Blackfeather

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Golden rays of sunlight shimmered on the rippling surface of the large pond. Clouds drifted lazily across the blue sky, partially obscuring the sun from view. A warm breeze stirred the fallen leaves on the ground. The cool water was refreshing against Blackfeather's body as she glided across the pond, the wind whistling softly in her ears and ruffling her feathers. It was a beautiful day. . . . If only she were in a good mood to appreciate the weather.

Unfortunately, Blackfeather was rarely ever in a good mood. Nowadays, being happy was almost an impossible task for her. The only thing she ever felt anymore was sadness; a dull, aching sadness that gnawed at her insides and destroyed her from within.

She glanced across the water at the group of swans huddled together at the other end of the pond. Even from a distance, Blackfeather could hear their gleeful shouts of laughter as they talked cheerfully to each other. They ruffled their soft white feathers and spread their graceful, creamy-colored wings. Blackfeather gazed longingly at them for a moment, then forced herself to look away. If only she had beautiful white plumage like they all had. . . .

She glanced down at her own chest, which, instead of being white, was a dark, jet-black color. She had always felt like an outsider to the rest of the swans whom she lived with in the pond. The other swans had discriminated against her because of her color, and refused to accept her into society. They treated her as an outcast, and none of them wanted anything to do with her. Their favorite hobby happened to be teasing Blackfeather about her color, which was often the cause of Blackfeather's sadness.

The sudden sound of splashing water jerked Blackfeather back to her senses. Glancing around, her dark, narrow eyes widened in fear when she saw the group of white swans heading toward her. She knew what was coming.

"Hey, Blacky!" the largest of the swans in the group called, his eyes narrowed and the thin line of his mouth curved upward in a tight smile. The swan was covered in thick white

feathers and wore an arrogant expression on his narrow face. His chest was puffed out and excitement gleamed in his eyes. He was known as the ringleader of the gang. This was Cloudwing.

Blackfeather edged away from them as they approached, her thumping heartbeat pounding in her ears. "What do you want?" she said fearfully.

"Oh, nothing," Cloudwing replied airily. "We just wanted to come over here and talk to you. You looked so lonely."

The white swans sniggered in amusement.

"Leave me alone," Blackfeather whispered.

"Sorry, what was that? I couldn't hear you," Cloudwing taunted.

"I *said*, leave me alone!" Blackfeather said, raising her voice. She edged away from them a little more as they advanced on her, coming closer and closer.

"Hey, Blacky, there's a little bit of mud on you. Oh wait, that's your natural color," one of the swans teased. His words were greeted by shouts of laughter.

"You looks like you've been rolling around in dirt," Cloudwing sneered, looking critically at her feathers.

Tears welled up in her eyes, but she blinked them away furiously.

Then, without any warning, Cloudwing lunged at her before she had time to react. She let out a gasp of surprise as he clamped his wing firmly over her beak and her eyes and shoved her under the surface of the water. Frantically, she writhed around, struggling under the crushing weight of him. Water flooded her nose and stung her eyes as she tried to breathe. She could hear the muffled howls of laughter from the swans, cheering Cloudwing on. She thrashed around, attempting to wriggle out of Cloudwing's grasp.

And then, suddenly, the crushing pressure was gone, and Cloudwing let go. Blackfeather broke the surface of the water and drew in a gulping breath of air. The swans were howling with laughter and cheering for Cloudwing. Blackfeather glared at them as she gasped for air. Her lungs felt as if they were going to burst.

The swans drifted back to the other side of the pond, leaving Blackfeather alone with her feathers dripping with water. She had never felt so humiliated before in her life. Cloudwing could have drowned her if he had held her head underwater for any longer.

As the sun sank below the horizon and glittering stars appeared in the darkening sky, Blackfeather began to feel exhausted after the day's tiring events. She tucked her head underneath her wing and almost immediately fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Blackfeather was awoken in the middle of the night by the desperate screams and shouts of other swans. Jerking awake, she glanced around in bewilderment to see the entire flock of swans in complete chaos. For some reason, they were panicking as they all tried frantically to get out of the pond and onto the shore. There were white feathers everywhere and the shrill sound of terrified screaming pierced the air. Blackfeather scrambled out of the water and rushed toward the other swans.

"What's going on?!" she demanded, observing the chaotic scene with confusion.

"*Crocodile!*" one of the white swans was screaming as she managed to clamber out of the water. "Everybody get out of the water, *now*! There is a crocodile in the pond!"

Blackfeather spotted Cloudwing amongst the crowd of swans huddled on the shore. Cloudwing usually looked arrogant and prideful, but at the moment his broad face was frozen into an expression of pure horror. Turning her attention back to the pond, Blackfeather saw a dark green snout jutting out of the water, with huge, flaring nostrils. Beneath the surface of the pond, she could see the rest of the crocodile's rough, flexible body and its huge, wide jaws.

Most of the swans had managed to clamber out of the water by now, and were huddled anxiously together on the shore. Suddenly, Blackfeather noticed a helpless baby swan in the water, paddling frantically and trying to get to the shore. Most of the other swans had used their wings to simply fly out of the water and out of harm's way, but the baby swan clearly hadn't learned to fly yet. With a pang of horror, Blackfeather realized the crocodile was heading straight for the baby swan.

Without even pausing to think about her actions, Blackfeather scrambled off the shore and dived into the water. The crowd of swans of the shore gave a collective gasp as they watched her paddle heedlessly toward the baby swan, who was barely managing to stay afloat in the rough water.

Blackfeather could hear the helpless cries from the baby swan. "*Help*!" he squealed as the crocodile came closer and closer.

"It's okay," Blackfeather panted when she reached him. Draping her wing around the other swan, she shoved him back toward the shore, thrashing her webbed feet furiously in an attempt to swim faster. The crocodile lunged at her with its jaws wide open. Blackfeather could smell the stench of its putrid breath and see every one of its pointed teeth coated in saliva. She managed to dart out of the way just as the crocodile's jaws snapped shut.

"Come on," she urged, dragging the baby swan with her as fast as she could by nudging him along with her wing. The crocodile was gaining on them and she put on a burst of speed, remaining just out of the crocodile's reach. They were almost at the shore.

The crocodile lunged at them again. The baby swan uttered a squeal of horror and Blackfeather barely managed to drag him out of harm's way. Her legs were exhausted and her muscles were screaming for her to stop, but she knew she couldn't. "Come on," she muttered to herself. "Nearly there . . ."

At long last, they both scrambled onto the shore, the crocodile's jaws snapping at them furiously. Fortunately, the shore was too steep for the crocodile's stubby legs to climb. After a moment of attempting to reach one of the swans, the crocodile eventually gave up and sank back into the water. Blackfeather watched it glide through the water until it left the pond.

Blackfeather became uncomfortably aware of every single pair of swan's eyes staring at her. She shifted her feet awkwardly and stared back at them. "What?" she said.

It was Cloudwing who spoke first. "You just—you just saved the baby swan's life," he said disbelievingly, his eyes round with surprise and even admiration.

The baby swan rushed forward to embrace his tearful mother, who wrapped him tight in her graceful wings. "Thank you," she whispered through her tears. "How can I ever repay you?"

Blackfeather was not used to being the center of attention. The swans' glittering eyes gleamed with admiration and respect as they all looked at her in wonder.

Again, Cloudwing broke the awkward silence. "Wow . . . I guess maybe you aren't so bad after all, Blackfeather. I didn't know you had that much . . ." He paused, searching for the right word. ". . . courage," he finished, regarding Blackfeather with his narrow eyes, gleaming with respect.

"Uh . . . thanks, I guess," Blackfeather responded, offering him a tentative smile.

This time, it was another swan who spoke. Blackfeather recognized him from the group of white swans who usually teased her. "Maybe we were wrong about Blackfeather after all, huh? I guess it was wrong for us to bully her like that."

To Blackfeather's astonishment, there was a mutter of agreement from the other swans. One by one, each of the swans apologized for all of the times they had humiliated Blackfeather, or called her hurtful names, or treated her like an outcast. For the first time in a long while, Blackfeather experienced an almost unfamiliar feeling: happiness.

And from that moment on, Blackfeather was no longer treated differently because of the color of her feathers.