

TOO FAR DOWN



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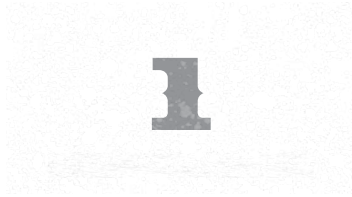
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This book is dedicated to my beautiful grandbaby,
Katherine. You have been a true, precious blessing
from the moment we knew you were on the way. God
bless you, Katherine. Welcome to the family.





SKULL GULCH, NEW MEXICO TERRITORY
FEBRUARY 1881

An explosion brought Cole Boden to his feet. His chair slammed backward into the wall. Cole ran for his office door and ripped it open.

Murray Elliot, his assistant, rounded his desk in the outer office. “What happened?”

A second explosion rocked the whole building.

Cole didn’t bother responding. He charged outside into the winter chill, just in time to duck flying rocks from the mountaintop. He threw himself back inside as stones blasted right over his head with the force of cannonballs.

“Murray, get down!” Cole grabbed at the man who’d responded much more cautiously and was well behind. He tackled Murray to the floor just as another explosion went off.

The log wall of the office buckled. This building was small but solid, so the rocks were coming with terrific force. Rocks

sprayed in through the open door and smashed into Murray's desk.

"What is happening?"

"I don't know." Cole glared at the man. "Something blew up. We're not blasting today, are we?"

"Nope, but we just got a supply of dynamite in."

"Where is it?" Cole imagined a wagonload of dynamite, and explosion after explosion. But no, that'd be just one big explosion.

"It's stopped." Murray lifted his head.

"Is the dynamite stored in that big cave?"

"Just like always, boss."

Cole knew explosives, and he knew they brought them in by the wagonload. And they stored them in a cold cave a good distance from where anyone worked. Even if they exploded, they shouldn't have done anything but rock that cave. At the worst it might seal the mouth of it.

Three explosions and nowhere near a wagonload had blown—which meant there was plenty more to come.

"I'm heading for the big cave. You stay in here."

"No, I'm coming with you."

"You aren't." Cole heaved himself to his feet. "It's my mine and my risk."

"I'm coming, Cole." Murray was up.

A fourth explosion sent a rock the size of Cole's head slamming through the roof.

Murray fell onto his backside, then scrambled into the knee-hole of his desk. He'd been hired for his brains, not his guts.

Cole was glad he'd been delayed from running outside. But he also knew he was going now, and it was most likely a blamed fool idea.

"Stay under there until we're sure the explosions have

stopped.” He hoped Murray stayed put under the solid oak desk. It should protect him even if the whole building collapsed.

Cole raced out the door to see the smoldering ruins of the newly opened mine only about a hundred yards from his office. The entrance was collapsed, and he knew men were trapped inside. Before he could deal with that, though, he had to make sure the dynamite was done blowing up.

He charged toward the cave.

He hoped and prayed his men inside the new mine were all right. If they’d been far enough in, around the corner from the blasts, out of the line of any flying debris, they should still be alive. The entrance had collapsed, but they’d shored the mines up with thick timbers. There was a good chance the inside of the mine was still intact.

Once he got near the cave, grit and dust filled the air. Choking, Cole jerked his kerchief out of his pocket and covered his mouth. His eyes burned, but he had to see. Cole raced faster, thinking of all that could have gone wrong, all the men who could be hurt.

He saw one still form on the ground, so covered with dust he couldn’t identify the man. Yet Cole could see clearly enough to know the man was beyond help.

Running, stumbling over rocks, barely able to breathe, Cole finally reached the cave. Outside it was a burning fuse, heading for a wooden box, torn open, full of explosives.

He slid on his knees to beat the fuse from burning down. It ran shorter by the second. Cole fumbled for the knife he kept in his boot as he crawled the last foot through the rubble. He caught the fuse only inches from burning down. He slit the sparking fire with one slash.

He looked down the side of the mountain. The office of the CR Mining Company was near the top of Mount Kebbel, with

only its snowcapped peak higher. The CR leased claims to many men, all spread over a hundred square miles. A few dozen of them were right here close to headquarters.

Cole's eyes swept down the long, steep slope dotted with mine entrances and saw boxes of dynamite burning at a bunch of them. Enough to account for nearly every box they had in storage. Cole could never reach them all in time.

Yards away, he saw the next fuse burning toward a wooden box. Thinking furiously, he saw this fuse was longer. Whoever'd done this wanted the explosives to go in separate blasts, and the boxes were far enough apart not to be set off by an earlier explosion. Men were deep in their mines, so they might hear the explosions, and they might not.

This time, with the men inside, was deliberate. Midmorning. All the miners were hard at work at this time of day and very few were outside. The explosions would bury them alive.

Fury pushed him faster. He scrambled, fell over stones, and smacked himself in the face so hard he saw stars. Then he was up again and cut the next fuse. With cold purpose he picked up a stick of dynamite, cut its fuse short, and lit it to the still-sparking fuse in his hand, then threw the stick as far as his arm could hurl it.

He watched the dynamite soar high in the air and arch down, hoping the miners farther down the slope, near the burning fuses, would hear it blow and come out to help.

His hand burned. He dropped the still-burning fuse with a desperate toss to get it away from the explosives. The stick of powder he threw detonated in midair, doing no damage but making a deafening sound.

Another fuse burned just ahead. Cole ran for it. He cut it, lit one stick, threw it, and ran on. He saw the first man poke his head out of his claim far below.

The man took in everything in a second, ran to the closest

stack of explosives, and cut the fuse before it could blow. Another man emerged. These men knew dynamite, knew what that box meant. They went to work saving themselves. Cole cut another, then another, and another. He hurled a lit stick every time, trying to alert the miners.

Then he heard another explosion. Sickened at who might've been in its path, he whirled toward the sound. The remnants of the blast colored the air below. Someone had figured out what he was doing and had thrown a single stick of dynamite to warn those farther down.

More men appeared. Fuses were cut. Sticks of dynamite were set off as a warning to all.

Finally he dropped to his knees by the last one at this higher level and cut it. His gaze swept the slope below him. He didn't see a single sparking fuse.

The men waved up at him.

"I've got a broken-down mine up here," he shouted. "Men trapped. We need help." He didn't know men were trapped for a fact, but the mine closest to headquarters was big, and a lot of men labored there. He prayed the ones inside had survived. And what other madness awaited him today? Was he asking for help that might lead others to their deaths? He leapt to his feet to go free the trapped men.

The world spun around. His vision blurred and darkened. Blood dripped from his head. By sheer grit he shook off whatever weakness wanted to knock him down.

No sparks in sight. He considered the piles of explosives and, by his own judgment, thought all the dynamite was accounted for now.

He couldn't be positive, of course, as some sticks could have been unboxed and set to blow separately. But he saw no sign of them.

He trusted his instincts about the dynamite and trusted his miners to be on the lookout. Then he sprinted back toward the collapsed new mine. Several miners that he'd just saved came up behind him, took one stricken look at him, and approached him. He knew he was bleeding but didn't have time to get a bandage.

"No, I'm fine. Come back to the new mine. It's collapsed." He left them behind to do as they wished.

Murray was doctoring a man sprawled out on the ground. Murray had been here running the mine when Cole came home from living in Boston for a few years. Cole had seen how smart the man was and had given him a raise and kept him on as an assistant. Murray had his own cabin here as part of his salary, and he even had his own claim and worked it during free hours.

Other men were working on the wounded, separating them from the dead. Yet others were digging at the blocked mine entrance. More men came every minute.

His teeth clenched, Cole rushed toward the miners who were clawing at the entrance to the mine. "Is anyone in there?"

One burly youngster with a full beard stopped digging with his hands. "There are twelve or fifteen men in there, boss. A couple of the men ran to get shovels while we start the digging."

"Twelve or fifteen?" Cole looked with dismay at the wall of rubble that filled the entrance. They had at least five feet of rock to clear if they hoped to reach his men.

"Yep, maybe more. We've lost count of who's missing. The first explosion went off right by this entrance. We saw you fighting the rest of those fuses." The youngster paused and added, "Boss, you're bleedin' pretty bad. You need to let someone wrap your . . . your whole head and face."

Cole saw the worry in the kid's eyes and wondered how bad he was hurt. Plenty bad, going by the loss of blood. "I'll be

fine. You're bleeding, too." The kid's arms were bleeding from working with the stones with his bare hands. "Everyone is."

"Well, you're a little worse than most." But the kid turned back and attacked the wall of stones blocking the entrance. A man who let another man make his own choices. Cole respected that.

A clatter drew Cole's attention, and two miners, coated in dirt, came running with their arms full of shovels and pick-axes. Cole grabbed a shovel and attacked the cave entrance. He glanced over to see Murray carrying a man over his shoulder toward the company office.

He dug. And dug and dug. With so many of them working, they got in each other's way and had to dodge flying rocks. For all the danger, they still dug.

Hours passed, though Cole had no idea just how many, only that all this had started early in the day, and now the sun was past its peak.

At last one of the men shouted, "I'm through into the mine!"

They fell to working on the tiny opening with renewed strength. It soon grew, and before it was big enough to crawl through, a voice came from behind the collapsed stones. "We're here—we can see light. We're digging from this side."

A ragged cheer went up from his men. The worst hadn't happened. The cave hadn't completely collapsed and buried all the men inside.

"Keep at it, men!" Cole plunged back into widening the opening.

By the time it was just a bit larger, an arm stuck out the hole.

"Stop, everybody! Don't cut him."

"Is that you, Cole?"

"Yep, Gully."

Gully was the real boss of the mine operation. Cole was the

manager; he did paper work, along with Murray, and yes, Cole threw his back behind a pickax plenty, yet Gully had been here before Cole. The old-timer knew mining and did the lion's share of bossing on the job. Of course, Cole had been smart enough to leave him to do his job so that deserved some credit, too.

Cole hadn't even looked around. All his men out here were coated in dirt anyway, to the point of being unrecognizable. He hadn't even noticed Gully was missing.

"I think we can get a few of the scrawnier men through this opening. We've got a few hurt that'll fit through. I'll send them first."

"A few hurt bad?" Cole realized they needed more help, more *skilled* help. He'd been working in a headlong frenzy and had done little thinking.

Now it came to him. Heath Kincaid, his new brother-in-law, had healing skills. Heath had once saved the life of Cole's pa, Chance Boden, who was injured in an avalanche. Having ridden with the cavalry for a time, Heath worked alongside an army doctor and became skilled at meting out medicine.

Rosita, the Bodens' housekeeper, was good as well. His sister Sadie had tended sick people plenty of times herself. He wanted them all here and for good reason. He desperately needed help. And they could sure as certain use his little brother Justin's strong back and quick thinking.

He never let his family help with the mines . . . until now.

"You!" He jabbed a finger at one of his men. "Get on your horse and ride for the CR. Get all the help you can and have someone there send for the doctor in Skull Gulch and more help from any neighboring ranches. Send them all running for the mines. Get the sheriff out here, too."

Disgusted that he hadn't thought of it earlier, Cole turned back to the hole in the cave. "We're ready." His throat grew

tight at the thought of who all might be hurt. He hadn't looked around yet except to notice Murray tending the wounded. His stomach swooped, and he leaned against the wall of the cave, letting his belly settle and his head clear while he waited for Gully to send out the first man.

A pair of filthy hands appeared, and they were slack. Cole saw someone holding the limp arms, guiding them through the opening. Cole gathered himself and blinked until his vision cleared, then grabbed one arm and someone caught the other. The man's head appeared next, supported as if someone was guiding a thread through the eye of a needle.

"Careful with him," Gully shouted from inside the cave. "I think an arm and a leg are broke. Who knows what else."

Cole quickly shifted his grip as he realized the arm he'd reached for was bent in an ugly way that could only mean a broken bone. He exchanged a look with the man helping him. He couldn't identify him. Cole probably looked just as bad. They nodded at each other and eased the man forward, others reaching up to help. All the men who'd been digging supported the man.

It was a fight to keep the nausea down just thinking how he'd gripped that arm.

Through the tight opening, Cole wondered about broken ribs, or worse, a broken back. Praying silently, Cole did his best to be gentle. As soon as they had him all the way out, Cole looked around and saw Murray flipping his jacket over the face of the man Cole had first seen when he left his office earlier in the day.

Dead.

"Murray, we need you over here."

Quieter, Cole said to the miners, "Murray's a good hand with healing. He's who we want helping with this."

He knew the men stayed back from Murray, who wrote letters and pushed numbers. True, he had his own mine, but he didn't mix with the men much. They treated Cole better because he was the boss and they probably thought they had to. But a divide existed between the men who leased their mines and those who ran them. No hostility, just no friendship.

"Bring him into the office," Murray yelled. "I'm using it as a hospital." Murray paused as he came close and looked at Cole. His eyes widened. "You may need stitches, Cole. You should come, too."

"Get back to work, Murray. No time right now for anyone to stop."

Something flashed in Murray's eyes that Cole couldn't understand. It seemed like anger or irritation of some kind. If Cole's head hadn't ached so much, he might've known what to make of it. Maybe the man was just frustrated that Cole wouldn't come along. Or maybe he'd seen too many men terribly hurt and he was just plain upset. Whatever it was, Murray would have to handle it on his own.

Four men carried the injured miner away toward the battered mine headquarters with Murray at their sides.

"Here comes the next one." Gully drew his attention back to the rescue mission.

Galloping hooves told him the man he'd sent to the ranch was on his way. Cole didn't have a man to spare right now, but someone had to go. He turned back to see another pair of limp hands emerging from the tight entrance they'd opened up.

With painstaking care they got four more unconscious men out. Cole swiped at the sweat on his brow and pulled his arm away to see a bright smear of blood. It startled him into jumping, and the move made his stomach dive and his head throb.

He steadied himself and went back to work. As the sun

dipped behind Mount Kebbel, the shadows lengthened and seemed to reach for them like shrouded hands of death.

Two more men climbed out, conscious, bleeding, and unsteady, but standing upright on their own. More of the diggers supported them on the way to the makeshift hospital.

“Let’s open it up more for the rest of us,” Gully ordered, sounding more cheerful. “The rest of us ain’t so skinny.”

Cole had lost diggers now because he’d sent them to help Murray. Those of them left tore at the opening with all their strength, though Cole had to admit his strength was waning. He was more aware with every shovelful of rocks that he had his own host of cuts and bruises. His knees ached and bled. His arms were coated with blood from falling before and cutting himself to bits digging and moving stones.

He vaguely remembered falling while he raced toward that first burning fuse and dashing his face on a rock.

Nothing that needed doctoring, though, not like these other poor souls.

He was surrounded by miners, both outside the cave and inside, so the rocks and dirt moved fast. Finally they had a gap with some height, so a larger man could crawl out.

“Enough. We’re coming.” Gully knew what he needed and Cole didn’t, so he let the foreman give the orders. One by one, five big men emerged from the collapsed mine entrance.

Gully was the last. He was bleeding, his head and neck crimson, cutting through the thick dirt that coated him.

“Are there more, Gully?”

“Nope.”

“Are you sure? I can go in and do another check.”

“Every man in there is alive and accounted for.” Gully caught him by the arm. “No one goes in there until I clear it. That’s why I wanted all the men out who could get through that little

hole. I saw some big cracks in the cave roof and it looks like the ceiling could come down at any moment.”

Grimly, Cole nodded. “Get over there and let Murray take care of you.”

Gully looked him in the eye, hard, studying him. “You need a doctor more than I do, boss. You look like you’ve got more blood on the outside than the inside.” Gully took his arm in a tight grip. Almost like he thought Cole couldn’t stand on his own, which was flat-out foolish because there he stood.

Cole decided he would go along if it made the man happy. He’d even lean on Gully, maybe agree to lie down a while just to put everyone’s mind at ease.

Before he could move an inch, hooves pounded coming from the east, and Cole realized he’d been waiting for that sound for what seemed like an eternity, although he admitted to being mighty confused. He saw Justin in the lead.

He felt a wave of pure relief at the sight. His brother—who he never stopped fighting with—was here. Justin would take charge for a while, and maybe Cole would just sit until his head stopped throbbing.

Justin’s wife, Angie, rode at his side—rode pretty well too, for a woman new to horses. Justin had been working with her.

Heath came next, riding alongside Cole’s little sister Sadie. The two of them were married now. Riding even with them to make four in a row was Jack Blake and his daughter, Melanie. For some reason Cole’s eyes settled on Mel—who’d kill him if he ever called her Melanie—and his vision shifted to strange and dark around the edges, as if he were looking through a tunnel. It narrowed more until she was all he could see, the only light in a black world. Her long caramel-brown braid blew back as she galloped. Her skin was tanned, even in winter. He couldn’t see her eyes from here, but he knew they were light

brown and that her coloring altogether was a single golden-brown glow.

She was beautiful. He'd never thought about her looks before. Well, maybe once or twice. But they'd grown up together, so you'd've thought he'd've noticed just how beautiful she really was.

Then he heard shouting, plenty of that today, but for some reason this shouting was aimed at him. Then the rocky ground punched him in the face—as if he hadn't taken enough of a beating today. And the tunnel he'd been looking through closed shut as the world went pitch-black.