

# THE CYANIDE CANARY

## CHAPTER ONE

**Tuesday, August 27, 1996 Evergreen Resources, Inc. Soda Springs, Idaho 10:20 A.M.**

Scott Dominguez pulled up the extension ladder, balancing it like a circus performer high off the ground as he stepped along the rounded surface of the acid storage tank. He fit the legs of the ladder into the twenty-two-inch-diameter entry hole and let the rungs slide through his palms until he felt it hit bottom. It was like dropping something down a manhole. Darkness swallowed it.

He sat down atop the eleven-foot-tall, thirty-six-foot-long rust orange tank dangling his steel-toed Redwings in the hole, thinking about the morning, and regretting his comment.

Theresa Cole, his fiancée, had driven him to work at Evergreen Resources, a phosphate fertilizer plant in Soda Springs, Idaho, at 6:45 that morning. She stopped the car near the construction trailer at the front of the plant, their normal routine. Dominguez kissed her good-bye, opened the car door, and turned to get out, but something made him stop.

"I'm afraid to go to work," he said.

He knew his comment had worried her, and he hadn't meant to do that. It was just that his boots were still wet from standing in the knee-deep sludge and water in the tank the day before, and he didn't feel well. His throat had started bothering him after he and Darren Weaver had climbed out of the tank, unsuccessful in their efforts to break up the sludge using a fire hose and brooms. The sludge kept clogging the 1¼-inch spigot, making the water level in the tank rise, so they decided to quit and wait until the morning when they could talk to their employer, Allan Elias, about cutting a bigger hole. By the time Dominguez got home, his throat burned and he felt like he was coming down with something. He begged off hiking with Theresa and his nephews and spent the night on the couch.

In the morning he'd felt better, but still not himself. He knew Allan was going to make him go back inside the tank, something he didn't want

to do. He thought about phoning in sick, but didn't want to lose his job. Besides, he felt better now, though his throat was still bothering him. He'd tell Theresa everything was fine when she picked him up to go to lunch at the Quick Stop in town.

Dominguez sat back beneath a cornflower blue, summer sky and wiped a trickle of perspiration from the side of his face. The temperature would likely hit the mid-nineties by early afternoon, but at just after ten in the morning it remained comfortable. Atop the tank he looked out over the Evergreen plant. To anyone driving along North Hooper Road, the rugged beauty of southeast Idaho's Bear River valley gave Evergreen the feel of a high-plain cattle ranch, but upon closer inspection, nature could not camouflage Evergreen's dilapidated and tattered condition. It looked damn near abandoned -- a junkyard of rusted tanks, cut-up railroad cars, and twisted bits of metal and plastic containers littering a pocked and scarred moonscape of craters and dirt piles. Pipes and smokestacks extended from the tanks and battered barnlike buildings at odd angles, a maze of metal that turned and digressed seemingly without purpose. Two mountains of mining waste rose above the building rooflines, one a coal black, the other a starch white. The piles had been trucked in from the waste ponds of the Kerr-McGee processing plant, which was just a mile down North Hooper Road.

Twenty years old, Dominguez had two years invested at Evergreen, his first real job after graduating from Soda Springs High, and he didn't want to get fired. He needed the money if he and Theresa were to get married. He wanted to replace the promise ring he gave her with a diamond, and maybe start saving for college -- something they continued to talk about. He couldn't do that working as a stock boy at the Quick Stop, or helping his mom out at the B&H Cleaners she owned in town. The real money was at the industrial plants along North Hooper Road, like Kerr-McGee, Monsanto, and Soda Springs Phosphate. Problem was, most wouldn't hire a twenty-year-old without experience.

Allan Elias did.

Elias had a big contract to process Kerr-McGee's mining waste and turn it into fertilizer, and Dominguez understood that if Elias could get the plant up and running Kerr-McGee would buy it. If that happened, he would have an inside track working for a premier company in town,

giving him and Theresa a real start in life. So he wasn't about to lose his job, even if that meant going back inside the tank, which was inevitable since he and Weaver were the only two Evergreen employees who could physically fit through the small opening. Lean-muscled like a flyweight boxer, Dominguez was just 130 pounds, with the wiry strength of a high school wrestler and nimble enough to keep a Hacky Sack in the air for two hundred kicks. Taller, but thin as a pipe cleaner, Weaver also had no problem fitting in the entry hole. Evergreen's other two employees, Brian Smith and Gene Thornock, were each twenty years older and carried the extra years in their chests and bellies. When they met Monday in Elias's construction trailer to discuss cleaning out the tank, Gene told Allan he couldn't fit in the hole, and Brian, well, he just flat out said he wasn't going in without safety equipment. Allan told Gene to stay on the outside and Scott and Darren to clean the tank from the inside. Brian was to turn the water to the fire hose on and off.

They met again Tuesday morning to tell Elias about the sludge clogging the spigot and that Gene wanted to cut a bigger hole, and that touched off another conversation about the lack of safety equipment.

"They should be wearing full rubber gear, and they should be wearing SCBA's," Smith said, referring to a self-contained breathing apparatus, which worked like scuba gear. "And the tank needs to be ventilated with air blowers. It's supposed to be tested for oxygen and gasses." Even then, Smith said, "they should not be going in the tank. It should be washed from the outside."

"You're not going to be directly involved in the tank cleaning," Elias replied, telling Smith he'd be working on the granulator, which was across the plant near the fire hydrant. "You can turn the water to the fire hose on and off."

"My throat is kind of hurting," Dominguez said.

"Yeah, it kind of irritated my throat...and my eyes, too," Weaver agreed.

"What about getting respirators?" Dominguez asked, hoping Allan would get respirators from Kerr-McGee, which is where they had borrowed the fire hoses.

Elias just got angry. He was renting two railcars to store sulfuric acid, and he couldn't transfer the acid into the storage tank until it was cleaned out. At over six feet tall with round shoulders and a thick chest, Elias was physically imposing. When he got mad his eyes bugged, his face flushed red, and his mouth became a great gaping hole.

"You guys lose everything I buy for you," he said, though none of them knew what he was talking about since they had never seen any SCBA's at the plant.

"Well, what about the permit? You also need a confined-space permit and everyone has to sign off on it," Smith said.

"I don't need a permit. There's nothing in that tank but mud and water. It's as safe as ordinary shampoo."

"I'll hand-write it."

"No," Elias replied. "I'll take care of it."

It was what he always said. He never did.

"I saw a mask in one of the railcars," Dominguez said.

Elias turned to him. "Well, go get that."

They left the trailer and walked down the dirt road between the two storage barns. Scott left them standing by the tank and climbed into one of the railroad boxcars in the boneyard. He found the trunk with the mask piled amid junk, carried it to where Elias and the rest of the employees waited, and popped it open. The respirator looked like something from World War I, a mask with a hose attached to a canister.

"That's not a respirator," Smith said.

Scott turned the oxygen valve and heard a hiss.

"Good. Just use that," Elias said. "That way I don't have to go get more oxygen."

"What about the rest of the safety equipment?" Smith asked, referring to the protective clothing, the air blowers to ventilate the tank, and the equipment needed to test the air inside.

"I'll take care of it. You guys just get in there and do the job. I'll see you in two hours. Have it done before I get back," Allan said. He walked back toward the trailer, got in his truck, and left.

But getting the job done turned out to be easier said than done. The claylike sludge continued to clog the opening, even after Gene cut a six-inch square in the side. The water also flowed underneath the tank, forming puddles around the freshly poured, three-foot-tall concrete saddles holding it off the ground. Brian said the blue-green tint to the water indicated phosphoric acid, which could weaken the concrete. If the saddles collapsed, the tank would crash through the plant like a knocked-down bowling pin. So they had to shut it down again while Gene built a sluice to direct the water and sludge away from the back of the tank. The sluice protruded out the back of the tank like an eighteenth-century gold miner's trough.

Atop the tank, Dominguez looked down into the hole. Maybe there was nothing to worry about. Maybe all the talk about safety equipment and confined-space permits was just Brian's way of getting out of going in the tank. Allan assured them there was nothing in it that could hurt them, that the sludge had the pH of ordinary shampoo. He'd even put some in his mouth and spit it out. Dominguez trusted him.

With the opening cut and the sluice built, he stood, climbed onto the ladder and stepped down a rung. Then he stopped. To the east the smokestacks of Monsanto billowed artificial clouds. Scott Dominguez closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the sun warm on his face; the air soothing his throat and lungs like a cool glass of water. When he opened his eyes he took one last look down North Hooper Road, a desolate two-lane highway that stretched like gray taffy to the horizon.

There was no sign of Allan.

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