

# **High Pocket**

(a novel)

\*\*\*EXCERPT\*\*\*

Frank Zajackowski

## 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.

“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.”