GOLD

By:

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PROLOGUE

Should he have waited?

Probably.

Fred Perkins ducked his head. His headlamp sprayed a beam of light across the rocky floor of the abandoned shaft. It was a relic—a mere dilapidated hole in the dirt compared to the nearby Kryterion Mine.

Fred was wrapping up a survey of the adjacent mine when he received a text from Liam, a member of his team. Satellite imagery revealed a potential source of precious metals barely two miles away. Liam was going in to investigate.

That had been two hours ago.

Shuffling deeper into the shaft, Fred hunched over, his lamp reflecting off of puddles of water beneath his boots. Ahead, noises echoed through the tunnel. An eerie keening sound that could have been the weight of the mountain preparing to crash down on him.

Swinging his head around, he was startled to find

that the entrance was now a mere pinprick of light in the distance.

"Liam?" he called, wincing at the hollow sound.

The temperature had dropped significantly.

What was he—200—300 feet in now?

"*Liam?*" his shout lacked verve.

Even the scuff of boot against rock could trigger a cave-in.

There were sounds ahead, though. He was sure of it. Rushing water? Muted voices? Had he somehow circled back underground onto Kryterion property?

Pivoting again, there was no sign of the entrance anymore. He switched on his phone, not hoping for a signal—just an extra source of light. The image of his wife holding a koala bear glowed against moist walls.

The tunnel was crude, the arced walls pitted as if thousands of fingers had clawed the formation.

Claustrophobia wrapped around his throat with equally eager fingers. Flashlight in one hand, phone in the other, he aimed both forward into the black chasm.

The Kryterion Mine benefitted from modern amenities such as string lighting and ventilation. This decrepit pit boasted no such conveniences. Hundreds of these abandoned shafts littered the area—leftovers from the gold rush of the late 1800's.

An eerie jingle sounded just outside the scope of light.

Wind chimes?

But there was no wind.

"Liam?" he tried again.

Hunching further under the tapering ceiling, he inched forward.

Just until I see the chimes.

If it's nothing, I'm outta here.

Liam will find his way out.

A shadow fell across the path. It quivered as the clanging grew louder.

Perspiration pooled under Fred's helmet despite the moist chill.

Another step.

Another.

Now he could see the source of the chimes. Rusted chains hung from a wooden beam to form a curtain across the narrow passage. That curtain rippled, but there was no breeze.

Fred cocked his head to aim the headlamp at it and saw a boot protruding from beneath the clanging metal.

"Liam?"

He crept forward, extending his hand as far away from himself as he could manage. Thankful for the work gloves, he reached out and drew two of the heavy chains aside.

The boot turned into a leg, and then a torso, until finally his beam landed on the eternally open eyes of Liam Carlson.

Fred gasped and stumbled backwards, landing hard

on his ass. He crab-walked in retreat from the corpse, losing his phone in the process. It was only a few inches away. Distressed, he reached for it when the chains suddenly parted.

The muzzle of a gun flashed. There was a quick scent of sulfur.
Fred Perkins became another precious ore buried deep in the mine.