

MAKEEN LIEL

COAL  
— QUEEN —  
JASMINE



AND THE CREATURES  
OF UNDERGROUND DARKNESS

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BY  
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Coal Queen Jasmine

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## About this Story:

All the historical information, including names of jobs in the coal mining industry, and the names of most of the characters in this novel – men, women, and children - are real. The information comes from historical data, and from coal mining incident reports from the 19th century. It is written in honor of the victims of those incidents and their families, so we never forget them, and so we remember their experiences and struggles forever.

## PROLOGUE

Dark... lost... cold, and pain. Outside, the storm is brewing, and the wind is blowing violently, but inside it is deathly quiet.

It's not an accident... they're not here because of an accident... someone did this, someone deliberately did this...

Not all of them are still alive, some of them have passed away.

That's not sad, it seems that the dead are the lucky ones here.

The voices... the voices!

There are voices in the dark... the voices are getting closer.

No time for friendship... no time for courage.

Hide...hide...hide, they are coming.

You can't see in the dark...but they can.

You can't push the rocks...but they can.

You don't eat men...but they do.

No time for friendship...no time for courage.

Whatever you see in the faint light ...don't scream.

Whatever voices you hear... don't scream.

Whatever happens to those near you... don't scream.

Don't scream...Don't scream... Don't scream!



# CHAPTER 1

## DARK BEFORE ITS TIME

The year is sometime in the nineteenth century, and the place is a small village in the old continent of Europe. Jasmine is a girl at the beginning of her youth. Who after her mother's death, lived in a modest house with her elderly father, who still works in the village coal mines.

Their village is relatively small. Not many people live there, since it is in the mountains. No important roads go through it, and it's not on any traveler's map, it's far from any port even though it's not that far from the sea. And it has only one road that horse carts loaded with coal use to get to the closest point to the train tracks, which is all that their village has produced so far, coal and nothing else.

Jasmine is tall with a fit body, olive skin, long black hair that competes with coal in its color and density, and her beautiful eyes

always smiling at life; the most beautiful girl in the whole village. No one disagrees with that, but also no one would disagree that she's the strangest one of them all! A girl like her, working with her old father in the coal mines. Amid all that soot, coal dust, and sweat. Amidst all those loud dynamite explosions and their intense smell. Under all those large and heavy wooden beams and sheds that support the roof and rocks from falling, way inside the ground's darkness and its dim and hot abysmal depths.

What is she thinking?

All the pretty girls go to work in the city, to work in factories or noblemen's palaces. And the lucky ones get to marry one of those spice traders, or maybe silk traders, since they are kinder. Maybe one of the lords or the king's men. If Jasmine would have gone to the city, the king himself would take her as a mistress for himself, no doubt about that. Then why does she stay here?

Every day before sunrise, Jasmine wakes up; she loves to see the sunrise and watch the light as it spans over the valley and the hills. That is her only chance, because when she comes out of the mine at the end of the day, the sun has already set a long time ago and darkness is here again.

The work in the mine goes on for twelve hours and sometimes more, six days a week. And there are other mines too where there are two shifts, one in the morning and the other at night. For some miners who have specific tasks, work starts at 2 A.M.

There is someone whose job it is to knock on the windows at workmen's houses at night to wake them to go to work, he is called the Knocker-up. And so like that, several days can go by for some miners without even seeing daylight.

This was the case for most of the workmen, except those who work above ground sorting the coal.

The mine's depth was always dark. Except for a few places, like where there is digging or cutting. And depending on the season, the mine was sometimes hot and dry, filled with coal dust. And at other times moist and wet with water drops falling from its roof.

Jasmine doesn't like the dark, and if the darkness of the mine and its seams where she works for long hours isn't enough for her, she comes out after work and finds that the world has already gone into darkness. She may watch the stars up in the sky for a little while, when she's walking back home on her tired feet with her father, but it's not like seeing the sun and being in the sunshine.

That's why every day before the sun rises, Jasmine washes her face and combs her hair without tying it up, then climbs up on the roof of their simple and isolated house, far away from the village's small number of houses so the daylight can cover her and the sun warms her body even a little bit before her old father wakes up.

Jasmine doesn't like working in the mines. She carries water down into the mine for the thirsty men, even down to the deepest seams. And she takes care of exchanging lamps. She really wants to quit her job. A girl her age naturally wants to leave the small village, to travel far to the city. Where the beautiful buildings and lights are, and big markets that contain everything.

But she don't want to leave, how could she leave her old father alone? She's the only one who can take care of him. Old Joseph, the mine's dust and smoke has finally gotten the best of his lungs. He's always coughing, and there's always blood.

There was a time long ago when tall and thin Joseph Kemp was the mine overman. Everyone worked according to his instructions and the mine ran smoothly based on his knowledge and experience. That always saved the workers wasted efforts and saved them from dangerous risks.

But the family that owns the mine no longer appreciated him in his old age. And if his brother, Gavin Kemp, hadn't been the one to take his place as the overman, he would have been fired a long time ago. Still, his work hours were reduced and his salary too, but he didn't mind.

All the workmen still respect old Joseph, and value his word. His many years of experience are very useful to them. And they always appreciated his patience and kindness when they were beginners and young, working slowly and making frequent mistakes, those were things that made them appreciate him even more.

Unlike his brother, Gavin. Short and fat, always angry, he keeps yelling at them with or without a reason. He wasn't a bad person on the inside, he was all right, he may even be good-hearted, but he's also unbearable!

Gavin, unlike his brother, always makes sure to be in control and show his power in front of the mine workmen. For him, they are just pack animals. When Gavin is unkind or disrespectful to the workers, they tend towards being careless or idle in their work, or they even ignore his rules.

They might even dare to turn their backs to him, which is not at all appreciated by the mine owners. Not to mention that most of the accidents in the mines are the result of someone's mistake. Intentionally or not, whether it's a small error or a big one, one mistake means at least one worker's death.

As the boss, Gavin's first duty is to prevent accidents. The only person that Gavin fears more than his mean wife who often scolds him, is his brother Joseph, the one who raised him and took care of him after the death of their parents.

The only mistake Gavin blames Joseph for is convincing him to marry the mayor's sister. And the only one that Gavin feels pity for more than his lazy kids who are just like their mother, is his niece Jasmine who works in the mines, a kind daughter to her father. The only mistake he blames her for is covering for the workmen's mistakes, like hiding the one who was responsible for losing three shovels that fell into the mine's cracks. Even if she did that out of sympathy.

He never forgets each time when he passes the village square to buy a big red juicy apple for his niece. Every day he chooses it carefully, and shines it for her himself. As for medicine for his brother, he stopped buying it some time ago now, after the doctor said that it was not useful, not anymore.

Every early morning after she greets the sun, and before her father wakes up, Jasmine comes down from their house roof quickly and with her many years of practice, she milks their only goat, feeds it, starts the fire in their old wood stove, collects the eggs after feeding the chickens, makes breakfast for herself and her father to eat here and a simple lunch to eat at work, and then she puts out some milk for their cat before she sits down with her father for breakfast. And finally, she never forgets to tie their naughty dog so it doesn't leave the house or follow them.

Over time, she taught herself not to complain about the food. She no longer hates the harsh coarse bread, and the yellow hard cheese doesn't upset her anymore. Even when she is bored with the food, hunger can still bring back her appetite.

After breakfast, they begin their long journey walking on foot to the far mines at the heights. Almost every day, they pass the Village Square and almost every day she goes to see Wallace the grocer to trade him the eggs she brought for oil for their only lamp, some soap for her, and some tea leaves for her father. And the last item isn't cheap at all, tea is very expensive here.

Tea is not included in what she can trade for eggs, so she has to pay for it, so she can only buy a small bit of it every day. But at least Wallace doesn't give her used tea leaves instead new ones for her father, and that is nice of him since other merchants often sell used leaves.

On their way to work they also pass near the village's well, where the girls go to get water and the women go to talk. They exchange greetings quickly and continue on their way. After that, one of the women always makes a comment about the girl, probably Mary Ann Moulson.

She talks about how she grew up, and that it's inappropriate for her to work with men now that she is older. This is indecent, her father should've sent her to school with other girls instead, this is wrong very wrong! The funny thing is that Mary herself used to work in the mines.

It hasn't been that many years since the Royal Decision was released, which prevented women's and children's labor in coal mines. There are still entire families working in coal mining in nearby villages, and some children in their village too.

The truth is that Joseph has always wanted to send his daughter to school, like her cousins. Learning wasn't free or cheap, but more than once, her uncle Gavin wanted to take care of her learning costs. It was Jasmine who refused his help.

All those classes filled with laws, rules, and punishment, away from her sick father. That's why she settled on her only chance with the rest of the kids who can't go to school, she studies at the church or chapel Sunday school. Learning at church was based on three things, reading, writing, and arithmetic, along with scripture. They were learning by copying, chanting, and repeating until they got it.

Kids learned by writing on slates, because paper was very expensive. The older students used ink and pens to write in copybooks. Jasmine had only used ink and pens to write on paper a few times with the help of Sister Margaret who let her use the copybooks.

After talking about Jasmine and gossiping about other villagers, until about the middle of the day, the women next to the village's well usually talk about three or four different subjects. Sunday's mass, the improper flirting behavior of the mine owner with the village girls, the day Wallace goes to the city to bring new fabrics, and the war, always the war.

One other subject they may touch on from time to time is only ever whispered about because it's the village secret. Even though everyone in the village, including the kids, knows about it. They sometimes whisper about the coal devils, but that isn't because of dread or fear. It is just for jokes and mockery. Since the first time the coal devil's myth appeared a long time ago, it has only ever been met with laughter and mockery.

The story goes way back in time. Back to when the village's current mayor's grandfather and its founder, Wardrobe, came to these lands as explorers. He was a traveler who worked for the Feudals exploring mountains, caves, and cracks in the ground.

He was searching for an iron reservoir, or copper, and maybe silver if he was lucky. The story goes that when he explored the caves around the Heights he found nothing but coal. Which wasn't used that much back in those days. So out of desperation he went further into the mountain caves; so far that when he wanted to leave he was lost and captured by the coal devils.

They are hairy and scary creatures with eyes that burn like fire, with tusks and teeth that can grind anything from bones to rocks.

The coal devils wanted to eat him, like they do with every human that falls into their hands. But, with his claimed extreme cleverness, he tricked them into trading them his life for a small wooden doll that he made out of his torch in a hurry. Promising them that if they kept taking good care of it, it would grow and grow until it became big enough for them to eat for years and years to come. So they released him, or so the story goes.

That wasn't really funny back then. But after those claims, and now, years since that day, the coal devils have become a subject for mocking all the time.

Mothers used them to scare the children from staying out and wandering roads at night. Men curse them every time bars run out of beer. And when boys ask what happened to them when they are being circumcised, coal devils were accused for taking a bite out of them!

Yet the worst were the firedamp, stinky and explosive gas pockets in the mine's seams. People say that the firedamp gas gathers from when the coal devils fart or burp. But it wasn't only jokes that have been told about these creatures. Poor Luke, he was the only survivor from the disaster that happened in the mines two years ago.

It has been said that the reason behind the disaster was the coal devils. People think the poor man has lost his mind. Why wouldn't he? Nine workmen, including two kids were killed that year, after being trapped for two nights in the tunnels, and their bodies were never found which has happened before.

Days after the accident, Luke went mad. He was never the same again. Investigations were done about the disaster and some people said it was caused by the floods and the heavy rain that fell during that time. Only Joseph Kemp believed that the incident was caused by more than just that.

Every few years, more or less, something like this happens, if not in this village then in another one nearby or far. They consider themselves to be very lucky if none of the workmen get killed or injured. And what is the reason? Well it's usually the same every time. An explosion of the damned gas pockets or the collapse of the mine's roof. And all of it happens when a worker lights a fire, uses poor lamps, or a naked flame comes into contact with the dangerous gases. But what is the alternative? There has to be fire to recycle the air and get rid of gases, and they need lamps to work in the dark.

There are many big and ramified coal mines in their village, created by generations of colliers. Still, they never produce anything besides heavy, hard rock coal. There are three general types of coal mines, there's the vertical coal mines that use shafts and elevators powered by steam engines to get down to where the coal is.

There are horizontal mines where horizontal tunnels lead to the coal. And finally, the most typical type in these areas, the slope mines with sloping tunnels down to where the coal is.

Like theirs, the slope mines usually contain one or more main tunnels that lead inside to where it divides into seams that lead to the coalface. Each time the tunnels get deeper the seams get smaller, and become very hard for miners to move around in. Tunnels were supported with wooden beams and columns to support the tunnels' ceiling which allows miners to go deeper in the mine. Getting to deeper levels means getting more tons of coal. The use of wooden beams was considered a real revolution in coal extraction.

The development led to an expansion in coal mining. Inside the tunnels there were railways used to get to the seams, and moving coal carts, which were called coal tubs back then. They used tunnel horses called Pit Ponies. The animals were very strong yet very small so they can fit in the tunnels to drag the coal tubs back to the surface. The pit ponies weren't always available, so there were workmen whose job it was to drag coal tubs too.

Seams and pits were known by numbers. This way every miner knows where he should be working. Over time, the mine becomes more and more like a network of tunnels, and it's easy and frustrating to get lost in there and can often be dangerous too. The air was recycled inside the mine through wooden doors.

A worker was assigned to be next to the door and open it and close it now and then to let air pass through the seams, and also for coal loaded tubs to pass through. This job duty is called trappers, and that's all he does all day. It's a simple job so it was usually given to kids.

Fire was always used to get rid of gases and rotate air, ventilation pipes were also used, but these needed steam engines which broke down easily, so they didn't depend on it a lot.

Besides Jasmine's sick father, everyone else starts work in the mines early. The work can carry on for more than twelve hours. Sometimes eighteen hours. And sometimes, the miners may work for two shifts in a row. If the mine owners decide that, or if they have a big order for the winter season or holidays like Christmas. The miners didn't object to anything. No one represented them even though their work was difficult and dangerous.

When Joseph Kemp thought it was a good idea to start a union for the workmen, so they would have someone to represent them and protect their rights, the only thing that came out of his idea was that the mine company decided to get rid of him quickly.

It was a clear message to all the workmen, that it's easy to replace any one of them, even if it's the Overman himself. And just like that, Kemp's dream of a union ended up as a silly idea. Even with the difficulty of their work, none of the miners wanted to lose his job. In those days, miner's payments were considered good compared to other jobs.

There were also a lot of workers in other jobs who are losing their jobs already. Like what happened with the textile workers in the textile mills back in the city. The workers were replaced by giant machines. It was the era of the Industrial Revolution, as they say.

Like her father, Jasmine wasn't able to do the same amount of work as one of the young and healthy male coalminers. That's why neither of them got paid much. Even so, the mine owner was forced to keep them because of Gavin being the boss of the workmen, and besides, the workmen themselves would never allow the mine owners to fire Joseph.

Jasmine's job was to provide the miners in the tunnels with drinking water. She also had to take care of the safety lamps they use down there, she maintained them, refilled them, and replaced them if necessary.

Her work was important, because of the existence of the dangerous gas pockets in the tunnels, any contact between the fire damp and a flame could lead to a catastrophic explosion. That's why miners used safety lamps, like the Davy lamp that was invented in 1815 by Sir Humphry Davy.

This lamp, which was made of glass, metal, and gauze, was revolutionary because if it did make contact with any dangerous gas, the gas burned inside the lamp itself, and not outside of it. The gas would burn off in small amounts in a relatively safe condition. This was also a revolutionary lifesaving invention in the world of coal mining. Due to the need for it after several explosion disasters that killed or injured a lot of men.

However, the lamp's lights weren't strong enough, and that was yet another problem. Water, lamps, and staying next to her father were all Jasmine's responsibilities. It wasn't easy inside the depth of the tunnels with all those workmen.

When she starts her work day, Jasmine is usually in a bad mood because she knows that she's not going to come out of there for twelve hours or more. The sky will be dark and the night will be there already, dark before its time. The night for her starts early when she enters the black darkness of the tunnels. Narrow and hot like the bottom of the sea.

Sometimes she goes a long distance inside the tunnels alone in the dark before she comes across a lamp, or a coal tub moving on the railway, or a trapper door with a boy next to it.

Really, anything or anyone that reminds her that there are others here, even though there are more than eighty miners who work in the tunnels on normal days!

Jasmine knows all the workers who are down here, and they also know her. Sometimes when she passes them down in the mines and tells them a joke or makes a comment, it is the only good thing throughout the entire day for them. Miners also don't go out until the work is done, that means that smoking or eating is done before they go down.

And when it's lunch time they don't eat a lot underground, it could cause them heartburn if they eat a lot and work in the absence of fresh air. So they usually take a little piece of bread and jam or bread and cheese, sometimes potatoes, or maybe bacon. And for drinking, they have either water or a tin of cold tea, reused probably.

Jasmine knows all the workers here by name, she even gave some of them nicknames that stuck and they themselves started to use them too.

She didn't give them nicknames because of the difficulty of recognizing them after they get covered with coal dust so nothing shows out of them in the dark except their eyes. But it was because of their names, there are so many miners with the names James, John, and Thomas, they even have two Peters!

That's why she gave them nicknames and no one really complained. So there was Fat John, and he was called that, well, because he was fat. He is a Hurrier but he's very strong, regardless of the size of the load of the coal tub that he's pulling he never fails or gets tired, ever. Even though the railway goes up hill.

They say that his strength equals three horses at once! There was also Thomas Four, a collier. The reason behind that nickname is that he never works except in seam number four, something about good luck that he believes in. She really wonders what his fate will be after work in seam four is over? There was also Light Pole Frank, also a collier.

Because he always reminded her of one with his tall height and the lamp on his hat. Next is Michael Brannan, who is in charge of explosions, or shots as they were called and fire, he's the firemen group leader. He became powder Brannan since he uses a lot of explosive powder.

They are different from firemen in the city who extinguish fires. It's the opposite here, because they start the fires. He and his group are the ones who take care of explosions or shots, and starting fires in the tunnels and the coal pits.

There was also the Grundy brothers, James and John, both are colliers. Two young men who are still doing what former miners used to do when it's unbearably hot in the seams, they work wearing very little clothing or nothing at all! She still remembers a glimpse of strong sweaty muscles shining in the dark under the light.

There was also Uncle Patrick who was a loader, and his young son Peter Patrick who was a Trapper.

Then there was Henry Bedford, or Half Henry, the only nickname that Jasmine didn't give out. And she hated it with all her heart. Thirteen years old, Half Henry worked as a Thruster in the beginning, pushing behind coal tubs, but that work left a mark on him and deformed his spine and his shoulders. Leaving him unable to stand up straight, that's why he became Half Henry.

So he became a Trapper, he stays throughout all his shifts next to a wooden door alone in the dark.

Trappers didn't have a light. Precious pennies weren't spent on candles or light for them. They just stay next to their doors and open or close them when it's needed to let the air blow through the tunnels. Or when a coal tub passes. After that he goes back to staying alone in the dark.

Severe punishment is given for any trapper who is found asleep. Because that could affect the air in the tunnels and put others in danger. Punishment would also be given for leaving his place even for a few steps, the punishment would be tying him to the door with a belt so he doesn't leave his post again.

Jasmine always tried to spend some time with Half Henry, whenever she could. She can't imagine herself being in his place, ever. Even though that was the job that was given for kids, even if it would have been her fate here too if her uncle Gavin wasn't the boss here.

All this leads to who gave Henry his nickname. Old Cubbins the locomotive, because he smokes like one. Releasing heavy thick clouds of smoke from his pipe, the one he holds with a mouth that has only three teeth, as if they remained just to hold his pipe for him.

He was a loader. And she hated passing by him when he smokes secretly, not caring about the rules, with all the smoke in a cloud around him while everyone else here is struggling to breathe.

More than that, he doesn't eat anything but porridge oats, with a wooden spoon from a wooden bowl. She knows all of these men, and all the other eighty workers here.

Finally, there was her uncle Gavin the Gavel. She called him that because of the number of times he hits his palm with his own fist each time he gives an order to the miners. Or when he gets angry and threatens to punish a worker. Which is what he does most of the time.

But not with her, she is the only one who has the right to touch him or poke him in his side and even frighten him sometimes. Still he doesn't respond to her with more than laughing in her face.

Then there was her father, Joseph. An old man full of manliness and handsomeness even if it was wiped away by time. She cares very deeply for her father. After the death of her mother, he took care of her all by himself, like he took care of his brother before she was born without any help from anyone. He didn't even get married to another woman, he didn't want any woman to come and impose herself on his only daughter.

Today, more than any usual day, there was a lot of movement in the mine. It was also unusual, when Jasmine found her father and her uncle both together around noon time near one of the cold faces, that they didn't notice her presence. They were discussing something.

Actually, it was closer to an argument. Her uncle was hitting his gavel, that is his fist, aggressively. While her father insisted on refusing him. So she just sat on one of the rocks carrying her father's lunch while they continued their argument.

“But we have to!” said Gavin exhausted “you think I don't realize how dangerous this could be? of course I do, but it's also worth it, besides we won't go far, maybe just a few more yards and that's it.”

“I said no,” answered Joseph firmly “I don't care about the reasons whatever they are, and you shouldn't either. Don't let them confuse you, until now we are still depending on the old beams. And you know what moisture and worms can do to them. Besides, we are in the slope part now, and that's the deepest place we have ever reached.”

“But brother!” said Gavin despairingly “I'm just talking about a little bit more work; we need the funding. Look at the tunnels' condition, ventilation pipes don't work well anymore, and maintaining the steam engines is very expensive, we are even suffering in the miner's basic gear!”

“No,” said Joseph more firmly “you are the boss of the mine's workmen now. And the first thing you must consider is the safety of these men, they are your responsibility, brother, and that is your first priority.”

Gavin sighed, shaking his head, he wasn't convinced or happy with his brother's objection. But deep down he knew that he was right, as usual. That's when he noticed Jasmine's presence there, while she was playing with one of the hanging lamps with a stick in her hand. She was trying to make some shadows on the wall, she amused herself with that when she was bored.

“What the...?” said Gavin angrily. “Stop playing with the light! If someone other than you was doing that, I would light him up instead of that lamp! What are you trying to do?”

“I'm trying to make your shadow taller,” said Jasmine with a smile. “No need for it to suffer from being short too.”

“Oh,” said Gavin before he understood the meaning of what she said and got mad, her father on the other hand couldn't stop himself from laughing at his daughter's sarcasm.

Even her uncle gave up and flicked her on her forehead with his finger saying,

“Naughty! makes fun of her uncle and gets away with it every time. At least don't do that in front of the men, isn't it enough that I can't get rid of that gavel title that you stuck on me?”

“I can release you from it,” she said quickly.

“No! Don't, I won't fall for that trap again.”

She raised her eyebrows. What trap is he talking about? He was getting ready to leave, he still had reports to write in the report book. Reports about fire damp and old ventilation pipes. And before that, he needs to make sure that none of the miners has tampered with his safety lamp, so he can increase its weak light. Which makes it lose its safety feature and makes it as dangerous as any open flame. But before Gavin leaves, he throws a red apple he picked and cleaned himself as usual, to his niece right before he adds to remind her,

“Don't stay too long here, the mine is dry and full of coal dust these days, which is harmful on your lungs. And don't talk to the workmen again or be kind to them, especially the Grundy brothers, those naked scamps!” He said while hitting his hand with his fist violently.

“I've sworn to them that if I ever see one of them talk to you again, I'll bury them in the deepest coal pit here... alive!”

He shouted and then left. And it looks like he really meant it. Jasmine, on the other hand, put the apple in her pocket so she could share it with Half Henry later and looked at her father to ask.

“Alright, what was all that about?”

Her father sighed while trying to resist his coughing and answered,

“Well, he is your uncle, he has the right to be jealous for you.”

“I meant what were you two arguing about?”

“Oh, that.” he coughed again. “don't worry about it, it's just the banality of the city again. An agent of one of those diamond companies will be here tomorrow with the mayor and the owner of the mine.”

“Here?” said Jasmine surprised. “So that is the reason behind all the movement on the surface, but what are they coming for?”

“I'm not sure if what I heard was true or not. But they say that they are coming in search for diamonds.”

“Diamonds!” Jasmine was even more surprised.

“Yes, diamonds.” said Joseph derisively. “Since when did coal mines have diamonds? I don't know!”

Jasmine started to serve their simple lunch, stunned before she asked again.

“But if there weren't any diamonds here, then why are they coming papa?”

“I'm not sure,” said her father. “Maybe someone said something here or there about these mines. The agent of that company is very interested. They are looking for new diamonds for something related to the King's jewelers. Of course the Mayor is falling all over himself with happiness.

And the mine owner, Mr. Blundell, is pressing hard on your uncle to double the work and do some shots to get further than the deepest point under the mountain.

They think that might convince the agent about the possibility of existing diamonds in the mine, and for that they can get some funding for new mining work.”

“Isn't that good? Funding more work in the mines?” asked Jasmine.

“It's very risky,” said her father looking at the roof. “A new unplanned and unstudied explosion in this place will affect all the mine’s parts. And threaten the new wooden beams. If they happen to collapse, even the biggest, largest old beams, won't be able to hold it up alone.

The entire mine may collapse from an irresponsible act like that. And the danger may even reach the ...a... never mind. What are they thinking? Their research is probably based on lies, and myths, they...”

Jasmine didn't listen to the rest of what her father was saying. She went with her imagination and her eyes to there, to the mine’s deepest point, where the digging work currently ended. Where the new railway for the coal tubs was supposed to be, near the end of the old abandoned tunnel of the mine, where the incident happened at its entrance two years ago, before they hit a hard-rocky wall, beneath the mountain.

That caused the digging and work to stop. Leaving a big hole in the face of the rocky wall in front of her like a small tunnel. It is so deep and so dark that even dozens of lamps can't light it. It is scary, and gives the impression that something is moving inside it, sometimes something shines in it all of a sudden and then disappears.

She always tells herself that its insects in the tunnels, because the other possibility really scares her. The evil, filthy coal devils. The ones who tend to destroy, and play with miner's lives.

And when they catch them, they eat them dead or alive. She may have made fun of the stories and jokes that the villagers make.

But deep down she's afraid of them. Everyone is, at least here inside the mine. She remembers once during her childhood when she asked her father whether the coal devils are real or just a silly myth. That day he did nothing more than pat her on her head and smile. What did he mean by that smile?



# CHAPTER 2

## BETTER IN THE MORNING

It was already evening in the village. Located in the center of the village is the mayor's office, which helps to manage the town's only industry, which is, of course coal mining. The Mayor, Mr. Robert Wardrope, was having a hard time sitting on the chair in his office, he doesn't know when it happened, but his chair doesn't fit him anymore! Maybe it happened after he became the village's mayor.

Each time he moves, his old wooden chair makes a squeaking noise. As if the furniture is screaming about his heavy body on it. The rest of the office was ordinary, though it was noticeable that some desperate efforts were made to make it look rich and luxurious. But what was immediately noticeable is the number of pictures on the wall, they are all the same.

The Mayor wearing one of his many hats that he loves, because they do a good job of hiding his baldness from the public. He has lots of photographs of himself when photographing wasn't cheap, easy, or common in those days.

In the same room was Mr. Abraham Blundell, one of the owners and the current manager of the Blundell and Sons Company. Very thin, and very tall, with a monocle on one of his eyes and an excessive elegance. Still with all of that, what really draws attention to him is his large Victorian mustache. Which he spends a lot of time, and money grooming it and buying oils, and perfumes.

Also in the room with them, annoyed and fidgety, in a red emblazoned dress that matches the redness of her face, is the mayor's sister, Mrs. Harriet Kemp, wife of Gavin Kemp. She is very similar to her brother in a lot of things and manners. They must be twins. Most certainly they are!

That's what Gavin, who was also in the room said to himself, while comparing his wife and her brother the mayor. His eyes and thoughts had strayed from the topic at hand.

The four of them have had a long, exhausting, and useless argument without resolving anything. In the argument, Gavin insists on what his brother said. Which is that he's not going to do any new shots to any depth whatsoever. While the others insist that it's necessary, and that it has to be done tomorrow in the presence of the agent who came all the way from the city.

Gavin, who's now tired and has a headache that is really bothering him that moment, said, trying with them again,

“How many times do I have to explain it? We're not going to do any new shots now. It's too dangerous!”

“Is that what you think or what your brother thinks?” Asked his wife, discontented while putting down her cup of coffee, which had gone completely cold.

“It is what we both think!” He answers, annoyed. “I checked the wooden beams myself at the end of the day, and what Joseph said is absolutely correct.”

“Joseph, Joseph.” said the Mayor bored. “What Joseph said, what Joseph thinks. I want to understand, are you the boss of the workmen, or is he?”

“It doesn't matter!” Shouted Gavin. “The results are the same. I'm the one who wants to understand. You're the mayor. Shouldn't you be worried about the safety of our men? And you, Mr. Blundell, don't you see that the old rickety mine could collapse from taking a step like this?”

“Exactly!” Said Mr. Blundell. “You said it, an old rickety mine. Very old, it doesn't even produce as it used to, and there is not much use of it now. But it would be very useful after the company agent visits.”

Mr. Blundell twisted his mustache and continued. “You see, if the agent was convinced about the possibility of diamonds existing in the deep seams, just the possibility of their existence I say, his employer will fund the mining work for an entire year with thousands of pounds! Not to mention that the prices of the mines and the land in the mountain will go up sky high!”

“And don't forget,” added the Mayor, “this miserable village will be the destination for a lot of investors, prospectors, and everyone who works in money and jewelry, imagine the wealth that it will bring.”

“But the mine could collapse, we could lose it forever!” said Gavin, frustrated.

“Of course it won't collapse!” said Mr. Blundell, underestimating. “It's an old mine but it won't collapse, it's near the core of the mountain. I do know something about mining, my dear. Besides, we do dozens of shots throughout the year all over Blundell and Sons Company mines. nothing goes wrong...well... most of the time.”

Gavin waved his hand, tired with a dry throat after all that talking, and said,

“But there aren't any diamonds, who said that there are diamonds in a coal mine!?”

“My grandfather said that.” answered Harriet.

“Who? The idiot explorer? The myth maker?”

“Mr. Gavin!” shouted the Mayor, hitting the desk with his hand. “You're talking about our family. About the founder of our village, even if it is not named after him!”

Mr. Blundell interposed quickly to calm things down and to explain,

“This idiot explorer, I mean... great Mr. Wardrope, is the reason behind the agent's trip here, my dear. You see, it was found within the secret letters that Mr. Wardrope sent to one of his employees, a letter which mentioned the existence of very rare blue diamond stones in these caves in the heights. That's why he came back here with his family, and that's why he founded this village. If it wasn't for the deadly sickness that didn't grant him enough time.”

“What!?” Shouted Gavin. “What kind of nonsense is this? Why did he hide that then? Why did he release all those myths?”

“To scare other people and keep other competitors and explorers away, maybe.” Said the Mayor conspiratorially.

Gavin stared at the Mayor with an insulting look, yet the mayor ignored him and continued,

“Even if it didn't happen, and we don't find any diamonds, by the end of the year we will send an apology letter to the diamond company about the failure of our seriously hard-working search, and say we're very sorry, and the agent will take all the responsibility for that all by himself. It's a successful plan in every way.”

“All you have to do is to make sure that the shots will be launched tomorrow, my friend.” added Mr. Blundell with an innocent smile.

Gavin couldn't believe what his was hearing, with their innocent smiles! All this is just a conspiracy with no regard for others' lives or anything else. It was too much for him.

“I'm sorry sir, but that's not gonna happen.” said Gavin in a very firm way, he got up after that, headed to the door before he looked at them, and hit his hand with his fist. He shouted very angrily,

“This is final! And let the agent, his blue diamond, and your grandfather all go to hell!” Then he shut the door behind him loudly.

They stared after him, stunned by the way he exited, disbelieving that he dared to yell that at them. It was enough to make Harriet fall down on the couch, saying something in grief about what a miserable marriage she has.

Mr. Blundell, on the other hand, started pacing around the room in circles, very worried while twisting his mustache. He couldn't believe that he was going to lose all that money that he could've earned in exchange for a simple trick and an old rickety mine.

Not to mention the money he has lost already for bringing the agent from the city and preparing his residency arrangements. Only the Mayor stayed calm, following Mr. Blundell with his eyes.

“Will you stop pacing.” said the Mayor, coldly. “You look like a broom moving on its own.”

“What?” Mr. Blundell froze in place shocked. While the Mayor turned to his sister, asking her with the same coldness,

“My dear? Can you delay your husband from going to work tomorrow?”

“Delay him?” She wondered.

“Even for an hour or two?” he asked.

She didn't understand why he was asking. Neither did Mr. Blundell.

“Why do you want him to be late for work? What are you thinking of?”

“I'm thinking of money for you, and power and nobility for me as the first Wardropes to be successful and wealthy. And put this miserable village's name in the history books. Now Dear Harriet, can you do that?”

“Well that's easy,” said Harriet, smiling with a foxy tone in her voice. “He always comes back from work tired and wants to sleep early, a well-cooked reconciliation dinner and some time with the kids should do it. He usually doesn't wake until someone wakes him up. It won't be hard.”

“Good.” said the Mayor with a voice that sounded just like hers.

“Good? Good for what?” asked Mr. Blundell nervously. “What about me, what should I do? What's my part?”

“Your part, my friend, is to make sure that the agent comes tomorrow at the earliest time possible, even if you have to spend the night in a carriage, to be ready to bring him here at daylight.”

“Really?” He asked surprised. “Should I?”

“He's exaggerating.” said Harriet, bored.”

“Oh, I see...”

“As for me,” said the Mayor while shifting uncomfortably on his chair, releasing a lot of wooden crackling noises. “I have to go to meet the person who is going to prepare the shot for us for tomorrow's event.”

“You mean someone out of the firemen team?” Asked Mr. Blundell, worried.

“Oh, don't worry dear. It's just gonna be a small pretend explosion. It won't harm anyone. Perhaps old Cubbins won't mind a small job like this, and all for a small fancy cigarette case. It will still look like a professionally done shot and it will convince the agent, after all, I don't think that he's any kind of an expert in these practical things.” The mayor got up out of his chair and checked his hat's position on his head, adding

“I will not let small things like this stand between us and our goals, not for someone from the Wardropes.”

“That's what's called cleverness” said Mr. Blundell, impressed.

“No, my dear Abraham, that's what called being prepared. Still I assure you that tomorrow will definitely be a big day.” said the Mayor smiling.

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Far away over the heights in Jasmine's house, nothing was unusual. Jasmine was cleaning off the dinner table while her father Joseph was smoking his pipe, and staring at the fireplace.

“Tea will be ready in a few minutes.” Jasmine called to her father.

“Oh, sorry dear. I'm afraid I won't be having tea with you tonight.”

“Are you all right?” She turned toward him, worried.

“Yes, yes, I'm fine, don't worry. I just intend to go to bed earlier than usual tonight.”

“Why is that?” asked Jasmine while sitting in front of him. “You aren't afraid of another defeat in cards, are you?”

“What? No! You naughty girl. I shouldn't have taught you all my tricks. Ha ha ha. I'm going to bed earlier because I want to get up earlier. I want to be in the mines tomorrow before the gathering with the owner and before the work starts.”

“But the work will start late tomorrow after the gathering with the owner and his guests, so why the hurry?”

Joseph coughed while cleaning his pipe, and said “I want to check again on some parts and some of the beams that me and your uncle Gavin talked about. It seemed to me today worse than I expected. We may have to fix some or even replace them.”

“And you have to do that alone?” she asked wondering.

“I'm afraid I have to my dear. Working in these mines is neither comfortable or safe, and the men always work under a great amount of pressure, so if they found out about the beams, that may raise unnecessary concerns and stress, which is not good, at least not until I'm sure of it.”

“But you're tired, and today was a long day, Papa.” said Jasmine in a worried tone.

“Oh don't worry dear, no matter how hard the day was...”

“Things will be better in the morning.” she finished his usual words with a smile.

“Yes, that's right, new morning new day,” he said while chuckling at the inside family joke they shared.

Old Joseph went to bed, but not before he kissed his only daughter's forehead, saying.

“Don't stay awake too long now, and tomorrow after you finish your housework, follow me to work, alright? Good night, my dear.”

“Good night, father.”

Said Jasmine, watching her father walking away. He's tired, he's sick, but he won't show his weakness to anyone, not even his own daughter, especially his daughter.

Jasmine herself, on the other hand, didn't want to go to bed, which was unusual. She didn't feel sleepy, which is something uncommon after a full work day in the mines, especially today when she was on her feet all day, preparing for the visit of the agent and the owner tomorrow. Something else wasn't the same as usual tonight, it was Jasmine herself.

“Better in the morning...”

Jasmine whispered to herself, unwary, she never understands her father's optimism. Inside she was feeling something weird, gloomy, and unexplained. It reminded her of that night when her mother was ill, and she was just a child.

That cold night she didn't sleep, instead, she stayed next to her mother's bed on the floor wrapped in a blanket, listening to her mother's short and exhausted breaths, with fear yet without understanding.

Watching in the light of the lonely candle with old Dr. Sanders, who was sitting on a chair next to her mother's bed. Checking on her mother every half an hour or so, before he sighs and goes back to his chair.

Her father stayed downstairs that night holding his pipe without smoking it, standing in front of the window on his feet all night long.

No one lit the fire in the fireplace that night. Until a morning came, that Jasmine didn't want to come, and the sun of a day that she didn't want to see. That was the day her mother died.

But it's an unexplained feeling tonight. A cold grip of ice is squeezing her heart and she didn't know why. So she finished her housework quickly, and instead of going to bed, she climbed on the house roof outside. It's summer time so it's okay to enjoy the night's breeze and see the stars.

The sky is clear, and the moon is absent tonight, it's all right, because it was really pale last night. No voices are anywhere around, even the far sea seemed to be peaceful and calm as if it's a giant mirror for the sky above it. Tonight is owned by the stars and the dark.

She gazed in front of her at the horizon ... the far horizon. Behind the woods and mountains and the far seas. There beyond where she can see with her eyes, there was a new day coming to them.

A day full of new things, new times, and a new sun coming with what's going to change her life, or at least that's what she wishes for. It's likely moving so fast toward them, Mr. Tomorrow. Coming fast so he won't be late, he can't be late, if that happened and he was late, it would definitely be a total mess! He must arrive at the right time carrying his events.

Some of them are happy and some of them are not, some of them she would like to know right now, and there may be others that she doesn't want to know, ever.

But why the hurry? Tomorrow we'll definitely come, in its time too. Although she really doesn't know whether she wants to meet him or not, not with this odd feeling inside of her.

She returned to stare up at the sky, at the night, and the stars shining far above her, like the diamond pieces in Mrs. Blundell's necklace. She's the only one who possess one in the entire village. Beautiful is the night and beautiful are the stars. Always there, even if they disappear during the day, they always come back. Even the sun is a big star, or so she has heard.

For the first time, she felt that she wasn't fair with the night. Previously, when she didn't like it, and chose the day and the sun over it, she didn't hate it, she just sees it more than she should. And it reminded her of the darkness of the mines, she thought, justifying it to herself.

And it separates them from tomorrow, it also divides the week into days and the months into weeks. And above all of that, it hides a lot under its thick and heavy black curtains. It hides thieves and creepy insects and all those people who are up to no good.

Who knows what happens at night in the big, foggy forest? Or near the old abandoned well? Or there, deep in the mine, at that frightening dark hole where the digging ends?

Maybe old Cubbins knows, it's his favorite place after all. She had always seen him sitting there in the dark on a rock at lunch time, eating his porridge with a wooden spoon from a wooden bowl. Maybe he should use a straw. She imagined that and laughed at the scene that appeared in her imagination.

She can only guess what's happening now in her uncle's house. Or in the village square, but she doesn't know for sure. Yet she definitely knows for sure what's happening now in the Grundy brothers' house. She laughed again, but she then she calmed herself down, and thought it was disgraceful and she shouldn't think about it. She took a deep breath after she calmed down a little.

And decided that for tonight she will stay here, and watch the stars till morning, so she can watch the sunrise and then go to the mines. She doesn't want to sleep. She will stay awake all night with the stars, maybe make a necklace of them in her imagination. She did get what she wanted, but not exactly.

Because suddenly she woke up from a short nap, to find that it's morning already. And the sun has already arrived without her seeing it, and it's already washing her face and her long hair with its early light like every other day.

Missing the sunrise wasn't what bothered her, she can make up for that tomorrow, now she's late for her house work and for going to the mines. She thought tomorrow was going to be late, she didn't think that she was the one who may be. What a rough start for the day.

Her father must have left early as he said he would last night, to get to the mine before everyone else, and find time to check on the beams. She mustn't be any later, she will make the breakfast and the lunch to take with her. She would milk the goat and feed it, collect the chicken eggs, take care of the dog and the cat as fast as she can, she was going to need to break her record here.

However, she won't go to see Wallace the grocer so she doesn't get any later, not to mention that he hates it when anyone surprises him. She will delay that until she comes home at night. As for now, before she starts it all, she needs to wash her face first. And after she's done all her chores in a surprisingly new record time even for her, she was on her way to the mines.



# CHAPTER 3

## THE BASKET

In the morning, when Jasmine arrived at the mine, the place was much different than normal. It was teeming with people and crowded. All the workers, including the younger ones, were outside the mine, gathered in a crowd a little bit away from the entrance in front of a small stage.

Gathering around, who she immediately recognized as Mr. Blundell. Only he has a mustache like that, next to him was his wife, Mrs. Blundell in full adornment. The Mayor was also there, lately, he had become rounder like a ball in the few past years. Next to him is his sister and her uncle's wife Harriet in expensive and obscure elegance.

The fifth person, though, who has two companions with him, she didn't recognize. With his costume and his long socks like city men, his cold countenance, and his half open eyes.

Which she didn't understand if they were really like that or was he having a hard time lifting his eyelids up a little bit? He must be the rich diamond company agent from the city. There were also some of the village's women and girls here. It seems that they're taking this occasion seriously.

But she didn't see her uncle Gavin, is it possible that he's down there with her father? She's at least sure that her father is down in the mines, because that's what he told her last night.

Quietly, she ignored the crowd which Mr. Blundell was speaking to, with a speech full of short sentences and heavy words, as if he was spitting stones out of his mouth. She really felt sorry for those who had to listen to him until the end. Maybe even clap for him too, it's not like they had a choice.

She put down her basket quietly next to the entrance. And snuck quickly inside, she doesn't want to witness this, and her father has been without breakfast until now. She has to find him fast, so they can have their breakfast outside the mine in the fresh air. And to let him see what's happening out here. Before the work begins or whatever they were going to do today.

But really, where is her uncle Gavin? She knows he will hate all this, and for that he will increase the hits of his gavel on his poor palm. Still it never happened that he was absent from work even for this.

In the meantime, at the mine yard between the parked tubs and the miners who are already feeling bored, Mr. Blundell continued his speech, one that was very obviously prepared for him.

Still it wasn't really his fault, whoever wrote that speech for him should've considered his mediocre speaking abilities.

“It's been an honor... a great honor... that the Blundell family... the ancient family... and from their humble mining company... William Blundell & Sons company... to become... the destination of... Messrs. Jonathan Dixon Limited... and Mr. Dixon... to find what suits... the King's jewelry... of local and ... national diamonds... from Blundell mines.”

“Diamonds?” said Thomas Four in a surprised whisper. “What diamonds is he talking about?”

“The man has lost his mind.” Said Powder Brannan without caution. “He's one of those educated idiots who says that diamonds were originally rocky coal, poor man.”

“Nonsense!” said Uncle Patrick. “if the origin of diamonds is coal, then how come we haven't found any? We are always in the coal mines, and I've never seen anything shine inside these caves, ever.”

“Coal shines.” commented Fat John.

“Really?” wondered Uncle Patrick.

“Yes, when Thomas loses control of his bladder after all that drinking!” John laughed.

“Hey!” Thomas Four objected. “it's a medical condition! The doctor said that!”

“Yes, yes” said Brannan annoyed. “Where is Gavin, where's the boss? how come he's not here?”

“Hey Frank.” called Fat John. “Do you see the boss from up there?”

Light Pole Frank turned his head around, searching the place before he answered, confirming.

“No, he's not here, and I don't see Joseph either.”

“That's odd” said Brannan even more annoyed.

Both Half Henry and Peter Patrick look at him before they looked at each other with half an eye.

For the kids, it doesn't matter who is here or not as long as Jasmine is there. She was the secret battle between the two kids. And the reason why they haven't been friends anymore for some time now. Since Jasmine started to look different than before. More present, and she made their naked feet feel warm even in the winter.

She had also become a little bit interesting for the Grundy brothers. A battle that hasn't been solved between them till today. On the platform, Mr. Blundell was continuing his speech. Without any real attention or interest from anyone.

“So... it is my pleasure...with the presence of the agent...Mr. Samuel McGarry...in person...this morning...to start the new digging stage... under the mountain...”

“The new what?!” Shouted Uncle Patrick, as shocked as the other miners.

“If you please, sir.”

Said Mr. Blundell, as he presented a small fire torch to the agent, which the agent threw away nervously to light a line of powder. It was scattered randomly and without skill or patience on the ground in a way that makes it hard even to realize that it's there. Going all through the coal mine yard to inside the mine itself.

“Hey!” shouted Powder Brannan protesting “Me and my team are this mine's firemen who runs its shots, and we didn't approve this! Who made this shot in this stupid way!?”

“The boss and Joseph didn't agree on this!” shouted James Grundy of the Grundy brothers.

The miners' voices got louder, refusing and protesting. While the flame was moving, wriggling its way to the entrance of the mine without anyone noticing. That was when Mayor Wardrope stepped on the stage and shouted with his sonorous voice,

“Silence!!”

Everyone went silent while the mayor continued with a loud voice,

“We all have to remember that Mr. Blundell here of Blundell and Sons company is the mine manager and one of the owners. And only he will decide whether the work in this mine does or does not need any shots, including when and why!”

“But this is dangerous!” shouted Uncle Patrick.

“We want the boss or Joseph Kemp to tell us that!” shouted Fat John.

The clamoring and the voices were rising among everyone, confusion, and even anger became master of the situation. While the agent and his companions took a few worried steps back. And the mayor continued yelling, ordering silence. That was what's happening when suddenly Half Henry shouted with a loud voice, silencing everyone, pointing with his hand to the mine entrance.

“Hey! Look over there!”

Everyone gazed at the point that Half Henry was pointing at in the main entrance, they didn't realize what he meant immediately. Not until they all noticed a food basket covered with a white cloth that they recognized immediately.

“That's Jasmine's basket! It's her basket, I swear!”

“But where is she?” asked Thomas Four wondering.

Suddenly everyone was shocked, staring back at the mine entrance after they realized the truth and that she must be in there.

“She's inside!” Said Light Pole Frank, stunned, adding “And if she's inside then Joseph Kemp is inside too!”

Everybody stared, terrified at the disaster that was about to happen inside the mine. Jasmine and her father are inside facing the risk of death. The mayor and the others with him took more steps back. It seems that the trick that was supposed to be pretend is real now. And it's threatening not just the lives of those who are down below, but even perhaps the lives of people up here too. Their small act wasn't supposed to turn into a real disaster that may not end without victims falling, and people dying.

“The flame! Put it out!”

Shouted Uncle Patrick, bringing everybody back to reality. All of a sudden, the workmen attacked the dispersed powder line that was spilled on the ground, trying to cut it, bury it, or wipe it away with their boots before the flame continued in it. Transforming the entire place into what looked like a dance arena.

With everyone trying to get to the powder line, while they could barely see it on the coal mine's black ground. Some of them were at the wrong side even from the beginning.

But the powder line was so large after it was poured by a trembling non-expert hand, using dynamite powder leftovers, so fine and dry sometimes it looked like dust. Every time it goes out from one side it lights up from another, even from the smallest spark, sometimes there were more than one flame moving around, which made Michael Brannan, head of the firemen team, shout angrily.

“Dammit! this is what happens when fools take over things! Who does such a stupid thing like this! Water! Bring water!”

Some miners went to bring water, others opened their tin water bottles and start pouring water on the powder line. When Thomas Four didn't find his own bottle on him, he unzipped his pants to pee on the powder, but he stopped for a second when he saw Fat John staring at him, surprised, not until he shouted at him.

“Well? What are you waiting for?”

So he started, but the flame continued its way determinedly, thanks to the stupid man who scattered the powder on the ground in every direction. With the presence of flammable coal dust, which is no less dangerous than powder itself, everywhere, the flame reached the entrance and went into it. Uncle Patrick tried to follow it to the inside. But Fat John and the others grabbed him firmly, because this meant putting more lives in danger and nothing else.

All of them are mine workers and all of them know that, it's too late. At the same time, Powder Brannan couldn't stop himself from shouting as loud as he could, a very long warning shout through the mine entrance as he always did whenever they launched a shot, hoping that someone would hear it.

“WATCH OUT! SHOTFIRER!”

After that, all the miners stood in silence, confused about what they should do now. On the stage was the mayor, Mr. Blundell, and the mayor's sister along with the agent and his companions, moving back already to take cover. The mayor didn't miss noticing old Cubbins while he was sneaking away from the place, walking away, or escaping, it doesn't matter, the thing that made him think to himself angrily,

“Dammit! What did that fool do!?”

Inside the mine, the echo of the warning shout coming from above reached Jasmine so low and weak, but enough to attract her attention. She stopped in place suspiciously. She was already half the way to the mine seams, but she's certain that she heard something. She raised the safety lamp in her hand, trying to get more of its weak light, and checked the tunnel where she came from, nothing seemed unusual.

Not until her nose picked up on a peculiar intense smell that she didn't expect. The smell of dry dynamite powder. She stared at the ground around her, there, what is that? She bent down to the ground and touched what, to her, looked like a powder that she recognized immediately, it is indeed a fine dry powder spilled and scattered here and there and almost everywhere. What does this mean?

Fireman Brannan and his team wouldn't do something stupid like this. They used fuses and blasting machines, they have procedures and rules. Only then when she realized the meaning of that powder on the ground, and that shout. But how? And why? That hadn't been approved. That was also when she saw from the corner of her eye, a light of fire dancing on the wall of the other side of the tunnel.

It has to be the explosion flame, making its way down the mine, where there must be a big amount of powder put there to explode powerfully. She didn't understand how could this happen? Now the flame itself appeared moving in front of her eyes. She got confused and lost her concentration for a second, she ran towards the entrance unaware.

But then she remembered what she came here for, her father. He's down there, dear God! She didn't know what to do!

Shouting won't help, no one up there is going to hear her, and no chance of her father hearing her, even if he does he won't understand what she's talking about.

She tried to stop the flame by herself, but with the stupid way it was scattered, and all that coal dust mingled around, her efforts didn't help, the only thing it did was make the flame slow down its progress while moving from side to side, either weaker or stronger or sometimes jumpy. Which wouldn't be the case if the powder was put in one consistent straight line. For a second, she looked towards the mine entrance, it didn't seem that anyone is coming down, no help from there.

That's when she made her decision and started running to the depth of the seams almost without any hope. All she wanted at that time, was to find her father no matter what was going to happen next. She ran with all her strength, she just wanted to find him. She didn't want the sun or the daylight anymore, she forgot about the night and the stars that shine like the diamond pieces in Mrs. Blundell necklace.

More and more, she felt that odd feeling that she had last night. It was the fear of tomorrow, tomorrow that has already come, and now became the truth, even if she knew that this was what was coming with it, would that have changed anything?

With the mine's depth getting darker, the flame's light became more clear, dancing stronger on the black walls of the tunnel, releasing shadows in wicked shapes shaking violently.

As if demons were dancing madly celebrating the coming deaths. Evil shadows that took their existence from the light of fire and its blackness from the dark, and its shouts from the poor girl panting with her intermittent breaths not only due to the lack

of air, yet the increase of dust in it, and the drum sounds from the banging of her shoes on the ground of the mine and its gravel.

The disaster was getting closer, stronger, faster, and with a lot of clamor, which frightened Jasmine more and more, she nearly fainted on the tunnel ground.

“Papa!”

She shouted with all that remained of her strength and weak breaths, before she bumped into someone. She opened her eyes, scared to find her father, who was coming back already, in front of her. He was staring, startled by his terrified daughter, with her tears all over her dirty cheeks with soot and mine dust.

Her heart was beating so hard even he could feel it. And her breaths were so fast she wasn't able to say even one word to him. But one look at the flame that showed up dancing on the ground, getting closer, and the spilled powder along the tunnel, made him realize quickly with his long experience what was going on. And it was his experience too that made him decide what he should do.

Escaping the mine won't work, there won't be enough time to get to the surface. This tunnel will collapse, the wooden beams that he checked earlier told him that, their condition was way worse than he thought. All he could do was to find some time and shelter, until the explosion and collapse ended and rescue comes, if it's going to come.

He didn't understand how he missed all this, with his years in the mining field, noticing all this and the explosive powder on the ground. Does the blame fall on his weak safety lamp, or on the weakness of his aged eyes? It doesn't matter anymore.

“We need to go, hurry up!”

Said Joseph, taking his daughter's hand and starting to run, with her surrendering to him and starting to run too.

Yet he didn't run up toward the surface, but instead, toward the depths, racing the flame of death as hard as he could, deeper and deeper until he reached it. The end of digging, the hole in the face of the rocky wall, the deepest and the darkest spot in the entire mine, however it's still in the heart of the mountain rock, there may be hope.

Not so far from it was a big pile of powder with some half empty dynamite barrels lying around it, he's going to have to do something about it too.

He pushed his frightened daughter so she fell in the hole, Jasmine watched him above her, unable to understand what he's doing. Joseph, on the other hand, didn't stop or hesitate not even for a second. He put his lamp on the ground, and rushed towards the nearest coal tub, turned it and flipped it upside down, then pushed it with whatever strength years have left for him off the railway, against the hole entrance, to cover it with his daughter inside it.

“Papa!”

Her voice came broken and weak. He looked at her eyes for a second before he said.

“You know, I don't know why I never told you this before, but it was your mother who chose your name for you.”

He said, smiling that strange smile which she never understood. Before he closed the hole with the body of the tub, the heavy and solid tub which was made for hard and heavy loads of coal and rocks. Joseph could've gone inside with her, but he knows that would reduce her chances of surviving, there may be hope of survival in the presence of air for two people.

But it would be even a bigger hope if all the air was left for one person, it's a weak hope that he accepted to pay his life as a price for. Since when did hope have a price?

Air is precious here, no difference between here or the depths of the ocean or the heights of the skies. It's still hope for life. Besides, there's still some other work that has to be done. That's why he turned to the pile of dry powder and half empty barrels that were meant to explode. It's a big amount and something has to be done about it.

It was a mad man who did this, no doubt, but he would get what he wanted if destroying this place is what was on his mind. Jasmine looked out from the side of the hole behind the tub at her father, while he was attacking the big pile of powder, taking the small barrels and what's left in them and throwing it as far as he could, scattering the big pile here and there, hoping to lower its mass, and therefore reduce the power of the explosion. "Father!" She cried to him again, scared.

"Stay on the ground!"

He yelled back at her loudly, and went back to scattering the powder in each and every direction. While its dry fine dust is rising to fill the place, so heavy and thick, that even the dark demon shaped shadows that followed her here from the tunnel with the flame, left the walls, and start dancing in the cloud of dust itself, in the middle of the place and around it.

More madly while the flame is coming closer, faster, and stronger. Madness was rising in everything, her father, the shadows, the flame, the light and the dark, the mine. And suddenly, nothing was there.

Up at the mine's yard, everyone, the miners, and Mayor Wardrope, Mr. Blundell, and his guests, all the men and women from the village, even the mine firemen, everyone was hiding far from the mine's entrance.

Behind the rocks and the tubs and the large coal piles, and whatever was good enough to hide behind. Who knows what the power or the size of the explosion is going to be? Or how much powder has been put down there after they saw all that powder spilled on the ground?

The quiet was intense and a minute or two had passed. Maybe nothing will happen, or that the explosion shot has failed. The Mayor thought to himself. That has to be it, maybe if he takes the chance to be the first one to stand up, that will make him appear as someone who is in control of the situation.

Still he didn't stand, instead he stuck his head out to say something to the others. He hadn't even opened his mouth yet when the explosion happened, powerful and terrifying, coming from the depths. Carrying with it coal ore, shattered heavy wooden beams, thick ropes, railway bars, and remains of destroyed tubs.

All that in a middle of a cloud of dust and black smoke, fire and ash, all came out at once from the coal mine entrance, to fall on the outside yard and whoever is in it, then bounced hard off whatever it hits, followed by the sounds of collapsing and cracking rocks with heavy big coal blocks colliding with each other. A sound all the miners know and they have always heard in their nightmares, and sometimes actually in their lives. The sound of the coal mine roof collapsing.

While a giant dark cloud was rising to the sky, half of it thick black smoke, and half of it bright red fire with a lot of gray dust and ash in its tail, and a very loud terrifying sound, rising into the sky, enormous and boisterous. Announcing to the village people in the other side and whoever could see it far away about the horribleness that happened and the catastrophe which had been. With all the villagers, old and young gathering in the village yard, staring at the cloud that is rising over the mine's area, stunned and terrified.

A strange quiet prevailed after that, leaving a strange silence behind it. Deafness in the ears and a headache in their heads, the miners stood up from their hideouts, shaking dust off themselves, checking on who's around them, while some of them are trying to break into the cloud of dust that covered the mine to get to the entrance, the Mayor too stepped out of his hideout, which neither Mr. Blundell or his wife did, but he noticed that his sister Harriet was staring at him, terrified, then he noticed that she's not staring at him, but rather staring at his hat. He took it off to find it split into two halves at its top, as if it was shredded by an iron shrapnel.

He stared at it sadly, felt it with his hand for a second, it was a gift from the agent who brought it especially for him from the finest hat maker in the city, he had only worn it today, it's one of the city's newest fashion styles, before he realized what is really scary and what scared his sister, it could have been his head instead of his hat if that shrapnel went down an inch or two!

He then threw it away, terrified. It doesn't matter if people see his baldness today, what matters is that it's still in one piece.

It was only once the cloud of dust and smoke cleared away that the real size of the disaster appeared, there wasn't any mine anymore, the entrance was blocked with rocks and debris after the explosion destroyed the deeper beams, leaving the other ones to crash, causing the mine roof to collapse on itself, leaving a large moraine behind it, it was simply the end of that mine.

The miners fell back, stunned by the scene, what hope do any of them have for anyone surviving after what they saw. Mr. Blundell gasped at the look of his destroyed mine, the Mayor was scanning the place searching for damned Cubbins, while Harriet, and Mrs. Blundell stuck together trembling in fear.

As for the agent, Mr. McGarry, he was still staring, and his eyelids still didn't go up even a bit, although he was shocked, which means that they just naturally looked like that.

Half Henry stood in front of the destroyed tunnel without knowing what to do or what to say, he whispered:

“Uncle Joseph?... Jasmine?”

The women who were there sobbed and the girls started crying, as if he announced what they already knew. They're dead. The men took their helmets off without even saying a word, some of them got tears in their eyes, and the first one of them was Uncle Patrick. Joseph had been his friend since childhood. The agent on the other hand, suddenly waking from being stunned, looked left and right at his companions before he gave them the signal to get ready to leave, saying,

“Alright, this ends things here.”

Still stunned and confused, Mr. Blundell looked at him surprised.

“But, But... Mr. McGarry...?”

“What Abraham? This money is for the funding of national diamond mining in mines that do exist, not for destroyed ones or for digging mines all over again.”

Mayor Wardrope interrupted, trying to calm things down.

“Mr. McGarry sir, if you give Blundell & Sons company some time, I assure you that he will...”

“Sorry!” said the agent, getting ready to leave, adding “this time you're talking about is the time of our company itself, and it's not for tampering with, and since the messages from your grandfather Wardrope mention this place in particular, not any other place, and until there's a mine here that reaches to the heart of the mountain, then we can talk, excuse me. Oh! My condolences for your loss.”

The agent tried to leave after that, but the Mayor and Mr. Blundell just wouldn't give up that easily, while the miners, the women and men, were circling around the remains of the coal mine in sadness and grief when suddenly,

“What's happening here!?”

Asked an angry voice, making everyone turns toward it, the mine workers became confounded, the women and girls went silent, even the Mayor, his sister, and Mr. Blundell tried to hide from it.

That was the mine workman boss, Gavin Kemp. He must've been on his way here, enraged about being late for work when he heard the loud explosion, which made him start running, even though his size normally didn't allow him more than a fast walk, a little, to arrive breathless, sweaty, and with more anger now that he had to run.

No one dared to answer him, and there was no need for anyone to, since the image in front of him was very clear and didn't need any more explanation.

“What the...? Dear God! What happened here? Who blew up the mine? Who allowed any explosive shots in the first place!”

Shouted Gavin, angrily taking off his hat and throwing it on the ground, so furious that it made the Mayor, his sister, and Mr. Blundell move even further behind the rows of people. While he kept hitting his hand with his gavel, madly shouting.

“Who allowed it? I said yesterday no shots! Who did this? Michael Brannan!!”

“I didn't... we were...”

Powder Brannan went silent after that, unable to answer or to say anything at all. Gavin looked at him angrily, but without understanding, why is he quiet? Yet why are all of them quiet? The miners, the men, and women. Why are they not shouting or cursing? Or doing anything at all? Why are they not answering him? Why are they not looking him in his eye? What could it possibly be?

“Wait a minute...”

Said the boss, Gavin while checking on the others.

“Where is Joseph?... Joseph?”

No answer, not even from anyone, they avoided answering him, so he asked again.

“Where's my brother? Where's my niece, where's Jasmine?”

The only answer was that strange silence, except for Thomas Four who decided to do something and approached him with the sad news, so clear on his crying face, before he even said anything, he came closer to tell him something he didn't want to hear.

“No, No...”

Said Gavin who already realized what happened and what he's going to be told, shaking his head in shock, taking stumbling steps back. Back to the time when his brother and his niece were still alive, but it seems that that time has already passed.

“Don't get closer, don't say it... don't you dare say it!...”

Said Gavin, warning in tears, but Thomas reached him and said it.

“They were inside.”

Poor Thomas Four fell on the ground after he took a hard slap from the miners' boss, who didn't want to hear what he now knows for sure. He kept refusing it, repeating that it's not true. The men didn't answer him except for bending their heads, and the women except with their tears, and nothing else.

It didn't take long after that in the coal mine yard until it was filled with men and boys coming from the village, led by Wallace the grocer along with miners' wives.

Everyone came, hurried and worried to check things out. Men are asking, and women are looking for their husbands or sons among the miners.

They weren't missing anyone, they were all here and they were all safe, all of them. Except old Joseph Kemp and his daughter Jasmine, letting the shock move to the village men, and the grief to its boys and girls, and they could do nothing about it but to be silent.

At the same time in front of the collapsed tunnel, the workmen's boss, Gavin Kemp, was kneeling on his knees tearful, staring at the mine wreckage, in his hand was a red apple that he took out of his pocket.

He was searching for any hope between the coal blocks and the big rocks and boulders. He dropped what was in his hand, and reached for the rocks, feeling one of them, they answered him with a hard, cold, rough, solid feeling, very hateful on his rough hand, how it's gonna be on his brother's old body and his niece's soft one.

After that, Gavin raised his eyes to the sky, opening his arms saying with a smothered voice only one word.

“God...!”

He then bent his head, unable to hold his eyes up anymore after they had been pulled to the ground by the heaviness of his tears.

