

Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen

Chapter 12

A NEW VENTURE

Bird wasn't waiting for me on my stoop when I got downstairs the next morning, but I didn't think anything was wrong. I figured he'd be in the library. He wasn't there, and he wasn't on the line in the cafeteria.

Every time the classroom door opened I thought Bird would walk in. But he never did.

Russell and T.T. asked me about Bird at lunchtime. "I hope he wasn't suspended," Russell said.

I stared at the cold macaroni on my plate, but I couldn't eat. "There are kids who've done worse things than Bird and they wasn't suspended."

"Barker really has it in for him," T.T. said.

I thought about Bird all afternoon. I couldn't think about anything else. Barker had to be set straight about Bird, and I was going to do it.

When everyone left at three o'clock, I thought of a million reasons to go home and not talk to her, but I knew I had to.

I lingered around in the classroom, then I took a deep breath and walked up to her desk. "Mrs. Barker . . . I . . ." My voice came out in a babyish whine.

She gave me a stern look. "Yes, Doris?"

I breathed deeply again. "What is going to happen to Bird?" I blurted out quickly.

"That's no business of yours." She was reddening up.

I don't know where I got the nerve from. "Mrs. Barker. Bird wasn't cheating. He ain't a bad person."

"Isn't a bad person," she said slowly. "Now you listen to me, young lady!" She wagged her finger in my face. "You need to stay away from kids like James. You're a bright girl. People like James will bring you down."

"Mrs. Barker. Bird studied for that test. I know, because I helped him. He gets the numbers mixed up; that's why he had the paper," I said quickly before she interrupted me.

"You helped him?" she asked.

I nodded.

She looked vaguely interested. "You don't understand Bird," I said boldly.

Mrs. Barker stiffened. "I understand him very well. And if you continue to show me disrespect by telling me how to run my affairs, I will have to inform your parents."

I wished I could red up like her so she could see how mad I was. I couldn't let her tell my parents. They might think Bird was wrong, and they wouldn't let me see him. I walked out the door and got away from Barker before I got into any more trouble.

I hadn't said anything that I wanted to say or the way I wanted to say it. Barker was probably running to the office now to call my mother and tell that I'd sassed her. I wondered if Ma would take up for me, or if she'd known that Barker had no reason to get me into trouble. I guess I got mad too. Amir would have known how to speak to Barker.

I took the shortcut through the playground to see whether Bird was there. Some little kids playing on the swings, and Russell and the other guys were at the basketball court. Bird was nowhere in sight.

I decided to stop by his house. The lock was broken on the outside door, so I just walked right into his dark hallway. As I ran up the four flights of stairs to his apartment, I prayed his father wouldn't answer. I knocked lightly on the door, and when no one came, I knocked again.

"Who is it?" His father sounded like I'd woke him up.

"Is ... is Bird, I mean, James there?" I said softly.

"He ain't home from school yet," he said gruffly.

"Thank you," I said, and tore down the stairs in case he opened the door.

I went home. Ma didn't say anything when I walked in, so I knew Barker hadn't called her. Maybe Bird would come over later and explain what was going on.

I didn't see or hear from Bird all evening.

The following morning, I looked around for Bird on the way to school. It was too cold to stay in the street if he was playing hooky. His father was home during the day, so I knew he wasn't hanging out there.

He wasn't in the library or in the cafeteria when we lined up for class. I hadn't really thought about Barker again until she came to take us upstairs. I wondered whether she'd say anything to me about our conversation yesterday. She didn't speak directly to me. She just made a remark to the whole class about picking and choosing friends wisely.

We had assembly later that morning. When we walked in the auditorium, I saw Mr. Lowe, the assistant principal, standing near a group of students from one of the special classes. Those kids were all squirming around and talking when everyone else was quiet. He yelled at a boy who popped in and out of his seat. I saw Bird slumped way down in the next seat. He wore a blue hooded sweatshirt pulled over his head like he wanted to hide his face. What was he doing with them? I wondered.

"Bird," I whispered loudly. Mrs. Barker put her finger to her lips and glared at me, and Bird sunk deeper into his seat.

When the assembly was over, Bird was gone. I thought he'd come over to us and go back upstairs with our class, but he didn't. I had to find out what had happened to him, so as soon as we got back, I asked Mrs. Barker for a pass to the bathroom.

I ran downstairs to the first floor where the special classes are. I looked for the one that I saw Bird with at assembly. A lot of yelling and screaming came out of a third room. I peeped inside. Bird was standing on top of a clothes closet, flapping his arms back and forth, threatening to fly. One girl, who couldn't talk well, said, "Fry, fry, the boy can fry."

Bird was in the class with the kids who used a toy clock to learn how to tell time and play money in order to learn how to make change. The two teachers in the room tried to get Bird to come down off the closet. Then I heard a familiar voice behind me.

"Young lady, are you enjoying the show?"

I turned around and could hardly speak. "Mr. Wash-Washington, I—"

"I think you'd better get to where you're going before —" He stopped when he saw Bird leap onto a chair. The girl yelled, "He fry! The boy can fry!" Mr. Washington ran in the room.

"Get out of here and leave this class alone," he shouted at Bird. "For someone who wants to get into the Drama Club, you're certainly taking the wrong approach."

The teacher looked like she was going to cry. "He's assigned to this class," she said.

Mr. Washington was shocked, and I know I looked like I had been electrocuted too.

Mr. Washington said to the teacher, "Let me talk to him for a minute."

"Keep him as long as you like," she said.

Bird kept his face down as he came out into the hall and closed the door behind him. He still had his hood on.

"Take that hood off your head and look at me," Mr. Washington said.

Bird lifted his head and tried to face Mr. Washington. His eyes looked at the wall, the ceiling, everywhere except at Mr. Washington.

"Man, what's wrong with you? Why are you making a spectacle of yourself, disrespecting the teacher, upsetting the whole class. When I saw you the other day, I was excited to have such an enthusiastic and bright student in the club. But, boy, you act like this, and we count you out!"

Bird dropped his head again and didn't answer.

"Mr. Washington," I said, "Bird ain't like them other kids."

"No. The other kids were sitting in their seats acting like they know what to do in a classroom."

"But, Mr. Washington, Bird is smart."

"I know what you mean." He turned to Bird again. "Mrs. Barker said

you were a problem." He lifted Bird's chin and made him look in his face. "You see where your behavior got you?"

Bird didn't say a word.

"Mr. Washington," I said, "Bird is a serious actor and he wants to join the club, but Mrs. Barker says he can't."

"She's not his teacher now," Mr. Washington said. "I'll take him in the club. But man, you better not act the fool with me. You hear?"

"Yes," Bird said quietly.

"And you're going to get your act together in this class too?"

"Yes."

"If you don't, no club and no chance to be in the show."

"I thought I couldn't be in it because of my grades and because I was put out of my regular class," Bird said hesitantly.

Mr. Washington looked closely at Bird. "Teachers can recommend students to me, but if I see a student who has potential or talent, then I can take him in the program. And I think you might have some talent." Mr. Washington glanced over at me.

"The play and the club are for everyone who wants to be in them." The vein in Mr. Washington's temple moved back and forth. "Get back in that class, and behave yourself. I'm going to be checking on you."

Bird went in the room and Mr. Washington followed him. I

waited outside in the hallway for Mr. Washington to come out. I couldn't understand how Bird could've been put in that class. I sat down on the staircase next to Bird's room and covered my face and cried. I felt bad for Bird. Barker, the principal, and whoever else had taken him out of our class were wrong. How could they put him in a class where some of the kids could hardly speak? Bird belonged with us, in room 402.