

*Danger in
Dead Man's
Mine*

DAVE GLAZE



CHAPTER ONE

Monday, August 19, 1912

Keeping his head down, Mackenzie followed Francis deeper into the deserted mine. With each step they took away from the sun-filled entrance, the coal black walls seemed to suck up more light. The air turned chilly and damp and smelled musty, like a dirt-walled basement.

Mackenzie stumbled over a rock hidden in the shadows. Reaching out to catch his balance, he skinned his knuckles on one of the roughly sawn posts that lined the sides of the shaft. “Ow,” he murmured.

“You all right?” Francis asked. “Do you want to stop?”

“No,” Mackenzie said. Not as long as I can see a little bit, he told himself. And – he glanced over his shoulder – I can find the way out.

“Aren’t you worried about cracking your noggin?”

Mackenzie asked. He could feel his cap grazing against the heavy braces held up by the posts. And Francis was at least two heads taller than him.

“So far, so good,” Francis said.

“Is that water I hear?” Mackenzie didn’t like the way his voice had changed inside the tunnel. It seemed weak, swallowed up by the rock.

“It’s trickling down the walls,” Francis said. “Father says there’s always water underground. Sometimes there’s so much, it’s like a little river running down the shaft to the entrance.”

“No one uses this for mining anymore, right?” Mackenzie asked. “The coal’s all gone?”

“The men who built this mine would have taken out everything they could get at,” Francis said. “First they dug out what they called rooms, except they left big pillars of coal to hold up the ceilings. Then they knocked down the pillars and hoped they could get the coal out before the ceilings came crashing down on them. After they left, other men would have picked over everything they could scavenge. Then it was abandoned.”

Mackenzie raised his hands to touch the roof. “What about *this* ceiling?” he asked.

“A mine entry like this was always braced really well when it was built,” Francis said. “But over years, lots of the old timbers will have fallen down. Parts of it probably have collapsed further back in the mine.” They stopped walking.

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"We shouldn't go any further without a safety lamp," Francis said.

"What's that?"

"It gives you some light," Francis said, "and the way it burns can tell a miner when there are dangerous gases in the air. You don't want to be near the damp. It can explode and kill you."

Mackenzie didn't want to think about explosions and ceilings crashing down. He decided he'd never come in here with anyone except Francis. Not even with Albert or any of his other friends at home.

"Have we gone far enough?" Francis asked.

"Yes," Mackenzie said.

WALKING OUT OF THE MINE, the boys squinted into the blinding sunlight that lit the bottom of a steep-sided canyon on the edge of Lethbridge. Footpaths and wagon trails meandered between the groves of trees and bushes that grew on the flat plain of the Belly River. Francis chose one.

"The city goes right to the tip of the valley here," he said, skirting around burnt tin cans, broken boards, and the scattered shards of a glass bottle that had been smashed against a rock. "It's easy for people to come down and get a look inside this mine."

"Like me," Mackenzie said. "You remembered."

"Of course," Francis said. "When you visited us at Bellevue all we could find on the mountain were caves

we *pretended* were mines. Finally I get to show you a real one.”

“And so soon!” Mackenzie laughed. “We just got here. Our mothers probably don’t even know we’re gone.”

“They’re sisters,” Francis said. “And they have the baby to talk about. They’re not thinking about us.”

“Are there more old mines down here?” Mackenzie asked.

“Yes, but I don’t know where.” Francis stopped and pointed up. “Look,” he said.

A thick, black beam soared across the canyon above the treetops. It was a railway bridge, but Mackenzie couldn’t see anything holding it up. It seemed like it was floating on air.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“The High Level Bridge,” Francis said. “Lethbridge is famous for it. Longest trestle bridge in the world. A mile from one side of the valley to the other.”

“Our train didn’t go across it,” Mackenzie said.

“No,” Francis said. “The bridge is on the west side of town. You came in from the east. You’d have known if you’d gone over it. The engineer slows down and people in the coaches start oohing and awing.”

“I give up,” Mackenzie said, “where are the trestles?”

“On the other side of those cottonwoods,” Francis said. “I’ll show you.”

The trail led into a meadow where a double line of

giant steel piers marched like a parade of soldiers across the valley.

“From further away,” Francis said, “the piers are hidden by the trees. It isn’t until you’re really close that you see them.”

It would be hard to miss them from here, Mackenzie thought. Craning his neck, he followed the criss-crossing steel plates of the bridge pylons as they rose higher and higher to support the wooden base that held the railway tracks. “Holy smoke!”

“Three hundred feet high,” Francis said. “From up there you can see clear to the mountains and everything that’s going on in the valley.”

Striding across the field, Mackenzie and Francis startled thousands of clattering grasshoppers into the air. On the far side, the boys joined a trail so well-travelled the plants had been beaten flat and the ground pounded into dust. Gritty brown clouds rose with each step.

Mackenzie brushed away the insects that had stuck like burrs to his clothing. Reaching behind Mackenzie’s back, Francis flicked a hopper from his cousin’s shoulder.

“When did you grow so much?” Mackenzie asked. “Your arms must be twice as long as mine. How tall are you?”

“Over six feet,” Francis said, grinning. “Mother says I had a growth spurt.”

“You’re only fifteen years old!” Mackenzie said.

“And already big enough to be a miner. Is that what you want?” he asked. “Is that what you’re going to do?”

Francis shook his head. “No,” he said.

“Then, what?”

“I’m not telling yet.”

Francis’s voice sounded different, Mackenzie thought, more serious. He was almost four years older than Mackenzie, but the two of them had always shared secrets. Why were things different, all of a sudden? he wondered.

THE PATH VEERED TOWARD the side of the valley and they heard the sound of squeaking wheels and jangling steel chains. Prancing saddle horses, huffing motorcars, and other hardy people on foot led the boys up the road out of the valley. In front of them, a wagon heavily loaded with grain made slow progress, the horses straining to advance up the hill. A railway tie was chained to the wagon and pulled in the dirt behind the back wheels. The teamster called to his horses to ease off. The wagon stopped and then rolled a couple of feet backwards until the wheels jammed against the tie. Feeling the weight released from their shoulders, the horses relaxed in their harnesses.

Near the top, the road climbed through a coulee and passed a dusty brickyard. When they reached the flat prairie, the boys could see clouds billowing from a

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trio of tall brick smokestacks that towered above a cluster of wooden buildings.

“That’s Galt Number Three Mine,” Francis said. “She’s running full steam again, at last. Everything was shut down by the strike for over a year. Do you see that tall building? It’s the head frame. That’s where the hoist is that brings men and coal up from underground.”

The road ahead split. In one direction, it ran across a meadow before meeting Ninth Street and climbing onto a bridge built over the busy railway tracks near the train station. The other way led to long rows of identical small white bungalows.

“And that,” Francis said, “is also called Number Three.”

The company houses were sparse, with plenty of space between the buildings, as if many houses had been planted on the dry grassland but only these few had come up.

“During the worst of the strike,” Francis went on, “we hardly had bread for the table. There was just no money.”

“What did you do?” Mackenzie asked.

“My father got odd jobs when he could. I left school for awhile. It’s hard, Mackenzie, when no one’s bringing home a pay packet. I don’t want my family to go through that again.”

Behind one house, an old man, his back bent and his shoulders stooped low, slowly swept the planks that

made a sidewalk to his outhouse. Swinging his head toward the road, the man studied the boys before giving them a stiff wave.

Pointing to a house with blue trim around the windows and doors, Francis left the road and took a shortcut across a vacant lot.

“Uncle Jimmy must be happy to be back at work,” Mackenzie said.

Francis shot him a glance. “He would have been,” he said. “Father hasn’t set foot in the mine since the day the strike started.”

EVERYTHING STOPPED, Mackenzie learned at supper, when Uncle Jimmy started coughing. It’s like, he thought, it wouldn’t be polite to talk or laugh or eat when his uncle could barely breathe. The coughing came from deep in his chest. Each hacking spasm sounded like it was tearing away part of his lungs. Holding a stained handkerchief to his mouth to catch what he spit up, Uncle Jimmy winced with each cough and each rattling intake of breath.

At the other end of the table, Mackenzie’s mother seemed to be studying the bowl of pudding she was about to serve. His baby sister Nellie had spotted the dessert from her mother’s lap and fidgeted to be fed. Their foreheads wrinkled with identical frowns, mother and daughter did not want to wait much longer.

Mackenzie’s mother put a few spoonfuls of pudding

into her own bowl and gave Nellie a taste. One of his mother's ears, Mackenzie knew, would be cocked toward the nearby bedroom where his Aunt Betsy waited for her baby to be born. Mackenzie's mother was here to assist with that delivery; Mackenzie had come to help with Nellie. His father's job with *The Daily Phoenix* had kept him in Saskatoon.

Francis rested his eyes on his plate and his hands on the table. Seated beside him, Mackenzie copied his stance. Across from them sat Mackenzie's cousin Ruth. She was twelve years old, like Mackenzie, and waiting for her own growth spurt. Ruth, Mackenzie saw, was the only one in the room ready to hand her father a glass of water. Next to her was cousin John Walter's empty chair. Eight years of age, Mackenzie thought, was hardly old enough to be skipping meals.

With a final sputtering cough, Uncle Jimmy grew quiet. Mackenzie stole a peek at his uncle. Francis looked just like his father, Mackenzie thought. Curly blond hair hung over their foreheads and ears. Crinkly laugh lines spread from the corners of their eyes. Their square chins were dimpled.

Uncle Jimmy wiped his lips, stuffed the cloth into his pocket, and scraped his chair away from the table. Walking across the kitchen, he pushed open the back screen door and let it slap shut behind him.

Mackenzie's mother wiped Nellie's face and handed her to Mackenzie. "There's dessert," she said cheerily. "Ruth made it. Tapioca. It's quite tasty."

Mackenzie had stirred the pudding. His mother was being polite. The top might look edible but the bottom was scorched to the pan.

“No, thank you.” Francis stood up. He walked down a short hallway and into the half-open door to his mother’s bedroom.

“Ruth?” Picking up a small bowl, Mackenzie’s mother dished in two large spoonfuls.

Ruth took the dessert and began to eat.

“Yes, please,” Mackenzie said, when his mother turned to him. “Just a bit. I’m not too hungry.”

“I’d certainly like some,” Mackenzie’s mother said. “And I know your mother would, too, Ruth. I’ll take it in to her in a minute.”

Aunt Betsy hadn’t left her room since Mackenzie and his family had arrived that morning. He had heard her talking quietly to his mother or to Ruth, but he hadn’t set eyes on her. The baby, he knew, was due any day.

Francis left his mother’s bedroom, walked through the kitchen without glancing toward the table, and pushed through the outside door. Mackenzie’s mother picked up a bowl of pudding and headed to the bedroom. Pulling the serving bowl closer, Ruth spooned more dessert into her bowl. Mackenzie held a spoon to Nellie’s lips.

Ruth was the cousin Mackenzie had spent the least time with. He felt odd asking her a question, but he wanted to know.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

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"Father's had a bee in his bonnet for hours," Ruth said. "All he could talk about was how happy this was going to make Francis. He could hardly stand the wait until you two came home."

"Francis doesn't look very delighted to me," Mackenzie said.

Ruth stood up and began stacking dirty dishes on her arm. "He knew it was coming," she said. "He could've done something about it."

Mackenzie watched his cousin add plates to the piles already spread across the counter. Curious about what Francis and Uncle Jimmy were talking about outside, he tried to think of some reason to follow them. Handfuls of cutlery crashed into the dishpan. Maybe, Mackenzie thought, I can get Ruth to tell me more. Setting his sister on the floor, he gathered in the cups and took them to the counter.

TWO DAMP TEA TOWELS WERE discarded over the back of a kitchen chair. Mackenzie picked up a serving bowl Ruth had washed, whipped the third towel over the inside, and set the bowl on a cupboard shelf. The last time he had visited this family, Aunt Betsy had directed everything in the kitchen.

"Do you always do this by yourself?" he asked.

"John Walter's supposed to help," Ruth said. "But he's good at sneaking away after meals. Or not even showing up to eat here."

“Where was he today?”

“You haven’t met Alfred yet?”

“No,” Mackenzie said.

“You will,” Ruth said. “Those two are like the Siamese twins you see at the circus. Always stuck together.”

“What do they do?”

“Don’t know,” Ruth said. “John Walter’s always done whatever he feels like. It’s worse when Mother’s sick and can’t keep track of him. He won’t listen to me.”

“And Francis?”

“He’s no help,” Ruth said. “Maybe if he’d box his brother’s ears once in awhile, John Walter would pay attention. But Francis wouldn’t. He’s too nice.”

“Is your mother all right?” Mackenzie asked. It felt odd that he hadn’t seen Aunt Betsy yet. She always made a fuss over him. No matter how old he got, she insisted on kissing him when she first saw him

“She doesn’t want you to see her big belly,” Ruth said. “She wants to have the baby first and then show him off.”

“When will that be?”

“Mrs. Giles will only say, ‘soon.’ She’s the midwife.”

“Don’t you have a doctor?” Mackenzie asked. “When Nellie and I were born, there was always a doctor.” It was only a year since Nellie’s birth. Mackenzie could remember what the doctor had said. “He told my mother it wasn’t safe to use a midwife.”

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“Mackenzie,” Ruth said, shaking her hands and drying them on her worn blue dress, “doctors cost money. We don’t have any money. My father hasn’t worked for months. You heard him coughing. He’s too sick. He can hardly breathe.”

“What about when he gets better?”

Ruth stared at Mackenzie. “You ever hear of black lung?” she asked.

You could die from black lung, Mackenzie knew. It was caused by the coal dust that miners breathe in when they’re underground. Mackenzie remembered rubbing his fingers on the bottom of their empty coal bin at home. The dust felt smooth. It smudged on his skin. When it settled in the miners’ chests, it coated the insides of their lungs. “Yes,” he said.

“No one knows if he’s going to get any better,” Ruth said.

Mackenzie tried to imagine what it would be like if his father didn’t work. How would they eat? Would I have to get a job? he wondered. His friend Stanley didn’t have a father and he had to quit school to work for Mr. Lavallée on his dray.

Thinking back to what happened after supper, Mackenzie asked, “Does this have anything to do with what Uncle Jimmy is talking to Francis about?”

“You’ll have to ask them yourself,” Ruth said, pushing the dirty pots into the dishwasher. “No one tells me anything.”

MACKENZIE GRIPPED THE HANDLE of the screen door but he didn't push it open. There was at least an hour of sunlight left and Uncle Jimmy was still outside. Mackenzie could see him lying flat on his back with his hands clasped behind his head. From twenty feet away, Uncle Jimmy's breathing sounded like an ogre growling deep in his cave.

Mackenzie thought his uncle seemed to have shrunk. He looked shorter and not as fierce as Mackenzie remembered. Whenever Uncle Jimmy returned from a shift at the mine, coal dust had always burrowed into his ears and filled the wrinkles on his face. It clung to the hollows around his eyes, to the webs between his fingers, and to the sheltered spaces underneath his fingernails. Tonight the man looked pale and sickly.

There was no sign of Francis. Whatever he and his father had spoken about, their talk was finished now. What was Uncle Jimmy doing out there? Mackenzie wondered. What was he thinking about? Was he going to be one of the miners who died from black lung?

Walking into the kitchen, Mackenzie saw the copy of the *Lethbridge Daily Herald* his mother had bought at the station that morning. It reminded him of his father back in Saskatoon. Before he left, Mackenzie's father had given him a small box of cigars to take to a friend who worked at the *Herald*. I'll do that tomorrow, Mackenzie thought, before the baby's born. Turning up the wick on a kerosene lamp, he opened the newspaper.

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HOURS LATER, MACKENZIE WOKE with his face pressed against the warm plaster of the wall beneath a small upstairs window. He was sharing John Walter's cot. When his younger cousin had shown up, Uncle Jimmy had sent him in to talk to his mother. He was still in there when Mackenzie had gone to bed. But he could feel him now, curled up against his back. Wiping sweat from his cheek, Mackenzie pried his elbow into the mattress and pushed himself high enough to see out the window.

The dull light from a quarter moon silvered the neighbour's houses and stiffened the plants in Aunt Betsy's garden into stone. A train locomotive huffed slowly away from the station, and then quickly picked up speed on its way east across the flat prairie. The train's whistle wailed a sad goodbye.

A rabbit bounded onto the grass behind the house, stopped for a moment to sniff the air, and then zigzagged toward the garden. Pausing again, the rabbit perked its ears and raised its snout. Satisfied there were no threats, the rabbit disappeared beneath the leafy stalks.

From the kitchen where Uncle Jimmy had laid out a mattress came the sound of a single barking cough, and then a snarl that refused to let the cough worsen. A woman moaned – Aunt Betsy, Mackenzie decided – and a moment later Mackenzie's mother's calm voice drifted up the stairway.

Shifting onto his other elbow, Mackenzie peered across the tiny room. Francis was sleeping in his bed.

When did he come home? Mackenzie wondered. Looking closer, he saw Francis was still wearing his clothes. He must have stayed out really late, Mackenzie thought, if he was too tired to get undressed.

A cool breeze rushed in the window, raising goose bumps on Mackenzie's arms. Nudging John Walter toward the other side of the bed, Mackenzie lay back down. He looked forward to tomorrow. He and his older cousin had plans to keep exploring the valley. Smiling, Mackenzie pulled up the sheet and closed his eyes.

Lethbridge Daily Herald

MONDAY, AUGUST 19, 1912

OLD SOL SMILES ON LETHBRIDGE

Happy Sun Heats Prairies to 100 Degrees

Old Sol is grinning on the grand province of Alberta today and his happy times will last at least one more week. All over the south, the temperatures are reaching one hundred degrees daily. The city of Lethbridge is no exception as the sales of ice chests for mothers and ice cream for fathers and children hit all-time highs.

Tired of heating the prairies only, Old Sol has turned his fiery attention on the Rocky Mountain foothills to our west. On the weekend past, the temperature soared over the hills until hot air met cold and lightning lit the heavens. For hours after, heavy black clouds dropped torrents of rain on the parched grasses. The sudden downpour has swollen the creeks and rivulets that are the sources of the Belly River. In a few days time when these muddy waters reach the city, we may see our Belly stretch its shores.