

## Bird in a Cage

Skye tore down the sidewalk, his eyes blurring with tears as he tried to ignore the shouts and laughter coming from behind him. Dodging bustling pedestrians and honking cars, he ran with all the energy he could muster, not daring to look behind him. Knowing his stamina would be running out soon, he dashed down a narrow alleyway. He stumbled a bit as his sprint died down, listening to the sounds of his pursuers catching up. Panic shot through his mind as he realized he was cornered. The familiar feelings of anxiety and dread started choking up his throat before he finally came to a wide iron door.

The voices got closer.

“There!” one of them shouted, just as Skye opened the heavy door, slammed it behind him, and locked himself inside.

The refreshing chill of the building’s air conditioning greeted him as he slowly walked around what seemed like an abandoned warehouse. Besides a warm stream of sunlight pouring from a window, the room was dark, empty, and quiet. The only thing disrupting what would be a peaceful silence was the hurricane of raging thoughts in Skye’s mind. He slumped against the wall, exhausted from the chase. Finding refuge from the chasers gave him safety, but also time to think, something he didn’t need. The adrenaline he had gotten while sprinting had temporarily made him forget why he was running in the first place, but it all came back to him in a blur.

He had thought that running away from home would make memories fade, but all it did was make them more painful. Once those bullies found him walking through the neighborhood, crying, they snickered spitefully at his vulnerability, even though they had no idea why he was sobbing or what was going on in his personal life. They didn’t know what went on in his head, the dark, tempting thoughts that rested there and tortured him when he slept at night. They didn’t know about how he lied to his parents about being okay when in reality he was breaking inside, but he didn’t know how to tell them since there was no actual reason. All the bullies saw was a crying boy, a wimp who was running away from his own house, another weakling for them to pulverize because it somehow made them cool. Their meaningless taunts, tinged with malice, were nothing Skye hadn’t heard before, but they still stung horribly. He wanted nothing more than to rise above the negative emotions, to fight the pain, to tell his parents, to stop pretending. But he couldn’t. And when he tried to flee the bullies, they followed, and it was by sheer luck he had found a safe-space.

A piercing noise suddenly rang through the air, pulling Skye out of his swarm of thoughts. He scrambled quickly to his feet. He had to find the source of the noise. As more mysterious sounds echoed through the immense warehouse, he stumbled into another room, following the noise until he came to where it was coming from.

A wall of about a hundred birdcages loomed in front of him. Birds of all shapes and sizes gazed at him with beady eyes as their squawks joined together to create a chaotic yet beautiful symphony. Skye’s eyes scanned over all of them, their bright colored feathers and smooth curved

beaks until they finally rested on a small birdcage in the corner of the room, away from all of the others.

He approached the cage and peered closely at the bird inside. It was a fairly large bird, a falcon, with ruffled dark gray feathers and white speckles that dotted them like stars in a cloudy sky. Its sharp beak was sleek and curved, and its shining black eyes seemed to meet Skye's gaze. He reached though the cold metal bars and touched the bird lightly on the head, expecting it to jerk away or bite his hand, but instead it rubbed its soft feathers against his fingers.

*A bird this beautiful should not be in a cage, Skye thought as he stroked his hand down the falcon's back, thinking of the bird's situation. It's trapped in a cage that keeps it from spreading its wings...but what if it has forgotten how to fly altogether? Trapped...in a cage...wanting to be free but being scared of not remembering how to be....*

Anxiety. Loneliness. Concealment. Fear. These were the things that made up Skye's own cage, the thing that kept him from letting go. He closed his eyes, imagining being happy, being able to move past all of the pain, telling his parents about how he'd been feeling, maybe even standing up to the bullies.

He opened his eyes and looked down at the bird.

*The difference between us is that a bird in a cage cannot free itself even if it wants to...but maybe I can free us both.*

With shaky hands, Skye unlatched the falcon's cage, opening it up wide so there would be enough room for it to fly out.

"It's okay," he coaxed it softly, "The hard part is over now. You're free."

The bird squawked quietly, ruffling its feathers as it perched on the edge of the cage. It turned to Skye, as if to say thank you, before swiftly taking off. It soared, almost touching the tall ceiling, letting out a triumphant shriek. Skye smiled as it zoomed out the open window, satisfied that he had helped it escape.

*But it helped me, too, Skye thought as he picked himself off the ground. It unlocked my cage, and now all I have to do is take off.*

And so he walked out of the warehouse, finding an empty alleyway. The bullies were gone, but he wasn't afraid of them anymore. In fact, he was ready to go home, but this time, he didn't run.

He flew.