

Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen

Chapter 11

A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIEND

Instead of eating at lunchtime, I looked for Bird in the schoolyard and the playground but he wasn't there. I ran back to school and went to the library, but he wasn't there, either. I looked in the gym before the bell rang for afternoon classes. He was nowhere around.

Why did he do it? He knew the dates, and he know Barker sees everything. Bird didn't return to class. I was so worried about Bird and angry at Barker, I couldn't think about anything else for the rest of the afternoon.

When I got home from school and walked in the kitchen, the first thing Ma said was, "Where's your friend? No studying this afternoon?"

I couldn't tell her what happened. She'd think Bird was wrong and she wouldn't let me see him anymore. I took an apple out of the fruit bowl. "Ma, can I go out and play before it's dark?"

"Oh, you made up with your friends?"

"I just want to go out for a while."

"What about your homework?"

"If I start it now, it'll be dark when I finish."

"Be back in here by five. And don't leave the block."

I ran to Bird's building, rang his bell, and hoped his father didn't answer. Finally, Bird came to the door. He opened it slightly and was surprised to see me. "Wait, Doris, I'll come outside."

I waited for him on his stoop. He sat down next to me as we silently watched two dogs chasing each other in the lot across the street. Bird picked up a stick and scraped it against the stoop.

"Why did you do it?" I asked. "After all that time we spent studying?"

He wouldn't look at me. "I wasn't cheating. I didn't want to mix up the dates."

"Why did you leave the room? Suppose you get suspended again?"

"I was mad. I left school for good. I'm never going to make it into the Drama Club, and I'm never going to make it out of sixth grade."

"Why didn't you try to explain to Barker? Tell her you was afraid of reversing the numbers?"

He looked at me. "You know you can't say nothing to Barker."

"You could've just tried to tell her you wasn't cheating."

He turned away from me again. "You don't understand, Doris."

I mean, like I know the dates, but my mind, it's like my mind gets a cramp, I swear . . . and then I can't find the answer even though I know it."

"You mean you forget?"

"I don't know. Not really. It's right here" — he banged his forehead — "but I can't get it out."

I stood up. "Bird, when things go wrong, you can't keep acting the fool and doing crazy things. It just makes Barker madder. You just got to ignore her when she act like that."

He got up slowly. "I know, but I can't. I get too mad."

Bird really needed a friend now, and I was glad to be his friend. "You want to have dinner with us tonight?" I knew my mother's cooking would make him feel better.

He nodded.

"Get your books, then, and I'll help you do your homework."

I had to do most of his work for him. He couldn't get anything straight in his head. Except those dates. We went over them again and he didn't confuse the numbers.

"You didn't need that paper. Why don't you explain to Barker and ask her to let you take the test again?"

"She hates me."

I scratched my head. Barker seemed to kind of like me a little bit sometimes. "I'll go with you. See, we'll just explain it to her in a nice

way when we go back to school on Monday."

Bird looked doubtful. "You better do most of the talking. She doesn't want to hear nothing I have to say."

"All you gotta do is apologize for leaving the room. Then we'll make her understand that you wasn't cheating."

When Bird left, I went back to the kitchen and put the dried dishes in the cabinet. I figured that on Monday everything would be okay. We'd talk to Barker and explain the situation to her. On Saturday afternoon, I ran into Bird on my way out of my building. I was going to try to quit my job again, if I could get up the nerve.

"Hey, Doris, I was wondering what you was doing today."

"Hi, Bird."

"Where you going?" He leaned on the railing leading to the basement.

"Listen, Bird, this just between you and me. I got this job at the Hive, but I have to quit. Do you mind looking out for my parents for me while I go in and quit?"

"Why you need the money so bad?" he asked. "I know everybody on 163rd Street need money, but it ain't like your family starving."

"I wanted to go visit Amir, and train fare is fifty dollars. But he ain't ready to see anyone yet, so I got some time to make the money. And besides, my parents won't let me work."

"How are you going to make money if you're not allowed to work?" he asked me.

I shrugged.

"Do you really want to visit Amir?"

"More than anything."

He grabbed my wrists. "Hey, I got an idea. I can help you keep your job," he said.

"Get outta here, Bird," I said. "I can't keep my job. My parents will put me under punishment until I'm thirty-five years old."

"You can," he said excitedly. "You ain't doing anything dangerous or bad. What if you just do a little bit more and then stop when you get fifty dollars?"

"I don't know, Bird."

"You got to let me do something for you, since you've been so nice to me. Let me just do this one thing for you. Listen, I'll be the lookout for you while you work." He talked on the side of his mouth like in one of them old-time gangster movies.

"No, Bird. I can't do it. I'll get into trouble. They really mean it."

"Come on, Doris. Let me save your life again."

I laughed. "I can see it now. My mother will run into Miss Bee on the street and Miss Bee say, 'Oh Honey Bunch is doing a wonderful job in my establishment,'" I said imitating her.

"Just tell Miss Bee you don't want your mother to know you working there because you're planning a big surprise for your mother."

"And if she knows I'm working, it won't be a surprise," I continued.

"Yeah." He nodded frantically. "Come on, Doris. Let me give you a hand."

"Maybe," I said. Bird was so intent on helping me, I was afraid I'd hurt him if I didn't say yes. We started walking toward the Hive.

"You'll have no problem with my help," he said, chuckling.

"Remember your help with the poem?" I said.

"Yeah, but I handled that paper-towel job like a pro." He flexed his muscles and grinned. Then he stood still in the middle of the block.

"We need a system," he said. "If your mother is coming, I'll hold up one finger. If the coast is clear, I'll hold up four fingers."

We started walking again. "I told Ma I was going to the movies. I feel bad lying to her."

"You wasn't lying to her. You was going to the movies when you left. Now you're going to work."

"I guess so."

"Just remember, if I see your mother coming, it's one finger. If I see your father coming, I'll hold up two fingers."

"Dog, Bird, that's a lot to remember."

He shook his head. "No, Doris. It goes like this: One for your mother, two for Dad, four for the folk who think they bad."

I hit him on his back. "You so silly."

"We forgot Nosey Nicols," I said. "Look, one for Ma, two for Pa, and three for Nosey; four, all clear. See?" I giggled. "I got it now." I looked to the left and right before I ducked into the Hive.

The cloud of smoke wasn't over Miss Bee's booth, so I knew business was slow again this Saturday. Miss Bee sat in her booth reading the paper. "Hi, Honey Bunch," she said. "Nothing much happening today. Got a lady coming in here at two."

The telephone rang, and my heart missed a beat. "Set up the counter for me, Honey Bunch." She answered the phone.

I took the shampoos, lotions, and combs out of the cabinet. I wished some more little girls would come in to have their hair comrowed. When Miss Bee finished her call, I told her how I wanted to keep my job a secret from my mother.

"Honey Bunch, you're a darling child. Your secret's good with me." She praised me so much I felt ashamed about lying.

I looked around for something else to do. Carol's and the other hairdresser's booths were clean. "Miss Bee, you want me to fold some towels?"

"Yes, sugar, and water the plant."

I sighed. Her and that plant. "You sure it ain't dead?"

"No, it's got some life in it still. You wait till spring."

I stretched my hand as far as I could and tried to hide behind the curtain and reach for the plant. It didn't look any better to me than it did last week. I took it to the back and watered it.

The telephone rang, and my heart thumped again as Miss Bee answered it. It wasn't my mother. She'd probably never call again unless someone told her they saw me in here.

When I went back to the window, Bird was standing outside holding up ten fingers and grinning. He couldn't help acting crazy.

I waved him away and then he held up four fingers — the all-clear sign. He ran up the block. Bird was a perfect lookout, but there was nothing to watch out for.

I started feeling guilty after about an hour, so I told Miss Bee that I had to go home and help my mother.

"Honey Bunch, no point in hanging around here," Miss Bee said after I folded the towels. "Things won't get jumping until the holidays." She reached down in her pocket, "Here's a little tip for coming and pulling out them supplies and watering my plant." She handed me \$1.00.

I looked up and down the block before I stepped out of the Hive. It was a relief to get out of there. Bird was near my building throwing a basketball between the rungs of the fire escape, looking proud of himself.

"Hey, Doris." He held up four fingers.

The sun shining right on the stoop took the chill off.

The air was crisp and fresh. I sat down.

"You finished already?" he asked, resting his basketball on the stoop.

"Yeah, and thanks a lot. I finished early." I didn't tell him why. "Want to go to the Plaza and see a movie?"

"*Blazing Guns* and the *Monster of the Dead and Dying* is still there," Bird said. "I saw them both last week." He grabbed my skinny hips like a cowboy grabbing a holster. I leaned back on the stoop and watched as Bird acted out the whole movie.

"Now let me tell you about *Monster of the Dead*. You got some tissues?"

I dug down in my pocket and found half a packet of Kleenex. Bird took the tissues out of the pocket and stuffed them in his mouth. He looked like a frog and roared like a lion.

Mrs. Nicols walked down the steps, looked at Bird and shook her head. I didn't even want to speak to her, but I had to. Otherwise she'd run me in to my mother, complaining that I was rude.

"Hi, Mrs. Nicols," I said. "How are you today?"

Bird said, "Hi, Mrs. Nicols, ma'am," and then he lowered his arms and growled some more.

Mrs. Nicols adjusted her flowered hat. "I love to see happy children," she said and tipped on down the street. A man passing by grinned at Bird's antics too. When Bird finished, he sat next to me on the stoop.

Then he tried to spin the basketball on his index finger. Suddenly, he looked very serious. "Wonder what Barker will say to me on Monday?"

"Don't worry about her. We'll explain everything." I put my hand on his shoulder. "Anyway, thanks, Bird."

"For what?"

"For being my lookout."

"As long as you have me watching, you can keep your job."

I hugged my knees tightly against my chest as Bird grinned happily to himself. But what was I really going to do about my job at the Hive?