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The Mine

A Novella

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Based off the Real Escape Canada's The Mine

Special thanks to JL Gervais

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The Appalachia Region, United States of America

1966

The time charts were a disaster of penmanship that looked as if they had been handed to a middle-schooler for revisions. Thompson hated Krahn's writing. In fact, he hated any writing that was not explicitly his. If he hadn't penned it into existence himself, it may as well have been a different language. The poorly dotted *Is* and the *Ts* with crooked lines were a twisted form of anxiety he simply couldn't purge from his mind. He suspected it stemmed from grade school, some thirty years ago now. Back then he had been getting graded on arts and crafts until cutesy projects evolved into formal essays about economies and mundane real-life matters. Every time he had an assignment returned his critiques were written in some awfully-colored pen. The scribbles were impossible to decipher. Making out numbers was one thing, but someone else's notes? It was a backhanded slap. It was why he refused to pursue a desk job.

The anxiety that came along with writing was almost too much at times.

Conroy Krahn's writing, however, was by far and away the worst Thompson had ever seen and, as a form of divine validation, he was not the only one who shared the opinion.

Supervising Lead, Margaret Paulsonm made passing comments about Conroy's writing, too. Yet somehow, after complaining to anyone and everyone, here he was staring at the ineligible scribbles again.

"Does Conroy have holidays? He should take them in a classroom. Surely someone could teach him to write properly," Thompson said, wiping sweat from his brow. The humidity of the mines was something he had long ago stopped noticing. Wiping the sweat away was as autonomous as breathing.

He held the paper inches from his face, still failing to make out any discernible words among the scribbles. The writing was simply awful. It was revolting.

“Conroy’s a valuable member of the team, you know that,” Margaret replied. She pinned a yellow paper to an already-crowded bulletin and took a step back. Her back was to him as she spoke.

“Valuable, sure, but replaceable all the same,” he muttered and folded his arms. He had not noticed how heavy his own breathing had become. Was he that worked up about Conroy’s writing? Maybe it was just the thin air. Sometimes he forgot he was still a few hundred feet below ground.

He glanced at the paper one last time. The only reason he could tell it was Conroy’s writing at all was because the man had a habit of double-dotting his *Is*. Thompson asked him about it once and Conroy simply said it was how he was taught.

“Sure, you could fire him. I’m not sure how one would take it being dismissed due to poor penmanship, but you can explain it to him. Then you’ll have even more fun picking out another worker to replace him,” Margaret said. Thompson knew she prized Conroy. He did, too, but begrudgingly so.

Conroy was not American. He was an immigrant along with thousands of others who had come across from Europe after the war. He came from a small town in eastern Germany, taking the long journey across the ocean with his wife and kids in tow. The weather, he said, was intolerable. On top of that, Germany was in economic shambles. The United States was on the other side of the coin. With its soldiers returning home, the country was surging into an unprecedented economic boom. The wheels of commerce were beginning to not only turn, but speeding up, too.

Thompson rolled his eyes. He mouthed a curse to Margaret's back.

Virginia, much like most of the Appalachia region, found itself in the midst of a gold rush. Not only was there gold, but dozens of other incredibly valuable minerals, too. The backdrop of the mountains had turned into a wealth of resources that were being exploited more and more each passing day. The mining scene alone was drowning in men ready to pick away at the rock.

It was hard work, but it was simple to do.

The training was next to none for a mostly sustainable wage. Work was always guaranteed. In fact, Thompson knew of men who did nothing but work. Free time was a mere dream for some, a fantasy buried deep beneath the rock. The days were long and progress was measured in years. Mines Thompson himself had opened would likely be in use long after he was dead.

The living conditions, however, were less than ideal. Apparently some of the newer sites were propping up hotels for the staff, fancy places with running water and women. Thompson didn't know if there was any truth to it, but his mind had swirled with all kinds of fantasies upon hearing it.

His camp was a collection of crude tents stuck in the wet mud. It rained a lot and when it didn't rain, it was blazing hot. The ground was sludge and most men were dragging around ten pounds of muck on their boots whether they wanted to or not. All their supplies were bogged down by it and most meals came with a side of it. There was no escaping the elements, not even four-hundred feet underneath them. For a while, Thompson figured maybe his camp was

old-fashioned, maybe enough to scare away the green workers. Conroy, however, didn't care. In fact, he was thriving.

Not only was he good at what he did, but he was one of the best on Thompson's team—maybe in the whole damn state. Conroy was a lanky fellow with spider legs oddly wedged into a short torso. He walked fast and carried himself with constant speed that never seemed to wane. His skin was as pale as any, even before the lack of sunlight. The only color on his body were his eyes that held a sickly shade of green. His scraggly hair was regularly glued to his forehead with sweat and he had narrow lips that exaggerated his tight cheekbones. The man was certainly not a proper german.

To put it short, he was built for life in the mines and Thompson disliked him all the more for it.

"I could replace him within the day. Do you know how long the waitlists are right now? For any position?" he asked. It was the truth, too.

Immigrants from all over Europe and even other parts of the United States had been flooding into the region looking for work. The land was cheap and it was good. Small towns were springing up all over the place as the industry bled into entire communities. It was a way of life now, something that encompassed more than just rock and ore. The industry was creating itself right in front of his eyes.

Still, Thompson thought, would it hurt to at least learn to write proper English? Conroy had chosen to come here after all. The least he could do was put in some effort to fit the part.

He pinned the ledger to the board, leaving the issue for another time. *He* would get paid. The money was not his concern. It was when. With so many new faces and teams being brought down on regular rotations it was easy for the schedule to get mixed up and crossed with someone

else's. Just last week a fresh team had shown up. They were two weeks early and now bunking in the tents outside, crowding the limited available space. The backlog was becoming cumbersome and Thompson was already dealing with enough managing his team, nevermind someone else's.

"Finding a replacement for Conroy isn't the problem here. It's finding a *good* replacement. The last thing you want is some inexperienced boy stubbing his toe on a rock and crying back home to his mother. You'll be doing interviews until the day you die if you let Conroy go," Margaret said as she continued re-arranging the bulletin, ignoring Thompson's complaints.

The board looked miserable as ever, even with her work, he thought.

Margaret held a stack of papers in one hand while she used the other to readjust the already-pinned sheets. Nobody ever looked at the board. He knew that and he was sure she knew, too. The only paper anyone was interested in was their schedule and corresponding pay stub. Everything else was exaggerated attempts to keep people from the realization they had willingly buried themselves four-hundred feet underground. It was an uncomfortable reality, even if you had signed up for it.

Maybe Margaret was not wrong about Conroy though.

Thompson sighed. He would never admit it. Good workers were difficult to find even with the overflowing applicants. The amount of could-be hires made it difficult to find not only qualified staff but *quality* ones.

When Thompson started out almost seven years ago the industry had been a fraction of the size it was now. His crew had been three men sharing one tent and two beds. The world kept on spinning while he buried himself underground and drowned in sweat and festered in body odor. Now, the industry was evolving into a more professional playing field with coordinators,

advisors, and all sorts of bureaucratic titles He didn't understand. What happened to the days of blowing up rock for twelve hours and going home to a case of beer, watching the sunset behind the conifers? When had he become a foreman in charge of people running ten—sometimes twelve—hour shifts?

“I'm not going to fire Conroy,” he admitted.

He would have loved nothing more than to do that, but filling out all the paperwork to go along with it was its own headache, never mind dealing with Conroy himself. It was not worth the time and effort. And like Margaret had said, Conroy was very good at his job.

“Where are your folks, anyway? Johnson's team will be coming in for pre-shift check-ups soon. They want the pipes filtered. I don't think they've been properly sanitized in a while and you know what that means,” Margaret said.

Thompson groaned. All Margaret ever asked was when, when, when. She was one of the new people, too smart to get her hands dirty, but with an attitude that matched the rock they were mining. She talked about their shifts as if they were running a presidential resort.

“Conroy is with Sav and Les in the east tunnel and Gunther took the west by himself. He wanted to clean up,” Thompson said. He spoke softly, preparing for the response he was about to get.

The pipes have to be regularly cleaned otherwise you risk the back-up and reverse flow of dangerous toxic gas. That was the next sentence lined up in her limited, but all-too-real, vocabulary. He could practically hear it already.

“Johnson's crew was complaining it was humid in the tunnels,” she said. She still had her back to him as she spoke. She had a way of making all the up-keep sound simple, as if there was nothing to it.

“They’re complaining?” Thompson scoffed. “They have the nightshift. Maybe someone should remind Johnson we’re all breathing the same air. None of my crew have said a word about humidity.” He shook his head. The ignorance of some of the other foremen was laughable. Johnson of all men should’ve known better. He’d been working the area for nearly as long as Thompson.

“I’m just passing what I’ve heard along,” Margaret said. She pinned the last of her papers against the board and stepped back to admire her work.

Thompson stepped beside her, looking at the board through squinted eyes. The rest of the room was dimly lit. It made the board look empty and decrepit. Some of the papers already had curled corners from the moist air.

Margaret turned to him. She folded her arms across her chest. Her expression was lit by a single bulb dangling from the low ceiling. A wire cage around it darkened it even more. It burned a hazy orange.

“What have I told you about single workers?” she asked. “You know we’re not supposed to do that.” Her face hardened. Sweat glistened in the dim light.

Now it was Thompson who turned away. His eyes landed on Conroy’s awful writing pinned to the board. He was surrounded by the things he hated. He had taken this job to get away from exactly that. His gaze scanned the bulletin board. Even with Margaret’s added corporate touch it looked horrible. It might have been pretty where the sky was blue and the air was fresh but, down in the shafts it looked as rugged as everything else.

“Gunther is a veteran. It’ll take no more than fifteen minutes. He’s not doing anything that’ll get him in trouble. Just routine cleaning. There’s no equipment involved,” he said. With Margaret there was no such thing as reasoning, but still he tried.

“We have to write that on our reviews, you know? Not to mention actually file it as an official report. There are rules,” she said matter of factly.

Reviews, reports, contracts, and all the rest of the legal paperwork was becoming monotonous. It was undoing the life Thompson had actively enjoyed for a time. A couple short years ago he had been able to run the place how he wanted. Now, to blow a chunk of rock with no more than three pounds of explosives required paperwork he did not have the capacity or care to fill out. It was rock. He was blowing it up. What was expected of him if not that? Before he could begin that tangent, the doorway to the shaft entry flew open.

Thompson’s team poured in with sweat-smeared faces and ashy stains. The putrid smell chemicals wafted in, too. There had been a time Thompson would have gagged, demanding the door be closed sooner, but his nostrils had adapted long ago. Margaret, on the other hand, flailed her arms like a fish out of water until the door shut.

A series of automatic vents turned on with a low whirl that filled the room with a hum. Immediately the smell began to filter out and the regular stale odour of the mine took over again.

Thompson let his team fill the space as they ditched their bulky gear. Savannah Andrews, who he regularly addressed as Sav, approached the bulletin board and haphazardly pinned a stained paper to it. Margaret let out a defeated sigh. Thompson hid his smile. It was a small victory.

“Is Gunther back?” Sav asked between heavy breaths. She unzipped her jacket coated in a layer of dark soot. A hardhat bobbed on her head with every movement.

Thompson shook his head. “Haven’t heard from him. Said he was doing some cleaning back in the west tunnel.” He eyed a set of radios to his right on a small wooden counter. They had been silent as long as he’d been here.

Sav paused. She shook off her hard hat. Her hands were painted a dark black from the coal. It matched her hair. Next she unhooked a beat-up walkie-talkie and placed it next to the others on the counter. Her face was an unmistakable one of concern as Thompson informed her Gunther had not checked in.

“The west wing? Are you sure? I thought we closed the west passage? Johnson’s team didn’t trust the support beams,” Sav said. Her eyes darted to Margaret for confirmation.

Thompson looked to Margaret, too, albeit with some disapproval. Was that what this had come to? He was the foreman of the team. Sav and the rest answered to him. They worked for him and here Sav was looking to Margaret for the answer.

“I don’t know.” Margaret shrugged. She sounded as disappointed as Thompson felt. Then she looked at him with a glaring face. The rest of the team looked at him, too.

“Again, he said he was doing some cleaning. Nothing to get your gear in a tangle for. The supports aren’t even that bad until about a kilometer or so into the tunnels. Gunther isn’t going that far,” Thompson said.

The mine rumbled. Motes of dust fell from the rock ceiling. The small, orange light swung back and forth, squeaking as it did. The light shifted across Thompson’s face as he looked up at it. He coughed on dust.

“Relax. Some of the other companies are doing active mining. I’m sure Gunther didn’t blow himself up,” Thompson said. At least, he hoped. He felt exasperated. His team was one composed of veterans. To see them standing in front of him after a day’s work with nothing but concern on their face after hearing a small dynamite discharge was nothing short of embarrassing.

“Maybe we should go get Gunther?” It was Conroy who spoke. He was the only one of the team who had yet to begin removing his gear. The uniform looked baggy on him. It had that effect on everyone but even more so on his thin frame.

“Johnson’s team is probably on their way down. Gunther will be back soon. Give him some time. The rest of you are free to go. I noticed Conroy filled out the time cards for everyone,” Thompson said. He said the last part with a bit of attitude. Conroy’s smug face told Thompson he was oblivious to his atrocious penmanship.

Sav took off her harness, untangling the straps and straightening out the buckles as she placed it on a hook next to the bulletin boards. She dusted her undershirt off and looked at the papers hanging in front of her. Behind her, Les emptied his pockets of sand, dust, and dirt. The pile at his feet was growing in a dark cloud.

“Sweep it up before you go,” Thompson said casually. Les returned a dirty look. Thompson trusted the man to listen.

Margaret joined Sav at the bulletins. They were in the midst of conversation when the mine rumbled again. It sounded closer than before. The orange light flickered, going out for a brief second before blinking back to life. The entire room waited in silent wonder until the sound echoed away.

“Who else is down here right now?” Thompson muttered. He leaned against the counter housing the walkie-talkies.

“I think it’s Martin’s team,” Margaret replied.

Of course she’d know, Thompson thought.

Thompson had met most of the other foremen working the area. It was rare that teams shared tunnels at the same time but it was not unheard of to connect the passages for better transportation of resources and product, if not to just simply get air moving in the stagnant shafts.

Martin's team was Austrian--made up purely of immigrants. Thompson only knew because not a single one spoke a word of English except for Martin himself. Thompson had anxiety at the mere thought of what their time cards must have looked like.

"I think we should go find Gunther," Conroy repeated.

Thompson looked at Conroy. The man stood near the door fully dressed in gear. He had barely moved as the rest of the team around him finished undressing and hanging up their uniforms on the appropriate hooks and shelves.

Are they all this stubborn? Thompson thought.

What had happened to the days of hiring people locally, giving the community the first offer at jobs? Thompson missed those days. Things had been easier then, back before the industry had gone all inclusive.

"If you want to get Gunther then by all means, go ahead, Conroy. I'm not going to stop you. Don't try and log it as paid hours, though, because I won't accept it," Thompson said.

Margaret turned around on a whim, immediately pulled to the conversation. "No," she said bluntly, staring directly at Thompson. She turned to Conroy, exchanging her stone-cold gaze for a friendly smile. "You can go *with* someone, but not by yourself.

Thompson groaned. He turned to his other two team members. Les was already undressed. He stood at the exit door with a somber face that was quietly begging for smokes and booze. The man reeked of it. Admittedly, Thompson was a little bit jealous.

Sav was dusting off the rest of her gear, making sure it was free of any stains and spots. Perfectionists were rare in any profession but for something as demanding as mining, being a perfectionist was next to impossible—not when being underground was part of the job. Still, Sav had a way of keeping her gear remarkably clean. Her mask’s visor was wiped to a shine, her boots were scraped off of the thick mud that quickly acquired, and her gloves were rinsed back to their original colors.

She had paused mid-cleaning after Margaret’s sudden comment.

“Sav, go down with Conroy and check it out, will you? For Margaret’s sake,” Thompson said. He made sure the exasperation was clear in his voice. He offered Margaret a smug smile. She returned the gesture with thin eyes and pursed lips.

Sav, for all of Thompson’s complaints of the job, was a bright spot in the dark shafts. The woman was tougher than nails and never said no to tough work. Where Conroy excelled in cartography and mineral analysis, Sav surpassed him in pure, grunt work ethic. She had lungs the size of Appalachia country, some of the older miners might have said.

“Fine. Just a pick-up, though. That’s all. I’m not trying to get bogged down with Laughton’s crew,” Sav said. It was to both Conroy and Thompson. Both nodded their approval.

“Time’s ticking,” Thompson pulled up his sleeve and tapped his wrist. There was no watch there but still he did it for effect. Everyone knew the shift was over already. What the hell was he still doing here anyway?

Sav began to regather her things, quickly donning the bulky gear once again. When she was dressed she was suddenly unrecognizable as a woman at all. In fact, nobody looked like themselves buried under the coveralls, straps, and belts.

Sav opened the door to the tunnels. The awful smell of raw ore wafted in. Margaret gave both Sav and Conroy a final lecture about the importance of working in pairs and then the two disappeared into the dark. Thompson held the door open, waiting as the headlights turned on and illuminated the path ahead. Once they had their bearings, he closed it. He drew in a deep breath of fresh air.

Fresher air.

“The rest of you can get going. I’ll wait up,” Thompson said. It was to Margaret more than anyone else. She was back at the counter fiddling with clipboards and papers again. The stuff seemed to materialize from nowhere. Thompson swore there had never been so much paperwork before.

“Are you seeing the zinc outputs of our tunnels? They’re well ahead of others, even Johnson’s crew,” Margaret said. She held up the chart for Thompson to see.

There were colors and numbers and long scientific names he had no chance of being able to pronounce. Truth be told, whatever was in the mine, he did not care. It was rock. It all looked the same and it all smelled awful and made his hands crack and bleed. There was nothing interesting or exciting about it. His ten-year-old self might have been excited to know he would be a “professional rock collector” when he was an adult, but living the reality was much different than dreaming the fantasy.

“It’s great, isn’t it?” Thompson said. His enthusiasm was transparent—not that he tried to mask it.

“It doesn’t bother you that in almost every other resource output you’re being beat by a large margin?” Margaret said. She had a way of turning a first-place celebration into a last-place sorry-fest.

Thompson snatched the paper from her hand. He lifted it to his face. The numbers still meant nothing to him. None of it meant anything to him. At the bottom, signed off in thick ink, was a messy name he could barely read but assumed belonged to Margaret. He wanted to gag just looking at the illegible writing. He shoved the paper back towards her.

“Just go. The shift is over. I’ll wait for Sav and Conroy,” Thompson muttered. He crossed his arms and leaned against the counter again, keeping his eyes glued to the mine entry as if they would be back in a matter of seconds. He knew it would be a while, maybe up to half an hour.

“All right, well, if Johnson’s crew comes down make sure you give them the word about working in pairs. No lone rangers this time or human resources will be paying your tunnels a visit,” Margaret said.

Thompson rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll make sure they hold each other’s hands so the boogeyman doesn’t get them. I get it. Goodnight, Margaret.”

“Goodnight, Tom.”

Margaret stepped forward, turning a series of cranks on the wall that would call for the elevator. It would be a minute or two as the shaft’s pulley system was constantly in use by other crews. The elevator shaft had nearly four hundred meters to travel between the surface and the base of the tunnels. Among that, there were hundreds, maybe thousands, of tunnels carved into the earth that snaked in every which direction. It was not hard to get lost and because of that Thompson had to keep an eye on his team as if he was a shepherd tending the flock. It was not unheard of for miners to go missing, get lost, or get entirely turned around. With no sunlight, time slipped away, and paranoia set in. Margaret was right: working alone was a dangerous game, but Thompson’s crew was properly trained. Margaret knew it, too, yet she insisted on maintaining the bogus requirements set by the industry owners.

When the elevator arrived, its doors rattled open. It consisted of a paper-thin cage that kept from tumbling out into an endless fall. She turned around, pulling the gates closed and initiating a return to the surface. She smiled at Thompson and waved goodbye before the elevator rattled and began moving up.

The mine was silent as the sound of the shaky pulleys echoed away from Thompson.

He took in a deep breath and wiped the sweat off his forehead again. He needed a shower. He needed a shower after every day of work. His wardrobe was beginning to wear thin with clothes that were not ruined with yellow-stains from profusely sweating all the time. He did not doubt his co-workers had the same issues. It was a gross job and the stains constantly reminded him.

Thompson turned to the lone radio on the counter. If he was going to be alone down here, he might as well have at least some company in the form of music. Anything was better than the eerie silence of the mine. He fumbled with the various knobs, tuning the signal until it picked up something.

A loud static burst from the small speakers, changing pitches as he dialed the knob some more in search of a station within reach. The static softened, then grew louder. It turned to a high-pitched whine and then dropped into a low hum filled with gray noise. Finally, with a final twist, the radio picked up a faded signal.

It was a soft voice, struggling to speak louder than the static plaguing the background. It was a man. His voice was young and professional, like he could have been a sports broadcaster. He was talking about something. Maybe the weather? John could not make it out as the static chopped away at the host's words. A moment later, the voice was entirely usurped by the radio's failure to land a stable signal.

“Damn thing. You’d think these things are better considering half the damn country works in a mine,” Thompson said to himself. He gave up, dropping his arms to his side in defeat.

How long were Sav and Conroy going to take, anyway?

The radio burst to life a moment later. It was a barrage of static that startled Thompson so bad he leapt away from the counter fearing the device had overheated and was seconds away from exploding. He cursed as the loud sound bombarded his ears and filled the room. He grabbed the radio and fumbled with the settings once again in a vain effort to shut it off or at the very least turn it down.

“A good day for some rock collecting,” a distorted voice said on the radio. The words were perfectly clear even through the buzzing static.

Thompson paused, staring at the device in his hands. Had he heard that? It had sounded nothing like the young reporter from before. The quality had been crisp and clear and the voice had been so different. So strange. Familiar almost.

Thompson collapsed the antenna on the radio. The signal chirped and whistled and went silent. Stupid thing was probably catching signals from a nearby team. Sometimes the radios interfered with each other, picking up short-range waves and broadcasting simple, meaningless conversation to whoever might have been listening at the time.

“It’s a great day for rock collecting,” the distorted voice said through the radio.

Thompson turned to it. He stared at the small box. How the hell was it still broadcasting? He paused, this time confident he heard the voice. It was speaking to him. At him. The voice was unrecognizable, distorted by a warped tone that sounded nothing like a person at all.

Thompson swore again. If he was going to have to wait for Sav and Conroy to return while all the while the radio broadcasted bits and pieces of random conversations, he was

going to lose it. He should have made Les stay, too. The man could not hold a conversation worth a damn but at least he was a person. It beat hearing the strange, stupid comments coming through the radio.

Thompson felt his pockets. Sometimes he brought cigarettes. He never told anyone about it. He suspected maybe Sav knew but she was one of the few Thompson trusted. She was a true miner.

He needed some kind of vice to survive in an environment like the mine and he had no doubts each member of the team had their own, too. If Margaret found out, unending amounts of lawsuits, red tape, and legal issues would consume him. The risk was high, the gamble was certainly not worth it, but still, Thompson committed to it.

A loose cigarette was jammed in his left pocket. When he managed to dig it out the paper was crumpled and bent and the butt had a slight tear. It was good enough. What other choice was there? Thompson had a lighter. It was a small red thing he always kept on him even while he was working. He stuck the cigarette between his lips and flicked the lighter. The flame ignited. Thompson could already hear Margaret's rant in his head.

You'll burn the supports, Thompson. You could ignite an entire cache of explosive elements, Thompson. There's active dynamite in these tunnels, Thompson. And the scolding went on.

Thompson moved the lighter towards the filter and stopped short of lighting it when the room shook. He heard the distant rumble of a discharge. More dust fell from the ceiling. The orange light swung back and forth. Thompson flicked the lighter closed and returned the cigarette to his pocket.

A moment later, the radio blared again, this time louder than before.

“It’s a good evening for rock collecting, Tom,” the voice said. The voice was suddenly so low it bordered on being a growl. Thompson froze. He looked at the radio. The static sound fizzled out and the device went dead again.

Had it just said his name?

Thompson shifted his hand to his side, feeling the cigarette scrunched in his pocket. He had not even smoked. He wiped the sweat off his forehead again. Where the hell was Johnson’s crew? They were running late now. Where was Sav and Conroy and Gunther? They should have been back already. Thompson walked to the door that led into the dank, rocky tunnels. He thrust it open and stared into the darkness beyond. He could see no more than a dozen feet into the tunnel before it descended into a wall of black.

“Sav?” Thompson called out. Part of him hoped she would call back. It was wishful thinking. Who knew how far into the tunnels they already were.

There was no response. Thompson slowly closed the door. Behind him the radio blared into static. He jumped again, startled by its sudden activation. This time, before the chilling voice could return to say anything more, Thompson closed himself in on the other side of the door.

He saw nothing but darkness.

He held his hand up to his face. He could not even make out his fingers right there in front of him. A small stream of faded orange light, from the dull glow of the emergency light, illuminated maybe a foot of the tunnel ahead. It was only a couple of steps forward until there was no light at all. Fortunately, there were several ways to combat that.

At Thompson’s side dangled his head-light. He strapped it over his forehead and flicked the light on. A beam of white immediately illuminated his surroundings. It revealed wide walls and a ceiling high enough he could walk standing straight up. Not all parts of the mine were so

luxurious. Wooden beams lined the rocky wall, holding back untold amounts of stone and ore that would have liked nothing more to close in and crush him. Along the wall was a thick braided rope that stretched the entire length of the tunnel system and branched off into each wing. They were used as safety nets for miners who found themselves lost or trapped. If you followed the rope, eventually you would get back to home base.

Thompson started forward. He walked slowly, stepping over the loose rock that had accumulated at the entrance. The thin pieces cracked and crumbled beneath his boots until he found himself on more solid ground. He put a hand to the rope almost immediately. It was a simple yet effective way to maneuver the dark without running into anything. Rusted shovels and old pieces of equipment littered the tunnel's mouth.

Nevermind the west wing, Thompson thought. Gunther should have simply stayed here to clean up the mess.

He had told the crew to be better than this. An old mug rested atop an empty crate and wrappers from some of Conroy's snacks littered the ground among the residual rock. He would have to make a note of it later, for another day when they were not already staying later than they had to.

Thompson glimpsed over his shoulder. The door to the main room had receded into a small orange square in the darkness. He was already far into the tunnel. Light had a strange way of creating odd illusions of distance. Either he was much further than he knew or he had barely moved at all.

Thompson's back suddenly went rigid. He spun around in an instant, prepared to reach for one of the old spade shovels on the ground.

Nothing was there.

There had been a noise. He was sure of it.

Thompson listened. It could have been falling rocks. Or bats. There were a lot of bats down here. Distantly, he could still make out the sound of the radio blaring static on the other side of the entrance door. He continued forward with small, slow steps until the sound of the radio completely vanished. If this was someone's idea of a prank, he was going to have some strong words for them.

Thompson turned around again, refocusing on the tunnel ahead. There had been no noise. He was trying to trick himself into believing the radio had been talking to him. The rock collector? It sounded like the ending to some dumb mining joke. He had heard far too many of those for a whole lifetime.

Thompson's footsteps echoed into the darkness. Not even his headlamp could fully penetrate the sheer isolation of the mine. The light simply was no match for the unending abyss ahead.

The west wing. That was where Gunther had gone to do the last of the clean-ups. It was a decent trek there, so far as Thompson knew. It was a newer route mired by all sorts of complications Conroy had smoothed out for the team—or at least was in the process of. It was no wonder it was a mess but why Gunther wanted to clean it up so bad was anyone's guess. He would not be pulling another stunt like this though, that was for sure, thought Thompson.

The dim orange glow had all but vanished. Thompson was deep in the mines now. Every few steps he stopped and listened. For what, he was not sure. He told himself he could still hear the radio but it was not possible. He was so far away now. The quiet had a weird way of letting paranoia set in. It was common among a lot of rookies, but Thompson was no rookie. He was far past the days of having potential paranoia.

A piece of slate crumbled under his boot.

Thompson paused. A different kind of sound, one that was not the gray noise of the radio or the distant echo of dynamite rattled off the rock walls. Thompson looked behind him. Blackness. He recognized the sound though. It was mechanical, metal in nature. It almost sounded like rattling chain-link.

The elevator.

Thompson turned back to the gaping darkness behind him. At least he thought it was the way he had come. He craned his neck back the other way. Endless tunnel spanned on either side of him. He shook his head. Forget about the west wing alone. One of Johnson's members could go get Gunther and the rest of his crew.

Thompson retraced his steps, scanning the ground for the broken slate rocks that signaled he was near the entrance. After a minute or two the orange square of the window appeared in the distance. He was practically sprinting back towards it when it suddenly blinked out of existence. Thompson stopped. His heavy gear tried to pull him forward but he planted his feet firmly on the ground. In the distance it flicked back on then off again, then on.

What the hell was Johnson doing?

Thompson held the frayed rope tight now. He had not even realized until he felt the dry strands scraping against his skin. When he reached the door he opened it with haste and stepped into the dim, orange corridor.

In the poor lighting of the single-bulb room the red blood smeared across the floor was unmistakable. It was on the ground, splayed across the bulletin boards, and dripped from the counter where the radio sat. Thompson froze in horror.

He had been gone for not even ten minutes.

The body lying in the center of the room was recognizable, too. He inched towards it, scared if he got too close something bad—something *worse*—would happen. What could possibly happen that would be worse than this? He stuck a boot out. His toe touched the shoulder.

The body turned over with a ragged gasp of air.

“Help...” Margaret wheezed through a mouth stained red with blood. It dripped from her lips and was smeared across her chin and up by her ears. Her eyes were wide, threatening to bulge from her face.

Thompson stumbled back. “What the-What is this? What the hell is going on?” Thompson said in disgust. His back hit the door. Instinctively he felt for the handle. What was he supposed to do? Runaway? Margaret was part of his team. What the hell happened?

“Margaret—just—just don’t move. I’ll get help. Conroy knows first-aid,” Thompson said. The situation looked far worse than simple first-aid.

The longer he looked at Margaret the more he noticed just how messed up she was. At first he thought her hands were balled into fists, a reaction brought on by the pain and shock she was undoubtedly in. Now, however, he noticed her hands were not balled into fists at all but instead were bloody stumps where her fingers had been. White bone stuck out through jagged knuckles and streams of blood trickled onto the floor where her head had been lying.

Thompson looked past her at the elevator door that was still open, inviting him in. Margaret could not have possibly fallen out of the elevator. The fall alone could not have done to her what he was seeing. This was not an injury sustained from impact. This was something worse. Far worse. By the looks of it she had purposefully brought the elevator back down. Maybe there was an animal at the surface? Bears or cougars could have done this; there were plenty of those in the region.

“Margaret, can you hear me?” Thompson knelt beside her. He shook. His heart raced and the sweat building on his forehead and beading on his hands was no longer a product of the humid air.

It was from fear.

Margaret did not say anything. Her eyes looked through Thompson, glossed over with a hazy glaze that told Thompson she had no idea what was going on right now. She was in shock. Her lips moved but all that came out was a wet gurgling sound that pushed more blood over her swollen lips. Thompson hovered above her trying to meet her eyes, but Margaret’s ghostly gaze made no acknowledgment. She did not even blink.

The radio burst into a chorus of deafening screeches. Thompson fell onto his hands, crawling away from Margaret’s body with labored breathing. The radio had nearly given him a heart attack. He stumbled to his feet, unable to take his eyes off the bloody wounds across Margaret’s body. The radio static grew louder.

“Here comes the rock collector, Tom,” the same distorted voice came through the radio.

Thompson put a hand on the counter to steady himself. He was dizzy, like he could have vomited. He opened his mouth, tried to gag, but all that came out was a string of saliva that dropped to the rocky ground. His mouth was bone-dry and his throat closed in on itself. His breaths were pitiful wheezes. He shimmied along the wall, pressing his back against it as if he could melt away and forget about what he was seeing. What he was hearing.

A song strummed away behind the incessant static. It was a faded guitar plucking away at a few chords in a melody that blended into the static. Thompson’s hand snaked its way towards the radio all the while he kept his stare locked on Margaret’s battered, unmoving body. His

fingers felt the device, searching for a button, a knob, or a dial, anything that would turn the awful noise off.

“The rock—” The voice disappeared behind the buzzing. “—collector is coming to collect.” It was strained, like it was almost warning Thompson.

It was so faint Thompson was not even sure he’d heard it all. His fingers landed on a dial. He spun it until it could spin no more and the radio produced no noise. The room went quiet.

The entire mine was silenced.

Thompson pulled away from the radio. He was still shaking. His eyes stung, they were so dry. He could not even bring himself to blink. His gaze snapped away from Margaret at the sound of a metal clank from the elevator shaft. His legs locked up. He did not want to move.

The elevator gates slid close and a bell chimed on the inside of the compartment before the chains began to rattle and the compartment began to move up. Thompson watched in disbelief as the elevator slowly inched up the shaft away from him and back to the surface.

The radio.

The rock collector.

Had another crew been warning him?

All kinds of critical thinking had gone out the door the moment Margaret’s body had arrived. He backed up feeling for the door to the mine entrance behind him. He pushed it open, spun around, and sprinted into the pitch black of the tunnels before he had even turned his head lamp on.

Rock crunched under Thompson’s boots. The sound of scattering shards and pebbles bouncing off the stone walls echoed throughout the tunnel. It took a moment before Thompson flicked his light on and illuminated the passage ahead. Wooden arches lined the stone ceiling.

Pieces of old, rotted wood were littered about. Thompson ran them over without a second thought, pushing himself as fast as he could go with the bulky gear that dangled off his uniform. The orange light from the main room had already faded behind him. He had to find another crew. Had to find his *own* crew.

The west passage.

Crates of ore were pushed against the walls in messy piles that reached the ceiling. Strange shadows bounced off rock and wood as Thompson's head bobbed up and down with his desperate motions. His light shone everywhere. His uniform clung to his body soaked with sweat and his heart thrummed in his ear. He was grunting, already exhausted, and he had barely been running.

The damn cigarettes. He knew they were not good for him and had probably done a number on his lungs. The air quality was already bad enough but damn him if he was going to let that keep him from enjoying at least something. The damn cigarettes.

Thompson kept going. The tunnels widened and bottlenecked and broke away into other tighter passages that had been loosely mined and surveyed for analysis. It was all Conroy's work that made the place a maze. Testing equipment was strewn about, stacked against drills and work lights and boxes, and old empty bottles of liquor that had been finished long ago, back before Margaret had banned drinking on site.

Some of the mine passages were partly collapsed in heaps of shattered framing and rubble. Sometimes other crews discharged explosives and the waves were enough to wreak havoc on Thompson's site. It was all part of the job.

The tunnel squeezed in on itself and Thompson slowed as his breath escaped his lungs. He bent over, panting like an exhausted dog. Any more and he would have his tongue hanging

out of his mouth, too. He looked behind him. There was nothing but darkness. He was not even sure how far he was into the passage. The west wing could have been behind him for all he knew. He should have grabbed a map. Why had he not grabbed a map? There had been dozens of them pinned to the board Margaret had organized. Of course he had not grabbed one. That would have validated the woman's work.

Damn it, Thompson thought.

What kind of thoughts were these? Margaret was gone. She was dead! And here he was arguing with himself, telling himself it was good he had not taken a map because it would have validated a dead woman's work.

Rocks crumbled somewhere. Thompson looked up, still out of breath. He could not run anymore. He did not want to. He put his hands on his hips, looking up and aiming the headlight from where the sound had come from. He heard footsteps. He had worked long enough to recognize the sound of heavy boots on the stone floor.

A long shadow stretched across the walls and rounding the corner ahead came a figure walking with short, awkward steps. Thompson narrowed his eyes. He held still and focused his light.

It was Sav.

Her head hung low and she favored her right leg as she slowly rounded the corner. She looked up, suddenly alerted by Thompson's light. A wave of relief washed over him. He exhaled and started towards her. His legs ached and his own breathing scratched at the back of his throat. A shame none of the liquor bottles had anything left. The subtle beginnings of a headache pounded away at his temples, but he brushed the feeling aside, overtaken with relief to see a familiar face.

“Sav, where is Conroy and Gunther?” Thompson asked.

He noticed Sav’s headlight was off or at least faded. He barely saw the faint glow of it masked behind something draped over the rounded dome of her hard hat. The closer he got, he realized the light was in fact on. When he finally stood in front of Sav, illuminating her in a blanket of his own light, he realized what was wrong. Sav was covered in tar.

“What the hell happened? Are you okay, Sav?” Thompson asked. He looked her over, stunned to see the mess that covered her gear in thick globules.

Sav looked up. Thompson stopped. She stood bent over as he had been before, breathing deeply. She sounded like she was in pain. When she looked up at Thompson, he realized why there was no response.

The tar covered Sav’s face save for a small circle around her left eye and the very corner of her mouth. It clung to her face in a thick sludge. Her one good eye was bloodshot, beet-red from the searing heat of the liquid. Steam rose off her body. The tar covered her hands, too. Thompson was inches away from touching the ooze himself but Sav grunted and he jumped back. She could not even speak. Her eye narrowed at him. Was she trying to stop him? The tar had probably seeped into her mouth, filling her throat with a thick, viscous substance that would eat away her vocal cords and eventually her trachea. She needed help. Badly.

“Sav, where are the others? I’ll get help. Margaret’s hurt, too,” Thompson said. Margaret was probably dead, he thought. Still, he was not going to tell Sav that, not when she was like this.

The black sludge was layered onto her face. It was matted in her hair, clumping it together in bundles that had burned an ugly brown.

Tar pits were not unheard of but more often than not the crews were able to detect them long before there was an incident in which someone could drill into a reservoir. It was beyond Thompson how Sav might have ended up like this. And where were the others?

Thompson patted down Sav's gear, searching the pockets that were still tar-free and did not pose a risk of burning his hands. Usually Sav had a water bottle or a canteen or even a flask. He moved his hands carefully, being sure not to get near the tar that coated most of her leg. It was everywhere and it was burning fast. He smelled rubber cords melting away and the thick material of the protective suit as it eroded, melting into her skin. Had the stuff not gotten into Sav's mouth, Thompson could only imagine the sounds of agony she would be making right now.

Thompson's hand hit something hard and round. He tapped it with his knuckles. Sav grunted. It was her water bottle. He felt it in the pocket. He could feel the cold water inside of it.

Thompson tugged on her pant leg. He adjusted his headlight. Black tar was smeared over the pocket where the buckle was. It had fused her pocket closed, sealing the bottle in the uniform. He cursed. He did not even have a knife or anything to cut through the material with. Sav grunted again. It was muffled and quiet through the tar that glued her lips together. Thompson could not imagine what she was feeling. Her body must have been on fire.

Sav shuffled. Thompson glanced up at her, looking at the one visible eye peering through the black mask. He stood. Sav pointed a shaky hand ahead. Tar hung off her arm, dripping to the ground. Apparently she could still see. Thompson followed her shaky hand pointing into the darkness, following the direction with his headlight.

The tunnel lit up. Black tar trailed off into the mine ahead, leaving a noticeable path of where Sav had come from.

“Tom?” a voice called out. “Tom, is that you?”

Thompson relaxed ever so slightly. “Gunther?” he called. Finally, he was ready for this to be over.

Gunther emerged a moment later. He was the first of his crew that actually looked okay. It was almost strange seeing one of his workers look normal.

“Sav! Good, you found her. We got separated by—by, I don’t know, we just got separated and then there were rocks and there was tar and oh god. Conroy? Is he here? Did he come back already?” Gunther rattled off the questions in a single breath.

Thompson held out a calming hand. Gunther was young, by far and away the youngest member of his team. He had been working for Thompson for only a few months but had quickly shown his worth, having a grounded knowledge of mineral composition and semi-advanced chemistry. It was his overactive hubris that had probably been the motivation to go into the west wing by himself to do the final clean-ups. Now here Thompson was, one of his team members maybe dead, one severely in trouble, and one still missing.

“Gunther, calm down. Breathe,” Thompson said. He held Gunther’s shoulders, looking him dead in the eye. Gunther could barely keep his eyes open with the blinding headlamp in his face. Still, he nodded and drew in several breaths until he noticed Sav standing behind Thompson.

“Sav, oh my—what happened? What the hell happened?” Gunther shook away from Thompson’s grip and ran to Sav, looking her up and down. He jammed a finger into the tar on Sav’s side and pulled away in pain, shaking the burning liquid off his fingertip. “What did she do? Sav, can you hear me? What the hell happened?”

“Gunther, stop. Calm down. She can hear you, she’ll be okay,” Thompson said. In his head he knew it was not true. She was never going to be able to work again; that was if she even survived. If the tar got into her stomach it would be lethal. He was not even sure Sav could hear anything. It was hard to tell if it had leaked into her ears.

“She wasn’t like this when she left. She wasn’t Tom! Something’s wrong. We have to go back for the others,” Gunther said. His eyes were wet with tears. Thompson saw them building at the corner of his eyes.

“Where are the others? Why are you all split up?” Thompson asked. Nothing was going to get accomplished if they did not have their nerves back in check soon.

“I was doing cleaning, right, and then—then I don’t know. I thought someone else came with me and I heard noises and I thought it might have been the rats or mice because you know sometimes—”

“Yes. Rats and mice get down here. Keep going, Gunther,” Thompson said.

“I was just trying to clean up and then there was a pig and it was dead and there were guts and—”

“A pig?” Thompson asked, cutting Gunther off. Gunther nodded. John raised an eyebrow. “Gunther, there aren’t pigs down here.”

“It wasn’t just a pig.” Gunther swallowed. He could barely meet Thompson’s eyes. “It was someone wearing a pig’s head.”

Thompson’s gaze dropped. He shook his head. No. This was ridiculous. Everything was. This was out of hand, something he had never dealt with before. His crew had suffered an extreme accident, maybe even a death, and now another was delusional. If he found out someone

was bringing hallucinogens to the work site then there was certainly going to be repercussions. Alcohol was one thing, but this? This was too far.

“Gunther, what are you talking about?” Thompson said. He did not have time for this, not when Sav stood behind him being eaten alive by burning liquid. He shook his head and turned around.

“Tom, I’m not lying! Conroy saw it, too!” Gunther said.

Thompson paused. “Where the hell is Conroy, anyway?” he asked. Anger bubbled inside him.

Gunther looked taken aback. His face was uncertain. Thompson was not scared anymore—he did not fear anything. Not the blood, not the tar, not the dark, and certainly not the voice he’d heard on the radio. He was simply and plainly infuriated. “Wait here for Conroy. I’m taking Sav up. She can’t stay here,” Thompson said.

“Don’t leave me here by myself!” Gunther yelled as Thompson started walking away.

Thompson stopped. He closed his eyes to hold himself together. Was Gunther about to start crying? Was he really so traumatized to witness a workplace accident? It happened all the time. If he could not handle it now, he would not be able to handle it later. Gunther was going to have to find a new crew when this was over and Thompson would be sure to inform the other foremen about his crybaby antics. How Gunther had gotten hired in the first place was suddenly beyond John.

“Okay. Fine. You take Sav back to the elevator, then,” Thompson said. He shoved himself past Gunther, putting a shoulder into the younger man with some disdain.

Thompson moved with haste. Inside, he felt sick, his stomach in turmoil. He needed fresh air. *Real* fresh air. Beneath his gear he trembled, freaking out at the fact Margaret was half-dead

and that Sav was on her way there, too. So much had happened so fast and it felt like it would never end. He was still down one on his crew.

Thompson felt Gunther's eyes on his back as he walked further into the tunnel. He had no doubt he felt as scared as Gunther looked but at least he was doing something about it. They were a crew—a team. It was his job to look out for these people, even if he was over it.

Thompson rounded the corner. Ahead, the gaping yawn of the mine stretched down for unknown lengths. The cavernous rock mouth revealed nothing but the dark stone around him. Thompson found himself latching onto the old guide rope once again. He held it tightly. He squeezed his hand on it until he felt his fingernails curve around the fraying rope and push into the palm of his hand. His skin was raw. It hurt but still he refused to loosen his grip. His own headlight was beginning to be too bright for his own eyes. He had not worked a full shift in the mine in weeks, too bogged down by the wave of Margaret's forms and files. What good had those papers done anyone? Here he was paying for neglecting the job he had excelled at for so long.

In the darkness ahead a light flickered. It was so far away that at first Thompson had not even acknowledged it until it flashed again. Sometimes old rail systems sparked, overheating or semi-activated by the warm air around them. That did not seem to be this. This seemed sharp and defined, unlike the faded power of an old mining system. Besides, his crew had not worked on a mechanical site for a while now.

It had been too wide, not focused enough, to have been a headlight from someone else. He suspected it ruled out the possibility of it being Conroy himself. The color had been an orange hue, not the usual white light most of his team used.

Thompson paused. He waited in silence, staring ahead to see if the light would show itself again. After a moment of calm, he called for it.

“Hey? Conroy?” Thompson said. “Conroy, it’s Thompson. The others are hurt. We need to go.” His voice carried away into the tunnel.

He heard the distant echo as it traveled down the winding passages, into tunnels shafts he was probably not aware existed. Nothing returned his calls. No sound came from the passage and the tunnel remained dark, void of any light.

Maybe he had been seeing things. His light was starting to give him a headache. It could have easily been a fleck of color in his own eyes. Thompson sighed.

Then he heard glass shatter.

His eyes narrowed. It had sounded as if it was just out of reach of his light. Thompson anxiously stepped forward. Hopefully Gunther and Sav had retired to the main room by now, or were at least closed. He had not even warned Gunther about Margaret, about the mess he would find. The man would definitely quit, that is if the sight did not drive him mad first. Poor boy, Thompson thought. He was not suited for a job in the mines.

Thompson’s light revealed the shimmering glass in a pile of small pieces. It was scattered over the uneven ground in various piles of shards. A brass contraption lay in it, too, also broken and dented. It was a lantern—an oil lantern at that. Its contents were splattered in dark splotches on the ground that reflected John’s light. He could smell it, too. He knelt down, looking at the mess and then looked ahead. Who the hell had brought an oil lantern into a mine? Even for all of Margaret’s fancy new rules, he was smart enough to have never done that.

“Conroy?” Thompson called again. He waited a moment.

No answer. What the hell was going on? Thompson stepped over the shattered glass. His hand found its way back to the guide rope. Any more of this and he was going to turn back and report a missing person. In fact, he should have done that long ago. He should have reported Gunther missing in the first place instead of sending his staff back into the mine. They could have avoided this whole thing. Margaret could have been fine and Sav would still be okay, safely above ground. It was Thompson's own stupidity that had led to this.

Thompson kept going. He hugged the wall, feeling the rugged edges push against his gear. It gave him some semblance of comfort being able to feel something against his body. He knew nothing could surprise him from that side. Of course there was behind him and in front of him that was shrouded in complete darkness, but it was easier to focus on the side of him that was protected.

How far along was he now? Thompson had not even realized just how far he had come. The west passage must have been well behind him, down some turn he missed. Gunther and Sav were certainly waiting for him back in the main room if they had not already gone up to the surface, hopefully to call for help. This whole thing had turned into a blind game of cat and mouse as he followed the string of noises and odd occurrences. Margaret would have killed him for this. Everything he had done, was still doing, was likely breaking some sort of "safe work" rule. Still, Thompson thought, it was too late for that.

Thompson stopped, adjusting his headlight and moving the band that tightly wound itself around his head and behind his ears. He was sweating, too. He did not realize it until he pulled down his sleeves and scratched his back. He felt his undershirt cling to his skin. If it were not for the thick work boots, he would be covering ground at twice the rate. It did not help that around his waist were an assortment of other tools. Parting ways with any one of them was something he

did not want to do, simply for the money he had spent to acquire them, but he knew there was no sense in dragging the dead weight around. Begrudgingly, Thompson began to empty his utility belt.

First was his belt of small chisels. He dropped it at his feet. Next was a case of drill bits. He dropped it. The case cracked open on the rock and the small bits spilled everywhere. He dumped his straps, a personal humidity reader, and a ball-point hammer. He cleared pockets of old framing nails and a tape measure that was bent to ruin. Before he knew it, Thompson was standing in a pile of old, used, half-broken equipment. The only thing he elected to keep was a spare flashlight in the event his headlight gave out.

As soon as he had finished cutting the weight of his gear down, his head jerked up at the sound of a familiar noise. The static of a radio struggling to find a signal. It was the gray, scratching noise that never ended. Thompson's skin crawled. A chill in his back told him to turn, begging him to take his heavy work boots and run as fast as he could the other way.

It did not take Thompson long to track down the source of the sound. The static was an invisible trail that led him directly to another radio resting on a stone ledge naturally carved out of the mine wall. The radio was a small thing, more compact than the one in the main room, but with a larger antenna that probably could get a longer range. Thompson walked up to it. The device blared white noise with no substance to it. He tapped all of the buttons. One of them had to be an off switch. The static remained, loudly playing into the empty tunnel as Thompson fumbled with the switches.

When nothing seemed to work, Thompson grabbed the antenna and bent it backwards with a light twist. The static went awry, turning into a low-pitched hum before muting itself into a soft noise trill. Still, the sound refused to die.

“For god’s sake,” Thompson muttered. He picked the radio up with both hands.

“The rock collector is coming,” it said as Thompson raised it over his head. The voice was suddenly clear, free of the static interference.

Thompson stopped. Not this again. How was it still picking up a signal? The antenna was a twisted mess and the radio was so distant from any kind of connection it was a wonder it was connecting to any source at all, even if it was from another crew.

“The rock collector is coming, the rock collector is coming, the rock collector is coming,” the voice said over and over, growing progressively more excited as it went. “The rock collector is coming, the rock collector is coming.” There was no break in the voice, not even a pause or break in the words. It was like it was stuck in a loop, as if it was pre-recorded.

“Tom?”

Thompson spun around. He dropped the radio in surprise. It crashed at his feet. A plastic corner broke away and the repeating voice stammered and stopped, finally silent.

Thompson’s headlight revealed Conroy stumbling forward out of the darkness with his arms wound around his body like he was trying to hug himself. It took Thompson a moment to realize the man’s steps were small and awkward as if he was trying not to trip over himself. Then, he realized, that was exactly what Conroy was doing. He was stuck, tangled.

“What the hell?” Thompson said. He started towards Conroy. The closer he got the more apparent it became. From a distance it had looked thin, catching glimpses of the light in bright strands. Thompson had assumed it was pulley wire, a thin thread that made some of the heavier equipment run smoother, less loudly. As he neared, however, he realized it was not pulley wire at all but steel wire.

Steel wire was not necessarily thick, but it was near impossible to cut through without heavier tools, all of which Thompson had already left behind. The wire was used for some of the heavier machinery that did deep-mine work and in the odd time they used it for explosives. Some of it was flammable, with an interior that held a detonation cord.

The steel wire wrapped around Conroy in a mess of tangles. It held the man's arms tightly against him in an awkward position. When Thompson got closer, he realized Conroy's arm was broken. It was bent backwards at the elbow, pressed into his side where the cord cut across his open wrists. He was bleeding, too. Beedlets of blood dotted Conroy's entire uniform, it seemed. On his legs, the wire had sliced through just under his knee, digging into the bone with each and any movement he made.

"Tom, I can't breathe," Conroy gasped. He stood on his tippy-toes. He looked like he was in agony. Thompson could barely manage to look at him.

The steel wire wound itself up Conroy's chest, ending in a tight loop around his neck where it forcefully pinched his skin. Red lines brushed against Conroy's throat as he wheezed for air. The wire pushed into his throat, rising and falling with his labored breaths.

A knife. Thompson needed a knife. No, he needed bolt cutters to get through this. He touched his hips, feeling his own uniform and all the spots his tools had been only minutes ago. There was nothing there. He cursed. He could use a rock. There were no shortage of stones lying around and surely one had an edge tough enough to break the bonds of the wire. Thompson directed his light at the ground. He searched for anything that would work, anything that looked remotely sharp. His light landed on a small silver stone with jagged edges. He picked it up, flipping it over in his hands and poking the edges with his finger. It would work. What other choice did he have?

Thompson looked over Conroy's body. The only chance he had of cutting the wire loose without hurting—maybe killing—Conroy was to find a place where the wire had at least some slack, enough for him to squeeze a finger or two between. Conroy edged toward Thompson. He hissed in pain, clearly desperate to get cut loose. Thompson moved his hands to a section of the wire under Conroy's rib cage where a few strands intersected. If he could break it there maybe it would loosen up enough to allow him to breathe easier. When he made a move for it, Thompson jolted back. He hissed in pain again and grunted, shaking his head. Conroy mouthed an exaggerated “No” to Thompson.

“Conroy, it's going to hurt a little bit but it's the only way to get you out of there. We don't have a lot of time,” Thompson said.

Conroy's mouth opened and closed. His eyes squinted together in the face of Thompson's headlamp. Thompson could see the wire pressing against Conroy's throat, squeezing his windpipe and slowly choking him out of breath. Thompson touched a length of the wire that curved around Conroy's hips, the part that was holding his clearly-broken arm in place. Immediately Conroy flinched. He gurgled as elsewhere on his body the wire pressed into his skin. Thompson took a breath. This was bad. Really bad.

How the hell could Conroy have done this to himself? Thompson thought. Conroy had his own light on his head. For some reason it was off. Maybe that was a start, but still. Wire like the one entrapping him was kept on a spool, almost impossible to trip over much less get tangled in.

Thompson crouched. Maybe he could start at the legs. There would be less pain and maybe he could unwind it instead of forcefully cutting it. The wire spanned both of Conroy's legs, holding them together by his ankles in a tight bond that spiraled up to his waist. Thompson

saw the crimson color of blood soaking into Conroy's pant legs. He was bleeding bad. The wire was deep, cutting skin, wearing the tissue down and digging in with every motion Conroy made. It must have been hell to have walked this far, Thompson thought.

Thompson slipped a finger between the wire and Conroy's work pants. He pulled it far enough to get it away from Conroy's skin and slip the edge of the stone through. Conroy made no discernible sound of pain. Not that he could if he wanted to, Thompson thought. The man choked on air.

Thompson tightly gripped the rock in his hand, pressing it against the steel wire and moving it side to side in a saw motion. Conroy grunted. Thompson slowed and looked up at the man. Conroy returned the look, not moving his head but tilting his eyes down to Thompson. His mouth opened and closed with nothing more than desperate gasps and wheezes. If Conroy was trying to say something, Thompson could not interpret it. Either way, it spurred Thompson to go even faster. In a matter of moments Conroy would be on the ground convulsing and then be dead.

"T-Tom!" Conroy yelled as best as he could. His voice was raspy, forcing its way from his mouth. It came out wet and rigid. It sounded painful.

Thompson stopped, puzzled, and then jumped back when the rock in his hand flashed into a burst of yellow sparks. The heat radiated from the flat stone into his fingers in no time. Thompson cursed, dropping the stone and waving his hand through the air in pain. A second later, the tip of the steel wire around Conroy's leg lit into a minuscule flame.

Orange sparks hissed at Conroy's boots as the steel wire turned itself into a slow-burning fuse. Thompson's mouth hung open as he realized what he had just done.

Conroy had been telling him to stop.

The stone Thompson had been using revealed itself on the ground in a flash of silver that caught the edge of his headlight. He realized then that it was not just any stone.

It was flint.

The sparks hissed loudly, burning with a white steam that masked Conroy in a thick fog. Thompson scrambled away, pulling himself back as Conroy's pants ignited in a flash of orange fire. Thompson barely saw Conroy's face through the haze as it opened in horror. He began shaking wildly, suddenly careless to the razor-edged wire wrapped around his body. The flames climbed his leg and the yellow sparks spread around his body, burning through anything and everything. A moment later and the flames were at his arms. No sound came from Conroy's mouth even as he opened it in silent agony. Thompson could only imagine what the screams could have sounded like.

Conroy writhed. He bent over, spun, twisted. The wire ensnaring him tightened, pressing into his arms and hands and legs. It sliced into the soft skin of his throat. Blood spurted out past the line of steel wire as the flames climbed higher. It felt like mere seconds before Conroy was on the ground—a mess of fire, sparks, and melting wire.

The smell was wretched. Conroy's body popped and sizzled with red pustules that swelled on his charred skin. The steel wire snapped and broke away as the fire sizzled out on the cooked skin of his back. When Conroy finally stopped moving he was barely recognizable as a person at all.

Thompson slowly got to his feet. The need to vomit resurfaced. His legs buckled, shaking and trembling as he steadied himself. He swallowed his sickness down, refusing to look at the morbid scene lying in front of him.

He had come for Conroy. He had found Conroy.

Thompson turned around. He could cover this up. Conroy had been setting charges and a part of the wall came loose. There was a small avalanche and the natural friction of the stone set the fuse on fire. It made sense. It was believable. Thompson would have believed it.

He bent over, his head between his legs, and opened his mouth with a wretched gag that burned at his throat. Strings of bile slowly fell from his lips. He spat, wiping sweat off his forehead.

What the hell had happened? Margaret, Sav, Conroy—half his team.

Thompson stood straight. Tears stung the corners of his eyes. Why was he crying? Sorrow, frustration, confusion? Maybe a combination of all those? He could have been home, a beer in hand and a cigarette in the other.

Something ran in the path of his headlight.

Thompson jerked his head to the side. He looked to his left and then his right. There was nothing but more rock, more wood, more old equipment. He turned around, looking at Conroy's mutilated body. Part of him had feared it crawled away. It would have been one of the less strange things to happen if it suddenly disappeared. Between the radio calls, his name on the radio, and the accidents to his crew—he did not know what to expect, how to discern reality from paranoia. It was all too much.

Maybe he was going crazy.

Sometimes the mines had leaks. The ventilation systems were known to have failures from time to time. There was toxic air in the pipes. No doubt some of it was severe hallucinogens. Maybe another crew somewhere had dug into a natural reserve of gas. He had heard those stories, too: entire crews driven crazy by toxins in the air.

Thompson stood over Conroy's immolated remains. If he could touch him, feel the flakes of skin fall off the body, he would know it was real. He knelt down. His hands shook, quivering as they hovered over the scorched remnants of Conroy's mining uniform.

Something moved in the darkness just beyond his reach of light. He was positive he had seen it this time. Thompson stopped short of digging his nails into the dead man's skin. He was a moment too late before whatever it was vanished into the shadows once again.

"Time for the rock collector to collect." The voice crept out of the shadows.

Thompson froze.

It was the same voice he had heard on the radio only now it was not muffled by the static behind it. It was clear. It was present. It was here.

It was in the mine.

"I'm in trouble. I need help. I have injured crew members," Thompson said into the darkness. His voice was as shaky as his knees. A sob threatened to break up his words but he held it back. He swung his head this way and that, lighting as much of the tunnel as he could. Still, no one revealed themselves.

"The rock collector will collect," the voice came again.

Thompson stood. Somehow it had come from the other side of the tunnel, opposite where he had heard it before. He put a hand to his headlight, adjusting the light to widen its scope. The tunnels were still void of anyone, it seemed, however, he could feel he was not alone anymore. There was no doubt someone else was down here with him.

The smell of Conroy's burnt flesh had already gone rancid. Thompson covered his nose. It was giving him a headache, stinging at his eyes and burning his nostrils. He waved a hand through the air.

Somewhere behind him a rock fell. He heard the cascade of smaller stones and pebbles as they bounced on the ground. A moment later something emerged from the darkness running faster than Thompson had the time to react to. He opened his mouth to shout his surprise but no sound came out.

It was small. Pale in color and running low to the ground. It sped between Thompson's legs before he had the time to react and when he turned around to follow it, he realized what it was.

It was a pig.

Thompson was lost for words. He was too stunned to even react. The pig went right to Conroy's body, burying its head in his side where part of the uniform had burned through to the flesh. The animal gnawed, vigorously pulling and twisting as it scavenged off Conroy.

"What the-No! Get! Go," Thompson said. He clapped his hands together. The pig did not move. It remained in place, gorging itself on strips of burned skin. "Move! Go!" Thompson yelled. He stutter-stepped towards the animal and still it made no movement to retreat. It did not even acknowledge he was there.

Thompson looked at the ground for more rocks. He could throw something at it, kill it if he had to. He turned around and his light illuminated a face in the darkness only a dozen steps away.

It was a person, no, an animal.

No.

It was both?

They stood in place, unmoving in the dark with a bloodied hog head draped over what Thompson could only hope was a real human face beneath. Thompson was petrified. His entire

body paused; his heart nearly leapt out of him. His mouth hung open and his eyes went wide. What the hell? *Who* the hell?

“The rock collector is here to collect, Tom,” it said.

It was the voice. The same voice from the radio.

It took a step forward and the rest of its body became visible in the white light.

They were wearing a tight suit, a one-piece get-up the maintenance staff usually wore. This one, however, seemed old and dated, like it had been sitting in the mine collecting dust for a long time. Their arms were long and spindly and clutched in one hand was the curved blade of a pick-ax. Thompson’s eyes were immediately drawn to the weapon that the person—*thing*—slowly swung back and forth at their side.

Thompson did not even think about it. He barely consciously made the decision before his body forced itself to turn around and run, screaming in his head to get out of the tunnel as fast as he could. His heavy boots became feather-light as he took off. He was not even sure where he was headed, if this was the way he had come or not. He had to find the main room, an elevator, even another crew. His breath was loud in his ears and his heart pumped faster than it ever had before. To his left, a small crevice revealed itself in the stone wall. He barely saw it hidden behind an old wooden beam that was awkwardly placed against the stone. He could hide there, out of the tunnels and away from whatever the hell that thing had been. He could wait it out, gather himself, and get back to the room.

Hopefully Gunther and Sav had called for help.

Thompson stopped, forcing his body and bulky suit into the cave-way. The jagged edges of rocks scraped against him, catching the material of his uniform and tearing through it as he pulled himself deeper and deeper into the cranny. His face pressed against the cold wall of stone

and his helmet banged back and forth, breaking away loose rock to make room. He went deeper and deeper, feeling the wall close in on his chest and squeeze him tightly. His boots snagged on narrow edges and he kicked hard, breaking stones and pushing himself further and further until he was jammed far enough that even if he was discovered, it would be hell to pull him loose. He was safe. He was alive.

Then the soft ground gave way.

It crumbled in a cloud of dust and soot. The passage was too tight for Thompson to get a grip on any of the ledges. He fell through with the rock, plummeting into darkness below. His shoulder slammed into rock, jerking him backwards and slamming his back into the opposite wall. He heard a crack, felt a sharp, searing pain shoot into his back and hit the ground hard enough it knocked the wind from his lungs.

When the dust settled Thompson saw nothing.

He felt the heavy weight of broken rock on his chest. He sat up slowly, feeling a tense pain that strained his shoulder as he sat up. He coughed out a mouthful of dust and instinctively went to tap on his headlight. He flicked the switch once, twice, and a third time.

No light.

Thompson felt his side for the flashlight. He grabbed it and immediately felt another bolt of pain fly up his back into his chest. He groaned, slowly pulling the flashlight in front of him. He could not see it, but he could feel it was dented and broken. In the darkness, he flipped the switch. The light flickered on. It was faded, probably broken.

The light was just enough for him to see his left foot buried beneath a pile of rocks. He pulled his feet away but nothing happened. He tried to pull away again but his feet did not move.

He grabbed his thigh and the sensation never came even as he watched his own hands touch his leg.

He felt nothing. He tried to move his leg, willed his mind to wiggle his toes or bend his ankle but the feeling was not there. Nothing moved. Nothing felt like anything. He touched his lower back. He groaned through barred teeth. It felt like his skin was on fire.

Thompson leaned back, taking in deep breaths, refusing to believe he was stuck. That he was paralyzed. The flashlight flickered out. He flicked it back on. The light was dimmer now.

Thompson twisted around as much as he could, shining it around him. Just out of arm's reach seemed to be a small cache of equipment piled up. He stretched his arm out, reaching for it. He must have fallen through into another team's old excavation site. His hand touched the pile and sank in. It was warm and soft. When he pulled away he felt the substance cling to his fingers and stretch back with him. The dim flashlight revealed black tar on the tips of his fingers. Thompson twisted more, leveling his face with what he had been reaching for and realized it was not a cache of supplies at all.

It was Sav.

Her body was crumpled, lying still and covered in the tar. She made no sound. Made no movements.

"S-Sav?" Thompson's voice broke.

He twisted the other way.

Gunther's open eyes stared at Thompson in the faded light. They were empty, void of anything that had once been Gunther. His body was bent and broken, covered in dirt and blood. Thompson could barely make out the wooden handle of a pick-ax embedded in his back.

“The rock collector is here to collect,” said a voice in a taunting sing-song way. It sounded distant but at the same time all too close.

Thompson broke into tears, sitting up and tugging on his limp legs as he heard the sound of soft footsteps on the rock floor behind him.

END