

The
Flight
of the
Cliff Bird



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DEDICATION

*For Dave, husband extraordinaire and fellow adventurer,
because you have always loved Cliff Bird and her story*



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PROLOGUE

In the high desert country of southwestern Colorado, a lofty green mesa towers above the Mancos and the Montezuma valleys. Mesa Verde, Spanish for “green table,” is blanketed with sagebrush and juniper and pinyon trees. The area was once home to the Ancestral Puebloans—the Hisatsinom, or Long-Ago People.

Halfway between earth and sky, in a place where eagles soar and quiet reigns, their dwellings still nestle beneath the cap rock of the canyons. Here at the mesa, these people—rich in culture and wise in their knowledge of the earth—once farmed and hunted; built homes, gathering places, and irrigation systems; and raised their families. Circa 1300 A.D., they began a great migration, and within the span of a few short years, the Colorado Plateau lay essentially uninhabited. But recorded in the masonry of their dwellings and the thousands of artifacts they left behind are life stories long untold.



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 can’t travel so far. One day I believe you will travel, even though you’re a girl. But first, there’s 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 deeply, 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 of my questions. Perhaps in that uncanny way that 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’s 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 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 can’t argue, for I have heard her. Instead, I link my skinny arm in her plump one. “I like turkeys, too.”

She smiles, but there’s trouble in her eyes. “Grandmother sent me to see if you’ll 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 don’t show Mesa Flower that her words have sent a jolt of worry through me. These days, sighting a stranger on the mesa—a stranger who won’t show himself—can’t 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 don't 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, for mother deer never otherwise leave their babies. 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's 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.

Aiiyyeee! I can't 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's 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've 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 will have both rescued and given life.

"You're 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's growing."

My almost-sister kneels beside me. "Father always says that when a wild animal is tamed, it's too easily killed because it doesn't run or hide when men approach."

I don't 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'll free her." I gather up the fawn in my arms, burying my face in her neck and breathing in the clean scent of sunshine.

“Did you see my flowers, Cliff Bird?”

“Hmm. Very nice.”

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

How we laugh then because we both know that she’s right! So I make sure that 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’s 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 twenty-four 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 tumbleweed across the opening and sweep away our footprints with a sprig of rabbit brush to keep our special place secret from passersby.

“Should 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’m not a good runner.”

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

“Not me. I don’t 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’ll be running so fast he couldn’t catch us.”

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

So I laugh. “If indeed he’s anywhere about, I’ll see him first because I’ll 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 strides 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’m an eagle with the sky rushing 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!” she calls out.

“Sorry, sorry!” I laugh, pushing my hair out of my eyes. It’s 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 shouldn’t 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’ve wanted to be close to Summer Sky. She, too, is my cousin—of the same clan, of the same age, born of my own mother’s sister. But the more I hope for friendship with her, the more like enemies we become, and I don’t know why she hates me so.

Mesa Flower sighs. “I’d 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 lies 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 don’t like, even though the other women and girls and I 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 strides from one place, and I’m never truly finished.

Aiiyyeee! I should have been born a boy, for then I would be hunting or trading, as my father before me. I would see faraway 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’s not there now. Do you want to 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’s even halfway down. As I’ve told her more than once, she wouldn’t be so slow if she didn’t 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 clings—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.