

The Passenger pigeon glided down with the grace of a swan landing on a quiet lake, careful not to attract unwanted attention from its human captors a few miles away. As it perched on the branch nearest to the cage, it cocked its head as if waiting in anticipation. Ruby assessed the bird holding the key to her freedom, a spark of recognition lighting her fiery rufescent eyes. The two had been acquaintances, caged in similar gilded prisons next to one another. The freed bird, named Feather due to its impeccably perfect feathers, had escaped with the help of the same girl who had named him. The girl was the merchant's daughter, who had observed the white-winged birds caged since her childhood and had been overcome with pity for them. Choosing to face her father's outrage if he found out about her actions, she stole the keys to the cages and attempted to free both the birds, succeeding in liberating only Feather before her an enraged father dragged her away from the area. Ruby had seen neither the girl nor Feather since that unfortunate episode. She blinked unbelievably, relieved to see her friend safe and sound. A light patter of footsteps sounded on the gravel behind them and Ruby whirled around in terror of the merchant finding and capturing Feather again. However, it was the merchant's nimble-footed daughter that met his gaze instead. She crept along the pathway, glancing around the area, wary of being watched. When she reached the cage, the passenger pigeon seated on the branch flew down and dropped the silver key onto her outstretched hand. Not allowing herself to do more than smile at the bird, she hurriedly put the key into the lock, twisting it to unlock the cage.

Ruby had been frozen with shock, unable to wrap her mind around the possible chance of freedom. But when she heard the sound of the key clicking into place, she understood the urgency of the situation and arched her wings to ready herself. As soon as the cage opened, Ruby tumbled out into the open air, refraining from squawking out in joy. She glanced back at the girl, gratitude flashing in her eyes. The girl nodded understandingly and offered her a tentative smile. Ruby saw no more as she streaked into the pale blue sky, testing out her wings for the first time. She rose into the limitless expanse of the sky, steadying her wings and following Feather out of the compound. Her white wings stretched out, harnessing the wind and slicing through the air. She tested her pinions, flapping them to rise higher into the sky. Her heart raced with excitement and was churning with emotions, thankfulness for the chance to be able to live her life outside of a cage, happiness upon finding her friend again and of course, the overwhelming feelings of joy and rapture at finally finding freedom. She had no definite plans for the future, no strategies for survival in the wilderness or even a specific destination. But she was free. And somehow, that was all that mattered.



A NEW CHANCE AT LIFE

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