

Canary *in the* Coal Mine

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Summary: Tired of his twelve-hour shifts and facing danger daily, Bitty, a canary whose courage more than makes up for his small size, treks to the state capital to try to improve working conditions in coal mines.

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For Butch, Graham
and Karina—always.



Chapter 1



Bitty flattened himself against the back of the cage as the Gap-Toothed Man reached his fat hot-dog fingers through the front.

“Here, birdie, birdie,” the man said. “Come on, birdie. Hurry up, now.” The meaty fingers opened and closed. Bitty swerved right, then ducked low. He didn’t duck low enough.

“Gotcha.”

The man wrapped his fingers around Bitty’s scrawny yellow neck—not choking him, but close enough—and transferred him from the wire aviary known as the Big House to a small wooden carrier. Tiny as he was, Bitty’s head nearly bumped against the top. The cage swung back and forth. By the time the canary left the warm safety of Jamie’s bedroom, the woozy feeling came again. Flying, what little he did of it, never bothered him, but he’d always been a lousy passenger.

“Beak up.” Uncle Aubrey’s voice followed them out of the bedroom, then out of the house as they lumbered toward the No. 7. “Make us proud. Remember: you’re a miner.”

“Yes, sir.” Bitty’s voice sounded more like a sick frog than anything birdlike. “As if I could ever forget,” he mumbled. The Gap-Toothed Man heard him, but he didn’t seem to understand any language that didn’t include grunts or jokes about foreigners, which to him meant anyone without a relative working in the mines of Coalbank Hollow, West Virginia.

Uncle Aubrey couldn't hear Bitty, and that was a good thing. Bitty's uncle knew the dangers of the coal mines, but to him, that just made their work more important. With tiny marks on the larger of the aviary's two perches, he kept a tally of the lives they'd saved, the lives of men. On the other perch there was another set of tick marks for the canaries who'd lost their lives down in the No. 7. Uncle Aubrey kept that tally, too, but he didn't speak of it.

"Bitty, dear, we love you." Jamie's mother always kept the window open just a crack, and Aunt Lou's voice crept through it.

Bitty lifted a wing, not in a wave so much as a salute.

"Hope it's a gas," hollered Chester. He was the only one who ever joked about the methane and carbon monoxide that lurked in the mine's dark tunnels.

"Ouch!" Chester yelped, and Bitty knew someone had given his friend a sharp peck in the back. Bitty hoped it was Alice. Under normal circumstances, she was the nicest canary in the Big House. She was also the prettiest, and Bitty was certain he would have thought that even if she hadn't been the only female canary near his age. Bitty liked Chester, too, even with all his bad jokes. If it weren't for the two of them, he'd be stuck listening to his aunt and uncle all night, or the angry rants from Chester's mom, or the unending conversations of the rest of the dozen canaries who shared his birdseed and prison but not his point of view.

Their voices faded, replaced by the gravelly crunch of the Gap-Toothed Man's boots as they moved along the railroad tracks before the dawn.

"Mmph. You birds make some kind of racket," said the man, whose real name was Mr. Hurley. He was puffing and sputtering from the short walk. "Couldn't pay me to keep a cage that size in my bedroom. Heck, couldn't pay me to keep it in my outhouse."

A half mile later they reached the head frame, the timber structure that housed the mine's elevator, and went in. The Gap-Toothed Man found the lights and pulled the lever, sending them down the shaft.

In some mines, Bitty knew, they didn't bother taking birds in

early. A lot of mines didn't bother with birds at all anymore. But the No. 7 had been gassy lately. Eight days ago, the miners had found Murray Polly laid out as if he were taking a Sunday nap with his boots on. Boggs was in a cage beside him, his toes curled, gripping an imaginary perch. The Gap-Toothed Man had other safety equipment, of course. But he always brought a bird down first.

Creeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek. Bitty buried his head in his chest and tried to drown out the noise of the elevator as it sank into the belly of the mine. Then he shook himself, closed his eyes and sucked in a last gulp of good air. He tried to hold on to each second, stretch it like a rubber band in case it was the last second of his life. The elevator hit bottom with a clunk, and the Gap-Toothed Man pushed open the gate, holding Bitty's cage in front of him like a lantern. If the air was poison, Bitty would know it two and a half feet sooner than anybody else. His lungs were full, as if he'd swallowed a balloon.

Here goes nothing, Bitty thought. *Or everything.*

He opened his eyes and breathed in.

The breath ended in something like a hiccup. So far, the cold, damp air was safe. Bitty breathed in again, and this time the darkness didn't feel as mean. But they were just getting started. The Gap-Toothed Man held the cage at eye level so his headlamp shone in Bitty's face. "Hey, bird," he grunted. "You all right in there?"

"*Fee-yo,*" Bitty replied in a sullen monotone. *Depends on what you mean by all right,* he thought as the man held the cage out again and started a slow loop through the gloom. The light from his safety lamp bounced along the walls so that they appeared to move. The sound of dripping water echoed in the mine.

"*Fee-yo. Fee-yo. Fee-yo.*" Bitty tweeted the canary equivalent of "blah, blah, blah." Whenever he stopped tweeting, the man checked to see if he was still breathing. Then he marked the wall with a piece of chalk.

"How's the view?" The miner held the cage low to the ground, then close to the ceiling. Bitty swung back and forth again. His feathers were yellow; inside he was green.

The Gap-Toothed Man set him on the floor of the mine for a

moment and took the safety lamp from his belt. He studied the flame, then studied the bird again. He measured the airflow.

“Heigh ho, heigh ho,” he finally muttered. “Reckon it’s time for work.”

He picked up the cage, and together they went back into the elevator. But this time they were going up.

“All right, now,” the Gap-Toothed Man called to the miners who were gathering near the entrance. They rattled their lunch pails and stamped their feet to keep warm. “It’s clean.”

The miners surged past. A number of them carried their own canaries, but just about a dozen carried the canaries who shared the aviary owned by Jamie’s family. Jamie had promised that no one else would have to lift a finger if they let him go into the canary business, but it was often Mr. Campbell who towed the birds to the mine in a little red wagon, which he covered with a burlap sack when it rained.

That was how the day began: men and birds loading into an elevator that the humans called the Cage. It was much bigger than the cage Bitty called home; still, it had earned the comparison.

“Yeoman’s job, son,” shouted Uncle Aubrey from a carrier that was gripped by Jamie’s father. He was a tall man who had to stoop to manage the mine’s low ceilings.

“Thanks.”

“Bitty! Over here!”

Bitty saw Alice carried by a man the others called Rusty—for his hair, though most of the time that hair was covered with coal dust; it looked more black than red.

“All right?” she asked.

“Still kicking.” Bitty did a strange tap dance that made Alice laugh, the same way she laughed when Jamie listened to Clovis Perkins, a radio comedian who made a career out of blowing his nose. A tap dance? What was he even *thinking*? “Heh-heh.” He tried a laugh of his own, but that sounded strange, too, so he just waved until Alice was out of sight. Soon they were going down again, and it seemed to Bitty that his entire existence could be categorized by opposing elements: up and down. Light and dark. Alive and dead.

Chapter 2



The men set up shop in the dark bowels of the mine and began hacking away at the vein of coal that ran big and black through Audie Mountain. The Gap-Toothed Man walked among them, making notes and sniffing the air as if he, not Bitty, would be the one to detect the gas. The sounds of axes and shovels made conversation tricky. At least there was no blasting today. The canaries' job was simple: breathe and chirp. Stop, and the miners would check for bad air. That was what they called the gas that crept like a ghost through the maze of timber and tunnels. One concentrated pocket of methane and *bam*, a spark could make it blow. A pocket of odorless carbon monoxide and the miners would fall to the ground, without the *bam*, but just as dead. The canaries were supposed to be the alarm. Bad air, and they'd wobble and keel over. They'd die for real if the Gap-Toothed Man or whoever had them didn't snatch them up and get them to where the air was safe. And of course there were the times when no one could run, like the eight-days-ago accident that had killed Mr. Polly and Boggs.

Mr. Polly had been one of Jamie's most loyal customers. Boggs was just plain loyal, the sort of bird who would do you a favor and make you feel as if you'd done one for him. He was much younger than Bitty's aunt and uncle, but older than Bitty and his friends—like a big brother, the kind who teased you but taught you things, too. He was Chester's mentor when it came to jokes, the one who'd taught

them that “can’t cry for laughing” was better than “can’t laugh for crying.” Boggs could mimic Uncle Aubrey’s deep voice, Aunt Lou’s quaver and the bossy demands of Chester’s mother. He might have had a career in radio if Doc Tatum hadn’t snagged him for Jamie when he visited the general store in Wheeling. (Mr. Weymouth, who ran the company store in Coalbank Hollow, claimed to be allergic to feathers and wanted nothing to do with birds, which was why Jamie’s family had been allowed to run their little side business in the first place.)

The canaries had watched the swinging cage, hypnotized, when Mr. Campbell brought Boggs home at the end of their shift. Then they’d watched Jamie slide the dead canary into one of the matchboxes he’d saved to use as a coffin. Jamie had held the funeral outside, in the darkness, and buried Boggs on the hill, where they couldn’t see.

Inside the Big House, Uncle Aubrey had stood on the higher of the two perches and said a few words about service and nobility, which was the same thing he always said. He cleared his throat. “May his spirit soar.”

“May his spirit soar,” the canaries repeated. Uncle Aubrey had scratched another mark onto the perch, and they’d retreated into silence. Bitty wished for that silence now, instead of the scraping and clanging of the mine.

His shift would likely last eleven hours, but already it felt as if they’d been down there for ten.

“You’ve got to find your happy place, that’s all,” Aunt Lou said whenever Bitty complained. He supposed she meant the aviary, but that wasn’t exactly full of wonderful memories. He had friends there, and his aunt and uncle, of course. But there was a constant reminder of those who were *not* there. His father, who had died in the mines with Chester’s father, had been buried before Bitty even hatched out. His mother had lived to see Bitty and name him, before she died a week later of a broken heart. (Uncle Aubrey said it was technically dehydration because the broken heart kept her from eating and drinking, but that didn’t change the outcome.) Dickens and Fern had been gone two seasons already. And now they’d lost Boggs, whose death (or Mr. Polly’s, anyway) barely got a mention in the city paper. It was

the big disasters—like the one in Everettville that killed ninety-seven men, or the one in Jed that killed eighty—that took the headlines and lived on in the songs Mrs. Campbell sang in a minor key.

The Gap-Toothed Man stared into the cage, and Bitty gave him an obligatory chirp, inhaling a mouthful of coal dust. He chirped again. With each *fee-yo*, he tried to remember something about his mother.

“*Fee-yo*.” She smelled like sunflower seeds.

“*Fee-yo*.” She was yellow, like Bitty, only her wings were brown, sort of a sunflower in reverse.

“*Fee-yo*.” He wondered if she ever sang, like Mrs. Campbell. Bitty didn’t think so.

Canaries were known for making music, but the canaries in the No. 7 rarely went beyond their steady *fee-yo*, like a telegraph repeating the same message in Morse code. They never even sang when they were happy, not that they were happy often, with the exception of Aunt Lou. No, Bitty didn’t have a happy place. He had a cold, dark, angry place, and he wanted to get out before they carried him out like Boggs in a matchbox coffin.

The question was how to escape. The aviary was locked from the outside with a long metal bar. Bitty couldn’t move it. He’d tried. The door opened in the early morning, when it was time for work. It opened at night when Mr. Campbell brought them home again. But the Campbells had quick hands. The door snapped shut in the time it would take to whack a fly.

Bitty tried to think of another way out, but the mine wasn’t conducive to heavy thinking. Thoughts passed through his brain slowly, as if he had to dig for them. Time passed slowly, too. If there’d been a clock, the hands would have moved backward.

The men stopped to eat and drink. The Gap-Toothed Man made another loop through the mine to test the air quality, but not before dropping a chunk of onion sandwich into Bitty’s cage. Whoever worked with Rusty got the best meals, but lately even those meals had been lacking. There were still biscuits, but without honey. Fruit this month had consisted of stewed prunes.

Inhale.

Tick.

Exhale.

Tock.

At last the whistle blew. Up they went, and then out into the mountain air. The men left the cages with Mr. Campbell, who stacked them on the wagon.

"Thanks," Mr. Campbell said as the Gap-Toothed Man handed him the cage with Bitty inside.

"Hope your boy's giving you a cut," the miner replied.

Bitty looked around as the cages were stacked beside him and up above. It was hard to see whether everyone was there, but he could see Mr. Campbell's lips moving as he counted the birds. Aunt Lou took roll, like a schoolteacher.

"Aubrey?"

"Here."

"Crockett?"

"Here."

"Hazel?"

"Here."

"Chester?"

"Ho!"

Bitty could just make out Chester's left foot in the cage diagonally above him. Then the foot disappeared, replaced by Chester's upside-down head.

"Sleeping on the job again?" Bitty asked him.

"Very funny. Speaking of which: Where does a five-hundred-pound canary sit?"

"Where?" Bitty asked, though he'd heard this one. It had been one of Boggs's favorites.

"Anywhere he wants to." Chester delivered the punch line so solemnly that to Bitty it sounded less like a joke and more like a call to action.