



## CHAPTER ONE

The whole world waits for rain, and I, Cliff Bird, wait with it. Day after day, the sun beats down on the mesa and dries our crops without mercy. It bakes the black-streaked cliffs that harbor our dwellings and pulls spicy scents from bush and tree until the air hangs heavy with perfume. On this afternoon, like so many before, no cloud mars the turquoise sky. No breeze stirs. How long can we live this way?

From within my secret place on the mesa top, I watch an eagle as it spirals ever upward. Skybirds like this do not concern themselves with such earthbound matters as rain. And why should they? When game can no longer be found, they fly away to a different life.

So free!

If I were such a bird, I know what I would do: I would look for my father. Six times of harvest have crawled by since he set out on a trading venture to the dwelling of Oraibe, far to the south.

“Take me with you, Papa,” I said then, holding my sandals in one hand and my feather robe in the other.

“No, little bird.” His voice left no space for argument. “You are but six summers old, and your legs cannot travel so far. One day I believe you will travel, even though you are a girl. But first, there is something you must do here at Gathering Place. Something great. I see it when I look into your eyes.”

I could not hold back my tears, but he knelt before me and smoothed them away with his thumbs, his fingers gentle

on my cheeks. “Stay for now, little Bird. Your mother needs you to take care of her until I return.”

Those were the last words I heard him speak. Yet I was not able to fulfill them, for Mother died of the coughing illness in the snows of that first winter after he left. Since then, I have been living with Grandmother and eating the food of the clan.

My thoughts so often travel the trail to the south that I almost think I would recognize it, were I ever to set foot off the mesa. But always this question haunts me: why has Father never returned? Truly Oraibe is a journey of many moons, but he could have traveled home five times over by now or at least sent word back to we who wait for him. Surely someone has seen a tall man from Gathering Place carrying trade goods and telling stories better than anyone else in the world. I swallow hard, for time has not eased the tightness that grips my throat at his memory.

Breathing deep, I focus once more on the skybird soaring above me. Perhaps it has flown over the trade route. Has it seen Father? The need to know is strong in me, and I scream a high, shrill eagle-cry into which I put all my questions. Perhaps in that uncanny way animals have, it will understand me. Truly, it does seem to check an instant in its flight. Yes, and I am comforted by this, and by the hope that the eagle may now watch for Father on my behalf.

“Cliff Bird!” It is the voice of Mesa Flower.

Staring for one more long moment at the winged speck in the sky, I raise my arm in salute before turning to greet my favorite cousin.

“There you are,” she says, stooping low as she passes through our secret entrance. “My, how very good you are at the eagle’s cry. I thought for a moment that the sacred

bird had escaped from his roost.” She adds, “My eagle cry sounds like a dying turkey.”

I grin, but I cannot argue, for I have heard her. Instead, I link my skinny arm in her plump one. “I like turkeys, too.”

She smiles, but there is trouble in her eyes. “Grandmother sent me to see if you will take something to Place of the Sacred Tree for her, but on my way to find you, I thought I saw a stranger.”

“A stranger?”

“I think so. As I stepped onto the mesa top after my climb up, I saw a man. But instead of greeting me, he dodged into the brush. I looked and even spoke greeting, but it was as if I spoke to the air, for I heard no answer.”

Tucking my long hair behind my ears, I do not show Mesa Flower that her words sent a jolt of worry through me. These days, sighting a stranger on the mesa—a stranger who will not show himself—cannot be good. To distract her from what we both know, I prance a few steps, dragging her along with me. “Nice day for a run. Want to come, too?”

She knows what I’m doing. I see that in her eyes, but she says, “Mama needs me to grind corn. She let me find you, but I must not stay away too long.”

Mothers need their children. This is as it should be. Yet somehow the thought feels tight in my chest. Me they feed, but they do not need me. I lift my chin. Someday no one will have to provide for me. I, Cliff Bird, will do it myself. But I never say these things to Mesa Flower, for it would bring sadness to her eyes. So instead I say, “I must feed the fawn before we go.”

Sandstone walls of rust and yellow encircle this small grotto we found earlier in the spring. No one knows of it except us, but lately we have company here, for seven days ago I found a baby deer. Now this little one lies like a sun-

dappled puddle in an enclosure I wove of branches and yucca fiber rope, and she belongs to me alone. My heart smiles when I look at her. Indeed, if I could, I would spend all my hours drinking in the peace she carries.

I love peace, but somehow it is often far from me.

Yes, here is peace and also comfort, for this little deer is very like me. Its mother is dead. Its father is nowhere to be found. If we had not taken it in, it would have wandered alone on the mesa and become prey for coyotes or mountain lions. Now it, too, must look to others for food and shelter.

There is a difference between us, though. This small animal is beautiful and gives pleasure. I am not beautiful, and of all the people in my dwelling, only Mesa Flower and Grandmother seem to find pleasure in me.

*Aiyyyeee!* I cannot let myself follow these thoughts, for my body grows heavy and chilled at such dark whispers. So I push them into the back of my mind and kiss the fawn's smooth head before scooping a handful of ground corn from a pot hidden by the entrance.

My people have little corn these days, and already this year's crops cry for water though it is not yet the height of summer. I wonder if perhaps I should feel guilty for giving food to an animal. But this corn from which I make gruel is what I have held back from my own ration, and besides, it seems to me that if I can care for this little doe, she will grow to have fawns of her own. That will give my people more meat than one so-small deer, and I would have both rescued and given life.

"You are safe here!" I whisper right into her ear, and she flicks it back and forth, tickling my nose and making me laugh. "Mesa Flower," I say. "Look how she is growing."

My almost-sister kneels beside me. “Father always says that when a wild animal is tamed, it is too easily killed because it does not run or hide when men approach.”

I do not answer, for I worry about this very thing. What if we have preserved her from coyotes and cougars, only to have her to be shot by some arrow? I kiss her again, right between her huge brown eyes. The thought of such a little one, hungry and alone, cowering in fear as the growls of predators draw near—I shudder. “She must grow more. Then we will free her.” I gather up the fawn in my arms, burying my face in its neck and breathing in the clean scent of sunshine.

“Did you see my flowers, Cliff Bird?”

“HmMMM. Very nice.”

“You’re not even looking!” my cousin scolds.

How we laugh then, because we both know she is right. So I make sure Mesa Flower sees me watching as she bends over some red blooms splashed against the dust, her short black hair falling forward, hiding brown cheeks. She is the sister I never had, born the same summer as I, and I wonder if she knows how much I love her.

“They need water.” She touches the plants like a mother soothing a child.

“What doesn’t? Everything is so thirsty!” More than 24 growing seasons the drought has gripped the mesa, so Grandmother says. Twice as long as we have lived and more! I settle the fawn back in the pen. What must the mesa have been like when the rains came often? I squint at the copper sun above us. “Imagine the seep springs full and running over!” I say, throwing my arms wide. “Then we would splash in the water and throw it up in the air to rain down upon us!”

But even as I speak the words, I draw back from the image they create. If I dared play in the water now, when the springs are producing barely enough to keep our dwelling alive, how my aunt's lip would curl, her nostrils flare, and I would shrink into myself. Cloud Woman. I feel as small and jumpy as a chipmunk at the thought of my mother's sister.

"Come, Mesa Flower. We should go."

Slipping out, we pull a tumble weed across the opening, and sweep away our footprints with a sprig of rabbit brush to keep our special place secret from passersby.

"Shall we race?" I ask when we stand on the path to Gathering Place.

"You know you'll win—you always do."

"Please?"

She shakes her head. "You know I am not a good runner."

I raise my eyebrows. "Maybe if you practiced, you would get faster."

"Not me. I do not get better at things," she says with a shrug. "Besides, what if we run straight into that stranger I saw?"

"We won't," I say with more confidence than I feel. "Besides, we shall be running so fast he could not catch us."

"You, maybe. But not me." Her eyes are big as she imagines.

So I laugh. "If indeed he is anywhere about, I shall see him first because I will be in front."

She snorts and pokes me in the shoulder, then off she goes, short, round legs pumping desperately, sandals sending up little smoke signals of dust that hang for a moment in the air. A good ten yards she runs before I spring from my place like a spear from an *atlatl*. My hair whips my back in the wind, and for a moment I am an eagle with the wind against

my feathers. Spreading my arms like wings, I swoop down on my cousin. Poor Mesa Flower. She can never make wind rush against her skin. I pat her as I fly past—up, over, and down the far side of the little rise.

I see no stranger. Only heat and sun and the trail beneath me. Mesa Flower must have been mistaken.

“Slow down!” Mesa Flower calls out.

“Sorry, sorry.” I laugh, pushing my hair out of my eyes. It is ever this way—me forging ahead, then waiting for Mesa Flower. Reddish dust puffs up as she flops on the ground beside me. We laugh at how she pants for breath. But when we sit up, she stares at our sandals and her laughter fades.

“Cliff Bird? Summer Sky found her sandals hanging from a ladder today. Do you know anything about that?”

I chew my bottom lip to hide my smile. “Was she angry?”

“Angry?” Mesa Flower makes a face. “I’m glad you weren’t anywhere to be found by the time she discovered them.” She touches my hand. “You should not tease her, Birdie. Can’t you just be friends?”

*Friends?* I scuff the dust and another layer settles on our scratched legs and feet. “She watches for the chance to get me in trouble. I’m sure she does. How to be friends with her escapes me.”

Ever since I can remember, I have wanted to be close to Summer Sky. She, too, is my cousin: of the same clan, of the same age. But the more I hope for friendship with her, the more like enemies we become, and I do not know why she hates me so.

Mesa Flower sighs. “I had better get back and grind Mama’s corn.”

“Yes.” I stand and pull her to her feet. “And I should find out about Grandmother’s errand.”

Place of the Sacred Tree lays across the mesa, one of many cliff dwellings in the canyons, and a good long way to run. Not that I mind. If only all work could be of this sort—running errands, visiting other pueblos, seeing the villagers, hearing their news! Work that I do not like, even though I and the other women and girls do it day after day, is the endless grinding of meal, or chasing birds away from the corn, beans, and squash my people grow on the mesa top. For these jobs I never move more than a few yards from one place, and I am never truly finished.

*Aiyyee!* I should have been born a boy, for then I would be hunting or trading, as my father before me. I would see far-away places and new sights and people always changing, instead of numbing sameness.

Lost in such daydreams, I come soon to the cliff above Gathering Place. Here hand and toeholds form a meager path down the sandstone, and I pull my mind back to the present, for this is not a place for distraction. One slip, one failure to find the small notches chipped out with hammer stones, and I could lie broken on the unyielding ground below. My breath catches in my chest as I think of the last person who fell—how his broken arm turned black, how he sickened and died.

Mesa Flower interrupts my thoughts with a touch on my arm. “I saw him over there. The stranger. Over by that big rock.”

I see nothing. “Well, whoever he was, he is not there now. Shall you go first?”

“Oh no. You first. Please. You know how long it always takes me.”

So I go before her, and truly, I need not have worried about falling. I stand safely on the ledge below the cliff before she is even halfway down. As I have told her more

than once, she would not be so slow if she did not pause between every hand and foothold as if she has forgotten how to move.

But at last she reaches me, and together we follow the path around the side of the cliff away from the sheer height. I feel a smile begin to lift the corners of my mouth. This is the part I love—to come around the bend and suddenly see the dwelling of Gathering Place tucked like swallows' nests beneath the jutting overhang. Always I pause a moment to savor the sight.

Here masonry houses tower from alcove floor to ceiling. Some are two, three, even four stories high. Tucked along the ceiling, a strip of storage rooms cling—tiny dark spaces seldom visited—while towers like silent guardians of the terraced plaza stand watch at either end. My eyes touch on doorways gaping darkly and note how ladders of wood, polished to deep red-brown by the passage of many hands, lend color and lines to what might almost be a scene pecked onto a rock. All else is a warm buff-tan—the rocks, the houses with their smoothly plastered walls, even the dust on the ground. And all about the upper reaches a white mist of smoke from the cooking fires drifts, greeting us with a homey smell.

Undetected under the shadow of the tower, I watch my people, little figures red-brown as sandstone at sunset. Working, playing, resting: they remind me of the birds for which I am named. Here I was born, and this place I love.

Mesa Flower studies my face. “What are you thinking, Cliff Bird?”

“See the way the plaza sweeps across the front of the village? The smoke holes in the ground with their ladders coming up remind me of the holes of the ground squirrel.”

Mesa Flower laughs at this. “Oh, Birdie. Ground squirrels do not use ladders, and besides, they do not live in kivas.”

I grin back at her. “Ahhh. Wise Mesa Flower. Did the gopher people tell you this? For all we know, perhaps their clans, too, meet in round, underground chambers.”

She smiles and hugs me for this silliness, but I’m not sure I really fooled her after all, for her eyes touch mine with concern.

I pat her shoulder. “Now Blossom, you mustn’t worry about me.” Then I notice one figure emerging from the bustle below us. *Oh, no.* “Then again, maybe I would welcome just a tiny bit of worry,” I add, rolling my eyes. “Don’t look now, but here comes Summer Sky.”

Together we watch our cousin march across the plaza toward us. Even though her coming causes my teeth to clench, I cannot help noticing how graceful are her steps, her face as pretty and bright as a cactus blossom. I hunch my shoulders and straighten my apron. I am like my father—tall and thin, a sapling reaching for the sun. Usually my heart swells with this knowledge, but in Summer Sky’s presence, everything I am becomes awkward.

Tucking my hair behind my ears again does not disguise the fact that it hangs in feather-like hanks of dusty black while Summer Sky’s short hair glistens like the blackbird.

*Aaaieeyyieeee.* I suppose if I did not lie on my back to stare at the sky, mine might shine too, but it is much too late to remedy this. Wishing I were already on the way to Place of the Sacred Tree, I ready myself as best I can.

“So. You’re back,” Summer Sky says when she is within hearing. Harmless words, really, but I hear a different meaning: *Why bother coming back? You know no one needs you around here.*

I swallow, fighting the thoughts, yet afraid they are true.

Her smile is cold, her teeth white and perfect. “It was a strange thing, Cliff Bird,” she adds. “After you left the dwelling this morning, I couldn’t find my sandals for the longest time.” Between narrowed lids, her black eyes glitter.

As so often happens when I talk with Summer Sky, my heart becomes thin as water. I cross my arms, throwing back my head to give myself strength, and my voice is too hard as I reply. “Someone must have found your sandals lying around. Maybe next time you should put them away where they belong.” I raise my eyebrows as if to say that I hardly notice her at all. “Excuse me.” Pulling Mesa Flower along, I try to brush by, but Summer Sky blocks our way on the narrow trail.

“Excuse *me*. Mother sent me to deliver a message. You are to stop by my house to pick up something for Grandmother.”

I can’t resist snorting. “Why didn’t you just take it to Grandmother yourself? Too busy?”

“Ha!” She snorts back. “Mother wants to talk to you, that’s why.” Then she turns and struts back down the plaza.

I am crushed like a kernel of corn under the weight of a grinding stone. Cloud Woman has summoned me, and I know how the talk will go. Covered in polite words about her duty as my aunt and the remembrance of my mother—as if she is not really as much my parent as she was my aunt’s twin—Summer Sky’s mother will scold me and remind me of what I never forget—that she instructs me only because she must, not because I matter to her at all.

With sharp words she tears to pieces all the good things I have done to try to please her since last she scolded me. I hate how with one sweep of her arm she dismisses endless hours spent grinding corn and tending crops—all worthless

in her eyes compared to some small thing I've done wrong—especially if it involves Summer Sky. Hiding my cousin's sandals seemed like such a funny thing to do this morning. *Aiyyeee!* I must remember to ask myself whether, in the end, such fun is worth the price that comes with afternoon.

Leaning against the hot rock wall, I suck air through my front teeth while Mesa Flower flutters about, cooing like a dove, trying to say something comforting. I make a silly face to help her feel better and say, "Offer prayers that Cloud Woman does not eat me up this time. And save me some *piki* bread for when I return from Place of the Sacred Tree." Then giving her a quick hug, I scrape up my tiny handful of courage, and follow our other cousin toward her house.



## CHAPTER TWO

Cliff Bird hates me, and I do not know why. Is it because I have both father and mother and she has none? If she holds that against me, then she has no real cause, for she is the one with freedom to come and go and to think as she pleases. I, Summer Sky, am ever at the beck and call of my parents. I must hide all my own thoughts, never letting them show in word or in glance. I must smile and act as they want me to, whether I feel like smiling inside or not. I must do all things well, yet no matter how hard I try, it never seems to be enough for Father and Mother. Always they want more from me than I am able to give, and when I cannot be what they want to see, Father narrows his eyes and punishes me with words followed by hours and sometimes days of silence, while Mother rages like a fire gone wild or one that smolders and smokes and fills every space with thick and unbreathable air. I am a rabbit cornered between them.

Cliff Bird is never thus. I have seen her stand before my parents as if their words are but sparks flying past her, walking away unchanged, caring nothing for what Mother or Father have said. Oh, for that kind of bravery! I never can stand up to their anger. My eyes burn, my heart drops like a hot coal into my belly, and I cower. This never happens to Cliff Bird. I suppose it is because she has the gaze of the eagle in her eyes, and all the world lies beneath her notice. Maybe she is actually one of the bird people in human form! Even now as she approaches our house, she walks high-headed, as one to whom all should bow. She does not bother to smile, and people do not smile at her as they do at me. I suppose I should not feel glad about that, but I do. I also want to fly at

her and pull her dusty hair, just to prove to myself that she, too, is of clay as all our people are.

Why does she not like me? In the times when Mother and Father are both happy, I do not mind so much. But on days like today when Mother broods by the fire like a wounded coyote while Father stands aloof, it would ease the ache in my throat to know friendship with this cousin of mine. Mesa Flower likes me. But she likes Cliff Bird more.

Is there something wrong with me?

All these thoughts fill my head, but still I nod and greet others as I walk, for if I cannot find kindness at home, I must search further afield. What I do not understand is why my parents should be angry with me if it is Cliff Bird who caused the problem. Should they not rather smile on me for my good behavior and praise all the ways I seek to please them?

I must have done something wrong. Something that did not have to do with sandals, for truly, I did not really leave them lying about, as Cliff Bird accused. Only right by our door, as even Father does at times. No, it must be something I do not remember doing, for even before he knew my sandals were missing, Father's face was darkened.

I take a deep breath and step into our house. There it is dim and cooler, and I want to feel comforted, but it is not a welcoming kind of dimness. Mother does not look at me at all. I can tell by the way her lips purse together that she has stored up words for Cliff Bird. At least I hope it is to Cliff Bird she directs them, and not to me.

Making my way to Father's side, I turn to watch my cousin enter. Look at her, how she crosses the threshold with her chin high, as if the smell of Mother's parching corn is distasteful. I narrow my eyes at her, trying to draw strength from my father as I stand by him, but he does not even acknowledge

my coming. Shriveling at the hardness of his face and Mother's displeasure, I wish too late that I had not mentioned my sandals.

I almost pity Cliff Bird.



Dusky coolness, wood smoke, and the scent of parching corn; these three envelope me as I step into the house of my aunt, she who is called Cloud Woman, my own mother's twin sister, who looks so like my mother but is not—she who should love me as a daughter. After the brightness of the sun, the little room is dim, but I do not need light to know that she does not glance up at my entrance.

Nor have Summer Sky's eyes softened toward me at all as she stands near my uncle, confident in his presence. When I see her thus, my heart twists with longing. Just so would I be with my father. And Father would not be as Grey Rock who stands silent and unreadable. Father would put his arm about my shoulders and smile at me, and there would be no scolding and no threatening then.

I keep my chin high as I wait for Aunt to speak. I think perhaps she likes to make people wait—make them feel somehow lesser so she will feel more. *Look up*, I think toward her. *Look up and say what you have to say*.

But when she does, she pins me with her gaze, and her eyes are narrow and hard. Smile, I tell myself. Perhaps today she will smile in return. This is a little game of hope I play whenever I meet her, for before my mother died, Aunt would smile with me and even laugh. But again today it is like one tiny raindrop splashing against the dry ground—it makes no difference. No welcome lights her face as she stands.

I draw back inside myself to a safer place, and from that distance, I notice strangely unimportant things, like the belly of Summer Sky's dog swollen from soon-to-be-born puppies, and the fact that I must have grown, for my eyes are

almost level with my aunt's. I wait to feel braver, now that I am taller, yet I am a rabbit cowering before a coyote. So I give her a coyote look right back. *Say your words*, I scream inside, *then let me go. I do not need you. I do not need you at all. Especially you.*

As if she hears my thoughts, Cloud Woman snorts, then gestures toward my uncle who stands like stone. "Your uncle has something to say to you."

So. I suppose I am of such little value to her that she does not take the effort to scold me herself. She uses my uncle, strange and silent, whose thoughts I can never read.

"Honored niece," Grey Rock begins, clearing his throat as if to rediscover his voice. "Once more we find it necessary to speak to you regarding your conduct. How is it that you have forgotten your obligation to your family? How is it that you so lightly esteem your clan's standing in the village that you..."

As Uncle's voice drones on, my small bravery leaks out and leaves me empty. No, worse than empty, for as he talks, I am reduced to smallness. Ever since Mother died, it has been thus.

As I have done so many times before, I puzzle about this while Uncle speaks. What happened to cause this unfriendliness toward me? I stand before him as if I listen, but inside, I go back to the day when everything changed.

I am standing beside my mother's bed. Wind Song was her name, and her face, once round and smiling, is thin and bony from the long coughing illness that has taken her. All through the warmth of harvest and into the cold of winter, she coughed and coughed. Now there was often blood on her lips, and she lay spent and weak when a coughing spell was over.

The feeble light of winter struggled through the window opening into our small room. “Cliff Bird?” These were the first words she’d spoken all day, and they came as quietly as tree leaves stirring in a breeze.

“Yes, Mother?” I bent close to hear. There was the smell of wood smoke in her long black hair.

“I go to join those who have gone before me.”

I slipped my hand into Mother’s thin, cold one, and whispered, “Please—don’t leave me.”

But I do not think she heard me. Slowly, as if each word were a stone almost too heavy to carry, she continued. “When I am gone, take my half of the necklace for your own. Your father has the other half. Perhaps he may still come back someday, if he is not already waiting for me in the land of the ancestors.” She coughed then, so long and so deeply I was afraid that her frail body could not bear it. “And little Bird?”

“Yes, Mother?”

“Remember that you are dearer to me than water or warmth.” These were the last words she ever spoke. Throughout that long, cold day, she lay as if asleep, not moving except to cough, and her breaths came ever louder and further apart. While snow fluttered down in a never-ending curtain of feathers, and an icy wind crept in at every opening, Grandmother and I tried to keep the small room warm. Auntie came into the house like a silent shadow and lay beside her twin as if she, too, were dying. Mother’s hands and feet became like ice. Then, as she ceased to fight for life, her body relaxed. The labored breathing stopped. I blew upon her face to help her catch her breath again, but to no avail. She was gone, and I stood by the bed, weeping.

Grey Rock taps me on the forehead with a hard finger, bringing me back into the present. “Cliff Bird, do you understand me?”

I nod. Though I am not sure exactly what he said, it can be no different than all the other times.

“Then you may go.”

I allow my eyes to drop. I do not really know him. Indeed, he never speaks to me except to scold. Uncles pour themselves into sons and nephews, and as a girl, my supply of love and instruction should flow from my aunt. Yet in this house there is not one drop of either for me. Though Cloud Woman pretends in front of others, we both know the truth.

As I turn, Aunt thrusts a pot into my hands. “Here is some meat for Grandmother. See that it gets to her.”

My face grows tight at these words. As if I would steal from Grandmother. From anyone! And how my hand itches to slap the smirk from Summer Sky’s red lips. Instead, I take the meat, spin on my heel, and stalk out as a mountain lion would—measured, proud, unhurried. I will not let them know how my throat aches from holding back tears or how the fire in my belly threatens to consume me.



I am still enjoying the way Cliff Bird looked when Mother spoke to her, when Father glares at me. “Why do you leave your sandals where she can find them? Do you have no care?”

“No, Father. I mean, yes, Father.” I do not really know what will please him, but I try both.

He turns his back on me, and I no longer exist. If only I had the courage of Cliff Bird. I, too, would march from this place. I could. I could do that. The thought leaves me shaky, and I fold my arms across my body to steady myself. If I followed her, what would Father and Mother do? Am I brave enough

to find out? I do not know the answer to these questions, but it does not matter, for Mother thrusts the mealbasket against my chest, and my moment for action has passed me by.

“Here,” she says. “Go grind enough corn to fill this basket, and see you waste no time about it.”

I am glad to take the basket and follow Cliff Bird out into the sunshine.



The bustle of the plaza is unchanged. No one in all the dwelling knows what Uncle has said or how I feel. That much is a relief. Summer Sky follows me out, but I pretend not to see her. Off she goes toward the mealing bins, but the way to my house takes me near the roost of the sacred eagle. Here I linger as I often do, just to gaze on his wild golden-brown beauty. How golden his eyes and how fierce! No matter how long they keep him captive, he will never be tamed.

“I am not a tame bird, either,” I say. On his perch I lay a tiny bit of the meat from Grandmother’s pot. “It is wrong that you are kept against your will, just so people can have your feathers for their prayer sticks,” I whisper to him, the injustice of captivity fueling the flames within me. Every time I stand before his roost, a fierce longing surges up from inside my belly. This great sky monarch should be flying free, up where he would rival the wind for speed, not tethered to a post in the dwelling of men. Always I feel it, but this time, that longing seems to be staring back at me from his fine yellow eyes. Perhaps it is my own pain that helps me read his, but regardless of the source, I nod my head and I whisper, “I will help you. I will end your loneliness. I promise.” How I will do it, I am not sure. But do it I must.

“Cliff Bird, Cliff Bird!”

A flock of small children engulf me. As their little arms hug my waist, some of my anger-fire fades. “Tell us a story, Cliff Bird.” “Come play with us.” “Please come, please come.” They laugh and pester, pulling at my arms.

I reached down to tweak one child’s short black hair. “I have to go to House of the Sacred Tree.”

“Take us, too, Cliff Bird. Take us, too!”

They join hands in a ring around me, jumping and chanting, and I laugh and jump with them until I see two women watching me. What do they see? A mischief maker? An extra mouth to feed? The thoughts pierce like cactus spines, and I step out of the dancing circle. “I can’t.”

But the children follow me all the way to where Grandmother sits in the warmth of the sun by our doorway. Her red-brown face crinkles into a thousand lines as she sees us. “Greetings, little ones. Greetings, Cliff Bird.” She pats the ground beside her as the children disperse. “Come. Sit.”

I crouch on the spot she indicates and set the meat down beside her. “From Cloud Woman. For you.”

“Your feathers are ruffled, my little Bird.”

Harsh words I have learned to survive, but this kindness sends twin streaks burning down my face. “I am fine,” I say, wiping the tears with my arm. “I just do not understand why Aunt, Uncle, and Summer Sky do not like me. They have each other. They have food to eat and a house that receives both evening breeze and morning sun. Why, with so much, are they so unkind?”

“They are not happy.”

“But why?”

“Ah. Well.” She stares off across the canyon. “There is never one answer to happiness. Grey Rock carries much

responsibility for our dwelling, and he does not have room for ideas other than his own, and my daughter—well—”

“But she did not used to be this way to me.”

“I have a story for you, Little Bird—one my mother’s mother told her, and she in turn told me.” Grandmother pats my back in a slow rhythm. “Once, when all was new, the Maker fashioned a multitude of pots,” she begins. “Some were not much bigger than your hand. Some were as large as a squash at the end of growing season. Some He made beautiful with paintings, and some were plain. Then, into each he put gifts. There were rich gifts and common ones, but no pot was completely empty.”

Grandmother leans forward and peers into my eyes, and I smile to let her know I am listening.

She nods. “Presently, the Maker brought in the People, and gave them each a pot, and as He did, He said, ‘This is yours, for your whole life. At the end of time, you must return it to me, giving account for how you have used what you find within.’”

“Some of the people were not content with the pots they had been given. They wished for more beautiful or more dainty ones. Some desired the big ones or the small ones, and no one wanted the ugly pots. Finally, they took the lids off and looked inside. Oh, what yelling there was then, for they discovered that the jars themselves had nothing to do with the gifts they held. Some of the least valuable gifts were in the most coveted jars, while some of the most valuable gifts were in the jars no one had wanted.”

The story does not make sense to me. “I, too, would have chosen one of the pretty pots, Grandmother.”

“That is why the Maker chooses for us.” She pulls up on her haunches in preparation for rising.

“Mesa Flower said you need me to go to Place of the Sacred Tree.”

Grandmother nods, and reaching inside the doorway, brings out a basket containing a pair of new sandals. She puts a piece of the meat Cloud Woman had sent alongside the sandals. “For my brother, Man-Talking-to-Stars.”

I take the basket and nod.

“Good journey, Cliff Bird.” She touches my cheek as softly as a feather. “Return before darkness comes.”

Grandmother’s blessing wraps me in warmth, but I have to smile at her last words, for darkness to me is like a thick robe which softens the pointed things of the world. Still, I understand her care—the path down the cliff face is not easy, even in daylight. For a moment, I wonder if I should mention the man Mesa Flower saw. But perhaps she was mistaken, and besides—if I do, Grandmother may keep me here in Gathering Place, and I want to go, to be alone under the high, blue sky, and to run. So I just nod and agree. “Until nightfall, then,” and turn my face toward the mesa top.