

Charlie, Tam and the Singing Canary

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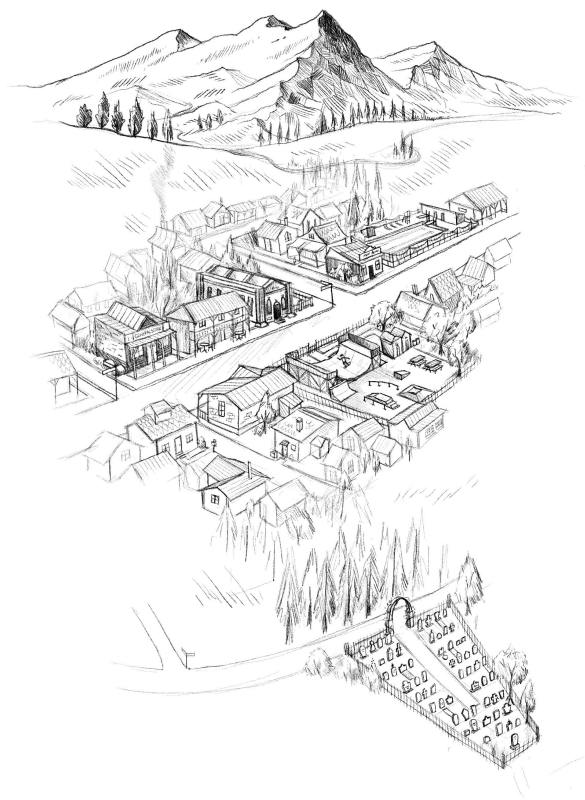
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For *Halina*

PART ONE

Coalburn



1

Tam's principal, Mrs Clemence – who's also the Year 7 and 8 class teacher – asks Tam to buddy up with a new girl, Charlotte, during her first week at Coalburn School. On the Monday, when Charlotte's due to arrive, Tam gets to school early and waits for her outside the gate. Mrs Clemence sees Tam from her office and gives her a thumbs up.

It's going to be easy to figure out who the new girl is, because she's not someone Tam already knows. She visualises the girl's mum or dad, or maybe both of them, dropping Charlotte off, but when Tam sees her for the first time, Charlotte's marching confidently to the school all on her own.

She's early too. Not many of the other kids are here yet. Good strategy, Tam thinks. Better to be on the front foot by coming early than on the back foot by arriving later than everyone else. That way you've already started to blend into the background.

Tam swings open the squeaky gate to let the new girl in. 'Hey, Charlotte, I'm Tam. I'm going to be buddying up with you this week. I'll show you around properly later on.'

'I don't call myself Charlotte,' the new girl tells her.

‘I’m Charlie.’

Oops. Bad start. ‘Sorry, Charlie,’ Tam says.

‘No worries. You weren’t to know. I guess you can show me around if you’re meant to, but my mum and I already had a good nosy the day we got here, including a walk around the school grounds.’

If Tam feels a little put out by Charlie’s self-confident arrival she tries not to show it. She’s determined to carry out the task Mrs C has given her. ‘You won’t have seen *everything*.’

‘Course not,’ Charlie agrees.

After that, and while the rest of the students file through the gate, they have a bit of a chat and quickly discover they’re both single-parent kids. Charlie lives with her mum, Tam with her dad. They also find out that their single parents won’t allow them to have a smartphone until they start high school the year after next. Charlie’s phone is a dumbphone, not capable of much more than text messages and calls. Tam’s is exactly the same.

‘We don’t get many newbies at the school,’ Tam tells Charlie, once they’ve moaned long enough about their respective phones.

‘Any Nowaks?’

Tam *thinks* that’s what Charlie says, but she doesn’t have a clue what “novacs” are. She decides it’s wisest to ignore the word for now. Hopefully she can figure it out later. Charlie doesn’t seem to be waiting for an answer to the question.

‘Most of us kids have known each other since we were babies, just about,’ Tam says.

‘Makes sense,’ says Charlie, ‘Coalburn being so small.’

‘It used to be a whole lot bigger,’ Tam points out, ‘back in the day. Count the pubs. You’ll see what I mean.’

‘I already have,’ Charlie says with a grin. ‘There are three of them.’

‘Four,’ Tam says, ‘if you include the wreck of one up in the hills. It was called the Midas Hotel, because of all the gold. Midas was a king,’ she adds, although maybe Charlie already knows this because she looks like she knows a whole heap of stuff. ‘Everything he touched turned to gold. His food included.’

‘And you can’t eat gold,’ Charlie says, grinning again.

‘He ended up being one very hungry king,’ Tam laughs in agreement. ‘And now the Midas Hotel is a ruin.’

‘Because the gold ran out?’ asks Charlie.

‘Yep. The gold miners too. They almost ran out faster than the gold. Except for those who stayed behind and became coal miners instead.’

Mrs Clemence appears from her office. She steps off the ribbon of verandah that loops the classrooms together. ‘Charlotte Nowak!’ she announces, loudly enough for everyone to hear. ‘Welcome to Coalburn School.’

Ah, thinks Tam. Now I get it. Nowac. It’s her last name. I must’ve misheard. I thought Charlie pronounced it with a *v*.

‘She’s Charlie,’ Tam tells Mrs Clemence.

‘And the *w* in Nowak’s said as a *v*,’ Charlie adds. ‘It’s a Polish name.’ She spells it out. ‘N O W A K. *Nowak*. I know, it can be confusing.’

Tam’s sure that Charlie has had to go through this performance many times before. ‘Nowak means newbie

in Polish,' Charlie says, in an aside to Tam.

'Not confusing at all!' Mrs Clemence declares. 'Your mum told me when we talked on the phone. I'd just forgotten. Apologies. We're so glad you've come to join us.'

Everyone is very welcoming to Charlie. As Tam knows, that's what makes Coalburn School so special. And they all make an effort to say Charlie's last name correctly. Not long before the bell goes, Charlie gets asked what sports she plays. It's definitely a leading question because the boy who asks is bouncing a rugby ball from hand to ground and back again, not an easy thing to do at the best of times, but especially not in the middle of a small scrum of clustering kids. He looks up expectantly at Charlie.

'This is Rory,' Tam manages to get in quickly. 'His dad works up at the mine.'

'I used to run with my dad,' Charlie begins, 'and we played a bit of rugby together,' and that's all Rory needs to hear.

'We could do with a new wing to help us beat the ATRs,' he tells Charlie. 'Someone really fast. You up for it?'

'Um,' says Charlie. 'I guess so. Sure.'

'Great,' he says.

'What happened to the old wing?' Charlie asks him.

'Flew off,' says Rory.

'Moved away,' Tam explains.

'I'm an expert at moving away,' Charlie says, without explaining.

'Practice on Saturday morning at the domain,' Rory