

Yellow Bird and Me

By Joyce Hansen

Chapter 14

A CLOSE CALL

On Saturday, I had extra chores to do because Ma went shopping and Daddy was working. I didn't know what time I'd get to the Hive. I wished that I'd quit before, and now I was afraid of hurting Bird. One good thing, though, once Ma came home I wouldn't have to worry about her going back out again. Actually I really didn't have to worry about anything since I had Bird as a lookout. But I was worried.

It was two o'clock when Ma finally came back. Miss Bee was probably wondering what had happened to me.

I ran downstairs and found Bird on his front stoop waiting for me. We both shivered as we walked to the Hive.

"Doris," Bird said, "You better hurry and make this money before the weather gets real cold. I'll freeze to death out here."

"Well, maybe we don't have to go," I said, thinking I'd have an easy way out.

He pulled his blue hood almost over his face and hugged himself.

"Oh no, Doris. It's okay. I've got it all planned out. I'm gonna do this spying stuff from your hallway."

"How's that?"

"If I see one of your parents or Mrs. Nicols coming down the stairs, I'll fly to the Hive, hold up my fingers, and fly back to the hallway. After all, I'm the Bird, you know." he said, flapping his arms like wings. "So, you see, Doris, you can keep your job until you get the fifty dollars."

Great, I thought.

He put one hand on my shoulder as we stood in front of the Hive. "Now remember, Doris. One for Ma, two for Pa, and three for Mrs. Nicols."

"And four, all clear," I finished. Sometimes it's hard to have such a good best friend.

The first thing I saw was the big cloud of smoke coming out of Miss Bee's booth, which meant the Hive was busy. She looked over her divider.

"Hi, Honey Bunch, thought you weren't coming today," she said.

"Had to help my mother," I said, hanging up my coat.

Several customers waited their turn, and Carol and the other hairdressers worked in their booths. I cleaned towels and took appointments. Each time I answered the telephone, I tried to deepen my voice, in case my mother called again. It was awful pretending not to be here.

After I'd been there about an hour, I happened to look toward the window and saw Bird holding up four fingers. Miss Bee saw him also.

"That your little boyfriend?"

Somebody yelled from the back, "That child too young for boyfriends!"

"He's my best friend," I said.

When I finished cleaning the towels, the same little girl whose hair I'd combed before, came in with her mother. The mother said, "I was hoping you'd be here. Could you braid her hair for me?"

Needless to say, I felt proud. "Them braids don't look too bad on little girls," Miss Bee mumbled.

I braided her hair in the back of the shop in case Mrs. Nicols walked by. I still had a view of the door and the window. When I finished, I took her to her mother, who sat in the front talking to Miss Bee.

Her mother said, "That's even prettier than before." I grinned as I stood back and admired my handiwork. Not bad, I thought proudly. Not bad.

The woman gave me \$3.00 and before I could finish saying thank-you, I looked up in horror to find Bird at the window holding up three fingers. I scooted to the back of the shop and nearly bumped into Carol who was washing her customer's hair. Mrs. Nicols, with her big false-tooth smile and bobbing flower hat, came tipping in through

the door. Everybody in the place knew her.

"Hi, Mrs. Nicols," Miss Bee said "Haven't seen you in here since the summer of 75."

Mrs. Nicols said, "Darling, I don't have to buy good looks. I have nature's gift."

"Sometimes even Mother Nature needs a little help, Mrs. Nicols," Miss Bee said. The customers laughed, and I didn't know what to do.

The other sink for washing hair was empty with a chair in front of it. I pushed the chair right up to the sink, laid my head back on the edge of the sink as if I was having my hair washed, and put a towel over my face.

"Girl, what's wrong with you?" Carol asked.

"I don't want that woman to see me."

"Who? Mrs. Nicols?"

"Sh-sh. Yes," I whispered from underneath the towel.

Carol chuckled. "I won't say nothing."

I prayed Miss Bee didn't walk back there looking for some supplies or something and see me laying down with a towel on my face. Suddenly the telephone rang. I didn't move. Miss Bee yelled from her booth, "Honey Bunch, answer that." Thank goodness she didn't call me Doris.

I just stayed there and listened to Carol turn off the water.

"Girl, get the phone."

"I can't, Carol." My voice came out muffled.

"Where's that gal?" Miss Bee yelled again, "somebody answer that."

Carol finally picked up the telephone — which was for her, anyway.

"Well, Mrs. Nicols, what can we do for you? Hope you ain't looking for miracles."

"I have a big affair to attend tomorrow. Can I get my hair done sometime this afternoon?"

"You have to make an appointment in advance."

I could've cried. Please don't ask me to make an appointment I said to myself.

"I'll do you a favor this once; next time you make an appointment in advance."

How am I getting out of here without Mrs. Nicols seeing me? Why did Miss Bee have to be so nice?

"Come back here in an hour."

"Thank you, darling," Mrs. Nicols said.

When Mrs. Nicols left, I removed the towel, and Carol laughed at me. "Girl, you're sweating." I told her and Miss Bee that I had to go home, but that they shouldn't tell Mrs. Nicols that I worked there on Saturdays, because she'd mention it to my mother.

I left before Mrs. Nicols came back. With the \$3.00 Miss Bee gave me, I made \$6.00. Now I had \$21.00 and was almost halfway to Amir. But this was a close call. I couldn't go back there again, or I'd be caught for sure. I was just going to have to find another way to make the money.

I looked carefully before I stepped outside. Bird was there grinning and holding up two fingers and I saw my father at the other end of the block, coming from the subway, but he couldn't see me.

"Bird," I said as we walked down 163rd Street. "I don't think I'm going back to the Hive anymore." I told him about how I'd hid from Nicols. He laughed and put three fingers in my face. I squeezed them, and he jerked his hand away from me.

"You've got to, Doris. You just have a little more to go to see Amir."

"It just ain't right, Bird," I said. "I just can't do it anymore. But thanks for helping."

"Glad to be of some assistance," he said bowing politely. "But I still think you could make the rest."

"I will," I told Bird. "But it ain't gonna be like this."