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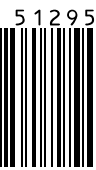
Look out!" rings down the shaft from above. We hear a roar and a fiery ball hurtles down the chute. It crashes into the marshy sump. The flames are so fierce, they singe my whiskers.

"Lord, the cage is on fire too!" Smith yells. Thomas and the men turn the stream of water on the hay car. The hose bucks in Thomas's hands, but in minutes the fire is out.

Thomas sinks against the wall, panting. I nose his hand. But then Andrew Lettsome rushes down from the escape shaft stairs. "The timbers above in the second vein are on fire," he tells everyone. "It's pandemonium up there. We have to warn the workers to get out!"

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HART



Dog
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Finder
Coal Mine Dog



Finder

Coal Mine Dog

1909



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Finder wants nothing more than to stay with his friend Thomas at Aunt and Uncle's farm. But times are tough, and even kids—and dogs—must go to work to help put food on the table.

When Thomas's family needs money, he's forced to quit school to work in the coal mines—even though neither of his late parents wanted that for him. His only comfort is his dog Finder, a failed hunting dog who now pulls a cart in the mines. The work is dirty and difficult, and Finder and Thomas dream of a day when they will get better jobs on the surface. But the mines are also dangerous, and men are regularly injured—or worse. When disaster strikes, can Thomas and Finder escape from the fires deep below ground?

Alison Hart

Illustrated by Michael G. Montgomery

PEACHTREE
ATLANTA

Finder

Coal Mine Dog

Finder

Coal Mine Dog

Written by Alison Hart

Illustrated by Michael G. Montgomery



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*To the many coal miners
who have sacrificed their lives*

—A. H.

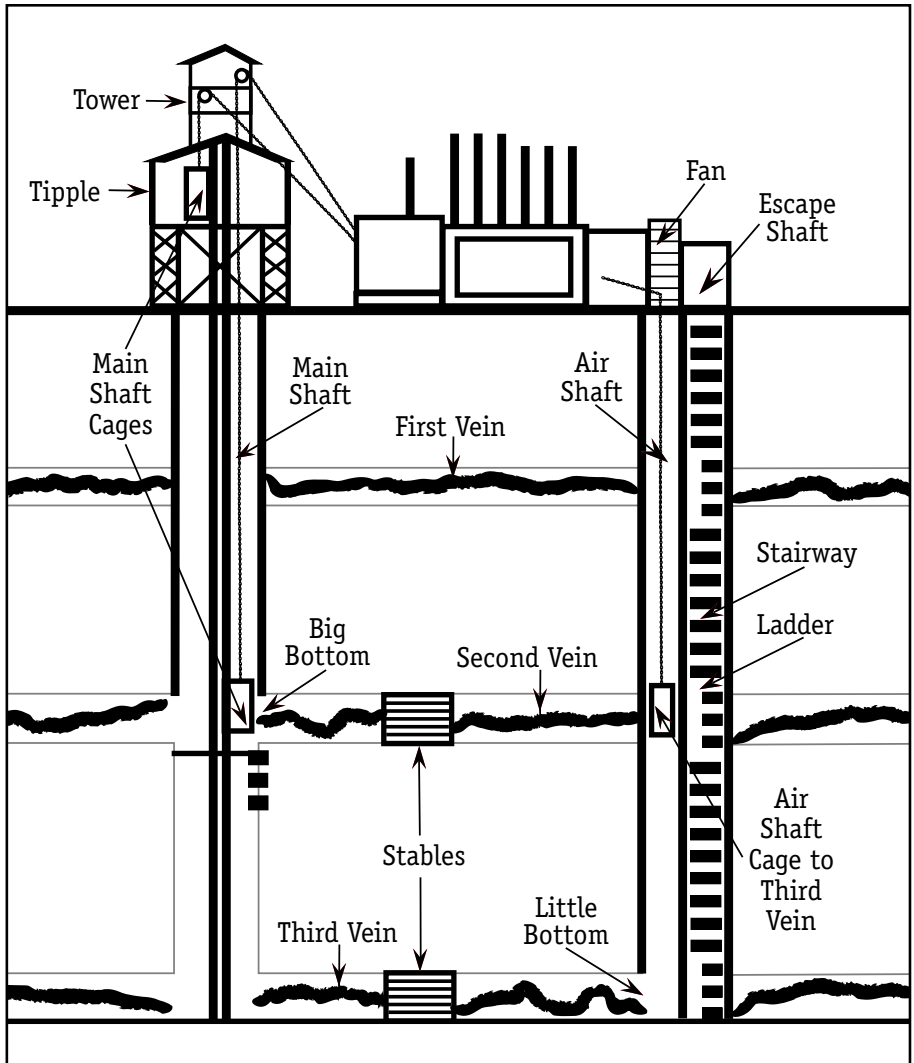
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Cherry Coal Mine

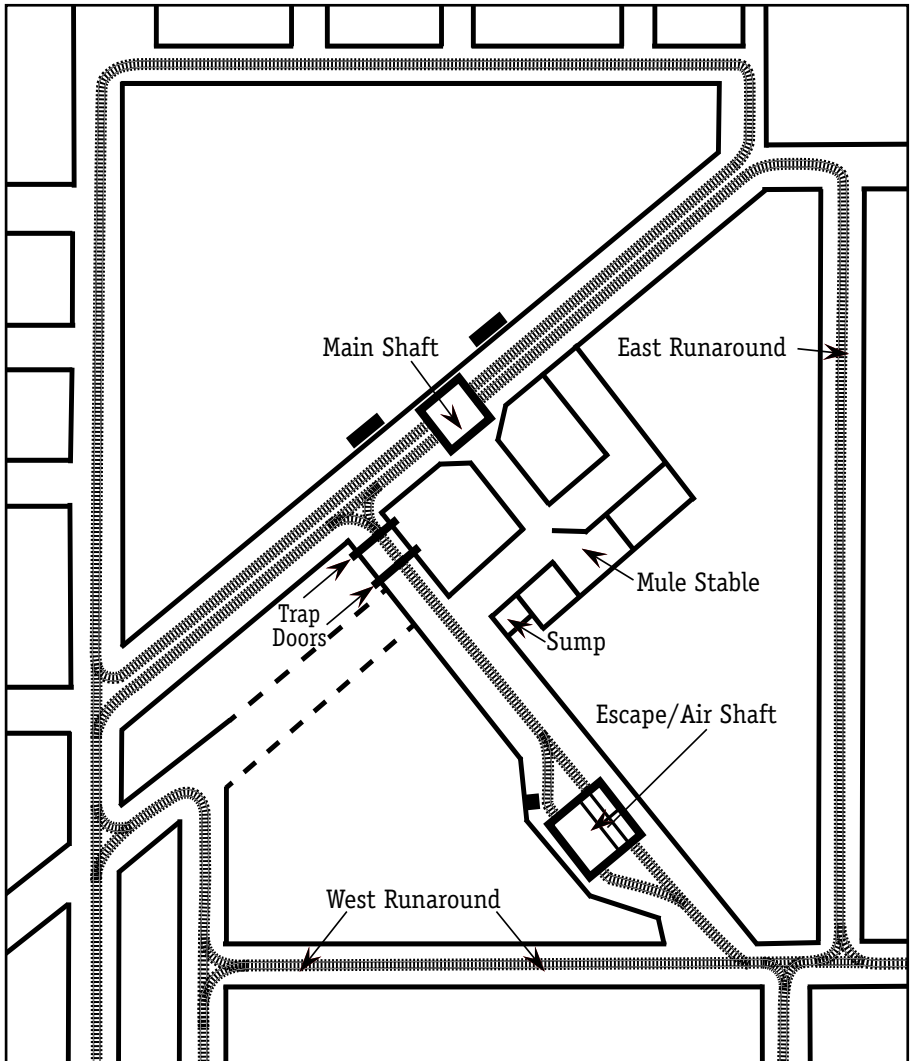
Side View



Cherry Coal Mine

Second Vein

Top View, Looking Down





CHAPTER 1

Hunting

September 10, 1909

My nose twitches. I am on the scent of rabbit on the brush and quail in the tall grass. The rabbit trail winds into a mound of thorns. When I poke my head underneath the branches, the perfume of ripe blackberries makes me drool. I pluck a few from the ends with my teeth until the thorns prick my ears and I scuttle out.

Then I catch another smell. It's sharp and heavy, and I don't recognize the critter. The track zigzags into tall grass and I follow it.

"Finder's a straddler like Daisy was," a voice says behind me. "That means he works with his nose to

the ground. Not like a drifter, who catches scent from the air. Straddlers are slower but the wind don't bother them. Our Daisy could scent a possum in a storm."

That's Uncle speaking. We're "training"—or at least that's what he calls it. Me, I'm just letting my nose lead me.

The pungent smell grows thicker as I come to a fallen tree. The trunk is rotten, the bark shredded as if animals have been scratching on it.



“What do you think Finder’s hunting?” That voice belongs to my friend, Thomas.

We’ve both lived at Aunt and Uncle Eddy’s house since early winter. Thomas arrived shortly after I left my littermates at Campbell’s farm.

Uncle trains me.

Aunt scolds me.

Thomas loves me.

“Could be rabbit or possum. Or maybe the coon that keeps ripping down the corn stalks,” Uncle tells him. “Let’s hope the cur can do his job and keep his mind on the scent this time.” Uncle’s words are curt. I try hard, but too often I don’t please him. “A hunting dog needs gumption. Daisy had it,” he adds, his voice catching when he says her name.

“Finder’s just a pup,” Thomas says quickly. “He’s still learning.”

Uncle snorts. “By nine months Daisy was treeing varmints without a command,” he says. “She didn’t have to be trained—knew it instinctively. If Finder

don't start showing some of the same gumption, he'll have to go back to Campbell's."

"We can't send him back," Thomas says. "Finder belongs with us now."

"I know you love the dog, but we can't afford to keep an animal just for a pet like rich folk do." Uncle sighs. "Fact is, soon you won't have time for him. Summer and harvest are almost over."

"I'll always have time for Finder, even after school starts."

"Thomas..." Uncle hesitates and looks at the ground. "Your Aunt Helen and I have been talking. School might not start for you this year. I've already spoken to the supervisor at Cherry Coal Mine. You can start out digging."

When I hear Thomas's sharp intake of breath, I whine and lick his hand. All summer Thomas and I had fun in the fields and woods when we weren't training. We'd hoe the garden or pick coal from the slag pile. Then we'd splash in the stream and hunt for

berries, mushrooms, and perfect sticks for Thomas to whittle and for me to chew. Those moments with Thomas made my tail wag, but now I sense that something is wrong.

“But my pa and ma didn’t want me to work in the mine,” Thomas says.

“I know they didn’t.” Uncle takes off his hat and scratches his head. I scratch too, at the flea nibbling my neck. “Except times are hard, Thomas. Farmers here in Illinois used to be able to live off the land. Now they can make more money *under* it. I’m lucky that they promoted me to mine examiner. Still, now that you’ve come to live with us, we’ve got another mouth to feed. We barely made it through the winter last year. You’re fourteen, big enough to look eighteen, and Cherry Mine has good wages. You—and that dog—have to work and earn your keep.”

“Sir, please don’t make me quit school,” Thomas says. “I’ll chop wood for the neighbors and keep our stove filled with coal. Finder’s strong—he can pull a

full cart of wood or coal from the slag pile. And he'll get the hang of hunting, I just know it. We'll earn our keep. You'll see."

I whine again, hearing the unhappiness in his voice. I'd like to plant my paws on his chest and give him a kiss, but Uncle says, "The decision is done, Thomas." Setting his gaze on me, he commands, "Get your track, Finder."

Dropping my nose, I pick up that heavy smell again. It leads to the end of the rotten trunk, which is hollow and dark inside. When I hunker down, chattering greets me. I freeze. Two glittering eyes stare out, and I hear the click of teeth.

I like following a scent. I like working for Uncle. But I hate the sharp sound of the gun and the smell of blood when the critter falls dead. And it sounds as if this trapped animal aims to claw or bite me.

My body begins to quiver.

"What's Finder got cornered?" Thomas whispers.

"Sounds like a raccoon." Uncle says excitedly. "It'll fight, but it would've been no match for Daisy.

Let's see what Finder can do."

Slowly, I back away from the growling beast. The raccoon skitters forward and swipes my nose with sharp claws. Yelping, I leap up and bolt.

Uncle hollers, "Get back here and fight, dog!"

I run from the coon, crashing through the briars and tall grass. I don't want to kill it and I sure don't want it killing me.

I race down a row of drying corn stalks, the crinkly leaves whipping my stinging nose. Finally, I get to the other side of the field where the stream winds through the weeds, and plunge my bleeding muzzle into the cooling water. In the distance, I hear the crack of the gun. The noise rings in my ears, and I want to bury my head in the muddy bank.

Thomas calls me.

I want to go to him, but I can't. I want to have gumption like Daisy did. But even when my nose sends me in the right direction, my feet take me in the wrong one.

Thomas calls again.

Tail tucked, I slink to a hollow of dirt in the bank. It's cool and hidden. Curling into a ball, I wrap my tail around my sore nose. If I wait here all night, I can sneak home after Uncle is gone in the morning.

Aunt will be there with her broom. She'll shoo me from the porch and tell me I need a bath, but Thomas will hug me hard. He'll feed me bacon he saved from his morning meal, and for a while I'll forget that Uncle is right: I'll never be a good hunter like Daisy.