The Coal Men

By

Michael L. Sena

The Coal Men

Green Horse Publishing Company
Vadstena, Sweden
March 2023

Fonts: Alegreya and Montserrat

CONTENTS

THE AUTHOR

My maternal grandfather, his two sisters' husbands, his wife's three brothers and most of the male first cousins and the husbands of female first cousins who immigrated to America from Italy were coal miners in Pennsylvania's Lackawanna and Luzerne counties between 1900 and 1960.

I was born and raised in Scranton, Pennsylvania. When I was twelve, the street on which we lived subsided when the mines below collapsed. Scranton, Pennsylvania was settled at the time of the Revolutionary War; it grew in size when the Scranton brothers began to manufacture steel in the mid-1800s, but it became Pennsylvania's third largest city after Philadelphia and Pittsburgh on the shoulders of anthracite coal. Under its streets in the valley along the banks of the Lackawanna River were a dozen or more flat-lying coal beds stacked over each other like the icing in between the layers of a multi-layered cake. From these beds came hard coal with the highest carbon content, fewest impurities and highest energy density. The coal was removed using the room and pillar method, with the pillars supporting the roof and the layers above.

Anthracite's heydays were in the 1920s. During the 1930s, before World War II, oil and gas took its place as the primary clean burning energy source, and by the time our

street caved in at the end of the 1950s, the bottom half of the beds were flooded and the top half had been left to the pillar robbers. They had replaced the coal pillars with wooden supports which had rotted. A heavy snow was enough for our little neighborhood along South Seventh Avenue to give way. Police and fireman banged on the doors of all the houses at four in the morning, telling us that we needed to get dressed and come outside as quickly as we could. The gas mains had broken and the imminent danger of fire was appreciable. We stood with our neighbors on the sidewalk across the street from our house in a place that had been designated as safe by the police.

Our house was as straight as it had always been, but houses to the right and left of ours were leaning noticeably. The street, which had been flat, was now rolling along its entire length. What happens next, I thought. What followed was a two-year painful process that eventually led to all of the families and businesses along the street having to move and all the buildings being demolished.

My father was born in the neighborhood, and, except for the three years he was in the Army during WWII, he had lived there all his life. When he returned from the War, he and my mother moved into a house my grandfather had bought for them across the street from his home and shoemaker shop. One of my father's sisters and her husband lived in a multi-family house my grandfather also had bought which was right next door to his. My parents, with the help of other family members on both sides, had

remodeled the entire inside of the house. In the fertile soil around the house, flowers and lawn flourished.

The neighborhood also had the grade school where my father, his brother and sisters, and my sister and I had gone: Washington Irving Number 12 Elementary School on Emmet Street. Our church, St. Lucy's, was founded by my grandfather and grandmother along with a few hundred other Italian immigrants in West Scranton and Bellevue. It sat at the top of the hill, visible from any point along the street. Downtown Scranton was a ten-minute walk across the bridge over the heavily polluted Lackawanna River, past the Scranton Gas Works and through the fruit and vegetable wholesale block. There had been a trolley up until 1952, and one of our neighbors, Mr. Malone, was a trolley driver who let my sister and me sit in the driver's seat at the back end when we were lucky to have him as a driver. There were two barbers, Patsy Mack and Louie Daverne, a butcher shop run by Mr. Meyer, a grocery store run by Abie Newman and his sister Esther, my grandfather's shoemaker shop, Sena's Shoe Repair, a lumber yard and four beer gardens. On the slope up to the church was another grocery store, Travatos, and an Italian bakery, Liberty Bakers. There was a silk mill and a hide and tallow factory at one end of the street closest to the downtown.

Everything on the street below our church, Scranton Street, and up to the grade school was demolished after the cave-in. The grade school came down several years later

since there were no longer any students in the surrounding area to attend it. Families moved to wherever they could find places to live. Those who owned their homes were compensated by the Scranton Redevelopment Authority based on an appraisal of the value of the property, not on the basis of what it would cost to buy a replacement for what had been lost. Still, it was better than nothing.

My parents found a house a few blocks away from the high school my sister and I attended. Some of our new neighbors belonged to our church. The neighborhood grocery store was owned by a good friend of my father's, and his son and I were friends, classmates and Teener League Baseball teammates, but many of my friends from the old neighborhood went to another one of the three high schools in the city. They all disappeared from our lives, except for my aunt and uncle who moved to an apartment not far from our new home. I lived in that house for the next four years, while I was in high school. I lived there during the summers and vacation periods when I was in college and graduate school. I visited there several times a year when I lived in the Boston area, and even after I moved to Sweden in 1992, up until nine years ago when my mother passed away. My longest periods of absence were the year I lived in London just after finishing my graduate studies at Princeton, and two years because of COVID-19-related travel restrictions. We sold my parent's house to a couple from Brazil with a high school-age son. My sister, a teacher in the Scranton school district, and her husband, a

fireman, built a new house on the back half of my parent's property when they married, and where they raised two sons. She is now a widow and still lives in that house. Now, on my yearly trips to Scranton, I stay with her.

At least once during my return visits to Scranton I drive along South Seventh Avenue. The street was straightened during the two years that we waited to receive the SRA settlement while one house after another around us was demolished. Ours was the last one to go. With the demolition went all the renovations my father and mother made with the help of family members, including my sister and me. The addition to the back of the house, with the hole for the foundation that was dug out by hand by my maternal grandfather who retired after thirty-five years of digging coal, also disappeared under the bulldozer. A few years after we moved, a car wash was built. Another couple of years passed and a self-storage company set up rows of storage sheds. There is one tree left among these buildings and it is the one my father and I planted before the cave-in.

I don't recall that any of the families had a choice about remaining. A number of other buildings on the street were unaffected by the subsidence, and there was no more settling while we still lived there. The city just decided that it would be easier to use Federal money to pay everyone to leave than to spend city funds to stabilize the mines by flushing them and re-building the infrastructure. Decisions like that affect peoples' lives forever. It did mine.

That house, that neighborhood and the people who lived there are still what I remember most about my life in the place where I was born and raised, a city built on coal, a city built on the backs of coal miners and their families.

Michael L. Sena
Vadstena, Sweden
24 February 2023

Dedication

To all the men in my family who went into the coal mines and all the women who prayed that they would come out.

THE MINERS

IT IS TWO thirty-five p.m. on Monday, November 22nd 1965 in a town in Carbon County in the anthracite coal region of Northeastern Pennsylvania. The roof in a section of one of the local coal mines has collapsed, sealing off four rooms and trapping six miners. One of them, Nicco, is unconscious, lying face down on the mine floor in the sealed off section. The lower half of his body is covered with rubble. He has worked together with the other five men for the past two years.

Except for one of the men, Wadz, the orphan from Poland, he has known each of the men since either he or they were born. Except for Wadz, they have lived in the town where the mine is located all their lives. Once Wadz arrived he never left. Nicco, Tony, Jonesy and Rossi left for military service and came back. Tony left again for prison and returned. Joey left for college, but didn't make it past his first semester before circumstances called him back. It was like they never left town. These exits were temporary and failed escapes to move to somewhere else, anywhere. All six of them ended up becoming coal men.

What all six of them also share, besides a European heritage, is their decision to go down into the mines. One of them, Jonesy, had the intention of becoming a miner of his own free will. Rossi had been working in the mines since he was thirteen. It was all he knew. The rest of them, including Nicco, went into the mines as a last resort, to make a living in a town and in a region where there were few other opportunities to do anything else. Each of them knew the dangers they would face each day, and accepted their fate every time they descended the shaft, two hundred feet below the surface, down to the seam where they worked. They had each hoped—and some of them prayed—that this day would never come, but now it has.

Nicco

Nicolas Salvatore Mattese was born in 1933. Everyone calls him Nicco. His father, Salvatore (Sal), is 64 and was born in the U.S. He is still working in the same mine where Nicco works, and is a WWII Veteran who served in Europe. Nicco's mother, Costanza (Connie) is 60 and was also born in the U.S. She worked as a seamstress in a dress factory from the time she was 13 until two years ago when the shop where she was working closed and moved to South Carolina. Nicco's

sister, Lillian (Lilly) Zukas is 31 and is married to Joey Zukas. Lilly works as a secretary to one of the vice presidents of the coal mining company that owns the mine where Nicco and the others are trapped. Their offices are in the center of town where Nicco lives.

Nicco is married to Ann (Annie) Diriggio. Annie is 31, has a college degree in teaching, and teaches the third grade in one of the town's grade schools. Annie went to college at Bloomsburg State Teacher College and graduated in 1956. They got married one year later. They have three children, six, four and two: Nicolina (Nicky), Jennifer (Jenny) and Scott (Scotty). Nicco and Annie grew up in houses that were separated by one house that was owned by an elderly couple who had lived there all their married lives, and where Annie and Nicco now live. Annie decided they were going to marry one another when Nicco was four and Annie was three years old. Nicco and Annie bought the house between their parents when it went up for sale, and now live next door to Nicco's parents on one side and Annie's parents on the other.

Both Nicco's and Annie's father's and mother's parents came from a village near Avellino, Italy. Annie's father, Giacomo (Jimmy) Diriggio, aged 63, works in the mine with Sal and the others, is also veteran of WWII.

Annie's mother, Angelina (Angie), is 60 and is retired from her job as a shop assistant.

Nicco graduated from high school. He was drafted into the army after high school and served six months in Korea. He spent two years in active duty, then joined his father in the mines. He had a job driving a coal truck for several years, but then went back into the mines. Nicco had never applied himself to school work. He could never convince himself that learning anything more than the basics was worth the time. He knew enough math to keep his checkbook balanced. He knew enough English to write a letter home or to Annie when he was in the Army. He could read well enough to follow the mass and read books to his children. He knew when the Revolutionary War started and when the Civil War ended. He knew when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and the day JFK was shot. It was the same date as today, November 22nd, but it was a Friday two years ago. Today is Monday. Thursday is Thanksgiving. It was his mother's turn to make the turkey. His mother and Annie's mother are both great cooks.

Rossi

Vittorio Michele Rossi (Vittorio and Vito to family and 'Rossi' to everyone else) is 54, born in 1911 in Italy. His

father, Tommaso, and mother, Evilina, are deceased. He is married to Genevieve (Jenny) Cipollini, age 52, born in the U.S. and a Registered Nurse.

Rossi and his family came to America from a little town close to Benevento in Campagna just after the First World War, in 1921. He was one of ten kids. Five of them, including Rossi, were born in Italy, and the rest were born in America. His sister Mary was six years older, never married and died in 1962 at the age of 53 of a hemorrhagic stroke caused by a brain aneurysm. She had been a secretary in the same law office since she graduated from secretarial school. Two of his older brothers had died in the Second World War fighting for the U.S., both in Europe. He had two younger brothers who didn't get to fight in the war because of health problems. One is a teacher in New Jersey and the other is a lawyer in Wilkes-Barre. His four other sisters are married and live in the area.

The family settled in town and his father went directly into the mines. Rossi went into the mines in 1924 when he was 13. He joined the Marines in early 1938, as much to get out of the mines as to prove he was a real American. He married Jenny Cipollini in 1940. Their parents had been neighbors in their village in Italy. Jenny's parents came over before the First World War,

and they are the reason Rossi's parents ended up here. Jenny went to nursing school in Hazleton.

Rossi and Jenny have four children: Albert (Al) 24, Vincent (Vinnie), 19, and twins, Camille (Lillie) and (Juliette) Julie, who are 16. Albert graduated from Kings College and is working there in the admissions department. Vinnie is a sophomore at the University of Scranton. Lillie and Juliette are juniors in high school.

Rossi went on active duty right after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and he was one of the first to be involved in combat. He took part in the Battle of Corregidor in the Philippines and was captured along with 11,000 Americans and Filipinos in April 1942. He spent the rest of the war as a prisoner of war, much of it in a dark pit in solitary confinement. He was freed after the second Battle of Corregidor in February 1945. When he returned home in the fall of 1945 after the surrender of Japan, he went right back into the mines and has been there ever since.

Jonesy

John James Jones IV (J.J. to family and Jonesy to everyone else), was born in 1945. His father, John James Jones III (Jay to family and Jonesy to everyone else), is 43 and a miner in the same mine. He is a WWII Veteran.

His mother, Alice (Wayne) Jones is 41. Alice's father and grandfather had also been miners. His grandfather, John James Jones, Jr. (Johnny to family and Jonesy to everyone else), is also working in the mine. His grandmother, Gladys (Howard) Jones, comes from a mining family.

J.J. is single and lives at home in a side-by-side duplex with his parents and grandparents. He had decent grades in school and was a star baseball player. He caught and batted left-handed and was All-State at first base in his junior and senior years in high school. He did not want to go to college, but he was offered a chance to play in the Pittsburgh Pirates AAA farm team in Columbus, Ohio after finishing his military duties. He decided to join the Marines, but he broke his leg during basic training at Camp Lejeune and was given a medical discharge. He walks with a limp.

He is a fourth generation miner in the U.S. His great grandparents on both sides came from Pontypridd, Southeast Wales where they had been miners for several generations before immigrating to America. His great grandfather, John, died in a mine accident, his third. Outside of the family, they were all called Jonesy. The family attends the Grace-Saint Paul's United Methodist Church.

Jonesy has a girlfriend named Lucy James. She works as a lab technician at Stegmaier Brewing Company in Wilkes-Barre. She went to junior college and studied to be a chemistry lab technician. She lives in McAdoo with her parents. She met J.J. at a Methodist prayer meeting.

At the age of three, Jonesy fell down an abandoned well when he was out in the woods with his parents. He followed the older children away from the adults who were busy picking mushrooms. The well was empty, so he wouldn't have drowned if he had gotten to the bottom, and, miraculously, he was not badly hurt from the fifty-foot fall. It was because of the branches that had grown into the well from the sides that he survived with just a few scratches. He was caught on one of the branches before he hit the bottom, and that is where he stayed for the two hours it took to first find him and then to pull him up. The well was too narrow for one of the adults to be hoisted down, so they put Jonesy's Cousin Henry, an eight-year-old, into a sling and lowered him down.

Wadz

Walter (Wladziu) Gorzynski, is called Wadz, pronounced Vaj. He shares his first name with the famous pianist, Liberace, whose real name was Wladziu

Valentino. Wadz is 25. He was born in the Warsaw, Poland Jewish ghetto in 1940. His parents and all of his relatives were killed in the German concentration camps during WWII. Father Andrew O'Malley at the Roman Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception where Wadz is a member is listed as Wadz's next of kin in company records. Wadz was born just after the German authorities established the Warsaw ghetto. His parents and their closest relatives hid with Wadz and his three siblings for two years during the war. They were found by the Polish police and handed over to the Germans. They were taken to different prison camps. He survived and was sent to America after the war. He ended up in a Catholic orphanage. Bad eyesight from an illness as a child kept him out of the Army when he was drafted at the age of eighteen. It also handicapped him in school. He went to work in the mines because that was the only job he could get when he left school at 16, and he has been there ever since.

Wadz is single and lives in a boarding house. He is very quiet and keeps very much to himself. He eats his evening meal six days a week and lunch on Sunday at the Silver Line Diner, the diner run by Tony's parents. He attends mass every Sunday at Immaculate Conception Church.

He met his girlfriend, Michalina (Lina) Dombrovsky two years ago in the town library where she is the head librarian. Lina lives on a farm outside of town with her father, Edward. She went to Penn State at State College. She started working at the library after finishing her college education in library studies. She took part in the March on Washington on August 28, 1963 when Martin Luther King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial.

Tony

Anatolios (Tony) Katsaros is 31. His father, Milos Katsaros, who is 62, owns and runs the Glider Diner which was started by his father. Tony's mother, Elaine, is 60 and works with Milos in the diner. His brother, Alexandros (Alex), is 32 and works with his parents in the diner. Alex sold insurance before becoming a one-half owner in the diner three years ago, and is married to Edith (Edie). Their sister, Giorgiana (Gina), is 29 and a nun in the Sisters of Mercy Order. Tony's grandparents on both sides came from Greece. Tony's father's parents opened the diner. His mother's father (Stefanos Stefanidis) worked in the mines and died in a mine accident when Tony was six. Tony never wanted to work

in the diner or the mines. His brother was in the same class as Nicco.

Tony went into the Navy after high school and signed up for submarine duty. He married Donna Giannopoulos, a nurse, after his first tour was over. It was an arranged marriage. They are now divorced. They had no children, but Donna had an abortion without telling Tony before she did it. She told him after having the abortion, saying she didn't think either one of them was ready to be parents. He filed for divorce and then found out she was having an affair with one of the doctors at the hospital where she worked in Hazleton. She claimed the aborted baby was Tony's. He didn't believe her. He went to the hospital where Donna and the doctor worked, found the doctor in the employee cafeteria, and left him unconscious with a broken nose on the floor after flattening him with a punch. The doctor didn't press charges. Tony had a job as a car salesman, but then he started drinking and gambling, lost his job, got into debt and took part in a robbery for one of the local racketeers to pay back the debt and got caught. He spent eighteen months in jail. When he got out, he took the only job he could get, in the mines.

His new girlfriend is April Cummins, a Navy nurse. She grew up and lives in Wilkes-Barre with her parents.

She has never been married. She is the sister of one of Tony's Navy friends, Mitch Cummins. Their father, William, is a conductor on the Central Railroad of New Jersey and their mother, June, is a cook in the GAR High School cafeteria.

Joey

Joseph Edward Zukas (Joey) is 33. He is married to Nicco's sister Lilly. His father, Adomas (Adam), age 62, works as building superintendent in high school. He was injured during WWII, so he could not return to the mines where he worked before the war. Joey's mother, Adele (Addie) Butkus Zukas, is 61 and works in city hall.

Joey was a star football quarterback and a star on the baseball team. He had a full scholarship to play football at the University of Arizona but left after the first semester. He was dating Lilly, who told him she was pregnant in November. He came home after the first semester and he and Lilly got married in January. He had a draft deferral for going to college that kept him out of Korea. Joe Junior was born in June, 1952.

Joey's family came from Lithuania in 1921. They had lived in Vilnius, the country's capital which became a free country after WWI when the new Soviet Union abandoned their claim to it. The Poles invaded Vilnius

and created a state called Central Lithuania and then incorporated it into the Second Polish Republic. Joey's father and mother were already married when they left with their parents and all the members of their families, arriving in America in 1921. His father was 18 and his mother was 16 when they arrived. Joey was the youngest of six children. His grandfathers, great uncles, father and all his uncles went into the mines when they arrived. When his father came back from the War he did not go back to the mine. He had been shot in the leg and the muscles never healed properly, so he walks with a limp. He was hired as the building superintendent for the high school.

Joey has not been able to hold a job, which is how he ended up in the mines. When he came back from college he worked in a lumber yard, but the pay was too low. Then he tried to be a used car salesman, but could not close enough sales to make a decent salary. He drove a bus for the local transit company until the company went out of business. Lilly had a steady and good-paying job as a secretary at the mine company office in the center of town. Finally, Joey decided he had to earn enough money to feel he was the head of the house, so he went into the mine.

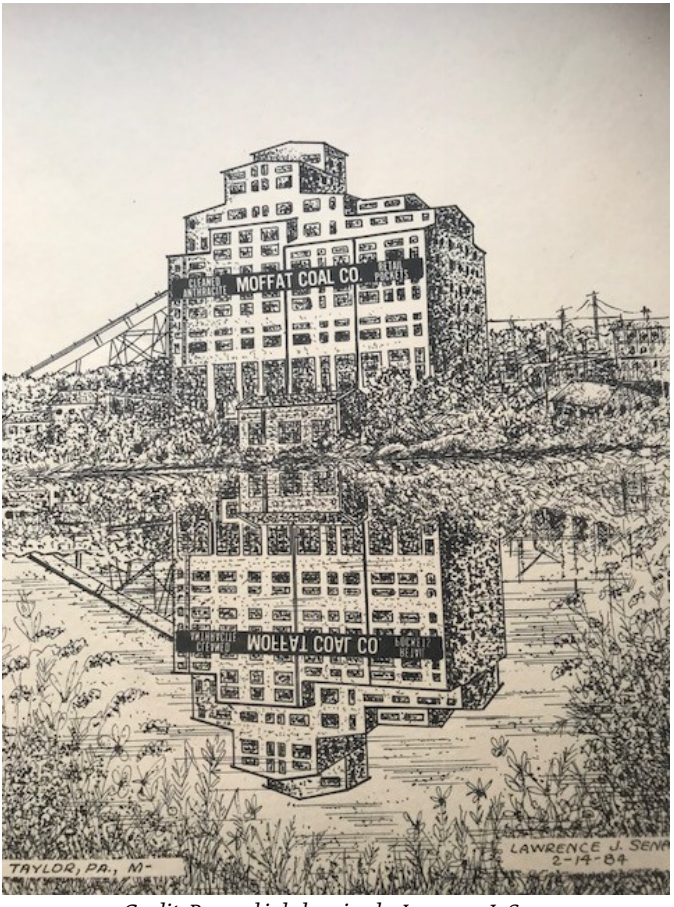
Three generations of anthracite coal miners

A young boy sits atop a railroad car full of large lumps of anthracite coal. Standing next to the car is his grandfather. His father is sitting on a makeshift bench. All three are dirty from their work in the mines. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anthracite mining was a family affair. Sons began working at the mines and coal breakers as early as eight years old. This photograph, was taken in 1917 in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Credit: Photo by John Horgan, Jr./PHMC Bureau of Historic Sites and Museums/Anthracite Heritage Museum

The Coal Breaker

The Moffat Coal Company breaker in Taylor, Pennsylvania was built by the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western Railroad Company in 1915-16. In 1920, the W. Y. Moffat Coal Company acquired the Taylor Breaker.



Credit: Pen and ink drawing by Lawrence J. Sena

Coal breakers are a feature of anthracite coal mines. They are large buildings which house the machinery and the workers who control them to break up the blocks of coal into sizes that are best suited for the various uses of coal as fuel, and also to remove impurities such as slate, sulfur or rock from the coal so that the coal burns efficiently. The breaker is located as close as possible to the mine entrance, although if it is built directly over the mine entrance, an explosion in the mine can cause the entire breaker to catch fire within seconds, trapping and killing everyone inside. After several disasters, like one in 1871 in Pittston, Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania legislature passed a law in 1885 requiring coal breakers to be situated at least 200 feet from the opening of a mine. Wooden construction was replaced by steel and reinforced concrete both for for safety and because heavier loads started to be processed at the end of the 19th century.

Depending on the placement of the breaker, lumps of coal were either rolled into the top of the breaker in mine cars, or hoisted up using first animal power, then steam and then motorized lifts. Once at the top, the coal was loaded into a crushing machine. In the old days, men with sledge hammers did the crushing. The most common post-War crushers were ring granulator types

where the coal lumps were fed in at the top and a rotating mechanism with rollers set at different heights pushed the coal against a perforated drum with hole sizes corresponding to the desired finished sizes of the coal.

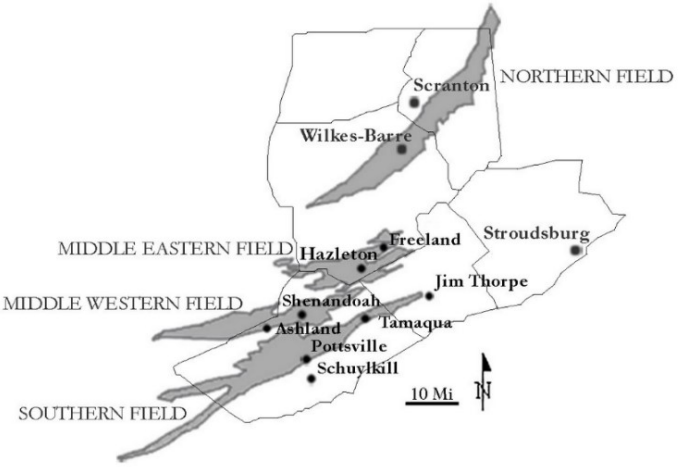
The smallest size of coal is called Pea, which is from one-half to 10/32 inches. Pea coal is used in screw-fed heating boilers called 'stokers'. There are three sizes of Pea, No. 1 Buckwheat (8/32" – 10/32"); No. 2 Buckwheat (6/32"); and No. 3 Buckwheat (3/32" – 4/32"). The next size is Chestnut, which is around an inch in diameter. Chestnut is mostly used in hand-fed residential boilers. Stove sizes are around 1 ½" and are used in home cooking stoves. Egg 2 ¼", Broken 3 ¼" and Steam 4 ½" – 6" used as fuel in steamships.

Coal breakers were eight or nine storeys tall. They were high because the process of sorting and cleaning the coal depended on gravity. At the beginning of the 20th century, "breaker boys" handled the lumps before the crushing stage as the coal slid down from the top level to the next level on inclined picker tables. They removed rocks and slate and threw them down chutes to the culm pile. Culm is waste made up of coal too small to use, coal dust and dirt. Clean lumps were put in another chute for clean crushing and lumps with impurities were put into a third chute for crushing and more cleaning. Some of

the cleaning processes involved using water. Another sorting process occurred on the second level from the top. The crusher was on the third level from the top. On the fourth level, more cleaning and sorting out impurities happened. This was mostly automated by the 1930s.

Coal and culm dropped finally to the bottom level. Dry culm was dumped into piles close to the breaker. As the piles grew in size, spontaneous combustion would cause the coal dust and small coal pieces to ignite and eventually turn the culm dumps into giant piles of ash with flickering flames visible when the light of day turned to the dark of night, emitting the characteristic smell of rotten eggs. Wet culm was put into holding ponds where the culm gradually settled and the water evaporated. The clean coal, emerging from the breaker and separated by size, was loaded into rail cars for delivery to the market.

The Pennsylvania Anthracite Coal Fields



These are the anthracite coal fields in Northeastern Pennsylvania where the story, The Coal Men, is set. LEHIGH COAL AND NAVIGATION COMPANY – Mauch Chunk Colliery, where the men are trapped, is at the top of the Southern Fiel

CHAPTER 1

THE CAVE

Damn it! I don't want it to end like this. I got more shit to do in life. I wanna be there for my kids.

"How'd it happen?" It's Tony. At least two of them made it. Who's he talking to? Make it be Joey.

"It was a squeeze. There was no explosion." That's Jonesy. *"A pillar crumbled right in front of me. I saw it happening. I heard the sound of the pillar cracking and I saw the black dust beginning to form a cloud starting from the ceiling down to the floor. At first I didn't understand that the roof was caving in, and when I did I froze for a second. Maybe it was longer. Before I could turn and run, the roof was already collapsing. I heard the chunks of coal falling in front of me and the dust filled my lungs when I took a breath. Then I saw Nicco. The chunks of coal were landing just behind him. He dove forward, but he didn't make it out all the way. The roof fell on top of him covering him up to his waist. The sound of the falling coal faded and the cloud of coal dust settled. He hit his head on the hard ground when he landed."*

That's when I passed out. What was I doing there, alone? I didn't see anyone else. I didn't see Jonesy. If I ran the other way I'd be dead. Maybe I am dead. Maybe I'm just imagining hearing Tony's and Jonesy's voices.

"I'za heard it, but didn't see nothin'." That's Rossi. I can't be imagining his voice too. I couldn't reproduce the way he talks in my dreams. Joey, you gotta be alive. *"Musta been a squeeze. There weren't no explosion. It musta been a squeeze. What time ya got, Jonesy?"*

Who cares what time it is! Who else is alive?

"It's two-ten," answered Jonesy.

"Okay. It'sa two-ten now. We'ze trapped. We gotta make a plan. Okay, whatta we got?"

Rossi's the shift foreman, so he needs to take charge. It's a good thing we've worked with him for so long so we know what he's saying. You'd think that after over forty years he'd be able to sound like he didn't just get off a boat from Italy and learn what he knows of English on the trip across the ocean. How many made it? Is anybody else alive?

"Jonesy, Wadz, Tony, you and me and Nicco. That's all of us."

It was Joey doing the counting. He made it! Sis would have killed me if I got out of here alive and her man didn't. They all made it, thank God. We're not out yet, but at least Joey's got a better chance of making it than I do since he's not unconscious and half covered in coal. She probably knows about it already. They're having a meeting up on the top floor of the office in town to decide what they're going to do. She's there sitting next to her boss listening to the big cheese lay it all out, what they'll say to the newspapers. Pa will get the call while he's reading his papers like he always does on his day off. He knows more about what's

happening in the world than the President. He could give Johnson a daily briefing on what's going on everywhere. Ma's over at our place watching the kids. She'll be a wreck when she hears.

"We godda get Nicco out from under there. He's unconscious, but he'sa still liv'n, ain't he? What a fighter! MI SENTI, NICCO? You hear me?"

Thanks, Rossi. Yep, I hear you loud and clear and I'm still alive. I can't feel anything below my waist, but I'm still alive. I can feel the dirt under my hands and on the tips of my fingers. I can smell the coal dust when I breathe. I can feel my chest pressing against the ground when I take a breath. If I make it out of here, I'm probably going to wish I was dead, but I'll cross that bridge if I get to it. Something felt off this morning when I came down the shaft. There was a different smell in the air. I remember thinking about it. *What's that smell?* I thought. The cold air came into my nose a little colder than usual. I've been breathing cold dust long enough to know that it always smells the same. It's been in the ground as solid rocks for millions of years and then we come down and break it into bits and it gets into the air and settles in our lungs. It becomes part of us. We cough it up and look at the small black spots mixed in with the phlegm. But it didn't smell the same this morning. Maybe a crack had already started and it was leaking out the smell of coal that we hadn't touched before. I should have turned around, gone home and called in sick. That's what I should have done.

"He musta shit'n his pants, unless it's one'a yuz guys."

It's me. If a couple of tons of coal fell on top of you, you'd have shit in your pants too. I felt it coming just before I passed out. What if I had died right then? My last thought would have been "I'm shitting in my pants!"

"It's him," said Joey.

You're an expert on how my shit smells, Joey, because if I didn't get into the bathroom before you during all those months you and Lilly lived with us after you got married, I'd never get to school.

"Anybody ain't got water?"

I could really use a slug of water right now. Somebody needs to turn my head so I don't have my face in the dirt. I'm having trouble breathing. The football practice field behind the high school was covered with coal dust just like this. We used it for our pick-up games when we were kids. No helmets. No padding. The worst was being at the bottom of a pile and having your face pushed into the ground. "Get off! Get off! I can't breathe!" That feeling of not being able to breathe was the most terrifying thing I have experienced. I need to be calm. I'm still alive. Air is getting in and down to my lungs somehow. Somebody needs to turn my head.

"I dropped my canteen when I heard the roof breaking up," said Tony. *"I was takin' a drink. It all spilled out."*

Tony is the thirstiest guy in town. Since he dried out and got clean, he's drinking only water, but he seems to need a lot of it. You always know where Tony's been working because it smells of piss. He's pissing all the time.

"Anybody else? Okay. Tony, I know how you drink lotsa water, so yuz gonna get yours poured into this here cup. I don't know how long it'sa gonna be before they break through, but we' godda make plans for the worse case. The last ting we can run outta is the air, and the second last ting is the water. The third is the light. Ever'body turn off the head lamp. I keep my lamp on tills she's dead. Then one'a yuz guys takes over. Got it? OK, who's got food? Anything left in your lunch buckets? Bring it out."

"Here's a baloney and Swiss cheese sandwich," said Jonesy. *"I always bring an extra one and eat it after I've washed up."*

I'm sure he got that advice from his Ma, Alice Wayne Jones. The Wayne family, like the Joneses, probably helped to invent coal mining in Wales before they all came over here. They know how to go to work in a mine every day, and they've been doing it over here for four generations. My family's been at it for only three generations, with me as the third. We don't treat it like a profession like the Joneses and the Waynes. Our lunch pails are all beaten up and theirs are all shiny. They look new but they're old. They just take better care of them. Jonesy's got an extra sandwich in his pail and I've got a Snickers in my inside coat pocket. It's probably peanut butter and melted chocolate now, but it's food.

"Let's see what we got. Two Pop Tarts, a Mars Bar, a Hershey's Bar, ten bags'a Planters peanuts. Where the hell do ya put all those bags, Tony? I got two baloney sangwiches and two Twinkies. Nicco's probably squashed his Snickers. Can you get his face out of the dirt, Joey. Carefully. You don't want'a move him or turn him. We don't know what's broken. But he's gotta breathe, get the air into the lungs. VORREI CHE TU POTESSI PARLARE CON ME, NICCO."

Thanks again, Rossi. Yeah, I wish I could talk to you too. I wonder if Annie's heard about this yet. She's going to be pissed. She didn't want me to come down here again. 'I thought you had enough of breathing in coal dust,' she had said when I told her I took the job.

Thanks, Joey. That feels a hell of a lot better. I can breathe easier now.

I thought I was set for life seven years ago when Charlie asked me if I wanted to drive for him. I'd been in the mines during the five years since I got out of the service. Charlie was going to buy a new truck, the fifth since he took over the business from his old man, and he was going to start delivering up the line. He figured he could undercut the competition by getting a good deal from *Lehigh Coal and Navigation*. I'd never seen Annie so happy as the day I came home with the news that I quit the mines and was going to start driving for Charlie. Everything was going great guns for the first five years, but it started to go downhill the last couple.

Charlie and I met in his office. He sat behind the same desk and in the same chair his father Louie had sat in for forty years, before he turned *Lehigh Valley Coal Delivery Company* over to his oldest son. Louie Salvatore was a smart man. He had come over from Palermo as a young boy with his parents. His father went right into the mines and died in an accident ten years later. Louie quit school as soon as he could get his working papers and went into the mines to keep the family together. Every day, at the end of his shift, he went to his second job, delivering bags of coal with a wheelbarrow. After a couple of years he had enough money to buy an old truck and he started delivering coal full time. His customers weren't just Italians. They were Greeks and Polacks and Lithuanians and Welsh and even Irish. So Louie decided he wasn't going to put his own name on the truck. No *Salvatore & Sons*. That's why he called it *Lehigh Valley Coal Delivery Company*.

Behind Charlie, on the shelf on the wall, were photos and trophies. The trophies were for sponsoring the Little League and Teener League baseball and basketball teams, and most of the photos were from the sponsored teams that won championships. Charlie and his two brothers, Paulie and Pete, were in many of them. Charlie was three years older than me, Paulie two years older and Pete one year younger. I was in some of those old photos as well, usually in the back row. The Salvatores were all good in sports. Pete was a first team high school All State defensive linebacker and played for Penn State. He

would've gone into the pros if he hadn't gotten hurt in his senior year. He went to California after college and we haven't seen much of him since then. He's one of the guys who gets to stand on the sidelines with the football team on Thanksgiving. Paulie studied accounting in Wilkes-Barre for a couple of years, so he's in charge of keeping the company's books.

"I'll sell you the truck if you want to keep going."

"I don't have the money and no one's gonna give me a loan for hauling coal," I had said.

"You know I'd bankroll you, Nicco, but all our money's tied up in the trucks. It's all Paulie and me's got left from the business."

"Damn the gas guys."

"I shoulda seen it coming. A couple of years ago, Gracie was up in Scranton visiting her sister. She just had a gas stoker put in and told Gracie how much cleaner the house was after they took out the furnace and the coal bin. It was like when the steam engines disappeared and the diesels took over, Gracie's sister told her. All of a sudden, the mothers didn't have to run out and pull the clothes off the clothesline when they heard the train whistle. I should've put two and two together back then and started investing in gas."

"There's still work in the mines," I had said. "There's still coal down there and I know how to dig it out."

"Annie won't be too happy about that, Nicco, and she'll take it outta my skin if anything happens to you."

"You probably noticed that there ain't too many other jobs in the area, Charlie, and Annie's not going anywhere else until her parents are both gone. And then she wouldn't move until the kids are settled. And then she wouldn't move if the kids live in the town, which she'll do everything to make sure they do, just like her ma did. I've given up trying to change her mind about moving so I can find a job that pays decent money and gives me some self-respect."

I'm sure both Annie and Charlie are outside the mine now. Pa's there, too. If I know Pa, he's told them he has to be on the team working on digging us out. He's probably told them that he has to be at the face. I want to be alive when they break through. It'll kill him if I'm not. It'll kill Ma for sure.

"Starda taykin' da rocks away froma da top first, Joey, soza dayza donna falla down ona'issa back," said Rossi, directing the work on getting me out from under the collapsed ceiling. I wish I would wake up so I could get a drink of water. I'm really thirsty. Nobody's said anything about my blood pressure. I read in the newspaper about a guy who was buried up to his waist like me in a mine accident up in Pittston. When they took all of the rocks off of him, his blood pressure dropped so fast he died. Joey, you have to take the rocks off slowly. I know you can't hear me, but maybe you can feel what I'm saying. Slowly.

"Take them off slowly, Joey," said Jonesy. *"It's his blood pressure we have to be worried about. The rocks on his legs have pushed his blood into the rest of his body. I'll help you."*

What a smart kid. He should be running the business. He knows more than the clowns in their fancy suits driving around in their expensive cars. They're bleeding the company and they don't give a damn about safety. Lilly's the first in either Pa's or Ma's family to work in the office. It's a good job, I guess, and they pay her a decent wage, but she's not one of their kind even if she acts like it sometimes. She's not going to get into one of their country club parties. She defends them when we complain about the pay or safety and Pa tells her not to forget what side of the tracks she was brought up on. Before Joey came down here, after his last job didn't work out, he tried for a job in the office. Lilly encouraged him and she tried to pull some strings to get him in. He didn't get the job. It went to a kid whose uncle is one of the sales managers. It's all rigged.

"Jonesy, checka how many rooms we got."

It's four. Four rooms. I know this part of the mine. That'll give us enough air for at least two days if we don't get any bad gases. I remember when Pa came home after working two days straight to dig out a crew that had gotten trapped. I was just a little kid. There were three of them who got trapped. He told us that when they broke through after three days all the bad gases came out. It nearly knocked them out. And when they were finally able to get

into the place where the men were trapped, they were all stone dead and colored blue.

"Check if there's any masks too, Jonesy. The air's okay, ain't it? What do yuz think?"

"It's good," answered Tony.

"Howza 'bout you, Wadzee? You been real quiet. The air's okay for ya?"

"Yeah, yeah. Z'okay I breathe okay."

"It's four rooms," yelled Jonesy, *"and I found two mask cases. I checked them and they're working alright."*

Two masks, six people. We might get another couple of hours after the air runs out. I don't hear anything or feel any vibrations from digging or drilling. I wonder what the distance is between them out there and us in here. A guy at the Post was part of a crew that pulled out a miner after a cave-in in Wilkes-Barre last year. He had his legs trapped, just like me, with his upper body in the room. He was only six feet in and it took them two-and-a-half hours to get to where the miner's legs were covered with the rubble and free him. The guy said the miner totally recovered. Another miner was completely buried in the same cave-in and it took them six days to recover his dead body.

It was Ma who said Pa didn't want me to follow him down into the mines when I got out of the service. "Why don't you take the money from the GI Bill and go to college," she had said. I laughed. There wasn't a college that would

take me with the grades I had in high school, not even a junior college or one of those new community colleges. "I'll save up enough money so Annie and me can get married, and then I'll get a job out in the air," I told her.

"It's bad enough that I have to worry about your father every day, and both of your grandfathers," Ma said. "Now I have to worry about you too. It's a good thing somebody invented the rosary or I'd go crazy. But you do what you have to do. You always do."

'Do what you have to do.' That was Ma's way of saying that she would be happy if I did what she wanted me to do, and she was going to be real sad if I didn't, and that I should feel damn guilty about what I was going to do anyway. Some mothers would say 'You're killing me! You're sending me to an early grave!' Not Ma. No, she just said 'Do what you have to do.' It was loaded with guilt.

Pa never said anything about me coming down into the mines. When I told him I was going to go to the mine office to apply for a job, he just said they would probably hire me. 'I'll vouch for you if you want.' He didn't say, 'You're going down there over my dead body!' I guess he knew that once I made up my mind to do something I was going to do it. Just like he did. He also knew that since I was stuck here, I didn't have many other options. But there was something else. Pa was good at his job. He was a damn good miner. Everybody said so. When I went with him to the mine as a kid, just to see where he worked, I could see he was proud to show me around and hear the miners tell

me I should hope to be as good a miner as Pa was one day when it was my turn. We'd walk down through the levels of the breaker, with the sounds from the crusher and the coal and culm crashing down through the chutes, and I couldn't hear anything he said over the noise. I knew I never wanted to work there. Pa was never a breaker boy. Then we'd come home and Ma would complain about the coal dust on my clothes and dirty hands from handling the coal. Pa's proud moment was gone.

There was one thing Pa wanted to do that he didn't do, and that was to move to California after the war. We were sitting around the table after a Sunday dinner not long after Pa came back home from the service. The whole family was there. Ma's brother, Uncle Junior, asked Pa if he had sent his job application to some company close to San Francisco. I knew that Pa had a war buddy from the San Francisco area who worked for the company. It had a funny name, like Hughy Packard or something like that. The guy was one of its first employees before he left for the war. I remember Pa got real quiet and Ma looked upset. Uncle Junior looked like he asked the wrong question and dropped it. I asked Ma about it after everyone went home and she just said Uncle Junior had gotten his stories mixed up.

I found out later that Uncle Junior had definitely not gotten his stories mixed up. One day, during the time when I was driving for Charlie, Pa and I were hunting deer. We were walking to our stand and, out of the blue, he said

I shouldn't have regrets when I got older. "There was a job waiting for me out in California after the war, but your Ma said we'd have to move all the relatives out there or we'd end up being miserable for the rest of our lives. She was right, just like she always is," he said. "There wouldn't have been a mine for you to go into, so maybe you would have tried a little harder in school. Who the hell knows? The company's doin' great. Hewlett-Packard. That's the name of the company. Hewlett-Packard. I probably could have bought a house big enough for us all with the money I would'a made working there." That was it. There was no discussion. We never talked about it again.

Yeah, Pa, I had dreams. I wanted to get my Eagle Scout badge. Cousin Jimmy and me joined the Scouts at the same time and got to First Class together. But I couldn't figure out those merit badges the way he could. It took me two years to get three badges so I hadn't even reached Star and he was already working on Eagle. I lost interest. Instead of working harder, I lose interest. That's what I've always done. Maybe that's something I should work on if I get out of here, not losing interest but working harder. I dreamt about flying jets, too. When I went into the Army I applied for pilot school. I was good at driving cars so I figured I would be good at flying planes. If I had taken the time to read the requirements for getting into pilot school I would've known I didn't have a chance. It's not just flying the planes. You have to know how they work. I didn't even take physics in high school. How the hell does

a plane stay up in the air and why do jets fly so fast? It wasn't one of the courses in the shop program. What a fucking waste of time high school was. The teachers figured us shop kids weren't interested in learning, so they didn't even try to teach us anything. And we just went along for the ride. We graduated with a degree, but it was a worthless piece of paper. I didn't need it to drive a truck for Charlie and I sure as hell didn't need it to buy my ticket into this shit hole.

Regrets, Pa? Yeah, I've got plenty of regrets. My biggest one is not taking the chance to go somewhere far away from here and trying to make a go of my life on my own, without everyone telling me it was okay if I struck out with the bases loaded in the bottom of the ninth and we lost the game, or if I didn't get past First Class in the Scouts, or if I graduated in the bottom ten in the class. Why the hell did Annie marry me? I guess once she told everybody we were going to get married when we grew up, she couldn't just tell everybody she changed her mind. They all treated us like we were engaged from the time we were little kids. Even when I was in grade school I felt guilty if I thought another girl was pretty. None of the girls paid any attention to me in high school. They knew I was taken. Jesus, I remember Father Lavazza giggling on the other side of the confessional when I asked him if I had to confess that I liked one of the girls in Annie's class. It was Angela Cavalieri, but I didn't tell him her name. Was I being dishonorable since I was supposed to marry Annie?

He gave me one of the best pieces of advice I have ever gotten: "Be honest about your feelings, and if you think you like someone else better than the person you are going out with, then you should first tell the person you are going out with before you make your feelings known to the other person." I didn't listen to him and forgot about Angela. She left after high school and I've never seen her since.

"What was he doing out here on his own?" I heard Joey say.

What was I doing here? Now I remember! Rossi told me to go back on the buggy road to the shaft and tell the shift foreman we needed more bits for the drill. Why did he pick me instead of Tony or Joey or Wadz or Jonesy? They'd be here now instead of me, or maybe they wouldn't have made it half way out and they'd be dead.

"I sent him out. It was'a me," said Rossi. *"Son'a'da'bitch. We broke the last bit for the drill I had with me. Nicco was there with me, so I sent him out ta get a couple more. MI DISPIACE, NICCO."*

No need to apologize, Rossi. Yeah, that's it. I was working with Rossi. We're a great team, Rossi and me. Good thing I wasn't in a big hurry or I'd be dead. I stopped to get out one of my Snickers, but before I could unbutton my shirt pocket I heard the sound of the squeeze. If I kept walking I would never have made it. Thanks, Snickers.

"Junior's looking forward to the game on Thursday," Joey said. *"The quarterback from Tamaqua is something else to watch. We don't have much of a chance against them, not with his arm.*

If he doesn't beat you with his passing, he runs all over you. He's like a combination of Starr and Jimmy Brown. We'll be happy when he graduates."

Just like Joey. We just got buried in a mine and we have no idea whether we're going to get out of here alive, and he's thinking about his son being disappointed that they might not get to football game in a couple of days. It's also like him to talk like he never picked up a football or a baseball bat. He never thought he was as good as he was. He was terrific, better than the kid at Tamaqua High. He could have been as good as Starr or Unitas at quarterback, or he could have played running back and been as good as Horning. He didn't even put up a fight when Lilly told him she couldn't go down to Arizona because Ma said no. That was his chance to make it. He's never found his footing after that. I know Lilly cares a lot for him, but she treats him like a kid, a big kid. Joey still follows her around like a love-sick puppy.

"Hope he goes to Pitt or Penn State," chimed in Tony.

"Pete Salvatore came in this weekend, but he's been over in Tamaqua most of the time," said Joey. *"Paterno has him working on the kid. He wants as many winners as he can get for when he takes over next year from Rip."*

Pete always came in at Thanksgiving, to stand on the sidelines with the coaches and play the big shot. He never gave up on Annie, even after we married. I know Annie never did anything to encourage him, but all she had to do

was look in his direction and he took it as a come-on. Everybody did everything they could to get them together. The kicker was their class day when Annie Diriggio was voted belle and Pete Salvatore was voted beau and they had all those photos in the newspaper with Pete wrapping his arm around Annie's waist. And then he took her to the senior prom 'cause no one who wasn't in the class could go. I never would have worked for Charlie if he'd stuck around, but he didn't. The town wasn't big enough for the hot shot. He's probably out there too, standing right next to Annie, telling her how he's going to do everything to get me out and be there for her if I don't make it.

Did you hear that, guys? Pay attention. You gotta concentrate on getting us the hell out'a here.

"I hear something," yelled Tony.

"I hear something, too," said Wadz.

It's faint, but it definitely sounds like a drill. Make it be a drill.

"It's coming from overhead," said Joey. *"They're drilling down."*

Air and water. The two things we need so they have time to open up the mine and drag us out. How far down are we, a couple or three hundred feet maybe? I guess they figure they can open up a lifeline from above faster than they can dig through the debris. I know it's only a couple of hundred feet at most to the shaft. Maybe it caved in all the way back to the shaft and they're drilling down just to keep

us alive until they can figure how to get to us. That wouldn't be good. That would be really, really bad.

"The only way we could have kept him from going down there was to get the hell out of here when we had the chance, after the War," said Sal. "Once he got his roots set with Annie, the two of them weren't going anywhere, just like us. You know that, Connie, so don't go blaming me for letting him do it."

Sal and Connie were in Connie's car on their way to the mine. She refused to ride in his pick-up because she said she needed a step ladder to get into it, so they took her sky blue '60 Dodge Dart whenever they went anywhere together. Sal was driving, as usual. He'd ride in her car,

but he had to drive. Connie was crying and talking at the same time.

Sal had gotten the phone call from the company president's secretary, Judy Bolin. It was Sal's day off. He had slept late like he usually did on his days off and he was hanging around the house pouring coffee from the big percolator that Connie had started and reading the papers that he had not gotten to during the past four days. At a little after two thirty-five he heard the mine whistle blowing continuously. That meant trouble. Then the phone rang. The secretary told him that there had been an accident in the section of the mine where Nicco was working. "Your son and your daughter's husband are in there with Vito Rossi, the young Jones, the Polish kid Walter Gorzynski and Tony Katsaros." She told him what the company was doing and that the families were welcome to come to the main office on Susquehanna and Broadway and wait in the big conference room, or go out to the colliery to the wash shanty. "Lilly's just come out of a meeting with the management. She'll be going to the wash shanty," she said.

"Where does the wall start?" asked Sal.

"About a hundred feet in," answered Judy.

"It's only another hundred to the face. If we're lucky, the roof held in the back four rooms."

"They're going to drill down into the back room."

"We're going to the breaker. Tell them I want to be on the rescue team, and get Jimmy Diriggio there as fast as you can," he had told her, and then he hung up.

Connie was next door at Nicco's and Annie's where she babysat Annie's and Nicco's three kids every other day. Annie's mother Angie took them the other days. Sal went over to tell Connie what had happened. Every miner who has a son who is a miner turns this scene over and over in his head. He knows that one day it will happen, that he will have to tell his wife that their son is buried in the mine, that they will try to dig him out before he is dead, but that they have to prepare for the worst. He wanted to walk slowly and explain things calmly. But he couldn't do either.

Connie had heard the whistle, and when she saw Sal she knew it was Nicco. Her scream of despair when Sal told her what had happened frightened the children, and they all began to cry. The scream was loud enough for Angie to hear it in her house next door and she came rushing in.

"What happened?" cried Angie, out of breath from running.

"There's been an accident at the mine," answered Sal. "Nicco and Joey are in there with four others. Not Jimmy. Jimmy's okay He's going to be on the rescue crew. Stay with the kids. We'll go to the mine," instructed Sal as he held his wife who was trembling and sobbing uncontrollably.

It took Connie a while to calm down enough to put her things together so they could get into her car and drive those couple of miles to the mine. "We'll get them out and then we can make sure they don't go back down again. You're just going to have to hold out another year for me to retire. We need my pension." He drove through the coal breaker's big, iron gate with the company and breaker name overhead: LEHIGH COAL AND NAVIGATION COMPANY – MAUCH CHUNK COLLIERY. Still with the old name for the town. "Lilly's already here," said Sal as they drove into the parking lot. "There's her car. Annie's here too."

Annie was still at work when she got the same call as her father-in-law. Classes were over and she was putting her lesson plan together for Tuesday when the principal, Bill Brooks, came rushing in to tell her she had a call from the mine office. They ran to his office and he left her alone to take the call. After she hung up, she called her mother but there was no answer. She called her own home phone and her mother picked up.

"Sal and Connie are on their way over to the mine," said Angie. "I'm here with the kids. Dad's on his shift and is going to be in the rescue crew with Sal."

"How are the kids?"

"Connie got them pretty shook up when Sal gave her the news. They probably heard her scream all the way downtown. I made some chocolate milk and cookies. They're okay now."

"I'll call you when I hear something, but in any case I'll be home tonight before the kids go to bed." She hung up and started out the door when the principal came in. "Is it an accident?" She nodded. "I'll get a substitute for the rest of the week. Don't worry. Let me know if there is anything else I can do, Annie."

"Thank you, Bill," she said simply and politely, and then walked past him. He would be the last shoulder she could think of crying on if the worst happened. He had been hitting on her since the first day he showed up in the school as the new principal a year ago. She drove along the river to the breaker. The fall colors had been very special this year, she thought, and they are most beautiful along the river. The colors and most of the leaves were gone now and there would be a year of unforeseen events and unpredictable weather before the colors returned, as they always did, in October. *Is it as pretty anywhere else, in all those places where Nicco has said we could move, where he could find a job above ground?* She didn't know. They had never been to San Francisco or Houston. She wasn't planning on going to any of those places either. Things were fine where they were. She likes her job, even though she had to put up with Bill. She just wished Nicco could apply himself and get a good job out of the mines.

When Annie pulled into the parking lot, Lilly's Plymouth was there, right near the entrance to the wash shanty where everyone would gather and wait for news. She parked in one of marked spaces and walked in. She'd

been here a few times with her father when she was in grade school. He might have forgotten something and she would drive with him to pick it up. It's not a place where women were welcome. There were no women miners. When she got to a certain age, her dad stopped asking her if she wanted to go with him back to the shanty. It was about the same time he stopped snuggling with her on the couch as they watched TV and kissing her goodnight.

Lilly was pouring herself a cup of coffee from one of the two large commercial thermoses sitting in the middle of two folding tables placed along one of the shanty's long walls. The other thermos held hot water for tea. The tables were draped with white tablecloths and covering the tablecloths were boxes of doughnuts and trays of sandwiches, paper cups and paper plates, milk cartons and sugar packets which the company had ordered and had delivered from the Krispy Kreme and the sandwich shop next to the office. Folding chairs were being arranged in rows facing the tables by a couple of the office boys. Jack Walsh, the shift superintendent, was standing in the middle of the room watching the boys work when Annie opened the door and walked in. She went directly to Lilly. Lilly put down her coffee and they hugged each other.

"There was always a chance that this would happen," said Lilly into Annie's ear.

"I never wanted to think about it. Nicco would try to talk about it, but I never let him. I just kept thinking that one day he would decide not to go back down."

Walsh approached them. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Maltese," he said, mispronouncing the name, making it Mal-teasy, instead of Mall-taysay. "We're doing all we can to get Nick and Joe and the other men out of there as quick as we can."

"Do you know anything about their condition?" asked Annie. "Can you tell if they are alive?"

"We don't have any news yet. They've started to get ready to drill down to make sure they have water and air while we work on digging from the shaft. I'll be keeping you all informed of how we're doing." Annie thanked him and he went back to his assistants.

"He's okay," said Lilly after he had left. "He means well, but he has no idea what's going on down there. He never set foot in a mine shaft."

"He could start by trying to get to know the people who are working for him. Nicco has never been called 'Nick' in his entire life."

"Joey never answers to 'Joe'," added Lilly, smiling.

Within a few minutes of Annie's arrival, Sal and Connie came in. Connie went directly to Lilly and Annie and they held on to each other for a long time, tears flowing onto each other's shoulders. Sal went quickly over to Walsh.

"What's the situation, Jack? Have there been any sounds from inside the mine?" asked Sal.

"No, not yet. They started drilling from above but they stopped to check if the location was right. It looks like it was a squeeze between sixteen and eighteen, at least that's what it looks like from the shaft side. There was no one in eighteen to twenty, so no one who was on this side saw it happen. The six of them should have been working in thirteen and fourteen. Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen and sixteen are sealed off. We're drilling down to get air in there and to check what's open. They're over fourteen now."

"What about going through the wall with a mole? There's room to get a three-footer in there. That's the fastest bet. Digging by hand will take a couple of days."

"They've located a drill over at Number 8 in Tamaqua. Jay and Johnny Jones are picking it up now. Judy said you and Jimmy Diriggio wanted to be on the rescue crew. Jimmy's already down at the wall."

"I'll get changed and go right down." Sal spent a few minutes with Connie, Annie and Lilly and then went into the locker room to change into his work clothes. He was a different man when he came out. It had been almost twenty years since the company built the wash shanty and the men showered and changed before coming home. It was just after the War that they put it in. Connie hadn't seen her husband in his mining clothes in all that time. He could have been working in a meat packing plant for all she knew. He never talked about his work and she never asked. He had a pay check at the end of the month that he handed over to her, and she gave him spending money. It was

enough for cigarettes and beers at the Post. If he needed more, like for his hunting license, he asked for it. Connie paid the bills, filled the church envelopes, gave the kids their spending money and handed money to Sal to pay for tickets to the movies when the family went together.

"As soon as our son and Joey are out of there, I want you to tell them that they can't go down again," Connie said to Sal.

"Since when did Nicco listen to anything I told him to do or not to do?" he answered. He was about to leave when Jenny Rossi walked in.

CHAPTER 2

THE HOLE

"WHAT ARE YOU gonna do when we get out'a here, Rossi," Tony asked.

"After I sees all thing's good with Jenny and the kids, I'ma going to the graveyard to put the flowers over Ma and Pa and Mary. Those times when I was in the hole I could feel them prayin' for me. I could hear them. It got me through the hole thing. Every time they put me in the hole for a couple of days or more, I always heard them. It was like they wuz there with me. After I been to the graveyard, I'ma gonna enjoy Tanksagivin' with my FAMIGLIA."

I learned that the men who were in the War didn't like to talk about the bad parts. Pa would tell us about the things he saw when they got leave, like the pissing kid in Brussels. He brought one of them home with him screwed onto an ashtray. All the pictures that were in Ma's album from the War showed him somewhere when he was on leave. He'd often joke about a German soldier surrendering to him while he was taking a dump in the woods. It was after the Germans surrendered and Pa was somewhere in the south of Germany cleaning out the final pockets of die-hards who wouldn't give up their weapons. The soldier just dropped his gun in front of Pa and held up his hands. Pa said he picked up the gun with one hand and

wiped himself with the other. The guy just stood there watching.

But with his buddies, he told the other side of the story. They all did. The men would tell each other about the bad stuff when they met at the VFW Post. That's when I heard about Pa's experience in the Battle of the Bulge during Christmas and New Year, 1944-45. He said it was the worst part of the War because it was the first battle and he had nothing to compare it to. He didn't know if they were winning or losing. All he knew was that there were a hell of a lot of American GIs who were dying, and he expected that he would be one of them. The artillery shells from the German guns kept falling, and every time one landed, men died. Every Christmas he lights ten candles in church, before the mass starts, for the ten men he knew who died during the Battle. He always comes back to the pew with tears in his eyes.

I was at the Post once with Pa when Rossi was talking about what happened to him in the War. A young guy, a marine corporal who had served in Nam, asked him where he was stationed and what action he saw. I knew Rossi had been a prisoner of war, but I had never heard the whole story. When I did, it changed everything I thought about him.

"I joined the Corps in thirty-eight. That was before Lejeune. We went through Parris Island, and then I got shipped to San Diego with the Second Brigade. We all knew that the war was'a com'in, but we didn't know where it was'a gonna start. They

trained the shit outta us with the amphibious jiggers. In the boat. In the water. Out'a the boat, out'a the water. I got shot a jillion a times. By the time da Japs come to Pearl Harbor, we were already on the Philipines. The Japs had gone into China in thirty-seven, so we were putty sure we were gonna be in their targets. We took an ass-whuppin, we did."

It was hard to follow Rossi most times when he talked. It was like he had just gotten off the boat from Italy a couple of weeks ago and picked up English in the streets. We always speak Italian with each other when we're alone, but he switches to his version of English as soon as somebody else comes close. He had just turned fifty-four. I know because our whole family had gone over to his house for his birthday a few weeks before. All of the Avellinese and Beneventani in town were there. He came to America with his parents when he was ten, in 1921, so he's had plenty of time to get the English language down a hell of a lot better than he has. His sister Mary, who was six years older, spoke English like Grace Kelly, like the Mainliners down in Philly. Mary never married and died in '62 at the age of 57 of a hemorrhagic stroke caused by a brain aneurysm. She had been a secretary in the same law office since she graduated from secretary school. His two younger brothers, who were born here, went to college. One is a teacher just over the line in New Jersey and the other one is a lawyer in Wilkes-Barre. Rossi just seemed to want to keep the Italian immigrant image alive. His accent was his way of doing it. On the other hand, he didn't get

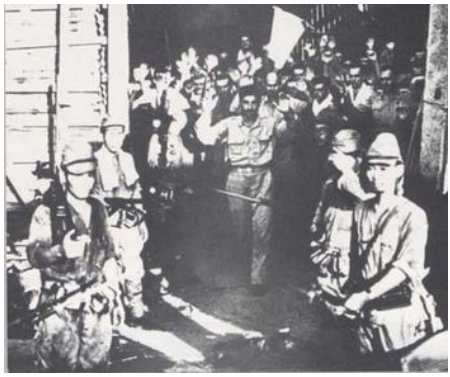
much of a chance to learn the language in school. He spent only three years there before he joined his father and his two older brothers in the mine. Both brothers made it through the War, spent a couple of months at home and then left for Texas to work in the oil fields. As far as I know, they're still down.

His pa, Tommaso, went right into the mines as soon as they got here. So did Rossi's two older brothers. All the men in his family were day laborers in Italy. Some days they worked on a farm, other days on the roads. Tommaso had never been in or near any kind of a mine in his whole life, but he knew what to do with a shovel and a pick. Rossi followed him down into the mines three years later. He was only thirteen. There were plenty of kids who came down here at that age forty years ago. Pa was one of them. They could crawl into spaces that the men couldn't get into, and they had the job of placing the dynamite caps. At thirteen, I was the Prince of Villa Maltese. The last thing I was planning to do was to work here. Ma said over her dead body was I going to follow Pa down here. She's still alive, God love her. She always figured I'd find something else to do, but that I'd settle in the area so I could take care of them like she took care of her parents. Her biggest fear was that I would move more than half a day's drive away, to California or Chicago or Florida.

Rossi married Jenny Cipollini in 1940 on Thanksgiving weekend while he was on leave. They're still one of the best looking couples in town, especially on the

dance floor. Their parents had been neighbors in their village in Italy. Jenny's parents came over before the First World War, and they are the reason Rossi's parents ended up here. Jenny was born here. Both families lived over in Coaldale. From what Rossi has said, it was like me and Annie, engage before getting their First Holy Communion. Rossi's and Jennie's oldest son, Albert, was born nine months after Rossi and Jenny were married, six months before Pearl Harbor. He's never seen the inside of a mine and never will. Albert graduated from Kings, and his brother, Vinnie, is a junior at the University in Scranton. Their twin girls are high school juniors and are both smart as whips. Annie says they will probably end up being joint valedictorians when they graduate. They want to go to Penn State, but Annie says Jenny has given them a choice between the Sisters of Mercy at Misericordia and the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary at Marywood.

"How the hell we ended up in that shithole Corregidor I'll never know. I was in the fourth Marine Regiment. The big cheese, General MacArthur, had gotten the hell outta there March. They took him over to Australia or some place. We were under Lieutenant General Wainwright after that. There was only a little food for us, and not much water. The Japs kept up the bombing



from land and from the air. On the fifth of May, the first wave of Japs landed. We beat them back. Next day, they come again. We killed them all. Eight hundred of 'em. Now they was really pissed, and we was scared shitless. We stood out another day, and then we had to give up or all get killed. We burned all da flags so the Japs wouldn't get them. Eleven thousand. That's how many of us they took prisoner."

"What happened then?" asked the corporal. *"Did you have to work on the bridge over the Kwai River?"*

"Them was the 'Limeys', kid, the Brits," replied Rossi. Everybody laughed, even the corporal. *"Sum of us got shipped to Japland. Sum of us, like me, stayed right where we were. They put me on'a the train with lots of other guys and it felt like we went around the whole damn world a couple'a times. Lots of the guys died. In the end, I wound up in a shithole of a prisoner of war camp that was real near where we was captured. The first thing they did with me was to shove me in a hole that was six feet deep and a couple'a feet wide. They put a bamboo cover over the shithole so some air could sneak down in there, but not so much.*

"Tell him how long you were in there, Vittorio?" said one of Rossi's cousins. Only family called Rossi by his real name.

"Yeah, how long were you in there?" asked the corporal.

"We gave up on'a the sixth of May, 1942, and we kicked the Japs' asses in January 1945. So you'za can figure out how long that was."

Over two-and-a-half years. Jesus, Rossi, how the hell could you have stayed alive during that time, I remember asking him when I heard this story.

"Danc'in, Nicco," he had said. *"I danced all the time. I danced in my head when I was in'a the hole. I made up new steps and tried'em out when they pulled me out'a the hole. I danced with the other prisoners when I was out'a the hole. Those guys who were still alive after the war was over were the best damn dancers the marines ever had. I tried to teach the Japs, but they just threw my ass back in'a the hole."*

"Don't you hate those sons-of-bitches?" asked the corporal.

"Nope. They was just doing their jobs, keep'in us from gett'in into the trouble. I make a big smile and called them horses' asses, and they can't understand a word I am saying. They just smile back and throw some rotten rice at me. I eat the rice, make the big smile, and call them sons'a bitches, and they just throw more rotten rice on me."

I'm lying here unconscious with my face in the dirt. Half of my body is covered with rocks and I'm probably paralyzed. If we do get out of here, life's going to be crap. But when I think about what Rossi went through after he was captured, I feel lucky. We'll die in a couple of days if they don't break through. We'll just run out of air and pass out, or we'll run out of water and die of thirst. Rossi spent

almost three years in a hole in the ground, shitting and pissing on himself, living on the water that dripped off his head that they threw on him when they thought about it, eating the rotten rice they gave him that they scraped off their plates and probably anything else that moved around him. He lived through that. How the hell did he do that?

"OK, Rossi, but after you have been to the cemetery and celebrated Thanksgiving, what are you going to do then?" persisted Tony. *"Are you gonna come back down here on Monday? And do you expect us all to be in here waitin' for you?"*

"Yuza mak'in a big'a jump from where we is right now to next Monday, ain't ya Tony?"

Everybody laughed, nobody louder than Rossi.

"I tell ya what. What I really wanna do is take the boat back to Italia and stay there."

Holy jeez! Did I hear him right? Did Rossi just say that he wanted to pack it all in a go back to a place he hasn't seen since he was ten?

"You're kidding, right?" said Joey. *"Have you been back there since you were a kid? There's been a big war in between then and now, and if I remember my history lessons, Italy was on the other side for half of that war. What if it's all different?"*

"I'm not'a kiddin'. I'm real serious. I been thinking about this a long time. When I come down here, into the mine, it's like I'm back in the hole. I feel safe. Nothin' can hurt me 'cause I'm not up there where they can hit me with them banboo sticks. But it's

not a life. Every day it's into the hole and out'a the hole. I talk this strange language in the hole, and my own language when I'm out'a the hole, but only in my own house and with'a my famiglia. I write the letters to my famiglia in Italia and they tell'a me how it's there. They say it's okay. It's good.

"You talked to Jenny about this?" asked Tony.

"If I go to Italia, Jenny's not comin' with me. I made her life hard enough. She's got a life here, and a good job. She's got lots of friends, some of them she don't think I know about. The kids are old enough to take care of themselves. I thought a lot about this. So if you all see me on Monday, it's gonna be in my best suit to pick up my last pay check. Maybe no. We'll see. First, we gotta get the hell out'a here."

He knows. He knows about the doctor. They were just good friends, people said. She didn't have any more kids than Albert until well after Rossi came home, so nobody figured she was doing anything serious, but everybody knew about it, even us kids. We heard Ma and the other ladies talking about it. Jenny was told that Rossi had been captured, nothing more. The Marines didn't know whether he was dead or alive, and if he was alive they didn't know where he was. We knew where Pa was the whole time, except for when he shipped out. That was secret. He was at Camp Kilmer in Jersey City and then they were all moved over to the Brooklyn Army Base before boarding ships for the trip to England. We got Pa's first letter after D-Day and then we followed him up through France to the Battle of the Bulge and through Germany and into Austria.

He didn't write much in his letters and postcards, but there were always photos that someone in his unit took. Pa's still in touch with him. Larry something. He lives up the line in Scranton. They always had big smiles, like they were enjoying themselves.

"The drilling has started over us again," yelled Joey.

"I heard it," said Rossi. *"This time it's right over us."*

"They got their bearings straight now," added Jonesy.

I can hear it clearly. Tell us how long it's going to take them to get all the way down to us, Jonesy.

"We're around two hundred feet down. They should be able to drill an eight-inch hole down in twelve hours, maybe fifteen. They don't have to know we're okay before they start to come through the wall, so they can start digging anytime. If they can get a three-foot mole, they should be able to make fifty feet in a day. If it's just the two pillars that are crushed, the distance between the two faces shouldn't be more than forty-fifty feet. It's nine o'clock, so it's been six-and-a-half hours now since the squeeze. If they keep drilling from above they should be through by six, maybe sooner, and if they start soon at the face, we can be out of her by tomorrow night at the latest."

"Still plenty of time to get cleaned up for Thanksgiving," said Joey.

I have a feeling I'm going to be spending Thanksgiving in a hospital if they do get through before we run out of water and air and I'm still alive in another

twenty-four hours. There are at least a dozen guys at the Post who lost an arm or leg in the Big War and in Korea. A couple of them are in wheelchairs and the others have an artificial leg or arm. Most of these guys have a real good attitude. They get on with life, make the best of it they can and don't mope around lookin' for pity. If I don't walk after this, I want to have that attitude. I'm not sure I can do it, but I want to try. Maybe the last time Annie and I had sex—when was it, a month-or-so ago?—is the last time for me. Will Annie want to find someone else? I couldn't blame her if she did. She's too young to give it up just for me. Rossi sure as hell wasn't getting laid in his prison hole. I wonder if he wanked off while he was in there just to keep his pecker in shape for when he got out. I'll bet he did. It worked. They had three more kids even if two of 'em came out at the same time.

"I can taste Ma's punkin pie already," said Tony.

"Don't start'a countin' those chickens before they hatch out, Tony."

You're right, Rossi. A lot can happen before we're out'a here. A lot.

They called Jenny at the hospital. She was with a patient when the call came so half an hour had passed before she could phone back to Judy Bolin, who told her what had happened. When she hung up, she called her

oldest son. "Albert, your father is trapped in the mine with the five men on his crew."

"Is he OK or don't they know yet?"

"They don't know. I'm going to the breaker. Call your Aunt Mary and ask her to go to the high school to pick up the twins and take them to our house and stay there with them. I'll call her later. Call your brother and tell him to get on a bus and come home. All of you go over to Aunt Mary's and stay there until I call you. I'll probably be staying at the breaker tonight, at the wash shanty where families wait when something like this happens."

"Vincent has basketball practice today until five-thirty, but I think I can get to him through the athletic office. We'll meet you at the breaker as soon as you let us know when we should come." And then they hung up.

Jenny went into the ward office, told her assistant what was happening and that she was now in charge. "I don't know how long it will take to get them out, but when they do they will probably be coming here. I'll let you know when I will be back." She walked out to her car. It was warm for late November. The weather report for the coming holiday was good right through the weekend, with mild temperatures and no rain. She had been looking forward to Thanksgiving and having everyone at their house. She had already done all the shopping and made most of the dishes and Vito's favorite pumpkin pies. She had taken the turkey out of the freezer this morning so it

could defrost slowly in the fridge. The turkeys are getting bigger, she thought. She would put it in the oven early Thursday morning after she had dressed it. Will it fit? Vito loved Thanksgiving and turkey was one of his most favorite dishes, followed by pumpkin pie with whipped cream. God willing, she thought, he would celebrate Thanksgiving this year in his home with his family after he and the men and boys had been to the game.

She remembered his first Thanksgiving after he came home from the War. *Twenty years has gone by so quickly*. Everyone was crying so much they could barely eat. Vito was back at the mine and he had gotten back most of the weight he had lost. He was a skeleton when he came home. He had lost all of his teeth and hair. She didn't recognize him. It frightened her to look at him. But gradually he began to fill out. He replaced the ill-fitting false teeth he had gotten from the government and his hair started to grow back. It was curlier than before and with a tint of brown rather than the pitch black that it had been. One feature that had not changed were his dark blue eyes.

She got into her car and started the drive to the breaker. On Saturday, they would celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. They had talked about taking the train to New York and staying at the same hotel, The Roosevelt, where they spent their two-day honeymoon, but they settled for having the families over to their house for Thanksgiving leftovers. She was married to two men. They shared the same soul, the same heart, the same sweet

caring for everyone. But one of them lived underground, spoke a language that few understood and was most comfortable, she thought, when he and his clothes were covered in dirt. The other, the man she married, lived above ground, spoke Italian, moved like Fred Astaire, dressed like Cary Grant and always smelled like he had just stepped out of the shower. She rarely met the man who lived underground, but she knew he was always there with them. Her husband had been alone when he boarded the train in December 1940 that took him back to San Diego, but when he came home to her in June 1945 he had his new companion with him. She met him on their first night together when he talked in his sleep. She didn't understand a word he had said.

At times—and this was one of them—Jenny thought about what her life would have been like if Vito hadn't come home from the War and she married Charles, one of the doctors at the hospital. He was a good friend during the last two years. They had first met in the cafeteria when she was having lunch with a group of nurses and a few doctors and Charles had asked if he could join them. He was new, doing his residency after studying at Temple University School of Medicine. The next day, Jenny was on her own during a break, just having a coffee, and Charles invited himself to keep here company. That's how it started.

Slowly, the began meeting on the days they both had off in places far enough away where they were sure they

would not run into any of their friends. They'd drive their cars to a place, like an ice cream parlor or a movie theater, and then drive to their homes. Jenny was very careful not to give him any sign that this was more than a temporary thing until here Vito came home. Charles wanted more, of course, but she couldn't betray Vito. She had to be sure he was dead. When she received the letter from the government telling her that Vito was alive and was coming home, she told Charles. She could see that behind all the kind words he was saying, he was disappointed.

She admitted to herself that she was also disappointed. She could see what her life might have been like when she met a few of her nursing school friends who had married one of the doctors like Charles. She'd meet them at the nursing school reunions dressed in fancy clothes and wearing expensive jewelry. They talked about the country clubs they belonged to and the weekend trips to Philly and New York. They had all quit nursing when they got married. Charles moved to Cleveland only a few months after Vito came home. He sends her a Christmas card every year signed Celeste, so she knows he is still there. She tells Vito that Celeste—pronouncing it 'sell-est'—was an Army nurse at the hospital during the War and went back to Cleveland where she came from before he came home. He never asks any more questions.

Jenny saw the silhouette of the breaker as she came around a curve. The late November eastern sky framing the breaker was already a dark steely grey while she could

see the setting sun reflecting off the breaker's surface and its west-facing windows giving it a red amber glow. She recognized the cars parked in the lot next to the shanty. *I've never been here*, she said to herself as she approached the entrance, opened the door and walked in.

This is where Vito makes his before-and-after transitions, like Clark Kent. He walks in looking like a well-dressed bank teller, changes into his miner's clothes, and then reverses it all after his shift is over. In between, he's someone else. I've never seen that man, just like I never saw the man living in a hole as a prisoner of war. I should have tried to make some excuse to come down here. I was afraid to do it. I was afraid of what I would see, a man I didn't recognize. Somebody else, not Vito. He'll be that person when he comes out. I'll hug that person I don't know. He'll smell of sweat and coal dust and he'll look at me with those blue eyes and he'll see what I'm thinking.

Connie and Sal Maltese, their daughter Lilly and daughter-in-law Annie were already there when she came into the shanty at four-thirty. They were standing in one corner of the room. Sal was in his mining clothes. It feels like a wake; it looks like a funeral parlor, thought Jenny. Two young men were standing with Jack Walsh, all three dressed in suits. They were each holding a paper coffee cup in one hand and eating doughnuts or sandwiches with the other. Jack must have said something funny because the other two men started laughing. A little respect wouldn't hurt, she thought. Everybody can laugh when we get our men out.

Jenny hugged Connie, Annie and Lilly. "Are the three stooges here just for the refreshments, or have they said anything about the situation?" Jenny asked.

"They haven't said anything yet," said Sal, "but I talked to Walsh and he said they've got a three-foot mole on the way so they can go through the wall, and they're drilling from above to get air and water in there. There's been no contact with the men, so we don't know if anyone was caught under the cave-in. If they're alive, your man will keep them safe until we can get in there. I'll go down there now."

"All that talk about how safe the mines are getting is just that, talk!" said Connie after Sal had left. "The only time I can sleep in peace is when I know that Sal, Nicco and Joey are all off shift. When I tell Sal that I worry he says that I'd worry more if we didn't have money to keep the house and put food on the table. What good is it if you're dead, I say to him. He never says anything except that he's heard my speech a thousand times before and he still isn't leaving until he's old enough to retire."

"Vito won't even talk about doing something else. He always says that if something happens to him, the kids have had a good start in life and I have my job."

"Nicco says I can choose between him working in the mines and us leaving for the West Coast. There's nothing in between. So if something happens to him it's all my fault."

"Joey doesn't want to leave here anymore than I do, and he's tried just about every other job there is. He's been able to hold this one down and he seems to be happy doing it. When I was a little kid I used to dream that we lived in Burbank, California where I figured all the kids that were on the Walt Disney show lived. How come our grandparents didn't move there, I used to ask Pa. Why didn't they go somewhere else instead of here where there's only coal mines. I never got an answer except, 'Why don't pigs fly?' That was his answer."

"I never told you kids that your father wanted to move to California after the War. He had a job that one of his war buddies was going to get him. It was me that kept us here. I couldn't think of leaving our parents the way they left theirs. Ma used to cry all the time when she would tell us how much she missed her mother and everyone else in Italy. I didn't want to do the same thing to her."

"We know, Ma. You always thought you and Pa had this big secret about California, but we knew all about it, and we knew that Pa used his dream about California to push away the dreams of the bombs falling around him during the war. Right Ma? We weren't as dumb and innocent as you thought we were."

The door opened. They turned to see Alice Jones walk in.

CHAPTER 3

THE PILLAR

"How many times your Pa and Grandpa been in one of these things, Jonesy?" asked Joey.

John James Jones the Fourth is only twenty. He lives at home with his parents, John James the Third and Alice Wayne Jones, and grandparents, John James Junior and Gladys Howard Jones. He is known as J.J. to his family. His father is Jay and his grandfather is Johnny. The great grandfather, John, died in a mine accident, his third and, as it turned out, his last. Outside of the family they are all called Jonesy. I know all of this because Jonesy told me his entire story while we've been paired up working together for the past couple of years. For some reason he talks to me but doesn't say two words to anyone else. It's not that he doesn't like them or that they don't like him. Everyone likes him and his Pa and Grandpa. They're just real quiet. But J.J. talks to me. I'm real glad about that.

What a great baseball player J.J. was right from the time he played in the Little League. Joey coached his team. J.J. still calls him 'coach' and still treats him with the respect a player gives to his coach. When Joey finished the first practice with J.J., he came over to the house and told me that I had to come to the next one just to see him.

Big, strong, left-handed, he played first base and hit home runs like they were the only thing he knew how to do. By the time he got into the Teener League, people were already calling him 'The Iron Horse', like Lou Gehrig. Joey coached his team there, too. We won the Eastern Teener League championship for two years when he was playing. Joey's more proud of those two trophies than all the ones he won himself. No one is ever going to put up the same numbers J.J. had in high school. They were even better than Joey's. J.J. didn't want to go to college, even though he had a ton of offers. The baseball scouts were after him to sign for one of the farm teams before he got drafted. He was going to sign, but he decided he wanted to serve first. He joined the Marines, and that was the end of his baseball career. A broken leg at Lejeune during basic training, a medical discharge and a gimpy leg put any thoughts of big league ball out of his head.

"One each. Pa's was a little over ten years ago. I remember he was trapped for almost three days. But Great Grandpa John was in three. The last one killed him."

"Sweet jaysus, Jonesy, what the hell you doin' down here?" exclaimed Tony.

He didn't answer. Maybe he smiled and shook his head slowly like he did when he didn't want to put words to his thoughts. It didn't take long after you met him that you understood that he didn't talk very much. He wasn't stupid. No, he's smart as a whip. Older folks say he's just

like his Pa, and even older folks say his Pa was just like his Pa. "It's them Methodists," some would say. "It's them Welsh," others would say. "It's his fall that's made him quiet," others would add.

When J.J. was three, he was out in the woods with his whole family one fall day on a mushroom picking outing. All the adults and some of the older kids were doing the picking while the younger kids, including J.J., were doing what kids do when their parents aren't watching them. Little J.J. found a spot that apparently no one else had found before, an abandoned well that was uncovered. He walked right into it, just disappeared without a sound and without a trace. When the other kids showed up without J.J., the adults spread out in the woods and searched for him. Old John had the presence of mind to walk back to the house and get the hunting dogs. He took a blanket from J.J.'s crib and let the dogs get the scent. He also fetched a rope. The dogs had located the open well before John caught up to them and soon the entire family was gathered around the well, calling to J.J. below. His faint cries were now audible.

The opening was too small for any of the men to fit into, so the rope was tied into a loop and one of J.J.'s older cousins slipped into it. He was lowered down the hole and before long he was pulled up, cradling his little cousin in his arms. J.J. was fast asleep. "He was just sitting on a branch sticking out into the hole," said his cousin. J.J.'s clothes were a bit torn and his hands, arms and head had

some scratches and bruises, but he didn't seem to be that much worse for wear or troubled in any way by the experience.

"Did your Pa or Grandpa talk about what happened when they were trapped?" continued Joey. *"Did they say what they were thinking?"*

"They never talked about their own accidents. Grandpa used to tell us how they found Great Gandpa after the last accident that killed him," answered Jonesy. *"He was working the same shift in another section of the mine when he heard the rumble. All the men left the face they were working and went up to the surface. That was when Grandpa knew that his Pa was trapped. Grandpa took a crew down the shaft that led to the face where Great Grandpa was working. When they got down to the pit-eye they couldn't get any farther. They started digging and had to use the shaft elevator to clear the debris and bring it up to the surface so they could continue digging. After ten hours, Grandpa and his crew had to rest and another crew came in. Pa was still too young to do the heavy work, but he was up on top helping to unload the shaft elevator.*

"It took three days of digging without stopping. They never heard anything from the other side the whole time. Early in the morning on the third day they uncovered a shoe. They kept moving away the rocks and shale, now more carefully, and they found the feet, legs and body of one of Great Grandpa's crew, Tommy Williams. One by one they pulled the dead bodies out from under the rubble. The last man they found was Great Grandpa. He hadn't been buried alive by the cave-in like all of the

rest of his crew. He was in a small room where he had been working, right at the face. He was sitting with his back against the coal face staring at the place where all of his crew had been buried. In his left hand he held a photograph of his wife. Her name was Kathleen. In his right hand he held a small bible. He always carried the photograph and the bible with him, in his shirt pocket over his heart. They said he had a smile on his face and his eyes were wide open."

Jonesy's great grandparents on both sides came to America from the same town in Southeast Wales. Jonesy told us the name many times, but I could never remember it. Pony- or Ponty-something. He was never there, but the family had photographs of it, and the photos could have been taken right here for all we know. It looked the same. Low, rolling mountains covered in forest, a river flowing in the valley between the mountains, and towns with coal breakers spread out along the river. Coal mining had begun in the middle of the 19th century in Wales, Jonesy had said, and the anthracite and bituminous coal mines that were getting started in Pennsylvania at the end of the century needed experienced men. Many of the Welsh miners who came to America went on to become managers and even executives. Jonesy's family continued to want to just be good miners, have families, live in neat, tidy houses, go to church and vote in elections. The Joneses, John, Jay and J.J., were the best miners the company had. They knew how to dig coal.

Jonesy has a girlfriend, Lucy James, also a Welsh Methodist who he met at a prayer meeting a year-and-a-half ago. She's a year older than Jonesy, lives with her parents in McAdoo and is a lab technician at Stegmaier Brewing Company in Wilkes-Barre. They look like twins. They're the same height, just over six feet. They both have thick, dark brown hair, straight, thick eyebrows, short noses, thin lips, light blue eyes and very white skin. I've seen them together, sitting in the diner. Jonesy introduced me to her one day when I came in and they were there having lunch. She has a firm handshake. I didn't think that Jonesy could smile before I saw him with her. I thought his face muscles didn't work their way into a smile. But I was wrong. I wonder if Lucy knows he's down here now. I wonder if Mrs. Jones will call her. I wonder if he's told her about their plans.

"They should be able to fit a three-foot tunnel boring machine at the face," said Jonesy.

"You mean those things they call moles, like the little animals?"

"Yes, a mole. It can go through the rubble and lay in three-foot diameter pipe to support the hole. I know there are a couple of them around. We don't have one here, but they should be able to get a hold of one pretty quickly. That will be the fastest and safest way to get through the wall."

I knew that a mole was a tunnel boring machine. They called them TBMs and they came in different sizes. I've

seen them working, and they do make fast work of a coal face, but you don't use them to dig coal. All you end up with is culm. I just hope they aim it right so that I don't end up as culm.

"I suppose you'll be down here right after Thanksgiving if they managed to pull us out, right Jonesy?" asked Joey.

"I guess. I don't have another job to go to and there's still coal to dig. We've been digging it here for almost a hundred years, and one day it may run out. Then whoever is left down here will have to stop digging. But maybe we'll have to stop digging before it runs out. I read a book that I got from Lucy who had borrowed it from the library about what we used to use in oil lamps before they discovered oil."

"In Titusville, Pennsylvania!" exclaimed Joey. *"They discovered oil in our great Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. See. I got some education too."*

When we got to high school all of us dummies were warehoused in all-boy classes for shop and phys ed. But before that, when we were in grade school, we sat in rows in alphabetical order. Boys and girls were in the same classes, one class with one teacher all day for the whole school year. The teacher would ask a question and everyone who thought they knew the answer would raise their hand. The teachers were all ladies named Miss McGrath or Miss Flynn or Miss Foley and they were all spinsters. There were half-a-dozen girls, always the same ones, and one of the boys, Edward, who raised their hands.

The rest of us just sat there while the teacher picked one of the girls. They knew Edward had the answer, but they made sure the girls got their chances too. Sometimes I knew the answer, like who was America named after, but I never raised my hand. If you were one of the ones who never raised your hand and you thought you had the right answer and raised your hand and she picked on you but you gave the wrong answer, you just ended up looking like a fool. You did that once, not twice.

Something I've always wondered about. How come the girls got to learn how to type and take shorthand so that when they got out of school, it they didn't get into college, they could get a good job like Lilly? The 'commercials' they called them. They got good grades, too. Arlene Dubromovicz was the best in our class, valadictor, or something like that, highest grades. Why couldn't they figure out something useful for us instead of shop where we made shelf braces and lamps? Hell, they could have taught us how to be good coal miners.

"Yes, before they discovered oil in Titusville, Pennsylvania. It was whale oil. That's why they used to hunt whales, for the oil, not to eat them. Maybe they ate them too, for all I know. Eventually, they had killed most of the whales in the places that were close to where people lived here in America and in Europe so the whale hunters had to go over to the Pacific to kill enough whales to make it worthwhile to hunt them. It took them a long time to get there and back, and with the storms and all the

sicknesses men could get and the danger of being thrown into the sea by those big whales, not all of the ships that went out came back.

"Then they discovered oil in the ground in Pennsylvania, Texas and California and other places and the whole whaling industry went into decline. They might still be hunting whales, but it's not for their oil to put into lamps. Something like that could happen to coal. We may still have a lot of coal, but somebody might come up with something better than coal to do all the things we do with coal today. Look at the steam locomotive business. How many people you know are building steam locomotives today? Zero. All the train engines run on diesel. They're already using natural gas instead of coal for heating buildings. They use coal today mostly for making steel and generating electricity. So when they stop having any use for coal that's when all of us who are still mining, including those of us digging it out and those who are running the companies that pay our salaries, will have to find something else to do, just like all those whaling men and the companies that owned the boats."

What in God's name is this kid doing down here with the rest of us? I hope to hell he gets out of here, that he gets himself a degree in engineering and he and Lucy have kids who will grow up and find a way to stop men from having to take jobs in coal mines and get them into jobs that will put food on the table and let them have the respect everyone deserves.

"Why the hell don't you do us all a favor and go to college so you can run the mine, Jonesy?" exclaimed Tony.

"If I go to college it won't be to run the mine. It will be to run a nuclear power plant. That's what I really want to do. That's how we're going to get our electricity in the future, from nuclear power plants."

"I don't know what a nuclear power plant is, but if it's anything like the bombs we're putting on top of missiles so we can blow everything to kingdom come, I don't want any of them around here," said Wadz.

"I heard that PP&L is going to build one on the Susquehanna, near Berwick," said Jonesy.

"Bilda wod, a newcler miss-eyel?"

"No, a nuclear power plant," corrected Jonesy.

"Holy shit!" yelled Tony. *"Is that so?"*

"It's only a rumor," answered Jonesy, *"but it's come from one of my cousins who works at PP&L, so I think it has a good chance of happening."*

"So you're gonna go to college, Jonesy?"

"I applied to Lehigh, you know the place that Asa Packer founded. Ma worked in the kitchen in his son's house when she was very young and she still keeps in touch with one of Packer's granddaughters. She got her to write a note of recommendation. We'll see what happens. Pa doesn't know anything about this yet. It was Lucy's idea."

"When are you thinking about doing this, J.J.?" asked Joey.

"I'll find out if they accept me in a couple of weeks, Coach. I'll have to do some refresher courses before I can start full-time. So I would start in the second semester which begins at the end of January. I'd start full-time in their summer program and if all goes well I'll graduate in three years. Lucy's applied for a job in the Chemistry Department's lab."

"You got all this planned out," said Tony. *"You gonna get married too?"*

"Whether I'm accepted or not we'll get married right after the start of the new year—if I get out of here alive, of course."

"Well I'll be damned," said Joey. *"We'd better all be invited to the wedding."*

"You'll all be invited and you'd better all come."

"Jonesy, could you say a prayer for us?" It was Wadz in his quiet voice.

"You sure it would count for us Catholics?" joked Joey. *"Didn't the nuns teach us that only Catholics could talk to God and went to heaven?"*

"Oral Roberts ain't no Catholic and when he heals all those people on TV there must be somebody up there listening to his prayers," pitched in Tony.

"He's a Methodist," added Jonesy.

"I think that's a good idea, Wadzee. He's probably been'a waiting up there for us to talk to him. Jonesy and you Wadzee are the best at going to church, so he's gonna listen to yuz. What'cha say, Jonesey?"

"I'll give it a try."

Dear God. It's John James Jones the Fourth here in a coal mine with my five friends, Rossi, Coach Joey, Tony, Wadz and Nicco. You can see that Nicco's unconscious. The roof caved in on him. We don't know if anything's broken, but it would be really good if we could get him to a hospital soon."

Thanks for putting in a good word for me, Jonesy. If you have another ear to listen, God, if I get out of here alive I promise to go to church with the family and not hang out at the Post during mass and not go there until Sunday dinner is over and I've helped to clean up.

"We have enough food and water for a couple of days, but if Nicco doesn't wake up he might not make it that long. So if there's anything you can do to help my father and grandfather and the other guys out there working to get through to us, Nicco would really appreciate it and so would we. All of us have things we could have done better to make you happier with us, and we'll be thinking of how we can do those things while we're waiting for a rescue. If for some reason that rescue doesn't come and this is the place where we'll breathe our last breath here on earth like my great grandpa, we know you'll judge us fairly when we meet you. I guess there's not much else to say, except please take care of our loved ones if we don't make it out.

"Anybody want to add anything else?" asked Jonesy.

"That about sums it up, Jonesy," said Tony. *"I hope he heard it."*

"That was a fine prayer, J.J.," said Joey.

"Thanks, Coach."

Both Jonesy's father, Jay, and his grandfather, Johnny, were on their shifts when they heard the whistle. All the men came to the surface for a roll-call. J.J. wasn't there. Jay and Johnny went to the shift superintendent and asked to be on the rescue team, and then Jay called Alice.

"The company just phoned," said Alice, before Jay could tell her why he was calling. "I'm getting ready to come down to the breaker."

"Dad and I are going to be on the rescue crew. We'll get him out, dear, don't worry. J.J. knows how to take care of himself."

"Be careful," she said, and then they hung up. No crying or screaming were heard in their conversation. According to the Jones family, this was part of what was expected if you worked in the mines or you had a loved one who worked in the mines. She packed a small bag with the things she would need for a few days, and she put in two sheets that she would place under and over her so that she wasn't in contact with the Army issue blankets they kept at the wash shanty. She remembered how she felt after two nights of trying and failing to sleep on and under those blankets the last time she was on a rescue watch. Bites

from the bed bugs were evident on her body and everyone else's who were sleeping in the room after the first night.

She put on her coat and hat and gloves and changed into her more sturdy shoes that she wore when she went into town, a pair of oxfords with a low heel, and walked to the bus stop. She didn't have a driver's license, and even if she did they only had one car and Jay and his father used it. J.J. normally took the bus unless he was working the same shift as his father or grandfather, like he was today. The bus drove down Center Avenue past their church and then along Packer Hill Road. It always made her happy to see that the Asa Packer mansion was fixed up and used as a museum. It was such a shame that it was empty for so long because the borough couldn't decide what to do with it. Thank God we have the Lions Club, she thought.

Within half an hour the bus was at the stop across from the road leading up the breaker. After she left the bus and it pulled away, she stood on the sidewalk looking up at the breaker. It was like it was yesterday that she had taken the same bus for the same reason. She hoped it would end the same way this time. She didn't want to lose her only child, not now, not when his whole life was just about to start. She crossed the road, walked up the steep incline to the shanty, opened the door and stepped in. She closed the door behind herself and stood there at the entry looking around the room. It was a place her son, her husband and his father saw six days a week. It was a place her father also passed through every workday until he died of heart failure

two years ago. It was built after the war, so her two grandfathers came home each day in their mine clothes. She had been in here once before, when her husband was trapped for three days. That was ten years, three months, two weeks and four days ago. She would never forget that ordeal. Now she would go through it again. The room could do with a little fixing up, she thought, maybe a new coat of paint. She recalled the musty woolen blankets that covered the army cots they had slept in when she waited for her husband to be rescued. It was more rest than sleep, and she gave in to her weariness after she had been awake for almost twenty-four hours. I hope they have clean blankets this time, she thought.

Across the room she saw the women, Connie, Jenny, Annie and Lilly. They waved to her. She waved back and then moved her gaze to the middle of the room where Jack Walsh and the other two men were standing. Alice and Jack had been classmates from the first grade through high school. He made Valentine's Day cards for her in elementary school. She joined the junior high school choir so she could be close to him. He asked her out on a date when they were sophomores in high school, to go to a movie. When she asked her mother for permission, her mother said that going to the movies with someone would lead to something more and that it would be best for her to stick to her own kind. Jack Walsh was Catholic. If you want to marry a Catholic, she explained, you had to become one or he had to give up his religion to take yours. It's a lot of

trouble that never ends up leading to any good, her mother explained. Alice explained all of this to Jack who said he understood. He had gotten the same lecture from his mother when he told her he had asked her out. He said their mothers were probably right, although he wasn't sure he couldn't become a good Methodist. She was sure she couldn't become a Catholic. They remained friends.

"Hello, Alice," said Jack as he approached her where she was still standing, close to the door.

"Hello, Jack. It's good to see you," and she took his outstretched hand.

"I wish it wasn't under these circumstances. I am so very sorry that J.J. is in there. We're doing everything we can to get him and all of the others out as soon as we can. We don't have any contact yet. We're drilling down an air hole from the top. We should be through by some time tomorrow morning. We have a mole ready to go through the rubble. Jay and Johnny picked it up in Coaldale. They are down at the face now." Jack knew the names the men in the Jones family called each other. "They were the first ones there since they were both on their shift. Sal Maltese and Jimmy Diriggio are now there as well. Sal's son and Jimmy's son-in-law are in there with J.J.."

"You'll let us know if there is any change, when they start digging?"

"Sure, Alice. Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

"I'll get it after I say hello to the ladies." She left Jack and paused before walking to the corner of the room where the women were standing. *I like my husband, and I appreciate the life we have had together, but he never sent me Valentine's cards. I wish I had not listened to my mother. Jack would have made a good Methodist.*

"Hello, Alice," all of them said in a round robin. Jenny came forward to take her hand. They were closest in age, but she really didn't know her or the other women. There were no reasons for them to meet since they belonged to different churches. Alice did not watch her son play his sports, where she might have met Jenny who had a boy close to the same age as J.J.. *He played basketball, if I remember right.* She didn't like all the cheering at the games and she was always afraid he would get hurt while she watched. Jay went to every one of J.J.'s games, whatever sport he was playing.

"Hello, ladies," replied Alice.

"Alice, my husband Vito Rossi is the shift foreman. He is in there with your son, Connie's son, Nicco Maltese, who is Annie's husband, and Joe Zukas, who is Connie's daughter Lilly's husband."

"They said that there were two others in there as well," said Alice.

"Tony Katsaros, whose parents own the diner, and the Polish orphan, Walter Grozynski," offered Lilly. "The Katsaros family hasn't arrived yet, but I'm sure Elaine or

Milos will be here soon. I'm not sure who the company called about Walter."

"My husband speaks very highly of your husband," said Alice, "so I am sure they are all in good hands."

"Can I get you a cup of coffee or tea," asked Lilly. "Shall I take your coat?"

"I'll keep it on. It's a little chilly in here, and I'll pour myself a cup of coffee and take one of those sandwiches. I hope the men have left something in their lunch boxes to eat. We always told J.J. that he should put in something extra every time he goes down, just in case."

Alice set her bag down below one of the chairs at the far end of the row from where the other women were gathered, walked to the food table and chose one of the sandwiches, poured herself a cup of coffee and then sat down. Lucy should be home from work soon, she thought. *I'll call her in half an hour. The two of them have been so busy making plans for their future together. This is Lucy's first trial. I know she will be strong.*

Lucy had just come home from work when the wall phone in the kitchen rang. She picked it up. "This is Lucy James… Oh, hello, Mrs. Jones… Oh no! Do they know if they are safe?…No? I will be there as soon as I can… Bring sheets? Yes, alright… No, I won't speed." She gathered a few things and the two sheets Alice had told her to bring and she was out the door and into her '58 Plymouth Fury in a matter of minutes. She and J.J. had talked about this only

once. J.J. had brought it up a couple of weeks ago when they were sitting in the Berkey Creamery at Penn State enjoying their favorite sundaes before a football game. He said that every time he goes to the mine for his shift he reminds himself that anything can happen. He says a little prayer and goes through a checklist of all of his unfinished business. If something is not right, he said he is prepared to turn around and go home. That never happened, he said. *I wish there was a box he couldn't tick on his checklist this morning*.

It wasn't only her parents; other family members and friends who were surprised that she was dating a coal miner. She was surprised herself. When they met at the prayer meeting, she had asked him what he did. When he told her, her first thought was one of disappointment. Why couldn't he be in college or even working in one of the factories? Why did he have to be a miner? It didn't take long for that feeling of disappointment to fade. J.J. was proud to be a miner. It wasn't a job. It was his profession. She admired him for that. The more she got to know him, the more she loved him, and the more she loved him, the more her family and friends understood that he was not only special to her but special himself. It was J.J. who began to talk about going to college so that he could do something else, something he really wanted to do and believed in. *Please let him live, God*.

When she pulled into the parking lot next to the wash shanty she had some difficulty finding a place to park.

When she finally did, she got out, took her bag off the back seat and started toward the door. She saw two figures at the door, preparing to go in. The door opened and the light from within turned them into shadows.

Alice was lost in her thoughts halfway through her sandwich when the sound of the door opening brought her back to the wash shanty. In walked Father O'Malley and Michalina Dombrovsky. Following shortly after them was Lucy. A deep sense of happiness and relief came over her when she saw her.

Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company

Lansford No. 6 Colliery

http://www.miningartifacts.org/Pennsylvania-Mines.htm

CHAPTER 4

THE HIDEOUT

"We gonna die down here?" Wadz asked, almost in a whisper.

"Hey! No, we ain't gonna die, Wadzee. They'll be coming to get us. All of us is gonna be up'a there before long. Don't you worry."

An hour, maybe more, had passed since we first heard the drilling from above, but it had stopped after about half an hour and hadn't started up again. Wadz hadn't said very much. He was always quiet. It was like he still didn't believe he could speak English so that people could understand what he said. It was more than shyness. His smallness didn't help. He told me, Joey and Tony his story one day at the diner. After about six months of being on the same shift, the four of us had started to meet for coffee at nine in the morning when we had a day off during the week. Tony was already there. He came into the diner early to help out. I picked up Joey and Wadz. We all met at the checkout counter where the card deck sat on its special shelf. Every couple of months Milos would put out a new deck, but it looked ratty after just a few days. We each split the deck. Low card paid. Ace counted as the lowest. Every group had their own

rules. When I met Pa, high card paid and if you got an ace you had to pay for a slice of pie.

Wadz said he was born just when the Germans set up the Warsaw ghetto, in November 1940. His parents and other members of his family decided that they didn't trust the Germans to let them live, so they convinced one of their neighbors to let them hide in their cellar. Wadz spent the first couple of years of his life hiding with his family in that cellar and three more years in German concentration camps. He was really undernourished, and some sort of sickness affected his eyesight. He said he was actually born in the cellar where they were hiding because his mother was almost ready to give birth when the Germans closed the ghetto.

"How the hell did they keep you from crying and giving your hiding place away?" asked Tony.

"My older cousin who was in the prison camp with me told me they made a sort of tent with layers of blankets and if it looked like I was going to start crying they put me in there. He said it worked because they didn't find us until I was old enough to stop crying. But I don't remember myself."

"How did they finally find you?" I had asked. "You were probably still too young to remember it yourself,

but maybe someone else in your family told you when you were a little older."

"My cousin said the people who owned the house where we were staying had been taken away, so we didn't have any way to get food and water without going upstairs ourselves. One day my cousin's father went up, he said, and when he opened the door, a soldier was there and shot him on the spot. They came down and took us all away."

Wadz said he remembered being in different camps after he was taken away from his mother. The last camp was one they called 'Little Auschwitz', in Lodz. He was there with his father, two brothers, one uncle and three cousins. He was the only one in his family who was still alive when the Russians came in January 1945 to liberate the prisoners. For some reason, he was handed over to the Americans, and then he ended up in Pennsylvania. He said it was all a blur. He couldn't even remember the sea voyage except for getting off the ship in New York. The next thing he remembered was being on a ferry and then a train which brought him to town. They put him into a Catholic orphanage where the nuns did whatever they usually do to raise a totally broken child. Some—maybe most—stay broken, but a few come out whole. Wadz was one of the lucky ones. He may be quiet, but

there is a really smart brain in that small head of his, and a truly big and warm heart inside his little chest.

Wadz's nuns weren't the same ones who taught catechism classes on Monday afternoons to us public school kids to get us ready for First Holy Communion and then for Confirmation. Those nuns treated us like stray cats that had managed to sneak through a crack in the door. They're the same nuns that Tony's sister Gina had hooked up with, the *Sisters of Mercy*. Wadz had the *Sisters of Providence of Saint Mary-of-the-Woods*. He won't talk about what he suffered during the nine years he was there. He just talks about the positive things, like being able to learn to read and do algebra. In my catechism classes I saw how some of the kids, both boys and girls, the ones who could recite the Apostles' Creed from start to finish, were given special treatment by the nuns. I didn't need or want their hands in my hair or on my shoulder, showing their affection to those who pleased them and their coldness to those of us who didn't learn as quickly. I made sure I stayed the hell out of their way. They weren't all like that. I'm sure Gina isn't, but she must see it. She must know it goes on. Our kids aren't going anywhere near the parochial school. Annie's not going to win that battle. Over my dead body are they going to go to a school where the teachers are nuns.

That's enough of a reason for me to get outta here alive, so our kids don't get taught by nuns.

Wadz had told us that as soon as he turned sixteen the nuns sent him out of the orphanage. I don't know where the hell they expected him to go at that age. I guess it wasn't their business to care. He went right to the mine office and they told him to get a Social Security number. When he did, they gave him a job as a 'breaker boy'. They sort the coal by hand as it comes up the chute in the breaker. In the old days this was mostly for younger kids before they were big enough to go into the mines. Today, it's for the rookies and for those who are too old to work down below or who have been injured and can't get disability. Wadz was able to pay for a room at one of the boarding houses, where he still lives. After a couple of years hunched over the coal chutes he moved up the shit ladder to 'spragger'. Wadz is small, but he's a fast runner, and slowing down a speeding coal car running down a track was something he was good at. He managed to keep all his fingers before he finally got to be a miner. He got drafted when he turned eighteen. He didn't get farther than the first lineup. He stood there in his shorts looking like he had just come out of the concentration camp and wearing glasses that looked like they had been

made with the bottoms of Coke bottles. *Get dressed and sign out*, the sergeant told him.

From that day in the diner when Wadz told us his story, I had a different feeling about him. I felt I wanted to help him, to protect him and to be his friend. I could tell that he was more friendly toward me. I could get a smile out of him easily now, joke with him. Now, we're in this mess together and I can't do anything at all to help him in the condition I'm in.

"I don't remember almost anything from the time we lived in the cellar, before the Germans found us and took us to a camp," explained Wadz. "One thing I do remember is that it was always dark and it was hard to breathe."

"That's why you feel right at home here, right Wadz?" joked Joey. "Always dark and hard to breathe."

"You got a strange sense of humor, Joey," said Tony.

"No. He's right. I felt safe there. It was after that I was scared. When we came up from the cellar I was blinded by the light. I remember that, too. Then everything is blank. My very first real memory is from the concentration camp. All I remember from that place is being beaten and being put in a dark room. I don't know how many times I was in there, but the last time was

when we were freed. There was a lot of noise and shooting outside and then soldiers broke down the door to the room where I was. They spoke a language I didn't understand. They took me out and put me and the other boys who were still alive on a truck and took us to a place where they washed us and fed us. Someone said they were Russians and that the Germans were all dead. Everything is a big blur until I got to America."

After spending his early childhood in the dark, Wadz should spend the rest of his life in the sun, not down here. I once asked him if he felt Jewish.

"I think about it," said Wadz, "I do. Sometimes I worry that I'm not doing the right thing being Catholic. All of my family died because they were Jewish. That's the only reason. They were Jewish. I'm alive because the Germans didn't see me, either because I was too small or I was in a room all by myself. I tried to say the prayers that my cousin said, but I couldn't put the words together. I hardly knew how to speak Polish. We couldn't talk where we were in the cellar. Nobody could talk. How could I say the prayers in a language that I didn't know? Maybe God will punish me because I am not following my faith, but then should I think the nuns were lying when they said that Catholics, not Jews, had the one true faith,

the faith that would take us to heaven? I don't know. I wish I did, but I don't."

I never thought about being Catholic. Nobody asked me if I wanted to be Catholic, just like they never asked me if I wanted to be born to Italian parents and grow up eating spaghetti instead of halupki. I actually like halupki more than I like spaghetti. I like Elaine's baklava more than I like Ma's ciambellone. God help me if I ever told her that. I'll bet Pa feels the same way. Baklava and halupki. But I'll take lasagna and a side of fried salsiccia any day over anything else. Seven days a week. And a cannoli. I don't know what the Jewish people eat. I don't know any Jewish people, except for Wadz, and he ain't exactly Jewish. They must have something good to eat otherwise there wouldn't be any Jewish people.

"Lina's gonna be waiting out there for you, Wadz," said Tony.

Michalina Dombrovsky is the librarian in the town library. Wadz told me over coffee at the diner on another day how they met. Wadz went to the library whenever he wasn't working. He read mostly history books, he said. He wanted to try to understand why, from the time people wrote books, so many people all around the world could start to kill each other every time they disagreed

about something, and why the people who got killed let their leaders start these wars. One day the new librarian was there when he came in. That was two years ago. He asked her for help finding a book he was looking for and something clicked between them. He figured maybe it was because the book was about Polish history, which Wadz had started to get interested in. Lina was also interested in Polish history because she had Polish ancestry.

Both of her sets of grandparents had come to America in 1904 and settled in this area. They had been farmers in a village in the part of what eventually became Poland in 1918. At that time it was part of Russia. Her father's father had an older cousin who had come years earlier and who had a small farm up on the mountain. Her father's parents moved in with the cousin's family and helped with the farm. Her father, his two brothers and two sisters were all born on the farm. The cousin didn't have any children, so it worked out well for both families. Her grandfather took over the running of the farm when his cousin got too old to work it, and was willed it by his cousin. Lina's father, who was the oldest, inherited it when her grandfather died.

Lina's mother's father worked in the mines and they lived in town. He was killed in a mine accident when

Lina's mother was still an infant. Lina's mother and father knew each other from the time they were born and were destined to marry one another. Lina was the only child and her father depended on hired labor to help him farm the land. Lina had gone to Penn State at the main campus in State College and graduated with a degree in library studies.

"I hope Lina's there. I'm sure Father O'Malley will tell her I'm in here. He's the name I gave to the company when they asked for a person who they should contact if something happens. Lina's mother just died and she's been taking time off from the library to help her father."

"Why don't you two get married and go and live on the farm," said Tony jokingly.

"We are. If I get out of here." I couldn't see their faces, but I imagined that they all just looked at our little friend in amazement, stunned with the news.

"Atta way to go, Wadz!" cried Joey.

"Con-grat-chew-lay-shunsa, Wadzee," added Rossi. *"You two is gonna make a terrific couple."*

"Have you set a date yet?" asked Tony.

"Not yet, but..."

Just as Wadz was about to answer, Joey cried out, "They're through!" I could hear the stones falling to the floor as the drill broke through the ceiling above. At least we won't suffocate, starve or die of thirst, and at least they drilled a hole that was far enough from where we are that a rock didn't fall on our heads and kill one of us.

"What's the time, Jonesy?"

"It's three-fifteen in the morning."

The sound of the drill bit retreating up the hole is really hurting my ears.

"Cover Nicco's ears, Joey."

You're taking good care of me Rossi. I'm going to owe you a lot when and if we get out'a here.

"The rest of you cover your ears too until they get the drill bit out," instructed Rossi.

Three-fifteen in the morning. I've been out for more than thirteen hours. People sleep for longer than thirteen hours when they're really tired. I used to sleep until afternoon on Saturdays, trying to catch up on all the sleep I didn't get during the week. My body didn't start to shut down. What's the word for that. I heard someone say it the other day. Begins with an 'a'. I'll think of it. I can feel my fingertips. I can smell the dirt and feel it

rubbing on my cheek. I'm still alive. 'Atrophy'! That's the word. See. My mind's still working, too.

"Grab the phone, Rossi," yelled Tony.

"A'low. It's'a me, Rossi. Who's this on the other end? It's your pa, Jonesy. It's better that you talk with him so he can understand what we's sayin'."

"Hi, Pa... Yeah, we're all alive. Nicco was covered by the fall up to his waist and he's been unconscious the whole time. We took the rocks of of him and we're trying to keep him warm... Yeah, we took the rocks off slowly so his blood pressure stayed steady. If there's a doctor there it would be good if he could tell us what else we should do... Pa says they are going to send down water and food and then they're going to get the doctor on the line. I'll send you the measurements of the room with Nicco's location. We can't move him. We don't know what's broken. There's a good ten feet on the north side of the room between where he is and the wall. I'll draw it. Send down a piece of paper and a pencil and a tape measure.

"Hello doctor. Yes, he is totally unconscious. The rocks covered him up to his waist, no further... He's not bleeding anywhere that we can see except on his forehead. He must have hit his head when he fell... No, there is no blood on his clothes or around his legs."

I don't feel anything. There's no pain. I'm just thirsty. I wish there was some way they could get some water into my mouth without drowning me.

"The doctor says he's going to send down a special straw with one wide end so we can get a little water into his mouth. Yes, doc, we'll make sure not to put in too much... He says there's not much we can do until they can get him to the hospital."

"Ask your pa if they've started comin' in from the shaft, and how far back the roof caved in."

"Pa, Rossi is asking if you have started digging from the shaft, and how far you figure you are going to have to dig...They started, Pa says. They got a mole like we thought. They think it's thirty-to-forty feet. They'll know better once I send up a drawing."

Jonesy hit it right on the head.

"Anything else from us," Jonesy asked. *"No? Okay. Pa, I'll make the drawing and send it up after you've sent down the straw."*

"You got it all right, J.J," said Joey. *"Nice going. Now we just have to hope that they keep the roof braced while their digging."*

I'm pretty sure there are at least a dozen rosaries being said out there and more by people in town. Let's hope He's listening.

Father O'Malley's is the pastor of the Church of the Immaculate Conception where Wadz attends mass every Sunday. Immaculate Conception was founded by Irish immigrants. Wadz goes there because that's the church the orphanage was connected to and he didn't have any reason to change churches when he left the orphanage. Lina and her family are members of the other Catholic church in town, St. Joseph's, which was founded by the German immigrants. All the Italian families belong to Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Nesquehoning. It was founded in 1905 in what was then called the 'Little Italy' section of the town on land that was donated by the Lehigh Coal and Navigation Company along Garibaldi Avenue. A larger church was built in 1950 close to the old one, and the area is now called New Columbus. Joey's family and some of the other Lithuanian and Polish families moved over to Mt. Carmel during the War and stayed there. Some others went to St. Joe's. Masses in all

Catholic churches were in Latin until just a year ago, so it wasn't like they were saying the mass in German in one place and in Italian in another. Wadz didn't like it when they changed to English. He knew the mass by heart in Latin. It wasn't the same anymore.

Father Andrew O'Malley has been the pastor since Wadz could remember. When Wadz asked him if it was alright to give his name on his job application as the contact person in case of emergency, he said of course. Wadz didn't really know anyone else, except his landlady, and he wasn't sure he should ask her to be the person who the mine company would call in case something bad happened to him. That was all before he had met Lina. Father O'Malley was sitting at his desk working on his Sunday sermon when the phone rang. "This is Father O'Malley," he said when he answered. "How can I help you."

"Hello, Father," said Judy. "This is Judy Bolin from the mine office where Walter Gorzynski works. There has been an accident and Walter is trapped with five other miners."

"Oh dear me! I heard the siren. God help them," replied Father O'Malley. "I will call Walter's fiancé. Is there some place where we can wait while you are trying to rescue the men?"

"You can come to our downtown office, but all of the others are at the breaker."

"We'll go to the breaker," he said, thanked her for calling and hung up.

I'll go directly to the library and pick up Lina and then we'll drive to the breaker, he thought. Lina was at the front desk when he walked into the library. He explained what had happened. Lina gathered her things, gave instructions to her assistant and then she and Father O'Malley drove to the breaker.

"Today is the day he celebrates his birthday," said Lina softly as they drove. "He doesn't know the real date, but shortly after he arrived in America it was Thanksgiving on the 22nd of November. He decided that it would be a good day for his birthday, not Thanksgiving, but the 22nd of November."

"That doesn't surprise me, that he would make a decision like that. When I talk to him he seems to have thought about so many different things. He reads a lot. He started reading much more when you became the librarian, Lina. Have you set a date for the wedding?" Wadz had asked him to officiate along with the pastor of St. Joseph's since that is where the wedding would be, at Lina's church.

"We were going to meet with Father Klicker on Saturday to talk about that and then we planned to talk to you. Walter was supposed to have Saturday off. Poor Walter. He was going to be leaving the mine soon to start working with my father." Lina began to weep.

"I'm sure they are doing everything they can to get to them out. All we can do is pray."

"I will pray, Father, but I have never understood how the mining companies can do what they do. These accidents happen all the time. Imagine if every time you walked into the church to say mass you worried that the church's roof would fall down on you and all the parishioners. How can the mining companies let these accidents continue to happen? There must be better ways to make the mines safe. If it isn't possible, then they should stop mining the way they do."

Father O'Malley understood that he was hearing the voice of Lina, the civil rights protestor. He knew Lina had taken part in the March on Washington when Martin Luther King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. He knew that many of his parishioners didn't like Martin Luther King or the cause that he represented. Most of them were one or more generations away from the reason they were living in America and not in Poland or Lithuania or Italy or Ireland or especially now Russia and the Ukraine. The

sons and grandsons of immigrants fought in the lands where their own ancestors had come from to help them get free from the Nazis and Fascists, but they don't want to let people living in their own country have the same freedom, whether they're Negros or Indians.

"They use strip mining in some places if the coal is closer to the surface, but we see what that brings. All the towns around here would vanish."

"That's what I mean. It's either strip mining or men being crushed. We're sending men in rockets up into space and bringing them back, but we can't keep miners safe. I know why Walter took a job as a miner, and I know why all the other men go into the mines every day. They want to earn a decent living. I saw what my cousins whose fathers were miners got for Christmas compared to what my parents could afford. We could barely pay the electricity bills so we could have lights on the Christmas tree. But Ma and I didn't worry every day over whether Pa wouldn't come home from work or that he would cough up coal dust until his whole body shook like his brothers and brothers-in-law. The mining companies don't pay the workers enough for what they do, and they don't spend enough on making the mines safe for them to work in. God, please bring Walter out safely so that he can finally have a life worth living."

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Father O'Malley reflected on what Lina had just said, that the owners of the mines were taking advantage of the men whom they employed, exploiting their greatest vulnerability, their inability to perform another job that paid enough money to meet the basic needs of the men and their families. But the wage in no way was commensurate with the dangers they were subjected to from the moment they entered the mine until they finished their shift. He saw that every day as he visited the widows who were trying to make ends meet on the Social Security checks and meager pensions they received. To make it worse, being in the mine carried the risk of contracting other life-ending ailments, like Black Lung. He had performed the sacred rituals for his parishioners for the past twenty-three years, but the one that he performed all too often, one that most of his fellow seminarians had no experience with, was administering the last rights to an injured miner or to one who was gasping his last breath. He didn't ask for a parish in the heart of the anthracite coal region in Northeastern Pennsylvania. It was simply the luck of the draw. Some might say he drew the short straw. He didn't think so. He was doing the work that he was trained to do. This is why he had decided to become a priest, to help

the poor and the needy, not to sit at wedding parties in country clubs.

He parked his car. Another car was driving in as he and Lina got out and walked toward the wash shanty. When they opened the door and walked in, he saw a parishioner in the room. It was Jack Walsh, who came over directly as soon as he saw them.

"Hello, Jack. This is Walter's fiancé, Michalina Dombrovsky."

"Hello, Father. Hello, Miss Dombrovsky. We are doing all we can to get all the men out safely and as quickly as we can."

Lina didn't say anything in response. Father O'Malley knew were the conversation would be headed if Lina did start to speak. "We are sure you are, Jack. We will pray for Walter and all the men who are trapped, and for the men who are working hard to rescue them."

Breaker boys sorting the good from the bad coal by hand

CHAPTER 5

THE SHAFT

"You need some water, Tony? It's been a couple'a hours since you had a drink."

"No thanks, Rossi, I'm good for now. Nicco must be thirsty, though. YOU GOTTA WAKE UP, NICCO, SO YOU CAN GET A DRINK."

I hear you, Tony. You don't need to yell. I'd wake up if I could. How long has it been now since they broke through from up top, five hours? What happens when you're unconscious? Does your body start to shut down different parts? I feel like I'm breathing. I hear my heart beating in my ear. It was going pretty fast as Joey and Jonesy were taking off the rubble, but now it sounds normal. Every turn of the mole on the other side of the wall registers in my body lying here on the ground. I can feel it getting closer. The air is fresher since they broke through from above. If only I could wake up. I still can't feel anything in my legs.

"Are we sure they aren't going to drill right into where Nicco is lying?" asked Tony.

"I measured it all out and put it into the drawing that I sent up the line," said Jonesy, *"so they should be staying well clear of Nicco."*

Tony was never interested in how the mines worked. His mother Elaine was going to keep him as far away from the mines as she could after her father died down here. He joined the Navy after he graduated from high school. He had decent grades. He was a smart kid. He signed up for submarine duty and took all the tests. He surprised himself and everyone else when he was accepted. He was stationed in Groton, Connecticut at the Naval Submarine Base New London. I was in the service when he finished his eight-week submarine training for enlisted men, but Alex and Joey went up with a couple of other friends to celebrate his graduation. It was quite a party they all said. He served on a couple of boats and then was assigned to the USS Seawolf, a nuclear sub that left New London on its shakedown cruise in April of '57. He stayed in for four years.

I was sitting in the Glider Diner having a coffee after my shift when Tony came out from the kitchen. It was the first time I saw him since he got out. During the year-and-a-half he was in the penitentiary down the road in Nesquahoning I visited him once a week. Tony's older brother Alex and I were in the same class since

kindergarten and have always been good friends. Besides Alex and Tony, the Katsaros' have a daughter named Giorgiana. Both of the parents, Milos and Elaine, were in the diner from before dawn every day until closing after dinner, so Alex had to look after Tony. It seemed like he was with us all the time. It was okay. He was a good kid. He didn't deserve what he got from his wife.

He met Donna at a wedding in Hazleton, where she lived. He was home on leave from the Navy. She was studying to be a nurse at the Penn State extension. When Tony finished his service and Donna was through with nursing school, they got married. The only thing they had in common was being Greek. Their parents, actually Elaine and Donna's mother, pushed them together and did everything they could to get them married. I never liked Donna from the very first time I met her. She treated Tony like shit, bossing him around, getting him to buy her expensive presents. They couldn't afford the house they bought without old man Giannopoulos kicking in the down payment for his daughter and Milos helping with the monthly payments. Tony was never going to sell enough cars to keep Donna happy.

It was like yesterday when Tony came into the Legion Hall where Pa and I were sitting having a beer on a Sunday afternoon. He looked like crap.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Donna and me are splitting up. I just came from the hospital where she works and left her fancy doctor boyfriend out cold on the floor. The cops will probably be at the house waiting for me when I get home."

Tony didn't have to explain to us why he did what he did. Everyone knew that Donna was sleeping around. It started even before they got married, when they were engaged, and continued during the two years they were hitched. We tried to tell Tony, but he wouldn't hear anything bad about her. He just got mad at us, so we stopped trying to help. Tony wanted kids, but Donna said they were still too young and needed to live a little before settling down. Then Donna had told someone at the hospital that she had an abortion. We had all known about it for over a week and it finally got back to Tony. He confronted Donna. She said it was his, but she didn't want to have a kid right now, maybe never. He found out who she was doing. The guy's wife called him to tell him. It was a doctor at Donna's hospital. He went there to give him and Donna a message. The police never did show up.

The doctor didn't press charges. Maybe it would have been better if they did.

Tony filed divorce papers. Donna didn't contest. They sold the house, paid off the loan from the bank and Donna's old man, split what was left over. Tony gave his share to Milos who said he was putting it into the bank for Tony's kids when he had them. Tony found an apartment in town. That's when things started going real bad for him. He started to drink and gamble. Alex tried to get him to stop, but he wouldn't listen. He lost his job at the Chevy dealer, took loans from the sharks and ended up over his head in debt. Tony had never done a dishonest thing in his life, but he must have figured his old life was over and there were no rules in the new one. When we saw him hanging out at the strip joint, we knew that it was only going to be a matter of time before he wound up in trouble. It was a botched heist of a truck carrying dresses to New York. He was caught red handed, and he was carrying a gun. He got eighteen months, a light sentence because he didn't have any priors. He served the full time.

For the first year Tony was locked up, his mother was a wreck. She went to mass every morning, stopped eating regularly and lost a ton of weight before Milos decided he couldn't take any more and closed the diner.

He told Elaine that he was going to sell it and move to Greece. She could either decide to snap out of it and stop blaming herself for what happened to Tony because it was ruining both of their lives or she could go on like she was without him. It took a few weeks, but Elaine came around. She said they both should take off for Greece, and that's when Alex decided it was time for him to make a decision about whether he was going to keep trying to sell insurance to all his neighbors and friends, or run the Glider. When Milos and Elaine came back after two months, they signed over half ownership to Alex and he's been there ever since.

"You look good, Tony," I said when he came over to my booth. "How you feelin'?"

"I feel great, and thanks for coming to see me when I was in there. It meant a lot to me. I shoulda listened to you guys from the beginning. I never woulda gotten into all the shit I was in. The sharks were waiting for me when I got out. 'Ya paid yer debt to society, Tony, but not to us.'"

"How much do you need?"

"Alex has covered it with a loan. I'm starting tomorrow in the mine. Maybe I'll get on your shift." When I showed up for work the next day, sure enough,

there was Tony, and we have been working together ever since.

"What was it like in the sub, Tony?" Jonesy asked. *"Anything like this?"*

"When I signed up for sub duty, they put twelve of us at a time into a room with low lights that were on all the time and no windows. There was one toilet in a small closet and hammock bunks three high, six on each side of the room. There was a long table with benches in the middle. We had to stay in there for twenty-four hours. You could ask to leave any time, but if you did, you washed out. You got to scrub the deck of a destroyer for four years. Three of the guys in my group couldn't take it. If you made it through the first part of the training, they put you back in the room for three days with another eleven guys. All twelve of us in my group went through it the second time. Those four years on the sub were the best time in my life.

"The biggest worry the Navy has is that somebody goes nuts when a sub is under. The eight-week course was all about weeding out the possible nut cases."

"How the hell did you pass those tests?" laughed Joey. Everybody laughed, and Tony did, too.

"It was strange. I never once had any problems with being inside a sardine can, right from the first time in the test room. When I was on board the sub, I never thought that we would run

out of air or we would be hit by a depth charger and sunk. I did my job, ate my three squares with a couple of coffee breaks thrown in for good measure, slept in my bunk, wrote letters home that would be picked up when we docked, and waited for a visit to a bar when we were in the next port of call. So except for the sleeping part, it's a lot like being down here."

"Yep, it sounds like submarine duty is a perfect way to get you ready to work in a coal mine," said Joey.

"The one part of the training that I didn't like was the escape tower. It was a tower filled with water. You got into an air suit that would float you up to the top and had enough air to get you up there. Then you went into a room that was supposed to be an air lock. They filled it with water and then opened the door on the other side and you had to go up to the top. That's when I felt claustrophobic. I was fine as long as I was in the sub, and I'm okay when I get down here to the face. The part I don't like is going up and down the shaft."

"How come you didn't stay in'a the Navy, Tony?"

"That was one of the three biggest mistakes of my life. The other two were marrying Donna and doing that heist. I figured that the Navy and Donna didn't mix. It was one or the other, and I picked the wrong one. Joey and Nicco tried to tell me she was no good before we got married, but I didn't listen."

"Well, you got out'a that lousy marriage, and you did your time."

"That must have been tough in there, Tony. In the jail, I mean," said Wadz.

"You know what it's like being in jail, Wadz," answered Tony. *"You were in the worst jail ever made. Sub duty made being in jail easy. Being locked up in a room with one other guy was nothing compared to being in a tight sleeping bay in the sub. The cell had a window. I could see the sun, the moon and the stars. I could see the rain and the snow. Those eighteen months were really good for me. I got clean from all the crap I was putting into my body and into my head. I had two different roomies, an Irish kid who was in for possession and a Puerto Rican who robbed a gas station with a toy gun and ran into a policeman on his way out. He cried every night. I read a lot. I looked forward to visits. Alex, Pa, Ma, and Niccocame at least once a week. Thanks, Nicco."*

Don't mention it, buddy. You'd do the same for me.

"I think I got my head straight about women during those eighteen months."

Tony was always a tit-man. He never went out with anyone who didn't have big ones. Donna's only selling point were her boobs.

"Unless you live in your bed, most of the time you spend with your wife you're not having sex. You gotta be with somebody who you can talk to and who wants to talk to you. You gotta like the person who's on the other side of the bed when you're not having sex. You gotta be interested in what she's doing and what she's thinking and feeling, and she's gotta be interested in you. You might as well stay single and not mess up your life or somebody else's life just because you want all the other stuff that goes with marriage."

"So you found that person, Tony? When you gonna introduce us to your new mystery lady?" asked Joey. *"We know you've been seein' somebody, but you've been keeping her under wraps. You been spending a lotta time up the line."*

"I've told Nicco about her, and Alex has met her. She's a nice woman, really a good person, a Navy nurse. Maybe she's too good for me."

"I hope this'a time you find a nice girl, Tony. Greek, Italian, Polak."

There was a short silence, like Tony was figuring out what he was going to say. Would he say it? He did. *"She's Negro. Her name is April Cummins. She's my Navy buddy Mitch Cummins' sister."*

It was silent again for a while. I could feel that everyone was letting what Tony had just told them sink

in and find the spot in their brain and in their soul and in their heart where the message would settle. Tony hadn't told anyone but me and Alex about April. He met her eight months ago at a Navy function in Wilkes-Barre. It was his crew's annual shipping out celebration, the day they all left port for the first time. It was the maiden cruise for their sub, so it was a double big deal. One of the crew was Mitch Cummins. Mitch and Tony got to be friends. He even brought him down to the diner a couple of times. Mitch was at the shindig with his sister April, who got a pass because she's Navy. Tony said he and April spent the rest of the evening after they met talking, and since then they have seen each other as often as he could get up to Wilkes-Barre, once every couple of weeks.

They talk. Nothing else. He says they have both been trying to decide if it's a good idea to keep on seeing each other, to go further than talking, but when they're together they feel like they belong with one another. She was born and raised in Wilkes-Barre. Her father is a conductor on the Central Railroad of New Jersey and her mother is a cook in the cafeteria where April and Mitch went to high school. She has never gone out with a Caucasian, and Tony has never gone out with a Negro. Tony's sure this would be the final nail in his mother's coffin, who still thinks he should marry a Greek woman

even after what happened with Princess Athena, as she was known to all of us. Rossi broke the silence.

"You don't make'a the things easy, do you, Tony?"

"I guess not, Rossi. I guess I never did."

"What's Alex say about it?" asked Joey.

"He tried to talk me out of seeing her when I told him, but then he agreed to meet her. We drove up to Wilkes-Barre one Saturday a month ago and we met for lunch. Yeah, it was a diner. We just talked and I could see that Alex was real stiff. But the more we talked the more Alex started smiling and then we were joking. When we drove home, all Alex could talk about was how we were going to get Ma to meet April and how Ma would be won over in a matter of minutes."

"So them's met?"

"No, not yet. Alex and me planned how we were gonna do it Thanksgiving weekend. Alex and Edie were going to have a leftover lunch on Saturday and invite April and Mitch. We figured that Ma would be won over just like everyone is when they meet her and then I'd talk with Ma after that and tell her that we want to start seeing each other."

"What if your Ma doesn't think that's such a good idea?" asked Joey.

"That's why they invented bridges," joked Tony. *"You only have to cross them if you want to get to the other side."*

Our old friend has been getting wiser as he's been getting older. I like that, Tony. I'll have to remember those words of wisdom. *You only have to cross a bridge if you want to get to the other side*.

"There's something else that we talk about. April convinced me that I should make a try to get back into the Navy. The VA Hospital has positions for military personnel, and a couple of them are for running the kitchen. I had a meeting with the Navy recruiting officer a month ago and since then my applications have been making their way through the system. Alice has been helping me fill them out."

"You gotta introduce us to your April, Tony. She sounds like she's a real nice'a person."

"Why aren't there any Negroes working with us in the mines?" asked Wadz. *"Does it have anything to do with why there are only Negroes working as porters on the trains?"*

"I got the answer to your first question a long time ago, Wadz," said Jonesy. *"I remember how it started. I was just a little kid and I drove with Ma and Pa to the mine. Pa was starting his shift and Grandpa was finishing his, and Grandpa would drive the car back home. I saw Grandpa come out of the mine in a car and he walked over to us before going into the wash*

shanty. His face was all black except for around his eyes. I shouted: 'Grandpa, you look like Amos 'n' Andy!' When Pa came home after his shift and we were sitting around the table eating dinner, Ma said that she always wondered why there were no Negroes working in the mines. Grandpa said it was the unions that stopped them from being hired. The mine owners tried to bring them up from the south and pay them dirt wages, like they did in the soft coal areas in the western part of the state, but the ones who were already at the bottom of the pecking order, the Irish, put a stop to it. Then the Italians and eastern Europeans came in and the companies paid them dirt wages instead."

"The Negroes should count themselves lucky. They'd just be trading one slave job for another," said Joey.

"I'm guessing that they don't see it that'a way, but there's nothin' I can do about it."

The sixty-five thousand dollar question is whether Alice is going to be out there waiting for Tony when and if we get out of here. I'm placing my bet that she will. From what both Tony and Alex told me about her, she has made up her mind that Tony is the man for her. He's a lucky guy. He went through a lot to get there, and I sure as hell hope he has a chance for some happiness.

The call came to the diner and Elaine answered. She was used to receiving phone calls with bad news about her son. She had prepared for this call when he told her he would be going into the mine. "It's my chance to get back some self-respect," he had said. Her father, Stefanos Stefanidis, had been a miner. He died in a mine accident when Tony was six. She remembered how her brother, Tassos, called her at home to tell her about the accident. She was there with Tony and his little sister Gina, who were six and four at the time. Tassos had been with their mother when she received the call. There had been an explosion, he told his sister. Elaine drove to the colliery with Tony and Gina. By the time she got there they had already confirmed that her father was dead. His mangled body was on the ground along with three other men in his crew. They were all covered with a large, black tarp. She wanted to see him, to touch him while his body was still warm, but they wouldn't let her. It wasn't until she saw him at the funeral home, in his casket, after they had pieced him together and filled in the holes that the dynamite had blown away, that she was able to press his hand and kiss his lips for the last time. Now Tony was trapped in the dark place that came back to her in her dreams.

She screamed for Milos and he came running out of the kitchen. So did their son Alex. Milos braced his wife and Alex picked up the phone.

"This is Anthony's brother. What happened?"

"Anthony is trapped in the mine with five others," explained Judy Bolin. "You can go to the breaker or come to the main office. They are doing all they can to get them out. We don't have any contact with them yet."

"We'll go down to the breaker," said Alex and hung up. He turned to his father and mother. "I'm going to call Gina. She'd want to know."

Gina, or Sister Giorgiana, was a nun in the order of the Sisters of Mercy. She lived in a convent in Hazleton and taught in the parochial grade school connected to the church and the convent. She spent almost all of her twenty-nine years saying prayers for her older brother. Maybe she thought she could pray more often or her prayers would be heard more clearly if she became a nun. She never explained to anyone why she decided to do it, to become a nun. She became a postulant at the age of twenty, when she was still in college at Misericordia. She wanted to teach and she wanted to be better educated than the nuns who had taught her. She took her first

vows a year after she graduated and her solemn vows two years after that.

"Hello, this is Mother Agnes," the voice at the other end of the line said.

"Hello, Mother Agnes. This is Alex Katsaros, Sister Giorgiana's brother. There has been an accident in the mine where our brother Anthony works. He's trapped with five other men. Can I talk to my sister, please."

"I'm so sorry to hear this. I'll get her right away." Gina was in the chapel with the other nuns at vespers. Mother Agnes came to her and asked her to follow her outside. As they walked to her office, she told her that her brother was on the phone, that there had been an accident at the mine and her other brother was trapped.

"Alex?" she said calmly as she picked up the phone. He told her what had happened. "Is there any word on how Anthony and the others are?"

"No, sis. I don't have any news yet. Mom and I are going down to the breaker. I just thought you would want to know."

"I'll come to the breaker, too. I'll ask one of the lay teachers to drive me. I will pray for Anthony. God bless you."

Alex made another call, to his wife Edith, and then he and his mother left for the breaker in his car.

"Anthony deserves another chance," said Elaine.

"He went down there for the same reason everyone goes down there, Ma. It's a job and it pays decent money. He needed both, one for his respect and the other to be able to start over with a clean slate. He wouldn't take gifts from any of us."

"Why couldn't he have become an electrician or a plumber or a carpenter? He could have been a priest!"

"Imagine Anthony as a priest, Ma. He'd never have gotten past the first week in a seminary before he skipped out to a dance somewhere."

"He was a good boy. I'll take all the blame for pushing him together with that witch. It worked with your father and me, but we were from the old school. We made it work. She's going to burn in hell for what she did to your brother. He deserves another chance."

"He'll get it, Ma. They'll get him and all the others out. I'm sure of it. I don't know why, but I'm sure."

"I won't let him go back down there."

"That's going to be up to Anthony, Ma. He's going to have to decide that for himself."

"Why can't he find a nice girl."

"Maybe he has."

"Who is it? If she was local I would know about it. Is that why he's been going up to Wilkes-Barre?"

"She's not local and it's not serious yet, but it might get there. I met her. I like her a lot. You'll like her too if you give her a chance."

"Why doesn't he invite her for Thanksgiving? What do you mean if I give her a chance?"

"Ma, Tony's trapped in a mine and we don't even know how he is. Let's take one step at a time."

"I've never been to one of these things before. I don't know what I'm supposed to do. When Pa died in the accident it was all over when we got there."

"You're not supposed to do anything, Ma. We're there so that we can see Anthony when he comes out. We'll go to the hospital with him so they can check him out, then we'll take him home."

"We should have brought pies. They'll probably have stale doughnuts and dry sandwiches."

"If it looks like it's going to take a long time, I'll go back and get some food. I'll call Pa when we get there and we can talk about what to do."

The parking area at the wash shanty was getting full. There wasn't any chance of a frost tonight, thought Alex, as they got out of the car. He had put the case of *retsina* in the tool shed behind the garage. It's the only concession Edie makes to the Greeks when the families come to their house for a holiday dinner. If they want *dolmadis* and *baklava* along with the candied yams and pumpkin pie, they'll have to bring them themselves, Edie had told Alex at the very first Thanksgiving dinner they hosted for the family a few years after they were married. Elaine played every card in her deck to keep Alex from marrying Edith, but she had everyone else in the family working against her, especially her husband. Edith was the best thing that had happened to Alex Katsaros, and he thanked God every day for the gift. He enjoyed the services at their church, Christ Lutheran Church, and he liked being an Evangelical Lutheran. April seemed like a good woman. Tony's life would be very different if they got married. Not everybody would like the idea, he thought, including many of Tony's friends and especially his mother. But maybe he was selling his mother short.

Jack Walsh was at the door when they came in. "Hello, Alex. Hello, Mrs. Katsaros." Jack Walsh was a regular at the diner and had been for all of his life. He used to come in with his father on Saturday mornings

when it wasn't his dad's shift day. Both of them always ordered waffles with a side of sausage, and instead of butter and maple syrup, they ate them with strawberry jam and whipped cream. Elaine would come over to chat just to watch them eating this strange concoction.

"Hello, Jack," replied Alex. "Is there any news? Have you made contact with them?"

"Not yet, Alex. We are planning to bore down an air hole to get a picture of what condition everyone is in and to get water and food down to them. Then we'll get a three-foot drill in the shaft to start boring into the rooms where they are. We're hoping that the collapse was behind them. We don't know at this point. We know where they were working and there's plenty of space between where they should have been and the collapsed area."

"How long will it take to reach them?" asked Elaine.

"It depends on how much of the roof has come down, Mrs. Katsaros. We are hoping that it will not take more than twenty-four hours. We'll know more once we have the air hole down to them. That should be done in ten hours or so."

Alex and Elaine joined the others. Elaine knew all of them except Alice Jones, who was sitting with Father

O'Malley and the librarian who came into the diner with Wadz, who had been one of her favorites from the first time he sat in one her booths. She waved to them as she approached Connie, Annie, Lilly and Jenny. Elaine and Connie had been good friends all their lives. They hugged each other and both of them broke out into tears.

"Who would have thought we would be here now with our sons down there," said Connie through her tears. "It wasn't supposed to be like this, Lainie."

"If these were the only tears I cried for my Anthony I would be happy."

Gina went to her room after talking with her brother and packed a small bag to take with her. She walked to the school across the courtyard from the convent and up to the principal's office. She knocked on the door and looked through the glass window in the middle of the door. Mother Helen waved her in.

"Mother, my brother Anthony who works in a mine has been trapped inside by a subsidence. I would like permission to go there to be with my family and pray with them for his safe rescue. May I?"

"Of course, Sister Giorgiana. I'll ask Robert to drive you."

Robert was Robert Kerrigan. He was assistant to the superintendent. He pulled the 1960 Chevy Kingswood station wagon in front of the entrance to the convent, held the door open for Gina and she climbed in. It took an hour to reach the breaker. They passed by the diner along the way and she caught a glimpse of her father. They work so hard, she thought. Luckily, Alex has given them the one thing they have wanted most in life: grandchildren. There's still hope for Anthony to deliver.

It was dark when they arrived at the breaker. Robert got out and opened the door for Gina and reached in the back to take out her travel bag. "Will you come in before you drive back, Robert?"

"No, Sister Giorgiana. Judy will be waiting for me for dinner. God bless you, Sister. I hope everything goes well and your brother and all the men come out safely."

"Thank you, Robert, and thank you for driving me. God bless you." Gina walked to the wash shanty door, opened it and walked in.

"Here comes Gina," announced Annie.

"Remember when she was a skinny kid running around the Glider waiting on tables?" said Jenny.

"Tony used to say his little sister was a lousy advertisement for the business. She served it but she didn't eat it."

"It looks like the cooking at the nun's house has been more to her liking," said Jenny.

Gina came over to her mother and the two hugged each other while tears flowed from both of their eyes. When they released each other Gina turned to Connie. "Hello, Aunt Connie. It seems like it's been more than just a year when we met."

"Hello Gina. It was last Thanksgiving. I liked it more when I could see you every day. They keep you too busy up there at that convent and school."

"After I've finished teaching, going to mass and vespers, praying for everyone, eating my meals and getting a little sleep, there's not much time left over for much of anything else. My prayers for Anthony take most of the day, but it feels like they're not getting through or God has a different plan for my brother that he hasn't told me about. Do we know anything more than we did a few hours ago when Alex called?"

"No," said Connie. "Uncle Sal is there. He's not going to rest until they break through and get everyone out."

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path
Ps. 119: 105.

And the angel of his presence saved them. Isa. 63: 9.

The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them. Ps. 34: 7.

Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels. Heb. 13: 2.

Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation? Heb. 1: 14.

A MINER'S PRAYER

O Lord after I have worked my last day and come out of the earth and have placed my feet on Thy footstool, let me use the tools of prudence, faith, hope and charity. From now on till I will be called to sign my last pay roll, make all the cables in the machinery strong with Thy love. Supply all the gangways, slopes and chambers with the pure air of Thy grace and let the light of hope be my guidance, and when my last picking and shoveling is done, may my last car be full of Thy grace and give me the Holy Bible for my last shift, so that Thou, the General Superintendent of all the colieries can say: "Well done, thou good, faithful miner come and sign the pay roll and receive the check of eternal happiness." Amen.

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. Rev. 21: 4.

Old things are passed away; behold all things are become new. II Cor. 5: 17.

Price, 10 cents. Sent postpaid on receipt of price.
Address
C. ERB, YORK, PA.

AGENTS WANTED

CHAPTER 6

THE TUNNEL

"I don't want to miss Thanksgiving, so I hope they start shaking a leg out there and get us out'a here," said Joey. *"My mother-in-law makes the best punk'in pie in the state, and Ma's apple cobbler would win all the blue ribbons if she would just put one of them into the pie contest."*

"I think Jenny'd give Connie a good run'a for her money on the turkey," laughed Rossi. *"Hej, the drillin' is comin' closer, don'cha think?"*

"Yeah, it's definitely getting closer," added Jonesy. *"They should know exactly how much more they have to dig now that they have a drawing I gave them of the room with the distance to the face from the hole above."*

"I wish Nicco would come to so he could tell us what's broken," said Tony. *"At least we got the rocks off him and his pressure seems okay."*

"He hears everything we're saying," said Joey. *"I'm sure of it, so say nice things. He'll remember it all when we're in the wash shanty."*

Joey was always there with us, like he was part of the family. The Zukases lived across the street and up the block. He's in every photograph of every birthday party that I and Lilly had. He's in the photos of my First Holy Communion party, my Confirmation party and my going-away-to-the

Army send off. He was with us on our summer Sunday picnics and our annual trips to Hershey Park and Gettysburg. He wasn't there for my sake; he was there because he was crazy about Lilly and she with him. That was it. I got a big brother in the bargain.

And he was big, even as a young kid. He's six-five now. He was six feet before he got into high school. One of my favorite pictures of him and me is the one where he's holding up a stalactite in Crystal Caves with one hand and the other one is on my head. He could have been a pro in football, baseball or basketball. He had a great football scholarship at Arizona State, and he was dressing as a freshman, the third quarterback. Why the hell didn't they get married and move back down to Arizona so he could finish with college and get drafted into the NFL or the NBA. The football coach even came up to talk to Mom and Dad and the Zuckases. He said they'd pay for an apartment and get Lilly a job after the baby was old enough. Dad and Adam Zukas were fine with the idea, but Mom and Addie wouldn't hear of it. It wouldn't have even entered his mind to say 'Screw it!' and take off back to Arizona. He gave up a free college education and probably a pro football career for the love of my sister, and he gets stuck here like the rest of us. It burns my ass every time I hear her giving him a hard time and bossing him around. He shouldn't even be down here. He's too fucking big!

All the Zukases and his mom's family, the Butkuses, were miners. His dad was a miner before the war, but he

got shot up in the leg during the war and came back with a big limp. He got a good job as the building superintendent for the high school, and he was there for every one of Joey's practices, football, basketball, baseball and track. Joey lettered in all four sports in all four years. The only games we lost during his four years were one each to Berwick and Tamaqua. Adam didn't want any of his sons to go into the mines, and the other three didn't. Joey always said he was destined to be a miner because he wasn't afraid of the dark or of being underground.

We had a tunnel close to where we lived. It was about a hundred and fifty yards long and ran under the railroad staging yard behind our house. Using the tunnel was the fastest way to get from our neighborhood to the Little League and Teener League ball fields, the summer playground and the high school up the hill. You could walk or bike around and cross over the tracks to the north or under them to the west, but that added about fifteen minutes to the trip. The tunnel was the best route. There was only one problem: there was always a gang from the other neighborhood hanging around the other end. None of the girls walked through the tunnel, not even in groups. In the summer, before I started high school, I rode my bike around to the north and avoided the tunnel altogether. Then came the first day of high school and I had to make one of life's big decisions. Would I take the tunnel and risk being beaten up, or would I commit to the alternate routes for the next four years. I decided to chance it.

Alone, I entered the tunnel. It was early September so it was pretty light out. There were a few lamps inside the tunnel but they weren't lit. I could see clear to the other side, and there was no one in there. Half way through, I saw them. There were four of them that had walked down the stairs and they were just standing there waiting for me or anyone else who was dumb enough to walk there alone. I turned around and began walking back. Before I got to my end of the tunnel, a large figure took up the entrance. I saw that it was Joey. He walked toward me and said: "We're going out there together." I turned around and we walked slowly, side by side until we reached the stairs and the gang of four.

"Mornin' guys," said Joey. "This here is Lilly's brother. He'll be walking here every day for the next four years, every morning and afternoon, and I want you all to make sure that nobody messes with him. Pass that on to your buddies. Jimmy, I'll see you at practice later today."

I walked through the tunnel every school day for the next four years, and even went through there on the way to the Teener League games. I always got a big 'hello' from the guys hanging out at the end, even after Joey graduated and went down to Arizona.

"You know," said Joey, *"there are folks who have never been in a mine or even a cave. My roommate in college for those couple of months I was there was one of them. He was from somewhere in California. He thought we was crazy when I told him everyone except Pa was a miner in my family and that I could do it if I*

wanted and that Pa would be down here if he hadn't been wounded in the war. 'Ain't you afraid that it'll collapse on top of you?' he'd ask. Naw, I'd say, our mines got good support. There are some mines I wouldn't go into, like the ones up the line that had their pillars robbed. Who could'a figured that we'd get a squeeze. Bad luck."

"Bad luck with the squeeze," said Tony. *"Bad luck that the roof fell on Nicco. Bad luck comes in threes."*

"They don't have'a to come one after the other. They can come in'a between a couple of good things." Then Rossi laughed, a big, hearty laugh, and everyone laughed with him.

"Let's just hope it was only the one pillar and they'll be in here soon," said Tony.

"The mole they're using should get through in six more hours if they don't run into any trouble," explained Jonesy.

"What kind of trouble?" asked Tony.

"There shouldn't be any trouble if they are using a steel tube to support the hole after they dig, but you have to know what you're doing to put the tubes in and get the material out."

"Well, I hope to hell they know what they're do'in," said Tony.

"They've got the best men in the valley working on it," offered Joey, *"so I'm feeling like we are as good as out of here."*

"That's the way to think, Joey. I'm feelin' real good about it, too."

When Joey was really young, he spent a lot of time in his cellar. His pa had bought him an American Flyer train set and made a platform for it in the cellar. He kept it up all year round. His pa started to make buildings for it out of cardboard and the thin wood on baskets and crates. He got really good at it, and the platform got bigger. He bought more locomotives and rolling stock. He put lights into the buildings so if you turned out the cellar lights it looked light night in the make believe town he had made. Joey would turn the lights in the buildings off and just run the trains with their own headlights on. 'It's real late at night,' he would say, 'and everyone's in bed.' The trains are still there in the Zukases basement and Joey began taking Joey Junior down there from the time he was old enough to walk. Adam still makes new buildings and keeps the trains running. He made a model of the breaker and all the buildings around it, including the wash shanty. He even made a replica of the sign sitting over the entrance.

It was Joey's trains that got me started fixing electrical stuff. We went down to his basement once when we were both in high school. Joey hadn't run the trains for a while and he figured it was time to give them a workout. One of the steam locomotives wouldn't move. The other locomotives ran fine, so it wasn't the track. We moved it to a different part of the track, cleaned off the drive wheel, but it still didn't run. I asked Joey if I could take it into my electric shop and let Mr. Hughes have a look at it. Mr. Hughes was the electric shop teacher. His first name was

Willard, but everyone called him Sparky, not to his face, of course. I took the locomotive in and asked him if he knew what could be wrong with it. "Let's have a look at it," he said, taking it from me. "Come with me."

We walked into his office where he had his own workbench. "We'll check to see if the problem is with your electrical connections first." He had a transformer on his bench that looked like the one Joey had. "I'll touch one wire to the roller wheels on the bottom of the engine and another to the big wheel. Nope. Nothing happening. I'll clean off the roller with alcohol and try it again." Still nothing. He picked it up, turned it upside down and put it under his magnifying lamp. "Have a look here. See that copper piece? If its clogged with dirt, it's going to keep the engine from getting power. Put some alcohol on a cotton swab and rub the swab on the copper while I hold the engine. You are going to need to do that until the swabs come off clean." I used about a half dozen swabs before I got it cleaned. He put it back down on the table and touched the transformer wires to the roller wheels and the big wheel, and it started running. "Joey's going to be real happy, Mr. Hughes. Thanks a lot."

"Hey Joey. There's something I always meant to ask'a you. How come you never went back'a to the college?"

"It wasn't for me. The one semester I was there I played and practiced football most of the time, and when I wasn't playing or practicing I was sleeping or eating. That was seven days a week. There was one course for the freshman players that met once a

week. It was called "The History of Sports". *One of the assistant coaches taught it. Great guy. I really liked it. I got an 'A', my only one ever. How about that! He showed us how every sport can be traced back to something the hunters did before everybody started farming. Did you guys know that people started farming around ten thousand years ago? Before that they all hunted and fished."*

"That's not possible," said Wadz. *"The nuns taught us that God created everything six thousand years ago, so your teacher must have been an atheist or bad at mathematics."*

"I guess they didn't teach evolution in your school, Wadz," said Jonesy.

"You mean the apes who turns into a human'a being? I'm with the nuns and Wadzee on that."

"I'll put my money on your teach, Joey," added Tony.

"Where was I? Yeah, anyway, he showed us how the skills the men learned from hunting animals were used when they were fighting against other men and then how they turned them into competitions."

"So throwing a football was like hurling a rock at a big, wooly elephant or one of the guys trying to beat it back over the hill?" asked Tony.

"Yep, that's it. He used the example of the big, wooly elephant. It's called a mastodon. That was one of the questions on the final exam, and I got it right."

Joey's living in the wrong time. He should have been born before people started farming all those years ago,

when they all lived by hunting and fishing and picking stuff that grew wild. He would have made a great Plains Indian. Studying or office work or a factory job or this shit job aren't meant for men like Joey. He needs to be outside. If he lived in New England he'd probably find his way onto a fishing boat. I can't see Sis as a fisherman's wife. If the two of them had given themselves more time they definitely wouldn't have ended up together. Lilly would have been better off with one of the managers in her office, or better yet, moving to Philly. She hates the woods and everything that goes with it. She doesn't even like hot dogs cooked over a fire. Joey should have found a nature woman to hike with in the woods.

"How 'bout bowling, Joey?" said Tony. *"They'd roll a big rock down a hill and knock down all the enemy's army."*

Joey had moved on and ignored the question. *"I've been thinking lately about how I really want to be spending my life, and it ain't down here. I saw an ad for a forest warden up at the State Game Lands north of town. I was thinking about applying. I wouldn't say anything to Lilly unless I get the job. She'd start to worry that I'd quit here before I had something else, but I thought I'd give it a try."*

If I get out of here alive but I can't walk, I'm going to have to find something else to do, too. I could start my own business fixing electrical stuff. I could. Why haven't I done it before? Sparky wanted me to take over his shop. I needed the paycheck every month, that's why. Annie had a regular paycheck. Teachers don't make that much, but they don't

have to worry about getting paid or getting laid off. Once they get their job in a school district, they have the job until they retire. It's like a fireman. Why didn't I become a fireman like cousin Jimmy? It's a tough job when you're working, but a lot of the time you're hanging around the firehouse and shooting the breeze with the guys, drinking coffee, making beef stew.

Sparky's shop has been empty since he died a couple of years ago. He had a good little business fixing toasters and toy trains on the side of his teaching, and then he did it full time after he retired. *Hughes Electrical Repair*. I'll bet his equipment is still there. I miss the old guy. I guess he figured out pretty quickly that I was going around to the family and asking them if they had any broken electrical appliances so I could go in there with them and watch him fix them. I could talk to Mrs. Hughes and see if she'd let me see if I could make a go of it before I start paying rent. She kind of adopted me because they never had any kids. *Nicco's Electrical Repair*. *Maltese Electrical Repair*. I think I like *Nicco's* better. Or I could take a card from Louie Salvatore's deck and call it *Lehigh Valley Electric Repair*, maybe? Naw, I'll call it *Nicco's Electrical Repair Shop*. Annie's going to have to make due on her salary until I can build up the business. I could sell things too to get some money coming in, like those new video tape recorders. Then I could do warranty repairs. First I need to get the hell outta here alive.

"What do you guys think about me applying?" asked Joey.

"It's just the job for you, Joey," chipped in Tony.

"It sounds great, Coach," added Jonesy.

"Those poachers, the ones that take more fishes than'a they should, would stay the hell out'a the woods if they knew you was the warden, Joey. Go for it. Let me know if you need'a the recommendation." And then he gave another one of his big laughs which are contagious as the chicken pox. Everybody was laughing.

How come he hasn't told me about this? It sounds like he hasn't told anybody. It's a great idea, perfect for him. He'd out smoke Smokey the Bear.

When the whistle blew, all the staff at headquarters knew there had been an accident and they had to go immediately to the big conference room on the top floor. Lilly's boss, Wayne Davis, Vice President of Finance, came out of his office and both of them walked up the one flight of stairs and into the main conference room. Clive Driscoll, the President, was already seated at the head of the conference table with a cup of coffee in front of him. Within a few minutes the room was full. The last person in, Clive's secretary, went to Clive with a piece of paper. They all knew that on the paper were the names of the men who did not answer to roll call. Clive looked right at Lilly.

"Is it Joey or Nicco or both of them?" asked Lilly, leaning forward in her chair.

"It's both, Lilly. I'm sorry."

Lilly leaned back without saying anything. She just stared down at the paper tablet she had brought with her to take notes. She couldn't pick up the pencil.

"Lilly, do you want to go out?" asked Driscoll. "Judy, can you get Lilly a glass of water."

"No, Mr. Driscoll. Thank you, Judy, I'm OK. I want to hear what the situation is before I leave and go to the breaker."

"Alright, here's what we know," began Driscoll.

Lilly listened, but her mind was elsewhere. *What am I going to do if Joey doesn't make it out of there? I can get by on my pay as long as the mine keeps running. That might be for a couple of more years or until I'm old enough to retire. Who knows?. Little Joey is going to miss his dad. Dziadzia can help, but Little Joey really loves his father. Why couldn't he find a job that he could keep? Why did he have to go down into the mines? I shouldn't have listened to Ma. We should have gone back to Arizona so he could have finished school and at least get a job as a coach somewhere. We were too young to get married.*

"Here's how we handle this with the press," said Driscoll.

The owners of the newspapers know their business depends on the companies that buy ads, so they're not going to write

anything bad about one of the biggest employers in the area. I see all the Christmas presents handed out to politicians and churches and schools and hospitals. Nobody ever publicly blames the company when miners get killed or injured or when the streets cave in and people have to move. Why is he wasting his breath and our time on talking about how we are going to handle the press.

Lilly came back to the room from her own thoughts when she heard her name. The assignments were being handed out. Everything that was needed would be delivered to the wash shanty, so all she needed to do was be there. "Is that OK, Lilly?" asked Driscoll. "Yes, fine. I'll go there right away."

When Driscoll had finished and all the assignments were handed out, Lilly went out to call her son, hoping that Joey Jr. would already be home from school. He was and he answered.

"Ma, I heard the whistle from the mine. What's happened?"

"There's been an accident at the mine, Joey. Dad is in there with five others. Your Uncle Nicco is in there as well."

"Are Dad and Uncle Nicco alright?"

"We don't know anything yet, Joey, but they've started working on getting to them."

"I guess *Nonno* and *Nonna* and *Dziadzia* and *Babcia* are there."

"Yes, they are there. I am going to the breaker where we'll wait while they're getting them out. Go over to *Sia* Angie. I'll call her to tell her you're coming. Your cousins will be there. Take your pajamas and toothbrush and don't go to school tomorrow. I'll be there before bedtime."

"Are they going to get Dad and Uncle Nicco out, Mom?"

"Don't worry, Joey. They will get them both out and all the others, too, and we'll be enjoying Thanksgiving together in a couple of days. I'll call *Sia* Angie and tell her you are coming over." Lilly called Angie who told her how Connie had reacted when Sal had broken the news about the accident. Lilly then called her mother-in-law. Adam had already called Addie to tell her that Joey was trapped and that he would pick her up to go to the breaker. Addie was calm when she talked to Lilly. "You never get used to it, the accidents," said Addie, "but you learn that it doesn't help anyone if you think they're dead before you know they are. I have to believe that our Joey is alive and will be back with us soon. You should, too. We'll see you at the breaker, Lilly."

After she hung up with Lilly, Addie stood at the phone thinking of how many times she had gotten a call telling her that someone she loved was trapped in the mine. One was too many. Now it was her only son. She hadn't had to worry about Adam since he came home from the war. Getting shot up in Germany was the best thing that had happened to him and to them. Her mother used to tell her stories about how in the old country pretty girls had their

faces disfigured by their own mothers so they wouldn't be taken by the nobles or the Russian or Polish soldiers. She had thought about what she could do to keep Joey out of the mines, but she never did anything. Now he's in there. *Don't die, Joey*, she thought as she heard Adam at the door.

Lilly drove the short distance to the breaker. When she walked into the wash shanty she saw that the folding tables and chairs had already been set up, a white tablecloth had been spread over the tables. Jack Walsh and two of his assistants were there and were putting out the thermoses, paper cups, paper plates, doughnuts and sandwiches. She was off the clock now. She was one of the wives, one of the family members. Her husband and her brother were both in there. But she knew that when it was over and she went back to work, she would be asked what went on in the room. Was there any talk about problems with safety? Did anyone talk about getting compensation for injuries? She had sat through meetings after other accidents and heard how they all talked about 'limiting the damage' and 'talking up' the safety measures they were thinking about taking. As soon as the coal dust settled on the rescue, nothing was ever done about making the mines safer. They paid her well, and part of what they expected of her was her loyalty.

Annie then Ma and Pa then Adam and Addie then Jenny then Alice then Father O'Malley and Lina then somebody she didn't know who turned out to be Jonesy's girlfriend Lucy then Alex and Elaine came in that evening.

They were going wait for the men to do their work, support each other with encouraging words, try believe that it would all be over in a day, maybe two, and their men would walk out, celebrate Thanksgiving with their families, and then get ready for their next shift. That's how it's always been—if the men came out alive.

CHAPTER 7

THE ROOMS

By 7:30 a.m. the wash shanty smelled like any morning at the Glider Diner. Milos started bringing in breakfast at around 7:00 a.m. He had driven their Chevy Suburban to the breaker with four large buffet warming pans containing scrambled eggs, bacon and sausage, pancakes and toast. He also transported a large coffee brewer, a hot water thermos, cartons of milk, orange juice, butter, jams and maple syrup, and dishwasher trays filled with plates, cups and saucers, and cutlery. It was still dark outside when Milos came in, but everyone who had slept over that night was awake. They hadn't gotten much sleep. Around midnight they had pulled out the U.S. Army issue canvas cots and blankets. There was no news from the mine up to that point. Both the drill from above and the mole were working at full throttle. Connie, Jenny, Addie, Alice, Elaine, Gina, Lucy and Lina stayed while Annie and Lilly drove home in Annie's car to see to the kids. Adam and Sal and Jimmy and Jay and Johnny were at the face. Father O'Malley left at midnight. He was saying mass the next morning. Alex also left at midnight to catch a few hours of sleep before going to the diner to help his father get breakfast started and to take over when Milos came to the wash shanty.

At 4 a.m., Jay Jones came in and turned on the lights. He went directly to Alice and tried to wake her. "They're all

alive, Alice. J.J.'s alive!" *I'm going to stay asleep until it's light. I don't want to wake up. I want to stay asleep. My baby J.J. is safe now. They found him in the well. They're taking him up now, slowly, slowly. I can see him now. He's here with me. He's safe.*

"Are they all alive, Nicco too?" Connie cried out after she awoke to Jay's words.

"Yes, we got the hole down from above and fished down a phone. I talked to Rossi and J.J. Alice, wake up!"

"I'm awake now, Jay. I'm awake. J.J.'s alive. Thank God."

Jay turned to Connie. "Connie, Nicco is injured. His legs were caught in the fall. He's unconscious but is breathing well. The men have gotten the stones off of him. We have a doctor up there talking to them and telling them what to do. We're making good headway with the tunnel and if all goes well we should be through by late afternoon."

Connie began sobbing, half out of joy that her son was alive, and half out of sorrow that he was injured. Addie comforted her. Everyone was now awake and, except for Connie and Addie, they gathered around Jay. What else could he tell them, they all asked. Alice brought him a cup of lukewarm coffee and a ham and cheese sandwich that she unwrapped from the cellophane.

"It was a pillar that collapsed. That's what caused the roof to cave in. All the men were at the far end of the rooms. Nicco had gone back to fetch a new bit for the drill when the pillar gave way. Luckily, he ran in the right direction.

He wouldn't have made it otherwise. They had enough water and food to get them through a couple of days. We're sending down more water and food through the hole. That's all we know right now. Why don't you all try to get some more sleep. There's nothing more you can do. We'll let you know as soon as we have gotten through with a tunnel."

"I won't…be able…to sleep…until I know…Nicco is alright," said Connie in between sobs.

"He's strong, Connie," said Addie. "He'll make it alright."

After phone calls by Addie to Annie and Lilly, by Jenny to her sons and daughters, and by Elaine to Milos, everyone went back to their cots and tried to sleep. Connie was too worried and restive. One after the other, they began stirring, each one trying not to wake those who they thought were still asleep. Creaking floor boards and flushing toilets soon put an end to the night's restless rest on the U.S. Army issue canvas cots.

The cots and blankets were all stored when Milos made his entry. Everyone pitched in to help Milos carry it all in and set up the breakfast table. After a sandwich and doughnut dinner the evening before, all the women should have had a good appetite. Their men were alive and they would soon be out. Still, the nervousness continued. They knew that anything could go wrong. The chairs had been moved out of their funeral home rows to make room for

the cots. Jenny suggested putting them into a circle so they could all see and talk to each other. “Leave a chair next to you empty so you have someplace to put your cup while you eat,” added Elaine, experienced in helping people eat their food. “Maybe the men will come in.”

Sal, Jimmy, Adam, John and Jay stayed at their posts, either above the vertical bore or at the face behind the mole. “The company ordered breakfast bags and coffee from Rep’s,” said Milos, “so they will be staying out there. None of them want to leave.”

They filled their plates with whatever they thought they could eat. Milos poured the coffee into cups and juice into glasses and when everyone was seated he joined them with a cup of coffee in his hand, standing rather than sitting.

“I wish I had thought to bring some sheets like you did, Alice,” said Connie. “I felt like bugs were crawling over me all night. I never got to sleep.”

“I felt the same way when I was here the last time, when Jay was trapped. I told myself that if it ever happened again I would remember to bring my own sheets.”

“Let’s hope we don’t have to remember to bring our sheets anymore in our lives,” said Connie. “I thought when Sal was ready to retire that would be the end of this for our family, but Nicco decided he had to go down, and here we are.” She began to weep. Just then, Lilly came in.

"We saw Walsh outside," said Lilly. "He didn't have any more news. Annie has gone with him to talk to the doctor who is there."

"I should go there, too," said Connie and she started to get up to put on her coat.

"No, Ma," answered Lilly. "You can't do anything out there. We need to let them do their jobs. Annie will be back and she'll tell us what the doctor says."

"Every day I pray that Anthony will come into the diner after his shift is over," said Elaine.

"Every day I pray that Joey will find another job so that he doesn't have to go into the mine," said Addie.

"Every day I pray that the mines will close forever so that no man has to go into them," said Lina.

"Where would the men work?" asked Lilly.

"They could work where we work," answered Lina. "They could be librarians, grade school teachers, secretaries, seamstresses, waitresses."

"I can just see Joey wearing an apron waiting on tables," joked Lilly. There were a few nervous laughs. "Then what would we do?" asked Lilly.

"If we women have been so smart to stay out of the mines, we should be able to figure out something, don't you think?" said Lina. Her anger was obvious and the atmosphere in the room began to change. What was her problem? Men worked in the mines and women didn't.

There were accidents in the mines, and sometimes the men died. This is how things were and would continue to be.

"There wouldn't be any jobs here if there weren't any mines," said Jenny. "Maybe that would be all just as well. Everyone could go where there are jobs and leave the rich people behind, the ones who built their expensive houses on the backs of our men."

"I can tell you that working in a dress factory was no picnic," chimed in Connie. "Maybe we didn't breathe in coal dust, but the dust from the fabrics was almost as bad. Sitting hunched over a sewing machine for eight hours and having to hold your pee until you were cleared to take a break was torture. We done our part."

"Yes, and being a farmer's wife like my mother was no waltz in the garden either, but the next generation of women isn't doing what our mothers did. We got to finish high school and go to college or secretarial school and then find decent jobs. If we didn't, the sweat shops would still be going full steam instead of moving down south."

"So what are you saying, that it's our fault our men are down there and we're up here? Is that where you're heading?" asked Lilly.

"Yes, I guess I am. We were perfectly happy to go along with our grade school teachers who were all women to make all the boys feel like they were stupid. We girls were praised and got the good grades and the boys were

made to feel like they would never learn anything. Think about it. Think about your grade school days. By the time we all got to high school it was too late. They were so far behind they couldn't catch up."

"I remember that Nicco never took a book home from school, never did his homework and managed to pass from one grade to another because he always had a girl sitting next to him who thought he was cute and who passed him answers to the tests. He never thought about what he was going to do the day after next. Maybe he thought if nothing else turned up he could always be a miner like Pa."

"So you think your father and brother and everyone else who goes down into the mines every day and put their lives in danger every minute they are working do it because they want to?" questioned Lina.

"Some of them do," a soft voice answered. It was Alice, who had been very quiet during breakfast. "Some men believe it is a calling, that it is what they were born to do. My husband and my father-in-law believe they were destined to be coal miners. So did my father and his brothers. They tried to instill this belief into J.J., and if you ask him a direct question about it, he will give you a direct answer, that he is a coal miner. But he isn't. I hope that Lucy will make sure he never returns to the mine if he comes out of there alive." Lucy smiled, nodded her head slowly in agreement and put her hand on the hand of her future mother-in-law.

"For Joey and Nicco and Tony and Walter maybe it was a last resort," offered Jenny. "My Vito has spent most of his life underground and doesn't think he can do anything else. I don't know why some of us women got to be the nurses and teachers and some of the men ended up being coal men. It wasn't so long ago that women were property, no better than slaves. We couldn't vote. The men beat their wives after they got home from the mine with a stop at the beer garden along the way. One or two shots-and-a-beer perked them right up. And they beat us kids when we got home from school. Our fathers were at the bottom of the totem pole when they were in the mine and they made damn sure they were at the top of the poles in their own homes."

"The new recruits, the immigrants, stopped coming after the first war," added Addie. "Our fathers and grandfathers were illiterate, couldn't speak English, took whatever job they could find and hoped they didn't get killed doing it, whether it was working in the mines, on the railroads, in the steel mills, in the dockyards. That all stopped when the laws came in after the first war. Then the mine owners had to start paying more to the miners, had to let them unionize, and men like my Adam and Joey started to think it was a place to earn a living."

"The second war changed everything for women and for men," said Jenny. "While the men were away, women replaced them in the factories and in the offices. We were earning salaries and in charge at home, too. I didn't get

any photos from Vito, but my friends and relatives got them. Their husbands were always clean shaven, smiling and with their buddies, sometimes on leave someplace where there wasn't any fighting. It looked like they were on vacation having a good time. It was a show for us. We had no idea how bad it was for them with the bombs dropping and people being killed all around them. They were wrecked when they came home—IF they came home. Almost half a million of the men never came home, but for those who did there was no way it was going to go back to the way it was before the war, neither for them or for us women. They weren't going to take over. No one was going to lay their hands on us, and we made damn sure that our girls were going to be as independent of men as they could be.

"Don't get me wrong," continued Jenny. "Vito never laid a hand on me, ever. He never hit the kids. I wouldn't have married him if I thought he would, and I wouldn't have stayed married to him if he had. I'm just saying it was different before and after the war. It was different with our parents."

The room got quiet. Connie, Addie, Alice, Elain and Milos knew exactly what Jenny was talking about. Gina, Lucy and Lina knew the stories. Lilly and Annie were in the generation in which there were holdovers from the old days, but their husbands were not among those abusive relics. It was just after 9:00 a.m. and Albert, Vincent, Sandra and Sarah Rossi entered the room. "Hi Mom," said

Albert. "Any more news?" The expressions on the faces of everyone there changed to smiles of relief. The twins ran to their mother and hugged her tight.

"Nothing more than what I told you on the phone early this morning, she said through her tears. They're working hard to dig a tunnel into the room where they are and they're hoping to be through by this afternoon. Have some breakfast. Mr. Katsaros brought the Glider here to us this morning."

The circle widened and the Rossis dug into the breakfast buffet. Some of the others went up for seconds. Milos filled up the coffee cups. Half an hour passed with small, quiet conversation. Jenny raised her voice to ask a question to her oldest son that everyone would hear. "Albert, do you think your father likes being a miner?"

"Is that a trick question, Mom?"

"No, I mean it. Do you think he likes being a miner?"

"If Dad could choose a profession he'd be a dance instructor. I thought you knew that."

Jenny stared at her son. Her face was motionless, no smile or frown, just blank. Her son went back to his breakfast.

"There aren't enough Italian speakers in town to make it a business," added Vincent, "and he sure as heck wouldn't have any customers who could understand him with his English. But that's what Dad would do."

"Yeah, Mom, that's what Dad would do," added Sandra.

"He's a great dancer," offered Connie. "Sal always comments on what a great dancer he is after the New Year's Eve party at the church hall. You're a good sport to let all of us women have a chance to take a spin around the room with him."

Not two men but three, thought Jenny.

It was just after noon when Alex came in with a woman dressed in a uniform. From the lapel anchor insignias, her blue uniform and her white and blue hat it was clear she was in the Navy. She had a slim build and was taller than Alex in her medium-heeled shoes, a head taller than all the women in the room, except Lucy. Her hair was mostly covered by her hat, but what hair did show was very black. She wore white gloves. There was something else that was special about her. The woman was a Negro. She and Alex walked directly to Elaine.

"Ma, this is April Cummins. She is a friend of Anthony's."

April took off the glove on her right hand and extended her hand out to Elaine. Elaine took it. Her face was expressionless and everyone else in the room was motionless.

"Hello Mrs. Katsaros."

"Hello Miss Cummins. Anthony was in the Navy with a colored boy named Cummins, from Wilkes-Barre. He came to the diner a couple of times. He was a real gentleman. Are you related?"

"Yes. His name is Mitch. He's my brother. That's how Anthony and I met. I went with Mitch to the party they have every year in April on the day their sub shipped out."

"So you're the reason Anthony has been driving up to Wilkes-Barre every chance he gets?"

"I guess so. They've gotten to know us pretty well at the Silver Line Diner. Anthony says your banana cream pie beats theirs by miles. I'm looking forward to trying it."

Elaine smiled and looked at Alex and then Milos who was standing next to his son.

"When I didn't hear from him today I called Alex and he told me what had happened."

"So you have met Alex, too?"

"I got to taste Silver Line's BCP, and I totally agree with Anthony."

"I want to be here when Anthony comes out. I'm sure they will all be rescued. I just feel it. Anthony was really looking forward to this Thanksgiving. I hope you don't mind that I have come."

Elaine stood for a second, looking at April. Then her eyes filled with tears and she took a step forward and

wrapped her arms around the stranger who had just walked into her life.

Gina, Milos and Alex came and put their arms around Elaine and April. Gina said, "Come and sit with us."

A few hours passed. Alex brewed more coffee and cleared the food and the dishes. He had left the diner in the hands of his cousin and Edie. He wasn't planning to go anywhere until his brother was safely out of the mine. *April is going to be good for Anthony. Real good.*

At just after three-forty p.m., the wash shanty door burst open and one of Walsh's assistants rushed in and shouted: "They're through!" All of them lined up at the coat rack to put on their coats and file out of the wash shanty. They had known that all the men were alive for almost twelve hours. Now they would see them and hold them again.

"Every one of you guys is'a gonna miss something about being down here when you stop coming down."

Rossi's right. No matter how much we didn't like most things about this job, there were reasons we didn't just quit. It was the money that brought Joey, Tony, Wadz and me into the mine at first, but it wasn't what kept us coming back down every day after that, what made us stop looking for some other job, made us feel like what we were

doing was something we could keep on doing for the rest of our lives. It might have been a family calling for Jonesy, and maybe Rossi felt that this was the only thing he could do, but at some point the rest of us gave up on any thoughts of looking for something else.

"I'll miss seeing something getting done," said Joey. *"We built these rooms. We didn't lay foundations, put up the frame and plasterboard. We carved them out of the mountain. Every day when we finish work, I can see how much more we've done. Some days it's a lot, some days not so much, but I can see it. The funny thing is that I don't think at all about why we're making these rooms, that it's the coal we're after. For me, that's just a waste product."*

"I never thought about it that way," said Tony. *"I'll miss working together with you guys. I said it's like being in a sub, only it's underground and not underwater. Everyone on board has to do their job otherwise it doesn't work. We all have to work together to get at the coal in a way that doesn't make it fall down on top of us, even though sometimes it does. Sorry, Nicco. I've been trying to think if we could'a done something we didn't do to keep the squeeze from happening. I don't think so."*

I don't think so either, Tony. Sometimes shit just happens. It wasn't nobody's fault. It could have fallen on any one of us. It just decided to fall on me.

"For me," added Wadz, *"it's like Tony said, being part of a team, having you guys counting on me to do something and then doing that something. It doesn't matter if it's just shoveling coal*

into the cars or handling dynamite. I gotta do my job. A'course, since I was born in a dark basement and spent the early years of my life there, this place is more familiar than an office in a New York skyscraper. Not that I ever been in a New York skyscraper or ever want to go into one. All I wanna do now is get married, hopefully have some kids and work on the farm with Lina."

You've been a good friend to all of us, Wadz. Who are your buddies going to be out on the farm besides Lina and her pa? I hope you find some. I hope you don't have to work so hard that you can't come into town and have coffee with us at the diner. I hope you don't forget us.

"When I was little and would go out on walks with Grandpa," said Jonesy, *"he would point at the smoke coming out from the stacks of steam locomotives and say,* 'Me and your Dad helped to make that locomotive run, J.J.'*, and I'd say,* 'How'd you do that, Grandpa?'*, and he'd say,* 'We mined the coal that is making that smoke.' *I remember being really proud that Pa and Grandpa could make trains run. By the time I started mining, there weren't any steam locomotives anymore, but I could say that the smoke coming out of the chimneys in all the houses was there because I had mined the coal that was burning* in the *furnaces. Now, fewer and fewer houses have a chimney with smoke coming out of them 'cause they're burning oil and gas. I'm already missing one of the main reasons why my family came down into the mines."*

I can hear that they're getting closer. The mole's stopped and their digging through the last part by hand. They're going to break through any time now. I want to

wake up so that I can talk to Pa when he comes in. I know he'll be first. I can feel my fingers in the dirt. I want to believe I can feel my toes inside my boots, but I'm not sure. What's Pa going to say when he sees me lying here with my face in the dirt? I want to be able to say something to him, that I'm going to be alright, so he doesn't break up.

"It's been'a twenty years since I come back from'a the war. Not one of those days haven't I thought about'a the hole. But every time the hole comes into my head, I see you guys down here with me, working and talking and laughing. The hole don't hurt me then. Nothing hurts. I feel real good. It's only in'a the dreams that the hole hurts, and it's Jenny who got to put up with it. I'm sorry for that. If Nicco was awake he could do the translation so you could understand what the hell I'm sayin'. NICCO, SVEGLIATI. BASTA DORMIRE! You gotta wake up. They's comin' through any minute now."

"*SONO SVEGLIO*... I'm awake...Rossi." They probably didn't hear me with all the noise from the drill. I'll have to talk louder.

"You hear thatt? Nicco's sayin' something. NICCO, *SEI SVEGLIO*?"

"Yeah.... I'm awake....What's a guy....gotta do...ta getta... drink...around here?"

"Nicco's awake!" yelled Joey. "Thank you, Jesus!"

"I'll tell them up on top that Nicco's awake and make sure they're ready to take him out quickly," said Jonesy. "Try to give him a little water like the doctor said."

"They told us not to move you, Nicco," said Tony, "so we'll have to try to give you some water the way they told us, a little at a time. How do you feel?"

"I feel…like shit…which is….probably how I look…and I know…it's how I smell. I've been waiting…for that drink…for a long…time. I guess I'll…be ready for a beer…when we all…get out'a here."

"You gonna feel great real soon, Nicco."

"And we'll all have a couple of beers together," said Wadz.

"More than a couple, Wadzee. This here is worth a six-pack apiece."

"Can you move your toes?" asked Tony.

"I can…move my… fingers. See. I don't…think I…can feel…my toes."

"Don't worry. They'll fix you up, Nicco. You'll be as good as new in no time."

"Sounds like you…all got plans…for when Thanks…giving…is over."

"You been listening to what we been throwing the shit about this whole time?" joked Tony. "You been takin' mental notes about what we've been saying?"

"You bet. None of you…got no secrets…from me. I been…thinking too. Things are…gonna be…different…from now on."

I heard a rock fall a couple of yards from my head and the room lit up. They must have shined a light in. "Are we clear of Nicco?" It was Adam's voice.

"Yeah, Pa, you're good," answered Joey. "We'll work from this side. We'll clear the rocks."

"How's Nicco?" I heard Pa say.

"He's awake, Sal," answered Tony.

"Thank God."

If Jesus or God had anything to do with me waking up I wish they had been on the job when the roof fell on me, but I'll take whatever I can get from them both. It's probably Gina out there who's been doing the heavy lifting with the prayers.

"What time's it, Jonesy?"

"It's three thirty-eight in the afternoon."

"Ca'mon. We're gonna get the hell out'a el oudda hear. Let's move the rocks."

The rocks were falling more quickly as Rossi, Tony, Wadz and Jonesy worked on clearing them away. Joey stayed with me. "Sis wouldn't…have let me…ever forget it…if I made it…out of…here and you didn't."

"Connie would have made life hell for me if it was the other way around. If you were able to hear everything that we were saying you know that none of us, except maybe Rossi, is coming back down here. Did you?"

"Yeah, I did. We've got three…weddings…to go to. I might…not be able…to dance…at any of them, but I'll sure as hell…enjoy myself. When Rossi…finally…decides…to pack it in…we'll have…some place…to stay when…we go on vacation…to Italy. You…gotta apply for…that warden's job, Joey. It's right…up your alley. You couldn't hear…what I was saying…to myself. Here it is. Even if I can walk…next week or…next month or…next year, I wouldn't…set foot in a mine…ever again…even if my life…did depend on it. I've got…an idea about what…I want to do with…the rest of that life…and I know…you and the other guys…are going to help me. We'll talk…about it when everything…settles down, OK?"

"OK, Nicco," answered Joey, "we're all with you, all of us."

"That's the last of it," Jonesy yelled. "You're clear to come through."

Sal was first in followed by the rescue team with a stretcher.

"OK, Nicco," said Joey, "Here's your dad."

Sal knelt down next to Nicco and put his face close to his son's.

"Hi Pa."

"Hi Son. I got the medics right behind me and they're going to take good care of you now."

"I don't….have any feeling…in my legs."

"Take it easy, Nicco. We'll get you to the hospital, and then the doctors will take it from there. They'll get you fixed up and you'll be as good as new."

"That's what everybody…here's been saying…the whole time. You guys…been eavesdropping…on us…from up there?"

"Yep. Heard every word you all said, but we ain't gonna hold any of it against you. I'm happy you haven't lost your sense of humor."

"After the doctors…are finished with me…there's a lot of things…I want…to talk to you about, Pa."

"I'll have plenty of time, Nicco. This is the last time I'll be wearing these clothes and breathing coal dust. We can take as much time as you want. I wasn't much of a father for you when you were a kid. There's nothing I can do about that now, but I can be here for you during the time I've got left. Now let's get you out of here."

CHAPTER 8

THE CELEBRATION

We drove by to pick up Joey, Joey Junior and Lilly, Adam and Addie. Ma and Angie were in the second row, and Pa and Jimmie were in the back row. Little Connie and Sal were on the front seat between me and Annie. I had gotten pretty good at lifting myself into the driver's seat with the bar Pa and I bolted inside the door of my new Dodge A100 Sportsman, and then swinging my wheelchair up with one hand while it folded flat, and then slipping it in behind my seat. The aroma of Ma's pumpkin pies filled the van. They were all safely packed in individual boxes and placed inside a larger cardboard box that Annie had strapped securely against the back of the third row of seats. There were three gallons of the homemade red wine that Pa and Jimmy make every year. Angie had made enough meat ravioli and sauce to feed an army that were strapped in there as well. We never had a Thanksgiving without homemade ravioli.

As soon as I parked in front of Joey's and Lilly's house, their front door opened and Joey Junior ran out followed by Joey, Lilly, Adam and Addie. Everyone was carrying something. Joey had two cases of Yuengling in his arms, and Adam had two cases of Coke. Joey was carrying a big oven tray covered with tin foil. That's got to be Addie's world famous apple cobbler. Addie had another tray with tin foil. It must be Lilly's recipe for candied yams that she

found in Ma's old Betty Crocker cookbook and has been perfecting for the past fifteen years. Lilly had the most important package, my two-month-old godson, Nicky. She resigned from her job at the mine the day after we came out. "They wanted me to tell them everything that went on in the shanty," she had told Joey. "That's when I realized I was working for the enemy." Within a couple of weeks she had been hired as the secretary for the principal at the high school, and two months later she announced at a Sunday dinner that she was pregnant. She's taken a leave of absence from her job this school year, but Joey's salary will cover their expenses even if Lilly decides not to go back to work.

My big sister has changed a lot during this past year. She came to the shop one day in the middle of July. It was unusually cool for a July day here in the valley. It was my birthday, normally a scorcher if it's not raining. Pa and Jimmie had been by earlier with doughnuts and coffee, and then they went to the bocce courts for the mid-summer knock-out tournament. They hoped for a three-peat of their first place finish. Annie and the kids had woken me up with my favorite cake covered with candles. I was dreaming that I was little and we were sitting around the table with the whole family and they were all singing 'Happy Birthday', then I woke up and it wasn't a dream.

"Happy Birthday, little brother. I needed some fresh air and decided to pay you a visit and see what you're up to."

"Did you walk? Should you be walking so long in your condition?"

"Do all men think that cavewomen hung around the fire for nine months when they got pregnant? They had to go out and gather while the men tried to bring home some meat. I'll bet that most of the time the family lived on what the women gathered."

"Well, thanks for stopping by. You can see there's a lot to do before I can start taking in customers, but it's getting there. Now that you're here, I can ask you something that's been on my mind. Why did you and Joey make the decision to have another child? If you don't think it's my business, just tell me."

"I'll remember this date as the first time that you and I have ever had a conversation, Nicco. Maybe it's a sign that we both have finally grown up. The answer to your question is that Joey and I also finally talked to one another as two adults and two people who have cared for each other without ever telling the other. The night Joey came home after the accident, he said he had something to tell me. After Little Joey went to bed, we sat in the kitchen. Joey told me he wasn't going back to work in the mine. He said he was applying for a job as a forest warden that was open. He wasn't sure he would get the job, he said, but if didn't get that one, he would apply for others. If it meant he would have to move, then he would do that. He said that maybe I would be better off without him.

"That really shook me up. I was always used to telling Joey what to do. I was the boss, and there was never any question about it. Now, Joey was basically telling me that he didn't give a horse's ass what I thought. My first reaction was to be angry, but something stopped me. In that very moment I realized how much Joey meant to me, and how much our life together we had already missed. I wanted to start over. You know the rest. I got pregnant that night, and I quit my job the next day."

Joey was wearing his warden's cap. Except for when he was on duty and wore his Smokey the Bear hat, he always wore his green baseball cap with the PA Bureau of State Parks insignia embroidered on it. I imagine all the animals in the neighborhood standing at attention and saluting when he walks out of the house in the morning in his warden's uniform to drive to work. He and Lilly both had the smiles on their faces like the ones that they had when they were in high school.

"We won!" yelled Joey Junior as Pa opened the back of the van. "35-to-14."

"We heard it on the radio," said Pa. "Sounds like it was a great game for the home team."

"The boys played like they really wanted to win," said Adam.

"Well now we have even more to celebrate," laughed Ma as the Zukas's contributions to our Thanksgiving feast were carefully placed in the van and surrounded by the

cases of beer and Coke. We were on our way to enjoy this day with the rest of the coal men and their families who had spent two days together just before Thanksgiving one year ago. *"It's been quite a year,"* I thought, as I looked over at Annie and saw her smiling face turned toward me. Almost everyone will be there.

Annie wasn't smiling when she looked down at me on the stretcher when they carried me out of the mine. Pa had to hold up Ma to keep her from passing out. Annie came with me in the ambulance to the hospital, and she stayed there the whole time during the next three days when the doctors ran tests to see if there was any way to fix my broken spike. They didn't allow any other visitors except Ma and Pa, who came in shifts so that one of them would be home with Connie and Sal.

On the fourth day, with Annie and Pa there, the head doctor gave me the bad news. Operating wasn't possible. The spinal cord was completely severed at the level of my waste, he said, and I would be a paraplegic for the rest of my life. "What does that mean?" I asked. "It means no bodily functions work from the waist down," answered the doctor. "You will not be able to walk or move your legs. The urinal and intestinal tracts will have to empty into bags for disposal, and it will not possible to for you to have an erection." I looked at Annie. "You're alive, Nicco. That's all that matters."

"We'd like you to stay here for another week-or-so while we prepare you for your new life, Mr. Maltese," said

the doctor. "Mrs. Maltese, we have special classes for spouses." Those classes taught husbands and wives of paraplegics how to clean up after us, and to reorganize the houses to make it easier for us to do stuff on our own without always having to ask for help. They didn't teach them how to cope with what life would be for them if they chose to stay married. Annie and I figured that out for ourselves.

When the doctor had left, I was feeling really depressed. "Maybe you should start over with someone else," I said. "Pete Salvatore has been waiting for you all these years." Judging from her reaction I think she was waiting for this.

"I probably deserve that. I guess I've always taken some pleasure in making you jealous even though there has never, ever been any reason for you to worry about my love for you. I don't think you're any different from most men, at least the ones I know. You take it for granted that we know how much you care for us without ever saying it. You think an expensive birthday present or a kiss on the cheek after we make love is enough to show your affection. I never had the slightest interest in Pete Salvatore or any other man, but making you believe that I did was the best way I knew how to make you show you cared about me. Nothing has or will change that, Nicco."

After I got home, one night as we were both lying awake in bed, I said, "I'm sorry I'm not going to be a husband to you anymore, Annie, but I think I always

enjoyed it more than you did. Maybe I can give you pleasure in other ways."

That was how it started. For the life of me, I still don't know how I managed to get those words out of my mouth. Annie and I weren't sure what to do at first, but we gradually found our way with a little help from books Annie found at the library with help from Lina. I'm sure the Church wouldn't approve of all the ways we've found to give Annie an orgasm, but Annie says she daydreams about us during the day and looks forward to going to bed every night. She's also enjoying her new job working with young kids with handicaps and disabilities.

It was one-thirty. The sky was an even grey without a hint of rain or snow in the air. We had flurries a few days ago, but it was now in the high 40s. This is how I remember most Thanksgivings, I thought. We drove along the river and a freight train passed by. Little Sal is a rail fan. I had found a Lehigh Valley HO train set that would be his Christmas present. Joey and I had tested it on his tracks, and it ran perfectly. Then I wrapped it up and hid it in the shop where I was sure Sal wouldn't find it before it was time to put it under the Christmas tree.

The Glider Diner was closed for Thanksgiving. Christmas Day and Easter Sunday were the only other days of the year when it wasn't open for locals and travelers alike, serving the best hamburgers, pies, meat loaf and home fries anyplace I'd ever been. When we pulled into the Glider Diner parking lot, it was empty except for Milos's

van, Alex's pickup, a white Oldsmobile 98, and Tony's and April's deep blue 1963 Pontiac Bonneville sedan. It was the first car Tony owned that was not a red two-door convertible. They traded in Tony's fire red Catalina soft-top when April learned she was pregnant. I figured that the Olds belonged to April's parents.

I flipped the wheelchair out from behind the seat. It opened up as I lowered it to the ground. I swung down into it while holding on to the bar. My arms had never been stronger, even when I was hammering and lifting blocks of coal. We had made a small gym in half of the back porch with a bench that could be used for presses and then adjusted for arm curls. Rolling the wheelchair the mile to the shop was plenty of exercise. Before we took anything out of the van, we all went into the banquet room in the diner that had a separate entrance door. Milos was one of the first in the valley to make his place accessible by ramp, both on the front entrance and here in the back to the banquet room. There are plenty of places I can't get into on my own, but the Glider Diner ain't one of them.

It was a beehive of activity in there. As soon as we walked through the door, everyone came over to welcome us in. There was a lot of hugging and kissing. Italians and Greeks have that in common. Not so much the Lithuanians, but the Zukases had been indoctrinated during all the years they had lived and worked with us. April and her parents joined right in. Mitch and his girlfriend, Theresa

Evergood, were more reserved at first, standing at the edge of emotional huddle.

"Mitch and Theresa have some news since you met them at our wedding. They're engaged," declared Tony.

"Congratulations!" rang through the room, and then they couldn't avoid the hugs and kisses. We had met Theresa at Tony's and April's wedding in June. That's when we met April's parents, William and June. What a great wedding they had. I had never experienced anything like it. Tony had gotten his marriage to Donna annulled, and their Greek Catholic priest, Father Theodore, agreed to co-officiate at the wedding that was held in April's Southern Baptist church in Wilkes-Barre. Most of us had never even been in a Protestant church before. The nuns had told us it was a sin. Father Theodore came in his big gold and silver robes carrying his smoking incense holder. April's minister took it all in stride. There was no liquor served at the reception, but there was plenty of beer and wine for the non-Baptists.

Tony got the job at the Veteran's Hospital, and they bought a house in the same neighborhood where April's parents have lived all their married lives and where April and Mitch grew up. Two months ago, April and Tony came down on a Sunday afternoon and paid us a visit. That's when they announced that April was expecting. She had just gotten the good news on Friday. "If it's a boy we will name him Alex," said April, "and if it's a girl she will be named May. That's my grandmother's name."

I thought back to when Tony was in jail and I'd come by the diner for coffee. Elaine was a wreck, Milos was a bundle of nerves. Alex would sit down with me for a few minutes and throw off all the weights he was carrying, and then thank me for listening by not letting me pay. Then by chance an angel walks into Tony's life and changes everything, not just for Tony but the whole family. I see how Elaine looks at April, and how April returns the affection. Imagine if she had shut the door back in the shanty. Alex told me how it all happened. Gradually, I heard about all the shanty stories.

"Show us where you want us to put everything, Elaine," said Ma. "Gina will show you," answered Elaine. I hadn't noticed Gina. I could only think of her as a skinny waitress running between the tables at the diner, always with a big grin on her face. She still had the grin, but she was no longer skinny. We went back out to the van and started carrying in the dishes. I was trusted with one of the cases of beer which I held on my lap, and Joey Junior provided the motor power to roll me up the ramp.

It wasn't long before the Jones family arrived. Johnny and Gladys, Jay and Alice, J.J. and Lucy all came through the door. Jay was carrying one of the two turkeys we would be eating, J.J. had a tray with the stuffing, and Gladys had made her cranberry sauce that was in clear view through the big glass bowl she carried. Lucy had a large centerpiece for the table. It was an impressive arrangement of dried flowers and leaves and squashes of different sizes and

colors. Johnny had continued working until the end of last year, and then he retired. Jay was the only one in any of our families who still went down into the mines every work day. "There's nothing else I can or want to do," he had said once when he came by the shop with a toaster that his mother did not want to part with, but which wasn't quite doing the job it had been built to do about half a century earlier. "There's not many years left in mining, and I figure I'll do what I was born to do until it's time for me to retire. I'll double-check the pillars before each shift," he joked.

Both Pa and Jimmie quit the day after we came out, just like Lilly. They went to the mine office downtown to hand in their papers. Lilly had just finished cleaning out her desk and was on her way out when she met them. She waited for them and then they all went to the Glider to celebrate. Pa said it was the first time he could remember seeing Lilly when she wasn't cocksure about everything. He said she told them she wasn't sure what she would do, but it wasn't going to be anything to do with mining. She told them that Joey had decided to quit too the same day. By the time Elaine came over with the second round of coffee, they were all balling their eyes out. I found this out from Ma when she came to see me during the first days I was in the hospital. I also found out that the company didn't accept Pa's and Jimmie's resignations but officially laid them off so they collect unemployment until their retirements started. It was a good gesture, but, on the one hand, it was the least they could do after all the years they

worked for the company, and it was peanuts in return for what both of them had given the company during all those years. But it was something. Lilly didn't get the same treatment.

J.J.'s and Lucy's wedding was a much quieter affair than Tony's and April's. The service was over in McAdoo at Lucy's Methodist church, and even though Methodists are supposed to be non-drinkers, it seems that is old history. I learned that the Methodists are a very tight community, so most of people from both Lucy's and J.J.'s families knew each other and were friends. J.J. gave us coal men a special place in the wedding. He asked us all to be ushers, which meant we got to wear tuxes. Lucy's maid of honor and bridesmaids all looked like they played on the state championship high school basketball team with Lucy---which they did.

We had just finished carrying in everything from the van and the Jones's two cars when the door opened and in walked Wadz, Lina, Lina's father, Edward Dombrovsky, and Father O'Malley. Lina looked like she would be delivering any day now. Even though it was November, Wadz and Edward still had the skin color of men who had spent the summer in the sun. I never saw Wadz look so healthy and happy. He had actually put on some weight, so he was no longer a bean pole. Wadz was carrying the other turkey we would be eating, and Edward had the stuffing. Father O'Malley was carrying a large basket filled with all manner of fruit, and I could tell by the smell that Lina had

a tray filled with cheeses that were covered by foil. As soon as they had put down everything they were carrying, they were engulfed in the physical greetings of all the guests.

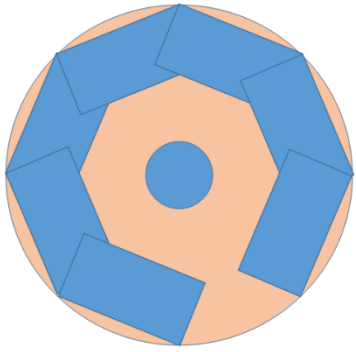
Lina's and Wadz's wedding in January was very small when it came to the number of guests, but Wadz had four ushers and a best man, all of us who were together on our last day as miners. I was best man. I was really touched when Wadz came over to the house just after New Year's day to ask me. Rossi hadn't left for Italy yet, so he was there with Tony, Joey, and Jonesy as ushers. Lina's maid of honor and bridesmaids were all cousins on both her mother's and father's sides of the family. Father O'Malley officiated.

"When are you due, Lina," asked Lilly. "It looks like it can be any day."

"It can be any day now," answered Lina. "Walter is keeping the gas tank full and Ojciec is ready to plow the long drive to the road in case it snows." Edward smiled. Wadz told me that he wasn't sure which one of them was happier about Wadz calling his father-in-law "Dad", or Ojciec in Polish, him or his father-in-law. He said he had to make sure he came into town and stop in at the diner regularly so he wouldn't forget how to speak English.

Gradually, all the food was on the table and we began to settle in for what was going to be a long dinner. Milos had made a special table that seated 32 people comfortably. That was how many we were if you didn't count baby Nicky.

The table was made of seven four-by-eight pieces of half-inch plywood that had been cut so that they made a circle which had an outside diameter of twenty feet. They formed an empty circle. Milos left out the eighth piece that would have completed the circle so that you could walk into the center. In the middle of the circle, he placed a round table for the centerpiece. He called it his *pièce de résistance*, which Tony told me meant his 'masterpiece'. It was a masterpiece, no doubt about that.



"Before we start, I'd like to make a toast to Rossi," I said. "Even though I was unconscious for almost the entire time we were down there, I could hear everything that was said. I think Joey, Tony, Wadz and Jonesy would agree that Rossi did a great job of leading us through that whole ordeal. He kept up our spirits, especially mine, encouraging us the whole time. I know we all wish he could be here with us today, but we know he's in a great place right now, just where he wants to be. He sent me a letter, which came a week ago. It's in Italian, so it wouldn't do any

good for most of you if I read it, although those of us who worked with him couldn't tell if he was speaking Italian or English most of the time. He says in the letter that he wishes everybody a happy Thanksgiving. His dancing instructing business is doing well enough to pay the bills, and he said he's even able put aside money every week to pay for a trip back, which he hopes he will do this coming spring so he can go to the twins' graduation from high school and Vinnie's graduation from college. Let's raise our glasses for Vittorio Michele Rossi, a great guy and a great friend."

"To Rossi!"

Rossi also wrote in his letter that his divorce from Jenny went through in October, but the papers are still not signed. He told me that he had asked her to come with him. She tried to convince him to stay and open a dance studio here. There wasn't any middle ground. He said he knew she was disappointed with the man he was when he came back from the war. He wasn't the same person he was when he left. She wouldn't have married him. It was pity not love that he felt from her. It was better for him to leave. He would miss his sons and his daughters, he said, but hopefully they'll be successful and have enough money to come to visit him often. He said the Bulova watch we gave him at his going-away party at the Post was keeping excellent time. We could tell that he really appreciated it.

Back in the spring, when the family was sitting around after Sunday dinner, Ma said she heard from one

of Jenny's cousins that Jenny had gone to Cleveland a couple of weeks after Rossi went to Italy. She was there for only a few days. Her cousin said that she was real sad when she came home. She met the doctor who was a friend when Rossi was a prisoner during the war and she didn't know if he was alive or dead. He was all affectionate and wanted her to move to Cleveland and marry him, said her cousin. He had been carrying a torch for her all these years. But Jenny said she couldn't imagine anyone else but Vito putting his arms around her. Maybe she'll figure out before it's too late that she belongs with him no matter where he is.

Rossi was with me, Pa, Jimmy and Joey on the Saturday in early February when we met Mrs. Hughes at Sparky's shop when we went there to talk with her about renting the shop. I had called her to ask if she wanted to rent it, and she had said that she was. Joey and Rossi lifted my wheelchair up the step and into the shop.

We made the introductions. She asked us to call her Dorothy. "I was so sorry to hear of your accident, Nicolas," she said. "Willard always enjoyed your visits and spoke very highly of you. I know he would be pleased to have you take over his shop where he spent so many happy hours."

The place was pretty much like I remembered it, and it looked like everything had been left just as it was when Sparky passed away—except for the thick layer of dust. The shop sat on its own, right next to Dorothy's and Willard's home, set back about six feet from the sidewalk.

It had been a candy and variety store that was run by the wife of the former owners of their house. Before that it had been a butcher shop, but that was in the early part of the 1900s. There was a small roof over the entrance door, and an eight-inch high stoop in front of the door, which is why Joey and Rossi needed to lift up my chair. I'd have to put a ramp up to that, I thought. The door was in the middle and there were two large, fixed-pane windows on either side. There was one room in the front that was twelve-by-twelve. It had a big rolltop oak desk one the left wall and a long work bench along one opposite wall. All of Sparky's tools were still there. In the middle of the ceiling was a skylight, about two feet by six feet that filled the room with light. There weren't any other windows.

I rolled around the space. A door on the back wall of the front room led to a hallway with a small bathroom on the left side with a toilet and sink, and a storage room on the right side that was six feet square. At the very back was a room that had a sink set into a counter with cabinets above. There was a kitchen table and six chairs, two windows and a door out to the back. This is where I will be spending the better part of my time if I decide to take it, I thought, so I needed to be sure it worked. Everything would have to come down to my new level. I didn't see any problems. I asked everybody what they thought, and they all gave it a thumbs up.

Dorothy wouldn't take anything for the rent. I just needed to pay for the utilities. "It will be nice to see

Willard's shop put to good use," she said. The disability pay and the one-time payment from the company would be equal to what I earned in a year as a miner. After year, the disability pay would be one-half of a year's salary. With some luck and hard work, I should be able to make up the rest, I thought.

"Have you decided on the name of your shop, Nicolas?" asked Dorothy.

"*Nicco's Electrical Repair Shop*," I answered quickly.

She handed over two sets of keys, one for the front door and one for the back. She had brought with her a one-page rental agreement which we both signed, and forms for electric, gas and water so they would be billed directly to me. We shook hands and Dorothy left us.

"There's quite a bit of cleanup to do, son," said Pa, "but we'll take it bit by bit."

"Bafours Eyeza leaves, Eyema gonna bilda yuzza rampa onna da frond, okay Nicco? Datta wayza yuzza gonna tink'a me everee tyme yuzza comma inta da shop."

"I'd like that, Rossi," I said. And before he left in March, he had finished the ramp and helped Pa put up the sign above the roof over the entrance. Pa's war buddy up in Scranton has a sign painting business on the side of his main job working at the Scranton Lace Company, and he came down with a couple of sketches. I picked one of them, and he did a real nice job, real professional. Gradually, we got the place cleaned up and I started feeling like I could

put in at least half a day of work without needing to take a nap.

Annie and I had a grand opening party on the first of June. It was just beer, soda, pretzels and potato chips with lots of balloons that the kids had fun blowing up. I've gotten the hang of not doing everything for free, but setting my rates according to what I figure folks can pay. When I did the books with Annie's help at the end of October, I had made my first profit. It was only a couple of hundred bucks, but it's a start.

I looked around the Glider dining room now. I couldn't imagine this a year ago when I went down into the mine for the last time. I could walk then, even run—although not fast enough to keep from getting my back broken—but I wouldn't trade the life I have now with the life I had then. If I asked everyone in the room how they felt about that question, I think they'd all have the same answer. We held hands around the table and Father O'Malley blessed the food and Sister Gina said grace. "Amen," we all said together, and then we dug into the best Thanksgiving dinner I have ever eaten.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Family and friends have been the inspirations for the people and their stories in this book. Some are gone and some are living. I thank them all.

I chose to send drafts of the book to friends and family whom I knew would have a personal connection to the stories and who would tell me if I was heading in the right or wrong direction. My sister, Joann Wolski, let me know that it passed the reading circle test. High school classmates and friends James Galdieri, Daniel Cuozzo and Paulette Posluszny Merchel[1] provided very useful feedback. First cousin, Thomas Alloy, gave it a good, hard read that resulted in several important changes. Second cousin, Albert Vitelli, whose grandmother was my miner grandfather's sister, grew up in the middle of a mining community, and his comments were invaluable. My good friend, Tom Crosby, a voracious reader, told me I had to find a publisher because he enjoyed it so much, but that I had to add a last chapter, which I did. Tom's wife, Kathy Crosby, a book copy editor who also happens to be from the Scranton area, gave it a thumbs up on the basics. Dr. Gino Mori, with whom I share a great great grandfather through his mother on the Rosati side and whose father

[1] Paulette passed away in May 2021. Our last conversations were in emails a few months before she died and were about this book. She helped to give Wadz his name.

was a coal miner, encouraged me from start to finish. He introduced me to Erika Funke, Senior Producer and Program Host for WVIA, the National Public Radio station in the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre area. Erika invited me to be a guest on her show, ArtScene, during which we talked about the book.

My mother, Maria (Mary) Rosati Sena, told me the stories about her father and the other miners in the family. If she had not had to leave school at the age of thirteen at the start of The Great Depression to work in a dress factory, she might have turned her experiences into novels. My father, Lawrence (Larry), through his art, his photographs, and his own stories, helped me to understand what it was like to grow up in a city built on coal. Because of my mother and my father, I have had the chance to turn their experiences as well as my own into this novel, but the credit is theirs.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Britt Marie, for her support and encouragement in all of my writing projects.