

CHAPTER 23: FLYING

Frances flew higher and higher and farther away from her house than she'd ever been on her own. She flew past Toby's vegetable gardens. She soared over the roof of her house and the enormous oak tree in her front yard. She passed her school and then Meredith's house as she continued her frantic ascent. She pounded her wings until she knew Fletcher and Gray and Brigid and her mom would no longer be able to see her, until her entire neighborhood would be unrecognizable behind her, even though she never turned around to look.

Birds couldn't cry, but Frances knew if she was in human form, she'd be a sobbing, blubbing mess. She couldn't get the image of her mother's frightened face out of her mind. Her screams echoed through Frances' ears in an unending chorus. The weight of what she had almost done hung heavy around her neck, her chest, her feet, until she felt her wings could no longer keep her from sinking right into the middle of the world. *But how could she ever go back?*

The sun was setting. Frances must have lost track of time in the pool. Everything had happened so fast for her. She thought she'd only been in the water a few minutes, but it must have been at least two hours. Tall buildings were fast approaching in front of her. Downtown. She looked for a place to land. She seemed to be flying at about the height of the nearest building, so as she got closer, she used her last burst of energy to lift herself over the edge of the roof. She then allowed herself to drift toward the center of the rooftop. She came in a little fast, scattering a flock of pigeons in her clumsy wake, but she did manage to stop running before crashing into a furnace vent. Not too bad for her first landing.

Frances watched the sun dip below the horizon beyond Cross Lake as the bulk of the dislodged pigeons returned to the roof to roost. The other birds seemed wholly unconcerned

with the lone cormorant among them; they displayed neither suspicion nor curiosity. Frances felt tired and hungry, and she wondered what should be her next course of action if she was planning to live out the rest of her life as an aquatic bird.

Before she'd had much time to think about it, however, she was startled by Fletcher's voice quietly saying her name. She looked around just as a light flickered on behind her, and she saw what looked to be a huge owl standing on the edge of the rooftop. The pigeons either hadn't seen him, or they had become so accustomed to the fake plastic owls on the tops of most buildings that they ignored him. Frances took a step back, and wondered if she'd be able to out-fly him.

The owl spoke again. "Frances, do you know who you are?"

She was surprised by his question until she remembered how she had lost all sense of time and humanity until only a little while before. She suddenly felt very grateful for regaining her wits, even if it had been at the last possible second. She also began to feel afraid she might lose herself again if she didn't shift back into a person right away. She concentrated for a few seconds on swapping her feathers for fur, shifted into a fur-covered version of herself, and sat on the roof with her arms wrapped around her knees.

"Yes, I know who I am," she answered hoarsely.

Fletcher-the-owl hopped down and walked toward her. "Well, let's be thankful for that then," he said.

Frances burst into tears. It may have been minutes or hours before she calmed down enough to look up at the noble, gray owl standing patiently before her. She sniffed and hiccupped and wiped tears from her cheeks with her furry fingers. She looked down at her feet. "I could have killed her," she said softly.

Fletcher didn't speak for a few seconds. Then he said, "There probably isn't anything I can say to make you feel better right now. But it's important that I say this anyway."

Frances looked into his yellow eyes as he continued to speak with his tiny beak. If she wasn't feeling so miserable, she might have laughed at him.

"You're right, Frances. You *could have* killed her. You could have hurt or killed any one of us including yourself."

Frances lifted her eyebrows skeptically, wondering when his attempt at making her feel better was coming.

"And if you *weren't* the most amazing, the most brilliant, the most powerful young shapeshifter in all of history, you might have."

"Fletcher," said Frances sharply. "I almost *murdered* my own mother. *On purpose*. I *wanted* to crush her to smithereens. I'm dangerous. And you're out of your mind if you think I'm ever shifting again."

"We can talk about it later. For now, it's time to get you home."

Frances scoffed and turned away from him.

"Brigid has the van downstairs. Gray should be on his way up with some of your clothes. They'll drop you at home and be off."

When Frances didn't move, he added, "Your mom is really worried, Fran."

"Yeah," Frances mumbled. "Worried I might be out trampling a bunch of innocent people."

Before Fletcher could respond, they heard a knock at a door in the center of the roof. Fletcher looked at Frances and lifted his wings helplessly. "No hands," he said. "Could you be a dearie and get the door?"

Frances sighed and stood, brushing dust from the fur on her backside. When she reached the door, she unlocked the deadbolt and opened the door just a crack. Gray stood smiling in the dim stairway holding Frances' backpack in front of him. "Your mom sent some clothes."

Frances reached around the door, grabbed the backpack, and mumbled a thanks.

"I'll wait here to show you the way down," said Gray, a little too cheerfully for Frances' current mood.

After Frances had pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie, she slipped into some flip-flops and shifted back to normal. She stuck her arms through the straps of her backpack and looked at Fletcher who was preening his feathers on top of an air conditioning unit. She cleared her throat, and he looked up at her. "Right," he said. "I'll be flying home then. Brigid and Gray will take you to your house. You just focus on school this week, and we'll pick you up Friday afternoon for the camping trip."

Frances had forgotten all about camping. "You still want me to come on the trip?" she asked meekly.

"Of course," Fletcher practically squawked. "In fact, it's mandatory." Then he flew down from the unit and landed about a foot in front of her. "I know it may not seem like it right now, love, but you *will* feel better in a few days. You're not guilty of anything, and no one blames you for what happened today."

Frances felt tears welling in her eyes again, and she quickly turned away from him as she blinked them back. She walked toward the door as Fletcher called, "Goodnight, Frances." She glanced back as he took off and soared toward the rising moon.