

MINE

FADE IN:

EXT. COWBIRD HOLLOW COAL MINE -- EVENING

Springtime in 1950's Appalachian Kentucky. The works of a coal mine is spread across the face of a crumbly mountain. Sign reads: COWBIRD HOLLOW COAL MINE.

At the mine entrance is TJ THOMAS, mine owner, late 40s - 50s, educated, but raised in these mountains.

TJ talks to FRANK KITCHENS, company engineer, hearty, red-faced, and a great lover of biscuits and gravy.

They enter the mine. Kitchens paces off sections of ground and records the results.

INT. COWBIRD HOLLOW COAL MINE -- AFTERNOON

SOUNDS OF DRILLING.

TJ looks at a map.

TJ  
300 northwest...and 75 due  
west...good. These numbers match up  
so far.

KITCHENS  
Well, sure. Why wouldn't they?

TJ  
Because every third mine map I've  
ever seen is wrong. Sometimes bad  
wrong.

KITCHENS  
This one's good.

The map has a RED STAIN stretching across a good third of  
it.

TJ  
What in Sam Hill is that?

KITCHENS (laughs)  
Some old boy spilled a Nehi redpop  
down on it. Still reads just fine.

TJ  
Okay, stop at the split. What's  
your paces?

KITCHENS  
300.

TJ  
 Good. Then it'll be another 60 paces  
 straight back to the working face.  
 She ends there.

KITCHENS  
 I'll pace it off.

TJ writes on the clipboard. Kitchens returns after a moment.

KITCHENS (CONT'D)  
 It don't end there.

TJ  
 What?

KITCHENS  
 It's 260 paces to the working face.

TJ  
 I hope you're wrong, old man.

KITCHENS  
 I count 260 paces straight back.

TJ  
 Better be 60.

KITCHENS  
 I'm telling you --

Thomas jams the clipboard at Kitchens.

TJ  
 What's that say?

KITCHENS  
 Says 60 feet.

TJ  
 Sonofabitch.

TJ drops the clipboard and breaks into a run. Kitchens tries to keep up.

KITCHENS  
 So, she's a little more dug out than  
 you thought --

TJ  
 You making test holes down there, or  
 drilling coal?

KITCHENS  
 We're drilling coal.

TJ stops, shoves Kitchens to the wall, and talks in his face.

TJ

You've got about 5 feet of barrier wall between your drill and a lake of sludge water!

KITCHEN

That damn map says I got 200!

TJ

Yeah. And every third mine map is wrong, you stupid sonofabitch!

TJ breaks away and runs down tunnel.

INT. COWBIRD MINE - WORKING FACE -- AFTERNOON

A huge, auger-style drill is dragging free great chunks of Kentucky bituminous coal. Kitchens runs to the operator and waves his arms, SHOUTING. Finally, the drill shuts down.

KITCHENS

Map's wrong! The map's wrong! We're too close to the flood-out!

TJ holds the map into his Union Carbide hard hat beam.

TJ

You need to get this checked out before we talk about a sale.

KITCHENS

I can understand that.

A small trickle of water pops through around the huge, motionless drill embedded in the rock.

TJ

You drill any closer to that underground dead sea, and you never see me again.

Another pop of seepage within view of the first. Both are growing strong and steady.

TJ and Kitchens head up the tunnel.

INT. COWBIRD HOLLOW COAL MINE DRILL WALL-- AFTERNOON

MINER ONE signals a reverse-out to the OPERATOR. The other workers gather up equipment. The drill SQUEALS, then reverses out sluggishly.

There is a growing puddle beside the wall now.

INT. COWBIRD HOLLOW COAL MINE ACCESS TUNNEL -- DAY

TJ and Kitchens are walking to the entrance.

TJ

I want clean test holes or you got  
no deal.

INT. COWBIRD HOLLOW COAL MINE WORKING FACE -- AFTERNOON

A sudden large spray of water shoots with force around the  
retreating drill. There is no missing it now.

MINER ONE (O.S.)

Hey!

INT. COWBIRD HOLLOW COAL MINE ACCESS TUNNEL -- AFTERNOON

KITCHENS

I'll drill em myself.

TJ

Makes all the difference in what  
kind of money I'm willing to pay.

KITCHENS

If it's green and sweet, I'm willing  
to take it.

SHOUTS from deep in the mine tunnel. Panicked MINERS run  
past them.

MINER 2

We hit water! We got water coming  
in!

KITCHENS

Shit! Are you sure?

Men pour like blackened rats through the tunnel. TJ runs  
deeper into the tunnel, hitting knee-deep rushing water.

TJ

Anybody else back there?

MINER 3

Floyd! He's trying to save the drill!

TJ plunges into the deepening water. When he rounds the  
curve in the tunnel, he sees a man nearly to his shoulders  
in rushing water, struggling with equipment.

TJ

Hey! You Floyd? Get your butt outta  
there!

Floyd reluctantly lets go, and starts slogging toward TJ. A  
sudden gush of water thunders from the lower tunnel and pulls  
Floyd under. He surfaces, yells, flounders, and goes under  
again.

TJ shouts, watching wildly for Floyd to surface. He does not. TJ finds a rope on the raw rock wall, and grips it, sloshing in after Floyd.

He shouts repeatedly for Floyd. Finally, a floundering arm rises from the churning water followed by Floyd's gasping, spitting face. TJ grabs him, and they thrash against the heavy pull of rushing water.

As they drag themselves along the rope toward safety, Floyd loses his precarious footing and slips under again, this time bringing TJ with him.

INSERT

TJ's hand being yanked from its grip on the rope.

RETURN TO SCENE

Tangled together, the two men tumble with the fierce current, crashing into the rock walls. TJ gropes along the walls, finding marker spikes. He has a handful of Floyd's wet shirt, and Floyd does what he can to help the progress. Finally, the frayed end of a rope brushes TJ's face. He seizes it, and hauls them the rest of the way to safety. They slosh out and lie crumpled, soaked and panting.

TJ swats Floyd lightly upside the head.

TJ (CONT'D)

You idiot! Trying to save a damned drill! That drill ain't going no place!

He pulls Floyd to his feet and they support each other, staggering toward high ground.

EXT. COWBIRD HOLLOW COAL MINE ENTRANCE -- AFTERNOON

TJ and Floyd emerge from the mine entrance, wet and tired.

KITCHENS

Okay, seal off this entrance and close her down.

MINER

Close it?

KITCHENS

We can't work it til we know how the barriers are holding.

The miners move to oblige.

KITCHENS (CONT'D)

The rest of you go on home. This mine is closed til further notice.

The tired miners stand in defeat.

TJ

Hey, listen up! Y'all that live close to Geness Creek Mine, head over there tomorrow. Rest of you go to Timberwood. We'll find you work.

Relief.

Kitchens claps TJ on the shoulder.

TJ (CONT'D)

I may still take 'er at scrap value. I'll let you know.

The gate slams shut and locks on Cowbird Hollow Mine. TJ drives away in a THOMAS COAL COMPANY truck.

At a crossroads, TJ stops the truck and takes out a small notebook. Inside is a list of names, some untouched, some crossed off, many circled. TJ carefully draws a circle around COWBIRD HOLLOW MINE.

EXT. COUNTRYSIDE KENTUCKY -- AFTERNOON

Some low income homes, farms, tobacco fields. Running horses.

EXT. FORD'S GAP MAIN STREET -- LATE AFTERNOON

TJ drives past a sign reading WELCOME TO FORD'S GAP. He drives slowly down the main street, past the schoolhouse, a baseball field, rows of identical company houses, a feed store, a filling station.

A little before the company store, TJ passes the DAVIS HOUSE, where RUBY DAVIS is just coming out the back door.

EXT. DAVIS BACK YARD -- LATE AFTERNOON

Ruby is in her late 20's and naturally gorgeous. She crosses the backyard carrying a basket and enters the wire-fenced chicken yard. Ruby reaches into a nest and brings out several brown eggs. As she moves to the next nest, her foot kicks something. She looks down at a crumpled bundle of colorful feathers.

RUBY

Oh, no! No, no!

She sets the basket on a barrel and runs to the door in time to see a large brown HOUND dashing from under the chicken house. He has another limp bundle of feathers in his mouth.

RUBY (CONT'D)

You hateful old thing!

Ruby picks up clods of red Kentucky clay and flings them gamely at the fleeing dog.

EXT. FORD'S GAP MINE ENTRANCE -- EVENING

TJ drives under a gate sign reading PRESTON-FORD COAL MINE. He parks near an office building with another sign that reads THOMAS COAL COMPANY HEADQUARTERS. TJ sits in his car.

Lights from miners' hats blink in the growing gloom as they

FIRST MINER

Hey, bonus! Bonus!

SECOND MINER

Bonus? Everybody get one?

FIRST MINER

Says 'Bonus for Achieving Goal'.

DONNY TAYLOR

We've been topping our goal by 25 tons a day for weeks now. That's why.

MINER 2

I ain't never pulled a bonus in 9 years at Harlan. Got docked for breaking a bad drill once. But never seen no bonus.

DONNY

Well, son, TJ Thomas ain't your Harlan boss.

The miners pull TJ out of his truck, shaking his hand. TJ smiles.

Then, he catches the arm of a passing man, GRISSOM, 20's, lanky, recklessly good-natured. TJ fixes Grissom with a stern look and points with his chin at the office door. Grissom nods with the look of a dog caught peeing the rug.

INT. TJ THOMAS' OFFICE -- EVENING

TJ sits at his desk. On the desk is a capped Mason jar of clear liquid. Grissom sits across from TJ.

TJ

I can't have it, Grizz. I just cannot have it.

GRISSOM

I know, sir.

TJ

I cannot have it in my mine. Not now, not ever.

GRISSOM

I understand, sir. I'm real sorry, sir.

TJ

Men drink this stuff, they get sloppy. Sloppy men break equipment. Sloppy men get men killed. I can't have it.

GRISSOM

I know, sir. It's the first I ever made, and I wanted to show it to ole --

TJ

I don't think I've ever been more serious in my life, boy. If I ever hear you've brought home brew into my mine again, you're boxing groceries for the rest of your life. You hear that?

GRISSOM

Yes, sir.

TJ

You hear me talking to you?

GRISSOM

Yes, sir.

TJ

Huffman!

HUFFMAN, about 22 and serious-faced, peeks his head in the door.

HUFFY

Yes, Mr. Thomas?

TJ

Huffy, Mr. Grissom here needs to empty his slop jar. Can you show him around to the back and watch him do it?

HUFFY

Yes, sir.

TJ

He'll be right with you.

Huffy closes the door behind him.

TJ (CONT'D)

Huffy is a nice, quiet boy. That's what I like about him. He don't run around telling my business. Understand me?

GRISSOM

Yes, sir.

TJ

On the other hand, if I was to tell him to, he can make sure everybody from your Granny to your girlfriend hears about this.

Grissom hates that idea.

GRISSOM

I understand, sir.

TJ

Don't ever make me bring you in here again.

Grissom takes his jar and opens the door.

GRISSOM

Thank you for letting me stay, Mr. Thomas.

TJ

Go on, now.

TJ sits back in his chair.

INT. DAVIS HOME -- EVENING

Ruby is dressed in a fresh skirt and blouse, and she is stunning. 3 children sit quietly on the couch. TOMMY, about 11, JEANNIE, about 6, and the baby, JONAH, a toddler. The children are barefoot. The house is clean but spare.

Ruby sits at the table, holding torn pieces of newspaper. The top piece reads "Ford's Gap Farm", "20 acres for sale". Ruby underlines 'five large bedrooms'.

SOUND of screen door opening.

Ruby quickly slips the stack inside a Bible.

HENRY DAVIS, 40, friendly-faced and handsome, swings open the screen door with a flourish.

HENRY

Who are these beautiful children?  
Whose clean feet are these? Jeannie,  
where's your braids?

JEANNIE

Mommy done curled me.

HENRY

She curled you? Well you look like  
P is for Princess, I'm here to tell  
you.

Henry swings the baby onto his hip, and eyes the covered  
baskets on the table.

HENRY (CONT'D)

What you make, Baby? Got anything  
to spare?

Ruby lifts the cloth and Henry grabs a golden fried chicken  
leg. He takes a savagely hungry bite for the amusement of  
the children.

RUBY

That's the last chicken I can spare  
to fry for a while.

She drops her voice.

RUBY (CONT'D)

Moby's dog got two more of our hens,  
Henry.

HENRY

I'll speak to Moby tonight. He's a  
good man. He'll do what's right.

RUBY

He'd better do it soon, or he'll  
starve us to death. Those were my  
best layers.

HENRY

That dog ain't turning out right at  
all. Moby'll take care of it.

As Henry sits, he knocks Ruby's Bible to the floor. He picks  
up the stack of real estate ads.

HENRY (CONT'D)

You shopping for houses again, Baby?

RUBY

It's just dreaming, Henry.

Henry puts the baby down and looks through the ads.

HENRY

3 bedrooms. I wish I could build  
more rooms onto this here house.

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