

Bird of Paradise Drums Beating

Chapter One

Brittany was in a hurry. She had to fit this power walk in before her class tonight. She hadn't gotten any exercise in yesterday and had felt sluggish. Now, partway through her walk, Brittany was invigorated. Arms pumping, head bobbing to her music, legs stretched, she moved with purpose.

As she passed a bend in the path something colourful caught her eye. Brittany turned her head but didn't slow her pace. In the distance she saw what could have been a bird. It was vibrant though, not drab like the other birds that hung around Kildonan Park.

Brittany smiled. She had a sudden memory of a trip to Mexico with her parents and grandparents. They'd gone to one of those bird places. It might have been an aviary. Brittany had loved the colours of the parrots and a pretty yellow bird she'd called Kissakee. That wasn't the real name of the bird though. What had it been called? Her mother would know. She'd have to ask later.

Brittany rounded the corner. Her eyes widened as she saw what appeared to be a Mexican parrot sitting directly in front of her on the path. "Wow," she murmured as she pulled her earbuds out then slowed her pace. The bird bobbed its head then did this strange little jumping motion.

Brittany laughed. What a riot. This was priceless. She was about to grab her iPod to videotape the show then decided against it. She didn't want to spook the bird.

The bird appeared to be dancing to Brittany's music. The beat was

definitely the same. As Brittany stopped to watch this spontaneous performance the song ended. The bird did a little curtsy. It was so cute. Brittany clapped her hands then gasped as the bird nodded in her direction.

What kind of bird was this? Someone must have trained it to perform.

The bird turned away, ran forward a few steps then took to the air. It circled over Brittany's head once then disappeared into the trees. As the bird rose into the air Brittany heard the words, '*What about the pain?*'

"That's a weird sendoff," Brittany said aloud. "What's pain got to do with it?" She chuckled as the words reminded her of the song, '*What's love got to do with it?*'

Brittany replaced her ear buds then picked up her pace again. She glanced at her watch, noted she still had time to finish her usual circuit then smiled as she mentally picked out an outfit for tonight. There was this really cute guy in her Biology class that had caught her eye the other day. Maybe they'd talk tonight at their lab....

"Have you got time for supper?" her mom called out as Brittany closed the door.

Brittany glanced at her watch. "Can I take your car to class?"

"Sure, I don't need it."

"Yeah, then I've got time. Thanks mom." Brittany gave her mom a quick kiss on the cheek then scurried off. "Gotta jump in the shower, change and get ready. I can eat before I leave. Later..."

Amy laughed then shook her head fondly. That one was always off to do something. Classes, power walks, studying, she had taken to university well. Even though it was early in the school year Brittany was sure to meet tons of people and then juggle her friends into the mix.

Andy walked in the door moments before Amy heard Brittany on the stairs.

“Perfect timing.” Amy beamed at Andy and Brittany. “Supper’s on.”

They chatted about what they’d done throughout the day over their meal.

“You’re especially pretty tonight Brittany, I like your outfit,” Amy commented as she watched Brittany shoveling food into her mouth. What Amy wanted to say was ‘*slow down, eat slower,*’ but she refrained since she knew that wouldn’t be a welcome comment.

“I’m glad your hair has grown out, I like it long like that,” Andy added. Brittany’s chestnut hair was currently shoulder length. Cropped short the year before the family had expressed mixed feelings about her hair length.

“Thanks mom, thanks dad.” Brittany grinned. “Hey, remember those birds we saw in Mexico when I was really little? Eric and Sam weren’t born yet. We went there with grandma and grandpa. There were parrots and cute tiny yellow ones I named Kissakee. That wasn’t their real name though. Do you remember what they were called?”

Andy laughed. “The ones that resemble Orioles, you followed them around whenever we spied one.”

They gazed at Amy, expectant.

Amy was the keeper of facts in the family. She stored away information to

be brought out later when someone in the family asked about a specific event, person, animal or whatever.

“Yes, their name is Kiskadee.”

“I knew you’d know that.” Brittany beamed at her mother. “I saw this bird today in Kildonan Park that reminded me of Kissakee. Only it was...” Brittany glanced at the clock on the wall then jumped up. “Oops, gotta run, see you guys later.”

She grabbed her purse, jacket and car keys then ran to the hall to get her shoes. Moments later they heard the door slam.

“She must have seen another Oriole.” Andy grinned. “Even though their yellow isn’t nearly as brilliant as they are in Mexico Brittany has always thought they were the same bird.”

They smiled as they shared the memory and gathered up the dishes.

Brittany walked into her lab class then glanced around before she headed toward a chair. Great, the cute guy was already seated. She headed in his direction, careful to appear nonchalant, not like a stalker.

“Is this seat taken?” She pointed at one of the seats beside him.

“No, go for it.”

Brittany smiled at him then got settled. It was great this bio class had a lab component. Maybe she’d get to be partners with the cute guy. The thought brought another smile to Brittany’s face as she reached down to grab her backpack. She laid out her notebook and a pen then threw the pack back on the

floor. The prof walked in moments later followed by some last minute students. The remaining chairs filled up quickly.

It was about an hour into the class. Brittany was daydreaming about the cute guy when something the prof said caught her attention.

“So take a quick break. Starting at the far wall the three people from the end will be lab partners tonight, then the next three and so on. This will be the same seating arrangement for all your labs. Take a moment to meet your new lab partners then grab a sheet for tonight’s assignment. You’ll measure sucrose solutions with the scale. You can take your break now. Be back in fifteen minutes.” The prof nodded then left the room.

Brittany turned toward the far wall then began to count three’s off in her head. Yes, cute guy was one of her partners. How cool was that?

“Guess we’re lab partners,” the man of her dreams said, “I’m Brad.”

“Brittany,” she replied.

“I’m Caitlin,” the girl on Brittany’s other side piped in. “Gotta go phone my boyfriend. See ya in fifteen.”

The rest of the class was like a scene out of a movie. At least it felt that way to Brittany. She was hyperaware of Brad as they measured and recorded each solution. Caitlin chattered away which helped ease any awkwardness that might have come up. Brittany learned way more about Caitlin than she needed to know but had to admit Caitlin did seem friendly, outgoing and pleasant. She also had a wicked sense of humour which resulted in the three of them bursting into laughter at the most inappropriate times. It turned out to be a fun lab and they

even managed to finish their assignment on time.

Brittany replayed the conversation in her mind as she drove home to her grandparents' house. She was glad she lived in Winnipeg with her grandparents while she went to university. If she had commuted from Gimli she likely wouldn't run into Brad as much. She made a mental note to hang around campus more as she daydreamed about Brad.

Brad had gorgeous dark hair, it curled every which way and she'd had to control herself not to run her fingers through it as they'd bent over their work. His voice was deep and husky. Shivers ran up and down her spine as she listened to him. She was glad Caitlin cracked so many jokes and kept up a running commentary so Brittany could covertly watch Brad. Every time he laughed she'd joined in, pleased he had a similar sense of humour.

She could hardly wait until their next biology lecture. Should she sit next to him or just nearby?

"I'm going for a walk. Do you want to join me?" Amy called to Andy as she prepared to go out.

"No, you go ahead."

Amy shook her head. She knew Andy would say that. What a creature of habit. She headed out the door, strode down the sidewalk then cut over toward the park.

The sudden effect of pain ripped through Amy's head then stopped her forward motion. Brilliant white lights flashed beyond her vision. Amy stumbled,

blinded. She gasped as her head throbbed. Pain seared her left temple as it spread across the top of her skull. Thump, thump, thump. Amy brought her hand up in a reflex motion, groaned then closed her eyes.

Amy frowned when she heard a distant voice call, *'What about the pain?'* She tried to focus in spite of her sudden headache. Startled, Amy's eyes flew open again. The overwhelming sense of pain passed, as if it had never been.

Amy was confused by the sudden absence of pain. It had been complete. It had overwhelmed her. Now.... there was nothing.

"Ow. What happened?" Amy uttered aloud. "The pain came from nowhere. Ow, that hurt. Is this something I need to worry about? How odd." Amy massaged her temple. She was careful at first then used more pressure when she realized the pain hadn't returned.

"Did you say something? I heard you talking. Hey, are you all right?" a woman called. The level of her voice rose with the last question.

Dazed, Amy slowly lifted her head. She turned toward the woman who stood a few feet away on the pathway.

"Have we met before?"

"No, I don't think so," the woman replied. "Are you OK?" she persisted. "You don't appear to be well. Maybe you should sit down."

The woman pointed to a nearby bench.

Grateful, Amy moved forward to take a seat. Her knees were shaky and her head tender. She touched the pain spot. It was gone but would it return? She made a mental note to book a doctor's appointment when she got home.

Amy stared at the woman before good manners intruded.

"I'm Amy. Thanks for helping me out there," she said by way of introduction.

"No problem. I'm Kara."

She joined Amy on the bench.

"You said something a moment ago?"

"No, it was nothing."

"Are you sure?"

Amy was surprised at the tone. Kara sounded skeptical.

"Well, no, it was just," Amy's words trailed off as she stared at Kara. Amy remembered the words '*what about the pain?*' then the searing sensation. Had Kara been nearby when Amy felt the pain and heard the words? Yes, Amy thought she had.

Did it mean something?

Kara interrupted Amy's thoughts. "I thought I heard you mumble something about pain. Was that it?"

Shocked by Kara's ability to read her mind, Amy hesitated. She sat upright then mumbled. "Yeah, well, I mean, no, well, yeah."

Kara crossed her arms, her expression puzzled.

"Which one is it?"

"I'm not sure," Amy hedged. "What I mean is, well, it's like this." Amy spread her hands out. "I heard something, a distant voice. I don't know what, exactly. It was about pain and it floated by on the breeze. It happened just before

you called to me on the pathway.”

It was Amy's turn to stare. Amy didn't want to mention what she'd heard and felt aloud. To talk about it would make it more real. She bit her lip to stop the further flow of words.

Kara was startled. With wide eyes she covered her hand with her mouth. A troubled “Oh,” escaped from Kara's mouth in spite of the hand that covered it.

Amy waited but Kara didn't elaborate.

As she observed Kara, Amy pegged her somewhere in her late thirties. She had clear skin, no wrinkles and striking blue eyes. Kara's dark hair was long, past her shoulders. Her outfit was questionable from a fashion standpoint. A beige cardigan covered her shoulders like a shawl. It complimented her scarlet tee-shirt dress. A wide turquoise belt cinched at her waist and yellow high top sneakers completed the ensemble. Amy thought the clothes were eccentric. Kara did have flair though. Amy never would have worn the outfit yet Kara managed to carry it off.

How did clothes suit one woman while they were ridiculous on others? Stature seemed to have something to do with it. Kara was taller than the average woman and held herself very erect.

Amy shook her head. Who cared about clothes? Why was she unfocused? Had the pain made her woozy? What had they been discussing?

Ah, the pain, that was it. Amy's pain remark had bothered Kara. Amy shrugged. So what? She may as well leave. Kara meant nothing to her. They'd only just met.

Amy stood. "It was good to meet you. I have to go." She strode off, quick, feeling a bit rude, not enough to turn back though.

Amy rolled her head in one direction then the other while she walked. Pleased to note she felt no ill effects from her earlier discomfort Amy continued her fitness walk. Her pace was more relaxed than before.

Amy heard footsteps pound behind her. Rather than move to one side, she quickened her pace. She put her head down then forged ahead. She'd rise to the challenge and walk faster than the person behind her.

The person behind increased their pace. She heard the stranger gain on the short distance between them. Amy slowed then moved to one side to allow the person behind her to pass.

Amy was taken aback when Kara drew up alongside her.

"Oh, it's you. What a surprise."

Kara stopped dead in her tracks then glared at Amy.

"I'm sorry," Amy apologized. "Did you want to talk to me? I know I left but I had to get away."

Kara frowned.

Amy's mother claimed frowning increased wrinkles. From what she'd witnessed so far, Kara should be covered in creases. Instead, Kara had skin smooth as satin. Had Kara taken advantage of cosmetic surgery? Who cared? When had she become so unfocused? It was annoying.

"Why did you leave?" Kara blurted.

"I don't know. I told you. I just needed to get away. I mean, well..." Amy

stopped. Why did she feel it necessary to explain her actions to a stranger?

Kara stared at Amy. Her gaze penetrated Amy's foggy thoughts.

Against her better judgment Amy rushed to talk. Words tumbled out of her mouth as if separate from her thoughts, torn from her without prior knowledge. "I had to get away. It's strange. I mean, I don't even know you but I had to escape. I'm sorry."

"Tell me more."

Against her better judgment Amy blurted out, "All right, it's like this." She stopped, shuffled from one foot to the other, hesitated. Amy knew procrastination put off the inevitable. "I don't know how to say this so I just will." Amy felt like a wild woman and knew her eyes bulged out in an unbecoming manner. Her voice rose. It was unsteady.

"When I passed you on the path I heard, '*what about the pain?*' float by on the breeze. Then I experienced a searing pain from my temple to the top of my skull." Amy touched the spot with her hand. When she removed her hand Amy stared at it, as if unaware her hand was an extension of her body.

Kara narrowed her eyes, stared at Amy for a moment then turned and headed over to a nearby bench.

With reluctance Amy joined Kara.

Amy watched people walk by. They laughed and carried on conversations. The normal actions reassured her.

In contrast, Kara and Amy sat in silence for a while. The quiet settled over them. Amy began to feel at peace, companionable almost with this stranger. How

odd.

When Kara spoke, Amy was sure something cold and unwanted joined them.

“You could have the gift,” Kara announced.

“What?” Amy croaked. She crossed her arms for warmth as a sudden chill penetrated her skin. Goosebumps rose on her arms as if a great gust of wind passed by. Yet when Amy glanced up, the trees had an unnatural stillness. The sensation was eerie. She shuddered.

“You felt the pain and heard those words on the wind, didn’t you?”

Reluctant to admit it Amy bent her head down then murmured, “Yes.”

“That’s it then.”

“What do you mean, that’s it? What’s it?”

Amy locked eyes with Kara. She felt as if her soul was exposed to this stranger. Each layer was peeled away in a gentle yet insistent strip until only her essential core remained. The exploration didn’t feel like a violation, more like a sociable investigation. Amy was amazed she’d allowed a stranger this depth of scrutiny. It was alien to her nature. Amy felt as if she’d just been probed.

Kara broke contact first. She stood up then announced, “I have to go. We’ll talk again another day.”

Startled, Amy jumped up.

Kara turned to walk up the path.

“But,” Amy stammered.

Torn between following Kara and heading back to Andy, Amy felt deflated,

like something momentous had been about to happen then got ripped away. The suddenness made Amy tired. Disheartened, Amy headed back to her parents' house. Not wanting to appear rude again, she turned to bid Kara good-bye.

Kara had disappeared.

Instead, a bird stood on the path. It held Amy's gaze.

Amy stared at the bird, intrigued by its brilliant colours. Reds, blues and yellows melded with one another like a rainbow or a kaleidoscope. While she stared, Amy heard something beat in the background. Intent now, she raised her head to listen.

Amy heard the beat of a drum far off in the distance.

There was something about the colour combination of the bird. Whatever it was eluded Amy. It nagged at her. There was some link, an item it reminded her of. The thought fluttered, vague like a cobweb trembling in the shadows.

Red, blue and yellow, they were simple colours. What country had that flag? Amy conjured up countries and their appropriate flag colours. She shook her head then murmured, "No, that's not it. It's something more immediate."

She glanced across to houses in the distance. Flowers, hedges, a fence, bordered the walkway. If she focused, perhaps the image would become clearer.

"Red, blue and yellow," Amy whispered hoping for a clue. Nothing nearby had that colour combination. It was something else then. She must have seen it earlier. Not too long ago though.

"Ah hah." Amy felt triumphant as she raised her arm to congratulate herself. "Nah can't be." Amy lowered her arm again. What an outrageous idea!

As Amy dismissed the thought, she heard the drumbeat fade away.

Amy turned then headed off, tired and ready for bed. Her feet dragged and shoulders ached as if a great burden had been laid upon them. Her earlier feeling of elation had been replaced by disappointment.

If Amy and her daughter Brittany had shared notes about the bird that night it would have avoided a lot of confusion over the next few days.

Chapter Two

The following evening, Amy was drawn to the pathway at Kildonan Park again. Amy loved how Winnipeg had so many walking trails. She'd walked a short distance when a musical sound caught her attention.

It was a bird, singing a song of sweetness, love and harmony. The pureness of the melody made her heart ache. Closing her eyes, Amy focused on the song, her mind a blank canvas open to the harmonious tune.

Amy had never heard such emotion from a bird. Lifted to an ultimate height she crashed down when the birdsong turned sad and painful. Tender notes seemed to reach within the depth of Amy's core. On the verge of fulfillment she craved more. When the sound broke off without warning, Amy cried out. Her heart ached as if a great love had turned from her affection without explanation. How could something so simple make you hurt when it ceased to exist?

Amy's eyes flew open. A bird sat on the path in front of her. She assumed it was the same bird that had sung the melodious notes. Curious now, Amy watched it. It could be the vibrant bird she'd seen the day before.

Intrigued by the bird, Amy stared. Where had it come from? As she contemplated it Amy was distracted by a distant sound. It was a drum, the same as yesterday. Was the drum real or the pounding of blood in her ears? Why had this bird popped up two days in a row in the same spot? Were the two events related?

Amy meant to go but her hand reached out of its own accord toward the bird. The drumming increased in tempo. With a start, Amy realized her posture

implored the bird to come closer. Why was she drawn to it?

She trembled then drew her hand back. “No,” she said aloud then turned to go. Amy wavered as she realized the bird frightened her. Desperate, she opened her mouth to talk to it. Part of her longed to approach the bird yet her logical part wanted to flee and never see it again. In turmoil, Amy walked forward then stepped back.

Frightened by the intensity of her feelings, unsure what to do next, Amy stumbled about like a sleepwalker. She turned from the bird convinced she should leave. Again she wandered back, pulled by an invisible string like a reluctant puppet guided by its master.

Throwing her hands up, Amy covered her face, almost weeping with frustration. Why did she feel this way? It was as if the bird controlled her or had set up a force field Amy had walked into. Powerless, she was torn by conflicting emotions.

“Do you like it?” someone asked behind her.

The drums faded.....

Amy tore her hands from her face then whirled to confront the speaker. Speechless, Amy stared at the woman before her.

“It has the tail of a Bluebird, the brilliant reds of a Scarlet Tanager and the yellows of an Oriole. Of course it sings like a male Nightingale. The colours indicate the male species rather than female. Have you ever noticed how dull female birds are compared to the brilliance of the males?”

“Huh? What?”

Shaking herself like a wet dog just out of water, Amy tried to focus on Kara. Where had she come from?

With a quick glance over her shoulder Amy’s eyes scanned the area behind her. She needed to see the bird, now.

A blank path greeted Amy like a slate wiped clean of memories. The air was silent, the birdsong and drums had both faded away. Had she dreamt them?

Disappointment washed over Amy. She felt like a child eagerly waiting for a present that finds out today is not the day for gifts. She had to sit down.

Amy spied a nearby bench then headed toward it. Her knees shook and her body felt quivery. Amy wished she were alone. She needed time to recover, to ponder why she’d felt so overpowered by the bird. Instead, she’d have to talk to this stranger again. With reluctance, Amy lifted her head then gazed at Kara.

Piercing blue eyes met Amy’s.

Amy sighed. With little enthusiasm she uttered, “Hello Kara.”

Why had this woman popped up again and where had the bird gone? Twice they’d met at the same spot. Although she didn’t believe in coincidence, Kara stood before Amy, a living, breathing, twist of fate.

Amy stared at Kara. Something about her was intriguing. Yet Amy felt repelled at the same time. Puzzled, Amy continued to scrutinize Kara.

Kara stood there. She held her head to one side as if curious about something. The movement reminded Amy of the bird.

The bird confused Amy. Did a connection exist between Kara and the

bird? What was up with the same colour combination? Yesterday Kara had worn red, blue and yellow. Amy noted Kara wore the identical shades today. They were the same colours as the bird.

Kara was quiet while Amy stared at her. Kara reminded her of a butterfly, poised to flutter by flowers just before it settled on the petal of its choice. Why had Kara mentioned a gift yesterday? Amy had never had special powers.

Amy frowned. Why was she so unfocused, doubting everything? As questions piled up, they cluttered her mind like newspapers in need of the recycle bin.

Kara broke into her thoughts. "I should go. Perhaps we'll meet again tomorrow night? Bye."

Kara walked away without another word.

Amy turned to say good-bye but Kara had disappeared again.

With weary limbs, Amy stood to retrace her steps back to her parent's house. Desperate and tired, she longed to talk to her husband Andy.

As she walked home in the evening twilight Amy watched lights of the city blink around her. They reminded her of twinkling stars dancing in the sky. It was hard to see stars in the city. There were too many lights.

At home, in Gimli, the stars were plentiful on any given night. Even though it was nice of Amy's parents to let her and her husband Andy stay in their house in Winnipeg, Amy preferred her home in Gimli. Of course staying at her parent's house instead of a hotel was a better option. She couldn't complain. So what if the stars were less ample in Winnipeg?

Relieved to be away from Kara, Amy increased her pace, eager to join Andy and share her strange meeting. She wanted to hear what Andy thought of Kara and the bird.

Andy listened to Amy's version of her chance meetings with Kara. A curious man, he held his head to one side. It reminded Amy of Kara and the bird. Andy focused his clear blue eyes on her. It was one of the things Amy loved about Andy. He paid rapt attention when she spoke.

"The bird seems to be the key to your puzzle. Perhaps the complexity of the bird expresses the interrelated parts of the woman Kara."

"Huh? What?"

At times Andy talked like a psychology professor. He had an amazing ability to reason things out but didn't always explain himself in simple, direct terms.

"Maybe Kara relates to the bird somehow. The bird could be significant to her. You've seen Kara and the bird twice on the same path. When Kara mentioned your hidden gift she could have been inviting you to ask questions or help solve her puzzle.

I think you're right Amy. There's more to Kara than you've seen so far. I wonder if Kara wears the same colours every day or it's a coincidence she's worn them yesterday and today. If you see her again you'll have to note how she's dressed."

"What about the drum I hear when I see the bird?"

“Ah, well that’s another part of the mystery, isn’t it?”

Unsure if the conversation with Andy cleared matters up or raised more questions Amy was torn. Should she walk by the river again tomorrow night? Did she want to cultivate a relationship with Kara or avoid her? Amy went to bed unsure what to think.

Amy awoke from a nightmare near dawn. Bathed in sweat, words echoed in Amy’s mind. They reminded her of Kara. *‘The pain, the pain is unbearable.’*

“What pain?” Amy uttered.

While she lay in bed images from her nightmare filtered through Amy’s mind. They reached out, tantalizing, yet ambiguous. Amy recalled hazy clouds. Surrounded by women, they’d tried to grasp at her. With arms outstretched, muscles taut and mouths wide open the women implored Amy to come closer. United as one, they uttered a soulful litany, an aching epitaph. *‘The pain, help us with the pain. It’s unbearable…….’*

Ripples coursed through Amy’s body, an electric current generated by the agony of generations. The sensation ceased, as suddenly as it had begun. Her mind cleared.

The anguish evaporated into thin air, back to where it had come, like a wisp in the dawn. Amy realized the nightmare and her encounters with Kara had to be related. A visit to Kara seemed in order. Amy had to know more about *‘the pain.’* It didn’t matter if she was ambivalent about Kara. Amy’s curiosity had been aroused……