

CHAPTER 14: RAT

Frances quickly looked around for somewhere to stash her clothes. She knew there was a small cabinet under the sink outside the stall, but it would just be her luck that someone would come in the bathroom as she was stuffing her clothes inside it, rat-faced and naked. She looked up at the cardboard-tiled ceiling. It would work well, as long as she could reach it. She stripped and tied her shirt, shoes, and underwear inside her jeans.

Now that she was totally naked, she felt more vulnerable than ever. She could feel her body trying to finish the shift, but she continued resisting long enough to climb up on the toilet seat. If she stood on her tiptoes, she could just reach one of the panels with the bundle of clothes. About a foot of space lay between the top of the stall and the ceiling. She hunched down for a second and turned so she'd be able to see the top of the bathroom door if it opened. Then she held her breath and reached quickly toward the ceiling. She raised the tile with the bundle and had to jump a little to shove it through the opening and onto the adjoining tile. As she landed the jump, she lost her balance and had to hop back onto the floor.

She looked up at the ceiling where the tile she had moved was now sitting slightly out of position. But before she could climb back up to fix it, the bathroom door opened, and Meredith's voice said, "Fran? Are you in here?"

Frances moved as quietly as possible beside the toilet and willed her body to shrink. She saw the edge of the toilet pass in front of her and sighed relief. Now on all fours, she scurried through the hole in the wall just as Meredith knocked on the stall door. Frances had left it locked. She turned and peaked from the dark hole to see Meredith's confused face appear below the stall wall. As Frances said a quick prayer that she wouldn't notice the dislodged ceiling tile, Meredith got down on her knees, reached her hand under the stall door, and picked up something

from the floor. Frances gasped as Meredith scowled at the blue and pink striped sock – one of a pair she had given Frances for her last birthday.

Meredith dropped the sock and bent lower to peer up into the stall. “Frances?” she said again. She looked genuinely surprised to discover no one standing on the toilet.

Frances backed further into the hole as Meredith crawled under the wall. She stood, brushed off her hands and knees, and unlocked the stall door. It wasn’t unusual for Meredith to be bothered by a bathroom stall door left locked from the inside. She was always the one to fix everyone’s stuck-out shirt tags or to re-write her notes at least two or three times before deeming her handwriting worthy of the binder. Frances rolled her tiny, black rat eyes as she realized it also wouldn’t be unusual for Meredith to confront her about how weird she’d acted today. Meredith would never let a mystery go unsolved. Frances wondered how she had ever thought she’d be able to pull this off.

She began making her way further into the wall before Meredith had left the bathroom. Once she was past the concrete block, she climbed onto a large pipe and began the search for a way out. Her sensitive whiskers helped her to navigate the dark passage as expertly as if she could see every dip and bend. Since she’d started on the second floor, she made her way downward. She tried to think of which direction would take her toward the back door where Brigid would be waiting to pick her up. But her rat senses of smell and hearing were so powerful, she found herself simply following them blindly to wherever they were leading her. In spite of the very bathroomy and mildewy smells, she seemed to be able to smell the warm outside air.

As she continued hopping downward along the pipes, she heard the bell signaling the end of the day. Already? She had lost all concept of time. She quickened her pace and soon reached

the ground floor just as it began to vibrate from the hundreds of feet now pounding through the halls. She stood on her hind legs and sniffed the air. She was undoubtedly still behind a bathroom, but her nose was able to pick up a sweet, flowery smell coming from somewhere on her right.

She felt something crawl over her tail. Her first instinct, the human instinct, was to jump away from the bug that would seem in her human mind to be the size of a large cat. Unfortunately, the rat reaction prevailed, and she pounced the water beetle and ate it before she'd really had time to think about it. Or fortunately, depending on how you look at it. She had been kind of hungry.

She moved through the wall past the pipes until she reached a wall stud and could go no further without climbing back up. It took almost no effort to move anywhere as a rat. Her tiny claws pulled her up the beam as easily as if she was walking along the sidewalk. When her whiskers sensed the cross beam above her, she poked her nose around until she found an opening. It needed only to be big enough for her head to fit through, and she could fit her entire rat body. Of course, she could have shrunk smaller if she'd needed to. But so far the normal size of a common brown rat seemed to be perfectly adequate for her current expedition.

Now she was in the ceiling, merely a quarter inch of cardboard tile between her and the students slamming their locker doors in the hallway below. If it was quiet down there, they'd probably hear Frances' scuffling over their heads.

Frances was pretty sure she knew where she was. If she was right, she needed only to continue in a straight path – or at least as straight as she could while climbing over wires and around beams – and she would arrive at the wall just over the back door. Plus, her nose was still telling her she was heading toward a way out. After another few seconds her sharp ears picked

up the sound of heavy hydraulic doors amid the locker-slamming and footsteps and talking. She knew she'd still have to figure out how to get to Brigid's car, but she felt relieved to be close to the home stretch. She picked up her pace and jumped over a cross-beam.

Frances felt a nanosecond of exhilaration as air rushed through her whiskers and her insides seemed to lift slightly. She was weightless, like in that moment when an elevator is starting to descend. But she wasn't in an elevator. She was in freefall. She hit the hard floor below as the ceiling tile bounced next to her. She was dazed not only from the impact but also from the brightness of the fluorescent lights after the recent darkness of the walls and ceiling. But in the next tumultuous moments her blissful disorientation quickly changed to frightening clarity. She was surrounded by people who were shrieking in every octave of human vocal range. Frances couldn't make out any distinct faces through her fuzzy rat-vision but she could see the circle getting wider as everyone tripped over each other to back further away from her. No one had stepped on her. Yet. She knew it was only a matter of time before someone would be brave enough to try it. Or at the very least, throw a text book at her.

I'm going to die by being crushed by one of my classmates, she thought.

Don't panic. She heard her mother's voice in her head.

No, I can't lose control. At least I'm still a rat. She tried not to think of what would be happening right now if she'd landed on the floor as a naked human.

Frances spun quickly to search for the best exit point from the hall. She *had* almost made it to a door leading to the outside, but it appeared to be the two sets of large double front doors of the school, not the back door she had been hoping for. Oh well. She'd worry about getting to Brigid's car later. For now, she just wanted to get out of the building. She began to run, aiming for a six-inch space between two large sneakers. The bearer of the shoes leapt dramatically out

of the way, tossing his backpack toward Frances as he fell into a pile of other students. Frances swerved out of the line of fire. The shrieking changed to laughter, but Frances barely noticed. She was two yards from the door as it began to open from the outside. One yard away as whoever had opened the door entered the hall and stopped abruptly to decipher the reason for all the commotion. Two feet, and the door was swinging closed. One foot, and a few inches of space remained between the door and its frame. Frances leapt forward. She'd made it half-way through the opening as she felt the door begin to push her into the doorframe. She squeezed through into the space between the two sets of doors and felt a moment of relief until she realized her legs were working frantically against the smooth painted concrete floor, but she wasn't moving forward.

She glanced back, still running in place, and saw the very tip of her tail caught in the now-closed door. She hadn't felt it until she saw it, but now she let out a high-pitched squeal of pain. She cursed in her head and stopped trying to run. But before she had a chance to shift her tail, the door opened. Whether it was a Good Samaritan or just someone exiting the school by chance, Frances did not know. Nor did she care to stick around to find out.

The second set of doors leading to the outside was propped open, and Frances could see the wide sidewalk lined with recently-planted rhododendron shrubs. She made a beeline for the closest bush and climbed up into the tiny branches where she was hidden from view.

"Did you see that?" she heard a girl's voice exclaim. "Some kind of animal ran into that bush!"

"Where? I didn't see it," replied a boy.

"It came out of the building!" said the girl, her voice closer-sounding than before.

Great, thought Frances as she saw shadows moving toward her shrub. But they stopped as a third figure approached them and an irritated Irish voice said, “Excuse me.”

Brigid! A tiny squeak escaped Frances’ mouth as she involuntarily tried calling the name out loud.

“Do you know a girl named Frances Grubb?” Brigid asked the others.

Frances considered jumping from the bush and climbing directly up Brigid’s leg. But she wasn’t sure Brigid wouldn’t kick her off and stomp on her, even if she did recognize that it was Frances.

The boy shook his head. The girl said, “I know who she is.”

“Have you seen her?” Brigid asked impatiently.

The girl shook her head. “I think she usually walks home.”

Brigid walked away from the pair without a second glance and headed into the building. Thankfully the interlude had distracted the students into forgetting they’d been about to poke around in Frances’ shrub.

The sidewalk became even more crowded as the students finished trading books between their bags and their lockers and poured out of the school toward the carpool lane and the buses. Frances would have liked to fly over them and straight into Brigid’s car window, but a cormorant would be twice the size of the shrub in which she hid, and besides, she hadn’t learned to fly yet.

The problem with shifting into a rat, it seemed, was that rats suffered from a bad reputation. Frances made a mental note to start some kind of advocacy club for misunderstood rodents as she began lengthening her tiny rat legs into sleek, striped paws. She hopped down from the shrub as a small, tabby cat.

Frances relaxed as her heart rate adjusted from the rat's four-hundred-plus beats per minute to a steady one-twenty. After a few seconds she realized she'd been staring sleepily at a patch of soft, thick grass. She felt like she had already been in training all day. She'd love a nice catnap in the sunshine.

She shook her head back to reality and stepped out from under the bush as a hand grabbed the scruff of her neck. She hissed involuntarily until she was lifted and held in front of a slyly grinning face. "Fluffy!" Brigid exclaimed loudly in front of a few onlookers. "I've been looking everywhere for you!"