



Feathered

DEBORAH KERBEL

For Mum, who flew with grace

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PROLOGUE

I'm not crazy. I swear I'm not. Ever since I was old enough to remember, I knew I had it in me to fly. I can't explain it any better than to say it's a feeling so powerful you shut your mouth and don't argue with it.

It's not because of my name. Daddy once said calling me Finch had nothing to do with flying. He said they named me Finch after a character in a famous book. I don't remember which book or which character he was talking about and it's too late to ask now. I guess it doesn't matter, because Mom took me aside afterward and told me that story's not true. She said Daddy hadn't read a book in twenty years and who does he think he's kidding pretending to be some grand reader. She said they named me Finch on account of how I came out of her belly bald and wrinkled and squawking like a baby bird. I guess I believe Mom. She has big honest eyes that can't hide a lie for the life of them.

It's not about my feather either. Although I'm probably the only girl in the whole world to ever grow one. You think I'm pulling your leg, right? Well, I'm not. When I was three years old, Mom plucked a curly white feather out of my neck. How it got there, they couldn't figure. After Dr. Nelson examined me and patched up the back of my neck, he told us to quit worrying. He said the feather probably got stuck in there from me sleeping on top of my quilt instead of under it. Harrison has a different theory. He says I was such a dumb kid, I probably ate my pillow, feathers and all. But I don't think so. Who would want to eat a pillow?

The feather left a little pink scar on the back of my neck. When I get scared or the loneliness comes over me, I run my fingertip over the tiny scar and dream about the day the rest of my feathers will grow in.

That's the day I'll fly away from here.

I might be a clumsy kid on the ground, but in the air I'll be as graceful as a dove.

CHAPTER 1

August 1980

Little House on the Prairie is my favorite TV show ever. I would watch reruns all day if I could. When it's on, it's like my real life falls away and all that's left is Laura Ingalls's world. In my best dreams, I *am* Laura. I call my parents Ma and Pa, wear a sunbonnet wherever I go, skip happily through flower-filled fields and put Nellie Oleson in her place whenever she's nasty. When life gets hard in Laura's world, there's always a nice parent or a kind sister to turn to. Yeah, I think everything was so simple back in those pioneer days. It's like people were so busy churning their own butter and sewing their own clothes, there wasn't time to waste on stupid problems like mine. Back then, you didn't have to worry if you were the only eleven-year-old in your neighborhood who couldn't ride a bike, because back then your family was probably too poor to own a bike anyway. And

you didn't have to worry if you were the only kid in class without a pair of Jordache jeans. And nobody laughed if you didn't know how to spell *astronaut* or *telephone* or *vacuum* because those things hadn't even been invented yet! In Laura's world, teachers didn't call their students dumb. And Pa didn't die. Nobody smoked cigarettes until their lungs turned black. And families sat around the table and talked and sang corny songs together every night. If I could beam myself into that TV show, you bet I would.

I hear footsteps overhead and hobble over without my crutches to dial the volume down, in case it's Harrison or his awful friend Matt. Although I'm guessing it's probably just Mom getting up to go to the bathroom. She's changed so much since Daddy died. The old Mom would never have let me sit inside and watch TV on a sunny afternoon in August. The old Mom would have nattered on about "fresh air" and "sunshine" before she shooed me outside, sprained ankle or not. She would have signed me up for day camp, or planned a picnic, or taken me on the bus to the beach or the zoo, or tossed a Frisbee with me. But this Mom doesn't seem to mind if I stay inside. This Mom doesn't say anything when I show up late for dinner. This Mom doesn't pull out the flyswatter when Harrison calls me names at the

breakfast table. This Mom doesn't even notice I'm here half the time.

Ever since the funeral last December, she has this empty look in her eyes — like swimming pools drained for the winter. At first, I thought she was mad at Daddy for leaving us. But now I get the feeling she's scared because she doesn't know what to do without him. I haven't told her this, but I'm scared, too. Mom's the smartest person I know, but she's never had a job in her life and she has to go out and get one now. I told her she's smart enough to be a teacher. That sounds like a good job to me. I mean, you get summers off and all. And maybe with a bit of luck, she could teach at my school and take the place of mean old Mrs. Garvin. But Mom says you have to go to a special school for that kind of a job and she doesn't want to start messing around with homework and books and tests all over again at her age.

Teacher school. I think that's kind of funny. I imagine my teachers sitting at a desk like me, doodling on their pencil cases when they ought to be writing down lessons from the blackboard. Can you make a grown-up stand in the corner at teacher school? Or sit in the hall? Or stay for detention? Hey, maybe that's where my teachers learned how to do it to me.

Whenever I suggest a new job idea to Mom, she says we have enough insurance money for now and she'll figure things out if I just quit bugging her about it. Her favorite figuring-out place seems to be the green corduroy chair in the living room. She sits there all day, smoking her cigarettes and staring out the window. Like if she sits and stares for long enough, a job will magically appear. There are days I want to haul her out of that chair and tell her she's never going to figure anything out sitting there all day. But I'm worried that'll make her angry. And something tells me it won't do any good anyway.

When the final credits are over, I flip the channel to see what else is on. A news station is doing a report on Terry Fox. He's the one-legged man with the curly hair who started running across Canada this spring. He's running to raise money so that scientists can find a cure for cancer. On my TV screen, he always looks so small jogging along those big gray stretches of road. I wonder if he's lonely running all by himself. I wonder if I would be. Sometimes when I see his picture, I feel like flying out my front door and never looking back.

Daddy died too soon for Terry Fox's marathon to help him.

The news report ends and suddenly there's nothing left to watch but soap operas and game shows, so I snap off the TV and hobble upstairs for a glass of Kool-Aid. Dr. Nelson said I'm not supposed to be without my crutches for another three weeks, but sometimes I forget them in my room. My room is so messy, it's easy for things to get lost in there. Even something big like a pair of crutches. The old Mom used to harp on me to clean it up. This Mom doesn't say anything about it at all.

When Mom sees me come up the stairs, she waves me over to where she's sitting in the green chair. My heart gives a little jump. "Yes, Ma?" I whisper, leaning down to get a close look at her. Her skin is the color of ashes and she smells of smoke. I push a clump of matted hair away from her face. Her eyes are like fogged-up windows.

"Run to the store and buy me some more cigarettes, would you, Finch?" she says, looking at me but not looking at me. She holds out an empty gold-and-silver package and a five-dollar bill. Her hand is shaking slightly and her fingers are cold as she presses them into my palm. "Show them the package so they'll give you the right one. Okay, honey?"

She shoos me out the door before I can argue.

There's no mention of fresh air or sunshine. And no time to get my crutches.

Laura Ingalls's ma wouldn't do that, I think to myself as I push open the screen door, blinking hard as the sunlight burns my eyes. I pull my imaginary sunbonnet up over my head. And then I pretend I'm Terry Fox as I limp-run down the street to the corner store. The gold-and-silver cigarette package is a crumpled ball in my fist.

CHAPTER 2

The TV set broke today. Right in the middle of the lunchtime news update. One minute a man in a brown three-piece suit was talking about the hostages in Iran and the next minute there was a loud pop and the screen became a fuzzy wall of gray. A weird burning smell came spewing out from behind the TV set, so I grabbed my crutches and limped out of there fast, just in case the whole thing decided to blow up. In the end, that didn't happen. But I went to make myself a snack before breaking the news to Mom.

I think about those poor hostages a lot. It's coming up to a year now since they were captured. Can you imagine not being able to go outside for a whole year? I can't. And how can they go that long without changing their underwear? I asked Harrison about it once, but he gave me that look that said, Quit bugging me with your stupid questions. So I shut up and didn't ask again.

My stomach lets out a soft growl as I limp into the kitchen. The word *hostages* always makes me think of the word *sausages*. Is that bad? And then I'm thinking about the big Sunday breakfasts Daddy used to make, and a giant bubble of loneliness swells inside me. Pulling open the snack cupboard, I run my fingers over my feather scar and stuff a Fudgee-O into my mouth to make the feeling go away.

When I'm done eating, I head to the living room to check on Mom and see if she's figured anything out yet. But my feet freeze on the edge of the brown shag carpet. Harrison's long legs are sprawled over the couch and he's showing off his Rubik's Cube skills to awful Matt. The way my brother's fingers spin and twirl over the bright colors of that cube is hypnotic. He makes it look so easy, even though I know for a fact it's not. I can't even get three rows to match up, but my brother can get them all. Luckily, Matt's too busy watching Harrison solve the cube to notice me. I back up and sneak out of the house before that changes, bringing the screen door closed behind me with a soft click. I don't want another body part to get sprained today, thank you very much. And when Matt's nearby, you never know what sort of bad things might happen.

It was only three weeks ago when I had to jump

out my window to get away from him (which is how I hurt my ankle). I was watching TV when he snuck up behind me, silent as a snake. I felt something soft and fuzzy sliding up the back of my arm and turned around with a start. There was awful Matt, holding up a dead mouse by the tail and grinning at me with his goat face and his crooked yellow-toothed smile. “Brought you a present, Flinch,” he said, swinging the poor thing back and forth like a yo-yo, bringing the furry corpse closer to my face each time. You can bet I screamed so loud, my throat hurt for days after. Then I jumped up and started to run. Matt chased me, of course. The one time I dared to look behind me, he was on my heels, his eyes glittering with danger. His legs are so much longer than mine, I only got as far as my bedroom before he caught up.

“Kiss the rat, Flinch,” he said, grabbing my arm and pushing the mouse in my face. “Kiss it and I’ll let you go.”

My body had switched to full panic mode. Somehow I found the courage to kick him in the shins and yank my arm away. My eyes did a quick scan of the room. As far as I could see, there was only one escape route. And I was positive it wouldn’t fail me. I was born to fly, after all.

I scrambled up onto my window ledge and pushed

out the screen. Running a finger over my scar, I made a wish that the rest of my feathers would come right now. This was the moment I needed them most. “Finch, don’t!” I heard Harrison yell from somewhere in the distance as I hurled myself into the air.

I remember the smooth feel of the wind rushing over my face and my arms. I closed my eyes, and for a split second I was sure I had done it. I was flying. A second later the ground rose up to meet me with a powerful smash. The boys found me a few minutes later on the grass outside. “You little moron. Get up before Mom finds out,” Harrison snarled, hooking his hands under my pits and pulling me to my feet. My ankle roared with pain and I passed out cold in his arms. But not before I heard Matt hissing his signature warning over my ear: “Better not tell.”

And of course, I didn’t. Who would I tell anyway? For sure not Mom. The way she’s been acting lately, I don’t even know if she’d hear me. Harrison knew the truth, but he wasn’t about to defend me against Matt, that’s for sure. Matt’s pretty much his only friend these days. He’s not going to give that up, even for the sake of his little sister’s safety.

Harrison wasn’t always mean to me. For most of our lives, we were really close. It’s only in the past

year that he's turned sour. Like a carton of milk that's been left in the fridge past its expiration date. I think some of it has to do with losing Daddy. But I think most of it has to do with awful Matt.

Whenever that boy's around, every part of me feels sprained.

In the end, I told Mom and Dr. Nelson that I hurt my ankle falling down the stairs. Mom didn't question it. I've always been a clumsy kid, so falling down a flight of stairs wouldn't be out of the ordinary for me.

I head to the backyard, hoping Harrison and Matt won't find me there. On my way around the side garden, I glance at the house next door and catch a quick glimpse of a little girl's face in the window. Our eyes connect for the tiniest second before she ducks out of sight. I wait a moment to see if she'll come back to the window, but she doesn't. She's one of two girls who moved in with their parents just last month. Except for moving day, we haven't seen much of them. Usually it's just the father coming and going in his navy blue suit and his white Chevrolet. Sometimes the daughters run out to the driveway to greet him or to kiss him goodbye. But then they

always disappear right back into the house again. At first when I heard a family with two little girls was moving in, I was so happy. The previous owners were an old couple who didn't like children, as far as I could tell. Since the minute the moving vans drove away, I've been dying to go knock on the door and say hello. But Mom won't let me. "Don't be a pest, Finch. Give the poor family some time to get settled in," she said.

You can bet the old Mom would have brought them a casserole on their first day here. Laura Ingalls's ma would have, too.

Harrison said him and Matt saw the girls last week, climbing into the car with their parents. He told me Matt said the mother's clothes looked funny, like she was wearing pajamas, and that he called them a bad word that makes me hate him even more than I already did. I wish they would come out to play one of these days.

When I get to the backyard, I pull out my green Frisbee and practice my throw. Daddy bought it for me last year. He said catching a Frisbee was less tricky than catching a ball. He was right. I love tossing it and watching it float through the air like a mini UFO. On the fifth throw, the Frisbee lands under my favorite tree — the big, spreading chestnut

that takes up the entire south side of the backyard. When I bend to pick it up, a soft chirping noise catches my attention. There's a baby bird lying on the grass. Its eyes are closed and its pink featherless body is flailing like a drowning victim. I look up and spot the nest perched on a low-hanging branch. "Did you fall?" I ask, reaching down to pick it up. I cup the little bird in my palm. Its squiggly body feels cool against my skin. I hold it a minute to warm it, then reach up and carefully put it back in the nest with its brothers and sisters. There are four baby birds altogether, each one as naked and fragile as the next. After that, I make sure to throw my Frisbee on the other side of the yard. Just to be safe.

At dinner, I confess to Mom about the broken TV. "The picture just disappeared. It wasn't my fault. Honest, I didn't do anything." She blinks and sighs.

"I'll call a handyman tomorrow," she mumbles. But I know what she's thinking, 'cause I'm thinking the same thing. If Daddy was here, he'd have taken care of it. We never needed a handyman before he died.

I push my food in circles around my plate. Fish sticks and ketchup. Mom's made the exact same dinner for three weeks straight. I'd complain about it if I thought it would do any good. The strange part is, she's a really great cook. When Daddy was alive,

she made sure we sat down together for dinner every night. A big homemade dinner with each and every food group properly represented. And she always loved making up new recipes and trying them out on us. Nowadays, it's either frozen food or takeout. It's gotten so bad, Harrison usually doesn't bother coming home to eat anymore. He eats at Matt's house now and, as much as I hate Matt, I can't say I blame him, 'cause dinners around here are as much fun as getting a tooth drilled. It's probably one of the reasons my brother puts up with Matt — just so he can get a decent meal once in a while. Every night at dinner, Mom sits with her chair angled toward the window, sipping from a glass of water and puffing on those awful cigarettes. As far as I can tell, she never eats anything anymore. I don't think I've seen her put a crumb of food in her mouth since Daddy's funeral.

I just hope those cigarettes of hers are packed with vitamins and minerals ... like the commercial says for my Apple Jacks.

CHAPTER 3

Matt and Harrison are hanging out at our house again today. Which means I'm hiding out in the backyard. I don't mind so much. Our house is built on the edge of a small forest that borders a ravine. Between catching water striders, climbing trees and making daisy chains, there are lots of "pioneer girl" things for me to do to pass the time. The first thing I do is check on the birds' nest. Their tiny twig home is so perfect and round ... like a beautiful work of art. I'm relieved to see the baby birds are all still there. When I chirp a hello, they stick their little yellow beaks up in the air and squawk. They must be hungry, poor things.

"Don't worry, guys," I whisper, "I bet your mom is coming with food soon."

I decide to leave the pioneer girl stuff for later and work on my Frisbee skills for a while. But after about half an hour of practicing the perfect toss, I watch it sail onto the next-door neighbor's back

porch. I stare at it for a minute while I consider my options.

1. Leave it and go play something else.
2. Hobble into their backyard and use my crutch to knock it off their porch.
3. Go ring the doorbell and ask for it back.

It's an easy choice. They've had a month to settle in, after all.

Their doorbell gongs like organ chimes. After a minute or two, the knob turns and the door opens with a creak. A small girl with brown skin and long black hair appears in front of me. Her hair is parted in the middle and held back neatly with a pair of red barrettes and matching ribbons.

"Hello?" She says it like she's asking a question. Her big eyes glide over me suspiciously. I smile and give her a little wave.

"Hi, I'm Finch. I live next door."

She cocks her head, like she's trying to figure out why I'm here. An even smaller girl pokes out from behind her. She's sucking her thumb so hard, it squeaks.

"My Frisbee landed on your back porch," I say. "I came to get it."

The girl's shoulders relax. For some reason, she

seems relieved to hear this. “What happened to you?” she asks, pointing to my crutches.

“Oh. I ... um, fell down the stairs.”

She nods but doesn't say anything.

“So, is it all right if I come in so I can get my Frisbee?”

She glances behind her, like she's checking for permission. “Okay, quickly,” she whispers, waving me in. Silently, we walk through the cool air-conditioned house toward the back door. I've never been inside this house before, so I'm surprised to see it's the exact same layout as ours. Except everything's flipped the opposite way ... like it's a *Through the Looking Glass* version of my own house. I'm guessing this new family's furniture must not have arrived yet, because except for a couple of chairs and a few floor pillows, the house is completely bare. We pass behind a thin woman who's kneeling on the hardwood floor in front of a shiny golden statue. The statue is wearing a garland of yellow and pink flowers. The woman is wearing a flowing orange shirt and matching pants. A tidy black braid hangs down the length of her back.

The girl holds a finger up to her lips. “Mother's praying,” she says softly. The woman seems to be talking to the statue. As she raises her hands to her face, her collection of gold bracelets fall to her

elbow. They jingle like little bells. I want to ask the girl what her mother's praying for, but I stop myself. I'm smart enough to understand that I should be quiet when someone is praying. Kind of like how I imagine people would act at church. The girl leads me through the house to the sliding glass doors at the back. The little sister trails behind us like a tiny shadow. When we get to the back porch, the older girl picks up my Frisbee from the deck floor and hands it back to me. I can tell she's pleased with herself for helping. We make our way back to the front door, quiet as ghosts.

"Thanks," I say, once I'm sure we're far enough away not to disturb her praying mom. "Do you want to come outside and play with me?"

"I don't know," she replies, twirling a strand of glossy hair around and around her finger. "I'll ask Mother later."

"We could play catch with my Frisbee. And I've got a badminton set in my backyard. And croquet, too."

She stares at me like I'm speaking a foreign language. "My name is Pinky Nanda," she finally says. "This is my sister, Padma."

Padma is holding on to her big sister's leg like her life depends on it.

"Nice to meet you," I say, sticking out my hand.

After a second, Pinky reaches out to shake it. A gold bracelet circles her wrist ... a perfect match for the little gold hoops in her ears. I wonder if her family is rich. No kid I know wears real jewelry like that. "You're pretty," I say. She smiles a shy smile. "How old are you?" I ask.

"Eleven."

I'm surprised to hear she's my age. She looks so much smaller than me.

"How do you like your new house?"

She shrugs. "I like it. But I liked our old house more. It was next to a park ... and I had a bigger room."

"So why did you move?"

Another shrug. "My father said it would be better here," she says. Then she presses her lips together like she's trying to stop something else from coming out.

Better than what? I can't help wondering.

"You're coming to school in September, right? We'll be in the same grade. Maybe the same class."

She glances around again. Like she's worried someone might be listening. "I hope so." She says it so softly it's barely a breath. "But I have to see what my father says. He might sign me up for a different school."

This surprises me, too. "Why? Roseborough's the closest. You can walk there in ten minutes."

“He thinks a Hindu school is ... better. He says I’ll like the kids there more. And learn more important things. But Mother doesn’t think so.”

“Well, they better decide fast because my school starts in two weeks,” I say. “The day after Labor Day. Just cross your fingers you don’t get Mrs. Garvin. I had her last year. She’s horrible.”

Pinky chews on her lip and doesn’t reply. Suddenly, I hear her mother calling from the other room. Her words sound fast and bubbly — like spilled marbles rolling across the floor. Pinky answers quickly, then turns back to me and pulls open the front door. “You have to go now.” She places a hand on my shoulder and presses me through the doorway. “Bye-bye.”

“Let me know about school, okay? We can walk together if you want. But your parents have to register you with the office ...”

Behind me, the door closes with a click. I stare down at the Frisbee in my hands, wondering what on earth I did wrong.

Harrison and Matt are in the backyard when I return with the Frisbee. Too bad I’m not quick enough on my crutches to escape.

“Hey — you still crippled?” Matt says, running to cut me off before I can get away. He grabs one of my

crutches and tosses it to Harrison. “Thanks. We’ve been looking for a baseball bat. Right, Harr?”

I turn to look at my brother, pleading silently with him to give it back. The last thing I want to do is give Matt the satisfaction of hearing me beg. But Harrison doesn’t make a move. He just stares at the ground like I’m not even there. Before I know what’s happening, Matt karate chops the other crutch out from under my arm. Now I’m standing there on one foot, feeling like a snail without a shell.

“You didn’t tell anyone about our game of Kiss the Rat, did you?” he says, stepping closer. His breath smells like rotten eggs. I put a hand over my nose and shake my head. “Good,” he says. He leans toward me and yanks the top edge of my yellow tube top back with his dirty-nailed fingers. He takes a second to steal a look at my skinny bare chest before letting it snap closed. My face burns with embarrassment. I clutch my top to myself, too scared and ashamed to make a sound. He smirks and picks my karate-chopped crutch off the ground. “Cool it, Flinch. It’s not like you have anything worth looking at anyway.”

Now my cheeks feel like someone’s lit them on fire.

“Hey, Matt! Look what I found!” Harrison shouts from the other end of the yard.

He points up into the chestnut tree. My heart stops.

“No!” I screech. But Matt’s already bounding across the grass like a German shepherd unleashed. Before I know what’s happening, he lifts my crutch in the air and topples the bird nest from the branch. I can hear the little babies chirping in distress. He bends down and picks up the nest. The birds are still inside. I can see their bright yellow beaks from here.

Then he picks up one of my badminton rackets from the grass at his feet.

Stop! I want to scream. *Leave them alone!* But I can’t say anything at all. Someone’s poured cement down my throat.

“Cut it out, Matt,” I hear Harrison say. But he’s too late.

“Keep your eye on the birdie, Flinch!” Matt hollers, tossing the little twig nest in the air and whacking it so hard it explodes on contact.

I scream and sink to my knees in the soft grass, squeezing my eyes shut so I don’t have to see anymore. Then I cover my face with my hands so that awful Matt won’t know how hard he’s made me cry.