

It's October the 16th, 2018, in Arizona, USA. John is so dehydrated that the paramedics can't find a vein for the IV drip. While suburbs and strip malls may have replaced the saloons and stagecoaches, there are still some who do things the old way, working on the cattle ranches, riding on horseback through the mountain trails. John starts to recce the shaft, measuring its depth, working out the best way to tackle it. By October 2018, he is ready to take the plunge. Cave-ins are a constant danger, and those ancient wooden supports will have weakened with age, damp, and rot. Critically injured and with a Mojave to deal with, any lingering hope is fading along with the daylight. They're all in the Aguila region, about an hour's drive from Wickenburg, and they are all accessed through mine shafts. Once underground, John uses dynamite to blast the rock, then picks through it looking for metal deposits in the mineral seams. Removing his feet from the edge, some loose stones and gravel tumble into the abyss, echoing away into the darkness. A rattlesnake bite left untreated will lead to internal hemorrhage and organ failure, as the venom works its way through the body. But as the last daylight dwindles, the prospect of a night surrounded by the rattlers looms. As he lifts one guano-covered stone, a metallic glint catches his eye. There are more noises at the top of the shaft now, and then the squeak of a pulley as something is lowered down towards him. And I could hear the rattling, and I just kind of looked down a little bit, and I could see that it was a green Mojave, which is one of the deadliest rattlesnakes in the world. This part of Arizona is all arid desert with tall stately cacti. Behind them, in the distance, low ranges of jagged peaks sit under wide blue skies. Not knowing was killing me. So I decided that I was going to go down this mine shaft, and see what was at the bottom of it. I had made a derrick, which was to hold my rigging as I repelled down the mine shaft. I was very comfortable, I was ready to go. My rigging was hooked to this derrick, which allowed me to repel down the mine shaft. But then, just a few meters into the descent, his carabiner snaps. He sees now that his fall was broken by several 55-gallon steel drums that lie crumpled up nearby. Then, as he leans back against the wall, he feels an unmistakable, muscular movement against his body. He's severely dehydrated now and that internal bleeding in his leg has continued unchecked. So the paramedics and the search and rescue from Maricopa County repelled down to the bottom of the shaft. Airlifted to hospital, John will undergo multiple surgeries. And if they do, will they locate him before he succumbs to his injuries? He freezes, still as a statue, trying not to panic, as the snake slithers under his armpit. Mojaves are aggressive creatures. Light, green in color, their heads are broader than those of more common Arizona rattlers. I felt the rattles rattling near my armpit. In this episode, we meet John Woodell, a 60-year-old prospector from Arizona. His curiosity will lead him into a living nightmare, and to the brink of despair. He ends up in the small desert town of Wickenburg, Maricopa County, just north of Phoenix. Bunch of mountains, washes, saguaro cactuses that reach 20 feet tall. It's a retirement area in Arizona that a lot of people go to. But it's not just nostalgia and a quiet life that called her. They call it gold fever, this craze for prospecting, and it catches hold of John. With all he's been through, the miner's lifestyle appeals to John. It may not feel like work to John, but gold mining requires backbreaking effort and nerves of steel. Anyone tells you that mining is easy, they are sadly mistaking or they don't know what they're talking about. But by 2018, even after 20 fruitful years of prospecting, there is still one site on the property that he has yet to explore. Or rather, he hasn't dared to explore it. This mine is old, very old. It dates back to the early 18th century, predating even Henry

Wickenburg's arrival in the area. Back when all the region's riches were lost, back when all the region's riches were undiscovered. Even though I could see gold in the rock, and very intriguing, but I did not want to cave in. So I left those areas alone, but it haunted me, because I definitely wanted to get down there and get the gold. The main shaft goes down 100 feet below the surface, before further tunnels descend even deeper into the earth. I had told Terry Schrader, that if I'm not home that night, there's something wrong, and you need to come find me, because accidents do happen at the mine. It had rained the night before, and the air was crisp, you could smell the cactus, you could smell the dirt. I had bought some new rock climbing equipment, and I was bound and determined to go down it. John arrives at the mine shaft. He circles the opening, giving the derrick, the support structure he's erected, a final once over. John is suspended from the derrick at the top of the shaft. He leans back and feels his harness tighten. There was enough light shining down the mineshaft at a hundred feet that I could see a couple of feet in front of me, and as soon as I hit, I looked up, and there's a rattlesnake about a foot away from my face. Its beady eyes are locked onto him, and now there are rattles echoing all around. John casts around for a makeshift weapon, slowly, avoiding sudden movements. When the snake is motionless, John lays down the metal fence post and catches his breath. Beer cans, food wrappers, empty cigarette cartons. He looks up at the sheer shaft above, eyes scanning for any possible route out. And I was thinking I was going to bleed to death from the femur fracture. The swelling kept my leg in place from moving and doing more damage because you have an artery that runs through your femur bone. Finally, the pale light of daybreak appears at the top of the shaft. With visibility returning, now he thinks back over the survival techniques he learned as a child growing up in Arizona. Suddenly, John is wrenched back into consciousness as he hears that dreaded sound again. Acting on instinct, John grabs another piece of metal and battles this latest intruder away. The surge of adrenaline reanimates John, but only for a moment. He watches the bucket vanish up the shaft. I had compression fractures in my spine, which I still feel today. After being discharged from hospital, John continues rehabbing at home. A refusal to be defined by his traumatic experience. This time he listens to it. He steps away from the shaft, packs up his equipment, and drives home. That was all motivation now that keeps me continuing on. I have spent a lot of time with my daughter and my grandkids. John Baddell lies on his back in the dark, struggling to breathe. The 60-year-old peers up to the only source of light, the narrow opening of the mineshaft 100 feet above him. It's a cramped space, maybe eight feet in diameter. Pretty soon you'll be plunged into total darkness. In his condition, there's surely no way he can escape this mineshaft single-handedly. Something cool and muscular, sliding past his skin. It was probably about four inches in diameter. Stay still, and prey will slither past him. These are the astonishing tales of ordinary people thrown into extraordinary situations. I'm John Hopkins from Noiza. John Woodell is born and raised in Arizona. He gets married and has kids, settling in Colorado. Wickenburg, Arizona is known for the old, wild west. Wickenburg is cowboy country, pioneer country. It's named after Henry Wickenburg, who in the 1800s hit pay dirt to the tune of 340,000 ounces of gold. A hundred years later, those tales still captured John's imagination. So when I got to Arizona, the first thing I did was buy a metal detector. My other son, Matt, he was a drug addict, and he died of an overdose. Or if you break out a rock and there's a big chunk of gold in it, that is the determination for going forward. Before long, John has a license to explore

half a dozen claims across a hundred acres of land. There are some old sections that was started back in the 1700s by the Spaniards. And those areas are very weak with the supports in there. Gradually the itch becomes an idea, and then a plan. I didn't work for anyone, I did all the work myself, which isn't always safe. He contacts his neighbor, a man called Terry, just so someone knows where he's going. John gives Terry the location, and tells him to come looking if he's not back by nightfall. He takes in the Arizona landscape. The beautiful rusty red desert rolls on for miles in every direction. He's all set to begin repelling down the shaft. So I swung out over the top of the mine shaft, and I did have second thoughts. Instead, John checks his harness one more time, grips the rope, and steps out into the unknown. The derrick creaks above him as it takes his full weight. Satisfied everything is ship-shaped, John starts winching himself down. Bit by bit, he feeds rope through the spring-loaded gate of his carabiner. And I grabbed hold of the second rope that I had, that I put there just for an emergency to get back out on. But even as he clutches at the backup safety rope, John is still plunging through the darkness. John hurtles into the ground at the bottom of the mineshaft. But before he can make much sense of his situation, he hears a sound that all Arizonians dread. Somebody had dumped a bunch of material, fencing, T-posts, metal, and there was a stick. But you can still hear the others sliding through the debris. In the fading light, John tries again to take in his surroundings. He has landed in an opening about eight feet across, and that debris he can hear the snakes moving through, it's all around him. I could barely see the light now because the sun was shifting, and I was looking up to find footholds to where maybe I could just pull myself up and out of the mine. My ankle was just throbbing so bad. The skin was actually peeling off my hands, and I had blisters. I knew that I had a fracture of the femur, which is your upper bone in your leg. Trying to get a mindset and stay positive was dwindling very fast. Add dehydration to the list of hazards. Fumbling in the darkness, John finds it in the back pocket of his jeans. He dials 911 and waits. Throughout the whole day, I was yelling and yelling and I yelled so much that I had lost my voice. And if I moved the wrong way, I could sever that artery. John is weak with thirst and hunger, but still conscious. Back in the 60s and 70s, you went through a desert survival class here in Arizona that was kind of mandatory. And I remember one of the things that I was told, if you have moisture in the ground, you can take a handful of that wet dirt, put it in like your shirt and suck on the dirt. John lifts up the rocks around him, searching for even a trace amount of morning dew. But the earth down here is covered with a white, chalky filth. But with renewed energy, John tries calling for help again, but to no avail. So I grabbed this rattlesnake by the back end, and I swung this thing up against the side on the ground. I bet I spent 10 minutes of slamming this rattlesnake on the side of the wall on the ground. But as the second afternoon drifts towards evening, John's fear is actually turning to desperation. Everything hinges on Terry coming to the rescue. He focuses his mind on his daughter and his grandchildren, on how he wishes he saw them more often and how much he'd like to see them again. As day three stretches on, he starts hallucinating. I saw a horse and when it got down to like it was maybe 20 feet away from me, I just closed my eyes because I almost thought maybe it's a grim reaper. I had never been in that position before and I have heard in the past that the grim reaper will come get you just before you die or as you're dying. As the wave of energy subsides, he's drained of strength. I didn't care about the rattlesnakes. And when I realized that it was Terry at the top of the mine shaft, I broke down

crying. Revived now, he hears Terry call down again. And then I could hear helicopters flying overhead. Soon more voices are calling out and searchlights are shining down from above. And they were still sending water down to me, trying to get some water in me. I was so dehydrated that it was, yeah, it wasn't quick enough. I had cervical fractures from hitting the ground so hard. In spite of everything, he's still haunted by the image of that gold sparkling the darkness. Either way, John finds himself standing by the derrick once more, at the cusp of the hole in the earth. It got the better of me. Now, I'll just let someone else take over the mine, because I've had enough of it. And I finally come to terms that it's not my cup of tea. From watching the small square of sky, he can tell the sun is fading. John tries to keep calm, to manage the pain that courses through his body. His only hope is to be rescued. Suddenly, John feels a movement against his body. I didn't move. It was slithering underneath my arm. I just froze. John reckons this one is around five feet long. Green Mojaves have been known to chase people. If your life depended on your next decision, could you make the right choice? He takes his life into his hands when he decides to explore an ancient, abandoned gold mine. I'm a religious man, and when you lose hope, you don't want to go on anymore, your body starts shutting down. In his youth, he moves away and serves in the military. By the late 1990s, John is middle-aged, divorced, and living alone. The area is kind of hilly. The surrounding area is just beautiful. The people in Wickenburg are good people. The area is known for gold mines. A friend of mine had gone to Wickenburg every winter, and he would come back with gold. By the end of the 19th century, Wickenburg was a boom town. Wild stories were told about the fortunes that could be made and the people who came to try their luck. And then there are those like John, who still venture deep underground in search of gold. I said someday I'm going to be a miner. In the year 2000, he purchases a number of claims through the Bureau of Land Management. He throws himself into the work, which gives him new focus and purpose. My son Shane had committed suicide. I have left my daughter and two grandkids. The long days underground, the challenge, and the solitude of it. I loved it every minute of the day. There was nothing else that I would rather do. Because when you're mining, you never know what you're going to get around the corner. And as far as I'm concerned, I didn't work a day in my life. So this other shaft was just a different area. But it continues to play on John's mind. Could this centuries-old spot be the one that makes his fortune? And I took my phone with me, so that I could take pictures, and encase some kind of an accident. In mining you always have a rule, you always have someone along with you. He sets the date, Monday, October the 15th. He does make one concession. The morning of October the 15th turns out to be cool and clear. It cements in John's mind that he's doing the right thing. Driving in his pickup, he turns off the highway and onto an off-road section. I was all set up, I checked my harness, everything was good. But looking into the darkness for a second, he questions his sanity. I grabbed hold of the side, sat down at the edge of it, and looked down and thought, you've got to be nuts. But that quiet cautionary voice does not win out. The rope is untethered, and in an instant, John is in free-fall, dropping like a stone. I was close to the edges. I couldn't see anything. The only thing that I thought of is just hanging on to the rope, and I would have a soft landing, but that wasn't the case. His legs buckle under the force, and pain tears through his body. In the gloomy half-light, the air is thick with dust. John lets his eyes adapt and tries to breathe through the pain. It was terrifying. I could see one rattlesnake moving, and I could hear other ones close by. And I

could hear them actually going across the brush that was down there that was dumped. There was cans. I could hear them going through the cans, making a noise. But yet, I had to do something, because if you get bit and you do not have medical attention, your chances of survival are zipped. So I grabbed the stick, and I beat the crap out of this rattlesnake. It's his fight or flight response, and flight isn't an option. I mean, it was deafening. The sound from the rattles was so loud that it was hard to focus on anything. Down here, he wouldn't stand a chance. When I tried to pull myself up, I just couldn't do it. I could feel my legs separate. The weight and the friction from the burns on my hands were so bad. John doesn't have any watch on him either. He taps the screen carefully, brings it to life. So instead, he just yells at the top of his lungs. Surely his neighbor, Terry, will come looking for him soon. Because hope was fading very fast. The pain and the fear of being bit by a rattlesnake, the odds were against me. At this point, I was just in hopes that a miracle would happen. The hours creep by. In his youth, John had trained as an emergency medical technician. Here, in the mineshaft, that experience is coming in useful. I knew my ankle was in bad shape. I was in hopes that the swelling would go down after this amount of time. But I got to thinking, if the swelling goes down, your bones will get loose. It was actually the swelling in my leg, even though it was painful.