

THIRD PLACE WINNER

THE ISLAND BIRD

by Linda Marie

I opened my eyes and had no idea where I was. Pain throbs in my left temple as I pull myself up from the grassy meadow where I lay. Strewn rocks, colorful hibiscus, and scattered copses of silver pine trees do nothing to tell me where I am. A low gurgle of bubbling water emanates from a nearby stream. I make my way to it to splash water on my face. My reflection shows deep auburn hair tied back in a low ponytail, diamond stud earrings and necklace sparkling in the sunlight. I gingerly wipe away the dried blood at my temple.

A shadow flits across the velvet grass. Looking up I see a huge bird coming towards me. It looks like a peregrine falcon in shades of purple and blue with pink eyes staring right at me. Excitement at seeing an exotic bird melds into fear as I realize it's coming towards me. I run toward the nearest trees hoping to find cover, but I feel the sharp talons grip my body as it sweeps me up into the air. Flashes of grass, trees, and flowers blur together as we climb higher into the cloudless sky. I close my eyes in terror trying to think how I can escape being this creature's lunch.

Falling downwards as the giant bird loosens its' grip on me, I land in a nest with shiny objects. A pocket watch, a ladies' ruby necklace, and a hunting knife with a shiny blade nestles in the twigs as if carefully set there on display. The bird gently nudges me to a corner of the nest. My diamond necklace and earrings sparkle even in the shade. Will the bird kill me for my jewelry?

Instinct makes me eye the knife for protection, but I realize I'm not hurt. The bird didn't pierce my skin when it gripped me. I search warily for bones of previous victims. What are the chances of the bird picking up these items without a person attached as I was?

The nest is built from twigs and leaves intertwined together in a weave that shows an intricate pattern. Part of me admires it, even as I scope a way of escape. The bird steps into the nest and settles in. As it falls asleep, I carefully find footholds in the nest to climb out. My body scraping against the twigs awakens the bird. It uses its' beak to grip the back of my tunic and set me back in the nest. Escape will have to come when the bird leaves. I settle in and fall asleep curled up against the soft feathers of the bird.

I wake to the bird shifting. It raises its' wings and takes off soaring into the evening sky. My heart beats faster as I know this is my chance to escape. Quickly I put the hunting knife in the waistband of my leggings and climb up the sides of the nest. Self-preservation takes over my fear of heights as I gulp down the paralyzing dizziness and cautiously climb down the outside of the nest. It is nestled among three branches with gaping holes between them. Choosing one to hold onto, I climb precariously onto it. The rough bark snags my flowery tunic as I crawl as fast as I can.

Uh Oh! I freeze as the bird flies towards the tree, something in its' beak. It flies to the nest and drops its' load. In mere seconds, the bird lifts me from my spot and carries me back to the nest. A large bunch of orange berries sits at the bottom. The bird nudges me towards the fruit. Tentatively, I reach for a berry and take a small nibble. Juicy sweetness explodes in my mouth as I realize how hungry I am. Reaching for more, I hand a berry to the bird and then eat more. We eat in companionable silence.

I stroke the birds' downy soft feathers as a new plan forms in my mind. Climbing down from a nest fifty feet in the air isn't practical. What if I piggyback? To see if this is a viable option, I gently lay against the birds back. As if on cue, the bird stretches its' wings and takes off causing me to grab tightly onto its' neck. I hold my breath in fear and then in wonder as the full moon lights up the sky showing the splendor of the meadows and forests below. The bird glides effortlessly through the night sky as I watch in sheer delight at the starry sky overlooking the picturesque valley below.

As we circle lower towards a stream, a whirring sound of helicopter blades pierces the silence. As the bird flies higher to get away from the intruder, the helicopter speeds up and goes higher. Soon it's over head and a large net drops out from the hatch. The weight of the net pushes the bird downwards as it flaps its' wings wildly to escape. I hold on tightly in terror as we descend into a copse of trees and hit the ground hard.

Lying still for a moment, I realize that I'm not seriously injured, and check the bird lying under me. It seems to be stunned. I try to move the heavy rope netting off us, but it doesn't budge. Quickly I retrieve the hunting knife from my waistband and start to cut through the rope to free us. The bird moves slightly.

"It's ok," I said. I pat its' feathers softly. "We're getting out of here!" I can hear the helicopter closing in. Desperately I saw through the rope quickly. The bird regains its senses and pecks at the net. The rope frays easily with its' sharp beak tearing at it. Finally, the net has a hole big enough for the bird to get through, but its' left wing is damaged. As we try to take off, the wing falls to the side. Silence ensues as the helicopter lands and shuts down.

I nudge the bird forward into the wooded area and he picks me up in his beak and starts running zig zag through the trees away from our pursuers. I dangle helplessly as a blur of

branches flash by. I can hear footsteps crashing behind us and then a loud bang. The bird stumbles and falls to the ground. I fall from its' beak and land hard on the solid ground, knocking the breath out of me. Two men surround us with guns aimed at us.

“Are you okay?” The older man asked.

I glare at him indignantly. “What are you thinking? Why are you trying to harm an innocent bird?”

An amused voice groans mockingly, “Looks like we have an ungrateful rescue.” He reached over to examine the bird. “We only have a short time. Let’s get busy.”

“Oh no you don’t!” I jump up pulling out the hunting knife, staring down the men. “You’re not touching this bird. He’ll never hurt you.”

“How do you know?” The first man asked curiously. “Wasn’t this bird carrying you off for his next meal?”

“We don’t have time for this,” the younger man interrupted. “The tranquilizer won’t last and we need to tag this bird.”

“What?” I scan the bird for signs of injury and see its’ chest rise and fall. “It’s asleep?” I lower the hunting knife warily eyeing the men for trickery.

“Mac Davis, local ornithologist at your service.” The younger man held out his hand in friendly greeting. “And this is Joe.” I shake their hands, feeling foolish.

“Nice of you to get along, but we’ll take it from here,” said a garbled voice from behind us. “Put your guns down and step away from the bird.” Two masked men with hunting rifles step out from the trees.

The ornithologists set their stun guns down and step away. I keep the knife at my side in the flowery fold of my tunic. “What are you going to do?”

“A rare bird like this brings in a lot of money.” scoffs the shorter man. He shoves his gun into my stomach to back me up. “Thanks for getting the net off and tranquilizing it for us.”

In confusion, I whisper to Mac, “You weren’t in the helicopter?” He nods a quick no, eyeing the men prodding the bird. The stun guns lay just out of reach. Tension fills the air as Mac and Joe run as one for their guns and the men at the bird whip around in surprise. I run behind the closest tree to the bird.

BANG! A masked man is down but the other returns fire as the ornithologists take cover. The masked man chases the men running right by the tree I’m hiding behind. I put my foot out, knife ready as he trips head long onto the ground.

A shot rings out. The masked man lays still.

“This is a day for the books!” Mac came to me cheerfully, again asking, “Are you ok?” I nodded going to check the bird.

“I thought you threw the net over us,” I commented as I smoothed the violet feathers of the sleeping bird.

“We’d never chance harming a living bird,” said Mac. “We thought you were lunch and needed help.”

Joe came over, waving his cell phone at them. “Help is on the way. We need to tag and assess this bird quickly before it wakes up. I’d like it to be gone before too many people are around.”

The men quickly assess the birds’ vitals and put a tracer tag on its’ foot, while I tell them the story of how I came to be with the bird.

“You’ve been to its’ nest?” Mac looks up from his work with wide eyes.

“Not by choice!” I reply. I hand him the next tool he needs to use.

“How do you know what I need?” Mac looks at me with raised brows. “Have you done this before?”

I shrug in confusion. “I don’t have any memory before waking in the meadow and this Island Hopper taking me.”

Mac finishes tagging the bird. “You look familiar. A Lacey Ashfield published an article in the Daily Bird Review about the White-winged Guan in Peru. It’s an incredible story.”

Lacey. Am I an ornithologist? I mull over his words as we work together to clear up the equipment. The bird comes out of the stupor and is startled to see Mac and Joe so close, and I reach out to soothe it.

“It’s ok,” I say, as I smooth it’s feathers gently. The bird seems to understand no harm is meant and rises. The injured wing is set but needs to heal. I start to gather nesting materials for it so it will be comfortable. It watches a moment and then runs toward the meadow at full speed and circles back again.

“I think it’s saying it can get around just fine without your nest,” laughs Mac.

“I think you’re right,” I smile, as the bird nudges my arm playfully. Then it runs off into the wooded area and disappears. At that moment several police cars drive up and armed police rush over at high alert. Mac and Joe explain what happened as I pull out my cell phone.

I look up Lacey Ashfield on the internet and immediately my face appears in an article about the ornithologist who travels the globe in search of rare birds to study and preserve their natural habitats. A photo in the background shows me with a Plains Wanderer in the grasslands of New South Wales. Flashes of memory are triggered at the sight and I swallow in relief.

“You ok?” Mac asks.

“Yes, never better!” I smile, knowing that I have a kindred spirit to help me in my life passion to help birds. Purple feathers of the Island Hopper flash through the trees letting me know I have a new bird friend also!