Set in the mysterious Pine Gap, Australia—think Area 51 with a neater accent—CRAWLSPACE (coming to theaters and on demand January 4 from IFC Films) opens as an underground research facility has put out a distress call. Chaos has broken out all around; scientists scream for help, patients do their best to escape and bodies begin to pile up.

Waking up in the middle of the madness is a blonde girl (Amber Clayton) whose memory is a blurry mess, and who doesn’t have much to go on other than the stitches on the side of her head and a bracelet with the name “Eve” etched in it. She’s also none too happy about waking up next to a collection of mangled bodies.

If the screams and spilled blood don’t hint that something has gone awry, the special forces unit en route is the final tipoff. After a quick debriefing on their carrier, the unit’s instructions are clear: rescue the scientists and kill the patients. Leading his half of the unit is Romeo (Ditch Davey), who spends more than a moment studying a photo of Eve. Don’t jump ahead and assume our solider and blondie fall in love in the midst of the subsequent terror, however, because shortly after the squad enters the base, Romeo and Eve don’t just connect—they reconnect. Shocked and setting aside mission priorities, Romeo is dumbfounded to see Eve, since she drowned years ago. Or did she? Breaking orders by placing her safety first and

foremost, Romeo now must put together the pieces, all while keeping his unit alive from an unseen threat. The surviving scientists are no help, as their contradicting answers are obviously covering something up…

This is where CRAWLSPACE differs from many the other monsters-in-the-corridors movies, treating the viewer not just to sci-fi and horror thrills, but drama and mystery as well. What is the menace that is leaving so many dead? Where are the other special forces guys? What is Romeo’s beloved doing in a genetic engineering facility? And even if Romeo and his unit make it outside, what will happen to Eve?

CRAWLSPACE might seem like it treads familiar territory, but it’s definitely its own beast. It’s our reward for sitting through so many dull and mundane cheapie sci-fi monster flicks; in fact, to call it a simple creature feature would sell it short. The action is well-paced under FX artist turned director Justin Dix, the human drama is engaging, the twists are great and the mysteries are ample enough to keep it constantly moving and exciting. It’s a well-thought-out flick that breathes new life into a genre the filmmakers obviously love and respect. Run, don’t crawl, to see it.