And what the hell do you think they all were chasing like their life depended on it. Gold!" he yelled. "That's what made this town, built it from nothing and keeps it going. Hell, that's what made the whole goddamn world. They got gold statues to God himself! Even He likes gold. You can take your diamonds and rubies and emeralds, and then there's gold. There ain't nothing like gold."

"It's important all right. There's no doubt about it," I said. I couldn't think of anything else to say with him staring wide-eyed at us, but he went on again like I hadn't said a word.

"Have you ever seen it? You've been working there ten years, and I'll bet you ain't seen it once. Maybe you've seen a speck or two in a rock face. You haven't had the luck I've had!"

He let out a loud and bitter laugh and slapped his leg. He grabbed his crushed hand and shook it out at us.

"This is the price for seeing gold!" he yelled. "It doesn't come cheap."

Mary jumped up, like out of a trance when he yelled out.

"Daddy, c'mon now. You're starting to scare me going on and on about gold like that."

He sat back, calmed down a bit. His head seemed to clear.

"I'm sorry, honey. I just want you to know right now that what I'm about to tell you ain't cheap to come by."

Then he looked me in the eye.

"She loves you," he said. "I saw that tonight. She's not my little girl anymore."

Mary started to say something, but he stopped her. "It's all right. You have no explaining to do to me. I'm the one with the explaining to do."

He paused, and in the silence I could hear a coyote cry out across the valley of Lead, and then the sound of the crushers booming in the background seemed to come up in volume.

"You know I used to be a drifter, Jake, a high-baller like you." He looked down at his bad leg. "Mary may have told you some of my accident, but she don't know it all, no one does. I was in there for three days before they pulled me out. Three goddamn days...everybody moaning around me, and I couldn't move but to crawl along the ground and it hurt too much to do that. So I sat there where I fell."

"Could you hear anybody coming, digging after you?" I asked.

"Nothing. Not a sound. My light worked for awhile. Then the battery went out and the place was darker than a coat pocket, the kind of dark you don't adjust to. Couldn't hear nothing nor see nothing. I might as well been dead. For a while I thought I was dead."

He stopped and flicked the ash from his cigarette and kind of leaned forward like he was letting go of a secret.

"But before it went dark, I saw something I ain't ever seen before or since."

"What? What was it?" Mary said.

"Gold." He eased the word out real slow. "Everywhere I looked. There was more gold than you can dream of. It's not sparkling in the rough like that. Not like some pirate's treasure chest. But it glitters some, soft and dull. The whole damn cavern was glittering with gold."

"Gold?" I heard myself say out loud, "sitting out there?"

"Nuggets, I'm telling you! Bigger than my fist. I was lying on it, beneath me, above me. Everywhere. It was like being locked up in Ft. Knox. Even in the dark, I could still see it before me."

He stared straight ahead trance-like. Mary went over to him and sat on the arm of his chair. She took a hold of his hand. "Daddy, are you all right?"

He nodded and whispered, "Gold, everywhere I looked."

"I'm going to make some more coffee? she looked over at me.

I went to the bathroom and Mary went into the kitchen. It was like we both were running from what we'd just heard. I don't know what she was thinking, but I figured it was close to what was going through my head. He was crazy, simple as that, and that the accident and all he went through made him that way. Hell, there's no way he could have seen what he said he saw. I've heard of what they call a "high pocket" where you might find fingers of solid gold in the middle of host rock. But they were nothing like what he was talking about. There weren't caverns of gold. No way.

He was unconscious, too, when they pulled him out. He probably was in shock and saw the whole thing in a dream at the hospital for Christ's sake. It was pitiful, really, if you thought about it. To think of him smashed up and dreaming about a gold-lined cavern all the years since the accident was pretty sad.

When I got back to the living room, Mary was pouring coffee. Sandy looked over at the two of us.

"So," he said, "now you know why I stayed in Lead all these years. There's a treasure down there. And we got to go get it. I can't do it by myself you can see that."

Man oh man, so that's what this was all about. He was spilling his big secret for me to go on a treasure hunt with him. He was nuts. I looked at Mary.

"I know it's dangerous. No beating around the bush about that. But this time it's for us, you and Mary and me. You can keep all you can carry..." he trailed off trying to laugh about it.

The air in the room got pretty heavy with the silence between us. I didn't want to tell him what I thought in truth about all this gold talk and Mary didn't either. He finally said what we were thinking.

"You don't believe. Do you? You think I'm out of my ever loving mind."

"I'm not calling you a liar," I said.

"No, daddy. It's nothing like that."

"It could've easy been pyrite..." I said, "You were hurt pretty bad and all. It might have been pyrite, easy."

"It was gold," he said and he wasn't angry. "It didn't look like gold. It was gold."

He leaned forward, started fumbling with one hand with his watch cap. He got a hold of it and pulled it off. Mary gave out a short gasp, and what I saw made me near cough. He had a gruesome looking scar that formed a deep groove on the side of his head. It was about four inches long, ugly, red, with no hair growing out of it.

"It's all right, Mary. It don't hurt me no more. It just looks like hell."

He put the cap back on.

"I got proof there's gold down there. That ugly scar, you know how I got that?"

We shook our heads, staying quiet.

"That valley on the side of my head is where my cap ended up after a rock dropped on it. Took the doctors to cut it off and put my skull back together."

"I don't want to hear anymore about this," Mary said with a shudder.

"You said you could prove there's gold down there," I said to move him off the subject. "How?"

I wanted to believe it; he was right about that. I mean, who wouldn't? Gold down there, maybe pounds of it, and nobody knowing it was there. It was a good dream to have if you were the dreaming type.

"I still have that old cap. It's my proof."

"How is it 'proof?'"

"Before my lamp battery went dead, I opened up the lamp like you do to change the bulb, and I picked up a chunk of gold the size of a peach pit and put it inside the lamp housing."

"Where is it?" I said quick. "You still have that cap?"

"Sure I got it."

"Have you ever seen it, Mary?" I asked her.

"No, she ain't ever seen it. No one's seen that cap except me." He got up and was walking toward the bedroom. "But you're going to see it now. Both of you. You'll see my proof. You're going to see I ain't telling some wild-ass story."

He walked out of the room, and Mary came back over to me.

"I never heard anything about this before. Just my dad talking this much is something to take notice of. I'm kind of scared all of a sudden. Could there really be gold down there like he said?"

"No way. He was hurt too bad to think straight or see straight. It couldn't be."

We could hear him moving something around in his bedroom. Then the noise stopped and we heard him walking in the hallway toward us, then he stepped into the living room with an old, beat-up cap in his hand. It was brown, or had been at one time, most of the paint was worn off. The left side was cut away some where they must have got it off of him like he said. It was the cap all right. I didn't doubt that. What was in it was another question.

"Here take it up, Jake," he said and handed it my way, "or you Mary. Here, take it." Neither of us moved. "Go on. Take a hold of it."

I got up and took it from his hand. When I did that, something rattled inside.

"Hear it?" he said excited. "You hear that?"

"I did," Mary said, and you could tell she wanted the sound to be what Sandy said it was.

"I told you. I told you there's gold in there."

"There's something in there," I said.

"Open it up," Mary was standing up by now. "Hurry. Go on. Open it up!"

I started to work at the latch to the lamp when Sandy reached for it.

"No don't!" he yelled.

"Why not?" Mary said.

But when I looked in Sandy's eyes, I knew why he didn't want me to open it up.

"You haven't seen it. Have you?" I said. "You put it in the dark and you ain't opened all these years."

"Is that true?" Mary asked softly.

"I've had that cap in my hands probably a thousand times in the past 12 years. Shook it like a goddamn piggy bank. Listened to it rattle, held it up to the light. Even slept on it under my pillow once."

Then he stopped short and grabbed it out of my hands. He stood in the center of the living room, turned the cap facing to the ground with the lamp down. He cried out loud as he flipped open the lamp casing. Something fell onto the floor at his feet. He leaned over and picked.

"It's gold! Goddamn it! I told you it was! Holy shit! I knew it all along! Look at it! Just look at it sparkle in my hands!"

Mary came up close, and he handed it to her. She'd never seen gold in her life to know if it was real or not, but she said, "It is gold, Jake. Look, it is!"

I took the nugget in my hand and felt the heft of it, I knew it was gold. But still I leaned over and held it in the light. I'm telling you right now that when I looked down at that chunk of gold in my hand, a lot of things suddenly seemed possible.

We were all huddled around it, rubbing it like it was a magic lamp and a genie was going to appear.

"It's gold," I said, like I still couldn't believe it.

"Damn bet you it's gold," Sandy said. "All this time, I knew it was gold rattling around in there."

He hugged Mary, and I stood up and we damn near shook each other's hands off and laughed and whooped it up.

Finally, we calmed down and sat back down. I was still holding the nugget. The sun was starting to come up and the lights inside grew pale. We sat there quiet, each of us with our own dreams of what the nugget meant and what we were going to do about it.

"It sure as hell is gold," I said not much louder than to myself.

"Yeah," Sandy said slowly, "and it's waiting down there for us to come and get it."

Chapter 10

I thought it was near to impossible that Sandy's story could be true. Sure, the nugget was real all right, but he could have put it in the cap lamp sometime after the accident, though I couldn't think of reason why he would and I've got to admit he looked surprised as hell when it fell to the floor. So let's say he didn't fake it, that he really did pick it up in the cavern. Well, what if he picked up the only chunk of gold in the place? But that seemed less likely than to think the cavern was solid gold like he said. Could there really be that kind of gold down there? It kept eating at me, but it seemed like I didn't have much choice. Either he'd put the nugget of gold in his cap to fool me or there really was a treasure of gold sitting down there and nobody but us to know about it.

Yet even if it was true, I didn't see what we could do about it. First of all, the mine is a monster of a place and a dig that old would be hard to find and nearly impossible to get to. Then there was the problem of getting into the mine without someone seeing you. The Homestake never closes. There's always someone above ground and below, guards, too, in some places. And let's just say we could find the

cavern and there was gold inside. Then what? The idea of trying to bring gold to the surface without power machinery was just too impossible to consider.

All this went through my mind on the drive back from Sandy's to my house. I ran in, took a quick shower and jumped back in the truck with a cup of coffee in my hand. I was late and I was supposed to pick up Tom. When I drove by his house, I could see his car was gone already. I knew he'd be wondering, and the last thing I needed was to have to explain my whereabouts.

"Where the hell were you?" he said when I walked up and opened my locker.

"Sorry, man. I overslept."

"Then maybe you can tell me why your truck wasn't in your driveway. I went by your house on my way in," he said with a smile on his face, like he'd caught me.

"Hey," I said pissed, "Drop it, okay?"

Getting angry seemed the best way to get him off the subject.

"I already dropped it. I'm on to other things by now...like your dad was here a minute ago looking for you."

That shook me up.

"What did he want?"

"Just wanted to talk to you."

I sure didn't want to talk to him. As far as I was concerned, we had only one thing to talk about, and I wasn't about to get into that. I saw him again in my mind in Rapid City. No, I didn't want to talk to him this morning.

Me and Tom finished changing and headed down the ramp when I heard my dad calling out.

"Yeah," I said without turning fully around so that he had to hurry to come up beside me.

"I'm sorry I missed you at dinner at the house Sunday. Business. You know how it is sometimes."

I searched his face for any sign lying. I didn't see it, but that burned me up even more. I mean, if he could lie like that to my face, what the hell couldn't he do?

He was dressed in a suit and looked out of place on the ramp with all of us in overalls. I was embarrassed for him to tell the truth. There isn't the greatest feeling between us miners and the white collar guys. We think they're all a bunch of duffs who don't do much, and though we know that's not completely true, it does feel like we're the one's making their money.

"You know the picnic's coming up," he smiled.

He meant the Company Picnic at Pactola Dam next weekend. I just nodded.

"I want to sign you up for the baseball team. My team. We got to get even after last year. Boy, they skunked us good."

I always had a hard time playing for him. His team was made up mostly of management types. Either I played for my father or I joined the miners and played with the guys I worked with. I was pretty good at ball, played on the High School team and whatnot. I don't me to brag, but I could turn the tide sort of speak.

"What do you say? Are you going to help out your pop?"

That "pop" just about made me want to puke. Lucky for me the cage came up and I started moving away.

"Let me think about it," I yelled back to him over the noise of the gates opening.

"Go on think about it. But I'm counting on you, Jake," he kind of laughed.

It was an empty feeling I had in my stomach when the cage headed down. I wasn't going to be able to go on long without having it out with him. The way it was, I was only half there. I wasn't really listening and not really answering either. I had a whole other conversation in my head all the time he was talking to me.

Mary and I had already made plans to go to the picnic, and by the time we got there Saturday morning, the place was packed with game booths for kids and sign-ups for just about everything from three-legged races to treasure hunts and boat races. There was food in the air with whole sides of beef bar-b-queuing and pigs roasting with an apple in their mouth. There was enough fried chicken and corn on the cob to feed an army, and all kinds of music, too, country groups and banjo pluckers and fiddlers walking around or sitting in the shade whooping it up.

While we looked for my mom's green-striped umbrella, Mary was on again about the gold, was it real or not, and if it was real how we'd go about getting it, pretty much the same thoughts I had but which I didn't say out loud. Then she always got back to one issue.

"How dangerous is it down there, Jake?"

“Plenty,” I said as I’d said many times to her in the last week. “Let’s not go on about this. I haven’t even decided yet I’ll do anything about it.”

“I know, I know, and I’m not saying you should. Not at all. But I know he’s making plans after seeing that nugget again.”

“What kind of plans?”

"I'm not sure. He's just buzzing around, in and out of the shed out back."

"Well, he can't do much by himself. That's certain. So let's just not get ahead of ourselves.”

I spotted the green striped umbrella. My mom had used that thing since I was a kid. It was on a small rise right near the baseball diamond. I guess my dad had some part in deciding they'd set up there. I mean, winning that ball game was a lot more important to him than playing the game as the saying doesn't go.

"Do I look all right?" Mary asked.

"Course you look great."

My mother caught sight of us first and waved and I waved back. I could see Gena putting food out on the picnic table.

"Hello," my she said, taking the basket out of Mary's hand. "You found us all right, then?"

"Couldn't miss you with that," I pointed to the raggedy umbrella.

"Lets more sun in than it keeps out," she laughed.

Gena came over and introduced herself.

"Sit down," my mom said. "Here out of the sun. It's always the hottest on the day of the picnic."

"I swear the weathermen and the soda companies are in cahoots," Gena laughed.

All their small talk was a way of getting around the hundreds of questions the two of them really wanted to ask Mary. I mean who cared about the heat? My mom couldn't wait too awfully long, and after she got both of us some iced tea, she got to it.

"Do you have family that works at the mine?"

"My dad works there. Has for a long time."

"Well, you probably know that Jake's dad, Robert, works there, too. He's a manager over in Safety. Used to be underground but not for over ten years."

She wasn't bragging exactly, but she was proud of her man.

"My husband, Ben, is a motorman, but I'm sure Jake already told you that," Gena offered.

"My dad's a bitman. He's been doing that for years," Mary said.

I think my mom and Gena both knew enough to know that meant something was wrong with him or that he was old, and they let the subject drop.

"Ben on the diamond?" I asked.

"Yes, with your father, either playing ball or getting ready to play ball. Why don't you see if you can find them. I want your father to meet Mary."

I didn't want Mary to feel uncomfortable being left alone. I looked over at her and then my mom said, "Go on. We women will do all right without you."

Mary nodded and I left them to themselves. I looked back once and Mary was taking out the chicken she'd fried and I could hear the chatter coming on.

It didn't take long to spot them. They were over by home plate in a kind of huddle, with them were two of my dad's old friend, Ralph and Bill, from the days when he was a miner. These guys stayed friends with him when he moved up on top. Lots of other guys he knew didn't. Bill usually played second base and he could whip the ball to first for a double play about as good as anybody.

Anyway, Bill and Ralph were there and some other guys I didn't know too well who were managers or office guys. One of them I'd heard about, Bud Johnson, who was a senior manager in New Projects Development.

My dad looked up as I came over.

"Here comes the star pitcher to save the day," he yelled out.

They all said their hellos and shook my hand and said how glad they were to have me on their team. Even though I didn't want to, I started to feel pretty good.

"Did you bring Mary?" Ben asked. I nodded. "She with mom and Gena?"

"I guess they're talking her ear off by now," I said.

"I want to meet her before she's running for the hills," he said.

"You will. Plenty of time for that," said my dad.

"Yeah right," said Bud, butting in. "We've got strategy to plan and games to be won."

I just looked at him cold.

"You better believe we do," my dad added seeing my glare.

"I knew you'd come through for us, Jake," Bud tapped me on the shoulder.

Man, this guy was rubbing me the wrong way. I didn't come through for him, but for my dad, who started asking me what I thought about the positions they'd assigned. It could have been the World Series the way he had everything planned.

"The way I see it," he went on, "we have our good points and our bad ones. We're going to be strong in hitting and with you pitching, Jake, strong in that area, especially. That means, naturally, they're going to have some trouble getting on base. We're also good in the infield. Ralph at first, Ben on third and Bud catching."

"I played some in high school myself, so I'll be signaling pitches..." Bud said looking over at me, then backed off a bit when he caught my look. "...if you like..." he added.

Our team was called the "Stakes," and last year the miners, called the "Diggers," beat us 6 to 3. It wasn't much of a surprise to me. Usually the miners won. Hell, they were in better shape. They didn't need to sit down after innings and they didn't get out of breath sliding into home plate.

"We going to kick some butt this year, Jake?" Bud tapped me again.

"Hard to say," I barely mumbled.

"That's not the spirit," he said.

"Of course we're going to beat them," my dad laughed, trying to lighten everything up. "We'll get them for sure this time."

"You bring your glove?" Ralph asked. "Got an extra if you didn't."

"Mine's in my truck, but thanks."

"Well, then, you better go get it," my dad said. "I'd like to get some practice in before we start. I want to get a feel for where we're strongest."

"I'll walk back with you," said Ben. "I want to meet the woman in your life."

"That's a good idea," said my dad. "Let's take a break and get back to it at, say, 1:00. How's that sound?"

Everyone agreed, and the three of us started walking back.

"What's her name, again?" he asked.

"Mary."

"I know that much. Your mother told me that. What's her last name?"

"Stennis," I said like it didn't mean a thing.

My dad almost stopped in his tracks, but Ben paid no attention to the name.

"Her dad's not the bitman...Sandy...?"

Ben looked over at me.

"Yep," I said flat as I could, "he is."

My dad nodded, thinking, taking some time to respond.

"I knew he had a daughter. Didn't know her name. But I knew he had one."

"How'd you know that?" I asked, suspicious of what he wasn't saying.

"I know him, or I mean I know about him enough to know he had a daughter."

"What of it?" I was ready to fight.

"Nothing. I'm not saying anything by it."

"What gives?" Ben asked. "I mean, shit, everyone knows what a bastard he is, but even he's entitled to a daughter."

"You're damn right," I added, "and he's got one."

"Does he know you're seeing his daughter?" my dad asked.

"Yeah, I went and told him."

"You did? I see."

"See what?"

"Nothing."

"Bullshit," I said because he seemed like he was hiding something.

"You know about his accident, then?" he finally asked.

I had to smile about that.

"Yeah, I heard about it."

"What accident? What the hell's going on here?" Ben was saying. "I feel like I'm on the sidelines."

My dad looked to me, but I kept quiet.

"Sandy was in a cave-in long before your time," he said softly. "That's what happened to him, why he limps and all."

Then he stopped walking, and we both waited for more. I was kind of looking forward to hearing the story from another side. I guess I was hoping he'd say something that would make the idea of going after the gold impossible.

"Did you know him back when it happened?" Ben asked.

"Yeah, but not close or anything." He stopped for a second, like he was deciding to say it all or not. Then he said it, "I was there. I was part of the rescue team that pulled him out."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It was too much of a coincidence.

"You pulled him out?"

"This was before I went upstairs to Safety. The area was very unstable, treacherous. They asked for volunteers to go down and dig them out. There were five of them in there."

"What happened?" Ben pushed for more.

"Sandy's the only one we got out. The place just collapsed behind him. It was like the mouth of a shark snapping shut."

"What happened then?"

Again it was Ben doing the leading. I kept quiet.

"What do you mean? We ran like the devil out of the place. It all could've come down any minute."

"Wait, let me get this straight," Ben said. "The other guys...they left them there to die?"

"They were dead already."

"You don't know that!" I burst out now.

At first he looked like he was going to jump down my throat. Then his face changed. He took his time.

"It wasn't our decision. The office upstairs called off the rescue. Called it off and closed the place down permanently."

"But what did you think!" I was pissed. "What did everybody think about doing that?"

He looked at me for a long minute before answering.

"They thought what you're thinking right now. That we should've gone back for them...but they're wrong."

"The Company left them down there to die," Ben said.

"Ben," my dad turned to him, "you should have seen Sandy. He'd been there for three days. His head all bashed in. He was nearly dead, himself. That last cave in finished them for sure."

"You can't know that for sure," I said again.

"The decision was already made. There wasn't any point in thinking different."

"Sandy's best friend died down there. Did you know that?"

"Look, Jake, I don't know what Sandy's been saying. He had a bad break, I'll give him that. But he's not alone. The mine is a dangerous place. You know that. What do you do? You pick up the pieces and you go on with your life."

"Yeah, sure, go back to the bottom of the pit and wait for it to cave in on me," I said.

"Don't talk like that," he said flatly.

"Yeah, man, that's not cool, you'll spook yourself," Ben was serious.

"What happened to Sandy happened a long time ago," my dad said.

"Yeah, well he ain't forgot it," I snapped.

"Maybe it's time he did," he said and walked up the hill to the green umbrella.

We stood there quiet. Thinking our own thoughts. For me, it was pretty clear he was asking us to let him off the hook. But I couldn't help wondering if there was

more he wasn't telling. And it gave me the creeps to think about the men left behind in that cavern. I hoped he was telling the truth about one thing at least...that those miners were already dead when the mine gave up on them.

Chapter 11

By the time we got back to the picnic area, everybody was friendly as could be, and I made the introductions. Ben told me how pretty Mary was right in front of her, which made her blush and look down. Then we ate and my dad told the "girls" to be sure to be at the diamond by 2:30.

"We need cheerleaders. Do you know any high school cheers we could use?" my dad asked Mary.

It wasn't meant as an insult because she looked so young, and she didn't take it that way.

"Sure," she said, "one or two I remember."

"Well, you ahead and sing them out loud and clear from the stands."

"It'll be fun," my mom said, "Teach them to me and Gena."

I went to the truck and got my mitt. All the way back to the diamond, we didn't talk about anything except the game coming up. My dad was trying to pump us up for it. Of course, he had to be careful about doing that. I mean, me and Ben were miners after all, so he couldn't run the Diggers down too much. Mostly, he just tried to give

me some advice about my pitching. I couldn't believe he could go on and on about the goddamn game after what he'd just told us about Sandy. I looked away when he talked and barely answered. Ben knew something was up with me, and asked. I said nothing was wrong, but my dad just kept on going over the "Big Game."

By the time we got to the diamond, I was boiling mad. The old snobs from the surface workings were out there in their brand new shorts and tee-shirts. I bet they only played once a year, at the picnic. Ralph and Bill were OK, like I said. But the rest of them made me sick right then. Bud shouted out a dumb hoot and said something about me being the saving pitcher, and how we were going to clean up on the Diggers. I almost bit my lip off to keep from telling him what I thought of him and the whole damn team.

And we didn't clean up on the Diggers or anything near that. They were out fielding us and even out hitting us no matter how I pitched it to them. By the end of the 8th, they were ahead by one.

My mom was whistling from the stands, which were packed with wives, girlfriends and parents of the players on both sides. My friend Tom Furgis had sprained his ankle putting up a fence at his house so he wasn't playing on the Diggers as he usually did. He was sitting in the bleachers and was rooting for his team and trying to razz me by calling out my name just as I wound up for the pitch. Mary was sitting pretty quiet through most of the game, not shouting out any cheers since a couple at the beginning. But when I came to bat at the top of the ninth, she started

yelling for me to hit a homerun. I looked over and nodded to her. We had a man on first. We had a chance to go into the lead. My dad came up to me when I was on deck.

"Okay, Jake. Looks like this is the time to let it all hang out. Go get 'em."

I didn't say anything. But I didn't want to win. I knew that for sure. I didn't want the managers to beat the miners and I didn't feel like giving them my best shot. But before I could work it all out in my mind, what with Mary cheering for me and my mom whistling and Gena calling out my name, the pitch came down the pike and I belted it. It was a homer. I knew that the minute it left my bat. And sure enough, I was standing on home plate, not even out of breath, before they got the ball back to the infield. The fans for the Stakes were hollering like mad. My dad came out and damn near hugged me, and goddamn Bud was congratulating me and slapping me on the back and telling my dad what a great kid he had.

"The game isn't over yet," I said to him. "Don't get too excited."

I had to keep looking into his stupid face with every pitch as my catcher. I felt like a traitor to my friends and to the Diggers. Hell, I was a miner. These same bosses or others just like them had left Sandy's best friend and the others to die. It was disgusting that here I was helping them to win. Not this time, not this time, I said to my self. They're just not going to have it their way.

Ralph was the next batter up and he struck out, so we were back on the field with us leading by one point.

"Strike them out, Jake," my dad shouted, "1-2-3 and down they go."

I remember what happened next as clear as if it was yesterday. The first guy up was Dave Helgaschmidt. Dave was a sandman, the guy who shoots sand and waste into a drilled out stope. He was short and strong. I didn't know him all that well, but I'd seem him around and he was the kind of guy that didn't say much, but smiled all the time, like he liked what he was seeing or hearing no matter what it was. I'd seen him warming up earlier and he could hit the ball a mile. I'd struck him out once and he foul tipped twice. I was pretty sure I could strike him out again because he was a sucker for an inside fastball. But before I knew it, I'd walked him. Not on purpose. But I was happy as could be, but I can't say I meant to do it. I sure as hell didn't want to win the game, but I wasn't so sure I wanted to be the one that made the Stakes lose. I was sort of in limbo out there on the mound.

"Way to go," Tom yelled at me from the stands. "That's what we like to see. Way to do it, buddy."

My dad was playing short stop and he yelled to me to relax and forget it, that I'd get the next one. Just hearing his voice and what he stood for made me want to ease up and let Stan, who was up next, send it over the left fielder. But I'll be damned if I didn't go and strike him out. Just like that, boom, Stan was out and my mom and Mary were cheering and the rest of the Stakes team was clapping and whistling, with Bud giving me the damn thumbs up from home plate. Somehow, though, Dave was able to get off fast enough to steal second. I was glad about that.

When John Cross came up to bat I got worried. He was the worst player on the Diggers team. He was tall and heavy set and real slow. It's funny, too, his being so

slow since he was a skip operator and that's a job where you have to be quick in body and mind. I wanted him to smack the ball and drive in Stan. Man, I wanted him to hit it. But he soon had two strikes and no balls and I was practically throwing them underhand to him.

"Easy. Easy, now," my dad said.

"Get him, Jake," Bud yelled out.

On the next pitch, he hit a grounder right at me and I caught it and tossed him out at first. I threw it high, not on purpose, but Ralph caught it, and tagged the base, then fell back and almost over and Dave went to third. Both sides of the bleachers were cheering on that play.

My dad called time out, and came up to the mound with Bud of course.

"Okay, now," my dad started. "Here we come to the whole ball of wax. I think you ought to try a curve on him. That's a good pitch for you."

"I don't know," Bud said. "I saw this kid practicing and maybe a fast ball would throw him off."

He didn't know what the hell he was talking about. He just pissed me off more.

"Do what you like," my dad said. "Just strike him out."

I looked at the two of them and then over to Mary and finally at Sean who was rubbing dirt on his hands and swinging the bat over his head and acting like he was a major leaguer. I didn't answer either of them and the stands started yelling for the game to get going.

"Jake," my dad said, looking me right in the eye. "Can you do it?"

I didn't answer him.

"Give him the fastball then. Maybe Bud is right about that."

"Maybe he ain't," I said short.

"Well, then. Whatever you think best. Just strike him out. Get his ass out of there."

Then he walked back to short stop.

I guess I hadn't made up my mind about what to do because on the first pitch, I just threw it high and he didn't go for it. The asshole Bud kept signaling a fastball. I just kept ignoring him. It was pretty quiet in the stands and I didn't look up. I got the ball back and picked up some dirt and dusted it off. I didn't let myself think about it any longer. I was sick of thinking. Sick of it.

I threw a homerun pitch, soft and just above the knees. There's no other way to say it.

Sean bit into it, hard, and I heard the crack and saw the ball sail over my head. The Diggers fans cheered like hell and inside I felt good. I was right to do it. I still don't regret it.

I watched it go way beyond where our left-fielder was standing and Stan was hugging and jumping up and down with the rest of the Diggers at home plate long before the ball got back to the infield.

But I wasn't there when it came in. I was already walking to my truck, and Mary was running to catch up with me, calling out to me. I didn't want to turn around

and have to see my dad or Ben looking at me walking away, so I just slowed some and let her come along side.

"Jake, c'mon. Where are you going? It's just a game."

"I'm going to see your dad."

"My dad? Now? What for?"

"I'm going down there with him. For the gold. I've decided."

"You decided? In the middle of the picnic?"

I didn't answer.

"Jake..."

"I've just decided that I believe him. One hundred percent. I believe him. There's gold down there. And I'm sure as hell not going to let it sit there any longer. To hell with all of them. I'm going after it."

Maybe it was the way I said it, or maybe the way I looked, but she didn't try to get me to stay. She just took a hold of my hand and we walked down the hill back to where we were parked.

Mary could let you sit quiet for a long time. I guess she got used to it living alone with Sandy all those years. If you didn't want to talk, that was all right with her, even if she wanted you to as much as I knew she did on the drive back to her house. But she didn't say so. Funny this is, I was ready to talk. If she asked me if I was glad we lost, I'd have said yeah, damn glad. If she asked why, I'd say those bastards made me sick and that Sandy was justified walking around with a chip the size of Mt. Rushmore on his shoulder. But she didn't ask me and I didn't offer.

When I decided to go down to the 3800' with Sandy, it was just as good as putting in my resignation at the Homestake. She knew that, and Sandy knew it, too. I felt like me and Sandy were going to show them all, that we were going to take a chance and get what we wanted, what we had coming to us. And not just for us, but for other miners, all of them who'd risked their lives for next to nothing, many of them losing it, too. Yeah, I was determined all right, and damn whatever happened.

Driving through Lead was like driving through a ghost town. The stores were closed and there was nobody walking down the street. They were all at the picnic. The place was kind of creepy. I remember thinking that it was like some science fiction movie where everybody got picked up by a spaceship. Even the Silver Star Bar was closed, and I don't think I've ever seen it closed except on election day. The Phillips 66 station was the only place open that I could see, and Bill Kempt and his son, Billy, were running the place. A bunch of his friends were there with him, and they were having a picnic of their own. He waved to me as we drove by, and I honked my horn back to him.

I turned right on Alert Street and went on over to Highland. I could have been going 100 mph. It wouldn't have mattered. There was nobody around. No kids were playing, no sprinklers on in the yards and no dogs running into the street. The houses were closed up and empty. Most people had put flags up on their houses.

"It's kind of eerie," Mary said, breaking her silence. "With nobody around, I feel like we came back to the wrong town."

I felt the same way, but didn't say anything. 'Course, it wasn't the town that had changed, it was me. Something had happened at the game that had nothing to do with the game at all. Maybe I couldn't put an exact name to it, but I feel the change deep inside, and changing back to who I'd been before was never going to be possible again.

Chapter 12

When we pulled into Sandy's driveway, it looked like he wasn't home. Mary unlocked the front door, and the living room was like an oven. She called out his name. He didn't answer. She opened the windows in the front of the house and offered me a beer that I took gladly.

"Where do you suppose he is?"

"He said he wanted to get a couple of things. But that was hours ago," she was a little worried.

She told me he'd been buzzing around since the night he told us about the gold. She would talk to him and he would only half answer.

"Let's check out back in the tool shed. He sometimes goes out there."

"To do what?" I asked.

"I don't know, really. There's no tools or anything out there. It's just filled with old junk far as I know."

They had a small backyard like most of the homes in Lead. There was a tree or two and some sorry-looking grass no one was taking care of. The tool shed was off to

the left of the back door. A small brick path led to it covered in weeds that we tripped over. The door to the shed had a padlock on it, but I could see by the time we got halfway there that the lock was open. There was a four pane window covered from the inside with an old blanket. The shed had once been painted white. Now, it was weathered gray wood. When we got right up to it, we could hear scraping or sanding going on inside. Mary looked over at me, then tried the door, but it was locked from the inside. She tapped on it.

"Dad? You in there?" There was no answer. "It's me and Jake. Are you there?"

The sanding or whatever stopped.

"Yeah. Hold on a minute."

I could hear shuffling coming to the door. Then we heard the door being unbolted.

"No one with you?" Sandy poked his head out and gave the backyard a quick once over.

He was blocking the doorway with his body and didn't seem about to move until he was sure nobody else was within a mile of the place. I could feel the heat pouring out of the shed, sweat all over Sandy's face.

"It's just us," Mary said.

"Okay," he slowly opened the door still looking around.

The shed was larger than it looked from the outside, filled with old mowers, one power, one not, spider-webbed and rusted. There were some fifty gallon barrels of who knows what and old pipes and tools and a lamp without a shade. There was a

drill press and grinding wheel and some other tools and machines and boxes of junk. All of it was pushed to the back and to the sides of the shed to make room for a long, newly built table in the center with a neon hanging above it. The top of the table was covered with a canvas drape with something bulging out. I wanted like hell to know what it was.

"What happened to the picnic? It ain't raining outside is it?" Sandy said with a nasty little laugh.

"Just felt like leaving," I said.

"The ball game ended," Mary added, without saying who won.

"Baseball," he said with a shrug. "Can't see why people get so all fired up about a kid's game."

"What's under the tarp?" I said straight out.

"Been working on something," he said with a smile.

"What is it?" Mary asked leaning in to take hold of the tarp.

"Hold on now, just wait a minute."

He walked over to the door and bolted it again. Then he came back, took hold of one end of the tarp, and looked up at us.

"This is for no one else to see or know about," he said and Mary and I exchanged a glance. Then he rolled back the canvass carefully.

The first thing I thought of was my model of Lead for the Science Fair, except this was a model of the Homestake Mine. Man, he would have won first place. The hoists were there and the shafts, set up on a mound that I guess was made of real dirt

and rock. He had ore cars and lines and vent bags, stopes, drifts and tunnels, the whole damn thing.

"What the hell!" I said.

"It looks real enough to dig in," Mary said.

"It's perfect in detail and scale," he said proudly, "watch this."

He turned on a transformer, like for a Lionel train, and the ore cars started moving on the track. They stopped at the skip station.

"Now get a load of this," he said excited as a kid.

He flipped a lever on the hoist and the cage went down from the mountain to the level that the rest of the mine was built on.

"This right here" I pointed, "is this the 3800'?"

He just nodded, busy watching the ore cars move over the tracks in one direction, then he'd send them back the other way.

The whole thing, the idea of the gold, the model, the ore cars, all of it seemed crazy to me all of a sudden. To see Sandy sitting there, like a kid with a new Christmas toy, watching the cars and the cage go up and down, made me almost want to laugh, except I got little spooked instead.

He switched off the power and the cars rolled to a stop.

"This is to plan from. This is exactly what it's like down there. Exactly!"

He waited for us to react. I didn't say anything, and neither did Mary. I guess she was thinking the same thoughts as me. Then he took a cigarette out and put it in

his mouth and lit it. He took a deep drag and blew it out. When he spoke, he was different somehow, serious, all business is the best way to describe how he sounded.

"Are you afraid of it?"

I didn't answer.

"It's all right if you are. That don't matter none. Might help, as a matter of fact."

Mary looked at me. I stared back at her.

I had to be honest with myself. I was scared in a way, but what I was feeling had more to do with what I said at the start of this story, about facing up to something. It was facing up to myself more than anything else. That's about as clear as I can put it. Getting the gold if it was there would be incredible, sure. But just the fact of going after it was equally important. It was shaking my fist at the Homestake owners. It was saying I deserved some of my own. I knew then I'd always wanted it. Now, I had the chance to go for it. It was right here in front of me.

"Yeah, I'm scared some," I said. "Who the hell wouldn't be? But all mining is dangerous anyway, right?"

"This time you're doing it for yourself, for the three of us."

Mary took my hand, but stayed quiet.

"There can't be no fooling each other about this anymore," Sandy said. "I been dreaming about this long enough. It's time to wake the fuck up. There's a shit load of gold down there, and that ain't no goddamn dream!"

That last part he yelled out and then drew back when he realized how loud it came out. He took a folded piece of paper off a shelf behind him.

"Come closer, I want you two to see this."

And it happened just like that. We walked over to the table next to Sandy as he unrolled a set of plans, we leaned over with him, and the three of us were now partners in this thing together.

He had drawn a detailed picture of the 3800'. It was like a pirate's map. He even marked the spot where the gold was supposed to be with an "X". There were arrows down the center of the 3800' through a haulage way. He'd drawn an ore car at one edge of the paper and a miniature truck beyond. The toy truck might have made the drawing seem a little foolish, but this wasn't a kid's game. It was for real now. I mean, we were talking about going into the largest mine in the country, blasting our way into a cavern and pulling out the gold and then getting out of the mine and riding off into the sunset. There were lots of questions to ask and answer before we got started.

"You don't see how we're going to do it. Right?" Sandy said.

"Well, since you asked. I don't. I'm worried about getting into the 3800' with no one seeing us."

"First off," Sandy said, "this isn't the 3800'."

"What is it?" Mary asked.

"It's the 3200'," he said proudly, "the supply level."

"The supply level?" I shook my head.

The supply level was the main supply point for the entire mine when trucks loaded things like ANFO, timbers, metalwork, and who knows what else. It was the busiest level in the whole mine.

"How are we getting in there without being seen?" I asked.

"I told you I got a plan."

"You mind telling me what it is?"

Sandy pulled over a couple crates for us to sit on, and went around to the other side of the table.

"Have you ever been on the 3200', Jake?"

"Been by it, you could say, on my way down in the Yates cage."

"Been on it?"

"No."

"I haven't either," Mary said trying to lighten things up.

"That puts me in the company of none. I've been on it a thousand times. Before there was a 3800' or a 3500' or anything deeper. And after the bottom of the Homestake got opened up, we all used to stop there to climb into a smaller cage to take us down to the next level. This was before the Yates cage went down anywhere near as far as it does today."

"Was it still the supply level back then?" Mary asked.

"That's a good one," he said. "And the answer is yes. But the reason why it's always been the supply level is even better for us. Near perfect you could say."

He looked over at me, teasing almost. He was happy with himself about something.

"Can you guess?"

"I'm listening," I said. "Get on with it."

"You know where the Supply Level comes out?"

"What do you mean, 'comes out'?" I said.

"The surface!"

He roared, like it was the jackpot.

"What surface?" Mary asked.

"You know what I mean, now, don't you Jake?"

"Come on," I said. "Give it."

"All right, don't rush me. I'm just having a little fun. Shit, it is hotter than hell in here."

"Dad, hurry up," Mary said, "tell us."

He leaned forward and tapped the paper where the ore car and truck were.

"The Supply Level comes out on the goddamn surface of the mine! 3200' feet down from the top of the mountain that the Yates sits on. That's why it's always been the supply level. You can drive right up and unload anything you want and wheel it right deep into the mine. It's built for easy loading for Christ sake! They tunneled right out to the sunshine halfway down the side of the mountain. I got a picture of it right here."

He pulled a couple snapshots off the shelf behind him and set them down in front of us. He must have gone out himself and taken them himself.

Seeing the photos, I realized the 3200' Supply Level was at the Oro Hondo Spur on the east side of the mountain. It's called an adit, a tunnel that comes out at the surface. You can enter it by walking in or riding an ore car into the mine. The mountain was covered with snow in the pictures that we were looking at. He told us he took them a few years ago near Christmas time. The opening is protected by a chain-link fence with a gravel road leading up to it from Mill Street.

"That's where we're getting in," Sandy said to me as calmly as could be. "Like it was made for us. We drive up, hop out and walk right in to claim out gold."

"Oh, is that right?" I said, "We just walk in with nobody seeing us or so much as asking what the hell we're doing there?"

"Late at night?" Mary asked.

"Late at night, early in the morning, makes no difference at all," I snapped. "Somebody's working down there all the time. The mine has around the clock shifts. Even today, the Company Picnic, I bet there's sandmen down there at the least."

Sandy didn't look shook at all when I said that.

"Today, sure," he said. "Not many, maybe, but too many for us. But there is one day a year when the place is shut down. Old man Mckern will be up top in the parking box. But that's it."

"The Christmas Ball," I said suddenly

"Sure...the Christmas Ball. You hit it on the head. They close down the whole damn place on that night," he said 'bout patting himself on the back.

"Okay, go on," I said, "maybe we could get in unseen; but getting in is one thing, reaching the gold and hauling it out is another."

"Yeah, but tell me this...you didn't think we could get in at all a bit ago. Not till I told you. It's all planned out, all of it."

He reminded me of a little kid, wanting to hear that he was doing great. Mary told him what he wanted and I went along with it, but I got the feeling there was something he wasn't telling us.

"Go on with the rest of it," I said.

"How far is the gold from here?" Mary pointed to the No. 3 winze, which is a small underground tunnel. "I mean from the 3200' to the 3800'?"

"About 600 feet from 3200 to the 3800," he laughed.

We let him have his laugh, then I asked, "How far is the cavern from where the cage lets off?"

"No more than a thousand feet the way I remember it."

"A thousand feet! That's one hell of a way to haul heavy gold."

"We're not going to carry it," he said. "There's tracks...some track. We'll take an ore car down with us. That's the only thing to do."

Just the way he said it I knew this was the problem part of his plan.

"We blast out the mouth of the cavern, load up the ore car and push it back to the cage and up we come and out the tracks on the supply level to the truck."

“It could work,” Mary said eagerly, wanting everything to be fine. “Right, Jake...couldn’t it work?”

“Anything could work with a plan this vague...”

“What are you saying!” Sandy roared.

“What am I saying? Let me make it clear for you. Here’s a few of things we don’t know. This cage down from the 3200’ to the 3800’...is it still there? Does the engine still run to lower it?

“I’ll bet it does,” he said.

“Yeah, you’ll bet? Well, I’m not the “betting” kind,” I said. “It’s been over twelve years, Sandy. Who knows if it’ll run? And how’s it driven anyway, gas or electric? If electric, I’m sure the lines have been cut.”

"Gas," he said quickly. Then changed his mind, "No, diesel. It's got a small motor, a GM 1000, probably five-hundred horsepower. No more than a couple of gears. Two belts, I think. It's running on cables. You know, on a simple tumbler."

"Could you drive it with less if you had to?" I asked.

"Sure. There you go," he tried to smile again. "That’s what I was thinking, bringing in a new, smaller engine."

Mary asked how we could carry an engine down there and Sandy told her that we could haul in an engine in the ore car on the tracks off the supply level.

"Are there tracks from the supply level to the cage, and how about tracks down there on the 3800'?" I asked.

"There's tracks, there's tracks," he hollered, "they rolled me out in a car down those tracks."

"Shit, Sandy, that was then. What's down there now?"

"What could've happen to them?" Mary asked.

I could see Sandy kind of wince when she said that. He knew, like me, a hell of a lot could've happened to them. The ground could have shifted and uprooted them. They could have rusted out if there was any moisture down there. Hell, the level could be under two feet of water right now for all we knew. There might have been another cave in destroying all of it.

But there was something even more important to think about. We needed to know if the level was backfilled.

"It ain't backfilled!" he shouted.

"You can't know that!" I yelled back.

"Stop yelling," Mary shouted above us both. "What do you mean *backfilled*?"

I explained to Mary that standard mining practices call for closing down a level that's no longer under production by pumping concrete slurry into the open area that was mined. The slurry hardens like rock and fills the cavity so that it's as solid again as if it never was dug out. If the 3800' had been backfilled after they hauled Sandy out, there was no way we could ever get back to the cavern of gold that was supposedly waiting down there for us.

"We got to find that out if the level still exists. No sense doing any further planning until we know that," I said.

“It exists. It’s got to!” Sandy stood up fast, knocking over his beer so that foam ran all over the model.

Mary started wiping it up. The beer didn’t hurt the model, but seeing all that foam rushing down the 3200’ shaft, pouring into the 3800’ level, submerging it, said a lot about the dangers of our plan if you know what I mean.

“Course, you’re right,” Sandy said, “we need to know what’s down there.”

He said it like he’d known it all along, like he’d led me to it, and maybe he had, maybe that’s why he was showing us this model to begin with.

“But we have something, don’t we? A plan to start from?” he asked almost humbly.

“Sure we have plan,” Mary said. “A good one, dad.”

It’s what he wanted to hear, and the smile that came to his grizzled face was a strange one. I didn’t speak for a minute. I remember taking my time lighting a cigarette and blowing out the first puff. I knew what we had to do and I knew I was the one going to be doing it. I could feel Sandy's eyes on me.

“All right,” I said looking first at Mary and then over to Sandy. “I’ll go down and take a look. That’s the only thing that makes sense.”

He didn't say anything.

“What happens if the hoist doesn't work?” Mary asked. “How will you get down the shaft to the 3800’?”

"I'm not going to go by the cage even if I could get the engine started. I can't operate it and ride in it at the same time. I'm going to climb down. There's a ladder inside every shaft in the mine. Safety valve, you could say."

I looked over at Sandy.

"Yeah, there's a ladder," he said.

"Hell, six hundred feet isn't an easy climb. But I could do it in an hour or so."

"Sure you could," Sandy said. "It's the best thing to do. Then we'd know for sure what we're up against."

"What about someone seeing you?" Mary asked.

"Me alone, with no equipment, I think I could manage it through the supply level."

"Yeah, sure you could," Sandy whispered, staring off into space, no longer looking at the map. Maybe he was wishing it could be him who was going down there instead of me.

The truth is I wished it could be him, too. I was in no hurry to put myself in an abandoned shaft, climbing down to an abandoned level that already claimed the lives of miners and was permanently shut down as a deathtrap over a decade ago. No, I was in no hurry at all.

Chapter 13

It took me about two weeks to get all my gear together. I couldn't carry more than a 100' of rope to climb part way down the shaft if there wasn't a ladder. I brought machine wrenches, a set of drivers and sockets, various channel-locks, and other small tools to help check out the engine. Of course, I couldn't risk trying to start it, but at least I'd look at the carburetor and gas lines and radiator and see if the crank was frozen. I also brought a can of fluorescent paint and planned on marking my trail like Hansel and Gretel.

I left my house just after 5:00 pm and parked behind a low ridge near 6:00. The East side of the mountain was in deep shade and cooling off quick. Since the first shift gets off at 4:00 and the second shift doesn't come on till 8:00 so the blasting smoke can clear, I figured I had a good two hours to get in the adit and over to the No. 3 winze and climb down to the 3800'. There wouldn't be time to come back up and out during the same shift break. I'd have to wait until next shift break a 4:00 am, a full eight hours. But there was plenty to keep me busy once I got inside.

I hauled the tool satchel over my shoulder, put on my cap and climbed down off the road and made my way fast through the thick brush to the adit entrance blocked by a six foot cyclone fence. I checked my watch. It was 6:20. I didn't dare try to cut the big old Yale Standard lock off the gate, but I could see about a one and half foot clearance at the top. I was able to push my satchel up over it and then climb the fence and squeeze through myself. I was inside, kneeling close to the tunnel wall listening for machine or man. I couldn't hear a thing, except the warm air rushing out from somewhere deep in the mine. It was like some great animal exhaling, the warmth of it coming at me. It had the stale smell of sweat and heat and exhaustion.

It was dark inside the adit and I turned on my cap lamp and started walking as fast as I could chance it. I had to be careful. The level was new to me and the cap lamp was the only light in the place. It made a small beam in front of me like a flashlight so I had to watch out for a pipe or low rock or anything. Until you try it, you can't know how much you depend on seeing hundreds of feet in front of you for all sorts of things, not only balance, but looking into the distance makes you feel sure of yourself. Without that, you can feel lost pretty damn quick.

I knew that the abandoned drift that led to the No. 3 Winze should be coming up soon if what Sandy had told me was right. I wished I had more light to help me find it. It was supposed to be no more than a quarter mile inside the adit. Shit, I thought to myself, I've walked more than that already. Who knows how long it'll take me to get in once I do find it, and the second shift wasn't too far from coming on.

The mine was quieter than I'd ever known it, no blasting or drilling or slushing or cars rolling, nothing to listen to except the echo of my footsteps, my breathing and the ventilation system, breathing for the mine. I couldn't help but think I was walking into the bowels of some animal and it was beginning to give me the creeps.

I started worrying now that I'd passed the drift. I looked at my watch and it was damn near 7:30. I decided to turn around.

Maybe Sandy was wrong about where it was. After all, he was nearly dead when they wheeled him out. Maybe his memory was playing tricks on him. Then my mind took the next step. Maybe there wasn't a No. 3 winze at all. I sure never heard of it. And if there wasn't one, how the hell could I believe that the gold ever existed. I couldn't doubt that the accident happened. My dad had confirmed that. But how about the rest of what Sandy said? And then the whole idea of the gold and what we were planning on doing seemed as crazy as could be. What the hell were we thinking?

I was going on and on like that, and I swear it was just like in the movies when you're on the point of giving up when my lamp reflected off of something glinting on the side of the adit. I rushed over to it and saw a small "DANGER" sign covered up with dirt except for one corner. I ducked down, thinking as soon as I'd found what I was looking for, someone was going to find me.

I took care in wiping a little bit off the sign and saw: "UNSTABLE ROCK BEYOND THIS POINT." I could see that they'd boarded up the opening with 4" X 12" lumber about ten feet long fastened with lag bolts drilled into the rock. I lightly

tapped the boards with a wrench. They were as solid now as they ever had been, but goddamn it, it was hollow behind them! I'd found the drift entrance.

I looked at my watch. It was 7:45. The 8:00 shift would be coming on in minutes. I'd no sooner thought it when the lights came on in the Supply Level and I was suddenly standing in light as bright as somebody's living room. I dropped to the ground, rolled into the drainage ditch and waited. It was then I noticed a set of tracks curving off the main rails of the Supply Level and disappearing under the wood boards. Hell, Sandy was right. Those tracks would lead to the hoist room and No. 3 winze. I just hoped someone wasn't going to come along and find me before I could get a board loose and disappear behind them.

By the time my eyes adjusted, I could hear drilling starting up and slushing somewhere. Pretty soon I started feeling more comfortable and dug out my wrenches and went to work on the lag bolts on the lowest board. The bolts were near frozen so that I had to jump on the end of the wrench to get them to budge. After I cracked all of them loose, I got back down on my side and slowly started backing them out. It took me nearly an hour from the time I found the entrance to the time the last lag came out.

And still the board wouldn't budge. I had to hammer in a small crow bar between them, worried the whole time the banging would bring someone running. Finally, there was a loud crack that echoed through the adit as the board broke free and fell to the floor. I rolled through the opening into the abandoned drift.

I've never been to Egypt, of course, but crawling into that drift was like entering some Pharaoh's tomb. It was dark and still and dead silent. All the noise of the mine stopped on this side of the wall like I was in another world. There were giant cobwebs and I expected to see bats flying around. There were square timber sets supporting the opening and a center post we'd have to cut out if we planned on brining an ore car this way along the tracks. I took a couple steps forward and saw the tracks heading off to the right into solid darkness. I've been a miner for quite awhile, but I am not ashamed to tell you that staring into nothingness like that made me uneasy to say the least. I had no choice, though, but to head into it.

I took out the can of spray paint and left stripes of yellow every so often. The tracks were in pretty good shape considering, and there didn't seem anything unstable about the drift. It's hard to say exactly how far I'd walked, maybe a few hundred yards, when I came to a fork. Sandy never mentioned there being another drift off this level so I had nothing to go on. One direction seemed as good or dark as the other. I took the left one, which came up against a dead-end pretty quick with a wall of rock in front of me. I took out my biggest wrench and banged on it. It was dead solid.

When I started heading back, I heard the rock start talking, creaking and swooshing and what not. It isn't anything unusual, even at this shallow depth, but where I was, the sounds spooked me some, afraid soon the walls would be coming down. Then there was a BOOM above me, and I started running down the tracks only to fall and ding up my knee and arm pretty good. I stayed on the ground until the sounds trailed off and my breathing got under control.

By the time I got back to the main line, I checked my watch. It was stopped and busted at 12:09. Shit! That could be a big problem, and I only had about four hours to get to the winze, check the motor and shaft, and get back to put up the board. It would be near dawn by then, and I was sure they started bringing in supplies when there was light enough to drive up the adit road. Without my watch, I knew I'd never be able to tell how long I'd been down here.

I started on again as fast as I could, walking and painting, painting and walking and keeping my eyes peeled for any sign of a shaft or head frame. Soon, there was a little rubble showing up on the tracks, a busted ore car plate then a beat up oil can. As dark and dangerous as it was in here, and as spooked as I felt, I was getting excited since the debris meant I was heading in the right direction.

Then I spotted something about twenty feet ahead that stopped me cold. It was a barricade with signs plastered all over it: "CAUTION--UNSTALBE AREA," "DANGER--DO NOT PROCEED," "ABSOLUTELY NO ENTRY."

I walked right up to it and stuck my head through. There, in the spot of my cap lamp, was the No. 3 winze and the engine with the cables and drum still attached. I could hardly believe it! I shouted out loud, "Goddamn, this its it!"

My hollering ended as fast as it began as I followed the cables with my cap lamp from the engine to shaft and saw them disappear into a solid concrete slab that sealed the shaft opening.

The level had been backfilled like I worried about.

I felt like somebody had just kicked me in the gut. I wanted to throw up. And I realized for the first time how much I wanted to go through with Sandy's plan, just how much I wanted to get the gold for him and for Mary and for me. That was no longer possible. That dream was over now that the shaft and 3800' level below it was filled with solid concrete.

I thought about just turning around and walking out. Instead, I broke down enough of the barricade to crawl through into the hoist room. I shone my light on the hoist and engine. It wasn't the 1000 diesel Sandy thought it was. It was a great big straight-8, gasoline, probably a GM, not that it mattered now. With the shaft backfilled with concrete, we'd never be able to get down to the 3800'. We wouldn't ever be coming down here again.

I reached up and grabbed onto the cables and walked a few feet right up close to the concrete slab. Then I stepped out on it. The moment I did that, I heard a creaking and groaning beneath me. I instinctively stood dead still, afraid to move. Suddenly, the concrete cracked and split open with a tremendous ripping sound collapsing into the shaft below and plunging me down after it with concrete showering all over me!

I thought I was dead for sure, but luckily I managed at the last second to latch onto the cables that cut deep into my hands as I jerked to a stop, swinging and hanging there in the shaft like a dangling in a church bell tower. My cap flipped off my head, falling past my feet and bashing into the shaft walls as it clanged its way

into darkness, finally going out so that I could only hear it bounce softer and softer, until I could hear and see nothing at all.

It was a terrible, disorienting darkness that enclosed everything around me, a blackness so complete my eyes could never adjust to it. I was in the “black curtain” that all miners fear. I told myself to hold on, just hold on, and I started to get myself swaying from side to side on the cables, reaching out with my feet to feel for the shaft ladder on either side of the shaft, and hoping like hell there was one there like Sandy said.

And there was. My feet finally gripped a rung, and I was able to pull myself over to the ladder and let go of the cables with one hand and grab onto the ladder, and then grab on with my other hand and foot. The cables settled back into position in the center of the shaft as I clung to the ladder, out of breath and trembling with fear. They had capped the shaft, but apparently not backfilled it. Why? I couldn't come up with an answer.

When I calmed a little, I reached into my pocket and found my Zippo. I lit it, and a circle of light showed the rusted safety ladder I was clinging to and ten feet of shaft above me and ten feet below. I've had close calls before in the mine, but nothing like this. The idea of falling down an abandoned shaft where no one would come looking for you shed a pretty bright light on the dangers the of what we were planning. I shook the thought out of my head and started climbing for the hoist room.

I hadn't fallen more than twenty feet so it wasn't far to crawl back onto solid ground. I stood up, brushed myself off, and knew now that we might be using this

engine after all and that I had better a good look at the motor and controls as best I could with the light of my Zippo. The radiator looked sound enough but it was hard to tell much with the water long evaporated. The battery had split and was long dead so I couldn't test any of the electronics, like the generator or starter, but we could replace them pretty easy along with the points and plugs and fuel lines and whatnot.

Most important was to check the engine oil to be sure there was no sign of water, and there wasn't. Then I managed to get leverage on the flywheel and make sure the crank shaft was free, and it too seemed okay along with the clutch. All in all, it was in better shape than I could hope for. I got the ID numbers off the engine block to help us find the right parts for it. I was feeling pretty good.

The big thing, of course, was the condition of the 3800' level at the bottom of the shaft. It's really the main thing I came to find out and the main thing I failed at. But there was no time now to get down there in complete blackness and back up before the shift came on. I had to get out of there.

I headed back to the supply level as fast as I could, flicking my cigarette lighter now and then, following my paint marks back out. I reached the fork to the dead end drift, and from there it was quick to the boarded up entrance. I listened carefully for some sound of blasting going on. There was nothing I could hear. That meant they'd already come off shift and hadn't started up again. Either way, I wanted to get out of the mine now before someone noticed the loosened board.

I was just about ready to push my tool satchel under the boards when I heard boot steps walking close to the tracks down the adit. Then I heard talking, two of them

it sounded like. I froze on my knees. I didn't dare try from my side to pull the 2" X 12" back into place. I didn't know what the hell to do. I figured I'd wait until they walked past.

Well, goddamn it, they didn't pass. They stopped right smack in front of me on the far side of the tracks. I bet you if I'd gotten down on my belly, I could have looked under the boards and seen their boots.

"See? Right here like I told you," one of them said.

"Yeah. OK. You're right. I see it."

For a second I was sure they were talking about the board I'd loosened.

"About twenty feet of it. No more...maybe fifty," the first one said.

"Fifty, easy," the other said. "Means all new track through here. Seventy-five feet to get it right."

Then I could hear them messing with the track, kicking it and such.

"It's loose enough to move with your foot."

"Yeah. Yeah. All right. Let's write it. No time to do anything about it now."

They walked away and I waited a good while before crawling under the boards. The cooler air in the Supply Level made me shiver at first with all the sweat I had on me. I tightened the lags and smeared them with dirt and mud, taking time to do a good job now that men would be working here. I picked up the tools and ran out of the adit, climbed the fence and raced up the embankment to my truck.

The sky was just showing pink so it must have been about 5:30. I'd been lucky on this trip, no doubt about it. Lucky that I didn't get caught, lucky that I didn't fall to

my death, lucky that I'd gotten as much info as I got. As I drove away, I realized now just how much I believed in the whole thing. I was as much hooked on it as Sandy was. My getting this close to it made me want to pull the gold out of there and get away with it clean, to beat them at their own game.

Yeah, I'd found out lots of stuff and had my notes and numbers and all, but I knew right then that we'd be crazy to go down to the 3800' without knowing a hell of a lot more about the level itself. Was it flooded? Caved in? Was there even a cage hanging at the end of those cables at the bottom of the shaft or had it been taken out when they closed of the level?

I knew Sandy was going to ask me to get those answers from my dad. What I didn't know is that he'd been waiting all along for me to go to my dad. Sandy had planned that, too. It took me awhile to figure out his reasons, and then I could have kicked myself for not seeing it coming a long way off.

Chapter 14

I waited a couple of days before going to see Sandy and Mary because I suddenly felt like I was getting caught up in Sandy's dreams about the gold and they were rushing in on me. They were going to cause me to do things I never would have done before, like risking my life down on the 3800' one day. I was also still chewing on the fact that I'd have to talk to my dad at some point and face up to how I felt about him with Sylvia. And I was still bugged about stealing gold from the mine...if there was any gold down there that is.

I was confused about myself. I was changing, you could say, growing up I guess. It was something like that, something you don't know until you pass it, and then all you can say for sure is that it happened. Anyway, I waited a couple of days and then called Sandy's house. Mary answered. When I told her I'd been down to the 3200', she got real excited, and Sandy took the phone.

"What d'ya see down there?" he said before I had a chance to say anything. I told him to calm down.

"I'm coming over. Break out a beer and I'll tell you what I found."

I hung up before he had a chance to argue with me.

No more jumping ahead, I told myself on the drive over. I was taking on too much pressure. If I didn't start taking things a day at a time, an hour at a time even, I wouldn't make it much longer. To look at what we had ahead of us was enough to stop anyone from trying. We had to get back in there unseen, get down the shaft to the 3800', after starting the engine somehow, find the cavern, blast it out, get the gold, and then we had to get back out with it. You just couldn't think ahead to all that and still go on. At least, I couldn't. I turned up the radio to make anymore thinking impossible over Merle Haggard wailing away.

It was getting dark when I drove up and the lights were on in the house. It was cooler than it had been, but still plenty humid. I knocked on the door. Mary gave me a kiss, and yelled to Sandy. He yelled back. It struck me as funny how different my arriving was this time from before. I never would have thought then that Sandy would be happy to see me. Damn, we were nearly friends. Fact is, I think I was the only friend he had.

"I was so worried about you," Mary said sitting down on the couch.
"Everything went okay?"

"Sure, sure. Okay enough..."

"Hold on!" Sandy yelled. "Don't say a word of it until I get there."

Mary leaned forward and pressed my knee. "Is it good or bad news?"

"A bit of both..." I said as Sandy came walking in.

"I heard that," he said, setting the Lone Star in front of me. "Is it mostly bad or mostly good?"

"Both," I said, after taking a big swallow.

"Don't play with me," he got bent out of shape quickly. "I waited long enough for this. Twelve goddamn years. I don't want to be joked with now."

"All right, dad. He's going to tell us. I'm excited, too," Mary was refereeing already.

"I'm not excited. I'm long past excited...I..."

"Hold on!" I cut him off. "If you don't shut up, you won't hear either the good or bad of it."

He shut up and let me talk.

"I'll make it short. I think we can get down to the 3800'. That's the good part. But what the 3800' is like, I don't have any more idea about than before I went in."

"How come you don't?" Sandy said fast, like he didn't even want his own talking to slow the answer down.

"I couldn't get down to it. There wasn't time and there wasn't a cage, least not as far as I could tell."

"There's got to be a cage!" he boomed. "Of course, there's a cage. I came up on it. There's a goddamn cage there. Gotta be!"

It was pretty damn clear why he got to yelling. No cage, no chance to get the gold.

"I didn't say there wasn't one. I said I couldn't see one that's all."

"I don't understand?" Mary said. "If it was there, you'd have seen it, right?"

"It was just too damn dark to see all the way down the shaft to the 3800', and I lost my cap before I could take a climb down."

"How's that...?" she started but Sandy cut her off.

"That's it. Of course that's it! It was down in the shaft all the way to the 3800'. They probably lowered it and left it setting down there. There's a cage, all right. They don't disappear. Of course there is."

We went on for awhile about there being one or not. Mary wanted to hear more about the rest of what I'd seen, and my fall, and Sandy half did, too. I say half did because he was kind of strange about the whole thing. Anytime I raised any problems about what I'd come across, he'd say they weren't any problems at all. They didn't amount to nothing as far he was concerned. He was sure, for instance, that the engine parts could be gotten with no trouble. He was sure the engine would start up when we tried it, sure the hoist would work to haul up the cage that must be there. And, of course, sure there'd be gold to haul up.

"Don't you understand," he kept saying, "we're going to get the gold. There ain't no question about that. No one or no thing is going to stop us. So all this little stuff is bullshit."

Anyway, after I'd finished, I looked at Sandy, waiting for him to ask me to go to my dad for what we didn't know, to come clean about what he wanted from me. But he didn't. Mary got up for more beer and made herself some coffee. Nothing was said the whole time she was gone. We just sat there and looked away from each other,

like a cat and mouse game. She came back and handed us the beer and sat back down. Still, nothing. I wanted it out in the open, put on the table, so I said it again.

"So that's it, getting in and out shouldn't be too bad, from the adit I mean. But that's all I know with any confidence."

"We know a lot more than we did," Mary said innocently.

I looked at Sandy.

"Maybe you could go in again," she said eagerly, "...if you wanted to...and this time go straight down the shaft so you'd have time for it."

"Too risky," Sandy said.

"I was nearly seen this time. If I got caught going in, that'd be the end of it all."

"Too risky," Sandy said again and pushed out his cigarette.

"And we have to know about the 3800'," I said, just about egging him on.

"What if it's flooded?"

"It ain't flooded," he snapped.

"We can't know for sure," Mary said. "Something could have happened in all this time."

"Anything," I said. "You know that Sandy."

He took the bait now. Hard and tight.

"There's only one thing to do then, Jake," Sandy said and I could tell he was calling my bluff. "You go to your dad for it."

"Oh, you think that might be a good idea, huh?" I half-mocked.

"Your dad's a big man. He can get his hand on what we need, just like that," he snapped his fingers in front of my face.

"How long you been waiting to ask me that question?" I looked him right in the eyes when I said it.

Mary raised her eyebrows at the tone that had come into our voices.

That "big man" stuff is what gave him away. He'd been waiting a long time for this, probably long before I met him, and that was a sobering thought.

"That's right, I didn't even think," Mary said. "Do you think he would?"

I couldn't tell if she meant it or if she was just pretending not to have thought of it before. It made me feel real uncomfortable not knowing whose side she was on for a minute, or if there were sides. I looked hard at Sandy. I wanted him to say what was really on his mind. He looked back with that same smile on his face. It was almost like a dare and gloating at the same time.

"How do you know he can get it?" I asked.

"A hotshot Safety Manager."

"Yeah, he's a manager. So what?"

It bugged me the way he was acting and talking. It was like the old Sandy all over again. You could practically see the chip on his shoulder. He sure wasn't trying to hid it.

"They're all the same, those guys. Bastards all of them. He can get the information. You know he can."

"Dad! That's not fair. You don't know Jake's dad. They aren't all of one piece."

"Oh, I don't, huh?" he said, looking from Mary to me and back again.

"You know him, okay. I heard about that," I said, thinking back to the baseball game and what my dad told me about the rescue.

He just smiled. He had something he was holding onto, something he was about to let go of; and when he did, it about knocked me off the couch.

"Yeah, what he tell you, Jake? That he saved my life?"

"Something like that, yeah, he told me that."

"How about what he didn't tell you?"

"Dad, what are you talking about? What are you both talking about?"

I saw his face change then. It fixed on itself.

"What the hell are you talking about!" I snapped.

"Did he tell you he was the shift Foreman when the walls started caving in?"

"The Foreman?!" I blurted out.

"Yeah, the Foreman!" he snarled. "You didn't know that did you?"

I couldn't believe it. My dad said he was part of the team, not the goddamn Foreman on the dig. I was right when I thought there was more he wasn't saying at the baseball diamond. Sonofabitch! It meant all kinds of things. First of all, it meant they knew each other a whole lot better than my dad let on. And it meant my dad had a lot more to answer for than he'd told me.

"He volunteered to go back down there, he probably told you that, and he drug me out of the place. I thank him for that and I hate him for that, too."

Mary looked over at me like I should explain something to her or maybe that I should have told her something that I didn't.

"I'm sure he had to call off the rescue..." Mary started but he cut her off.

"Hell no! He didn't want to call it off," he said.

Now I was a little confused, but I stayed quiet and let him light another cigarette and then continue.

"I was near dead, so you two don't have to believe me if you don't want to, but I heard it from everyone down there when I come to in the hospital. Shit no! He didn't want to call it off. He was the Foreman. We were his men. My best friend, Chuck Mills, was his goddamn responsibility. He knew he should've have stayed down there. But he didn't."

"Just say what happened," Mary's voice was flat.

"You would do better to ask Robert Garnes that one," Sandy said looking at me.

"Wait a fucking minute," I barked. "Don't you pull that shit on me. If you know something, I want to hear you say it."

He took a deep drag off of his cigarette and started speaking as the smoke came sputtering out.

"You betcha I know why. Even if he won't admit it, he knows why, too. It was those shining bastards on the hill told him to call it off. He was the Goodman Foreman. But he did what the boys in white shirts told him..."

He stopped for a second and I could see he'd thought about holding the next part back, but then changed his mind.

"And next thing you know," he said, "he's a manager himself. Simple like that. You figure it out."

I kept quiet, now, the energy all suddenly gone from my fight. Was he right? I didn't know. My dad was spooked as hell talking about Sandy and the accident with me and Ben at the picnic. I remember how nervous he seemed. Hell, he could have been up for a promotion anyway. That's possible, right? But it felt wrong anyway I looked at it.

"He might have lost more men going back in there," Mary said, "You have to think of it that way."

"They don't think about shit like that!" Sandy nearly yelled. "When are you going to listen to what I'm saying? It was public relations, that's all they cared about. Not people, but money."

Mary looked away.

"Oh, but I got them this time," he said, starting to sound a little crazy again, "I got 'em good. "That whole mine, from the day it was damn near tripped over by Custer's scouts. I got it all. I'm telling you two right now. We got the seed of it all. The root of that whole fucking place. All the gold it ever produced started growing in that cavern I laid in for three days. I know that's true. It's the core of the Homestake Gold mine. You don't need to look any farther. I have been in the center of that mine! The very heart of it!"

He lurched up, took a few steps, then turned back to me, speaking softly.

"You ask your dad for what we need. He knows he owes it to me and to what he has left of himself."

He walked out of the room. There wasn't much for me and Mary to say after that. She seemed kind of sorry for me when we kissed good-night. She knew I was stuck with this. We needed what he could tell me. There's no getting around that. But helping to make what was now my crazy dream come true was about the last thing in the world I wanted to ask from him.

Chapter 15

I went to work the next day and the day after that and the next week. It went on like that for a few weeks. Me and Sandy didn't speak much at the bit window. It's not that we weren't friendly, we were. It's just that there wasn't much to say. Maybe he was making plans for the gold, but he didn't discuss it. Everything seemed called off until I talked to my dad. I felt like I was sleepwalking. I went to work, did my job, came home, slept, and went back at it again the next day. Another Sunday dinner went by and my dad was there this time but I didn't talk to him much either. No one brought up the ball game, no one brought up anything.

Then I got a call from Ben and he wanted to take me out for a drink for my birthday that was coming up in a week.

“Just the two of us. Like the old days,” he said.

We drove over to Hickok Bar in Central City and got there around 7:00. The place was near empty, a small Western bar with phony spittoons dotted around like empty planters, a pool table, a juke box and the best Bison Burgers in the state.

“Well, guess this is it,” Ben said when we sat down. “The big Three-O. You want a Lone Star to cry in?”

“Sure,” I said with a laugh as the waitress came over and we ordered beers and Bison’s with habanero spread.

“Sometimes when I see the kids,” Ben said, “running in and calling me dad, it's kind of hard to take. I don’t feel that old. Don’t get me wrong, marrying Gena was the best thing I ever did. No regrets...”

“Wait a minute,” I said, “I'm the one who's over the hill. You're only 28. You’re talking like we’re two old duffs ready for the final reckoning.”

“Shit, sorry. How the hell are you? How's Mary and you doing?”

“Great,” I said and stopped. He looked at me for more. “Simple as that. More than any other before her.”

“Are we talking marriage?”

“I’d say I love her if you asked me, but marriage is something else.”

“She sure is pretty and Gena and her got along real good, I think.”

“Yeah, she liked her and mom.”

We sat quiet for a few moments, then Ben started reminiscing.

“Remember that time we were going to break into J&E's Hardware and steal all the mountaineering stuff? Gonna run off into the hills for the rest of our lives? Our getaway plan,” he laughed.

“Yeah, crazy man.”

“We were serious, though. At least I know I was. Sometimes I still wish we did it, just to see if we could have done it.”

“Ah, hell, come the winter, if we made it that far, we'd have froze our asses off.”

“Maybe so. But, shit, I'd like to think I tried something like that just once.”

The Bison Burgers came, we ordered more beer, and Ben added a couple shots of Wild Turkey to the celebration. We spent some silent time chomping our way through the great plains and the fire sauce, and I felt like both of us had something on our mind we were avoiding. For me, of course, it was my dad and Sylvia, and I guess deep down I'd hoped that's what was on his mind, too.

“How's life at the Homestake?” I asked to get talking again, and I walked right into his thoughts sort of speak.

“I got an opportunity that's come up,” he said.

“What do you mean? What kind of opportunity?”

“Exploratory drilling into rock cores.”

“Don't you even joke with me. You know how dangerous that is. Red's not even cold in his grave for fuck's sake. And what about all your talk about the rich managers and the lowly miners?”

“Hey, I got expenses, man.”

“Yeah, a new boat, a new truck...buying a new house anytime soon?”

“Who knows?” he stopped a moment, “Gena's pregnant.”

“Really? I mean, good for you. But, you really want four kids?”

"It's a little late to ask that question dont'cha think?"

"Course it is," shrugged. "But are you sure about the production contract?"

"Hey, I'm not an idiot. I've seen the geologies. They look damn good."

"What level, who's running it?"

He looked up from his burger, and I could see he didn't want to answer. I stared and waited.

"Olners, 4100 I think, not sure yet..."

"Olners level? Are you fucking crazy? That guy's an asshole."

"Yeah, I know, Capital 'A', but he produces like a son of a bitch."

"How big are the bonuses he's offering?"

Ben wiped his greasy hands and fumbled with a cigarette, obviously stalling the answer.

"Oh," I said, "they're that big, huh? Is this your getaway plan?"

"Very funny," he said.

"Okay...but, Ben, watch yourself...I mean it, really watch your ass with this guy."

"Course I will, I got mouths depending on me."

We sat quiet both thinking our thoughts, and we might be sitting there still, but thank God the waitress came over with a cupcake with a candle in it and set it down between us. I blew it out, took another shot of whiskey, and forced myself to speak up.

“Well, now I got something I want to say,” I said, and my voice must have sounded different because he put down his beer and looked me right in the eyes. “I want to know...”

I sputtered out, hanging out there, with no way back.

“Go on, Jake. What the hell is it?”

“It's dad. He's running around with someone else.”

I said it as fast as I could just to get it done and over with; and when he didn't react, I thought maybe he didn't hear me right.

“There can't be any doubt about it,” I went on, “I saw him myself, with McFelan's wife, at a restaurant in Rapid City.”

Still, he didn't say anything. He took a swig of beer and looked back at me. I couldn't read his face.

Then he said softly, “I know. Sylvia McFelan...I've known for some time.”

“What the fuck do you mean, ‘you know?’” I jumped on him. “How fucking long is 'some time'?”

“Nearly a year.”

“Jesus!” I yelled.

A guy at the bar turned around. I leaned in.

“Here I've been thinking I'm the only one with this great big dark secret and you over here have known it a year. Christ Almighty.”

“Don't get sore, Jake. I was going to tell you.”

“Oh yeah? When the fuck exactly were you going to tell me?”

"All right. Sorry. Okay? I was going to...but I didn't..."

He stopped there. I sat back up, took a swig of my beer.

"How'd you find out?" I asked.

"You're not going to like it, Jake, not one bit."

"Tell me," I said.

"Gena told me."

"Gena!"

"I said you wouldn't like it."

"Gena. For god's sake. How did she find out?"

"It gets worse," he smiled a little, "You sure you want to know?"

Instead of getting angrier, I laughed out loud, and damn it felt good. Here I'd been walking around like I had a secret heavier than Mt. Rushmore on my shoulders, and now I was glad to let them carry some of it.

"The mayor told you," I laughed and now he broke up, too.

"Mom told her," he said.

"Mom? Oh come on, Ben. Mom? How the hell does she know...?"

"Wives know Jake. Look, I was going to tell you lots of times, but Gena promised mom she wouldn't tell anyone."

"She told you didn't she?"

"Jake, you're thirty for God's sake. Get married already and learn the secrets of life...women tell everything."

"Yeah, guess they do..."

A quiet moment went by.

“He’s a bastard, I do know that...” I said.

He didn't answer me, and this time he didn't look at me either.

“You don't think he is a bastard?” I challenged him.

“Sure I do. Course I do.”

“What’s mom going to do about it?” I asked.

“She’s already doing it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She told Gena she could live with it.”

“You're kidding? She said that?”

“I thought the same thing at first. But Gena told me if mom accepts it, it’s really not my business.”

“And dad knows she knows? God, this is sounding like a goddamn soap opera.”

“It is a fucking soap opera. And I don't know if he knows...but could be.”

He leaned forward and spoke softer.

“Jake, he's our dad, right? And there she is our good, old mom. Little league and cookies and all that. But, shit, when you come down to it, they're just folks. Plain and simple folks. Like everybody else.”

“Yeah, well, bullshit. That's what I say to that.” I was still huffing and puffing.

“Not everybody is screwing everybody else.”

“Dad ain't the first or the last. That's for certain.”

“You haven't said nothing to him then?”

“What for? What the hell would I say?”

He was right, “what for?” Suddenly, there didn't seem much point in it. What was I going to do, tell him he was a bad boy? It's funny how everything can change in a minute like that. I sure as hell didn't like what he was doing, but who was I to tell him what to do? Shit, he sure wouldn't like it if he knew what I was up to with Sandy. And if he didn't, so what? I wasn't about to listen to him. In fact, I was about to ask him to help me to get it done. Jeez. Crazy.

I'm not saying I understood my mom in all of this. I didn't. I don't know why she put up with it. I don't think I ever would. But who's to say what you'll do before you do it? She had it worked out for herself. I guess the rest of it wasn't my business. I mean, I couldn't find fault with either of them for being parents. They were good at that.

“It's a lot to think about,” I finally said.

“Now don't get me wrong,” Ben said serious as could be, “If I found out Gena was arm and arm with some sonofabitch, I'd pity him because I'd kill him and maybe her, too.”

We both laughed and ordered more beer. I could say that we drank into the night, which we did, and that everything was peach pie. But it wouldn't be the truth. There's no denying that I felt better about my dad, sure, but not good by a long shot. I know Ben didn't either. Not inside. We got up finally, and he drove me home, or steered me home is more like it since he was too drunk to drive.

I fell into bed with my clothes on, my head spinning and the name Doug Olnier, Doug Olnier, Doug Olnier going round and round in a swirl in my brain. What the hell was he up to? He was one of the top contract performers in the mine, rich contracts, sure. But he was a corner-cutter, too, a risk taker...though it was his crew that would be doing all the risking.

And the 4100' level bugged me, too. That level had been played out a years ago. I didn't want to think it, but I couldn't help but wonder if they were planning on digging up from there, not down. Up to the 3800? That can't be, I told myself. It can't be. Then I thought again about those guys I heard talking about that lose track on the Supply Level as I was about to come out of the abandoned adit. What were they really doing there? Repairing track or replacing it for heavier gauge? And why right at that spot?

The questions kept spinning and spawning new questions until I finally blacked out, and sleep came on.

Chapter 16

My dad had his office in Building #2 where most of the managers and supervisors were. I told him I needed to talk and he said lunch was best. I'd been there a hundred times and never felt comfortable in the place. There's a skinny receptionist with a beehive hairdo bigger than a keg of Bud who I swear checks your feet whenever you come in like they're probably covered in mud; and sure enough, when I opened the door, she looked right down at my boots. I wanted to kick her desk and topple the keg.

But it wasn't really her who bothered me the most. It was the big belly guys sitting in the cubicles moving papers from one side of the desk to the other. I know this isn't fair to say, probably, but you just can't help but believe their work is easy compared to breaking your back underground. I guess it made me feel like a kid, too, sitting in the lobby waiting for my dad to come out and get me.

"Hi, Jake," he said slapping me on the back, "ready as you are."

"I was thinking the *Drill and Steel*," I said.

"Sure enough. Haven't been there for ages."

I knew he hadn't. It was a place for miners, not mangers, and I felt better with miners all around me to talk to him. We walked out and decided to take two cars since my shift was off and I didn't want to have to drive back to the Homestake later.

I got there first and took a table and ordered two beers. The place was packed with miners two deep at the bar with the shift change just gone off. I knew some of them and the rest I knew well enough to nod at. The place has plate-glass windows looking out on Main. There's wood chairs and tables and even sawdust on the floor. It's a lot like you might picture an Old West saloon to be.

I'd just finished pouring my beer when my dad walked in. He stopped inside the door and looked around for me. I swear the place went dead silent. It was like he was a Russian spy or something. He looked back at them all, I got to give him that, nodding to a few he recognized, and they half-nodded his way. He caught sight of me, and ordered two more beers from the bartender on his way over to the table. It took a minute or two for the talking to get going in the place and the laughing to start up back to normal.

"You drink here, usually" he asked.

"Here or the Silver Star."

We stopped short for a minute, knowing we weren't here for small talk. I didn't know how to start right in. I hoped he'd ask me what was on my mind. And sure enough he did. Right then the other two beers came and we got a menu, but I didn't let the chance pass.

"It's about the mine," I said, "there's some stuff I want to know about it."

"The mine, huh?" he looked confused or just plain surprised.

I think it was the last thing he expected me to say, which made me wonder for a minute what he thought I was going to ask him about. Was it Sylvia? Or maybe he thought I was fixing to discuss Mary with him, man-to-man.

"You probably know more about mining than I do," he said trying to laugh it off, "I've been topside for too long."

"I mean information about a certain part of the mine, a level."

"You want to get the special?" he asked, "roast beef and sweet potatoes?"

He called the waitress over, still ignoring my question, and we placed our order. When she walked away, he took a deep pull on the beer and then leaned in.

"What's on your mind, Jake? Quit the bullshit, just get at it."

"Okay," I said, "I'm talking about the 3800', the shaft that's closed down."

"Christ Almighty," he said disgusted. "This is Sandy, isn't it?"

"I want to find out some things about it."

"You do? Or he does?"

"We do."

"Jake, look, I don't know what the hell he's got planned, sorry, what you've got planned, and I don't expect you're going to tell me, but you've got no business down there. Period."

"Who's saying I'm going anywhere?"

"No? You writing a history book on mining, that it? Let's not lie to each other any longer."

I thought that was a little strong saying I was lying, but I kept quiet, and found out the lie he was talking about was his own.

“Here’s a little history for you...a tidbit about the past,” his voice was bitter and cold coming at me.

He took another long drink. Then took his time lighting a cigarette. Finally, he let go with it.

“I was the foreman on the 3800’. Bet he didn’t tell you that. Probably saving the big surprise for later.”

“He told me,” I said flatly, looking straight at him.

“Course he did,” he said just a flatly back to me. “Course he did. Yeah, me, I was responsible for the safety of my men. That’s what Foremen do. I did a great job, don’t you think?”

The bitterness was for him, not for me.

“What the fuck, dad...I don't know what to say to that.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Sandy’s saying it for you. Revenge, I guess that’s his game? I got access to Company records. He wants me to steal them. And he's got you here asking for it. Pretty slick, isn't it?”

“It ain’t that way.”

“Oh no, what way is it?”

I couldn’t answer it to be honest. I wasn’t sure all of a sudden.

“Look, Jake, I'm not perfect. God knows that and so do plenty of others. But I won’t do it. It’d be stealing plain and simple and I’m not a thief.”

“Is that what you’re calling me?”

“I’m not calling you anything.

Our food came right then, and we sat there eating quiet for awhile. My head was chattering like mad. Maybe he was right about the revenge stuff. There's no doubt about how Sandy looked on the Homestake and my dad, for that matter. But it's the last part of what he said that stuck in my craw. The bit about stealing. Again I thought about what we were planning to do.

“The place is a death trap,” he said, making it clear what he'd been thinking about. "That's the best information I can give you about the place. Nobody in their right mind--and maybe that leaves Sandy out—but nobody else would go down there. Certainly not you."

"I know what I'm doing. I can take care of myself."

He was kept eating and didn't look up at first.

"I'm not trying to tell you what to do, son. I'm trying to warn you. Sandy's gone off half-cocked about something...what, a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow? There ain't no pot of gold, and you know that. Maybe that girl of his, Mary, has got you blind to..."

"Don't bring her into this," I said hard.

He nodded, shrugged and started, slower.

"I'm just telling you the truth of the matter..."

“The truth? Well let me ask you something, dad, truthfully...”

He look up from his roast beef, worried, and again I wondered if he expected me to ask about Sylvia McFelan.

"Did you want to leave or stay?"

He didn't answer.

"You would have stayed and gone in again after the miners left behind."

"I'd have been wrong," he said flat.

"But you would have stayed. You would have tried to get them out."

"It wasn't up to me."

"But if it had been," I said, asking, I guess, for my dad to tell me he was still the hero I remembered from childhood.

He looked down first, then away, and then into my eyes. "Yeah," he said, short and nearly so low I couldn't hear it.

I felt bad right away when I heard him say it. There was pain in his voice. I don't know how many times in the last twelve years he must've gone over this ground. It couldn't have felt good.

"Yeah, I would have stayed...but that doesn't make me right and the Homestake wrong. They had to make the decision, Jake, not me. Thank God. And they thought it was the only way to go."

"For who?" I asked and this time it didn't come out nasty.

"For everybody. I'm not denying they had their own reasons. Shit, Jake, look at it. They got a whole goddamn town looking at what they do, and taking them to account for it. How could they chance getting more men killed? They couldn't. I don't

know what you think. I know what Sandy thinks. But they're people, Jake. Just like you and me. They put their pants on one leg at a time like the rest of us. They make good decisions and bad ones. And I still ain't saying that they did the wrong thing by calling off the rescue. Nobody can say that for sure. If you want to go and judge them. Go ahead. But I don't and I didn't."

He stopped there, took a drink and then went right on again. He didn't even look up to see if I was looking at him. He knew I was listening.

"And I know something else you might have heard from Sandy. I know the talk that went on after I went upstairs. I heard it about my promotion. All of it. And I'm telling you right now, straight to you," and now he looked up from the table, "it ain't nothing but a crock of shit."

The way he said it, or maybe the way he looked at me when he said it, I believed him and told him so.

"I'm not asking you to believe it, Jake. I'm just telling you how it is."

Maybe he didn't need my believing him, but something felt settled now that the truth was out in the open. The waitress cleared the table and we lit up a smoke and ordered a couple shots of JD with a beer back.

We clinked our glasses and fired them back. He grabbed my arm when I set the shooter down.

"And damn it all," he said, "I don't know what the hell you have planned and I don't suppose you're going to tell me, but Jake, I do hope you truly know what the hell you're doing. That level is trickier than a slicked hog. They didn't close it down

the day we dragged Sandy out of there and board it up all of these years for no reason. It was too dangerous even to salvage the equipment. That place can't be worked safely by anybody.”

“I will, pop,” I said thinking that maybe I should tell him about the contract Ben had signed onto with Olnier, but it didn’t seem like it was for me to get into that.

We said our good-byes outside and shook hands good and long and then got in our cars. On the way home, I went over what he'd said, and it was a lot to think about. Some of it was already changing my mind about the way I'd looked at the mine and at Sandy. But as I drove on, the idea of the gold kept drifting back to the surface of my thoughts. The gold, goddamn it, the gold! They boarded up the place, he said, the day they dragged Sandy out. Not even equipment salvaged. And it had been closed ever since.

Yeah, my dad had told me plenty, whether he meant to or not. The cage had to be there, probably just out of my lamp beam when I'd looked down. It had to be there. And if Sandy wasn't a crazy man, and if the gold was ever there, it was still there, too. Sitting down there in the dark, one big nugget gleaming at the heart of the Homestake Mine.

Chapter 17

After dinner with my dad, things got confusing for me. Not so much because of what he'd said or even what he was doing. There's no question I respected him for not going against the Homestake and what he believed in. And there's question that I didn't respect him for Sylvia and all that, but I didn't hate him anymore, either. I guess you could say I accepted it. What else can a person do?

What confused me was that the more I thought about the dangers of the 3800' the more I wanted to do it. It was gnawing at me. The idea of all that gold sitting down there, waiting for someone to come and get it was never out of my mind. I wanted to see all that glittering gold. I didn't even care most times about getting it out of there, just seeing it would be enough.

If it was there, and if we did take it, we'd be stealing it. Plain and simple. Hell, for Sandy, stealing it made it even better. He wanted to get even with them. It was revenge like my dad said. They owed it to him, he thought, and he was going to get it and that was that. And maybe they did. I don't know. He'd sure given them a lot and a lot had been taken from him.

Of course, all of this leaves Mary out, and like I said at the beginning of this story, she was the one who got us down there on the 3800'. She didn't make any spectacular speech or anything. She just called me a few days after I'd seen my dad and asked me to go fly a kit with her. She said we could make a picnic of it, though it was colder by now.

It was autumn in the Black Hills. The mountains were spotted with all sorts of colors. Lots of green was left, and of course some of the fir trees would be green all year, but still it was winter coming on and you could see the changes. At night it was getting plenty cool, but in the sun with the warm wind like today it was still comfortable.

I could see her from a long way off, standing in the front yard with this huge kite, barely holding it from blowing her away. I mean, it must have been 6' x 4'. I had to laugh when I saw it was made of newspapers glued together and the sticks looked as big as broom handles. She painted a face of an owl with two great big eyes.

"There's only one problem," she said coming over to the truck and dragging the kite behind her. "It doesn't fold up. You think it'll fit?"

"I'm not worried about it fitting, I'm thinking about it lifting us off the ground and into the clouds."

I opened up the back door of the truck and folded down the rear seat. The kite fit, just barely, on an angle.

"Do you think this will hold it?" She handed me a spool of fishing line, 20 lbs. test.

"You're crazy, you know that?"

"That's a compliment, right?"

"Yeah, it's a compliment," I said and kissed her.

We went out highway 85 to Deer Mountain since it wasn't ski season yet, and there'd be plenty of room to get the big kite up. The parking lot was practically empty, and it took the both of us to haul the kite as the wind starting really kicking up. I finally had to lay it down flat to keep it from taking off.

"Let's walk it to that hill," she said. "What do you think?"

"You're the expert. If I get blown off a cliff, send for a search party."

We walked over to the base of a ski run and tied the fishing line to the kite.

"Have you got a tail for it? It's going to need something to settle it in this wind."

The wind was coming over the parking lot and the flat part of the grounds and then shooting up the hill.

She opened up the picnic basket, and pulled out a long strip of coiled bed sheet.

"I don't know how much you'll need of it, it's plenty long."

"I think we should start with all of it," I laughed, and tied it to the bottom of the kite.

"I'll walk part ways up the hill and yell when I'm going to let it go," I said.

But it was a lot easier to say than to do. It was gusting up the side of the slope, bucking into the kite, the newspaper rippling and crackling and damn near lifting me

off the ground. I had to use everything I had to hold the kite up and to keep my balance at the same time. The tail was whipping around my legs and I was sure it was going to tangle and that I'd be lifted up with it.

Finally, I raised up the kite and yelled to her to get ready.

"Ready," she yelled back.

"One-two-three. Go!"

I shoved it off and the kite shot straight up, the line peeling off the spool in her hands. I could see she was having trouble holding it so I ran back down to her and took the spool. Damn, it was like holding a bucking bronco or something. Really tugging, so that I had to brace myself from being pulled back up the hill.

"I guess you know how to build them," I said.

"The first kite I ever flew was homemade. My dad made it when I was about six. It wasn't this big, but it flew like the devil."

"He took you kite flying?"

I don't know why I said that with such a question. It's just that I couldn't picture it, him making a kite and all.

"Sure. We did lots of things together," she said. "Most of them boy stuff, sure, but then I have to admit I was pretty much a tom-boy anyway so it was fine with me. I don't know if it's that he wanted a son or not. He never let on that he did. It's just that most of the things that he knew how to do were for boys."

I didn't know what to say.

"We went fishing together lots of times and even hunting one time."

"Why only one time?"

"He wasn't any good at it anymore. His arm and leg I mean. It mad him mad as hell. You know, not being able to do it right. Watch it!" she yelled because the kite was starting to dive and dip.

"You've got five hundred yards there, and I bet it could take it all out," she said, helping me let out some more line.

"The fun part's going to be bringing it in."

"That's why I'm going to let you do that," she laughed.

"I went to see my dad," I said from out of nowhere. It surprised me and her.

"I knew it. I Thought you did."

"Why?"

"I don't know. You seem happier I guess."

"Oh, yeah?" I laughed uncomfortably. I had to tell her that we didn't get what we needed. But she was right about my feeling pretty good since then. Confused some, like I said, but good all the same.

"He won't help us," I said.

She didn't react. Didn't say anything. I stayed quiet for awhile.

"Don't you want to know why?" I finally said.

"Because of my dad."

"No, not really. He doesn't agree with Sandy, but that's not it. If anything, he feels sort of sorry for him."

I wish I hadn't said that. She looked hurt and turned away.

"He told me he wouldn't betray the Company. Simple as that."

I stopped there to see how she'd take that. She looked up at the kite and then to me.

"Why don't you pull it in and I'll set up something to eat," and she ran off.

I went to work getting the kite in, and believe me it was plenty of work. Hell, by the time I had the kite close in enough to drop it to the ground, I was most of the way up the hillside. I kept the line close and managed to get it down the hill, the tail flapping and jerking like a live wire behind me. I put the kite down and laid a rock on the center bar to hold it down. She'd laid out a blanket and I sat down. She handed me a beer and a sandwich without a word. The warm wind was the only noise while we ate for a few minutes.

"So what does it mean?" she finally asked.

"It means we don't have any idea what the hell to expect down there. The cavern could be underwater, could have caved in again years ago, maybe the whole damn 3800' doesn't exist anymore."

"Is that what you think?"

"Where I was standing was solid, but that was on the 3200'. I couldn't see but 100 feet into the shaft. I don't have any idea at all."

"You think it's too dangerous to try...?" she stopped, her voice trembling, clearly upset at the thought of it. "...if you do...then it's off...I'll do what you..."

"Hold on a second. I didn't say anything about calling it off. Not yet I didn't. We haven't got that far yet."

"We haven't?"

"Look, Mary. You know how I've felt from the beginning about this whole thing. The craziness of it. Shit, we still don't know for sure there's gold down there. But since I've been down there and come back to tell the tale, so to speak, I can't get it out of my mind. I don't know what it is, gold fever I guess." I took a swig of my beer and bite of the sandwich. "So no. I'm not planning to call it off. But you have to know what we're in for. Really. It could be hell down there. Who knows what could happen?"

She sat quiet for a while and you could tell she'd been going over the worst of what could be going on down there.

"There's something else, Mary, something my dad made pretty clear."

"What?" she said scared a bit.

"It is stealing, you know, what we're planning on doing. I'm not claiming to be a goodie two shoes or nothing. I know it isn't a bank, but still it's robbery. There's no way around it that I can see."

"I've thought about that to."

"Yeah, and what?"

"You're going to say this is just an easy way out, and maybe it is, but the way I look at it they've already been down there and given up on it. I bet they'll never go down there again. I mean, would they?"

I was just about to blurt out that Olnier was digging in that neck of the woods for some reason, but I kept it to myself for now.

"It's stealing you're right, but, Jake, when do you start counting?"

"What do you mean, counting?"

"You could say the Homestake stole the whole mine from the Indians. The whole Black Hills for that matter. There's no denying that if you want to look at it that way."

"Yeah," I said, "and the Indians stole it from the dinosaurs."

We both laughed now and she leaned in and kissed. Then she pulled out a small box wrapped with a bow from the picnic basket.

"Maybe I shouldn't be giving you this...but hell...happy birthday from me and Sandy."

"You didn't need to get me..."

"Don't start that, open it up," she cut me off.

I pulled the bow apart and opened box. Inside, pinned to cotton wool was a solid gold four-leaf clover on a gold chain. I lifted it out. It was heavy as hell.

"Is this the nugget?"

She smiled back to me proud as could be.

"He melted it down and molded it, over three ounces. I bought the chain."

"I don't know what to say. Honest. I don't."

"Don't ever say where it came from," she laughed.

I turned around and she snapped the clasp around my neck.

"How does it feel?"

"Feels great, solid weight, but fine. I can't believe he'd part with that nugget."

She smiled, "He said there's plenty more where that came from."

I smiled back at her.

By the time we'd driven back to Lead, we were both feeling better, settled I guess you could say. We pulled onto her street and got about halfway up it before we noticed a fire truck in front of her house.

"Oh, my God!" Mary yelled, "Hurry, Jake. Hurry!"

I was already on the floor with my foot, and we could see now smoke coming from the backyard. We came skidding up to a stop behind the fire engine. There were a couple of firemen wrapping up hoses and talking on the radio casually. The fire must have been out. We both jumped out of the car.

"What's going on!" I said to one of them. "Is Sandy, the man in there, all right?"

Before he could answer, Mary was running up the drive into the backyard.

"It's out. Not a big one. It was the shed out in the back. That's completely gone. Nobody hurt."

"What happened?"

"Gas fire. The old guy had an engine running in the shed with a rigged Mickey Mouse gas line. Don't know for sure, but we figure it leaked and went up. He's lucky. Tell you that. Could have exploded. Happens all the time. You'd be surprised."

"Thanks," I said and hurried after Mary.

As I went through the gate, I could see what was left of the shed, smoldering and putting out some clouds of smoke. A couple of firemen were soaking it with the garden hose and another was knocking down the only wall that still was standing. Sandy was there. He was sitting on the back stoop, Mary next to him.

"Jesus, what happened? The fireman out front said something about gas," I said sitting down.

He put his finger to his mouth, "Later."

Mary shrugged her shoulders.

He stood up, "I'm getting a beer, want one?"

I sort of laughed. "Sure, why not."

He went into the house.

"What did the fireman say outside." It was plain that Sandy hadn't said a word to her.

"He had an engine in there," I nearly whispered, nodded to the center of the rubble where a big old blackened engine sat straight up.

"That about does it," a fireman yelled over to us. "Keep an eye out for the next hour or so."

"Yeah, we will," I yelled.

We walked into the kitchen, Sandy was sitting at the table, his beer and mine in front of him.

"That's the engine like at the 3800?" I said grabbing my beer.

"Quiet," he said, "Mary close the door."

She pushed the backdoor closed.

"Where did you get it? Or better yet, how did you get it in there, when the shed walls were up?"

"An old buddy of mine, Roger Kelly in Pluma, runs a junk yard and old tools place. He had the damn thing and helped me to get it over here in the shed."

"When?" Mary asked, surprised by all this.

"Oh, shit, two weeks ago maybe. You were in school or something."

Of course she was in school, but he could have told her about it. She just shook her head and looked back at him.

"Listen," he said. "I rigged up a starter switch and it came with a radiator, ain't worth much now, but that don't matter. What I'm saying is that the bastard started. Fired right up! Threatened not to, kicked it over, stubborn, you know. So I primed the carb again--I rebuilt that by the way--and she came to life, and purred like anything for a while. Well, not purred exactly because I had a short pipe on her. All that doesn't matter. What I'm saying is that she ran like a champ. Like a real sonofabitch!"

He threw his arms into the air and whistled loud. Mary smiled some, and I couldn't help but smile, too. But I didn't let it carry me away. I mean, this one starting here in his shed didn't say that much to me about the one we needed starting down there.

"You should have heard it, Gawd, it took me back to working down there. That engine

firing away, I could damn near hear the cage a dropping from it. This old engine's been sitting in a yard in Puma, out in the elements...and it started. The one on the 3200 has been protected underground all these years. For sure it's going to start."

Maybe, I thought. Maybe.

"Where did you get the parts to rebuild the carb? Did you find a new starter and generator?" I asked.

He was nodding his head at me before I finished asking.

"The carburetor, sure, there's tons of parts for it, and the generator and starter are nearly unchanged through 73. No problem there. Plugs I had to order, and I had to order points and condenser and such." He stopped there and you could see he was thinking it all over again. "Jake, Mary, we're going to do it! That bastard's going to start when we hit it. It is. I know it!"

There were other things to think about, the clutch housing for one, but I wasn't about to bring them up right then. I was thinking about what my dad had said, or didn't say. When I looked over at Mary, I could see she was thinking along the same lines.

"It burned the shit out of the model I built," he laughed. "That's one thing gone for good."

Mary and me busted out laughing the way he said it, like a little kid that's just busted a window but keeps thinking about the homerun ball, not the glass.

Chapter 18

My shift had changed again as November began and I was back to working days. ‘Course days or nights didn't make much difference once you got underground.

I came onto the ramp and picked up my gear and headed to the cage. When I passed the Production Board and saw what it said there, I about fell over. The board has all the active levels listed and their crew make-up and times in and out, so I'm surprised I spotted it, but my eyes went right to it:

ACTIVE: Level 3800' - D. OLNER

I stood there in the middle of the ramp frozen, staring straight at it. A miner bumped into me.

“Sorry, man,” he said and then looked up to see what I was staring at. “Yeah, I heard Olners making up a new crew. Count me out of that one.”

He walked on past me, and I was still just standing there, thoughts racing through my brain. I figured the only way for the Olners crew to get to the 3800' was through the Supply Level adit that I'd gone on a few weeks back. I had to know for sure, and I took off running for the Yates Cage that was already loading for the shift

before mine. I could see the gates just being pulled closed as I pushed past people, yelling out, “Hold it! Hold it!”

The Operator saw me hauling ass toward him and held the gate with a yell of “Hurry it up will ya.”

I gently as possible pushed my way onto the cage, men grumpily moving to give me room.

“Thanks, really appreciate it,” I said to the Operator, “Main Supply Level for me.”

He closed the gates and the cage began to drop. Since it didn’t have too far to go, it didn’t get up full speed and was actually rougher and bumpier than normal. The Main Supply Level came up quickly and the cage jolted to a stop. A couple of engineer types got off with me and gave me a curious look since miners don’t normally work on that level. I nodded, kept my head down and let them get some good distance between us. I felt suspicious as hell and took my time heading to the adit.

And I was right about where the crew would be. I could see a halo of light up ahead. I could hear the sounds of machines working and when I rounded the final turn, I stopped dead in my tracks at the sight of a construction crew and a skip loader banging away exactly where I’d undone those boards and climbed on through, exactly where the two engineers had been talking about loose track when I tried to get out and had to wait for them to finish. I dropped down to my knees and scooted over to the level wall. I could see from here that they were widening the adit so they could lay

bigger gauge track to bring in boring equipment. This was a goddamn disaster for us!
No other way to say it.

And then I saw him, Olnier, coming up quickly from the other side of the work area. Yelling for the Foreman who walked up to him.

“At twenty feet of track a day, we'll be up to the 3800' shaft itself in about two weeks,” the Foreman yelled above the equipment.

“No sooner?” Olnier demanded.

The Foreman shook his head, “tunnel's too narrow to get bigger equipment working it.”

“All right. But keep at hit hard, 24-hour shift changes,” he said and started to walk away and then yelled back to him, “And put a guard on the entrance.”

“A guard?” the Foreman said surprised.

“Yeah, a guard. I don't want any trespassers.”

“All right, I'll get a guard out here... should he be armed?” he tried to joke.

“Don't be a wiseass,” Olnier barked back at him.

I watched him walk away and wanted pick up a chunk of rock and throw it at him. I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs. I kicked a nearby ore car and about busted my foot. I slumped down beside it, pissed and defeated. I was also angry at my brother, Ben, which was stupid, sure, but somehow I thought he should've warned me about this, at least told me the crew was coming this way as well as from the level he was working on. But why should he tell me? He had no idea what I was up to. There was no point in blaming him. No point in blaming anyone. I sure as hell hoped Sandy

would be reasonable about this when I told him, but I knew he wouldn't. No sense, though, in putting it off. I sneaked back along the Supply Level and caught the next cage back up to the ramp.

When I pulled up to Sandy's house, I thought maybe I was on the wrong street because a massive two and half ton dually truck nearly blocked all signs of the house behind it with its huge camper shell filling the driveway. This was a monster vehicle. Brilliant white. Chrome gleaming. It dwarfed Sandy who was out there polishing the front bumper like a proud high school kid.

"That's one helluva truck," I said flatly as I walked up. I was in no mood to be impressed.

"Biggest GMC makes," he said without looking up, "unless you want to go to a 16 wheeler.

I came up close to it just as Mary came out of the camper.

"We're gonna need every inch of it," he said whispering, "gold is near as heavy as lead."

"Show him the engine," Mary was beaming.

He went around to the front and Mary popped the hood release. He struggled a little with his one good arm to lift the hood.

"Take a look at that," he said proud as if he'd built it himself.

Inside was the biggest engine I'd ever seen crammed between two wheels. I don't think you could've slipped a knife blade past the sidewalls.

"That's a 454. Nothing can stop this truck. I'm gonna add external gas tanks, two of them, thirty gallons apiece...and the suspension, I'm gonna beef that up, putting in air shocks and spacers, too, in the coils, to tighten it up, and then..."

"Sandy!" I nearly yelled to cut him off, "We got to talk."

He looked at me and knew something bad was coming, "Not out here," he said.

He walked toward the camper door, Mary ahead of him, turning once with real concern as our eyes connected.

When we got inside the camper, Mary tried to lighten things up by saying, "I know, it's bigger than a house."

We sat down at the large dinette that was bigger than my kitchen table, and Sandy closed the door and leaned against the sink.

"So what have we got to talk about?" he said trying to sound tough but there was fear in his voice and I felt bad about that already.

I let a few seconds of silence go by and looked at Mary, whose face was now covered with concern. There was nothing to do but say what I'd seen, so I said it.

"Olnor's reopening up the 3800', working his way back to the shaft, widening the adit for new equipment to start a full-scale production crew."

"If that's supposed to be funny, it ain't," Sandy glared at me.

"It's no joke. He's posted a 24-hour guard to protect their workings."

"I knew I should've kept my secret. I never should've trusted you!"

"Dad! That's ridiculous!"

"Who the fuck you been bragging to!"

“I haven't said shit to no one! You know Olners been doing exploratory drilling a couple of levels below on the 4100.”

But I could see Sandy was barely able to control himself, boiling up, actually breathing loud, nearly panting.

“You don't fool me!” he said through gritted teeth, “You never wanted to go after the gold to begin with. You didn't have the fucking balls to believe in it!

“Stop it!” Mary yelled.

But he didn't stop, he got louder, pointing his finger at me.

“I seen you coming onto shift, picking up your bits, already sweating, dry mouthed...trembling. You're chickenshit of the place!

“Dad, quit it!”

“Tell me I'm wrong!” he ran right over her, “Go on, tell me I ain't right.”

I keep quiet, just staring back at him. He took a couple of steps for the door then turned back at me.

“You and your dad are cut from the same cloth, both of you quitters. Both of you scared off by the 3800 and what it holds down there!”

He slammed the camper door.

“Don't pay any attention to him,” Mary said quickly, trying to erase it. “Everything he's ever dreamed about is in that mine. It's nothing to do with you. It's just his own way of...”

“Stop it, Mary, please.” I took a deep breath. “He probably is right.”

I paused again to collect myself as best I could. I took out a cigarette and lit it. I took a deep drag and looked out the camper window. I could see the Black Hills in the distance with dark clouds blowing in from the North. Probably going to be a fair sized storm, the first of the season. I turned back to Mary.

“Truth is, Mary, that when I saw the lights of Olnier's crew, some part of me was glad.”

"Glad about what?"

"Glad I didn't have to find out if I had the guts to go through with this whole thing.”

She reached out for my hand but I pulled it away.

“You want the truth, Jake? I'll tell you the truth. The truth is I'm happy it's finally over. That it's over and done with for good. You don't have anything to prove to me.”

I stood up then, looking down at her.

“No? Maybe I don't. But what about to myself? What about that?”

I walked out, got in my car, and drove away.

Chapter 19

I had a two week topside assignment hauling rough-sawn eight-by-eight timbers around on a forklift and filling up a truck bed. The work was mindless and was to be a kind of break for high-ballers like me from the dark and sweat of the pit. It was good I guess to be out in the sun for a workday. It might have been mindless work but in my own mind I couldn't stop thinking about Oler and his crew digging day by day closer to the 3800 shaft both from below and above. That naturally brought Ben to mind since he was working the lower path up to the 3800. We hadn't talked about it again since my birthday and there was no way I could bring it up now without surely fighting it out with him.

I swear to God no sooner had Ben come into my mind then exactly at the same moment I felt something or thought I heard something coming from the direction of the Yates Shaft. I shut off the forklift and listened.

It was an alarm bell, ringing in the distance, coming from the ramp! Ben! Ben! Ben! His name rang in my head as I ran across the asphalt, threw open the doors to the ramp, and ran to the Yates Cage!

It was the same chaos scene of every accident underground. A madhouse. Alarms are blasting crazy loud. Miners are yelling, and I'm pushing my way through them to the Control Panel to verify the accident site. But like I said, I just knew it was Ben's level, and when I reached the Panel, the Red Indicator light was flashing the 4100 Level. Ben's level.

"Get out of my way! Out of my way!" I yelled, pushing myself through the men, driving forward to the cage.

It didn't have to be Ben who was being hauled up the shaft. Many men were working on that level. Who said it had to be Ben? The words repeated in my head. But as the rumble of the cage coming up the shaft shook the ramp, I knew it was going to be Ben. Now I just prayed with every second he got closer that he was still breathing, still alive. Just let him get next to me alive I said out loud. Let him come up alive!

The vibration increases and finally the cage doors open and the rescue team pushes out a gurney. I know instantly it's Ben, even though his face is covered with an oxygen breather. And I know that's a good sign. He's still breathing. Thank God, he's still breathing. How bad is he rushes next through my mind as I grab onto the rail of the gurney.

"Ben! Ben! Can you hear me?"

"Hey, out of the way!" the rescue guys were yelling. "He's going to be okay! Move aside! Move aside!"

I grabbed onto Ben's hand and he squeezed mine hard and turned to me. He was in a hell of a lot of pain I could see that in his eyes, but he nodded, agreeing with the rescue guys that he was going to be okay.

"Sure you are, Ben! You just stubbed your toe is all!" I tried to laugh it off.

But I could already see the horrible damage that had been done to his left leg. It was busted up, bloody and skewed at a bad angle. Part of his boot had been cut off and there was enough blood on it that maybe his foot was gone with it. I couldn't tell for sure, and I didn't want to know anyway. I just wanted to help get him to the ambulance as fast as possible. I yelled like a madman for the ramp to clear and we pushed the gurney outside where the ambulance was waiting.

I learned in the next week what had happened as Ben went through his surgery to put his foot back together as much as possible. He was druggy and mostly out of it but he wanted to tell me it was his fault. This accident was his stupid fault for pushing and pushing, for not thinking but just bullheadedly banging forward. From what he said, I guess the crew was making good progress. He was working in a four man team with a miner name Eddie, the two of them paired at the lead, drilling cores along the fissured face of the rock. Eddie was fighting with a Jumbo Drill rig that started squealing and burning up until it just stopped dead, stuck in the rock face. Eddie was trying to free it, but Ben grabbed a five-pound sledge and tromped through puddles of water to get up next to it.

"I just pounded on that bit. Pounded on it like a crazy man. And it came free. Hell, yes it did," Ben laughed, shook his head. "Yeah, came free with a Goddamn

explosion of rock. Knocked me over and put me under about two feet of heavy debris. Dumbshit! Lucky my crushed foot is all I got as payback for using a sledge on a burned-up bit!”

I tried to laugh with him and to agree with how lucky he was, but to look at his leg and foot suspended in some kind of traction device and to see my mom’s red eyes and Gena’s worried face, he didn’t seem lucky at all. He was just another miner injured for what seemed like nothing. ‘Course I felt grateful that he was alive, don’t get me wrong. That was the most important thing, and he was lucky to be in this hospital bed with his family sitting around listening to him tell his story. We all were lucky for that.

But the edge of fear had come back into me. Deep into me. My nightmares were coming on more regularly since Ben’s accident. Timbers falling. Rocks crashing down. Men crying out in terror. Then the silence, worse than screaming. The dead silence of dead men.

I sat up fast in my bed last night. I shook my head. I heard something. Was someone knocking on my backdoor? Yes, there it was again. Louder. Someone knocking for sure. It was 2:30 a.m. I looked through the window and saw my dad standing there, his hair a mess and jacket pulled over a tee-shirt. Dead drunk. I opened up and let him in.

“What is it? Is mom okay?”

“No. Yes. Fine as can be expected.”

He walked into the living room and sat on the couch.

“I wouldn’t turn down a shot of JD,” he said taking off his coat.

“You got it, pop.”

I brought the bottle and a couple glasses and poured us both a healthy shot. He took a good swig. He settled into the couch. I could see he had something to tell me. He waited a bit more. I said nothing, just sipped my drink and waited with him. He leaned a little forward and refilled his glass. Took a drink. Now he was ready.

“I told you I was the foreman, but I didn’t tell you everything.”

I didn’t say a word. I didn’t even want to move.

“There’s not a day goes by I don’t think about those men left behind.”

He looked over at me, into my eyes.

"It was my fault," he said, "all of it. We barely got Sandy out alive. We had to parallel drill a separate bore hole from the 3700' to reach him. I took a skip bucket all the way down to the 3800' myself. I didn’t want no one else volunteering. I had enough blood on my hands already.”

He stopped there and refilled his shot glass.

“The place caved in again the minute I pulled him out. There was no going back after that. I padlocked a steel cap on the escape shaft, and painted a white cross on it for those left behind.”

He stood up then, wobbly, and started to walk away from the couch, but he was so unsteady that he thought better of it and sat back down.

“I called off the rescue. Me! Nobody upstairs. Me alone. I couldn’t risk more men going back down. Is that quitting? Then call it quitting. Truth is, I should’ve

closed down production weeks before. The rock was fissured and shifting daily. We had warning, water seeping in, plenty of warning. I ignored it...the bonuses, management on my back...I'm responsible for those men who died down there..."

"It was an accident, dad..." I couldn't keep quiet no more.

"You sound like your mother. She tells me what happened to Ben was just a terrible accident."

"Well, it was," I said, though I knew what he was getting at.

"It was my Goddamn fault! I should never have let Olnier reopen the 4100!"

He slammed his fist down on the table.

"And now that bastard's risking more men in that Godforsaken pit. If there is a workable vein down there, it don't belong to the likes of him."

He stood up.

"I came here to tell you that. You deserve to know that."

"I understand, dad."

I got up and took his arm as he walked to the back door. I pushed it open and helped him get in his car.

"You all right to drive?" I asked but he ignored me, leaning out the window.

"I hope you and Mary get out of this Goddamn town, get away from the mine clean, and Sandy, too."

He drove off then, slowly, winding his way down the hill.

It must have been a hard decision for him to come over here tonight. To come over here and tell me what he did, not so much about his responsibility in Sandy's

accident. Sure that was hard to say out loud, but that wasn't the hardest thing he decided to say tonight. No, not by a long shot. The much harder thing was telling me about the parallel shaft down to the 3800'. He told me there was a way to keep our crazy scheme going. That must have been a damn hard thing to do. I thanked him for it quietly as his tail lights got lost in the snow that had started falling. I thanked him for letting me take my own chances with my own dreams.

The booming of the rock crushers seemed to grow louder as the snow clouds held their sound close to the hills. Boom...Boom...Boom. I charged over to my woodpile, grabbed my axe and threw down a log on the chopping stump. Crack! I brought down the axe hard. Crack! I brought it down again and again, Crack! Crack! Crack!

“Bang on, you sonofabitch!” I yelled out to the crushers, “Bang on! But I'm coming in after you. You hear me? I'm coming in.”

Chapter 20

I wasn't sure who to tell first, Mary or Sandy, about the new way down to the 3800'. I could've told no one...just kept the information to myself. That would've put and end to it all. Believe me, the thought crossed my mind to keep quiet. Maybe that would've been the smartest thing to do, but it wasn't the right thing, I knew that. Like I said at the beginning of this story, I couldn't keep away from the truth anymore, just like Sandy couldn't keep away from the gold. We both had to go after it.

I waited a couple of days brooding over it and then phoned Mary. We met up at Carrs, a booth at the back of the place. It was crowded and plenty noisy, which was perfect for us to talk in private. The snow had been coming down fairly solid since morning and by noon this little pizza place was toasty warm against it. I stood up and waved to Mary when she came in and she was tugging off her big heavy coat before she got to the booth. There was no beating around the bush with her. She knew I had something important on my mind and she wanted me to get right at it.

I told her what my dad told me and what it meant. She stared past me. Not a word from her for a long time. Then she leaned forward and took my hands in hers. I felt like a little kid ready to be told something important by his mom.

“We’re not going to tell him,” she said in a whisper. “He doesn’t have to know. He’s still acting like Olnor doesn’t exist anyway, let him go on pretending.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant by that, but before I could ask, the waitress came over and we ordered coffee. Still hadn’t let go of my hands. When the waitress went away, Mary squeezed my hands even tighter.

“Don’t do this, Jake!” her words were intense but soft. “You don’t have to tell him!”

“I do, Mary. I do.”

She dropped my hands, turned away, and for a second there I thought she might pull on her coat and walk out of the place. Instead, she kept her eyes off me and seemed to gather herself into herself. I let a few moments go by, even long enough for the coffee to come back, and still she hadn’t looked at me again.

“Mary, listen will you to what...”

She snapped around now, eyes on me, cutting me off, “Let’s get out of Lead. Now. Today!”

When I stayed quiet, she rushed on in a near panic with a plan she was making up on the spot that would keep her dad and me safe, at least in her mind.

“Jake, c’mon, it’s not about gold anymore. My dad will get over this. It’s not about that now. It’s just about you and me. I love you. I don’t want to lose you. I don’t want you to do this. You don’t have to do this.”

“Mary, you don’t know what you’re saying,” I said taking her hands, “I’ve got to. It’s not for him...or for you...it’s...”

“No, no, Jake, no you don’t, please, you don’t...”

But she could see it in my eyes, she knew I wasn’t going to be talked out of it this now, not this time. She pulled away slowly now, and waited for me to tell her why. I stalled a little, put some sugar and cream in my coffee. She waited. I looked up at her.

“I told you at Latchstring that I played baseball in high school...until I hurt my shoulder. Well, I didn’t just play baseball. It was my whole world. Everything I ever wanted to do, everything I figured I’d be doing in my life.”

“I know,” she said, “I looked you up in the School Year Book. You were four-year Varsity, you were All-State, and I know about the accident, how you couldn’t pitch anymore after that. What that meant to you. I know...all that...”

“No, you don’t,” I cut her off, “You know, Mary. You don’t.”

“What don’t I know?”

“I was the Local Hero alright. The big sports star. I was scouted by the White Sox my senior year. I signed an option with them. My dream come true.”

Mary’s eyes were focused right on me, trying to figure out where I was going with this.

“But it didn’t take long before I started thinking I wasn’t good enough, that the Sox had made a mistake and that they’d find out, that they’d cut me from the team.”

“I don’t understand. I don’t know what you’re saying, Jake.”

“I’m saying I knew I would let everybody down, specially my dad. That it was all bullshit. Who was I kidding? I could never really do it. I wasn’t that good. I could never get the dream I was after. Never. And I couldn’t get that thought out of my head. It poisoned me. It was eating me up.”

I stopped then, took a sip of my coffee and Mary stayed quiet, waiting for me to get it all out. I appreciated that. I needed time, even now, I needed a bit more time.

“Three weeks before the end of school, I went to a party, got drunk and rolled my car over an embankment. Tore the hell out of my shoulder, and the White Sox tore up the option.”

“But that was an accident. It wasn’t your fault,” she nearly pleaded.

“Was it an accident? Did I go over that embankment by mistake? I don’t think so. I don’t think it was any kind of an accident.”

She seemed like she was about to say something, some words that would make me change my mind about what I did. But then she thought better of it and stayed quiet.

I reached over and took her hands now. “I got to go through with this. You understand? Not just for your dad and Ben, not even for all the miners left behind, but me.”

“What the hell am I supposed to say to that?” she said, not angry now, not judging me or nothing, just what she was feeling.

“You don’t have to say anything. It’s up to me now, my decision to go after it.”

We finished up our coffee pretty much in silence. I followed her back to her house, and when I came into the living room, it looked like a camping store or parts warehouse had been dumped out on the floor...flashlights, sleeping bags, tools, flares, rope, boots, a couple fire extinguishers. Sandy stood in the middle of the mess holding a portable generator in his hand that he’d either just picked up to examine or was just about to set down. So this is what Mary meant. He was moving forward with his plan as if I’d never said a word about Olnier. It was nuts really, but I guess he figured if he kept moving forward, I’d have to go along and help as best I could. Now I had something to tell him that would make the planning he’d been doing worth something.

So I told him. I told him what my dad had said about the parallel bore hole.

“That don’t change much,” he said with a strange smile, “not much at all. Now we don’t need to worry about the cage is all. The way I see it, we still get there just after dark, we still cut through the gate, put our stuff in the ore car, we take down the boards, get back to the shaft, now the bore hole, same thing, same damn plan...”

He rambled on like this for awhile longer, ignoring out all sorts of stuff that had changed, like the fact that Olnier’s crew would be down there smack in the middle of the Supply Adit forcing us to find a new way into the 3800. And the fact that we’d have to find some way to keep them distracted while we found that new way. I guess I’d be the one figuring out that stuff.

I looked over to Mary and she kind of shrugged with a roll of her eyes. So I let him go on a bit more with the telling of his plans. No sense in stirring up trouble before I had to.

“Shit, if we do it right,” he said, “and if all goes like I know it's going to, we'll have all the gold and no one will be the wiser. Those bastards won't ever miss it. They don't know what they got, not one good goddamn idea of it!”

“Yeah, Okay, Sandy, enough now of that. We get the gold, all of it, then what?”

I wanted to bring him back to ground sort of speak.

"Then what? What do you mean?" he said.

"We got a truckload of gold. Right?" And I stopped when I said that. It was hitting me that I was as crazy as him right then. I mean, a truckload of gold! Who were we kidding? How could that ever happen? But I went on. "What are we going to do with it?"

"We're going to have over 300 gallons of gas in that truck and extra tanks besides, and we're going to drive like bats out of hell, but not too fast that we get pulled over, right straight up to Canada out on 85. We say good-bye to Lead, to South Dakota, and to the U.S. of A. That's what we're going to do."

Canada? I thought to myself and then said it out loud. He looked at me and waited a minute or two, and then said, "Why not?" The way he said it, I thought maybe he'd just thought up this part of it. I knew we'd be leaving Lead after going in for the gold. That was the whole idea. But Canada, that never came into my mind. I

guess, I'd never thought it out this far before. He was right, though. Why not? I didn't have an answer, and Mary seemed comfortable from her side of the room. Okay, I guess that was it. Canada. I'd been there once before on an elk hunt with Tom and a couple of buddies. Probably wasn't more than six or seven hundred miles away. With some luck, we could make it without stopping for gas. All right, Canada.

"It's three people," he said. "One on the hoist and engine, two down getting the gold."

"Well, there's three of us," Mary said, trying to sound like it was natural and that it settled the problem, no need to figure further.

"Now wait a minute," I said. "No way!"

"Why not?" she said back to me and then she looked over to Sandy for support, but I could see he was going to stay out of it, or try to, and that pissed me off.

"Because it's dangerous, for Christ's sake. That's why."

"It's dangerous for you, too. I'm sharing in the gold, right?"

"We don't need three, Sandy. Two of us. You and me. You run the hoist. I go down there." Now I was looking to him for support, but still he stayed quiet.

"Sandy," I said louder now, "I can blast the place and haul it to the cage. You can bring me up."

He looked at her and she stood her ground, staring him back down and me too.

"It's your daughter, goddamn it!" That hit him like I knew it would. You could almost see him jump back some. "Make her see how dangerous it is. Mary, you can

wait in the truck. Keep the engine ready to run...you'll be our getaway driver," I tried to joke.

"There's no time for you to do it alone," he said firmly. "Two of us are what we have to have on the 38. Besides, I'm the only one who's been down there before, I know what we're looking to find."

"Jake," Mary said, "I know it's from your heart and it feels good to hear you say it. But nothing's going to happen to me on the 3200' where I'll be."

"You don't know that," I said.

"We don't know anything for sure." Mary was still talking but Sandy looked ready now to say something. Mary kept going, though, and didn't notice. "Nothing is for sure except that we're doing it. And I'm going to be a part. Besides, there is no one else."

"Jake," Sandy said in a near whisper, "I wouldn't let her go if I thought it was too dangerous for her up there."

"Dad," she said quickly, "I'm a big girl now. I have a say in this. I'm saying yes, no matter what happens."

"I know you do," he said and then turned to me and told me the truth of what was on his mind. "Goddamn it, Jake, do you think I'm going to sit up there and work the fucking hoist while you blast into my cavern and gather all my gold? Do you think I'm not going to be there to see it, to touch it? Jesus Christ! I am going to be there. How long do you think I've been waiting for this? How many nights I've sat right on that stoop out there and gone over what it's going to be like. Or dreamed of it."

Sonofabitch, the dreams are all I've had! Well, you can forget it!" he yelled. "No way. Do you hear? I'm going to be there. I'm going to walk or crawl or slide on my belly if I have to, but I'm going to see that gold for myself. That's what I'm going to do!"

A long silence came over the living room when he finished his piece. There was no way I was going to change his mind or Mary's. And, hell, the thought of bringing somebody else in on the plan didn't make any kind of sense. It was going to be her, whether I liked it or not. It was going to be the three of us going in after the gold.

Chapter 21

We had a lot of work to do on the engine we were bringing in. We took parts off and then put them back on until we could do it blindfolded, figuring we'd either fix the skip engine with our new parts or hook this one up in its place if that made more sense. Sandy wasn't in the best of shape, and I'm not just talking about his injuries. He smoked like a chimney and drank a fair amount, but hell he never was the one to call it quits as the cold nights came on.

We also had to reinforce cabinets inside the camper shell too so they could handle a heavy payload: up to four or five hundred pounds of gold! It was crazy to imagine them stuffed in a couple weeks from now. We sure didn't want gold falling out onto some border guard's foot if we happened to get searched as we crossed into Canada.

And we talked about how we'd turn the gold into money. We knew we couldn't go to a bank and put it on a scale and ask for dollar bills. "We could make jewelry," Mary said in a sort of joking way, "like four-leaf clovers, and sell them." What seemed most likely was to stake a claim somewhere in the Canadian wilderness an

say we mined the gold there. Hell, there sure wasn't any way of tracing it, no serial numbers.

We went on like that late into December with Christmas only a week away. I was on my way to pick Mary up to drop some gifts off at my folks and decorate the tree. It was weird to think I wouldn't see them on Christmas Eve and Christmas morning like always. I didn't like to think how they would worry when I didn't show, specially my mom. Anyway, tonight we'd decorate the tree and I'd tell them my presents looked better under the tree than sitting at my place on the floor. Hell, I knew I was going to have to say something to my dad so they all didn't think I died when I didn't show up at the Christmas Ball.

On the drive over, I couldn't get Mary off the subject of her dad. She was real concerned. She went on and on about the way he was acting, "Running around like a chicken with its head cut off" is the way she put it. She stopped for a second to catch her breath.

"He's just smiles and laughs when I tell him he's got to slow down and relax."

"You're not used to him. He's happy. That's all it is."

"Happy? It's like he woke up a different person." She got very serious. "What if there isn't any gold down there? That's what I keep thinking about. Do you know what that will do to him? It makes me shiver just to think about it."

"That's why I don't let myself think of it. We're going down there and that's all that matters now."

Truth is, I was as worried and spooked by how close we were to going after the gold as she was, but I kept it to myself.

We turned onto Grand and it started to snow like crazy, putting a new coat of cotton on everything in just seconds. We managed to slip and slide our way into the house with cheers of Merry Christmas and the kids squealing and my dad handing us a couple of hot mugs of eggnog.

"Looks like it's really dropping out there."

We handed our coats to my mom as she came up and kissed us both and Ben hollered "Howdy" from his place by the fire, his leg still in a cast.

"Great looking tree," I said to him.

He'd been the one in our family to pick out every year since he was ten years old. He seemed always to know the best ones on the lot, how they'd drop, how long they'd last and how fresh they were.

"You'll have to do my part in decorating this year," he raised his cup of eggnog to Mary.

We shot the breeze for a while, and I kept thinking how this was going to be the last time for a long time that I'd be talking to him face to face. Boy, it felt weird. It was all I could do to stop myself from telling him what really was going on with me.

"Don't keep talking all night," my mom yelled over to me. "We all have to help decorate tree."

"I can't wait," I said with a laugh, but I meant it. I felt like I was going off to war or something and this was the last time for everything, a farewell party.

Mary was helping the kids rearrange some of their bulbs to the higher branches. She had Susie in her arms and was holding her up to put up a red bulb.

"Here's your reindeer." My mom handed me a little wooden ornament I'd had for as long as I could remember. The paint was nearly worn off and it was missing an ear.

"Santa gave him this ornament on his first Christmas," she said to Mary. "I have pictures of it somewhere. Ben got one too that Gena's putting on tonight. Do you remember Robbie when we got them?"

"Plain as yesterday. They were at J&E's when some things were still handmade. They've been lost and bitten and I don't know what all, but still there they are."

We went on like that for a what seemed like a very short time and then the tree was finished. We turned off all the lights and plugged it in. The kids all went "AHHH" and squealed with delight. My mom flicked the lights back on and got us all to stand around the tree for a picture, Ben hobbling over with Gena's help. I couldn't help but wonder where the hell I'd be next year at Christmas, and what it would be like not being here at home.

My mom and Gena and Mary went into the kitchen to get dinner together. Me and Ben and my dad sat around the fire, quiet mostly. It was comforting to sit there and listen to carols on the radio. The dinner soon came on the table and we carried the kids in. They were damn near asleep, and after all the candy-canes and cookies they ate, they weren't much hungry for dinner anyway. But they perked up some when the

dessert was served. My dad opened a bottle of good sherry he bought and poured us all a glass. The whole evening was just racing by faster than I could hold onto it.

"I bought the sherry someone else ought to make a toast." He looked at me, and I nodded back to him, both of us silently understanding one another. I raised my glass, and then it just popped out.

"I want to make an announcement. Me and Mary are planning on getting married."

I don't know what the hell came over me. But I knew I wouldn't have another chance before we really did get married to tell them all. Ben reached across the table and shook my hand. I kissed my mom and Gena, and the kids were laughing and giggling. I looked at Mary and she didn't seem to be shocked. My dad said something about Christmas surprises, and then he stood up and put his glass in the air.

"Here's to Mary and to Jake. To the both of you. Good luck and the blessings of love to you today, tomorrow, and all your lives together."

"So when's the big day?" Gena asked.

"Have you planned that far?" my mom asked, I think hoping she could be part of the planning.

"Sometime next year," I said. "Sometime in Spring." My mom smiled.

Not long after dinner me and Mary had to be getting home. The snow had eased up some so we figured we could make it down Grand without needing to put chains on. I picked up the kids one at a time and gave them a big kiss good-bye.

"When is Santa coming?" Dwayne asked, nearly half asleep. Then the other two, Susie and Robert, started asking the same thing.

"Next weekend will be Christmas Eve. So it isn't far away at all."

Gena came over gave me and Mary a kiss and hug, "I'm so happy for you two. I was beginning to think the day would never come."

"Congratulations again, big brother," Ben yelled from his chair, and I'll see you at the Ball next Saturday."

"Have you been before?" my mother asked Mary. She said no. "The music is wonderful and everybody's so dressed up. It's just something to look forward to. Gets you really in the Christmas spirit."

Before Mary could say anything, and I'm sure she didn't know what to say, my dad handed me a small Christmas tree Ben had picked up for me. "Let me help you out to the car," he said making it easy to get to the door.

My mom gave us both a final kiss and I felt funny as hell knowing she was saying good-bye for a lot longer than she knew. I drew back from her, "I love you, mom," and gave her another kiss. She stood in the hallway and waved to us as we headed to the truck.

"Let's get you in there," my dad said to Mary, opening the Bronco door. "It's the coldest night of the year so far, and feels ready to be Christmas."

I was on the same side of the truck, heading to the back to put the tree in, and my dad closed Mary's door and grabbed my arm before I lifted the tailgate.

"I don't know how to say this" he began. I waited for him to go on. "Well, I . . . we, won't be seeing you at the Ball. Right?"

I didn't really answer so much as I just look at him.

"Look, son, let me ask you straight. Are you sure about what you're doing? Damn sure?"

"I'm sure."

He drew back, "Then all I ask is that you be careful and don't be afraid to back down if you have to. Understood?"

"Sure thing, pop."

He pulled me into him and hugged me tighter than I could remember.

The next week, which was the last week before going down into the mine, is still sort of jumble in my head. It was either Monday or Tuesday that I got over to Sandy's and finished the truck with him. And sometime during the week we drove to Puma to fill the truck and extra tanks with gas to avoid any questions in Lead, but still the gas attendant there couldn't help but ask where we were going in the dead of winter. "To Mexico," Sandy said, and that shut him up.

Sandy was calmer during the week, like I hoped he would be. He was different, though, there's no getting around that. He seemed distant. But he wasn't running around like Mary said. You could talk to him, even if everything you said he brought back to the 3800' and the gold we would soon be hauling out from it.

Later in the week, we started packing the truck with stuff we wouldn't need in the mine with us. We held off on the retrieval gear until Friday night. Mary was also

busy closing up the house, covering stuff and emptying out closets. Sandy still hadn't made any plans for what he was going to do with it. For me, it was easy. I rented the place I lived in, so I just told the landlord I was moving and that was that. And the place was furnished, too, so there wasn't much for me to take that I didn't throw away.

What stands out most for me that week is how I kept going over and over the in my mind the new plan we had to get past Oler and his crew, all the things that had to go right for us to even reach the new bore hole on the 3700'. Getting to the cyanide vats was going to be tricky all by itself, but the thought of what I had to do once I got there was enough to get me jittery and my heart pumping faster than I liked to admit. I'd feel sure one minute that I could do my part to get the whole thing rolling, then the next minute I was sure I'd screw up or get caught before we even got started. I knew I had to shake off my old fears or I'd never pull this off.

On one of the last days of the week, the three of us sat around the fire and Sandy told us his news.

"I should have been a thief all along or r an actor or some goddamn thing. It was easy as pie."

"And the car? Goddamn it, Sandy, you got the car there?"

"Is the Pope Catholic?" he laughed out loud, a little too loud. "The car is there!" he boomed. "I did just what I said I would, good and good."

He started laughing again, low at first, then he went on for awhile and he got louder. To tell the truth, his laugh made me uncomfortable. I looked over at Mary and could see she was upset by it, too. Finally, he stopped.

"I wheeled the car right onto the cage, told the operator I was picking up steel from the supply adit."

"And they believed that?"

"Hell, yes. I believed it myself. I pushed the car right past the new operations go for the 3200'. No one even looked at me. I got down there about 3:00. Nothing was going on. Not really anybody there today."

"So where is it? Just tell me exactly where it is."

"Where would you like it to be?" He was enjoying the hell out of this little victory.

"You left it right at the gate?"

"You could stick your hand through the gate and grab it. Nobody's going to move it with the holiday coming on."

"Shit I hope not."

We ended up a bit drunk with the fire roaring and us recounting all the items we'd packed into the truck, going over the list of things left to do, and a final crossing-off of the things we'd changed our mind on and didn't need to worry about anymore. Then Mary got up and went into the other room. When she came back in, she had a gift in her hand that she handed to Sandy.

"What the hell?"

"Open it," she said.

I knew what it was, Mary told me her plan on this a few weeks ago. Sandy read the card out loud: "Daddy, Merry Christmas and a Happy New Life. Love, Mary and Jake."

I got a kick out of her adding me to the card. He stood the card up on the coffee table and tore off the paper. It was a plain box he held now, and he paused like he suddenly knew what was inside. His hand shook a little as he slowly lifted off the top half of the box. There was paper covering the object inside, but from the shape of it, he knew his guess was right. He held off reaching for it a moment or two more. Then he dug in with his good hand and pulled out the yellow miner's cap with the number fourteen freshly painted in white on the side. It looked brand new, like it'd never been worn before, and I think at first that's what Sandy thought. But he held it up to the light and looked inside and saw the repairs. He took off his watch cap, and put the cap on real slow.

There was a moment or two there when all of us were quiet. The cap was a symbol of just about everything we were doing, of lives lost and hope abandoned and now reborn again in us. We all knew it was an important moment and we let it linger. Then he took off the cap, rubbing his thumb over the cap lamp where the golden nugget had been hidden for all those years.

"Gawd, honey," he said in a whisper. "It's a beautiful thing. Damn if it isn't."

Chapter 22

Finally, the day was here, the day we'd been planning for months. It was nearly impossible to sleep, and I'd been long awake when the morning light started leaking into my bedroom. I got up, made myself some coffee and eggs, which is all the food I had left after cleaning out my refrigerator. I sat there eating and thinking and thinking some more. The snow had been falling all week and before it could melt much, the next load fell on top of that. It was 8:00 now, and I didn't know what the hell to do with myself until 4:00 when I was locking up my place and heading over to Sandy's.

I cleaned my dishes, emptied the trash, took a shower, laid out my clothes and it was still no more than 10:30. It went on like that for hours. The time was creeping by. There wasn't anywhere for me to go and nothing left to do in the house, so I turned on the TV. The reception was bad because of the weather, all I could get was Christmas carols. I turned it off and laid back on the couch and went over for the 100th time the plan I'd come up with for the cyanide vats to get Olnier and his crew out of our way so we could get down to 3700' level. Now, in the light of day of my

living room, that plan seemed pure crazy to me. But it had to work. If it didn't we'd be running out of the mine with our tail between our legs before we even got started.

All of the sudden, I jumped up from the couch and realized I'd fallen asleep and been dreaming about the plan, not just thinking about it. Holy crap! I frantically searched for the mantle clock in the near dark. I found it and it said 2:30. What a relief! I didn't even want to think what I do if it had said 7:30 or 9:30. I could have ruined the whole plan, missed it all.

I made some strong coffee, turned the TV up real loud and started getting dressed to go. I could see out the window there was freezing rain coming down. I turned on the porch light so I wouldn't kill myself on the ice. Wouldn't that be a sonofabitch, I thought, to fall and break my fool neck right here on my front stoop. That made me laugh like hell. I guess it was nerves or something, but I laughed like a crazy man over the thought of it. Then, finally, I was in my Bronco and heading down into Lead with my windshield wiper ripping away.

When Mary opened the door for me, I could feel the warmth of the house come through the screen. "Hi," is all she said, with a sort of sigh, and she reached up and hugged me tight before I got in the door.

"You okay?"

Before she could answer, Sandy hurried in from the kitchen fully dressed in gear, including his new miner's cap with the damn light on. He walks right passed me mumbling, "Snowing now. Rained some. Now snow."

“Hey, Sandy, slow down there,” I call over to him, but he walks on past me to the back bedroom intent on something.

“He’s been like this for hours, waiting for you, preparing, searching...” Mary says.

“Searching for what?”

“A flashlight, a drill bit, knife, blasting caps, rope, wire. I heard him poking around all night, hasn’t slept, won’t eat...” she seems like she might start crying, “I don’t think he’s up to this...maybe we should...I don’t know, postpone it, call it off, something...”

“Okay, okay, take it easy. I’ll talk to him.”

I follow him into his bedroom. He’s got his back to me, rifling through a drawer.

“What’cha looking for? We got everything taken care of.”

He keeps searching so that I have to come right up behind him.

“Sandy,” I say not too loud not wanting to spook him. He keeps on search so I yell, “Sandy!”

Now he stops and turns to me, his eyes not focusing, not saying a word.

“What the heck you doing, man? I’m counting on you. You know that, right?”

He walks away from the bureau, turns on the bedroom light, but stays silent.

“Tell me now, Sandy,” I say hard, “are you going to be all right down there? This isn't no practice run. This is the whole thing, and you got to be sure.”

“I’m sure!” he barks at me.

He turns and sees his reflection in the mirror, an old crazy-looking miner ready for some kind of battle. He reaches up, turns off his cap lamp. Rubs his hands over his face, still fixed on the mirror.

“I’m ready...been ready a long time.”

I shake my head, I’m really concerned, but I just say, “All right, then. Let’s go.”

And we are ready. There’s not much to do but lock up the front door, hurry across the frozen lawn, lock the camper shell and climb in the cab of the truck, which is warm with the engine running and the heater on high. I’m at the wheel as planned, Mary in the middle and Sandy at shotgun. We all look straight ahead, a long, silent moment, running with our own thoughts of the night ahead. Through the windshield the snow blows hard across the headlights as the wind begins to gust.

“What’re you waiting for?” Sandy snaps, “Let’s go.”

Mary and I see each other in the rearview. We both look worried, no denying it. I reached inside my shirt and took off the four-leaf clover and hung it on the mirror.

“Good luck for all of us,” I said.

“Okay,” Sandy said gruffly, “I see that. Good luck and let’s get the hell going.”

I shrug, put the truck in gear, and slowly pull onto Siever Street, the house lights behind me soon lost in the howling storm.

By the time we reached the Oro Hondo Spur, which is a road where the Main Supply Level comes out to the surface, the snow was dumping on us. That was fine with me because our white truck was invisible just a couple yards out. The Ball was

set to go on at around 7:30 and the only people on the outside of the mine would be a couple of old watchmen up at the top of the main gate and parking lot. There wasn't much to worry about us ever being spotted getting in, at least not until morning, and that gave us close to twelve hours. The only thing on my mind right then was getting to the cyanide plant to start this whole thing off.

I could see the mountain through the snow as we pulled to a stop, just the outline, but there it was, looming out of the night. I knew Mary saw it, too, looking like it was hanging in mid-air, like it was almost ready to fall on us. But it was more than the way it looked that was impressive, it was that we were here, damn near ready to get out of the truck for the first time and cut open the lock on the gate.

"You'll be able to see the gate and the cyclone fence any minute," I said to Mary.

Just when I said it, the truck lights shined on the fence.

"There it is," Mary almost yelled out. "Look, there."

"You got it," Sandy said, then to me, "Pull up close and see if you can turn the truck around, heading out back down the road."

I had the same idea since I didn't want to be backing out of the drive or turning the truck around with a ton or more of gold in the rear end. It was crazy to think a thing like that but that's why we were here. I pulled right up against the gate and then backed up and did a three-point turn and headed the truck away from the gate. I stopped about three feet away from it. The gate opened inward so there was be plenty of room to load from where we were.

"That's it," I said, "no more waiting."

Sandy put on his gloves and Mary and me did the same. I looked at her, and she looked cute as hell with her miner's cap on and the gloves and all. But it didn't seem like the time to say much about that, so I just leaned over and kissed her and kept quiet.

"Let's go," Sandy said, and he sounded good, sure of himself.

We jumped out of the cab and right away the cold came over us. It was probably well below zero and going down fast. The snow was whipping, too, by the side of the mountain. I could feel it bite into my face and I had to nearly close my eyes. I cut the padlock on fence and the three of us hurried inside to the adit entrance where the ore car was exactly where Sandy said it would be. We huddled behind it, and in the silence of the adit, I could make out the soft thudding of what must've be Olners's crew working along through the night. He said he was going at it twenty-four hours a day and he sure as hell was.

I pulled out three gas masks from the ore car and passed them to Sandy and Mary, keeping one for myself.

"Wait about 20 minutes, then get ore car moving, wait for..."

Sandy cut me off frustrated, "I know, I know...if we don't hear an alarm by 25 minutes, get back to the truck, et cetera, et cetera..."

"That's right..." I fired back at him, "et cetera, et cetera!"

I left them and ran ahead through the adit to an intersecting passage that led to the outhaul of the cyanidation plant. It took me a little bit longer than I thought, but

finally I made it into the outer hallway of the plant. I stopped in front the glass door entry to the cyanidation plant where a Warning Sign read: *Cyanide is a deadly gas. Do not enter without authorized gas masks in place.*

Like I said at the start of this story, the gold produced by the Homestake is embedded in other rock, quartz mostly, and to get it free, the Homestake first crushes it, then breaks it down smaller in ball mills, then beats it some more until the rock and gold are all about the size of sand. To get the gold free of the sand is where the cyanide process comes in. Huge vats holding nearly 800 tons of a slurry formed by mixing the sand with water and cyanide that is spun around and around until the gold particles get leached out. If you look at all the steps to creating gold, it's no wonder how precious it is on a lady's finger or man's watch.

I pulled on my gas mask and pushed open the glass door to enter the massive room where the huge cyanide vats were churning in slow circles. The vats were locked behind a narrow corridor fronted by security bars. Every twenty feet or so, there was a one foot by three foot opening in the bars to allow equipment to be passed to men inside. I looked through one of those openings now, searched across the vat closest to me, to the far side where a red Release Button was positioned. Above the button was a caution sign: DO NOT FILL VAT ABOVE SAFETY LINE.

A Red Safety Line circled the rim of the vat. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a handful of stones. I could see my hand shaking. I could feel my heart starting to race. I could feel a panic beginning inside of me, a panic I couldn't let take hold of me. I took some deep breaths. Then a couple more. I told myself that I could

do this, that I was going to do this. That Mary and Sandy were counting on me and I wasn't going to let them down.

I selected a stone. I stepped back a couple feet from the opening. I looked at the Release Button. I took a breath and held it and tossed the stone through the opening. I watched it skip across the surface of the cyanide slurry...one, two, three, four times it skipped and then just flew over the far edge of the vat, missing the Release Button and bouncing off the wall.

“Damn it!” I yelled out loud and then shut up fast afraid someone might hear me.

I took out a second stone and tossed it fast thinking that not thinking too hard would be best. It whizzed right off the surface of the slurry in the vat with just a couple of skips and then clanged against the far edge of the vat.

I took out a third rock, whispering to myself to calm down, that three times is a charm. Then I thought back to me showing off with Mary and telling her I could count the skips and still hit a target. I even blew on the damn stone this time for luck and settled on four skips as my lucky number. I wound up like a pitcher and let that stone rip! It sizzled across the cyanide solution in four skips just like I planned and it smashed into the arm holding the Release Button, but it missed the button itself!

Oh shit! I felt desperate! Stupid desperate! As I stood there now I felt like a dumb son-of-a-bitch! I was sure the whole idea of skipping a stone to activate the Release Button to let slurry rush in and overflow the vat was the stupidest idea possible. And without the disturbance of the flooding slurry would cause rushing into the

Supply Adit, there'd be no way we'd ever get past the Olnier crew and make it to the 3700. What the hell was I thinking? Was I crazy to think I could hit that button? Or was I just choking now that it was in front of me like I'd choked many times in the past?

Well, shit, I couldn't choke now, I said out loud. I had Sandy and Mary waiting on me. I couldn't let them down and I couldn't let myself down. Not this time. Not tonight. I couldn't let Olnier beat me at this.

I yanked out another stone. "Do it, Jake," I said to myself, "six skips. C'mon, bottom of the Ninth, two outs, full count, all of it on the line...Toss it!"

I let it fly. On the first skip, I knew it was headed straight for the button, no doubt about it. And goddamn...2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and the stone struck the very center of that damn button with a WHACK! The funneled chute flopped open and a gushing stream of the thick gray cyanide slurry rushed into the tank.

"Yes!!" I said under my breath.

Within seconds, the slurry started rise fast to the Safety Line circling the vat. I didn't wait for it to get any higher, but took off running for the Supply Level. I didn't have to wait and see what that heavy slurry was going to do when it started to crest the vat and begin to spill gray sheets of cyanide-rich sludge over the floor. I knew that it wouldn't take more than a few minutes before the vat would get off-balance and tip fully on one side, releasing thousands of gallons of slurry against the glass wall.

And sure enough that's what I heard first was the explosion of that glass wall, shattering on impact, and not long after that I heard alarms going off as the slurry

breached the hallway. I ran even faster to get back to Mary and Sandy, but I could picture the slurry wave racing to the Yates Shaft. More sirens went off, and then I could hear men yelling, “What the Goddamn is that smell?” It was cyanide fumes of course, and everyone on Olnier’s crew would be running now for the exits. Oh boy, there were going to be some pissed off people with this mess to clean up. I kind of wished I could stay around and wait for Olnier to get called up and to see him barreling over to the plant with putrid, poisonous cyanide mud everywhere.

But I had something more important to do, which was to get back to Mary and Sandy and to help them get the ore car rolling fast down the Supply Level before the maintenance and safety teams could get the blowers going long enough to clear out the cyanide fumes and bring in the clean up crews to the level.

As I came bounding out of the passageway back to the Supply Level, I could see the ore car rolling toward me with Sandy and Mary with their gas masks on pushing that heavy car for all they were worth. I caught up with them and put my back into it, too. We were in a race against time now, and with the sirens blaring, the red safety lights flashing, the noise of the slurry rushing into the shaft, it felt like we were in the race of our lives.

Soon we were past the Abandoned Level where the Olnier team had left all their gear behind and run off. We kept pushing the car, steering it off the main line and onto an adjoining set of tracks that feed to the supply shaft and supply cage. It was this smaller cage that would take us down the 3700’ where we’d find the parallel bore hole my dad told me about.

We reached the supply cage quickly, which was good since I didn't know exactly how long before maintenance would get there. The cage was smaller than we thought and we had to wrestle to get the ore car in and then all of us had to climb on top of the gear in the car before we could get the gates closed.

"Hit it!" Sandy yelled, "Let's get going!"

It wasn't even worth answering that kind of yelling, so I didn't. I pulled hard on the release lever and then hit the Down Switch. The cage lurched and then stopped and for a moment it didn't move. I felt sure we were too heavy, but no, it started again with a jerk and began to lower us to 3700' Level.

And the ride down went pretty smooth and fast. So far, so good I thought. We were able to push and pull the ore car out of the cage which wasn't so easy since all that weight took some real heft to get moving. But it was moving now and we had flashlights shining on every nook and cranny searching for the cutoff that had to run to the bore hole. But we couldn't find it. And we'd gone far enough we thought.

"Where the hell is it!" Sandy boomed. "Your dad better know what he's talking about."

"Keep looking, keep looking!" I yelled back confidently, but inside I was worried, ready to retrace our steps, ready to have my head examined. Then Mary yelled out, "I see it...there!"

She pointed to a narrow tunnel up on the left. We pulled up close and a new problem immediately showed its ugly head.

“Ain’t got not tracks,” Sandy said, “No fucking tracks for the car. Who the hell knows what now?”

I got pissed then, “Hey! All right. Knock it off. We’re going to haul the gear. Remember that part of the plan?”

And it’s true we did have a backup plan to carry the gear if we had to, and we brought along a collapsible dolly just in case. But man I hoped we’d never have to use it considering how heavy the gear was and how much extra time it would take. There was no choice, though, and to his credit, Sandy pitched as best he could haul the gear down the narrow tunnel in the absolute blackness ahead. Mary and I hefted the Honda 200 onto the dolly. It was just about the most important part of our gear since it was going to run the skip bucket up and down the bore hole.

“You start looking about a 100 feet ahead on the left,” I yelled to Sandy, “We’ll catch up.”

Sandy, cable and whatnot over his shoulder, limped ahead of us into the tunnel.

“I’m worried, Jake,” Mary said when he got some distance from us.

“I’m worried, too,” I said to her, “I won’t deny it. But like you said that day at Pactola, sometimes you got to believe things will work out.” She half nodded to me. “We got to keep going, that’s all we have to do, keep going,” I said with a forced smile.

And so we did. We trudged on forward into the dark. Sandy’s lamp was soon out of sight and that got me a bit jumpy, but then I heard a banging going on in the darkness ahead of us.

“Sandy, where are you?” my words echoed all around us. There was no answer, then Mary yelled.

“In here!” Sandy answered and Mary’s flashlight found an even narrower passageway off to the left and we could see Sandy’s lantern bobbing in rhythm with the banging he had carrying on.

When Mary and me got far enough into the passageway, we could see it opening into a small skip room, a shallow chamber with maybe a seven foot ceiling, with a series of pulleys and cables hanging from it, leading under a padlocked metal plate that had a white cross painted on it, the white cross my dad had painted all those years ago.

Sandy was banging on the padlock with a hammer over and over again. I rushed up to him and grabbed his arm.

“Stop it! You’re sending a signal bell through the whole mine! We gotta keep quiet.”

“This is it!” he yelled trying to yank his arm free.

“Daddy, quit it!” Mary yelled with real force and he settled down.

“We brought a torch for that, remember the plan, the plan...”

“Alright, give me the torch,” Sandy reached to take it from me.

“No! I’m doing that. You start checking out the engine, see if we can get it going, then grease the pulleys. Mary’ll help you.”

Sandy gets up reluctantly and goes over to Mary, who's already working on the skip engine and doing exactly what we'd planned for her to do, getting the cables greased up, ready to move again after these years.

It took no time at all to cut through the lock. I grabbed the cast iron cover plate and tugged it slowly off to the side. When I did that, the rush of warm air coming up from the 3800' down below and washing over me gave me the creeps. It felt like a breath being released from depths of the mine. I didn't say anything. I gently settled the cover plate on the ground next to me. Then I shined my light into the bore hole, and watched it travel down deep into the darkness where I knew Sandy and I would soon be heading.

Chapter 23

Both Sandy and Mary thought it best to leave the old engine connected to the cables and hoist and swap out new parts from the engine we'd hauled in. They were moving quickly according to our plan, right down to the size of the wrenches, pullers, and screwdrivers. Mary was starting on the battery and generator and then she'd drain the oil and water and take the hoses off the radiator. Sandy was starting with the carburetor, his specialty. I planned on going right after the clutch, and if it went fast, I would go onto the distributor and points.

We rigged up two flashlights, and with each of us having our cap lamps going, the light wasn't half bad. I looked down the drift behind me and had this terrible feeling of Olnier suddenly appearing with the police and asking, "Just what do you think you're doing?" I shook the thought out of my mind and got down to work.

"I don't think we ought to smoke down here once we get the carburetor off," I said to Sandy. "There's no ventilation."

"None at all," he answered, which was his way of agreeing with me.

"How's the linkage on the carb?" I asked.

"It'll do."

"The battery's in and the generator's almost hooked up," Mary said a few minutes later.

"I'm going to leave the carb," Sandy said, "for the time being. I'll adjust it when we start the engine."

"It's working," I said, meaning the jack I'd brought. It backed the engine off far enough so I could pull the trans spline free to get at the clutch.

"Sure it's working," Sandy said. "We got it all planned. They'd never figure it in a 100 years. But we got it. Them bastards."

Me and Mary said nothing to that, just kept on working. I don't know how long we went on exactly. I swear, not one of us looked at our synchronized watches. But after a while, we'd all done our own jobs and the distributor was in an I took the plugs out so I could tune the engine.

"Give me hand," I said to them. "Put the bar there on the hoist wheel and both of you push down hard."

They did and I waited till No. 1 cylinder was top dead center and then I set the points. I put the rotor in and the cap on and put in the new spark plugs. Sandy had already gapped the plugs at home.

"Well, shit," I said standing up. "We're almost ready to give it a try."

I walked over to the gas tank that was set up on a timber stand, about ten feet from the engine. I disconnected the gas lines and unbolted the tank, then carried it as far down the drift as I thought safe to dump out the old gasoline. We hooked it back

up and Mary filled it with fresh fuel while I looked at the control panel of the engine and hoist. There wasn't much to it. It had an starter switch and a gas and clutch pedal, and a hand brake and shift lever. We'd never bothered thinking about the starter switch. That was something we'd missed. If it didn't work, we'd just have to hot wire the engine.

"Come here a second, Sandy. Tell me if you think this is neutral." There were no markings on the panel.

"It's only got one gear up and one gear down," he said coming over. "Up is up, down is down. Here," he pointed to the lever, "in the middle is neutral. That's all there can be to it."

"Okay," I said, "You prime the carb and I'll get the Honda going, and we're ready to give it a try."

"We're all set?" Mary said, almost like she wished we weren't.

"I think so," I looked to Sandy.

He was quiet now. He just nodded. I looked over at Mary and then around the room, too. There were shadows and dark holes beyond them. The engine and hoist were the brightest spots in the place with the flashlights hanging above them. If they didn't work, or if just the engine worked and not the hoist or the other way around, then it wouldn't matter if there was gold the 3800' or not. It was up to fate now, or luck or whatever you want to call it.

"What time you got?" Sandy said.

"11:00," I said.

"That's what I got, 11:01," Mary said.

"All right," Sandy barked, "Let's start the Honda."

He walked over to the ore car and got out the little Honda generator. He took hold of the rope and gave it a good yank. It fired right up, and in the close hoist room it sounded like a tank running at you. Mary attached jumper cables to it and to the battery for the engine. I was just about to flip the starter switch at the panel, but Sandy yelled, "Let it charge," meaning let the battery charge awhile.

Mary came over to me and stood behind the panel. Sandy walked over and primed the carburetor again, and pulled out the manual choke all the way.

"Now! Hit it!" he yelled.

I hit the starter switch and the engine cranked and cranked with plenty of juice from the Honda. But the engine wouldn't fire up. We had left the valve covers off to verify the oil pump was working and I could see that it was. Sandy waved to me to turn off the switch.

"Why won't it start?" Mary said looking at me, but Sandy snapped out an answer.

""Nothing's wrong with it! It will start!"

"Mary," I said, "come here and when I tell you, flip the starter switch to 'On,' not all the way to 'Start.'"

I walked over to the engine and popped the distributor cap.

"Okay. Put it to 'On.'"

There was plenty of spark. So I checked the gap again, and it seemed good. Understand, I wasn't worried about anything yet. Hell, we had barely given it a try.

"Okay," I said back to Mary. "This time when I say, put it up to start and hold it there."

I had more than one plug off so it wasn't going to start up on me. I just wanted to see if spark was getting to the plugs. I told her to hit it. When she did, the spark jumped off the wire and to the block where I was grounding it.

"Okay. Cut it." I said. "We got fire all the way through."

"Could be gas," Sandy said.

"Could be," I said, "but the pump's new and should be plenty strong."

I walked back to the panel and hit the gas pedal.

"Is there gas coming to the carb?"

"Shit, yes! Stop it!" he yelled at me. "You're going to flood it."

He was beginning to get to me some. This was a team effort here, and he was acting like the leader.

"All right," I yelled back. "Let's try it again. This time no choke. Push it in. If it doesn't fire, you can pull it out a bit at a time till it takes off."

He pushed the choke in. We fired the Honda back up. As soon as it went on, I hit the switch and the engine turned over and over; then it almost caught, but instead sputtered and went over and over again. "Pump it! Pump it!" Sandy was yelling at me. I put my foot down hard, and up and down again, and goddamn if the engine didn't sputter then all the sudden the room filled with the roar of it taking off! It was louder

than any of us had figured on. It sounded like a jet about ten feet above your head. I could just barely hear Mary screaming out in joy behind me, and I could see Sandy jumping up and whooping under the lights next to the engine. "We got it! We got it!" he was yelling.

I waved to him to shut it off, worrying that maybe it was too loud, that Olnier and his crew would hear it and follow the sound to us.

"Take grease for the pulleys," I said and pointed. Sandy opened up the tub of grease we had and just stuck his hand in and came out with a great gob of it. He handed the tub to Mary and she didn't hesitate to do the same thing, thoroughly dousing the pulleys with grease.

Then we looked at each other, standing still, waiting, just waiting.

"Go on and do it!" Sandy yelled.

He was right. There was nothing left to do but engage the clutch and see if we could pull the skip bucket up. There was no sense putting it off. If the clutch plate was set wrong or if the pulleys didn't hold, we'd have to pack it all in and go home. This was the moment of truth.

"Go on!" he said softly now.

"All right," I nodded back.

Mary started the engine up this time so that she'd have some practice doing it alone, which she'd have to do bringing us back up. Then I put my foot on the clutch pedal and slowly pushed it in. I heard it squeal, and I was about ready to let out on it, but then it quieted and I could feel the throw-out bearing seating correctly. I put my

hand on the gear lever and slipped it into forward position, and then I eased out on the clutch slower than I've ever eased out on any clutch. The cables and pulleys held firm, and the drum started turning. It was pulling up! We could hear the cables squeak at first until the grease started to work and then it was pretty much smooth.

We were all smiling at each other and happier than happy, and then the damn clutch slipped and jerked and the engine stalled, jerking the cables hard. The place got deathly quiet.

"Jesus Christ!" Sandy yelled. "What the fuck happened?"

"We gotta adjust the clutch cable that's all."

Sandy jumped to it and took the play out of the cable.

Mary restarted the engine and I eased the clutch out. Right away, I could tell that it was better this time. It felt solid. Sandy and Mary walked over to the bore hole.

"Stay back!" I yelled, "that skip could pop out of the hole."

It seemed like hours, like they say, but it probably couldn't have been more than five or six minutes when Sandy and then Mary started yelling that they could see something coming up! I put the lever in neutral and ran over to them.

"Goddamn it!" Sandy yelled. "Don't stop it now!"

"I want to see if the hoist can hold it steady. We won't be getting a second chance when we're both in it coming back up loaded with gold."

I took Mary's light and shined it down the shaft. Sure enough, about 40 feet away was the top of the skip bucket, covered with rock and debris.

"It's there!" I turned to Sandy.

"Damn right it is," he said.

I went back to the panel and put the hoist back in gear.

"Slow! Slow!" Sandy yelled. "A few more feet!"

And then the skip bucket came into view, cresting out of the bore hole and into the hoist room. It was about the size of two 50 gallons drums, open at the top, wire mesh floor, and iron bars on the sides.

"That's going to hold you two?" Mary said.

"Course it'll hold us," Sandy snapped at her, but man it was a lot smaller than I thought it was going to be. We wouldn't be bringing the gear back so at least we could pack in the gold in the lower bucket and sit on top of it to get back out...assuming that we found gold of course.

But there was no time to talk about any of that now because we all suddenly heard a booming and banging on what must be the Supply Level. The sounds meant that Olnier's crews were out there now that the cyanide must have cleared trying to clean up the mess. I knew Olnier's team would be working their heads to figure out how such a mess could've happened. I only hoped we'd be down to the '3800 and back up long before they found the answer. We all must have been thinking the same thing because we started running around getting our gear together like madmen. We pushed cargo bags into the bottom bucket, being careful of course with the dynamite we'd need to blast open the cavern once we reached it.

And then we were ready to go. No more planning, no more waiting, no more nothing.

Sandy climbed into the top bucket and Mary leaned in to kiss him.

“You stay with Jake, daddy, you hear me.”

“Ain't too far to stray down there,” he said gruffly.

“Well, fine, but listen to what he says, okay?”

He didn't answer.

"I got 11:50," I said to her.

"That's right," she nodded looking at her watch.

"Four hours, no more. We'll whistle and you pull us up."

"Four hours," she nodded.

“We know all that,” Sandy yelled, “Start the goddamn engine!”

We ignored him and I walked Mary over to the panel. She was shaking like a leaf.

"It's going to be okay," I said, “don't worry about us. This is all you have to think about," I pointed to the engine.

"I'm be fine," she said.

"You'll know we've bottomed out on the 3800 when the cable goes to that marker," I pointed to one of the metal bars welded at different spots above the drum.

"Slow way down when you get near there. But be sure to let us drop down to the bottom, so we don't wind up off the ground."

She started the engine up and it sounded good, solid and smooth. I headed for the skip and she grabbed my arm.

“Jake...”

I tried to smile, "We'll be back before you know it."

"Don't take any chances down there."

"That's really funny," I said and she smiled realizing what a fool thing it was to say.

"Let's go!" Sandy yelled.

She kissed me quickly, "I love you, Jake."

"I love you, too. Just listen for my whistle, that's all."

I got in the skip, damn near sitting on top of Sandy. He looked scared it seemed to me, but he smiled his weird smile and said, "Here we go, boy. Blow the whistle!"

I blew the start signal and Mary started lowering us. We held tight but still jerked forward as the skip bucket slipped into the dark of the bore hole.

It was a slow ride, nothing like the Yates cage. I looked down through the wire bottom and there was nothing see. No blue lights, no water running by us, nothing but blackness below and blackness above. And it was quiet except for the sound of the cable and the engine now off in the distance. I looked up and soon could barely see the mouth of the bore hole. I pictured Mary sitting at the panel lowering us. I could see her nervous face.

"Feels solid," Sandy said, but there was some question in his voice.

"Yeah, slow like this is good."

Very soon the engine sound all but faded, and I got scared for a minute that maybe it had died. But, of course, we were still moving. Going down in a mine shaft you'd normally be passing levels of 150' each with indicator lights, but here there

wasn't anything at all to tell you how far you were down and how far there was to go. In this darkness, I was fighting dizziness already, forcing myself to breathe slowly, in and out, in and out.

"Should bottom soon," Sandy said kind of startling me.

Then we started slowing down, meaning Mary had seen the marker coming up on the drum. Sandy shined his light through the mesh floor.

"Look!" he yelled and his voice echoing up and down the shaft. "There!"

About 30 feet below us was a timber square set where the bucket would rest.

"Goddamn," I said feeling out of breath from nerves I guess.

We were really going slowly now. Mary was doing a hell of a job. I reached out and touched the side of the shaft, feeling the warm rock beneath my fingertips.

"Hold on," I said.

It wasn't much of a jolt when we hit the platform, but it sure creaked under the weight of us. The sound was eerie and loud in the shaft like it was breaking apart. Then it got quiet all at once and I knew that meant Mary had shut off the engine. I felt like we were in the middle of nowhere, and the idea of really being down here, about ready to step out into it the dark was like we'd landed on the moon.

"We made it!" Sandy said slapping me on the back.

"Yeah, yeah," I said softly as if afraid to disturb the tomb.

From where I was standing, the 3800' didn't seem like a level at all. I mean, it was no more than a drift going off in two directions. It wasn't much wider than the bucket we were in. The back, or ceiling, was very low. I looked off into the dark, and

I could hear my heart beating in my head where my cap fit tight. I had never been underground in this kind of silence, and I didn't like it one bit. Nobody had been here for over twelve years. It was like walking into somebody's dream; and when I heard a sharp scraping sounded echoing down the drift, I nearly jumped off my feet until I realized that it was just Sandy opening the wire mesh gate of the skip bucket.

"Which way?" I said getting out now myself.

"Yeah, you don't know, do you?" He said real proud. "You'd have to flip a coin." He pretended to take a coin out of his pocket and he flipped it in the air and watched it come down. He caught it. "Heads, Left, Tails, Right," he laughed a little . He put his hand on his arm, like he had the coin under there and he peeked at it. "What do you say? Heads or Tails?"

"C'mon!" I said. "Which way?"

"Heads or Tails?" he said again, and serious, too.

The look in his eyes spooked me some. I stared back at him and was pissed off at the time we were wasting with his fool game.

"Tails? You want Tails? Or Heads? Which one," he chuckled. "Don't be too quick, either. There's riches for you one way, and nothing but the dead black of night the other."

"Knock it off, Sandy!"

"Heads? Or Tails?"

I still didn't answer. Then I thought of something...maybe he didn't know either. Jesus! Wouldn't that be something? Here we'd planned and planned and come

all this way, and maybe he'd forgot which way the cavern was. Maybe he wanted me to choose. Okay, I thought, I'll call his bluff and find out.

"Heads," I said. "Left."

"Well, now," he said real slow, "Let me check her out."

He peeked under his hand. "It's Heads, and Right we go."

"Wait a minute! You said Heads was Left."

"Bullshit!" he shouted and you could hear it a hundred times echoing around us. "We're going to go your way, Jake, my boy, to the Right."

He started to laugh and took off limping down the right side of the drift. I didn't know what the hell to make of him now. There's no doubting that he'd said Left was Heads. But, hell, he was already getting some distance away from me and there didn't seem much choice but to follow. Besides, he had spoken the truth about one thing...he was the only one among us who'd ever been down here before.

Chapter 24

Sandy had his big light pointed straight ahead, and as far as I could see there was nothing to look at. If this was the right way to go, there was a long distance to cover. I was running through my mind what we had left to do, and the part that worried me the most, of course, was the blasting. I wondered if this level could stand to be dynamited.

“How much farther,” I yelled.

"Keep coming," he said, nothing more.

I looked down at my watch. It was 12:45. I thought about the Christmas Ball and how, by this time, most people would be drunk as skunks, and most would be starting to leave. I thought about Mary up in the hoist room and hoped she'd keep calm no matter how this turned out. I next went on to thinking about my mom and dad when suddenly Sandy yelled, "There!" and pointed ahead. About 50 feet in front of us was a wall of rock. I came up around him and walked up to the rock pile. I pressed on it and it was solid as a mountain. I'm telling you right now it just didn't seem possible that I was standing next to a cavern full of gold.

"That's the door. The goddamn door," he said.

He let out a deep breath then frantically started pulling blasting caps and dynamite out of the satchel.

"Blast in the middle," he said damn near gasping.

"Hey, hey, take it easy," I grabbed the sticks out of his hands, "I'm doing the blasting. You're running the wires. Remember the plan!"

"Blast it in the middle," he said again to no one.

He was looking straight ahead like he was sleepwalking. It could give you the willies. Here I was, about ready to blast this place to who knows where, and here was looking like a zombie. I looked past him down the drift and into the darkness behind us, and I couldn't help but think that bringing him down here was a mistake, but way too late now.

"Blast the middle," he said one more time to no one, "Middle to high middle. The top is what's going to go."

Maybe he was remembering being pulled out of here long ago. Maybe he was right about where to blast. I didn't have a better idea, it seemed as good a place as any. The hard thing now was to figure out how much dynamite to use. I knew from experience that too little could be worse than too much. You don't want to have to blast twice so better make the first one the right one. There was another thing bothering me, too...the air, or lack of it. The blast was going to eat up a lot of what air there was down here, and what was left was going to be heavy with fumes. I felt my right shirt pocket and was glad I'd brought my ammonia caps with me. I didn't plan on

being down here that long after the blast, but still I knew what kind of a headache and disorientation could come on from the blast and the fumes.

"Take these wires and roll them out as far as they'll go," I said, "I'll set the caps and sticks, and then I'll hook up the plunger."

"In the middle. The middle," is all he kept saying, but he took the wires and plunger from me and walked back down the drift.

I started pulling out rocks and digging crevices and putting in my sticks and blasting caps. I soon was about ready to hook up the wires, when I stopped dead. My hands just froze where they were. I didn't trust him; it's as simple as that. I just couldn't take the chance of him taking the two leads I'd told him to hold apart and put them on the plunger and blow me to kingdom come.

I walked back and saw him crouched down against the wall. The moment he saw me he yelled, "Get Down!" and I saw he had the plunger leads connected, and he pushed down hard on it. Of course, nothing happened. I grabbed it out of his hands.

"Are you crazy?! You could've killed me."

"It's my gold. I'm blasting it."

"Not yet!" I disconnected the wires. "I'll drag you out of here if you don't quit this shit. Now stay put!"

I hurried back to the rubble, connected the blasting caps, then walked back to Sandy. 'Course, none of this was done calmly. Truth is, the whole time I kept picturing the place coming down on us with the blast. Hell, there are no two ways about it, I was scared to death, but there was nothing to be done now about that either.

Sandy was quiet, waiting for me as I hooked up the leads and held out the plunger to him. “You can blast it, but we’re going to count it off slowly. Got it?” He nodded. We laid down on our stomachs to avoid flying debris and I counted slowly, “Three...two...one!

Sandy pushed the lever down. A flash of light came first then a tremendous...BOOOOM! Rocks bounced off walls and flew past us, smothering us in a cloud of dust, drowning out our cap lamps. The blast echoed and echoed down the drift for the longest time and I worried I’d used too much dynamite. I was sure Oler and crew must’ve heard the blast. What the hell would they think it was? I was concerned, too, that Mary might be scared silly. I turned quickly to be sure Sandy was all right. But he wasn’t next to me.

“Sandy!” I yelled and my voice echoed all around me. I shined my flashlight which barely penetrated the dust, but I could see the rock pile and a small opening at the top of the rubble, and a light bobbing beyond it inside the cavern.

“Sandy! Goddamn it!”

We were through! Goddamn it, we were through! I grabbed the heavy cargo bags and ran after him, stumbling over rocks that littered the floor and falling flat on my face. And that’s when I saw it. Right in front of me, the size of a grapefruit, a chunk of gold. I could hardly believe it. It was like a yellow ball shining in the middle of darkness. I picked it up, man it was heavy, solid like lead. A great big chunk of gold sitting right there in my hand! Then the yelling started. Sandy yelling from inside

the cavern. I put the chunk of gold in a cargo bag and started climbing up the rock pile to the opening.

It wasn't any bigger than a window for a house, but I shined my light through and even from the outside, I could tell that Sandy hadn't been dreaming all these years. He'd been remembering, remembering a sight you could never forget. Everywhere I turned my head there was gold! Gold on top of gold! The whole cavern was one color, the color of glistening gold! "Sandy, you bastard!" I yelled, "You hit the jackpot!"

I pulled myself into the cavern and shined my light around. The cavern couldn't have been more than 20' X 30', but it took me a moment before I saw Sandy over against one wall. He was kneeling down, intent on something and he didn't look up when my light fell on him.

"Holy shit, Sandy! Holy, goddamn shit is all I got to say to you. You were right. I want you to slap me and prove all this gold ain't a dream!"

He still didn't answer as I walked over to him. Then I saw it, a skeleton, the skull and everything. It was perfectly laid out at his feet with some of the clothes still on.

"Samuel T. Everett. Thirty six years old," Sandy said. "Poor sonofabitch, digging for gold his whole goddamn life and dying on top it. Funny ain't it!" he yelled and swung his arms up in the air, nearly hitting me.

"One hell of a joke." He started laughing that crazy laugh again and it echoed all around me and off the gold-lined walls.

“Knock it off!” I said hard.

But he didn’t stop, “You thought I was crazy” he half laughed and hollered, “Cracked in the head! Maybe I am crazy, but what do you think now!” He lurched to his feet, waving his arms at the incredible sight of gold around him. “Go on! Tell me what you see! I want to hear it!” He picked up a chunk of gold and pushed it into my chest, “What’s this?” Then he grabbed another chunk, “And is this! Tell me! Gold!” He was tossing chunks at me now.

“Cut it out! Gold, all right, it’s gold! Now, stop it!”

“My gold! It’s my fucking gold!” he yelled back at the top of his lungs.

Then a rumbling started. The cavern was shaking suddenly, nearly knocking Sandy off his feet.

“Stop yelling!” I grabbed him, “You’re gonna bring down the roof!”

And he did shut up with a scared look in his eyes. I tossed a cargo bag over to him and opened mine up, “Hurry! Help me fill these,” I said, but he didn’t pay any attention to me.

“Go on shake, crash on down!” he seethed between clenched teeth like he was in a battle with the damn mine, “I ain’t afraid of you! I got the gold now!”

The shaking got rougher, chunks of gold raining down on our caps like hail, and Sandy fell over. I reach down and grabbed him and tried to pull him up, but he was fighting me, yelling like a crazy man, “Get away! I ain’t leaving! I won’t leave ‘em behind. It’s mine. My gold! Get your hands off of me Garnes!”

He never called me that before and I realized he wasn't talking to me but to my dad, Robert Garnes, from all those years before. He was back there at the time when my dad pulled him out. He was reliving that rescue.

"Sandy, it's me, Jake! Jake!" I pulled him upright, "Look at me! Look at me!"

His eyes were wobbling all over the place and I hauled back and slapped him hard across the face, "Sandy! It's Jake!" His head snapped back, and I thought I'd hit him too hard, but it brought him around. He shook himself free of me, rubbed his good hand over his eyes, and picked up the cargo bag.

"You all right, now?" He didn't answer. "We gotta work fast. Just fill ours bags and I'll push them through."

We said nothing to each other for a long time while we were working. Every now and then, one of us would let out a yelp when we ran into a gigantic chunk of gold we couldn't budge. Hell, it was crazy, we'd just let it stay there. There was plenty more around. There wasn't much air, though, and we were both huffing and puffing like steam shovels. Finally, our bags were nearly full.

"That's enough, Sandy. Anymore and we won't be able to drag them out of here."

He looked up at me like I was speaking another language. He looked back down and started picking up more gold.

"I said that's enough! We got plenty!"

I went over and just pushed him aside and zipped up his bag. He swore at me, but seemed to understand that we had to get out of there. I grabbed his good arm and pulled him toward the rock pile leading to the opening.

"You first," I said, pushing him forward and he started clawing his way upward.

Then the ground shook again, shorter this time, but a lot harder. It nearly knocked me over and it did loosen more rock, but Sandy was near the opening now.

"Gimme the gold!" he yelled to me, and I pushed with all my strength to move the heavy bag of gold high enough up the pile that he could grab onto it and pull it behind him as he inched through the opening and out of sight.

I turned back to the cavern to grab my cargo bag when the cavern literally started coming apart. Gold and rock seemed to be exploding out of the walls. The whole ceiling felt like it was collapsing on top of me. I covered my head with my hands and dove to the ground. I don't know how long the shaking went on, but by the time it stopped, the cavern was so filled with gold dust I could barely breathe. Somehow my cap had come off and the lamp had gone out and I was in a suffocating blackness. I wasn't even sure if I was awake. It seemed like my dream all over again. I even thought I heard the sound of miners crying, and shapes in front of me. But there was nothing there. In fact, it was so black I couldn't see my hand in front of my eyes. I searched for my cap and thank god I found it and turned the lamp on.

I struggled to stand up, turning around slowly, searching with my cap lamp to find the opening. But it wasn't there. The rock pile was solid from ground to ceiling

and I was trapped inside. “Sandy!” I called out, but there was nothing but my echo in the cavern coming back to me. I called again. Again nothing. I could barely breathe. There wasn’t much time. I crawled to the top of the rock pile and tried frantically to dig my out. No way that was going to work. The rocks were wedge solid. I climbed back down, found my satchel and pulled out the bag of blasting caps and dynamite sticks. It seemed insane to blast inside that cavern, but I had no other choice. Then things got worse when I heard the sound of the engine starting up in the skip room. Sonofabitch, Sandy’s signaled Mary to haul him up without me!

I had to work fast now. I grabbed a blasting caps and a couple sticks of dynamite. How much could I safely use? I laughed out loud when that stupid thought came into my brain. No amount would be safe to use inside here, but there was no choice either. I got to the top of the pile and stuffed one stick in with a long fuse down to the bottom of the pile so that I could at least hide from the blast itself. I fished out my lighter and could see my hands were trembling as I used pliers to pull off the wire casings, “Calm down, Jake, not now, man, not now.”

I took some deep breaths, opened and closed my hands to get them working again...and was able to get the lighter going and bring it to the fuse end. It sparked into life like a firecracker fuse, racing up the pile of rock.

“It’s going to be okay, it’s going to be okay,” I said over and over again as I laid face down in the gold, covering my head with my hands, waiting for the explosion above me. And when it came, I was aware of the light and blast for only a moment, and then my whole world went black.

Chapter 25

I don't know how much time went by with me unconscious. Truth is, I wasn't sure where I was or if I was asleep or awake. It was too dark to see a thing. I heard booming and crashing, like a thunderstorm in my head. I reached up and found my cap lamp and pressed the On button. Nothing happened. I pressed it again and again. A light flickered on, then off, then on again. It held On, and the world came back to me in this tiny cavern.

I crawled around searching for the opening. My cap beam bounced from rock wall to rock wall. There was no opening. I started breathing hard, panicking. "Calm down, Jake, calm down! Hold it together..." I said out loud over and over like some kind of crazy chant. I had to push the darkness and fear away if I had any hope of getting out of here.

Then I could feel a vibration and hear the engine noise from the skip room and in the background Sandy yelling out to Mary to haul him up. I frantically pulled out a blasting charge and had to guess where the opening had been. It was a gamble, a gamble of my life, but I thought the rock pile nearest to me was the cavern entrance. I

jammed in the blasting cap and tried to run a fuse to the other side of the cavern but my hands were shaking too bad. “Jake, no bullshit now!” I screamed to myself. “Hold it together, hold it together!” I was in a battle with myself that I had to win. I took in deep breaths, opened and closed my fists, forcing them to work. I stripped the wires, inserted the raw ends into the blasting caps, then crawled to the far side of the cavern, laid myself flat against the ground, and attached the wires to the plunger.

This was it, life or death it seemed to me. And a calm suddenly came over me. I breathed in easy now and blew out long deep breaths. “Okay, man, here we go...3, 2, 1...” I pushed the plunger in and a BOOM! blew through the cavern, rocks and gold chunks flying through the air.

I stayed where I was, my hands covering my head, expecting the ceiling to collapse, but it held. I forced myself to stand and shined my lamp through the dust-filled air. There it was, a small opening at the top of the rock pile! I crawled and clawed my way to the jagged hole in the wall of rock. I hesitated for a moment, wondering if I could find my cargo bag of gold and somehow push it through the small opening; but now I could clearly hear Sandy yelling, “Haul me up! Haul me up!” and I could hear the engine revving toward him and I knew there was no time to lose if I planned on getting out of here alive.

I pulled my way through the opening and slide down into the drift. Now I could really feel the shaking of the mine, the damn place was like a carnival ride, the ground rolling and fissuring under my feet. I ran toward the shaft yelling, “Sandy, goddamn it! Sandy! Wait! Wait!”

But he didn't wait, and of course Mary had no idea I wasn't in the skip bucket when she started hauling it up. By the time I got to the shaft, the bucket was beyond my reach. "Sandy! Sandy!" I yelled up to him, but even if he could hear me above the roar of the engine, what would he do or even want to do?

There was no safety ladder in the shaft, of course, and there was no other way out. Maybe I could wedge myself against the walls of the shaft, back and boots pushing hard, and shimmy myself upwards. I managed to get a couple of feet up, but then I slipped back down. I tried it over and over again, barely gaining any height. And then the roar of the engine sputtered, choked, and stopped dead. The shaft filled now with the screeching of the cable drums straining under the weight of Sandy's cargo bag of gold in the skip. Sandy was yelling crazy, "Didn't believe me! But I've got the gold! They didn't believe me!" and I could hear Mary's voice and the machine-gun pops and stutter sounds of the engine as she tried desperately to restart it.

I yelled up to her, but she couldn't hear me above the engine and the cables screeching and Sandy's yelling. I struggled frantically to get up to the bottom of the skip so I could grab hold of the mesh bottom and hang on. But there was no way I could climb that high, no way I was going to make it before Mary got the engine restarted.

Then the mine shook violently like an earthquake had hit it, and the goddamn cable drums howled and trembled and slipped their gearing so that the skip bucket started dropping down the shaft toward me ready to crush me death. I tried to unhinge

myself from the walls fast as I could, but thank God the cables suddenly held at about five feet above me. Sandy was howling, scared the death, blowing his safety whistle over and over again. “Sandy!” I yelled up to him, but he didn’t answer. I strained with everything I had left in me to shimmy up to the bottom of the skip bucket and I latched onto the mesh bottom. The bucket sagged some with my weight, but the cable drums held.

I couldn’t see Sandy because the cargo bag of gold filled the bottom of the bucket, but I could hear him mumbling to himself, “All the gold...all of it! Mine! Just for me you bastards...” Then the roar of the engine restarting filled the shaft and drowned him out. Come hell or high water, I said to myself, I wasn’t going to let go of this thing. It jerked when Mary shifted into gear, but I held tighter to the mesh. The cables screamed and groaned, but I clung on, and it started to move up the shaft. “Pull! Pull!” Sandy was yelling and thrashing about, making the bucket bang against the shaft walls. “Stop it, Sandy!” I yelled up to him. That was a mistake because he came to his senses enough to know that somebody was below him, threatening him and his gold is the way he looked it.

He tugged at the cargo bag to look through the mesh floor, and I caught eyes with him. He looked like a crazed animal, trapped in the cage. I don’t think he knew who I was even when I yelled up to him, “Sandy it’s me, Jake! It’s me!” He started stomping on the grating, stomping on my fingers, “Too heavy! Let go! Too heavy! Let go!”

I held on and kept my mouth shut as we gained height. He could stomp all he wanted, break my goddamn fingers if he had to but I wasn't letting go. Then there was a horrible wrenching sound echoing down the shaft, and I knew it was one of the pulley's ripping out of the rock. The skip bashed into the side wall knocking Sandy on his butt, and nearly knocking me loose, but I held on and the engine kept running and we kept rising, dragging the skip against the shaft wall.

And finally, sonofabitch finally, I could see the light in the skip room just above us and Mary did exactly what we'd planned and kept the engine pulling until the skip bucket and me hanging onto it came bounding into the hoist room like pulling in laundry on a clothesline!

I let go with my bloody fingers and dropped to the ground and Mary came running up.

"Jake! You all right? What happened!"

Before I could answer, Sandy rolled out of the skip bucket yelling like a madman, yelling to no one but himself.

"I've got the gold! I got the goddamn gold now!"

Then he came at me, jumping me before I had even stood up. He was on my back yelling and ranting, "Get the hell out of here. Let go of my gold!" Mary was grabbing him, trying to pull him off, "Dad! Stop it! What are you doing?" But there was no sense talking to him. He was out of his head. I bucked him off and he banged onto the ground pretty hard. That didn't stop him for long. He hobbled over to the skip and started tugging to get the cargo bag of gold out of the bucket. He couldn't

free it, though, and then the mine let's loose violently shaking and Sandy lost his balance and fell away from the skip, collapsing backward toward the shaft, but managing to stop himself from tumbling into the black hole by latching onto the skip cables.

“Dad!” Mary ran over, trying desperately to keep her own balance as she reached for him. But before she got there, the ground broke away from under him at the edge of the shaft so that he fell backward into it, barely hanging onto the skip cable with his good hand. I ran over, “Don’t let go, Sandy! I’ll get you. Don’t let go!” But he’d already slid down the cable below the floor level and I had to get down on my belly reaching out for him. All the while the mine was coming apart. Sandy was quiet now for the first time. Scared quiet as I reached for him.

“Take my hand!” I yelled, “reach out and grab it!”

But he was too afraid to move, and I leaned out even farther, half my body into the open shaft. I managed to grab the cable and started hauling Sandy up, hand-over-hand, like a bucket out of a dark well, but then the one remaining pulley tore out of the wall with a crash, and the snap of the cable shook Sandy’s hand free and he plunged down into the darkness of the empty shaft.

“Noooo! Dad!” Mary cried out, charging forward recklessly so that I had to grab her as the mine raged on, sending more debris down the shaft. I held onto her tight, trying to calm her as she clung to my shoulder, sobbing and trembling. “He was right, Mary,” I said softly, “everything he said. You should’ve seen it. Glittering all around him. It was all his this time, just like he said. Just the way he wanted...”

“The way he wanted *what?*”

I knew the voice instantly, and it didn't surprise to see Olnier standing there, pointing a gun at us.

“It's not too hard to figure out what you're doing here,” he said with a laugh motioning to the cargo bag of gold. “Drag that bag over here!” he yelled. When he came over for it, I jumped him, and the gun went off.

That's when everything seemed to happen like it was happening in a movie. A picture here, a photograph there. All in bits and pieces. We were rolling and punching on the ground. He hit me with something, a board or rock, and I just tore into him and would've killed him maybe, but then the gun fired again. I saw Mary was above us. The gun in her hand, pointed at the ceiling. “Get off of him!” she screamed.

She fired the gun again, and the exploding bullet turned all hell loose in the mine. The place started to disintegrate, ceiling, floor, walls, all of it crashing down around us. Olnier fell back. I took the gun from Mary. Threw it down the shaft. And that's when I first heard it, a low rumbling coming from deep below. I knew what it was right away. It grew louder quickly. “Run Mary! Run!” She didn't move. I screamed again “Run!! Water! Water's coming!” Now she turned and ran down the tunnel. I frantically dug as much gold out of the cargo bag as I could and jammed it into my shoulder bag. I pulled Olnier off the ground, though I was tempted to leave him to what he deserved. I swung his arm over my shoulder and we hauled-assed out of there, the three of us running for our lives.

But it was too late. The water was gushing from the shaft, already flooding the hoist room, rushing after us in the tunnel. I saw the tide of it swallowing everything in its path, timbers, rocks, tracks, everything. Rocks were crashing down in front of us, making it harder and harder to move. Then, a huge boulder seemed to come out of nowhere about forty feet ahead, completely blocking our path. The water smashed up against it, sweeping us all off our feet. I struggled to keep my head above water with the weight of the gold dragging me under. The surge swept us along, breaking us apart. “Mary! Mary!” I yelled into the noise of the flood. “Jake!” I heard her somewhere to the left of me and I lunged for her, but Olnier grabbed me, fighting to pull the bag of gold off my shoulder, dragging us both under. I punched him, pushing him to break free of me.

“Let go of it!” I heard Mary scream. “Let go, Jake!”

I saw that Mary had pulled herself onto a narrow ledge, a few feet above the water swirling. I tried to swim over to her, still clutching the gold, dragging Olnier with me when a huge wave of water took us both under. I was swallowing water, choking, damn near drowning. I had to let go of the gold, I had to or I’d never have made it back to the surface. I managed to get to the ledge and Mary pulled me onto it. I looked for Olnier. He surfaced for a second or two, the bag of gold clutched in his hands. “Help me! Help me!” he yelled. “Let go of the gold! Swim over!” I reached out for him, but he wouldn’t release the bag. “Let go!” I screamed over and over, as more and more water gushed into the tunnel. Olnier was sucked under again, longer this time, but managed somehow to come up again, red-faced, bleeding from the nose.

“Let go of it!!!” I screamed one last time and Olnor, barely conscious, made eye contact with me, and finally did let go.

For a moment that seemed to last forever, the bag of gold swirled in the turbulence, suspended just out of reach, and then it disappeared under the water.

“Help me! Help me!” Olnor screamed over and over, slapping at the water reaching for my hand as I leaned from the narrow ledge. “C’mon! Swim!!! Swim you sonofabitch!!!” But before I could grab his hand, a solid wave sucked Olnor beneath it. And he never came up again.

The same wave nearly knocked me and Mary off the narrow ledge. We stood up, the ledge quickly disappearing as the water rose higher and higher. “There! Over there!” I pointed to a rough-hewn pipe way, like a chimney rising up from the ledge. “Hurry!” I pushed her along in front of me, up into what must’ve been a hand dug shaft from another century of mining. We clawed and slipped and fell and clawed some more, inching our way higher and higher up the shaft as the water chased after us. “Keep climbing! Don’t look back!” I yelled up to Mary, who stayed quiet but strong ahead of me.

I had my cap lamp tilted up to give her light ahead and I saw old candle holders still fixed into the rock face from miners long ago. We started passing busted tools, hammer handles, spikes, even an axe head or two on our climb up. I wondered where we were, in what part of the mine, some ancient claim probably, maybe the Manuel Brothers themselves. It was possible I guess. I looked back just once and saw that we were barely a few precious yards ahead of the rising water. And then I saw

something else...the water was sparkling at our feet, filled with flecks of gold so that it shimmered like a golden river rushing after us.

Mary screamed, "Up there! Look!"

I shined my cap lamp up and saw nothing.

"Turn off your cap! In the dark you can see it."

I shut of my lamp, and sure enough, about thirty feet above us as the shaft narrowed, there was just the barest haze of light, like a dim lamp shining through a curtain from outside.

"Climb, Mary! Climb to it!"

As we climbed faster for it, the water gained speed in the narrowing shaft, becoming pressurized in the tighter space, but also pushing us faster up to the light. "It's ice!" Mary yelled out, and she started pounding on it. It was too thick to break through even though I was next to her now, pounding until my fist turned the ice red. The water was at our waist, then our chest. It was going to drown us in gold. Almost made me laugh. "Goddamn it! Goddamn it! Goddamn it..." Mary was saying and sobbing over and over as she smashed her own knuckles against the ice.

I dove under the water, fought my way back down the shaft, feeling along until I found one of the axe heads. I pounded the ice cap with it, chipping it, breaking it open with chunks of ice falling around us so that we had to duck. But when we looked back up, the sky, the red dawn sky lit the way for us. I climbed with the last of my strength, pulling myself out into the frigid air of a Black Hills morning, and reached back and pulled Mary out, both of us sprawled on the mountain of snow.

But it wasn't over yet for us. We could feel the ground rumbling beneath us, and behind us a kind of hissing and gurgling sound was getting louder and louder.

I stood up, pulling Mary to her feet, "Run! Run!" I yelled, but we slipped instead, sliding down the icy slope as the sound of a raging river filled the air and we saw a steaming geyser blast out of the narrow chute we'd just escaped, but not a geyser of water, it was a shower of gold...specks of it, then larger flakes, next came nuggets and then solid chunks of gold sailing down on us. "Cover your head!" I yelled and dove on top of Mary as what seemed like the heart of the Homestake Mine blasting out.

Who knows how long the shower lasted? Forever and just seconds it seems to me now. The next thing I do know for sure is that the two of us were screaming, "Look at it! Gold everywhere! A mountain of gold!" We were laughing and snatching up gold as fast as we could from the golden carpet at our feet. We stuffed the pockets of our jeans and shirt, we took off our coats and tied them together at the arms to form a kind of cargo bag of its own and stuffed that until it was so heavy with gold we had to slide it down the hill like a sled of treasure.

And I had a good idea where we were on the mountain, not more than a quarter mile from our truck, tucked around the bend and probably under a few feet of snow. I'm not going to say that dragging a heavy jacket full of gold along a frozen path is easy, but the glittering booty did give us plenty of reason to keep our pace up and get to the truck, start it, and make our way off Homestake property before the bright morning brought the town posse after us.

The city of Lead was still asleep when we reached Main Street. And why wouldn't it be? To most folks in town nothing amazing had happened while they slept in their beds. To them it was just another Christmas morning. But up ahead, a truck turned onto Main, a truck I recognized as a Homestake Safety Truck, its red lights flashing. As we got closer to each other, we both slowed until we were stopped, window to window in the middle of the street. The truck window came down and I lowered mine.

"There's some kind of emergency at the mine," my dad said with a barely hidden smile on his face. "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

"Nope," I said flatly with a smile of my own.

"Didn't think so. My duty to ask though."

He looked past me, and saw Mary had been crying. I could see him weighing whether to ask her a question, but then he thought better of it.

"I'll tell your mom I saw you. Let us know when you two settle."

The way he hit the word, "two" answered all the questions he might have asked.

"We will Pop," I said, and he rolled up his window and drove off.

Before I rolled my window up, though, I listened to the strangely silent town. Silent for the first time I could remember. Silent now that a mine emergency had shut the rock crushers down.

Mary put her hand over mine on the steering wheel.

“It’s a good day to be above ground,” she said, managing to find a smile.

“Yeah it is,” I said, “one hell of a beautiful day.”

I eased the truck into gear and we took off slowly, the four leaf clover gently swaying from where it hung on the mirror in front of us.

We drove most of that day and crossed the border into Canada like we planned. We spent some time traveling around. When we saw a pretty spot, we just pulled over and camped out awhile in the truck, like we joked about doing with Sandy. It's a beautiful country, all right, and by the springtime, we had seen a good part of it. We bought some land and settled there. It's real nice, even has river running through it. But it isn't the Black Hills, and they keep coming into our minds from time to time.

We say we’re going to make plans soon to visit Lead. We talk about driving into town and up Grand Avenue on a Sunday afternoon for dinner and knocking on my folks door as natural as can be. Or maybe we'll have a pack of kids of our own by then, and they'll run up ahead of us and rap on the door. My mom will open it and she won't know what to say she'll be laughing and crying so hard. And Ben and Gena and their kids will all be there, and my dad will walk up, put out his hand, and I'll shake it good and hard, and he'll tell us to sit down and stay a spell.

The End