Bird in the Hand

by Willma Willis Gore

Probably my remembrance of chasing and capturing chickens by hand so that Mother could finish them off with an axe for our Sunday dinners gave rise to my life-long queasiness about touching any feathered creature. I was fortunate that my children’s choices of pets were cats, lizards, and tortoises, so that I was not confronted with feathers as we went through the stages of pet rearing.

I was met with a challenge a few days ago when, long past child rearing, I cat-sat in my son’s home. The cuddly warmth of a furry cat on my lap or beneath my hand is pleasant for me and I am grateful that son and wife have always chosen cats for pets.

What is not so pleasant is the fact that their Opal, a gray Persian, is wont to bring captured birds from the back yard through the cat door into the living room. She “plays” with them—rather roughly—until someone rescues the bird.

I was reading when I heard a fluttering sound and looked up to see a red-capped house finch perched on the top of the refrigerator. Across the room, in the middle of the carpet, Opal toyed with feathers she had managed to remove from the bird before it escaped her claws.

Alan and Ursula were due home in an hour—just 60 minutes from now—and as long as the bird remained atop the refrigerator, I could put a cup of water and some oats up there for her. Alan would deal with it when he returned.

Of course, mere feathers were not Opal’s idea of appropriate playthings. She wanted the whole bird.

“Naughty, naughty, Opal,” I said to the cat. At that moment, apparently thinking the bright, overhead fluorescent fixture in the kitchen ceiling was an escape
avenue, the bird flew up from her refrigerator perch and thumped her head before dipping low to skim over the cats’ water bowl. But she righted herself quickly and returned to her perch on the top of the fridge.

“Don’t try that again, Miss Birdie,” I addressed my feathered friend, and returned to reading my book.

When I heard the flutter of wings again, I looked up to see that the bird was no longer on her safe refrigerator perch but had flown across the room to tall corner windows, again seeking the great outdoors. These windows reach floor to ceiling, and birdie fluttered from the low sill to the top of the glass, determined to get through the barrier to the safety of the tree, clearly visible, in the yard.

Both cats were now on the floor beside the tall window watching their prey’s frantic search for an exit. If I put them out into the back yard, they would only return through the permanently open cat door.

My feather phobia well in place, I didn’t want to touch the bird but neither did I want to witness its demise. Opal crouched, ready to spring. I dropped my book, crossed the room and swept Opal aside with one foot. Positioning myself before the tall window, I was reluctant to touch the bird but it descended to where I could reach it, and I pinned it against the glass, with my right hand, actually connecting with dreaded feathers. My left hand automatically went “to help” the right and I cupped the nearly weightless feathered body in my hands.

I was astonished to feel that tiny heart race against my palm and it brought a miracle change in me. The body was warm, almost hot, and the breast was downy, softer than cotton. The memory of distasteful chicken feathers disappeared as I carried Miss Birdie to the front door,
planning to place her in the tall hibiscus bush beside the walkway. But the moment I opened my hands, she flew up to disappear into the blue sky.

Opal, at my feet, scolded with a yowl. But I had performed a rescue that gave me a sense of accomplishment and taught me that bird feathers can be as warm and appealing as cat fur.

The End