

Prologue

Frank O'Connor looked up at the gaping black hole in the hillside. Broken rock rimmed the tunnel entrance and continued deep into the earth. Hard spring rain bounced off his yellow hard hat like little rubber balls, adding to his frustration.

Four months. Four lousy months of blasting into the hill of rock. God only knows how they buried the dead in the graveyard up above. He had seen the core sample before the project began. Just below the perfectly groomed lawn of the graveyard, below the fertilized topsoil and the healthy nests of well-fed worms, the soil was mixed with heavy clay and large chunks of rock. He could see the gravediggers, driving their shovels into the dirt, and the percussion as their shovels hit rock after rock, sending hard vibrations up the wooden handles and deep into their arms. He knew that feeling. It radiated through a living body, sometimes so deep, it made his teeth ache.

Deeper into the core, the rocks became boulders, and below that was nothing but solid bedrock. On top of the tunnel was the cemetery, and he was ordered to blast right underneath it. It wasn't a secret, exactly, and he was well aware of them every time he set foot in the tunnel. The deeper he went, the more he felt them, hundreds of them, looking down from above in aging, splintered coffins filled with water and mud. Graves

were strewn on the left side of the tunnel as well, where the hill sloped gently down into the beautiful, grassy resting place of the recently deceased, and on top of that the not-so-recently deceased. There were coffins buried on top of one another. As the old graves aged and sunk deeper into the earth, new graves were dug in between, and eventually on top, until the entire graveyard was full of people. The dead ones.

He wrinkled his nose, as if the stench of his dark vision followed him. *Why don't they just cremate them and get it over with?* That's what he wanted done when his time came. Then his ashes could rest on a mountain, somewhere far away from this empty, haunted place.

The rain fell harder, making pools of muddy water at his feet. The sky was a flat, dark gray, the day much darker than it should have been at 6:00 p.m. It was an half hour past quitting time. He couldn't go home until every one of his men were accounted for, most of whom had gone home already. Eric Simetz was the only one left in the tunnel. He had radioed in that he was just about finished setting the electrical cable for the next day's work. That was at 5:25 p.m., five minutes before quitting time. Frank had radioed him at five forty.

"Simetz, this is Frank. Do you read me?" It was silent for a moment, and then a sudden crackle brought the walkie talkie to life.

"Loud and clear, buddy."

"Listen, I'm freezing my ass off out here. Let's call it a day."

"OK by me. Out in five."

"Gotcha."

Frank called again at 5:55 p.m.. There was no answer. Five more minutes, no answer. The day grew darker as he waited. His clothes were damp underneath his yellow rain slicker. Cold raindrops fell from the rim of his hard hat. Frank peered into the darkness of the unfinished tunnel, expecting any minute to see bobbing light from the head-lamp that Simetz wore.

Crap, he thought. He didn't want to go in the tunnel. But as lead supervisor for the tunnel project, he had to. Something could be wrong. Frank walked over to the lip of the tunnel and stood, looking into the darkness in front of him. A sudden breeze from the tunnel blew his coat away from his body. Immediately, he knew something was wrong. A breeze that blew *from* the tunnel? Impossible. He took his flashlight out of its holster and walked down into the darkness.

His footsteps echoed off the roughly hewn walls, each step another crunch in the rocks beneath his feet. At thirty paces, he had the eerie feeling that he was being watched. The hair stood on the nape of his neck. He whirled around toward the tunnel entrance, half expecting someone to be standing right behind him. No one was there.

Daylight lit the space in front of him but stopped about ten feet from where he stood. His eyes searched for any sign of movement, any small animal that might lurk in the shadows. He listened for any sound that was out of place, anything at all unusual. But he heard nothing.

"All those stories are catching up to me," he said aloud. He thought of the skeletons above him, suspended in rock and mud. The sound of his own voice made him feel better. The uncontrolled racing of his heartbeat didn't.

He turned around, switched his flashlight on and started down the tunnel again. He thought about all the things that had gone wrong since the start of the tunnel project. Hell, he should have known it was unlucky to begin with. Digging under the graveyard had to be bad luck. And there were the stories. They had started almost two weeks into the project and hadn't stopped since. Some of the men had worked together for years were longtime friends and co-workers had come to him in the strictest of confidence, some embarrassed, some in sheer panic. First, they accidentally blew a hole in the side of a sewer main than ran underneath the graveyard. A torrent of waste had poured down onto the men below, like the flowing blood of something alive. That was just the beginning.

Two men were injured when loose rock cascaded down onto them. Several had reported strange sounds deep inside the tunnel. One man quit after he swore that a cable came to life and wrapped itself around his ankles. Too many things had happened. Too many unexplainable events. Too many tales spun out the imaginations of frightened men. The stories themselves may have spooked some of his workers into seeing things, but these were people he knew and trusted. They were not given to flights of fancy. They were truly frightened. Standing alone in the black tunnel made him shiver, and he fought to resist the urge to turn and run. The tunnel felt *alive*.

Frank thought he saw a movement ahead, just beyond the beam of the flashlight. He stopped.

“Eric? That you?”

Silence fell like a thud behind the echo of his voice.

Frank shone the light deep into the tunnel, scanning it in waves from side to side.

He took a deep breath and continued. His footsteps crunched in the rocks underneath the hard rubber soles of his boots. The portal of winter daylight was almost invisible now. Loose rock fell from the wall to his left. He jumped, then silently scolded himself for being afraid. In his line of work, loose rock was a fact of life. Today, it frightened him. Once again, he felt the sensation of being watched.

Screee-ump. The screech of metal against rock echoed down the empty tunnel.

“What was that?” he started. “Is anyone there?”

His mind frantically searched to put a meaning to the sound. A shovel? A shovel scraping the pile of rock at the opposite end of the tunnel? He didn’t know for sure.

“Eric!” he called again. He prayed someone would answer him. He prayed so that he could get out of the tunnel and into the safety of the light.

Silence buried him. He wanted to run. He took one step backward and stopped. The silence was deafening. He held his breath. *Almost to the end of the tunnel. Just a few more steps.* He forced his feet forward into the blinding darkness. Time drew thin.

The beam of light glanced off the yellow backhoe at the end of the tunnel. He almost breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of it. More rocks slid behind him, but this time he did not jump.

“Eric?” *Answer me now you jerk!*

Screee-ump. The screaming scraping sound again, this time much closer than before. His whole body froze. More rocks slid behind him. Frank whirled and took two steps backward. His heels hit something hard and in an instant, he was falling. He thrust his hands out behind him to break the fall, throwing the flashlight to the ground in the process.

He landed on his palms first, and then the rest of him slammed onto the hard bed of rock below. He felt the sickening crunch of bone against bone as his wrists absorbed the shock.

“Shit!” The flashlight clattered down beside him, sputtering out for a moment, then mercifully beaming a low, dull light on the wall to his right. There was a hole in the wall. A river of rock and mud still poured out of it.

His legs were elevated, resting on something soft, and firm and wet. Frantically, he pushed himself with his feet, backward off the warm, wet thing he had tripped on. Holding a wrist against his chest, he scrambled over to his flashlight and grabbed it, swinging the light toward the broken wall.

The light was unsteady in his shaking hand, making shadows shiver on the walls. He followed the river of mud to the ground beneath. On top of the small landslide lay a small coffin, broken open from its fall. The stench of sour wood and rot filled him. Two small skulls gleamed in the light, their skeletons on top of one another, their arms entwined as if they had clung to one another in the moment of death. He swung the light slowly down the mound of mud and wet debris, past bits of the old, wooden coffin. Another small skull teetered on top of the debris. It moved from side to side, and in his mind's eye, it grinned at him with the face of a child. He let out a faint whimper as the skull tumbled from the pile in a clatter and rolled across the rocky ground to his feet. He kicked at it in a panic. *Don't let it touch me. It can't touch me!* The skull played within his feet like a soccer ball until he connected it squarely with the side of his boot and knocked it into the far wall. It shattered like fine porcelain.

“Oh shit.” He tried to shout, but the sound was a mere whisper. On the tunnel floor ahead of him, buried up to his crushed chest, was Eric Simetz, eyes wide in terror, and clearly dead. Frank didn’t hesitate a moment. He jumped to his feet, ignoring the biting pain in his broken wrist, and ran.