

CHAPTER 2

WILL IT EVER GO AWAY?

The black void was overwhelming, with not the slightest trace of light. Only the sound of picks striking coal and the occasional rattle of a coal wagon gave it any reality.

Joseph sat on the small wooden box waiting for the signal. He was terrified of his surroundings and wanted to run away, but he had nowhere to go. So he sat and shivered.

He jumped as he saw a glimmer of light and heard the sound of steel on stone and the rattle of chains. The light got slowly brighter and he watched until it appeared around the bend in the tunnel. A horse was slowly pulling a small wagon piled with coal, led by an old miner bent over from age and many years of working in the mine.

It was old George, who was too weak to swing a pick and shovel. However, he could still lead the horses, although that tested his old legs by the end of the shift. He should have retired long ago, but he had no money to live on and no one to care for him.

The image was ethereal in the light of the candle lamp as George walked past.

‘Hello, Mr. Thatcher,’ Joseph said. The voice seemed to echo.

‘Lo, Joseph,’ George replied as he shuffled slowly down the tunnel. The light faded until Joseph was in pitch darkness again.

He sat waiting, then heard a knock. It was his mother’s signal to open the door to their small coal tunnel.

Joseph opened the door and saw his mother kneeling, a candle lamp in her hand. Her arms and chest were bare, covered in sweat and coal dust. Joseph could see her eyes reflected in the light of the candle she was carrying. Behind her was a box with lumps of coal in it. She pulled it forward and they both tipped it into a coal skip nearby.

He watched as she disappeared back into their tunnel, wearing only pants and a cloth around her head. Then she was gone; and he returned to the darkness that tested the will of the strongest man.

He felt something brush against his leg and began to shake. It was a mine rat, hungry for anything it could chew on. Then another one rubbed against him, making him cringe even more.

One crawled up on his lap searching for the warm flesh it knew could be found there. The other ran up his arm and sniffed at his neck. They were huge, big as cats, and to Joseph they were the monsters from hell.

He wanted to run but couldn’t move, petrified with fear. The first rat had found his clenched hands and was sniffing them; the second rat’s whiskers tickled him as it sniffed his neck searching for soft flesh. Suddenly it bit into the back of his neck. The first rat followed suit, biting into his fingers. He felt the needle sharp teeth sink in, trying to tear a piece of flesh from his hand. The pain was excruciating. Joseph tried to scream but nothing came out. He tried to move but was frozen in fear. ‘Move, jump up, wave your arms, shake them off.’ His body would not respond to his

terrified mind.

Suddenly he found an inner strength and jumped up, screaming and waving his arms, trying to remove the biting rats. His screams echoed in the mine shaft, giving the horror an even more surreal effect. The rats were not to be deterred easily and hung on, biting deeper, pulling at his flesh.

Joseph screamed louder and tried to pull the rats off, but they wouldn't let go. 'Get them off, get them off,' he screamed desperately.

'Joe, Joe. It's all right. It's all right,' a voice was calling.

'Mummy, get them off, Mummy,' he screamed.

'Joe. Joe. I'm here, it's Alatheia.'

The vision faded and Joseph opened his eyes to find he was lying in bed. Alatheia was leaning over him, shaking him.

'It's gone now, Joe. You've had another nightmare,' she said, hugging him and stroking his face.

Joseph slowly sat up. He was covered in perspiration and was shaking. 'Oh thank God for that—will it never go away?'

Alatheia had explained to her children why their father had nightmares. 'It was terrible in the old days. Women and children had to work underground and push the wagons themselves. There were rats as big as cats, and it was hot as hell, and you had to get your quota or you got little money.' She shook her head in dismay.

'In 1858 the government carried out an investigation of coal mine owners and the working conditions in these mines. And would you believe, they didn't know what the damn mine owners were doing? They couldn't believe that women were working almost naked on hands and knees and children as young as four working underground in coal mines and being attacked by rats.

'So they made a law banning the employment of women and children under the age of twelve underground.' Alatheia clapped her hands. 'Your Granddad and Grandma were thrilled that she didn't have to go underground anymore.'

'What about the quota? They wouldn't be able to reach it,' Jack asked.

'Well, most of the mine owners were very upset and said they couldn't make a profit if the government insisted on enforcing the law. But the government told them to go to hell. So they had to set new quotas.'

'I heard that they are making huge profits, and that there Lord Lisle or whatever his name is, even built a castle in Cardiff and lined the roof in solid gold,' Grace, the eldest daughter said, with venom in her voice.

'Yes, built at the expense of the misery and suffering of us coal miners,' Alatheia replied.

'Can't we get out of here and go somewhere else? Start again?' Jack asked.

'Oh, would that we could,' Alatheia sighed. 'But we're trapped like the rest of 'em. We've got no money to get away. We're trapped just as firmly as them there Negro slaves to those plantation

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owners in America.’

‘Well, we’re not staying. Are we Jack?’ Thomas said, putting his arm over Jack’s shoulders. ‘As soon as we’re old enough we’re joining the army. Jack’s going in the Coldstream and I’m joining the Grenadiers,’ he announced proudly.

‘Why didn’t Dad join up?’ Jack asked.

Joseph, who sat smoking his pipe and listening, said, ‘I would have, lad but I would be in London or sent overseas and you lot would be here. I can’t do that. That’s why I took up boxing to earn a few bob extra. You get pretty fit in yon mine, so that helps.’

Alathea looked at him, admiring his physique and fitness, one of his greatest assets. He stood five foot eleven inches tall, and weighed fifteen stone five pounds without an ounce of fat on his body. Mining with a pick had built his shoulders and chest to admirable proportions, and at the age of forty-two years he was in his prime.

‘Well now, you kids know what’s what. But stay away from that bloody gambling— it’s broke many a poor miner,’ Joseph growled. ‘They’ve nearly all lost their money.’

‘Unless you’re the bookie,’ Grace added with a small grin.