



*“...I sang a song of praise,
giving thanks for the spark of life
that is me.”*

CHAPTER ONE



Song Bird

“Not for Sale!” That’s what the label on my cage said. My job was to stay right there on my perch and attract people into the shop, like ants to sugar.

And in they came, all sorts of people, their eyes wide with expectation. “Show me the bird that sings like that!” they said. “I must have that bird!”

“Sorry, Ma’am,” Mr O said every time. “He’s not for sale. I could never part with him.”

“But just show him to me!” they implored, and Mr O brought them to where I sat swinging on my perch, in the top row of cages, just at eye level if you were a human adult of average height. Fathers and mothers lifted their children to peer through the wire bars and stare in awe as I sang a song of praise, giving thanks for the spark of life that is me.

Some customers didn’t want to take ‘no’ for an answer. They tried to persuade Mr O to change his mind. “His song reaches into my very heart! I must have him!” they pleaded. “I’m prepared to pay double for him!”

But Mr O just shook his head firmly. "Sorry, Ma'am. Sorry, Sir. He's not for sale." Then he smiled broadly. "But he's not the only canary. Have a look at all the others. I've got budgies too, and Waxbills and Lovebirds and all sorts. I'm certain you'll find one that is just perfect for you!"

The customers gazed into each of the cages, marvelling at the colours and varieties of birds that twittered and chirped and hopped from perch to perch. Once they made their choice Mr O led them to his display of shiny new cages; round ones, tall ones, green ones, gold ones. And from there he took them to look at accessories to go with the cages, like perches, bird baths, honey-sticks, rope toys, bells, mirrors, cuttlefish, grit, and the right box of seed for the right bird.

After that came the fluttering and flapping that put us all in a tizz, as Mr O took the round fishing net on its pole and stuck it into one of the cages to catch the bird who was to go home with the customer in the brand-new cage with accessories.

"No, no, you've got the wrong one. It's that one. Yes! You've got him!" the customers squealed in glee. And finally the automatic doorbell jangled as they left the shop with their new bird in its new cage, back to their busy lives, happy as can be.

The fluttering and fear of being caught and tangled in the fishing net subsided and, after a while, I threw my head back and my throat warbled with song once more.

We all waited for the voice to answer. Even Mrs Rat was quiet.

“I've lived in heaven,” said the voice.

By now, we all knew who was speaking. It was the weird creature who had landed on our door step in a square box punched full of air holes.

“Then tell us what it's like,” we chorused. “Tell us, tell us, tell us.”

The creature began in a voice as sad as the song of the winter wind:

“There are trees in heaven. The breeze whispers wonderful secrets in amongst the branches, and the leaves dance at the slightest chance:

“There is fruit of all tastes and all shapes in heaven, with sweet juice dripping to the ferns on the forest floor;

“There are a thousand birds, with plumage that shines and shimmers in colours too radiant to describe;

“There are voices in heaven that sing songs of praise all day...”

His voice trailed off.

“Tell us more,” we whispered urgently, and after a moment he spoke again:



“The birds are free in heaven, to fly with strong strokes from mountain tops to sea shores;

“To rise before dawn and welcome the first rays of the new day;

“To perch on the highest branches and watch the setting of the sun;

“To bring the miracle of life from a nest of eggs;

“To nurture the young with food and warmth;

“To swoop and to soar and fly amidst the rain drops...”

“Tell us more,” we pleaded.

But this time he remained silent and, with glorious pictures of heaven in my mind, I tucked my head under my wing and fell soundly asleep.

CHAPTER TEN



A plan for freedom

The next evening was no better. The loss of Mrs Rat had a profound effect on all of us. We examined our situation from every angle.

“Can we blame Mr O?” asked the Turtle dove. “After all the snakes must have food, and they don't eat seeds like we do.”

“Well they don't have to eat so much,” squawked the Ringneck parrot. “One ate so much he burst out of his own skin!”

“They don't even have to look for their food. It's just given to them. There's no justice in it,” commented a Zebra finch.

“How can they look for their food when they're trapped in a tank?” asked the Laughing dove.

There was a long pause.

“We're all trapped. Every one of us,” murmured a small voice.

We mulled over our predicament. Only the bubbles in the fish tank intruded.

