

CHAPTER 18: TIFFY

Frances' problem-free few days were no indication of what Friday would be like. Because Friday was anything but problem-free. And if before that day, Frances' role in life as the number one target of all of Tiffy Cadigan's favorite personal insults had not already been established, what happened on Friday definitely secured the position.

Frances had known Tiffy longer than even Meredith and April. The two of them lived only a few houses apart, and they had not only somehow managed to end up in the same class every year from kindergarten through fifth grade, but also in the same homeroom for the first two years of middle school. They'd never exactly been best friends, but they'd grown up playing with the same neighborhood kids and attending most of the same birthday parties and summer camps. And Frances knew the precise moment when their relationship had changed from friendly to hostile; it'd had to do with a boy.

Tiffy's ninth birthday party had been at Chuck E. Cheese's. As Frances was not yet Tiffy's mortal enemy by that point, she'd been invited, along with every other kid from their third grade class. By the end of the afternoon, twenty-plus eight-and-nine-year-olds were hyped up on greasy pizza and sugary soda, and the outnumbered parents were looking worn and irritable. Tiffy, Frances, and a few other girls had huddled next to the ball pit, giggling about the boys tussling inside it. Tiffy had had a crush on a boy from her church, Omar Thompson, and she'd been trying to convince one of the other girls to tell him for her. After several minutes of squabbling and more giggles, Frances had been selected for the job. Since Omar hadn't gone to their school, however, Frances hadn't been sure which of the rowdy boys was the correct target.

Tiffy had spent a great deal of time discretely pointing into the ball pit and describing the boy in the blue shirt before Frances had nervously climbed inside and waded through the plastic

sea, trying to avoid the colored missiles flying through the air. She'd stood with her back to the girls, the boys wrestling in the center not paying her the least bit attention. She'd cleared her throat and timidly tapped the shoulder of a tall boy in a bright blue shirt. The boy had turned to face her, arms raised, two plastic balls in each hand, ready to hurl them at whomever had interrupted the battle. When he'd seen Frances standing there with her mouth open and her eyes lowered, he'd assumed she'd bumped into him by accident, and he'd begun to turn away.

Frances had taken a deep breath, cleared her throat again, and poked his shoulder once more, a little more forcefully than the first time. The boy had turned around again, and stared at Frances. "Yeah?" he'd said impatiently.

"Tiffywantsyoutoknowshelikesyou," Frances had mumbled in the direction of the boy's stomach.

"What?" he'd responded, exasperated. All the other boys had stopped playing and were also staring at Frances.

Frances had swallowed, looked into the boy's face for the first time, and pointed behind her toward the girls. "That girl over there," she'd said a little less mumbly. "Tiffy. She wanted me to tell you she likes you. She, uh, she *like likes* you."

The boy looked over Frances' head, then back at the boys behind him, most of whom had doubled over in fits of laughter. He'd looked at Frances, his eyebrows raised practically to his hairline. "Who? *Tiffy*?" he'd asked. "My *cousin*, Tiffany Cadigan?"

"Eww, your cousin likes you!" shouted one of the other boys. And they'd all howled with laughter.

Another boy had directed his jibe toward the girls outside the ball pit. "Tiffy, you *like like* your *cousin*?" he'd shouted. "You gonna marry him and have mutant babies?"

Cousin? Frances had thought. *That can't be right.* And she'd turned slowly toward Tiffany, whose face had been as red as a ripe tomato and whose gaze had been so piercing, Frances had thought it might slice right through the mesh net between them.

"Not *that* one, Frances!" shouted a girl to Tiffany's left. "The *other* blue shirt!"

Sure enough, when Frances had glanced back toward the boys, she'd spotted another bright blue shirt, the wearer bearing much less of a family resemblance to Tiffany than first boy had.

Tiffany had, of course, blamed Frances for ruining her entire birthday, and now, four years later, she still hadn't let it go. Either that, or she simply got so much pleasure from tormenting Frances, that it had become her favorite way to pass the time. Frances had mostly gotten used to the abuse, but she still tried to avoid catching Tiffany's eye as much as possible.

Frances' first mistake on Friday morning was waking up happy. She was really starting to get the hang of this whole shapeshifting thing, and now she could talk to Meredith about it. She climbed out of bed, stretched, and smiled in her mirror. The pimples on her chin were clearing up nicely, and her hair wasn't even that frizzy today. *It's going to be a good day*, she thought, blissfully unaware that this naïve confidence would be her downfall. For if Frances had spent her usual amount of time thinking about all the things that could go wrong at school, if she'd been even a little bit suspicious of her recent lucky streak, she might have been more prepared.

Math, gym, and history passed by without a hitch. April was feeling a little better since yesterday; on the way to lunch she started talking about their shopping plans for Saturday. She and Meredith, who had brought their lunch, found seats at their usual table while Frances joined the line at the soup bar. Frances spotted a wave of color in her periphery and looked up to see

Tiffany striding brazenly through the cafeteria. Today was her 13th birthday, and everyone knew it by now. Tiffany was dressed to the nines in hot pink with purple sequins. A bright yellow feather boa looped her neck, and she wore a silver tiara with the glittery words BIRTHDAY GIRL across the front.

“Ahem,” said someone impatiently behind Frances, and Frances realized the line had cleared in front of her. She moved up, grabbed a cracked plastic tray that should have been retired long before now, and began filling a large bowl with chili. She piled a handful of crackers onto the tray and shuffled between bustling students in the direction of her friends.

She’d covered half the distance when she felt a familiar tingle in her toes. She paused momentarily, took a deep breath in an effort to suppress the tingle, and took a hesitant step forward. The second her foot touched the floor, pins and needles shot up through her entire leg. She felt her feet widening in her shoes, and she knew she needed to get out of the cafeteria immediately if she didn’t want the nickname “Bird-girl” printed under her yearbook photo for all of eternity.

Frances glanced nervously toward the exit to her left. It was too far and past too many people. She looked to her right. That exit was a little closer. She took another quick step in that direction, but it was too late. She felt her stomach turn over, and she lurched forward, the contents of her lunch tray flying onto the unsuspecting students nearby. Frances sank to the floor, thinking of nothing except how to hide her legs from onlookers. But after a second, she realized the tingling had subsided. She chanced a quick glance downward and saw that she was sitting on her knees. Her normal, human knees. *False alarm*, she thought. She nearly cried with relief until she realized that a commotion had broken out at the table in front of her.

“YOU!” screamed the infuriated voice of Tiffany Cadigan.

Oh. No. Frances slowly lifted her face to see the birthday girl standing before her, murder in her eyes and glops of dark red chili dripping from her hair and running down the front of her pink and purple leotard.

Time slowed nearly to a halt as Frances and Tiffy locked eyes for several unbearable seconds. Other students gasped in slow motion, and then their laughter echoed in Frances' ears as if she were hearing it through leagues of salt water.

"I'm sorry," Frances said helplessly, raising her hands in surrender. "It was an accid—

But Tiffy didn't let her finish. "You... ruined... my... birthday... AGAIN!" She'd given dramatic emphasis to the statement by taking a tiny step forward with each word. Now she was about two feet away, and time sped up again as she closed the distance by tackling Frances with the adrenaline-fueled force of an angry gorilla.

If Frances had seen the scene on a sitcom, she would probably have found it hilarious. But this was no sitcom. And Tiffy, though significantly smaller than Frances, had rage and purpose on her side. Frances' meager attempts to get a grip on Tiffy's shoulders through the slippery chili and push her off only seemed to feed Tiffy's fire. The two of them rolled around in the meaty mush, Tiffy screaming obscenities and grabbing and punching whatever of Frances she could find, and Frances thinking only about blocking her face and, no matter what else, *not shifting*.

Students were shouting and egging them on. A tight wall of bodies had formed around the scuffle as everyone had abandoned their lunches to get as close as possible to the action. Finally, after what felt to Frances like hours, a loud whistle pierced through the cacophony. The surrounding students cleared a path, and one strong pair of arms linked under Tiffy's armpits and pulled her to her feet, the furious girl still swinging and kicking on the way up. A second pair of

arms scooped Frances up from the ground and deposited her none-too-gently on a bench. Frances' saviors had been Coach Murphy, who was still blowing her whistle and shuffling students back to their seats, and the school's lone security guard, Mr. Cooley, who still held the wriggling Tiffy by the armpits.

The chili was everywhere. More chili than Frances thought could have possibly been in the bowl was spread in a greasy red layer over the previously white linoleum. It covered both girls from head to toe, and Frances was pretty sure she had a bean or two stuck in her ear canal.

"What happened here?!" shouted Coach Murphy, her silver whistle wiggling fervidly from the corner of her mouth. But before either girl could respond, she added, "You know what, never mind. Both of you, to the showers!"

Tiffy had calmed down enough to stop struggling against Mr. Cooley. She now hung limply in his arms like a rag doll, tears rolling down her chili-stained cheeks, her murderous gaze still fixed on Frances. The bell rang to signal the end of lunch, and Coach Murphy blew her whistle again and shouted for everyone to clear out. Meredith and April each gave Frances a sympathetic wave as they shuffled out with the rest of the students.

Mr. Cooley released Tiffy as Frances stood up. Coach Murphy turned back to the girls and said again, "To the showers, now! I want you washed off, in your gym clothes, and back here in ten minutes to clean up this mess." And then, when neither girl seemed to be giving her enough hustle, she shouted, "Move it!"

Tiffy and Frances moved as quickly as they could, trying not to fall as their shoes slid across the slick floor. Frances gave Tiffy a wide berth in the hall on the way to the locker room, although she could hear a pair of squeaky sneakers behind them, and she knew Coach Murphy was following to make sure they weren't tempted to have a rematch.

The girls showered and changed silently, and Coach Murphy led them through the empty halls back to the cafeteria, where someone had placed a trash can, a large yellow bucket filled with soapy water, a shabby mop, and a pile of rags.

“This is your detention,” said Coach Murphy sternly. “Frances, the tables. Tiffy, the floor. Finish it before your next class, and I don’t want to find a single bean left behind.” And she left the room.

Frances grabbed a rag from the corner of the table, dunked it in the bucket, and began scrubbing now dried-up chili from one of the benches. Tiffy started on the floor with the mop. They worked in silence for a few minutes until Tiffy mumbled, “I hate you, Frances.”

Frances was not surprised by this, and for a moment she thought about how foolish it would be to respond at all. But she was struck by how unfair it was for Tiffy to hate her so much for a completely unintentional mistake. Twice. She was tired of four years of Tiffy’s unfounded spite, and after all, wasn’t Frances now suffering the same punishment even though she hadn’t started the fight?

“Tiffy,” she said flatly, stopping her scrubbing long enough to stand assertively and look straight into Tiffy’s eyes. “It was an accident. Just like it was an accident when I ruined your *ninth* birthday. I’ve never done anything to offend you on purpose.”

Tiffy grasped the mop handle so tightly, her knuckles became white. Her eyes narrowed and she spoke slowly and deliberately. “You offend me every day with your stupid face.”

The statement was so ridiculous, so childish, that Frances couldn’t help but laugh. The guffaw exited her mouth before she had time to stop it. And then, despite her best efforts, she couldn’t *stop* laughing. She collapsed onto the bench behind her in a fit of snorts and sniggers. Tiffy just stared at her, fuming so fiercely that Frances thought the girl might start venting steam

from her ears any second. But by the time Frances finally regained her composure and wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes, Tiffy's face had changed starkly. Her expression was now a combination of astonishment and terror.

Frances stilled herself abruptly. "What?" she asked, realizing too late that the soft sound of shifting molecules had been humming in the background for several seconds.

Tiffy dropped the mop and took a step backward, never looking away from Frances' face. Frances saw movement between her eyes and lifted a hand slowly toward her nose, dreading what she might find in its place. She felt something hard and pointy; her nose, mouth, and chin seemed to have merged together to form some sort of large, curved beak.

Tiffy took another step back and said, "What is happening... to your face?"

"What do you mean?" was all Frances could think to say, although she knew there was no way to disguise the fact that the enormous beak of a toucan had just said it. She turned quickly away from Tiffy, willed the beak away in a blink, and turned back trying unsuccessfully to pretend nothing had happened.

Fortunately, Coach Murphy chose that moment to return to the cafeteria to check on them. Tiffy jumped when the lady spoke. "I don't see much working going on in here, girls." Tiffy looked up into the coach's face, her eyes still wide. She opened her mouth as if to speak, but seemed to think better of it. She looked briefly back at Frances, who smiled awkwardly, and resumed her mopping. Frances focused all her attention on a glop of caked chili that had bonded to the edge of the table, and when the bell rang, she wasted no time getting to French, a class that she thankfully did not share with Tiffy Cadigan.