

Chapter 1

The miners moved stiffly as they wearily completed their tasks a mile beneath the earth. This was the eleventh hour of a fourteen-hour shift. The coal mine was wet and cold. The lighting was dim and there was a constant flow of dust. The occasional pockets of gas gave the scene a foul odor. Being a coal miner in West Virginia meant working a man's job until it killed you or you retired to spend a few short years with your family.

There were ninety men on this second shift of the day. The mine was open twenty-four hours every day except Easter Sunday and Christmas Day. Each man was dressed in coveralls, blackened by the thick dust that was the bi-product of their subterranean environment. Faces were covered to the point that no one was recognizable. Few spoke. Exhaustion had set in and all struggled merely to finish the shift, go home, shower, and fall into bed where they would cough and hack until slumber brought relief. They would wake the next day and start over, slowly killing themselves to provide for the families they rarely saw. It was a tragic existence.

Gustav "Gus" Schultz was the third shift supervisor. He watched carefully as the men worked towards the end of the shift. Most accidents occurred late, when fatigue made men careless. Gus knew what could result from even minor mistakes. At sixty-

two, he had worked in this mine for over forty years. He was a powerfully built man with white hair and deeply set green eyes. His face contained deep crevices and his hands were thick and callused. He wore the medal of St. Jude around his thick, gritty neck. He and his wife, Greta, were married at the Lutheran church in Matewan, West Virginia thirty-seven years earlier and had raised a son who had graduated from West Virginia University. The son, Buck, had followed his dad into the coal business, albeit above ground as a geologist. Gus had wept at his graduation from college and at his subsequent wedding. He also wept at the birth of his grandson and namesake, Gus II. It gave him great pleasure to know that he would be the last to work here in the Buchanan Mine or Hell's Hallway, as the mine was known to the workers.

Gus had stopped to talk to a group following a shuttle car up the track when the earth shook and all hell broke loose. The earth groaned as it fought to shake the support pillars loose. Large pockets of dust-filled air were exhaled toward the group as they raced for cover. Somewhere up the line there was a cave-in. Everyone moved quickly away from the noise. The safest place in a cave-in was as far away from the point of collapse as possible. Gus knew the collapse was towards the front, meaning he and about half of his men were trapped. Wisely, he waited against the wall until the emergency lighting began at the midway point of the two-mile deep mine. There was a cacophony of muffled screams and cries for help mixed with the moans of the dying.

Each shift had emergency team leaders and they had specific assignments in the event of a crisis. As Gus reached the emergency equipment lockers, his teams were getting organized. The lockers contained food, water, first aid equipment, and lights.

There was also enough emergency self-contained breathing apparatus, or SCBA, for the entire crew. Gus felt a sense of relief as he saw the gleaming yellow tanks, assuring him that they had fresh oxygen to stay alive until they were rescued. He instructed the team leaders to make certain each man was given a respirator to wear for when the pocket of air they were breathing dissipated.

Once the equipment was dispensed, Gus organized his team leaders. Even the most experienced of the men were wide-eyed, in varying stages of shock.

“I want you to take turns looking for injured near the collapse. We’ll start in one hour. First we will give the devil time to finish what he has started. I don’t want to lose any more of you if the collapse isn’t over.”