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A Watch of Nightingales

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Edited by Briana St. James.

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*X-treme* titles differ from E-rated titles only in plot premise and storyline execution. Stories designated with the letter X tend to contain difficult or controversial subject matter not for the faint of heart.

# *A WATCH OF NIGHTINGALES*

Sahara Kelly

### *Acknowledgements*

For all those who believe that dreams are more than the brain's simple attempt to deal with day-to-day life. And for all those whose dreams have haunted them, stayed with them and taken them to places they never imagined – nor ever understood.

For my husband and son, who are still trying to understand that being a writer is a dream come true for me – along with the occasional nightmare now and again.

And, as always, for my friend and writing partner who shares my dreams and understands my nightmares.

### *Author's Note*

Once again, the title of this story is taken from an “old” English expression denoting a flock of birds – in this case, nightingales. Such collective nouns are, sadly, no longer in use these days, which is a darned shame. The picturesque images offered by these phrases...an Exaltation of Larks, a Charm of Hummingbirds, a Deceit of Lapwings...are gloriously descriptive and uniquely delightful. It's sad that our language is slipping so rapidly away from the richly elegant and into the mundane – but understandable. Expressions like these wouldn't fit our world of thirty-second sound bites or downloadable video clips.

The nightingale itself is a casualty of our times. A smallish bird, native to England and Europe, it is migratory and breeds as far east as Southwest Asia. The chilly winters will find it heading south for Southern Africa.

Although it will sing during daylight hours, it is distinct in that it will sing late at night in the darkness of a summer evening. It is, of course, especially noticeable at that time, when other voices are silent. The male serenades its mate at the peak of breeding

season with a loud and impressive song, featuring a wide range of whistles and trills. While it once ranged freely across Britain, its numbers have dwindled and there are now, by some estimates, as few as five thousand nightingales still remaining in Southeast England.

Oddly enough—and for your trivia file—the nightingale is the national bird of Iran.

## Chapter One

"Who should I sign this to?"

"Just to Joanie, please. Oh, Miss Donner, I can't tell you what a privilege this is—to *meet you in person.*"

The woman tittered and gushed as Marianne signed her pen name on the flyleaf of her latest novel. "Thank you, Joanie. You're very kind."

"No, really. I've read all your books several times. It's as if you take me back to the Regency—to England in the 1800s. I don't know how you do it. But it's almost like you've *been* there."

Marianne smiled again. "I'm glad you enjoy them."

*Stock answer.* It was hard to say anything else. The truth would have shocked the hell out of her readers who just enjoyed the latest Maura Donner romance. Nobody knew that Maura Donner *had* been there.

She went there damn near every night in her dreams.

Marianne pinched the bridge of her nose and realized that the book signing was winding down. Joanie had been the last reader in the line and it was with a sigh of relief that Marianne glanced over at Shelley and gave her the "cut" sign. It was enough. They were done.

There were the obligatory thanks to be exchanged, a brief chat with the manager of the little bookstore, a few remaining copies to be signed and, with any luck, sold later on. They would sell too, mused Marianne as she scrawled her pen name over the books. She was blessed in that regard, at least. Romances were always hot and, at the moment, the current craze was for Regency historicals. An award-winning movie with a couple of huge names had helped fuel the fire.

No, Maura Donner wasn't complaining.

But Marianne Donovan was tired to the bone. Weary from lack of sleep and interrupted nights when a scream choked in her throat and woke her once more. She couldn't fall back into her rest after that, but paced her apartment, occasionally writing down some details she'd remembered.

The way the carriages sounded as they rolled over the cobbled streets. Or the reflection of the watchman's lamp as he walked the rain-soaked roads.

She couldn't, however, find the words to describe the one thing that always lingered long after the dream had ended.

The song of a nightingale.

And although she'd tried many times, there was one other memory that haunted her and defied the written word.

*Him.*

The Honorable Christian Lawrence. He of the blue eyes and flying red-brown hair. He of the hard muscles and soft lips. He...

Just thinking about him made Marianne shudder and she dragged her mind away from her private obsession and back to the business at hand.

"Thanks for helping, Shel. It was a good afternoon, I think." She put her pen back in her purse.

"Yep. Lots of nice folks came out. Shows what a draw you are." Shelley passed Marianne her raincoat. "Getting them out on a dull day like this—well, hell, honey. You're a name writer now, I guess. I'd better get used to it."

Marianne grinned. "Yep. Fame and fortune await us, oh agent extraordinaire. We'll just sit and rake in the bucks."

"Nope. No sitting for you. Writing, more writing. I need that next manuscript of yours by the end of next month, remember?"

"You're a wicked slave driver, taking fifteen percent of my soul." Marianne walked to the door and looked out at the rain-slicked parking lot. "And I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Me neither." Shelley touched her shoulder. "You try those sleeping pills?"

"Yeah. Didn't work. I slept a bit, but still woke up feeling like crap."

"Hey." Shelley moved away, heading for a notice board where local flyers decorated a good-sized piece of poster board. "If all else fails..." She pulled one free of its pin and started reading. "Perhaps it's time to try an alternate therapy."

Marianne rolled her eyes. "Not more herbs, please. They made me sick the last time. And that icky valerian tea was only good for making me pee. I can't get into the lotus position, don't want to contemplate my navel—which has to be about the most boring thing on my entire boring body—did I forget anything?"

There was silence as Shelley finished the flyer, then she turned and looked at Marianne. "Yeah. There is something else, apparently. This." She waved the flyer. "*Dream therapy.*"

"Uhh..." Marianne blinked. "Dream therapy? What the f—what the *hell's* that?"

"Dunno. But if it'll help you get a good night's sleep, who cares?" She passed the pale blue sheet to Marianne. "Read it. Call them. Who knows?" She turned. "I gotta scoot. Meeting Robin for drinks and dinner."

"Okay. You drive safely." Marianne followed her into the parking lot and ducked into her own car, still holding the flyer.

She put the key in the ignition, but something caught her attention and she turned on the light above her to take a better look. It was a bird—a raven by the looks of it—and it was apparently the logo for this dream therapy place.

Or group. Or whatever it was. She frowned at the simple phrases.



*Do you dream? Are your dreams troubling or disturbing in any way? Do you dream in colors? Remember sounds or tastes or smells? Are you having trouble sleeping? If you answered yes to any of these questions, perhaps we can help answer some of your concerns.*

Underneath was a title of a book, *Dreams and Dream Wanderers*, by Jake Corvo and Renny P. Corvo. There followed the obligatory quotes from respected sources, a grainy image of the cover, also featuring a raven and some rather fluffy clouds, and an email address where the interested could obtain more information.

On a whim, Marianne removed her key and left her car, dashing back through the rain to the store.

"Forget something, Miss Donner?" The manager looked puzzled.

"No, I just thought I'd check and see if you've got this book in stock? *Dreams and Dream Wanderers*?" She waved the flyer. "I just read the blurb and it sounds interesting..."

"Hmm." The manager looked at the paper and checked the title once more. "Seems as if I saw it over here somewhere." He rummaged behind the counter. "Yes, here we are. Local printer—came right to us, since we like to support our community writers."

He held up the book triumphantly. "This is it, right?"

The cover was more impressive than the flyer had shown. The raven stared expressionlessly at Marianne from its perch above the clouds. And behind it was an eye, vague and misty, but staring as intently as the raven.

"I'll take it."

\* \* \* \* \*

The first few chapters were well-written but mundane, telling Marianne nothing she didn't already know. She had grabbed some leftover pizza, a glass of wine and her new book when she'd finally reached home, happy to close the door of her small townhouse behind her and shut out the noise of the city.

For some reason, she consistently relished the quiet that welcomed her, glad that there were no roommates with radios blaring or the TV interrupting her quiet solitude. It was almost as if the trappings of civilization deafened her on occasion.

She shrugged. She'd always been a loner. Now she could simply accept that and enjoy it. Royalty checks had made this little hideaway possible and she was happy in her end unit tucked away at the rear of a nicely private development a couple of miles outside town.

The small fireplace had cost extra, but tonight—with the rain still pattering down outside—it was worth every penny.

Marianne curled her feet beneath her favorite blanket and read on, her wineglass half empty next to her.

These theories were interesting. The idea that the resting mind could tap into a “realm” that defied current thinking about the psychology of dreams. And, for that matter, existence itself.

Dr. Jake Corvo proposed the theory that people's dreams, if of a certain nature, might well be the shadows of energies remaining in what he loosely termed the soul of the dreamer. These energies might have come from experiences long forgotten, or from matters unfinished in one's life.

Consequent chapters delved heavily into the psychology and Marianne skipped through those, a bit out of her depth when it came to clinical discussions of the human mind and the way neurons and synapses interacted with each other.

But toward the end, Dr. Corvo wandered away from the traditional and into the realms of what he readily confessed was simply an idea.

He suggested that the most disturbing of dreams, the ones that remained vividly in the waking mind, might well be reflections from a past existence. Some experiences, he expounded, could leave a “footprint” on a soul. This footprint would be carried throughout this soul's passage across time and its current “host” until whatever had precipitated it was corrected.

He admitted it was probably outrageous and might well negate the usefulness of the rest of the book, since it would likely get him written off as a crackpot. His prose was honest, straightforward and simply presented the idea without undue embellishment. He also mentioned one thing that caught Marianne's attention.

*"I have personally experienced such dreams. Vividly colorful dreams of a past that was not mine, nor even in this century. I am at a loss to explain them other than as part of the phenomena suggested above. My wife will verify my assertion.*

*She also assures me that, most of the time, I'm not mad."*

Marianne's lips curved into a smile. She liked his style. There wasn't much else in the book, just a reference to the research center he and his wife had opened and a web address.

It was enough to send her to her computer and the website.

There she found pictures of Dr. Corvo and his wife, an attractive couple, a few compliments from satisfied clients, which told her little or nothing and an invitation to email them if there were any questions.

*"Questions? Dr. Corvo, you have no idea..."*

Without a second thought, Marianne opened an email, addressed it and began to write, pouring out her nightmarish experiences with verve and style as befitted a writer of romance novels.

It was damn near a novel when it was done and sent—and nowhere near complete. She had related how she'd begun these dreams as a girl, then found them intensifying, taking greater form, showing greater detail...always waking her, sometimes touching her so deeply she would not sleep for fear they would return.

And now they had reached a peak.

For every dream ended the same way. With the death of Christian Lawrence and the song of a nightingale.

But she couldn't put that in an email. She could barely think about it in the privacy of her own mind. She was afraid — scared of the emotions she experienced, terrified that the truth of the matter boiled down to one simple fact.

She was in love with a man who didn't exist.

## Chapter Two

*"Christian, where are you?"*

"Here, Mary Anne. Can't you see me?" His laugh sounded from behind a tree and he peered around it, a grin lighting his amazing eyes. "You are indeed a shortsighted miss. I've been here all the time."

She ran to the tree, only to find him gone once more. "Christian, for heaven's sake..."

Hands clasped her waist, palms hot through the thin silk of her gown. "I'm here, love. Always here for you." He spun her around into his arms and pulled her close, his lips kissing away the words of protest from her mouth.

"Ohhh, Christian..." It was a sigh of pleasure as he kissed her again, deep, lingering kisses that lit a fire deep in her belly. She wanted him so *much*.

For the thousandth time, she prayed they could wed soon, that this need for secrecy in their meetings could be eliminated. She wanted to walk by his side in the sunshine, share his meals, laugh with him and lie with him all night. It wasn't much to ask, she hoped. Just the chance to lead an ordinary life like an ordinary woman. To be with the right man forever.

It was almost as if they'd been destined to meet—the rainy ride, the thrown shoe and both seeking shelter at the same little inn. Within hours, they were already half in love with each other and less than a month later they'd lain together and given each other all they had. It was wrong, Mary Anne knew—very wrong. But the passion had risen so fast between them on that night, they'd been unable to hold it in check.

And once freed, their desires knew no bounds.

To touch, to kiss, to learn new places and new sensations—Christian and Mary Anne embarked on a voyage of sensual pleasures most willingly.

And, of course, Christian made absolutely sure that Mary Anne understood she was *his*. She did. She couldn't imagine even touching somebody else's lips with hers now. She belonged to Christian—her lips, her body—everything she was belonged to Christian.

It was almost painful, this need for someone. An ache that wouldn't go away—a hunger never sated.

The question of marriage was almost an afterthought. Neither Mary Anne nor Christian doubted that it would occur. Christian asked, Mary Anne accepted—it was the way things were going to be.

She'd answered him with her lips as she said *yes*, along with her heart and her body, sinking with him into the soft grasses of the forest and loving him with all the new skills she'd eagerly learned.

She took his cock into her mouth without a second thought, knowing it gave him enormous pleasure. He would use his lips on her later too. She liked that every bit as much as he did.

And, after a while, they'd make love, slowly perhaps at first, but always riding a long frenzied spiral to their peaks. It just got better and better between them, the sparks flying as soon as their gazes met, the heat rising with the first touch of their hands.

Oh yes, loving Christian Lawrence was a wonderful thing. Being loved by him was even better.

The only fly in the ointment was, of course, Christian's background. Although a decorated officer in his own right and possessed of a tidy little estate near Mary Anne's parents, an ugly truth still remained.

Christian Lawrence was, to many, a nameless bastard.

And to Mary Anne's parents, there was no more terrible obstacle to overcome.

The Reverend Danton severely reprimanded his only daughter when she confessed to speaking with Christian. When she slipped and referred to him by his first name, her mother was horrified.

“You’ll call him *Captain Lawrence*, Mary Anne. You must *never* use his first name—what on *earth* were you thinking? You should not be speaking with him. *Ever*. Silly girl. Now go and change into that pretty white dimity dress. Your father’s curate will be here any minute and your father wants you present for tea.”

Mrs. Danton was obedient to her husband in all things and gave Mary Anne little leeway to be otherwise. Nobody at the Vicarage knew of a slim figure slipping through the darkness to meet with a strikingly handsome officer. If they did, they remained mum about it.

Yes, the state of bliss that existed between Mary Anne and Christian was all that was wonderful—and yet over it hung the shadow of disapproval and the threat of separation. Mary Anne was to turn twenty-one within weeks and fully intended to spend her birthday in the arms of her husband. Attaining her majority would enable them to utilize the special license Christian had obtained in London.

She was old, relatively speaking, to be unwed. But the silent knowledge that her parents intended for her to wed her father’s curate lurked like a dark cloud on her horizon. The few eligible gentlemen in the area hadn’t come up to scratch in her mother’s opinion and the hoped-for invitation to attend a few select London balls in the company of a maiden aunt had provided nothing but two weeks of gazing at the sights. She’d seen Almack’s from the outside only, had briefly ventured into Devonshire House only to find the Devonshires were not receiving that day and had left the capital with a few pleasant memories, but little else. Certainly no proposal from any titled gentleman swept off his feet by her looks.

Thus, Mary Anne had attained the ripe old age of twenty and remained without a husband. Her parents determined that such a course of action could not be allowed to continue. The curate had only recently been appointed, was widowed and possessed of

a sizeable estate and had simply taken on the job of curate as a method to meet eligible women to bear him children. Preferably beginning with an heir.

He was also fat, well over forty, had too few teeth and too many chins. He was not to Mary Anne's taste at all, since he'd shown a tendency to "instruct" her how to go on when they'd met.

Her hackles had shot up like a dog confronting a badger. It hadn't been a propitious meeting. Her parents, of course, had cared not one whit. She would do as she was bid, whether it was attending all the Sunday services without respite, or marrying the man they'd selected for her.

She did the first and had done so for as long as she could remember. In fact, she'd obeyed her parents in most everything they'd insisted she do, or learn or wear. The only transgression had happened when a pair of blue eyes met hers and her heart vanished from her own keeping.

And when they'd spent a few stolen nighttime hours together, wrapped in nothing but their passion and Christian's cloak, Mary Anne knew the die of her life was cast and there would be no going back.

No matter what lay ahead, Mary Anne would always remain true to her one and only lover, Christian Lawrence. She did not worry about the inevitable outrage that would follow the announcement of her marriage, nor did she care particularly if her parents disowned her.

There was even a tiny place in her brain that told her she'd be better off without them. Spending her life with the man she loved, and who loved her, was infinitely preferable to an existence that would render her miserable and shackled to the wrong husband.

That tiny place had expanded, solidified, grown into a garden burgeoning with the flowers of delight she and Christian shared.

They loved, passionately, whenever the opportunity arose. Christian protested on occasion, begging to be allowed to run away with her — right that minute if necessary.



She refused, knowing if they didn't wait for her majority, the marriage could – and would, most likely – be annulled. It was only a few short months, she told Christian. Only a few short months of stolen meetings, quick and desperate embraces, loving that sent her legs into convulsions, collapsed her lungs and made her heart stand still. Whether deep in the forest or in a deserted barn on fresh hay – it made no difference. Mary Anne couldn't get enough of his body, his lips, his cock and his desire.

And as the days drew in, her birthday neared.

The sense of urgency grew, binding Mary Anne in its coils, making her nervous and edgy. She couldn't eat, her stomach churned at the least little thing and she found herself bursting into tears almost without provocation.

Two days before her birthday, she realized the truth.

The day of her birthday, she packed a small bundle, crept silently from the house with it tucked away in a basket and headed for Lawrence Manor.

Only to see a crowd gathered at the crossroads and something dark dangling from the gnarled tree that marked the roads. Blackness swirled across her vision as her world crashed into pieces around her.

Hanging from the makeshift gallows was a body – a body that had once been Christian Lawrence.

As always, Marianne Donovan woke with a scream of horror strangling in her throat, tears pouring down her cheeks and a sense of grief that even she could not find the words to describe.

Once again the dream had caught her up in its coils and ruined her night. There would be no more rest for her.

\* \* \* \* \*

The neat house tucked away in the hills west of her home looked welcoming to Marianne as she locked her car and took stock of her surroundings. It certainly didn't look like any kind of formal institute, but more of a smallish country estate. There were

a couple of smaller buildings—garages or sheds maybe—that could well once have housed horses or livestock. The main building was very Colonial in style, yet with a cheerful and more relaxed appearance than the center-entry type of older home she was used to. A couple of additions had softened the symmetry, ancient-looking maples shaded tall windows and a solidly lush growth of ivy clambered enthusiastically up one side of the front entry.

Tentatively, she rang the bell. This could be a massive mistake, a stupidly foolish attempt to solve her nightmares with more absurd new-age nonsense...

"Hello."

The woman smiling at her looked — *normal* — greenish eyes crinkled with humor and a mass of curly white-blond frizz that was barely tamed by a clip here and there. Jeans and a sweatshirt completed the look of casual friendliness. *Thank the Lord.*

"You're Maura Donner, aren't you? I adore your books and your picture doesn't do you justice. C'mon in. I'm so happy you're here."

"I...er...well, thank you." Marianne grinned. She couldn't help it. The smile on this woman's face was enchanting. "You must be the *other* Dr. Corvo?" Stepping inside she watched the woman nod.

"Yep. Call me Renny, otherwise it gets confusing. Especially since neither Jake nor I are medical doctors. Please don't have a heart attack while you're here, okay? I'm an archeologist, he's a psychologist. Too many *ologists* in one family, if you ask me."

Marianne's chuckle echoed Renny's as she followed her down a hallway to a gorgeous library that almost sent the writer in her over the edge of bliss. "*Holy sh* — I mean — well, *wow*."

"*Holy shit* is good. I take it you like it?" Renny looked amused. "Jake and I built this on to the house, just finished it actually. We both love books, had a helluva collection individually, so when we got married it was a case of build ourselves a library or drown in unlabeled boxes of miscellaneous literature."

Marianne wandered around the room, her fingers caressing the spines of everything from weighty psychological reference books to paperbacks creased with the signs of many readings. “Not a *terrible* fate, I suppose...” She crossed to the fireplace, admiring the carved wood mantel, then turned to the wall where afternoon sunlight was pouring in through tall French doors leading out to a small, but cheerful, garden.

The scent of chrysanthemums reminded her that autumn was established, although not too many trees had yet turned to their fall splendor. This was a room for all seasons, she realized. In the winter, it would be cozy and lit by the crackling of a warm fire. In the spring and summer, the doors would open to admit the scents and sounds of nature—and now the doors were still open, but would probably be closed at night as the temperatures began their dip ever downward with the increasing hours of darkness.

Renny was quiet, as if understanding Marianne’s need to acquaint herself with her surroundings, simply seating herself in a large overstuffed chair and tucking her legs up underneath her.

Finally, Marianne returned to the center of the room. “I’d kill for this, you do realize that, don’t you?”

Renny smiled. “I had a feeling it would appeal to a writer. We didn’t honestly plan it for that reason, of course, but since both Jake and I love books—it just happened to turn out like this. I figured you’d be more comfortable here than anyplace else. Of course, we can go into the parlor, if you’d rather? Or his study? It’s where Jake usually meets our guests...” Her voice trailed off.

“Hell, no. This is...a home away from home for me. You’re right. It appeals on so many levels. I could certainly write like the devil in a room like this.”

“I’m glad.” Renny nodded at the couch beside her. “Come sit down, relax a bit and tell me about yourself. Jake’s on his way – got held up with a phone call.”

“Another client?” Marianne shed her jacket and let it lie casually on the arm of the couch beside her purse as she sat down.

"Nope. Somebody much more important. The plumber." Renny rolled her eyes. "In the overall scheme of the universe, I reckon plumbers sit at the right hand of God. They screw up and life goes seriously awry."

"Saint Freeflow of the Plunger. Anger him and your life turns to shit."

"*Literally.*" Renny's laugh rang out. "I'm so glad you're here. I like the way you think." She turned to a low table beside her. "And as I said, I adore your books. Got a couple right here, as a matter of fact..."

Marianne blinked as Renny pulled two of Maura Donner's latest books from the untidy pile covering the dark wood surface. "Good grief. You read Regencies?"

"Sure, why not? I love 'em. Yours particularly. You have a gift for taking the reader back to that period, letting them inside the characters. Letting them *live* the romance, not just read about it..." Renny paused. "I know you from these..." she held up a book, "as Maura Donner. Is that your real name?"

"No. Please call me Marianne. There are times when I need to be Maura Donner, like at book signings or conventions. But here—now—I need to be Marianne Donovan."

"Because Marianne Donovan is troubled by her dreams."

Marianne jumped at the sound of the voice behind her. She spun in her seat to see a tall man observing her intently with dark, dark eyes. His expression was friendly, though, his pose casual—leaning against the doorjamb with his arms crossed.

He moved as she watched him warily. "Hi. I'm Jake."

She stood, reaching for the hand he offered. "Um, hello. Yes, I'm Marianne."

"And you've met my wife." Jake strolled to the fireplace and rested an elbow on the mantel, reminding Marianne of nothing less than a Regency hero she might have written. "I hope she's convinced you that neither of us are actually nuts." He grinned. "Although I'm beginning to have serious doubts about the sanity of our plumber."

Marianne sat back down and smiled, reassured by his tone as much as his words. "Well, everything seems pretty sane. Of course, I haven't had to use your bathroom."

Renny giggled. “That’s okay for now, thank God. It’s the hot water that seems to be the issue.” She glanced at her husband. “So, Jake? Where do we start? And I’m not talking about water heaters here...”

Jake nodded. “I know, love.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “Let’s begin at the beginning. Marianne, tell us all about it.”

“Um...you got my email, right?”

“Yep. And very wonderfully written it was too. But those were words on a screen. I need to see your face as you tell me the whole story. Tell me—tell us—everything you can remember about your dreams. Tell us...about *Christian*...”

As Marianne took a breath and began her tale of love and loss, nobody in the old New England home could possibly have guessed that a man, thousands of miles away, was waking at that very moment and struggling to recapture a dream.

It was not the usual kind of dream, either. This was simply a sound—a sweetly disturbing sound—the rhythm and harmonies of which he fought to recall as he reached for some paper and a pencil. It was exactly the theme he sought for the final movement of his symphony—and it had come to him in the darkness of a California night.

Even he, composer and musician though he was, did not know it was the song of a nightingale.

## Chapter Three

"And then...and *then*..." Marianne's story stumbled to a halt as her voice faded.

"Then what, sweetheart?" Jake was gently encouraging.

She gulped. "Then I see his body swinging from that tree." Her eyes filled with tears. "And I wake up screaming."

"Oh dear God." Renny leaned over and gripped Marianne's hand. "You poor darling. That's — *terrible*."

Marianne sniffed and closed her eyes. She would not cry, absolutely not. Telling strangers her dream was bad enough, but crying over it? No. That wasn't her. She was private, controlled — keeping such things to herself.

A hand nudged her elbow and she glanced down to see a box of tissues in Renny's hand. "Here, Marianne."

"Thanks." She took one and blew her nose defiantly. "So, hearing all that — can you first reassure me I'm not nuts? That I haven't sunk so deeply into what I write that it's leaked out into some weird part of my cerebral cortex? My hypothalamus? Whatever?"

Jake shook his head and grinned. "Nope. I reckon you're just about as sane as they come. But if it's any comfort, Renny and I felt the same way when we first tried to figure out this dream wandering thing..."

Marianne blinked at them both. "You? You two? You had dreams this real? This vivid?"

Renny nodded. "You have *no* idea."

"Wow." Marianne sat back, stunned. "What happened?"

"That's a long story." Renny flashed a quick wink at Jake. "It has to do with ravens and strangely wonderful things. Maybe I'll tell you about it some time, but right now, we're here to focus on *you*, not us."

"Marianne..." Jake paused. "Look, this isn't going to be easy, but there's some harder questions we need answered."

"Okay." Marianne looked at him, waiting.

His cell phone rang. "Shit." He glanced at the number. "It's that frickin' plumber again." Jake moved to the door. "Renny...you know what we need here. Can you take this for a while? Perhaps it would be best, anyway..."

"Sure, babe." Renny nodded.

"I don't get it." Marianne watched Jake flip open his phone and start talking as he left the room, closing the door behind him.

Renny stood and moved to a small cupboard from which she extracted a decanter of something golden and a small sherry glass. She poured and brought it over to Marianne. "Here. Try this."

Marianne looked at it. "What is it?"

"Probably what one of your heroines would call a cordial." Renny laughed. "It's actually just a simple liqueur, with a few extra herbs and flavorings thrown in. It'll help you relax a bit. Take the edge off your nerves."

"Uhh..." Marianne sniffed the glass. "Well, it smells nice—kind of fruity?"

"Yep. It's really harmless, Marianne. I'm not drugging you here. I need to ask you difficult questions, to get deep into your memories of your dreams. The more we know, the better we can help you. It'll go easier and quicker if you're relaxed."

"Oh what the hell." Marianne tossed the contents of the glass into her mouth, swallowing the shot down without a blink.

"Er...well, that's one way of doing it." Renny huffed out a laugh. "Usually we take a few sips at a time, but as you said...*what the hell*."

Marianne's throat burned slightly, but the taste of the sweetly spiced herbs wasn't unpleasant on the back of her tongue. She put the glass onto a side table and leaned back. "Okay. Ask away."

A delicious sensation of warmth spread through Marianne's belly as the drink began to work. She could almost feel her tensions draining away through her pores. This was definitely a good thing—she was calmer than she'd been in ages, ready to deal with whatever lay ahead. Ready to answer whatever questions she was asked.

This moment in time could mean so many things. It could explain what was happening to her in her dreams. It could explain Christian. Perhaps it could even explain his death—she had no idea at this point. But for once, she was ready to confront the madness and the pain.

Marianne didn't realize she was smiling until Renny smiled back. "Good. *Now* we can start."

Taking a breath and straightening her shoulders, Renny looked deep into Marianne's eyes. "I need to know the strength of the emotional bond between Mary Anne and Christian. I need to know everything there is to know about their passion, the depth of their love—the intensity of their desires."

"Okay, sure." Marianne nodded.

"Did she fall in love with him over time? Or the minute she saw him?"

That was easy. "The moment she—I—saw him. Something about his eyes. They were so blue, Renny. So full of laughter and life. He smiled at me as we talked about the weather, how my horse had thrown a shoe. All commonplace stuff, but it was like I was drowning in those eyes. I barely noticed how handsome he was—I couldn't look away from his gaze."

"And you slept with him soon afterward."

"Oh yes." Marianne felt the desire curl deep down in her pussy. "There was no question. No hesitation. Neither of us even asked—it was inevitable."



"When you love him – when Mary Anne lies with him – can you feel it?"

"Of course."

"Do you climax? Orgasm with him?"

Marianne licked her lips. "Yes."

"Tell me about your loving? What do you feel when he touches you?"

How could she describe something so unimaginable? Marianne considered the question. "I feel – I feel like there's a star exploding inside me."

"Go on."

"I feel like the most loved, the most cherished woman alive. He makes me tingle, shiver and yearn for him in ways that stun me when I remember them."

Silence fell for a few moments between the two women, then Renny continued. "Explain what you mean, Marianne. Let's see..." She thought for a second or two. "Describe your sweetest memory of loving Christian. Share what you can with me. Please?"

Marianne closed her eyes and sorted through her dreams. Yes – yes, that was it. The stolen hours in the woods just beyond Lawrence Manor. The soft night air, the darkness, the sweetly soaring sound of the nightingales...

\* \* \* \* \*

"He told me to touch him. I remember his exact words. 'God, Mary Anne. Touch me. I need to feel you touching me more than I need air at this moment.' He was fumbling with his boots, trying to get them off his feet."

She paused. "I laughed. It was funny watching his struggles. I told him as soon as he'd finished undressing, I would touch him. And I really wanted to. He looked so wonderful as he stripped, his muscles were shining in the moonlight and his legs – he had this light coat of hair on his legs that always tickled my skin when he was on top of me."

"He threw his clothes aside and I saw his cock—so hard, so ready. Just the sight of it made me drool. I knew that what I wanted to do was something he liked. He never demanded anything of me, Renny. It was all mutual, our lovemaking. One gave and the other received."

"I understand."

"I told him to wait—he was going to take me in his arms and I wanted him to, but not at that moment. There was something I wanted more." She chuckled. "I remember he froze when I got onto my knees in front of him, took him into my hand and started stroking him. I think I said something about it being a surprise to me, how hard and yet how silky I always found his cock."

Marianne glanced at Renny. "I had no inhibitions with Christian. From the first, he'd encouraged me to talk to him, to tell him what I liked—what I wanted. He loved to hear me use blunt words as we loved, honest words that meant so much more when we whispered them between us. I loved when he spoke them too. They...aroused me. They were erotic, hot—they made my blood fire up as much as his kisses and his touches. Just knowing a man wanted me *that much*—well, it was beyond description."

She swallowed. "It was late, the moon was high and the air so soft against my body. I knelt in front of Christian, stroking his cock first with my hands and then leaning forward, breathing in that special fragrance that always filled me with the knowledge I was with the man I loved. I put my mouth on him, Renny. My lips just around the tip of his cock at first, tickling it with my tongue then sliding him deeper until I couldn't hold any more."

"It was good?"

"Oh it was wonderful. I adored the feel of him getting all slick and slippery in my mouth, then pulling away from him and teasing him with a few quick swipes of my tongue. A tiny spot underneath the head of his cock always made him moan—I'd make sure I spent quite a bit of time there, just to hear those soft sounds of pleasure. I got so turned on *myself* just knowing what I was doing to him. Does that make sense?"

“Oh yes. All the sense in the world.”

“I’d never imagined doing this, or enjoying it so much. Christian almost purred for me this time. ‘Damn, Mary Anne,’ he said. ‘You’re going to suck my heart out, aren’t you?’ I asked him if there was any heart left he hadn’t given me yet. He got quiet then, and reached out to me. I felt his fingers running through my hair. ‘No, my love. You have it all. Everything I have to give, I have given to you.’ His exact words, Renny. Those were his exact words.”

Marianne paused, but Renny was silent.

“It was at that moment I knew how much I loved him. Like something inside me finally fell into place and the pattern became whole. It was almost as if he knew it too. He tugged my head away. ‘No more, Mary Anne,’ he whispered. ‘No more or I shall come too soon. I would rather do that buried in your sweet body.’ Then he got down beside me and pushed me onto my back. ‘Let me play too. Then we shall play together.’ That wickedly sweet smile on his face at that moment is branded in my mind. I won’t ever forget it.”

After a deep breath, she continued. “We played. Oh *God*, did we play. He touched my breasts—he knew just how to suckle them—not too hard or too softly. He knew how to stroke between my legs, how to make me so wet for him I wanted to scream. He was so *aware* of me, of how the things he did excited me. ‘Don’t scream, love.’ He’d say that a lot, always when I was on the very brink of doing just that. ‘You’ll scare the nightingales.’”

“Nightingales? You heard nightingales?” Renny sat up a little straighter.

“Always. We were in the forest, a special place we called our own. The grass was soft—so soft—with his cloak or a blanket it felt like a real bed.”

Marianne chuckled. “I never screamed, though. Even then I knew that there might be somebody around. Some passerby or a rider journeying through those woods. But by God, it was hard keeping that scream quiet.”

"It must have been." The sympathy in Renny's voice encouraged Marianne to continue her story.

"It was even harder when he settled himself between my legs. Lord, that moment? Those few seconds before he pushed his cock into me? They seemed like eons, Renny. Like time itself stopped and watched him—watched us. 'I can't wait, love.' That's what he said. 'I can't wait.' And his face, so full of desire and need, his eyes hungry, wandering all over my body like he could devour me with just the heat of his gaze. I truly believe he probably could have if he'd set his mind to it."

She closed her eyes. "Then he took me. Deep strokes, slowly at first, sort of testing the waters to see how much of him I could take. He'd always ask if I was all right, making sure he wasn't being too rough." Marianne knew she was smiling. "As if he ever could be."

Renny moved beside her, a shifting of her legs—no more than that—but Marianne sensed her presence and drew courage from the companionship it offered. It was a huge relief to be able to share this madness, this passion, especially with a woman who might possibly understand the overwhelming emotions Marianne experienced in her dreams.

"This particular night he stopped—just stopped his movements—buried so far inside me I swear I could feel his heartbeat where his cock touched my soul. He just stared into my eyes. 'This is where I belong, Mary Anne. This is where I'll always belong. Where I've always known I should be.'"

Marianne fought the tears now. "I can't forget the expression in those amazing eyes of his. So hot, so passionate and so full of love I thought I'd come right there and then, just from that look. 'This is *right*, Mary Anne. Righter than anything else in this world.'"

She sighed. "I didn't understand what he meant by that. I still don't. I thought afterward that perhaps he was talking about us loving each other. But then again, he had an odd look on his face...something that told me it was more than just the sex. It was a fleeting moment, though, because he started moving again and when his cock started that particular movement inside me—well, I was lost. He knew exactly where to

stroke, how to thrust to hit some amazing places—I climaxed very soon afterward with his mouth on mine, kissing away my screams. His cock shuddered inside me and I felt him come too, something uniquely special. It was as if we rode the same horse, the same wild ocean—each body pulsing in sync with the other.”

“Wow.” Renny breathed the word low.

“Yeah, wow.” Marianne leaned back and rubbed her hand over her face. “Just thinking about it gets me hot.”

“Then what happened?”

“Then we just held each other, you know...those wonderful moments afterward when your heart slows back down to normal and your body starts to relax. All exhausted and tingly and content.”

“Yes. I know.”

“And then I drifted again, sort of sleeping and not sleeping—that odd dream state of affairs that I really can’t describe.” She looked at Renny. “It became less real and more of a dream at that point. Suddenly I was dressed, it was almost dawn and I was on my way to meet Christian. Was it the same day or a different day? I have no clue. There was nothing to tell me anything like that.”

Renny nodded silently.

“I knew I had to get to Christian. It was important and I was late for some reason. I could feel the tension in the back of my throat. I was afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

“Don’t know.” Marianne frowned. “It’s frickin’ aggravating too. Something was driving me, pushing me onward through the forest. I *had* to get to Christian before...before...”

“Before...?”

Marianne shook her head. “It was too late. He was dead when I reached the crossroads.”

Tears were pouring over her cheeks, but she made little attempt to wipe them away. "At that point, my dream ends—*always* there. The last thing I see before I wake is his lifeless body swinging from the noose. I scream...and scream and *scream*..."

Renny moved quickly to Marianne's side, reached out and took her into her arms, holding her while the grief poured through her in great shuddering waves of agony.

"Cry it out, babe." Renny stroked Marianne's shoulder. "Cry it out."

Marianne did as she was told.

She wept.

## Chapter Four

"She's not going to like it." Jake finished off his beer.

"I'm not sure." Renny stared into the fire as she snuggled next to him. "She's in pain, Jake. Real agony. I could see it, I could hear it in her voice – shit, I could almost *feel* it radiating off her in waves."

"Agreed. And after what you've told me, this emotion certainly can't go on. It'll drive her insane, trying to live with that kind of hurting." He stared at his empty bottle. "Oh dear. I appear to have finished this delightful beverage."

Renny snorted. "What a shame. You want another, you're on your own. There's plenty in the fridge, but I'm too damn comfortable to haul ass out there and fetch you one. You married a wife, honey, not a slave."

Jake sighed deeply. "There is something to be said for the old days."

Given that the *old days* for both of them were anywhere from several thousand years ago to a few centuries ago, Renny knew what he was talking about. "Slavery belongs in the past. We're equal partners in this marriage. Twenty-first century all the way."

"Which means I have to get my own beer, I suppose."

"Yep."

"You want one too?" Jake groaned as he unfolded his long legs from the rug on which he sat with Renny.

She leaned back against the couch and tucked her blanket more cozily around her knees. "Nope. I'm good. Thanks, anyway." She watched the dancing flames as Jake left in search of more sustenance.

He returned promptly with a fresh beer and a bowl of pretzels. Renny shook her head at him.

"What?" He looked aggrieved.

"These things are bad for you." She took one and crunched it. "I'm convinced Marianne will go along with it, the more I think about it."

"Okay. I'll trust your instincts." Jake settled himself. "Exactly how we're going to tell her we want to hypnotize her, drug her and send her back into her dreams, I'm not sure."

Renny snorted. "Well, not exactly like *that*, for a start."

"Not tactful enough?"

"No."

Jake shrugged. "What can I say? I'm a guy. We believe in being up-front about this stuff."

"Yeah. Right." Renny grinned and snitched another pretzel. "I think we can phrase the whole thing a little more professionally than stare-at-my-eyes, drink-this-drugged-up-tea and relax."

"Okay. You go first." Jake chuckled.

His wife sighed. "I feel for her, Jake. She's so damn in love with her dream Christian. He's everything to her — her life, her soul — I remember some of what that was like. Loving you, dreaming about you — it may be a bit blurry now, but you and I both know it was there. It brought us together."

Jake stroked Renny's knee. "Thank God." His hand slid further along her thigh. "I'll always be grateful to our dreams, babe."

She put her hand over his, staying its progress for a moment. "If Marianne can find peace, it will be enough for her, I think."

"Perhaps." Jake sounded thoughtful. "But what kind of peace she'll find...well, that remains to be seen." His fingers tightened around Renny's thigh. "She'll have to come to terms with his death, Ren. She can't change the past."



"I know." Renny felt a little lick of sadness brush the back of her neck, chilling her. "I know."

Jake leaned to his wife. "That's for tomorrow. Right now, I can think of something I'd much rather munch on than dry pretzels." He nipped Renny's ear.

She smiled and put thoughts of the following day aside. "Really?"

"Mmm hmm." His tongue followed his lips and circled the delicate lobe. "Much tastier." His hand slid from beneath Renny's and found its way to her panties beneath her robe. "And much moister too."

"Is *moister* a word?"

"Probably not. But it's certainly accurate..."

Renny sighed and surrendered as her husband's wonderfully talented fingers slipped beneath the fragile lace and cotton of her underwear and began exploring some incredibly sensitive places.

Her last rational thought as they tumbled onto the rug in front of the fire was the hope that someday Marianne would find this happiness...this *bliss*.

And make her dreams come true.

\* \* \* \* \*

Marianne was far from having dreams of peace and fulfillment.

She had packed a small travel bag as directed, accepting Jake and Renny's suggestion that she stay with them for a few days. They seemed hopeful that they could help her come to terms with all this stuff.

Marianne herself wasn't so sure.

She sat at her desk and double-checked her email before closing her laptop. Of course it was going with her—a writer never left home without it. God knew when an idea might hit and she drew comfort from the familiar light of her screen and quiet click of her keyboard.

There was nothing important that needed to be answered. She was well into her next novel, several chapters ahead of her own personal schedule. It was as good a time as any to go out of town for a little trip.

Into her dreams.

She shrugged. Maybe—maybe not. She liked Jake and Renny, which was a good thing. If all else failed, she'd get a few days at a nice country house with pleasant people and charmingly bucolic scenery.

Once again, Marianne scrolled down her links to the entries in her folder marked "Christian". Used to doing research for her books, it had taken her little time to dig up a few hazy facts about him.

She'd begun the night after her first vividly erotic experience with him—the night she'd remembered his name after she'd awoken. Subsequent dreams had filled in the blanks, but that first time had incited a curiosity that had all but overwhelmed her for several days.

*"Lawrence, Christian, Capt. b. 1789. d. 1818. Illegitimate son of Sir Hillary Lawrence. Mother unknown. Served in Wellington's forces and received commendations for his actions on the field at Waterloo. After his death, his estate was sold to a distant branch of the Lawrence family. No offspring.*

*Lawrence, Hillary Arthur William, Bart. b. 1760. d. 1827. One son, Thomas, b. 1792. One daughter, Elizabeth, b. 1794. Distinguished member of the Dorset Lawrences..."*

There was no more about Christian. A lot about his father, of course, since Sir Hillary was one of the "landed gentry" and had made his mark on history by building several elegant estates and quite modern educational institutions around Dorset. All of which bore his name.

It was surprising that Christian was allowed to style himself a "Lawrence", all things considered. But given his distinguished military career in Wellington's train, Marianne assumed his father had given him credit for that, at least. Or perhaps tried to claim some of the credit. Marianne wouldn't have put it past him.

The picture she had assembled from her research of Christian in her waking hours bore a close resemblance to the Christian she met in her dreams. He was a good man, an intelligent man for his time and wanted nothing more than a life of quiet happiness. With her.

He bore no grudge against his father for denouncing him as a bastard—in fact, Marianne couldn't recall him saying much of anything at all about the man other than he'd gotten his blue eyes from him. Had they even met since he'd come of age? She didn't know.

At first, her research had frightened her. Coming to terms with the fact that she was seeing a real man who'd lived in the past—and doing it while asleep—well, that was some freaky shit. But over the course of time, Marianne found herself more accepting of the idea. She was not about to refute the assertion that there was still a whole universe of things not understood about the human mind, plus she was steeped in this particular time period because of what she wrote.

But loving him and watching him die—over and over again—yeah, that was different. She shut her eyes against the images of his body swinging horribly against the early morning sky.

She'd remember his vibrant passion, the light in his eyes when he claimed her, the song of the nightingales—always the plaintive sounds of that darned bird. Christian had told her it was a nightingale, since she'd not have known otherwise.

Marianne also tried to forget the terrible sense of frustration, the vague impression that she might have been able to do something to prevent this tragedy. It haunted her every bit as much as his death, lingering in her heart long after the dream had ended.

An uncertain knowledge that gnawed deep inside. A feeling of something left undone—something incomplete—she wasn't sure how else to describe it, she just knew it was there. Always there and growing stronger as her dreams grew more intense.

She sighed and turned off her laptop. Maybe Jake and Renny could help her find out what the hell it was. What the hell she'd done or *not* done a couple of hundred years ago as somebody else in another country she'd never been to.

And wasn't that the craziest thing?

With a wry grin on her face, Marianne turned out the lights. It was time to grab some sleep if she could. Whether she'd dream of Christian again tonight or not, she had no idea. But at least there was a tiny little flicker of light in her darkness now, a possibility that she might get a few answers—a few solutions as to the cause of her madness.

For *madness* was surely what it was. How could it be anything else?

*The darkness of the forest surrounded her...*

It would be dawn soon. Although still very black beneath the canopy of oaks and fir trees, Mary Anne knew the first fingers of light were creeping over the horizon. Only an hour until she was to meet Christian—one hour that seemed longer than she could imagine. A lifetime of seconds and minutes.

Her basket was clutched tightly to her breast, almost concealed by the folds of her cloak. The cool morning air was touched by the first nip of autumn and she was glad she'd brought it, even though she'd not need it later when the sun rose.

She'd made the decision. She had run away, left her pathetic excuse for a life behind. Today a new life would begin, a dawning of joy and happiness with Christian. It was rather apt that they'd chosen to meet at the same time the dawn was breaking over their little part of the planet.

And, in fact, a new life had already begun.

Mary Anne slowed her pace and lightly touched her stomach where Christian's child lay sleeping quietly. She'd known they were risking much with their lovemaking, yet was helpless to resist the allure of such passion.

A smile crossed her face at the thought of a lifetime filled with that very passion, surrounded by their children. She didn't care about what anybody might say. She didn't care about her family or the fact that they would definitely disown her. They'd given her little but a roof over her head, food and a continual burden of religious fervor.

Had they ever loved her? She couldn't say.

But Christian did. She knew that down to the soles of her feet. When he touched her, smiled at her, stripped her naked and claimed her over and over again—yes, *that* was love. When he held her hand and talked to her, sharing his hopes and his dreams, telling her of what he wanted their future to be like—*that* was love.

Having been deprived of such things for her entire life, Mary Anne had felt her heart blossom with his every attention, his every caress. She'd flowered beneath him like roses after a shower of warm rain. This was the right decision for all of them. And wouldn't Christian be thrilled when she told him her news?

Last night—only a few short hours ago—she'd almost let her secret slip, but then she'd held back. Better to see his smile in the daylight, in the carriage that would take them to the coast and the boat he had told her would be awaiting their arrival.

The plan was to travel to the Colonies, to have the captain marry them as soon as they were at sea and to pass some months abroad until the hue and cry died down. Not that there'd be much in the way of hue and cry. Oh her parents would be distraught, but more at the idea of such shame visiting their family than at the loss of a daughter.

She wrinkled her nose and moved on, her boots making little sound on the soft grass of the well-worn path.

Last night...had been *incredible*.

Even now her body was alive with the remembered thrill of Christian's touch. He'd caressed her breasts until she'd almost come with the simple ecstasy of his fingers and his tongue. Her pussy still throbbed as she dared think of what he'd done to her, sucking on her tender folds and probing so cleverly past them to places that made her

want to scream with pleasure. She was incredibly sensitive these days, so sensitive that the slightest touch sent her spiraling into delights unimagined in her wildest dreams.

It would only get better. The sun would rise today on such bliss – she smiled again at the mere thought of it.

A sound distracted her from her reverie and she paused. There it was again – a whimper of some sort?

Off to her right, in the brushes and ferns. Definitely a whimper.

Birds stirred, waking and demolishing the silence with their songs. Alert to every noise, Mary Anne stayed still, trying to pinpoint what she'd heard.

It came again, not a whimper this time, but a short harsh scream of agony...

And her alarm clock blared again, rousing Marianne to wakefulness.

"Fucking hell." She reached over and blearily *thunked* the damn thing on the off-button.

Stretching, she tried to recapture that moment in her dream. It was strangely elusive, like the name of a song whose melody was clear but whose identity was blank. She'd been walking through a forest and heard something...

*Shit shit shit.*

It was gone.

## Chapter Five

The sun rose on one of those amazing New England mornings when the mist hung in the distance over trees just turning to hues of fire, evidence of the cool air mass that had chilled the night, but would soon surrender to the rare and welcome warmth of a gorgeous autumn day.

Marianne sipped the godawful coffee she'd bought, along with a tank of gas, from a small station on her way to Jake and Renny's. It was hot and full of caffeine, which was all she'd asked. The fact that it probably had a bit of leftover engine oil in it as well...she shrugged. Drinking it at this time of the morning, looking out over this kind of view—who cared what it tasted like? She sure didn't.

Fancifully, she imagined knights gathering in a field not far away, the early light glinting off their armor as they joined together for a hunt—or a joust perhaps. There would be maidens, long of hair and draped in silks, peeking from bright tents at their favored gallants. Somewhere a boar would roast over a spit, sending the aroma of food up to mingle with the fragrance of woodsy smoke and dying leaves. It was that kind of morning, beloved of writers with a good imagination.

And possibly a yen to write a medieval romance or two. Marianne knew the time was coming when she absolutely had to leave the Regency behind her for a bit, turn to a new challenge and keep her stories fresh.

It would mean leaving Christian out of her tales, though. A little bit of him, some tiny personality trait or physical characteristic, seemed to slide into all her heroes these days. He was *her* hero, so it was probably inevitable.

Although he would fare very well as a medieval baron, bravely leading his knights into battle and rescuing the gentle maiden. Which would, of course, be a woman

bearing a distinct resemblance to herself. She wasn't about to let her hero go off and fuck anybody else. Obsessed with this man she might be – stupid, she wasn't.

Idly leaning against the fender of her car, she let her thoughts wander where they would. Her past, for example. Was there anything there to hint at a previous life? A previous passion buried in the mists of long ago, much as the forests she gazed upon?

Nope. Not a damn thing.

Above the treetops, a hawk circled lazily, wings barely moving as it rode the thermals in search of breakfast. Marianne watched it, wondering what it must be like to fly so freely. Her attention was caught by a tiny movement, something dark was skittering through the grass of a nearby field – a rabbit. Or maybe a hare – it was too far away for her to see much more than brown fur, ears and the quick flash of a white tuft of tail.

The hawk saw it too. Marianne found herself tensing and sending mental messages to the bunny – *move your furry ass, dammit...*

It was too late. A slick swoop of shining feathers, a short tangle of wings in the grass and the bird was airborne once more, this time with something drooping from its talons.

Foolishly, Marianne's eyes stung with tears. The rabbit had done no wrong – but, then again, neither had the hawk. It was life, nature – the process of survival. If she could have saved the rabbit, she probably would have. But then again, the hawk needed food to survive, as did its family.

Would she have made the right choice if it had been in her hands? Would she have chosen to save the rabbit or sustain the hawk?

How did one ever know which choices were right and which were wrong? For some obscure reason, her hand dropped to her stomach, touching it, remembering the dreams of a child within. That child had been hers and Christian's in some former existence, perhaps. That life – created by love and desire – she would have moved heaven and earth to protect it, she knew.



So...the hawk was entitled to provide for its family. Harsh and unforgiving, life moved on. Species survived.

She finished her coffee and spared a thought for the rabbit. Yes, life moved on. But at what cost? With a last look at the now-empty fields, Marianne turned and got back into her car. These were pretty heavy metaphysical concepts for somebody who hadn't been sleeping really well, coffee notwithstanding.

Perhaps she could resolve some of them over the next day or so. Or at least put some of them to rest. With that thought uppermost in her mind, she pulled back onto the road and headed west. It would be less than an hour now until she reached her destination. And not much longer until she could start working on a possible solution to her problem—her dreams.

The sun rose higher as the miles slipped by and Marianne found herself with one question uppermost in her mind. If she had to choose between living a “normal” life and never dreaming of Christian again, *or* loving him in her subconscious mind—knowing he'd die every time she slept—which would *she* choose?

Pulling into Jake and Renny's driveway some fifty-odd miles later, she still hadn't decided.

\* \* \* \* \*

Choices weren't uppermost in Chris Harvey's mind when he awoke to find himself soaked in an unpleasant mixture of his own sweat and the results of his nocturnal orgasm. He'd actually *come* in that frickin' dream, something he hadn't done in years.

It was dark still, although the moonlight on the Pacific outside his California beachfront home gave his bedroom a glimmer of illumination.

*Shit. Fucking stupid shit.*

He staggered to the bathroom, dazzled himself blind by turning on the lights and cleaned up enough to head back to his rumpled bed.

The dream lingered on though, dancing lightly through his mind like one of his melodies before it got itself transcribed into notes, rhythms and key signatures. Of all the crazy things – it had been a dream of long ago, times he'd barely even imagined.

Medieval times.

*Her name was Marion.*

Her long dark hair spilled over the furs on his pallet, tumbling to the floor in a cascade of shadows and silk. She stared at him, all wanton desire and passion as she lifted her arms in a gesture of welcome. Her eyes glowed as she smiled, every movement, every gesture a lure of its own.

He lifted the light blanket, slowly pulling it back to reveal her naked limbs, blinking at his own hand, so strong and calloused, yet familiar. The chill within his tent had brushed his nakedness, but done nothing to quell the throbbing of his cock. He was hard, needy, desiring nothing more than to find himself buried to the balls within the hot cunt of this woman who smiled at him.

"I am here at your bidding, Sir Knight." The words were whispered, almost a sigh from lips that were moist and full.

"And will you do as I bid, now that you are here?" His hand thrust the coverlet to the floor.

"Yes." Her breasts trembled with each breath she took. "Yes. Name it and I shall do it. As long as you bid me to give you pleasure. 'Tis all I desire."

His gaze swept from her full breasts down her curvy body to the darkly furred mound of her pussy. In response, she parted her thighs a little, giving him a glimpse of her secret petals, furls of flesh waiting to be plundered by a warrior with a strong sword.

Well, he had that weapon ready, without doubt. "And what of your own pleasure, Marion?"

She licked her lips. "I shall hope that you will see to it, my lord." Her legs shifted once more, this time a blatant invitation. "You are a warrior of much renown. 'Tis said you are as skilled with bedsport as you are with the mace and the lance."

He touched her ankle, marveling at the soft skin, then let his fingertip wander upward, brushing her thigh and teasing past her pussy, stopping just below her navel. Where he lightly flicked her skin and watched the flesh shudder. "I trust you will find my skills...adequate."

She licked her lips, sheening them with a glow of her own saliva. "I'm sure I will."

His hands continued their journey, moving up to her breasts, palms sliding over the hard buds at their tips. "You are sensitive there."

Her throat moved as she swallowed. "You are indeed observant, Lord Rossignol."

The scent of her, redolent of flowers and woman, filled his nostrils as he bent one leg and knelt on the furs beside her. "My given name is Cristophe. You have leave to use it." He lowered his head, watching her eyes widen as he neared her. "I would hear you scream it aloud, Marion, when your passion peaks."

He dipped to her, brushing their lips together, then sliding his tongue over the fullness, urging her to let him inside.

She obeyed.

He kissed her, mouth hard and demanding. He wanted her writhing beneath him, aroused and willing. He wanted her body crushed against his own, their heat mingling as their skin fused into a blur of desire.

Little by little, her muscles tensed, her arms lifting to his shoulders and clutching him as she voluntarily deepened their kiss. The pallet creaked as Cristophe eased himself over her, straddling her thighs with his, mounting her much as he would his precious destrier before a joust.

His cock was harder than any lance, aching to penetrate her wet heat. A moan broke the silence, hers, perhaps—or maybe his. The delight of simply kissing her was driving his arousal past any limits he'd ever imposed upon himself.

She was his woman, his trophy—the prize he'd won by vanquishing all combatants in the games of the day just ended. The meal they had been supposed to share had quickly become less about food and more about lust. One glance at each other and the flames of passion had leaped high.

Pulling back, Cristophe licked his own lips, tasting the cinnamon sweetness of her tongue. “By the saints, lady. Your taste fair drives a man insane...”

His hands found her breasts as he eased their bodies apart and he felt Marion's thighs press against his own, an attempt to urge him onward. He couldn't help the grin. “Wait. Patience offers its own rewards.”

“I am not known for my patience, my—Cristophe.” Her fingers scrabbled at his head as he tongued one of her nipples. “Especially not when you do—oh, *that*.”

He did it again, loving her low husky moan of pleasure. But not too much, not yet. He moved further down along her body, his cock now lying between her legs on the soft fur. The combination of sensations was driving him mad and it was sheer agony to hold back from plunging his cock savagely into her.

And yet he did hold back. There were more delights he would show her. For some reason, he was driven to lavish every single one of his skills on this woman. She was more than a bedmate, more than an idle interlude.

She was everything he'd dreamed of, everything he desired. And he would let her know in no uncertain terms. His tongue slid over her navel, pausing to play for a moment, then moving down—to find the seat of her passion.

Nuzzling between her thighs, Cristophe sought and found the little pearl of flesh, the tiny center of her pussy. He sensed the immediate response as he flicked his tongue carefully around it, a shimmer of arousal that passed through her body like a bolt of summer lightning. She cried out, this amazing woman of his, then whimpered as he

suckled her, lips caressing the swollen folds, nipping gently around the small bud, tongue spreading a blend of her juices and his own saliva.

She thrashed and moaned, answering each touch with increasing urgency, her nails biting in to his forearms as he held her hips still beneath his face.

"I cannot—please, my Lord—do not do this to me—I cannot stand more—" Marion's heels drummed against his muscles as her legs fought to pull him where she wanted him most.

"You can. And you will."

He pushed her, harder and faster, wanting her to come right there and then. His mouth, his tongue, his face—he used every tool he had to drive her over the edge.

She shattered on a scream, pulsing around him with spasms of madness, her cunt thrusting rhythmically against his face, her ass clenched tightly within his palms.

*That* was what Cristophe wanted. That moment of inhaling her release, drinking the juices she spurted so freely as her body let go and tumbled into ecstasy.

"Now, lady." He lifted himself away from her pussy and moved upward with intent. "*Now* let us go further."

Before the shudders had ceased, he was in her, plunging deeply into her cunt with one massive thrust.

Marion screamed once again, frantically clawing at him with hands and inner muscles. She sucked him inside, milking him, urging him to move, to plunder that which was his—and his alone.

He pounded into her, a madness of his own cascading through his brain, blinding him to anything but the need that crushed his balls and his cock—the need to empty himself into the fiery darkness welcoming him with a savage kiss of burning liquid.

Cristophe rode her hard, sensing her body responding to each thrust, knowing she was with him, beneath him, around him and beside him as they neared the pinnacle.

“My God—yes—*Cristophe*—” Her cry rattled his eardrums as she splintered into a trembling and shaking spasm that threatened to buck him off.

He hung on, knowing his own release was only seconds away. A massive tremor clamped her cunt onto his cock and he choked out his own cry as his balls erupted, cock throbbing and pulsing in time with her movements, his seed rushing out into the boiling essence that was Marion.

He froze, a moment of bliss that transcended time itself.

Then, strangely, the air began to suck itself from his lungs and he fought for breath, fought to cry out yet again as she shuddered around him. His vision blurred, his neck constricted by something—someone—

He came again, endless streams of passion, still dousing the fires within her cunt.

Blind now, *Cristophe* panicked. He could not breathe, he could not see—a red darkness began to swallow him even as the last few spurts from his cock overflowed from Marion’s body and soaked them both.

He could hear her mewling cries of completion—and he could hear something else.

A bird—singing a melody of such painful sweetness...

He faded away, lost in some swirling abyss where there was nothing but that music...

And woke up as himself, Chris Harvey, renowned composer and conductor and embarrassed maestro covered with his own come.

*What the fuck was all that about?*

Trying to recapture the details of his dream, Chris lay and listened to the ocean. But all he could hear was that damned birdsong. *Again*. Making a mental note to himself to add a quick flute passage over and above the clarinets, he turned and pummeled his pillow.

He made himself one promise. From now on, he would absolutely not eat cheese popcorn before going to bed. Add to that a note about not watching old Errol Flynn movies too. Marion, indeed. Maid Marian, perhaps, from the classic *Robin Hood*. Although, God knew, she'd been no virgin maiden. Not his Marion. And he hadn't been wearing green tights, either.

Chris snorted. Enough was enough. He was tired, flat-out exhausted from trying to get his symphony finished and facing deadlines that were too close for comfort. Dreams were, in his opinion, the brain's way of dealing with stressors.

So he'd dealt with 'em by fucking his brains out in his dreams. He didn't have a current girlfriend to take the edge off—there simply wasn't enough time to devote to any kind of relationship. Not right now, anyway.

So he'd gotten off subconsciously. It had worked. Quite nicely too. Up until that end bit, where he'd felt uncomfortably like he was strangling to death.

He sighed and closed his eyes. Just a couple more hours sleep and he'd be ready to go.

*Mustn't forget – flute over the clarinets –*

## Chapter Six

"Uhh...say that again?" Marianne stared at Jake.

Renny snorted. "No, *don't* say that again." She glared at her husband. "We are *not* going to drug you and hypnotize you."

"Yes, we are." Jake looked quite unrepentant. "That's what it boils down to."

A gusty sigh from his wife punctuated the stunned silence that followed.

Marianne swallowed. "Um..."

"Let's try this again." Renny shifted her long legs more comfortably on the chair. They were in the library once more, the doors closed this time, since the morning air was cool in spite of the sunshine.

"In order to tap into your dreams, Marianne, we need you to be as relaxed as possible."

"Drugs help. It's too early for martinis." Jake grinned.

"Will you cut that out?"

"Yes, dear."

Renny tried again. "Ignore that oaf over there." She dismissed him with a wrinkle of her nose. "It's not unlike any kind of deep therapy session, honey. You're probably familiar with the general idea. Inducing relaxation allows the mind to wander more freely, without the boundaries we all impose upon our thoughts, whether consciously or not."

Marianne nodded. "Makes sense."

"Once the mind and the body relax, the therapist can dig more deeply into the psyche of their patient, exploring ideas, memories—all the clutter we bury on a regular basis—the stuff that sometimes comes back to haunt us without our realizing it."



Again, Marianne nodded. "Okay. I'm with you so far."

Jake settled himself into another chair near Marianne's position in the corner of the large overstuffed sofa and took her hand. "All kidding aside, Marianne, this is the best way we've found to help you remember your dreams as fully as possible. That's how we start dealing with these mysteries."

"And once you've started?" She couldn't help the question. The warmth and strength of Jake's hand, along with the quietly supportive tone of his voice, were already starting to work their magic.

"Then we encourage you to go *into* your dreams." He thought for a moment. "This is where we take a different path to the regular process of therapy. At this point, a usual session would dig for childhood memories, things like that. I want you to step away from everything that is Marianne...to walk down into the mists that hold your dreams. To become that Mary Anne..."

"To be her. To feel her life..." Marianne shivered a little, her fingers tightening around Jake's grasp.

"Yes. Exactly." His eyes held hers steadily. "To relive that existence that still lingers somewhere in your mind, someplace we can't understand or identify. We just know it's there."

"And then?"

"Then we learn the truth about Mary Anne and Christian. You learn the facts, the emotions, the depth of their love and the reasons behind your dreams."

Marianne managed a weak laugh. "You make it sound so simple."

Renny leaned forward. "It's not. Make no mistake, Marianne – this will probably be difficult, painful and may result in you learning things you don't want to know."

Marianne swallowed. "Well, that's encouraging."

"There's one more thing..." Jake drew her gaze back to his face with a squeeze around her fingers. "Marianne, you have to understand and accept one dark truth. You

*cannot change the past.* You can only come to terms with it.” He looked somber. “By coming to terms with it, your dreams will make sense. As they make sense, you can begin to deal with what they mean. What they represent. And they should no longer trouble you so much.”

“I won’t dream about him anymore?”

“That I can’t guarantee.” Jake looked thoughtful. “But I can say that you should be able to sleep more and dream less. It varies from person to person.”

Marianne pulled her hand free of Jake’s grasp and folded her arms protectively around her body. “Oh God.”

Her mind whirled as she faced the possible consequences of what she was about to do. She’d have to *live* as Mary Anne, to *be* her for a while, if only in her imagination. But to be her in a conscious state, to be aware of so much more than the misty drifting images that trekked through her dreams on a regular basis.

Would she get to actually be with Christian on a true and real level? Would she be able to taste him and touch him—to experience him fully, not just drifting in and out of sleep?

“How real *are* these induced experiences?”

“We’re not sure.” Renny answered. “For us—for Jake and me—they were every bit as real as could be. We felt—*everything*. And, more importantly, we remembered everything quite clearly, down to the last tiny detail.”

“Really?” Marianne’s eyebrows rose.

“Yes.” Jake nodded. “Only then did we understand what was happening. That there were things in our distant past that needed resolution.”

“You mean you two...” She paused, uncertain of what to ask at this point. It was all very confusing.

“Everybody’s different, Marianne.” Renny’s tone was soothing. “What happened to Jake and me convinced us that there was more to the whole business of dreaming than

we'd imagined. We promised ourselves we'd use our experiences to see if we could help others troubled by dreams. And we have. Most cases are simply a matter of discovering the root cause and dealing with it consciously."

"Most cases." Marianne watched Renny's face carefully.

"Yes, most cases." Renny thought for a moment or two. "But every now and again, somebody like you comes along. Somebody whose dreams are more than the release of daily angst. Somebody whose dreams indicate a deeper and more convoluted cause—one that we hope we can explore with you, here and now."

Marianne sighed and leaned more fully into the arms of the couch, relaxing her body. "Hookay. Do I have to smoke a joint?" She grinned at the two people watching her.

Jake huffed out a laugh. "Nope. Absolutely not."

Renny chuckled too. "Nice idea, but no. We want you relaxed enough to respond to hypnosis, not craving brownies." She reached to the small end table beside her and opened the drawer beneath. "We will light one of these, though."

Curiously, Marianne watched as Renny withdrew a small bundle of what looked like hay or grasses. She recognized it from some of her research wanderings around the Internet. "Oh—a smudge stick, right?"

Renny nodded. "Yep. Cedar, sage and lavender. Just a little something to help matters along."

Marianne watched as Renny lit and candle and held the flame to the tip of the bundle. "Um...cedar for positive energy and sage to remove negative energy...lavender for..."

"The smell." Renny grinned. "I love it." She watched the curls of smoke rise steadily and then put the smoldering bunch of herbs onto a convenient ashtray. "Now we're ready."

Jake stood and walked to the small cabinet tucked beneath one of the library bookshelves. Quietly he poured Marianne a glass of something richly red. She blinked at the sunlight burning within the liquid as he returned and held it out to her.

"Wine?" She sniffed. "And..."

"Herbs, mostly. It's another liqueur we've made ourselves from various additives we know work to relax the spirit. Absolutely harmless unless you're allergic to ragweed or something?" He frowned. "Sorry, I should have asked..."

"No, no allergies at all." Marianne lifted the glass to her lips. "Bottoms up."

It was warm and sweet, lingering on her palate like any full-bodied wine, but with a definite aftertaste that reminded Marianne of the scent of flowers. "Nice." She took another mouthful.

Jake resumed his seat, pulling the chair at more of an angle so that he could sit almost directly in front of Marianne. Once more he took her hand in his, stroking it softly. "Now you can relax, sweetheart. I want you to let go of as many worries as you can. Here, you're safe. Here nothing can harm you or hurt you in any way."

His voice was low and soothing, a source of relaxation all by itself. "You are going to feel so good, so warm. The muscles that have been so tight in your neck and shoulders are going to ease soon. Your back won't ache at all, but will feel supple as you lie back against the soft cushions behind you."

Marianne felt her eyelids grow heavy. "Mmm. Yeah." Idly she finished the special wine. She was getting warmer, most definitely. And she moved her head a little, realizing her neck no longer tensed as she stretched it. "I think it's working."

She closed her eyes.

"All you have to do is drift, Marianne." Jake's low tones encouraged her to do just that. "Relax your thoughts. Don't focus on anything but the sound of my voice. Your body is safe, secure here with us. Your mind can go anywhere it wants, think of anything it wants, be anywhere it wants..."

A delicious lassitude settled over her like a blanket of sunlight. Almost dizzily, Marianne fell into it, following the gentle words that led her further, deeper...

"I want him. I want to be with Christian..."

Scarcely realizing she'd spoken aloud, Marianne tumbled through veils of time and space...

\* \* \* \* \*

And landed on her back, naked, with the softness of something extraordinarily furry cushioning her skin.

Next to her, heat radiated from a massive body.

She blinked.

"Good morning, lady." The voice was deep and sensual, as were the fingers that ran from her kneecap to her pussy. "Are you well this day?"

"Uhh..."

"I'll take that as a yes." A shadow blocked her vision and firm lips fastened on hers, tasting sweetly of wine and herbs and man.

The kiss was everything a kiss should be, passionate, demanding and full of promise. His tongue quickly slid past her lips, probing delicately then more strongly as her own responses leapt to wakefulness.

*He was hers.* The thought flashed through her mind as she instinctively parted her thighs, allowing his hand to cup her and fondle the soft folds of flesh. Moisture pooled rapidly and dampened his palm, his skilled touch finding the seat of her pleasure with unerring accuracy and arousing it with a mixture of tenderness and insistence.

Helpless, Marianne sank into him, welcoming the heavy weight of his thigh as he swung it across her nakedness, burying her more deeply in the furs of their bed.

"I need you again it seems."

"No kidding." The words spurted from her mouth as he pulled back a little, his cock solidly thudding into her body, seeking her heat.

"And you need me too, my Marion." Hard muscles ground over her skin, ripples of sensation that took the breath from her lungs and made her shiver. "See how your breasts welcome me with their swollen nubs?"

Robbed of words, she could only nod as he discovered those same swollen nubs and suckled them, tongue flickering hotly over the sensitive peaks. It was delicious and delectable and just — *wow*.

Marianne's mind screamed questions, foremost among them *who the fuck are you? Who the fuck am I?* But her body refused to be distracted from what he was doing. And by God he did it well.

He knew every inch of her, it seemed. He knew where to lick, where to kiss, where to nibble and where to stroke. He even knew *how* to stroke, finding her clit with ease and alternating gentle caresses from his hand with slides of his cock over the slick flesh.

She surrendered. This was only a dream after all. A vague illusion of a time long gone and a lover she'd probably created in her imagination at some distant point in her literary meanderings. And what a lover he was.

"Say my name once more, Marion. Tell this poor knight what he does to you."

"I..." She stumbled, lost in the passion he'd aroused within her and desperate to answer those needs. "*My love...*"

The words came from somewhere deep in her heart. He was her love and her lover, both at the same time. His cock sought and found her cunt, sliding into her with ease, filling her to capacity.

"Yes, Marion, oh yes." He pressed more deeply, shuddering as he held his passion in check, muscles corded and rippling against her. "You are my lady, my woman. When this joust ends, we shall be simply Cristophe and Marion. Lord and Lady Rossignol. Husband and wife."

“*Cristophe...*” How comfortable his name sounded as she whispered it. “Yes, Cristophe, oh yes...fuck me, my love, my Cristophe...”

His teeth flashed as he grinned, taut and ready and buried to the balls within her. “As you will, my Lady Marion.” He shifted, pulling back a little then returning as if loath to part from her body. “And I say those who avow Saxon women are cold in bed are fools.”

*Saxon women? Holy shit...*

The tiny part of Marianne’s mind that observed this interaction grasped at his words but they slithered away as Cristophe began to move. She gave up caring who or where she was. For the immediate moment she was simply a woman being fucked well-nigh insane by the most talented of lovers.

Lifting her legs, Marianne ran her ankles up over the firm flesh of his thighs and his hard buttocks, feeling them flex as he moved within her. When she locked them around his waist, he sighed with delight.

“Faith, you are all a man could ask for...” His gaze lowered to where they were joined and Marianne shivered with erotic delight as she watched him.

In and out, in and out, his cock slid more rapidly now. Rock solid, it was big—yet not too big for her cunt. In fact it was just right, stretching her just the tiniest bit to add to the wonderful sensations coursing through her. His strokes matched her desires, his body brushing her clit as he thrust against her, teasing it as he withdrew.

He even twisted a little, a grinding of bodies that heightened the moment and sent Marianne’s body into overload.

“Christ Almighty, Cristophe...” He was touching *something* inside her, something extremely sensitive and trembling that seemed linked to her clit and her breasts and her heart. She cried out as he stroked more strongly, a cry that was echoed by a groan from his throat.

“Now, Marion...*come* for me. Ride with me...” Cristophe growled the words as he hammered his cock into her, their bodies meeting with the erotic music of flesh colliding and parting.

She could – she would. She had no choice.

Feeling the scream boil up from her very soul, Marianne came, a massive eruption of every single nerve ending she possessed. Her neck arched, her lips peeled back from her teeth in a rictus of passion and every cell in her body exploded as Cristophe rammed himself into her cunt and came too.

Legs clamped to his body like a silken vise, she spasmed around him, sucking him ever deeper into the vortex, draining him, milking his cock with strokes of her cunt as it orgasmed fiercely along the pulsing length of velvety steel inside her.

Her nails dug into his biceps, her breath vanished from her lungs and all she could do was hang on – holding fast to Cristophe as she soared free.

He followed Marianne, a savagely harsh groan of satisfaction mingling with the echoes of her scream, pushing his hips against her in a final thrust as his balls emptied and flooded her with hot streams of completion.

It was untamed and raw, sex mingling with passion and desire, a fulfillment that shook Marianne to her core.

When they both eased, collapsing around and on top of each other, she struggled to heave air into her starving lungs and reassemble the bits of her body that had apparently flown off all by themselves.

“Dear God, you entrance me.” The words were huffed breathlessly into her neck where Cristophe’s head had landed when he tumbled bonelessly atop her.

“And you are crushing *me*...” A tired chuckle answered him. It was the truth, since his body was hard, heavy and squashing what little breath she could draw.



He rolled to her side, settling her in the curve of his massive arms. "My apologies. I would never harm a hair on your...anything." His fingers brushed her pussy gently, calming the shivers that still trembled so deep inside her cunt.

A chill of something resembling fear danced down Marianne's spine. Apprehensive and not knowing quite why, she turned to him. "Cristophe, I find myself concerned—afraid—"

He smiled at her. "There is no need, love. None can best me in the joust. I shall win."

A joust? *Good God.* "Are you sure?" She intertwined their fingers. Was this the cause of her concern?

"I may be a bastard Norman, but I can fight, Marion. Certainly there are many who would see me fall and rejoice at it—none more so than my damned half brother." He sighed. "Geraint has yet to fully understand I do not wish for anything from our father. I make my own way."

"I'll bet you do." Idly Marianne turned in his arms and pressed her cheek against the mighty muscles of his chest. "But have a care, Cristophe..." Why she felt compelled to urge caution, Marianne had no idea. But it was an urge too strong for her to fight.

He glanced at her, eyes glittering blue. "Pay no heed to the gossip, sweetling. The lances will be blunt, the swords unsharpened. This is a joust for honor, no more—no less."

His words did much to soothe her nerves, but Marianne still felt something annoying niggling at the back of her brain. Some premonition that all was not as it should be.

A clatter from outside the tent distracted Cristophe and he shifted. "I must leave."

Marianne hated the feel of his body moving away from hers, leaving her bereft and shivering. "I know." He had to go. Somewhere deep inside she knew it was inevitable.

"Stay. Sleep. Get all the rest you can." He leaned over and dropped a light kiss on her lips, tucking the bedding close around her shoulders. "You'll need your strength for when I return."

Tiredly she managed a smile. "I shall eagerly await that moment, Cristophe. Hurry back to me, my love..."

Sleep claimed her, a soft drugging fog of unconsciousness obliterating everything from her thoughts. She had no idea how many hours had passed before she was awoken by a rough hand shaking her.

"Mistress, quickly – mistress – wake up, oh please *wake up*..."

Marianne rolled over and blinked groggily at a woman dressed like a serving maid. "Whaaa..."

"It's Lord Cristophe. He's – oh merciful heavens – *please* – wake up." The woman shook her insistently.

"What about him?" Marianne raised herself, grabbing the blanket and wrapping it around her breasts.

"The joust – an accident –"

Cold fear poured over Marianne and she stumbled from the bed, holding tightly to the blanket and moving to the parting in one wall of the tent. She looked through, blinded for a second or two by the brilliant sunlight.

"They're bringing him now, see?" The woman stood beside her and held back the fabric.

A scream choked silently in Marianne's throat. Three men bore a body – a large body – covered in blood that had dried to a dull stain here and there on the armor it covered. It was Cristophe, she knew it beyond a doubt. His blue eyes gazed sightlessly at the sky.

"No..." It was a mere whisper.

"Yes and it was murder, may the Saints forgive me." The woman bit back a sob. "He was the last to joust, his opponent his very own half brother, Lord Geraint. The lances — they were not blunted — an accident the squires say, but there's few who believe it."

"His half brother?" Even now, Marianne's brain was staggering to comprehend the bloody body and the tale she was hearing. It wasn't real. It *couldn't* be real — these things didn't happen in real life, only in the movies...

"Everybody knows how much Lord Geraint despised Lord Cristophe. Too close to us Saxons, he said. Many agreed, sons of pigs." The woman spat her anger. "Methinks 'twas naught but an excuse to kill him. To secure his portion from their father and rid the world of a man he accused of duplicity and betrayal."

"So much blood..." Marianne was transfixed by the lifeless limbs. "Oh God, so much blood..." Her body began to shake and fierce shivers racked her. "He's dead. I've lost him — *again* —"

"My lady, you must dress. Make haste. They'll come for you too, I'm afraid. Should you be carrying his child..." The servant's words pierced the shock and horror enfolding Marianne and she moved, only to feel a throbbing ache low in her abdomen.

Warmth ran down her thighs and she stared at the blood dripping over her feet to the floor. It was the last straw for the Lady Marion. "Oh *dear God*. I do *not* carry his child it would seem..."

"Oh, my lady, my lady —" The servant wrung her hands in distress as Marianne stared blindly around her.

The sound of voices became a dull buzzing in her ears, words blurred into mutterings, her vision darkened as spots appeared in front of her eyes.

Marianne could see nothing now and hear little more than nothing. She was drowning, falling into a great black maw that would obliterate both her and the rising pain of her grief.

She opened her mouth wide and cried out a great rolling scream of agony...

Only to find herself back on Jake and Renny's couch, clutching her belly, her face soaked with her own tears.

She gulped back another sob, tried to speak, then gave up and buried her face in a pillow.

Marianne Donovan wept for the loss of a knight who died centuries before she was even born.

## Chapter Seven

"Fucking *shit*, Jake. I can't do this anymore."

Marianne sipped the brandy, appreciating the warmth as it burned its way down her throat. "What am I? The kiss of death or something? I traveled through time having great sex, only to watch the men of my dreams cut down and slaughtered, practically before my very eyes?"

The story had unfolded and Marianne had related all she could remember of her sensually tragic medieval dream. The lingering aftereffects were dispersing now and she could discuss it more rationally in the familiar atmosphere of the library.

Jake was watching her intently. "Believe it or not, we've made a lot of progress, sweetheart."

"Easy for you to say. You didn't get laid by Sir Romance Cover Model Knight and then have him filleted to pieces the very next day." Marianne rubbed a spot beneath her breast. "God, just thinking about it makes my heart ache."

"Was it Christian?" Renny's question was thoughtful. "Was he the same man, Marianne?"

Her thoughts tumbled over themselves at Renny's words. "No, it wasn't Christian. This one certainly had the blue eyes, but his body was different—his taste was different—I dunno, Renny. My feelings were every bit as intense, I can tell you that." She put her empty glass down and sighed. "And losing him hurt every bit as much."

"Makes sense." Jake nodded.

"Good. Explain it to me, then, because I'm sure as hell having a hard time with the whole damn thing."

Jake looked away from her and stared out of the window, his face expressionless for a few minutes as silence fell in the room. Finally he turned back to Marianne. "It would seem to all boil down to one simple question. *What is love?*"

"Pardon?" Marianne blinked.

Jake rolled his shoulders, in a motion clearly designed to ease some tension. "Take these dreams of yours...you are with a man you know you love. He loves you as well, showing it in a variety of exotic—erotic—ways. You are absolutely certain, in your heart, that you and he belong together, yes?"

"Yes." Marianne nodded. That knowledge was unarguable. She loved, passionately and with her whole essence, the men in her dreams. Up until now, it had only been Christian, but apparently there had also been others—like Cristophe...

"So what seems to be developing is a pattern. The women you were, whose memories and desires linger somewhere in your brain cells, had a mate, a special man meant for them alone. For Marion, it was Cristophe. For Mary Anne—Christian. The name thing is fascinating too—"

"That could be nothing," Renny interjected. "Merely Marianne's mind working to create a manageable dream."

"Good point." Jake nodded at her. "It's interesting, but probably not something that's crucial to the matter at hand. What *is* crucial—" he turned back to Marianne, "is that this love, this predestined mating of souls, if you could call it that, has been interrupted more than once." He paused for a moment. "Take a look around us—at the life that surrounds us. Everything has a place in the overall scheme of things. A leaf dies, but nourishes the seeds in the ground it falls upon. Nature preserves, uses and maintains. Can we really say that love isn't the same sort of thing? If a leaf doesn't go to waste, isn't it within the realms of possibility to accept that something as incredible as love won't go to waste either?"

Marianne frowned as she considered this hypothesis. "So what you're saying is that my predestined mate managed to get himself offed before said mating occurred? Leave

it to me to pick a soon-to-be-dead boyfriend." She lifted an eyebrow. "Wait a minute, if that's so, then explain the sex."

"Easy. Tab A gets inserted into Slot B..."

"*Jake.*" Renny's squawk cut him off. "Stop it. You know that's not what Marianne meant."

Marianne's laugh echoed through the room. "He knows, Renny. But thanks for the humor there."

Renny shook her finger threateningly at her grinning husband. "Your timing can be appalling." She turned to Marianne. "Look, as near as I can figure this out, you're meeting the right man in your various incarnations. You're falling deeply in love with him and everything goes according to plan. But..."

"Yeah. It's that *but*, isn't it? The idiots manage to do something royally stupid and get themselves killed."

Renny nodded. "Before you have chance to bear a child."

"Oh." Marianne stilled as the ramifications of this theory sank into her mind. "Holy shit. I never thought about that."

Jake, for once, remained silent as Renny continued her hypothesis. "Marion clearly wasn't pregnant when Cristophe was killed. Mary Anne believed herself pregnant when Christian died on the gallows. We don't know what happened to her and her child, do we?"

Marianne shook her head. "No. I've never dreamed past the moment of Christian's death. I see him hanging there and poof. I wake up." She shivered. "It's like my mind can't take any more."

"If I may..." Jake raised an eyebrow at his wife who snorted. "There is one thing I'd like to ask about this new dream of yours."

"Okay, shoot." Marianne tucked her feet comfortably beneath her.

"Did you hear the nightingale?"

She sat back, thinking—trying to recall every tiny detail of her time with Cristophe in their tent. Jake’s tone made her believe this question might be important, so she concentrated as much as she could on her memories.

Finally she threw up her hands. “Nope. It was early morning. I remember hearing sounds from outside and seeing...his body. Horses’ hooves, clatter—just noises you’d expect to hear in such surroundings.” She frowned at Jake. “No nightingale. Is it significant?”

“I don’t know.” Jake frowned too.

“Wait a minute...” Renny stood and hurried to a bookshelf, tugging down a small volume. “What was Cristophe’s name again?”

“Er...Cristophe?” Marianne looked puzzled.

“No, his last name. Lord something-or-other.”

Jake lifted his head. “Rossignol, wasn’t it? Maybe like the skis...couldn’t say about the spelling, of course...”

Renny rustled pages, the noise loud in the silence as Marianne and Jake watched her. Finally she paused and ran a finger down over a certain section.

“Holy shit.” She lifted her head and stared at the two of them. “You’ll never believe this.”

“What?” Marianne asked curiously.

“Rossignol?” Renny gulped. “It’s French for *nightingale*.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The rest of the day passed in a blur for Marianne. They all agreed to take a break from the weirdly paranormal stuff and that doing routine things like eating dinner, walking in the fall sunshine, napping—all the activities “ordinary” folks did on weekends—would be of benefit to everyone.



Either Jake or Renny stayed by her side, talking of inconsequential matters, passing her a rake when she offered to help with a few garden chores, keeping her grounded in more ways than just her contact with the earth.

She nipped dead flower heads off chrysanthemums, trimmed back a few shrubs whether they wanted trimming or not and managed to breathe in the cool autumn air without dwelling on times long past.

It was soothing busy-work, quietly easing the confusion and ache within her heart. But it was a temporary respite at best, since Jake had recommended they spend the evening trying to deal with the one major issue in all this – Christian.

And it was to this topic that they returned after a lazy evening meal when they settled themselves once more. This time they were in Jake and Renny's living room, a comfortable space featuring yet another fireplace, welcoming furniture and soft colors that invited relaxation.

Marianne was, sadly, anything but relaxed.

"I don't know how, Jake." She nipped at one fingernail. "I simply do not know how to force myself to dream of Christian. Not now – now that it seems there's other...what can I call them? *Passions* in the distant past."

He fussed with the wood in the fireplace, finally getting a blaze going to his satisfaction. "That's my job." He brushed off his hands and nodded at the flames.

Renny agreed. "Now that my man has made fire and fulfilled his masculine obligations..." she chuckled at Jake's expression, "we can get down to business." Legs tucked up on her chair in what seemed to be her customary position, Renny turned to Marianne. "Jake will guide you this time, Marianne."

"How?" Marianne snuggled deeper into the cushions.

"He'll use hypnosis tonight. Yes, you've got our excellent *mind martini* and you'll be relaxed, as you were this morning." She nodded at the glass of cordial Marianne had already half finished.

Marianne glanced at Jake. "I figured you'd hypnotized me then. Your voice, the way you spoke to me..."

Jake shrugged casually as he pulled an ottoman over and sat down in front of her. "I did. A little. Just enough to get you really at ease with what you were about to do."

"Okay."

"Now, I want you to give me your hands and just look into my eyes."

"Sure." Marianne took a last swallow of the sweet liquid, licked her lips, and did as she was bid, placing her hands—palms down—into Jake's. Her muscles were already soft and pliant as the special drink went to work.

"We're going to travel together, Marianne." His voice was soft, a caress of sound on the back of her neck, soothing and velvety. "You are going back to your dreams of Christian. Back to the love you shared with him, back to the pleasure of his touch, his kiss..."

Jake's eyes were dark and beautiful, pools of chocolate that flickered with a rainbow of colors.

"You are warm and safe, you are with friends. Nothing can hurt you..." His fingers stroked hers, an additional comfort that did much to calm her turbulent thoughts. "You are relaxed now, here with us. You want to share this feeling with Christian. To see him once more through the eyes of Mary Anne and the eyes of Marianne. To be with him as yourself—the woman who has loved him throughout time."

"Oh yes..." Jake's face blurred, then disappeared as Marianne closed her eyes.

"Let your thoughts drift freely, just listen to my voice and go where they take you. It will be a wonderful journey, something you want—a place you want to be—a love you want to share and enjoy..."

She floated, weightless and formless, her mind a wisp of clouds.

"Can you hear it? The song of the nightingale..."

Somebody spoke, asked her a question, but she couldn't remember who it was. The fog was lifting...

*It was early...*

The song of the nightingale hummed in her mind as her heart thudded with joyful anticipation. This was the day—the day she would leave her home, her parents, all the things she'd known and endured for the first twenty years of her life.

She would bid them farewell with a smile on her face and a song on her lips because she was going to be with Christian forever. Their future lay ahead of them, a path full of sunlight and opportunities, not a lane shadowed by the restrictions of discipline and obligation.

She had no doubts, no regrets. From this moment on, she was free to live, to love, where she willed.

Mary Anne walked firmly through the forest, her basket on her arm—a meager bundle of clothes within. Everything else she needed, Christian would procure for her. The less she had to remind her of the bleak home she was fleeing, the better off she was.

Her love for Christian swelled within her, almost touchable in its intensity. It was so...so *right*. She'd known it from the first time their gazes had met. The first time his lips had touched hers, the first time their bodies had met in desire and in passion. She'd felt she'd come *home*. In his arms, in his embrace, Mary Anne found the safety and the security she'd always believed could be hers.

And now it *would* be. She picked up her pace as the first rays of dawn began to push away the night, picking her way carefully through the trees toward the crossroads where they were to meet. Accustomed to the forest, the rustle of its inhabitants did not disturb Mary Anne. There were no creatures wandering the shadows that she feared, nor were the sounds she heard unusual. Perhaps a fox returned from a night's hunt, or a badger scurried back to his sett where he would snooze away the daylight hours.

But her pace slowed as an unfamiliar noise caught her attention—a whimper, quickly muffled.

She stopped, head tilted, listening. Birds were singing now, welcoming the oncoming day, but she ignored them, trying to pinpoint what she'd heard.

There—there it was again, a short sound of distress, now louder, off to her right in the undergrowth. As she turned her head, it grew into a sharp cry of pain, only to die off once more into silence.

Unable to continue, Mary Anne turned her steps toward the noise. It was definitely something in pain, some animal perhaps. There were still a few traps in this area, although the men in the nearby village patrolled the forest regularly, trying to keep them at a minimum.

People had to survive, to catch in the wild what they could not afford to purchase. But these traps were vicious—toothed and wickedly effective—and the villagers had chosen not to risk their children's safety for a wild rabbit stew. There were other ways to forage for food should the need arise.

Mary Anne pushed the greenery aside as the whimpers began anew, this time accompanied by soft whispers. There was definitely something or someone suffering and she had to find out who or what it was.

Within moments, she was staring at two faces, one small and streaked with tears, the other frantic, wide-eyed and afraid.

"What's happened?" Dropping her basket, Mary Anne hurried to the child and her mother.

"Please—help me..." The woman was struggling with the ugly jaws of a trap that had locked fast around the child's tiny ankle. There was a lot of blood and Mary Anne gasped as she saw how the flesh had been ripped away by the metal teeth.

"Oh dear Lord." Without another thought, she dropped her basket and rushed to add her strength to the woman's hands. "Here, you pull from that side while I pull from this side."

The child whimpered, then clamped her mouth tightly shut against a cry of pain.

"You are so brave, little one. Never fear, we shall free you."

"I should not...you should not be here..." Beads of sweat dappled the woman's forehead and for the first time Mary Anne realized she was a gypsy. Long dark hair and colored beads mixed in a tangle as she fought to grasp the mechanism of the trap.

"Is she your daughter?" Mary Anne settled herself next to the device and began to pry her side of the jaws free.

"Yes, mistress. She wandered away from our little camp against my instructions. I have searched all night. We must leave here before we are discovered."

Mary Anne nodded. There was little comfort for these wandering folk in this area. They were reviled as thieves and troublemakers by the more staid of the villagers, her parents among them. "I understand."

"You will get into trouble if you are found helping us..." The woman tugged hard. "Easy, Marguerite. 'Tis coming..."

"I could not walk past such a thing. Say no more about it." The metal was sharp and Mary Anne bit her lip in concentration as she pulled with all her strength. She put aside all thoughts of Christian for this moment—a child was seriously hurt. That was all that mattered.

The two women worked feverishly, straining their bodies, cutting themselves without regard to their own safety. The spring was new and strong, intimidating as a trap and almost undefeatable as a shackle around Marguerite's little limb. Their battle continued as the sun rose higher in the sky, each advance met by some new challenge as four hands desperately tried to free the child.

Finally, with a last savage move, Mary Anne and the gypsy woman stretched the teeth free of Marguerite's flesh and the exhausted child pulled her leg away from the horror and pain of the trap.

She sobbed quietly as her mother flew to her side and the clang of metal on metal marked the closing of the hinged device around nothing but air. The woman immediately began tending to the gash that had bled so freely.

Mary Anne leaned back and wiped her hands on the soft moss, realizing the sun was now fully up and the day well begun. She would be late meeting Christian, but he would wait for her, as she would wait for him, should he be delayed.

Shaking out her cloak, Mary Anne stood. "How is she?"

The question seemed to surprise both the gypsy and her daughter. They'd been locked in a terrible struggle for so long, perhaps they'd all but forgotten to speak.

Then the gypsy smiled, a hand resting on the dark hair of her child. "She will do well now. We can heal the wound, nasty though it is."

Marguerite gazed somberly at Mary Anne from eyes as dark as night, but said nothing.

"You have my thanks, mistress..." The gypsy struggled for words.

"None are necessary. Marguerite needed help. I'm glad I was here to aid you and that she will be well." She glanced at the sky. "But now I must hurry."

"May you be blessed, mistress. Your kindness this day...may it bless you always."

Tossing her cloak around her and picking up her basket, Mary Anne smiled. "Thank you. Be careful in the woods. Take care of the little one. And Marguerite?" She fixed the child with a stern look. "Pay attention to your mama in future, all right?"

The little girl nodded soberly.

Laughing, Mary Anne scurried back through the brush to her path, waving over her shoulder at her new friends. They would be well now and, with any luck, would be gone from these woods before any knew of their presence.

For her part, she had a rendezvous with her future and she was already late. There was still a mile or so to go and Mary Anne walked quickly now, her heart light, her steps rapid.

She'd already done one good deed this morning, even though it had delayed her. Christian would understand, she knew. He would have done exactly the same thing had he found the child caught. Although, she mused a little ruefully, with his strength it would have gone a lot quicker.

Before long, the crossroads loomed into sight—but instead of the quietly empty roads she'd expected, there was a small crowd there. A cart or two, some people—what on earth...

Nearing them, Mary Anne's throat caught on a gasp of horror.

There was something—*someone*—dangling horribly from the old oak tree marking the intersection of the two lanes.

Slowing her pace, she moved softly through the hedge, trying to avoid being noticed by any of the villagers. Oh God—was that her *father*? And the curate too. Yes, they were there, staring at the body.

Her gaze followed theirs—*dear Lord in Heaven...*

Mary Anne's mouth fell open on a scream she never uttered.

The mists of time began to swirl around her as the ultimate horror sank through into her brain. It was *Christian* hanging there, Christian's dear face distorted and terrible in death. Christian's body swinging gently to and fro from a noose fastened to the strong branches of the oak.

*"Stay, love. Stay. It is a horrible thing, but you must see it through. It cannot harm you or Christian anymore."*

A voice—soft and comforting—Mary Anne *knew* that voice from somewhere. Instead of fainting away or swooning into unconsciousness, that voice drew her back again to where she stood behind a large fir and gave her the strength to stare at the lifeless body of the man she loved beyond desperation.

Tears began to fall unchecked as she stepped from the concealment of the evergreen boughs toward the awful sight. "Christian, my love...what have they done to you?"

*"You must find out, Mary Anne. We are here with you. You are safe. But you must go on – for just a little while longer."*

The voice came again, a whisper of solace in the back of her mind. Yes, she must find out what on earth happened. She must fight the overwhelming urge to scream and rant and let go of all that she was, all that she held sacred. She wanted to die—right there, right at that moment. She wanted to die if that was the only way to be with Christian.

But the voice stayed with her, holding her desires in check, steadying the tiny part of her that could still think with any degree of rationality.

"Mary Anne. What are you doing here? This is no place for a woman. Get you home." Her father's hand was on her arm, a harsh grip that bruised even as she swung around to face him.

"What has happened here? How *could* you..." Words failed her as she choked on her grief, able only to wave a hand at the terror behind her.

"We did only what good and honest men would do." The curate stepped to her father's side, a look of superiority on his pudgy face. "The beast was a murderer. A killer, pure and simple. We exacted justice for his crimes. May God have mercy on his soul."

Both men dipped their heads respectfully, oblivious of the fury that swamped the woman before them.

"May God have mercy on *your* souls. Because, before that very God, I swear you have hanged an innocent man." Her body shook with the force of her anger. "What right do you have to take a life? What *right*?"

Her father glared at her. "If you must know, then so be it. A body was discovered just after midnight. A man, one of the villagers, his neck snapped cleanly. Right outside his..." he gestured with his head toward Christian, "gates. There was nobody else in the vicinity. There were no servants or others who could have done such a thing."



"Especially in *that* particular way." The curate pierced with a stern gaze from beneath his straggly eyebrows. "'Tis a method commonly known to be taught to soldiers. It was obvious who had perpetrated the foul deed."

Mary Anne gasped. "This is what you base your terrible actions upon? A mere supposition of guilt and a man meets his death?"

"He did not deny it when we questioned him. He would not account for his whereabouts last night. He was guilty. Guilty as sin." Her father's look was disdainful. "It came as no surprise to many of us."

She wrenched herself free of his grip, surprising him enough to let her go. "How dare you? He was prejudged and condemned before this incident, wasn't he? His birth condemned him, not any act you wish to lay at his door."

"Hush now. You are being foolish. Go home, Mary Anne. You should not be out at this time. Especially not here."

"'Tis not a sight for such gentle eyes, I'm sure."

The curate moved toward her, but Mary Anne stepped quickly back. "The sight which appalls me the most is right in front of me, not behind me." She spat the words at the two men, stopping them in their tracks.

Pain and fury boiled within her soul. "It is impossible for Christian Lawrence to have committed any crimes at all last night. I know this as a certainty." She squared her shoulders and stared at them both.

"How do I know this? Because *I was with him*. 'Til long after midnight."

Her father's face suffused with an angry blush and the curate's jaw gaped.

She ignored their reactions, fueled now only by the desire to see them humbled and made aware of the atrocity of their deeds. "Yes, I was with him. We met a little after dark and walked down to the stream. There's a place there we loved, it's where we spent many a night together. Where we talked and made plans for our future. Where I gave myself to him and he gave himself to me."

Heads were turning as her voice grew stronger. "If you had waited, given him due process of law, asked the right questions and done your duty as a man of God, I could have saved his life. *I could have told you the truth.*"

Her father's face hardened. "You whore. Be silent." The words were hissed between clenched teeth.

"It doesn't matter what I am—not now. What matters is that you've killed an innocent man. *You* are the murderers here, *not* Christian Lawrence." Her words hung in the air, an accusation that did not sit well on either man's shoulders.

The curate's lips curled in a grimace of distaste. "I'm...I'm...shocked..." He seemed to withdraw both from her and her father.

"I'm disgusted." Reverend Danton's eyes hardened. "You are no daughter of mine anymore. I'm done with you. Get your whore's body out of my sight."

He swung his hand viciously toward Mary Anne's face, the blow catching her by surprise and making her stumble. Losing her balance, she fell hard, catching her side on the edge of the cart by the side of the road.

It was a sharp collision, driving the air from her lungs. She tumbled headlong into the dirt, sobbing out a cry as the pain of the impact cascaded through her body. Curling in upon herself, she wept, the pain radiating in waves, jolting her belly and her gut even as she wrapped her arms across her stomach.

It got worse, like a knife stabbing her repeatedly and she whimpered aloud as she realized that her thighs were wet, that blood was seeping through her gown onto the sandy surface of the country lane.

She was losing Christian's child—she had lost Christian and now the baby too—it was too much for her to bear.

This time, there was no voice encouraging her to stay.

Her vision faded, the pain ebbed away—there was nothing but blackness—

## Chapter Eight

Jake watched Marianne as she slept on the couch, bundled in a blanket and snuffling a little into the cushion beneath her head.

He'd sent Renny to bed a couple of hours ago, promising to stay awake and tend the fire until Marianne awoke. There was no point in both of them losing sleep. Not right now, anyway.

He had a book next to him and a low light illuminated the handsome couple on the cover. Maura Donner was indeed one helluva writer if she could hold his attention with a Regency romance. And she had. He'd picked it up out of idle curiosity and found himself drawn into the tale of lovers, carriages, adventures that were improbable, but believable. Her characters were crystal clear in his head, a tribute to her skills.

Jake was impressed with Maura Donner, but even more impressed with Marianne Donovan. She'd taken a journey few women would ever experience. He felt, deep in his bones, that she'd survive it. But he kept watch over her sleeping form, just in case she needed a helping hand.

Something was gnawing at him about this whole thing. Something in the back of his mind that wouldn't come forward and be identified, but was there, all the same. He stared into the fire, letting his mind clear of clutter and drift—doing the sort of mental exercises he asked of his clients.

And there it was. The *nightingale*. The one continuous thread through Marianne's voyage, in one form or another. His hand crept absently to the small alabaster raven around his neck as the germ of an idea began to form.

Was it remotely possible that birds were the key? That things like love or souls or something could be transferred into a species of creature and carried through time until a suitable moment occurred?

For him and Renny, it had been a raven. Jakob, his special soul mate. Jakob had been so much more than just a bird and had indeed carried something special through millennia. As time passed, Jake found himself remembering his own history with greater detail. He still marveled at the miraculous way he and Renny had found each other – at last.

For Marianne, there was a nightingale. A song or a name – regardless of the form, it seemed to be consistently present in her memories and dreams.

He frowned at the fire. This was really pushing the envelope when it came to theories. Bad enough that he was encouraging some really weird past life regression stuff. If he threw birds into the mix, he'd be laughed off the face of the planet.

Well, it was something to discuss with Renny when he had chance. She'd tell him if he was out of his frickin' mind. A smile chased the creases from his eyebrows. Renny was everything he'd ever wanted in a woman and then some. Their love was predestined, a chase through time that had ended exactly where it was supposed to.

He could only wish that Marianne's dreams could end so well, but he had no idea if they would. Jake was troubled by that. He didn't like the thought that he'd opened a can of worms for her, forced her to face the death of *her* beloved. And there was no hint that any resolution might lie ahead for her in this lifetime.

Would she be able deal with it? What would it be like for her now, the memory of a grand passion residing inside her heart? Perhaps she would measure every love affair, every man in her life, against Christian. And that would not be a good thing, since Jake doubted anybody would be able to come close.

He knew, from his own experience, that once a love like that came along, nothing could compare. *Ever*. It was a haunting of the most wonderfully painful kind, a kind that brought ghosts of desire, an ache of emptiness along with it.

Marianne stirred, distracting Jake from his thoughts. She whimpered, then sighed.

"Hey, honey." He moved to sit on the floor next to the couch and stroked her shoulder gently. "How do you feel?"

Her eyes opened and, for a moment or two, Jake wasn't sure if she actually saw him. Then she blinked and stretched her neck a little as if easing a kink out of the muscles.

"Hi, Jake."

"You okay?" He kept his touch light, soothing her, and his voice low in the shadows of the living room.

"I think so." Freeing her arms from the blanket, Marianne pushed herself into an upright position and ran a hand through her hair. "Feel a bit like I've been run over by a truck, but other than that..."

She swallowed and cleared her throat, sighing gratefully as Jake passed her a bottle of water. He was prepared...most of his clients developed a healthy thirst after their sessions.

"Good, that's good." Pouring calm confidence into his tone, Jake shifted back to his chair. "If there's anything you need, just say the word."

She drank, then looked up at him. "Jake. I *died*, didn't I?"

"I don't know, sweetheart. I can't tell you that." Her eyes were dazed and still turned inward, looking at something he couldn't see.

"I think I did. But—" She sucked in air, a gusty breath that seemed to refill her lungs. "Oh God. I *know*. Now I know what happened..."

"Can you tell me?" He almost whispered the question. It might be too soon for her to deal with it all or, then again, now might be the best time while it was still fresh in her mind.

Marianne glanced around. "Where's Renny?"

"Asleep. I sent her to bed. Don't worry, I'll make sure she knows it all."

Marianne nodded and slowly, awkwardly, began unfolding the simple tale of missed opportunities and chance encounters that had made her dreams a nightmare for so long.

"And as I fell, I knew I'd hurt myself. Badly." She rested a hand on her belly. "I was losing my child. Christian's child. I'd lost them both."

Jake said nothing. What could he say? She'd lived these moments, these tragedies. There was little he could offer in the way of comfort, except for his presence.

"I do believe that I could not have survived. Miscarriages were common and death often the result. Even childbirth was risky in those days."

Jake noted her voice was calm, even though her eyes shone with unshed tears.

"It's funny." She shrugged.

"What's funny?"

"I ache, I want to weep just thinking about it all. But it's like—like—a weight has been lifted." She glanced at him. "The pain is all still there, but now that I know what happened and why...well, it's just easier to bear for some reason."

"That's good." Jake's inner tension uncoiled. *She was going to be okay.*

"It's so stupid, really. Like some novel full of missed opportunities, accidental mistakes, shoving a note under the door only to have it end up under the carpet and remain unread. Lives changed by the sheerest coincidences..."

"Yes, it is. Life can be like that, can't it?"

"I guess." She stared at the fire, silent for a long period. Then she moved. "I think I need to sleep now." A small grin curved her lips. "I think, thanks to you, that I *can* sleep now."

"Good girl." Jake rose to his feet. "I think you will too. But if not, this house is your house for as long as you're here. Feel free to wander if you need to." He took her hand and tugged her to her feet. "I hate to sound like Scarlett O'Hara, but tomorrow is another day. If you can put all this aside just for a few hours, it'll be a good thing."

She nodded and smothered a yawn. "Thanks, but God, I'm tired enough to sleep standing up right now."

He chuckled softly as he closed the fireplace screen and turned off the lights. "Lying down is better. Go to bed, Marianne. Let it go."

"Yes, Captain Butler. Tomorrow is indeed another day. Can we go to Tara?"

\* \* \* \* \*

To her surprise, Marianne *did* sleep. And like the proverbial log too. Several hours of total, blissful unconsciousness—something she couldn't remember doing for far too long.

When she woke, it was to find the sun high in the sky and the birds chirping crazily outside the window. In desperate need of coffee, she hurried through a shower, threw her clothes on and stumbled downstairs, led by her nose to the pot brewing on the kitchen counter.

"Well, hello to you too." Renny grinned at her from the doorway to the garden. "Welcome back to the land of the living."

Marianne felt a slight blush rise over her cheeks. "Yeah, sorry. I did sleep rather late, didn't I?"

"No prob, honey." Renny moved inside and poured herself another mug. "It's actually only about ten o'clock. And sleep is a good thing for you right now." She sipped. "Jake told me."

"Ah. Okay." Marianne crossed to the table and sat down.

"Sad story. Very poignant."

"Yes. Yes, it is." The coffee tasted wonderful this morning. "But I'm glad I know the whole thing now. It makes it easier to bear."

Even as she spoke, Marianne knew it was the truth. Her love for Christian was as strong as ever. Her grief at his horrible death as painful as ever. But now—now she *knew*. She glanced up at Renny. "Funny how life is all about choices, isn't it? A choice to help a child and a man's life is forfeit."

"Yes." Renny nodded and sat down across from Marianne. "We all have to make choices, honey. She chose to help an injured child. That says a lot about Mary Anne right there. She put that little girl's needs before her own need to be with the man she loved. Mary Anne was a good woman. A woman with a kind heart, a woman with passion and tenderness."

Marianne nodded. "I know. And knowing that, I have to ask myself if I would have done anything different." She paused, lost for a moment in the past. "Honestly, I don't know."

Renny sighed. "Don't even try to answer that question. It's impossible. You know too much from the here and now to try to second-guess the way-back-when."

Marianne swallowed. "Thank you, Renny. I have to thank Jake too, when I see him, but I just want you to know that...well..."

Renny reached over and covered Marianne's hand with her own. "It's okay. I understand." Her fingers tightened. "I really do understand."

"Sharing a moment here? Can I watch?" Jake peeked in through the open kitchen window.

"Pervert." Renny laughed at him. "Marianne is merely trying to express her enormous gratitude for our intervention into her most private passions and dreams."

"You didn't mention our bill?"

"Jake, you're an ass." His wife gazed affectionately at him as Marianne chuckled.

"Well, if there isn't going to be any girl-on-girl action, why don't you two stop holding hands and get out here into the sunshine? It's glorious, warm, the chrysanthemums smell all—um—*chrysanthemum-y*..."

Renny rolled her eyes. "C'mon, Marianne. What he means is that if we go out there, he won't have to do any of the weeding he promised, since he'll have the excuse of wanting to leave us alone."



"Hey." Jake's snort of outrage echoed through the kitchen as Marianne and Renny walked into the sunshine. "I've been working."

Marianne looked at the Sunday paper, messily dumped on one of the low tables outside next to a comfortable lounge chair and an empty coffee mug. "Mmm hmm."

"Okay. Sort of working. More like thinking a lot about the work I will be doing." His smile was innocent and a thing of delight. "As a matter of fact..." He leaned down and grabbed a section of the paper. "I found something."

Renny pursed her lips. "Really?"

Jake dropped a light kiss on them. "Yes. Really."

"You're incorrigible."

Marianne looked away. Their love for each other was so strong. It almost outglowed the sunlight dappling the stones of the patio beneath her feet. Would she ever feel that way about a man? After Christian?

She couldn't help but doubt it. She'd known a love like that, even though it had been in her distant past. She wouldn't settle for anything less. Not in this lifetime, anyway.

It was a rather depressing realization.

"See?" Jake's voice interrupted Marianne's train of thought. He was pointing at something in the paper.

"Hmm." Renny glanced at Marianne. "I don't know, Jake..."

"What?" Marianne looked at them both. "What is it?"

"Jake's had an idea. One of his better ones, as a matter of fact." Renny smiled. "He thinks—and I tend to agree—it would be good for us all to get out this afternoon. It's a great day, the scenery is perfect, the sunshine's warm...hell, why not?"

Marianne blinked. "Um..."

"Look." Jake held up the folded newspaper. "We're less than an hour from the Oakwood Concert Bowl."

“Oh wow. Yes, that’s right.” Marianne remembered that the summer music and theater facility wasn’t that far away. Although an artist in her own right, she’d never attended any of the plays staged there, or the open-air concerts offered by both rock bands and classical orchestras.

“This afternoon, music lovers are to be treated to...lemme see, where is it?” Jake squinted at the advertisement. “Yeah, here it is.” He quoted the text. “*A unique way to end the concert season.* Oakwood Concert Bowl music lovers will be treated to the debut performance of a new symphony, conducted by the composer himself. Maestro Harvey has traveled from California especially for this engagement and will be leading the Oakwood Symphony Orchestra as they present, for the very first time, his latest work.”

“Maestro who?” Renny tilted her head.

“Dunno. Harvey somebody. Californian.” Jake looked apologetically at his wife. “Sorry, darlin’. I’m not really up on the classical music world at the moment.”

She nodded. “Yup. Now if it was the Rolling Stones...”

Jake’s eyes gleamed. “Point taken.” He turned to Marianne. “What do *you* think, honey? Are you up for a ride into the beautiful bowels of New England in the fall? Followed by a two-hour snooze on the soft green lawns of the Oakwood Concert Bowl?”

Renny pushed her hair back over her shoulders. “Think about it, Marianne. It’ll do us all a world of good to get out of the house. Look at something different, change our line of thought. I know I could use the break and I ‘m guessing it would work for you too.” She grinned. “It’s an outdoor theater. We get to sit on the grass in the sunshine and listen to the music. Napping is not mandatory.”

“It’s not?” Jake sounded stunned.

Both Renny and Marianne laughed. Within a few moments, Marianne realized that, yes, this was something she would like to do. There was much she had to come to terms with, but brooding about it, wandering around and pulling it to bits in her head while she analyzed it—that wasn’t her way.

God knew she should be writing, but she wasn't sure she was up to that yet. There was still too much of Christian and the pain of losing him lingering in her heart. He was so much a part of all her heroes, all her romance novels.

*It's too soon.*

But a lazy fall afternoon of music and sunshine – yes, *that* she could do.

Her smile was enough of an answer for Jake and Renny. Before she knew it, she was bundled into the back of their station wagon along with a basket of snacks, a couple of bottles of wine and several thick blankets.

It was wonderful to drive down country roads, to see the fall colors blossoming richly throughout the woods, to let the air whip her hair around and to *breathe*. Her soul was grieving, but her mind was at ease for the first time in so long, she'd forgotten what it felt like.

With each mile, Marianne's world adjusted, shifted, sorted itself into a new and more comfortable pattern. She had memories, gloriously wonderful – and yes, tragic – memories. But now, that's all they were. Just memories. No longer was she crushed with a sense of desolate frustration or unfulfilled desire.

The past had become just that...the *past*.

Although it hurt to remember it, she knew that if she allowed herself sufficient time, it would finally settle into where it was supposed to be. She was, in fact, blessed in many ways. She had a wealth of experiences in her mind that most people would never know. Vivid recollections of a period in history and its people. Material that she could draw upon for her novels, a researcher's dream. And she also possessed a new and unfamiliar sense of fate. A personal awareness of what it meant to make choices in her life, how those totally innocent choices could mean the difference between life and death.

As they entered the Oakwood parking lot, Marianne made herself a promise. She'd *live* every day, make the most of every second. So what if she had nobody now, no great

love to light her soul? She'd survive. And she'd make that survival joyous in every way she could. Life was indeed too short.

Filled with resolution, she untangled her feet from the blankets, grabbed the basket and stepped out into the autumn sunlight.

## Chapter Nine

Maestro Chris Harvey peered around one of the smooth plywood proscenium arches at the audience. It was a good crowd, the chairs in the VIP section were full and the green swath of grass beyond was cluttered with blankets and lawn chairs where the rest of the attendees sprawled at their leisure, enjoying the sunshine.

He heard the muted clatter of wineglasses being filled from picnic baskets, laughter and a general buzz of conversation as they awaited the start of the concert that marked the last performance of this year at Oakwood.

Rubbing his palms down his smart black slacks, Chris realized he was sweating and it had nothing to do with the warm fall day. He was, for one of the few times in his life, fucking *nervous*.

Beethoven he could handle with his eyes shut. Ditto Stravinsky, Schumann, whoever. It was somebody else's music with not a huge amount of allowance for variations in the conductor's interpretation. Mostly it depended on an orchestra that knew its ass from its oboe.

The Oakwood Symphony orchestra had no problem telling the difference. They were young, enthusiastic and took direction well. Must be something in the country air, Chris decided, that had made rehearsals go like a dream.

Still, today was different. It was *his* symphony that was going to echo around the natural amphitheatre. There would be no preconceived notions on the part of his audience. No eager anticipation for how he was going to handle the complex third movement, since nobody'd ever heard the complex third movement, which wasn't *that* complex anyway.

He winced. He was gonna give himself a crashing headache if he kept this up and that was the last thing he wanted minutes before his performance. He *had* to keep

himself focused. Backstage—or the hidden bits that functioned as “backstage” in an open-air concert hall—was buzzing with activity. Which was why he’d sought out this quiet nook for himself.

Absently, he gazed out over the crowd, trying to clear his thoughts. His eyes were drawn to one brightly colored blanket and the woman who sat there. For some reason, she seemed—familiar?

He squinted against the sun, trying to get a better look at her. Dark hair tossed around her shoulders and she was chatting with another couple as they shared a bottle of wine. He couldn’t place her. But there was *something*...

He turned away, slightly baffled at his odd fancies only minutes before he was to go on stage. It wasn’t like him to get distracted at this point.

An aide hurried to his side and passed him his baton. “Here you are, Maestro. Break a leg.”

“Thanks.” Chris nodded and took the baton, feeling his feet land on more solid and familiar ground. Just the comforting weight of the tools of his trade cleared his thoughts and brought him back to the present.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Fellow music lovers...” The music director was about to begin the introduction.

Chris straightened his shoulders, tugged at his white, open-necked shirt and checked his cufflinks. He liked conducting in informal attire better than his more restrictive tuxedo. One of the many reasons he’d chosen Oakwood to debut this particular piece.

“From California.” The man sure loved the sound of his own voice. Chris grinned. Didn’t they all?

“It’s an honor to welcome him here to the Oakwood Concert Bowl and to offer you the debut performance of his new symphony. A fitting way to end our forty-third season here in these wonderful surroundings.”

There was a smattering of polite applause and behind the director the orchestra began their preliminary tuning noises.

“So, without further ado, I’d like to invite you all to join me in welcoming Maestro Christopher Harvey as he conducts the Oakwood Symphony Orchestra in the very first performance of...*The Nightingale*.”

The crowd rose to its feet as Chris stepped onto the podium and tapped his score.

\* \* \* \* \*

The first movement was winding down before Jake, Renny and Marianne managed to get their mouths shut. Their gasps of surprise had been mutual, a synchronized triple jaw-drop along with three simultaneous indrawn breaths.

None of them had bothered to check the title of this new symphony and hearing it like that, out of the blue, from a strange man in front of a full orchestra—well, Marianne’s head spun and she wondered for a second or two if she was going to faint dead away.

The music drifted around her, but it took her quite some time to hear it past the buzzing in her ears. The little dots that were swimming in front of her eyes finally disappeared and the tingling numbness in her cheeks faded, leaving her stunned and staring at the stage.

The strains of the first movement died away, there was a brief spattering of applause and then the second movement began. As her heart rate slowed back down to something approaching normal and she realized she wasn’t going to fibrillate herself to death on the blanket, Marianne closed her eyes and began to listen—finally—to the music itself.

It was sweetly and delicately phrased, beginning with a soft duet for cello and oboe. Rich melodious harmonies began to build, telling Marianne a story of love, passion and eventually the climax of fulfilled desire.

She gulped. If she hadn't known better, she'd swear this Maestro had orchestrated her dreams. There was something classical in the score, something that could have been right at home in the Regency. A styling, perhaps, a flourish here and there – whatever it was, it took her back into the past and painted pictures of days gone by.

She was having a visceral and visual response to this music, something that surprised her enormously. With her eyes shut and her mind open, she could see drifting images behind her eyelids. Images of lovers, of moonlight, of sensual moments that defied verbal description, but were easily created by the notes of a violin.

The third movement began, echoing the melody that ran through the piece, but this time with an undertone in a minor key, a foreboding harmony that sounded poignant, yet passionate. Short, but vivid, it built to a crescendo, a cascade of liquid beauty that brought tears to Marianne's eyes.

Raptly she gazed at the back of the conductor. What *talent*. His body swayed and writhed as he coaxed these musicians into producing sounds of incredible beauty and complexity. He seemed to grow taller before her eyes, his dark hair flying loosely around his head, his white shirt a splotch of brilliance against the black t-shirts worn by the entire orchestra.

It was dramatic—this chiaroscuro of light and dark—a theatrical staging that perfectly suited the beauty of the symphony. For a few seconds, the sun's rays picked him out, dancing across the front of the stage and highlighting him in an aura of brilliance.

Marianne had to blink to focus. It was dazzling, a multimedia experience coupling the vision of this talented conductor, highlighted by the sun, with the music he'd created from a mere thought.

There was more applause this time at the end of the third movement and Marianne could sense the involvement of the audience now, as lost as she was in the magic spells woven by this wizard with a baton.



He ignored it, though, remaining frozen for an instant as he raised his arms in preparation for the final movement.

And it began, a soft sound, a flute piping plaintively melancholy notes into the air of a warm New England afternoon. Silence fell like a blanket over the audience and Marianne found herself holding her breath along with everybody else.

Then she realized what she was hearing and her hand blindly fumbled for Renny's arm. Grabbing it tightly, she held on.

"Marianne? You okay?"

Marianne shook her head. "No. That tune..." She swallowed convulsively. "Do you know what that is?"

Renny leaned to her. "What?"

"It's—" She could barely form the words. "It's the song of the *nightingale*."

Renny's gasp was soft, but audible. "You sure?"

Marianne nodded. "How could I possibly forget it?" She stared at the stage. "I've heard it too often to make a mistake."

She realized Renny was sharing this information with Jake and released her arm to brush her hand over her eyes. Without her knowing it, tears had already formed and were stinging the corners. Once again, the melody echoed around the audience and out into the setting sun. It grew more distinct, picked up by different instruments, tossed back and forth now in an increasing counterpoint, developing a richness and a depth that only the full orchestra could bring.

Marianne's heart ached fiercely as the too-well-remembered song of the nightingale flew from the stage into her soul and touched the pain within.

Unchecked now, the tears began to fall, the agony of her loss finally breaking through her reserve, unlocked by the key created by a stranger. Marianne wept silently, letting the music flow around her, releasing her grief and offering a strange kind of comfort.

Renny's arm slipped unnoticed around her shoulders, but the other woman remained silent as the waves of the final movement swept over them. There was nothing to be said—this moment had to arrive, Marianne knew. She had to face her agony and deal with it.

And now, thanks to a symphony and one simple motif within it, she could.

She didn't care if anybody saw her cry. She didn't care about the brilliance of the performance or the skillful composition, or the juxtaposition of themes and the intriguing use of the lower registers in the final movement.

She didn't care about any of the things the critics would probably rave about. Nothing mattered to her at that moment except for the song of the nightingale.

And the man she had loved for eternity.

She barely realized that the music had ended. Scarcely heard the sound of applause as it rang out with cheers and whistles and went on for some time. She could not see the stage through her tears, nor get a good look at the conductor as he turned to accept the plaudits of his audience.

She barely heard Renny as she whispered softly to her. "Take all the time you need, Marianne. Jake and I will meet you at the car."

Marianne managed a weak nod. "Thanks."

Wrapped in her grief, she rested her head on her knees and sobbed.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Dammit.*

Chris muttered to himself as he searched his score for his page of notes. He must have left it on the podium.

With an exhausted sigh, he strolled back out onto the empty stage to retrieve it, knowing the audience had long gone. It had been a fabulous performance and he was still a bit buzzed with euphoria.

Though not enough to join the gang backstage where champagne corks were popping, laughter and jokes were being exchanged and phone numbers tossed around all over the place. These musicians would reunite elsewhere, or if not, meet again next year when the Oakwood season opened once more.

But for Chris, this was the zenith. No longer just a Maestro, he now felt himself a real composer, a real musician. He was complete.

*Almost.*

Ignoring the nagging feeling that there was just one thing missing, something unfinished, Chris found the page on the floor at the very front of the stage. As he picked it up, he noticed that there was still one blanket left on the grass. Still one audience member left.

It was the woman he'd noticed earlier – and she seemed to be crying. He could hear the soft whimpers thanks to the acoustics of the landscape and they grabbed at his heart in a strangely odd way.

Scarcely realizing what he was doing, he put the paper on the conductor's shelf and walked toward her. He couldn't leave her there, not when she was in such evident distress.

"Excuse me. Miss?" He spoke as he walked, so as not to scare her. "Are you all right?"

She hadn't heard him, apparently. "Miss? Hello? Can I help you?"

Slowly she raised her head from her knees, tears glistening in the dying rays of the sunset. Her gaze met his – and Chris gasped.

It was like a punch to the gut, a visceral charge of heat that shocked him to his core. Dark brown and shining with tears, her eyes fixed on his face, then widened as he drew closer to where she sat on her blanket.

"What's the matter?" He knew he formed the words, but wasn't sure if he'd spoken them or not. *"I know you."*

That was unexpected. He hadn't thought of saying it, had no idea where it came from. But something in the recesses of his brain forced him to speak. And it was the truth.

"I know you." He repeated it, staring at her as she gazed up at him. "Who are you? How do I know you?"

Awkwardly, she struggled to her feet. "I don't know. But I know you too. I know your music. The song of the nightingale..." Her gaze heated as she took in his features, glancing here and there as if drinking him in. "It's—him. It's Christian. *And me.*"

He frowned. "My name's Christopher." His brain whirled slightly as he fought to hold on to something that was inside there, but just out of reach. "And you're...you're...M—M—"

He *knew* her name, goddammit. He just couldn't recall it.

"Marianne."

"Marianne." Chris repeated it, savoring it, tasting it on his tongue like the familiar sensation he got from the first sip of a favorite wine. "Yes. Marianne."

Tentatively, she reached out and touched his cheek. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Her hand felt *right*, warm, as erotic and as sensual as any passionate caress he'd ever received.

"Your music. The nightingale. It brought back some memories for me." She was fighting, Chris could tell. Fighting to recover her balance, to pull herself back from whatever agony she'd been suffering.

Her hand fell away and Chris felt the loss like a blow. He reached for her wrist and brought it back to his face. "Touch me again. It feels good."

They had drawn nearer to each other, Chris realized. Near enough that he could smell her fresh scent. He breathed her in, another sense of familiarity sweeping over him.

It was his turn to reach out and slip his fingers through her mussed silky hair. "What's happening? Why do I feel like I've known you forever?" He tightened his grip and pulled her nearer. "Why is this like...like...coming home?"

Slowly he eased their bodies together, a perfect melding of curves and planes, a blending of heat that nearly took his breath away.

"I feel it too." She licked her lips as their faces moved inexorably closer.

The kiss was inevitable.

Chris brushed her mouth with his, barely touching the soft fullness. But it was all it took. Like dry tinder, his senses exploded and he crushed her body against his as he kissed her once more. This time she welcomed him, parting her lips for his tongue, moaning a little as he took what she offered and delved deeply into her sweetness.

Her breasts crushed into his chest, nipples beading as he held her tightly against his body. Chris was beyond himself, lost in the myriad sensations ravaging his sanity. When she slipped her arms around his neck and wrapped them tightly, hanging on to him for dear life, he nearly came right there and then.

His cock fit into the heated softness between her thighs as if they'd been made for each other, her shapely buttocks filled his palms as he slid them down to cup her and if it hadn't been for the vague awareness that they were in public, Chris knew he'd be buried in her up to his balls and pumping his life into her.

What the hell was happening?

Slowly their lips parted and they stared at each other, panting and flushed. Then a soft smile curved Marianne's kiss-swollen mouth.

"Hello, Chris."

He smiled back. "Hello, Marianne."

Then she said something odd. "*This time, we're going to get it right.*"

And the sweet sound of a bird serenading the arrival of dusk drifted around them as they stood, still embracing each other, on an empty sweep of grass.

It wasn't a nightingale, of course...but it could have been.

## **Epilogue**

*For those who absolutely have to know what happened next...*

The success of Maestro Chris Harvey's symphony, *The Nightingale*, made quite a splash in the entertainment sections of the newspapers. The sections devoted to highbrow things like classical music, of course, since a new movie released the same weekend, featuring lots of blood, gore and a popular actor—naked. Naturally naked movie stars got a lot more press than a symphony.

However, when that same Maestro was seen around Boston with the best-selling author, Maura Donner, a few more footnotes appeared in both the entertainment sections *and* the social news sections.

The latest Maura Donner novel rose to prominence shortly thereafter and was described by her fans as being “one of her best yet”.

The marriage between the Maestro and the author was also duly noted. Although more quietly, since the affair had apparently taken place somewhere off the radar of the tabloid journalists who might have been tempted to snap a few unauthorized photos of the whole thing if they'd known about the country home of Dr. Jake Corvo and his wife Renny.

Fortunately, they didn't.

After relocating to California, Maura Donner continued to write her novels, enjoying the ocean and the company of her husband who was, so it was reported, hard at work on his next opus.

They were both tickled pink when a film production company optioned one of Maura's novels, lured most probably by the thought that they could also nab a score for themselves by one of today's most promising composers.

The movie was a runaway hit, earning award nominations for both Maura Donner and her husband, Chris Harvey, in the screenplay and music categories respectively.

Unfortunately, they didn't win.

But neither cared particularly, since on the very night of the award ceremony, Maura Donner, in her real life persona of Marianne Harvey, was giving birth to their first child – a daughter.

They named her Laura and were both thrilled that she had her father's incredible blue eyes.

Yes, *this* time they got it right.

Which was all very nice and sweet and of absolutely no interest whatsoever to a man in Washington, DC. He had problems of his own.

Prime amongst which was his internal confusion and irritation at the presentations he was scheduled to make on behalf of a large resource development company. He had no love for large development companies and was sort of pissed at himself for getting into this position in the first place.

Second to this annoyance was the fact that he wasn't sleeping very well. Ever since he'd arrived in the nation's capital two days ago, he'd been having the weirdest dreams – something that was completely out of character for him.

Last night's had been almost identical to the first...

He'd been thrusting one very hard erection into a sweetly hot cunt, a sensual and erotic dream that surpassed any he could remember having in a long time. Long thighs had gripped his hips as she rode him, a caress of silk coupled with the bite of her fingernails as she dug them into his shoulders.

His eyes had been closed – his cock on a hair trigger as she'd pushed herself down one last time...

In his dream, he'd finally lifted his eyelids to look at her.



*Big mistake.*

Straddling him was a woman, smiling down at him with the heat of passion flushing her high cheekbones. Her hair was a black veil cascading over her lean body in shining waves, her skin smooth and sleek.

And as he stared at her, spellbound, she changed...softening, blurring...turning all grey and downy and feathered... With something close to what he could only describe as erotic horror, he felt himself on the edge of coming—a scream of mixed terror and completion choking from his throat as he woke himself from the nightmare.

*Christ above. He was fucking a heron...*

## **About the Author**

Sahara Kelly was transplanted from old England to New England where she now lives with her husband and teenage son. Making the transition from her historical regency novels to Romantica™ has been surprisingly easy, and now Sahara can't imagine writing anything else. She is dedicated to the premise that everybody should have fantasies.

Sahara welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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