

THE SACRIFICE

by Elaine Mallaband

Vincent stood on the bridge, gazing down into the Abyss. In his left hand he held the letter from Catherine which spelled the end of his hopes and dreams. The paper was wet with his tears and he had come here to be alone in his grief. He knew his life was over, for what was the use of living on when the love of his life had decided to end their relationship? The very thought of never seeing her again filled him with an aching emptiness he found utterly unbearable.

The letter had been passed down by a Helper and, for the hundredth time, his eyes ran over the brief but apologetic message, his eyes blurring with fresh tears at the words.

'Dear Vincent, we know a real future together is impossible. I have decided we should not see each other again. Be happy without the complications. I'll never forget you. Love, Catherine.'

He sobbed freely, letting the tears flow unchecked, then finally tossed the paper into the Abyss, wanting to follow it, watching it float down slowly until it disappeared into the unknown depth of the pool.

He thought of all that had passed between them and the special moments he treasured in his heart - and then he previewed his life ahead without her. The bitter sweetness of living with the memories of her and what they had been to each other, in spite of the difficulties, was unthinkable. He knew he could never be the same man he had been before she had come into his life. Half of him would be an empty shell that moved and breathed, but didn't feel any more.

He thought of her beauty, her warmth and her zest for life and he cried out in pain. A strange darkness overcame his mind and he let his weight take him over into the Abyss, making no effort to save himself. The name that reverberated around the sheer walls surrounding the deep pool was Catherine's, as he fell endlessly down and down....

He awoke suddenly with a jolt, startled and relieved that the nightmare had ended. His face was covered with clammy perspiration and tears from the ghastly dream. It had felt so real, he looked around for evidence of a letter. There was only, by his bed, the large and beautiful seashell and the white rose in its pouch that Catherine had given him.

It was still too early to rise, but he didn't feel like sleeping any longer. There was a restlessness in him and he so wanted to see Catherine, but he knew she wasn't at home. She had gone to stay with a friend who was having personal trouble. He remembered her telling him she would be away for three or four days, if all went well.

How he missed her and those meetings on her balcony patio -- special moments he lived for at the end of the day - just talking, reading, being so close together. He wanted them to last forever.

Somehow, he managed to get through the next two days by keeping himself busy with tunnel

projects, but the hours seemed to take twice as long as usual to pass. What depressed him most about the waiting was the remembrance of the bad dream with that chilling letter.

'Was it an omen?' he kept asking himself. *'Was she really visiting a friend or was there something else behind her absence?'* He was torturing himself and he needed to see her, to be reassured that everything was well between them. Yet, as she was a part of him because of their special bond, he felt a certain sorrow in her that he couldn't understand, but perhaps it was caused by her friend she was helping.

On the fourth day, Mouse brought an envelope addressed to him, urgently delivered from Above. The mere sight of it sent warning bells clanging in Vincent's brain, the dream rushing back to haunt him, chilling him through and through.

Mouse proffered the blue envelope. "It's from Catherine!" the youth told him excitedly, grinning.

Vincent was deathly afraid to open it, but took it from him with a shaking hand, then stood gazing at the neat handwriting on the envelope.

"Aren't you going to open it?" Mouse couldn't understand why his best friend was so reluctant to tear it open and read her letter. Vincent looked as if he was in a state of shock, clutching the envelope, eyes closed, breathing unevenly.

"Can 'I' do it for you?" Mouse volunteered helpfully. He was quite concerned for him.

Vincent shook his head. There was a throbbing in his temples and his heart raced. The whole of his stomach had turned upside down. He felt quite ill and weak. He stuck the envelope in a pocket of his padded waistcoat, much to Mouse's surprise.

"I'll read it later, Mouse, and thank you."

"But it might be very urgent." The young man was quite baffled now.

Vincent laid a hand on his shoulder. "You don't understand why, Mouse," his husky voice was low and strained. "There will be a time to open it but not now."

Father also noticed how preoccupied his son appeared today and put it down to him missing Catherine, but he did see him toying with a letter he kept putting back into his pocket every so often. He had to say something. It was beginning to irritate his curiosity and patience. The next time he saw Vincent gazing at the envelope, he pointed his stick at it.

"From Catherine I presume?"

Vincent nodded, his face sombre, his eyes downcast. He couldn't bring himself to speak.

"Not good news then?" Father persisted. He didn't like his son looking so troubled.

"I don't know, Father," Vincent managed at last, his voice lower than usual. "I haven't read it yet."

Father's eyebrows went up a shade. "Not read it? Why? Has something happened between you?"

"I don't think so." Vincent gestured, spreading a hand. "She has arrived home today."

There was a worried frown on the elder man's forehead as he surveyed his son's sad face. "But why are you afraid to open it, Vincent? This isn't like you."

"Three nights ago, I had a black dream." The younger man faltered, then went on. "There was a letter from Catherine...." He couldn't go on but Father had heard the pain in his voice.

"And you think that this letter contains the same bad news to upset you so much?" He held out a hand to his son. "If you feel you can't bear to read it, then let me."

Vincent shook his head at the kind offer. "Thank you, Father, but I must be strong and read it myself, even if it means...." His words trailed off and there was a profound silence between them.

"If you read it now, Vincent, you will find out what the message is. Ignore the bad dream - it doesn't mean anything. I've had more than my share in my life." Father tilted his head. "This dream you had. Care to tell me about it, or is it too painful?"

"Some other time." Vincent slowly got up from the chair near the chess table, a shuddering sigh escaping from deep within him, and departed to his chamber.

Several minutes passed before he could bring himself to slit open the envelope, sick with fear for what he might read inside, but he took a little comfort from the fact that the paper he had seen in his dream had been white. The neatly written envelope and single sheet he held now were a pretty blue, with Catherine's name, address and telephone number embossed in gold at the top right side.

However, he held his breath as he scanned the message to read,

'Vincent, MUST see you tonight. Please come! Have something important to tell you. All my love. Catherine.'

He let his breath out, almost sagging in relief that it wasn't a 'Goodbye' note but he was somewhat mystified as to what she had to tell him and he wouldn't be completely satisfied until he saw her tonight on her balcony. He smiled at the underlined words '*must*' and '*love.*' Such special words, small but with so much meaning, but he couldn't fathom why he still sensed a certain sadness in her. This really perturbed and frightened him.

There were several hours to pass, before he could venture out under the cover of darkness to climb up to her balcony, and he didn't feel like playing chess with Father, or reading any of his treasured books. He felt too restless to sit down, so he went to patrol the vast array of tunnels, to inspect the entrances and the security, paid a visit to the Cavern of Winds and his bridge, then slowly made his way back to Father's chamber, where the friendly clink of pottery and inviting aroma of freshly-brewed coffee greeted him. He sank onto a chair and Father glanced towards him.

"You're just in time for coffee, Vincent. Want some?"

The big man nodded. "It's very welcome." He watched the older man pour the steaming liquid into the mugs, add sugar and milk, then stir briskly.

"Where have you been for the last couple of hours since you went off to open your letter?" He passed a mug to the younger man, who took it, his claw-like nails clinking on the side as he clasped it. "You '*have*' opened it by now, I imagine?" Father thought his son looked slightly less troubled than earlier in the day.

"Yes. She wants to see me tonight, urgently," Vincent told him. "There is something she has to tell me." His eyes met Father's thoughtful gaze, expressing the painful thoughts and indecision.

"Well, that sounds perfectly prospective to me. Why are you still worried about it?" Father sipped

his coffee experimentally, to see if it was cool enough to drink.

"Because my dream haunts me and I can't forget it." Vincent looked down into the swirling liquid and sighed heavily. "It gives me such pain to remember it. When I felt myself going over into the Abyss...." He couldn't finish.

"Then it must have been a bad one," Father said, noticing how the crease above Vincent's nose had deepened. "How do you feel about this letter? What does your bond tell you about her?" He laid a comforting hand on his son's shoulder. It felt tense.

"I feel a great sadness, as though she is grieving, and a love that has brought on the sadness. I see her weeping yet...." Vincent shook his head, confused. "There is also an inner excitement - a tension."

A sudden picture of Catherine with tears on her face passed through his mind and he wanted to go to comfort her, hold her against him.

"When you last saw her, how did she seem to you? Was she happy, depressed, cool towards you?" Father stood just behind Vincent. "Can you remember?"

"I feel she was happy." Vincent gazed upwards, recalling their last meeting. "It was a magical night, made for love. There was a multitude of stars so bright and so near, we could have reached up to pluck them. You could smell the perfume from the flowers on her balcony and it was warm, with such a fragrant breeze coming across from the park, it was intoxicating. But the joy and pleasure of having Catherine so close is beyond those wonders."

He was silent for a moment, then went on. "She told me then that she was leaving the city the next morning to go to help a friend who was having some personal trouble. I believed her - and why shouldn't I? We have never kept any secrets from each other. I wanted more than just to hold her and I knew that Catherine had felt the same way. If I had allowed myself to kiss her, then the danger of something happening would have been there."

His closed eyes felt the beginning of scalding tears forming under his lids. "It was unbearable for both of us. She deserves more than I can give her. This is tearing us apart, Father."

Vincent wiped the trickle of tears on his cheeks with his free hand. Father bent to kiss the top of his son's head in love and to comfort him.

"Vincent," Father coughed and the younger man glanced up, knowing the tone.

"Don't say it! I know, I should let her go her way and forget she ever existed, but we tried this before and she returned to me very quickly."

"It would be the best way and the kindest. Your love for her is a kind of torture which can never be fulfilled. Break away now! End it and, in time, her memory and what you are to each other now will fade to the back of your mind. Try it! Yes, I love Catherine, too, as a father, but you are more important to me than anyone else in my life. You know this!"

Vincent swilled down the last of his coffee and rose from the chair. Father smiled at him, concern in his face.

"Find out what she has to tell you and then remember what I've just told you. It's the best advice I can give you as a father and a friend."

Vincent shook his head and left to prepare to visit Catherine. He had loved her since the night he had found her, badly beaten and only half-conscious, her face brutally slashed by men who had mistaken her for another woman, but by loving her, he had felt such pain and a hopelessness he had never experienced before.

He had also had the joy of knowing that Catherine had come to love him, but they lived in different

worlds and, though he could never be a part of hers, she had become part of his - it was easier for her to venture into the underworld where Vincent, Father and all the other inhabitants lived in comparative harmony and safety faces the dangers Above.

All their late night meetings had been confined to the balcony, whether they had been sitting on cushions in the shelter of the enclosing walls, or standing at the rail, admiring the view.

He never allowed himself to enter her apartment, as he knew of the personal risk to Catherine, if his desire for her should be let loose in an unrestrained moment of passion. He could not count the times he had wanted to crush his lips to hers - and he had needed every ounce of self-control he possessed to stop himself in these heady moments.

Now the hour was dark enough to venture out and he climbed nimbly up to her balcony and swung himself over. Everywhere was wet from the heavy rain, which had fallen most of the afternoon and evening and was still falling steadily, soaking his cloak through quickly. The rain bounced on the tiled floor and dripped from the plants in the pots.

He knew they couldn't talk out here, but he was afraid to enter her room where she was waiting for him. He was about to tap on her window when she opened the door and gestured him inside.

"Come on in, Vincent," she said, taking his hands, hard and wet, in hers and gently pulled him indoors. "Let me take your cloak. It's so wet. I'll dry it for you."

He noticed how pale and tired she looked and wanted to take her in his arms, but was too afraid. He would have to tread very carefully from now on. He looked down at his boots. "My boots will spoil your carpet, Catherine."

"I have a pair of my father's slip-on mules you could borrow. I'll get them for you." She smiled warmly at him and hurried to the bathroom, carrying the wet cloak to hang up, then found the brown leather mules at the bottom of her wardrobe. She realized that her heart was beating madly and she felt a trifle breathless.

When she returned to the main room, Vincent had seated himself on a dining chair and had removed his knee-high boots. He saw she was wearing her flowered robe over satin pajamas and he knew he had a battle on his hands. He thrust his feet into the mules, feeling awkward, realizing that he shouldn't be in her room. He wondered whether he should leave. His head swam, knowing what could happen in this intimate atmosphere.

"I didn't think you would come tonight," she told him, seeing how ill at ease he appeared - and knowing why. "The weather has been like this for hours."

"I wanted to know about the letter you sent me," he said bluntly.

She knelt at his feet and sought for the words she had been rehearsing all day. Now he was here, it was more difficult than she had imagined. Taking hold of his hands she kissed them, then moistened her dry lips.

"Vincent, when I told you I was going to stay with a friend for a few days, it wasn't true." She saw a fleeting expression of pain cross his face. She hastened on before her courage could run out. "I wasn't with anyone. I was in a clinic having treatment that will enable us to be like any other couple in love - to love without your fears. Do you understand?"

He shook his head, his eyes searching her face. "How can this be?"

"After you left me, the night before I told you I was leaving for my friend's house, I couldn't sleep. I wanted you and needed you so much, it hurt." Her soft voice broke and a single tear ran down her face. "I just knew we couldn't go on avoiding our desires for each other any longer, so I booked myself into a clinic and.... as to any children between us... well, I've fixed.... I've taken care of that

problem."

For one moment, he sat as if stunned by the enormity of what she had just told him, shocked at the horrific and devastating sacrifice she had made for him, for their love together.

"Would you want to marry a woman who had given up her chance to have your child, Vincent?"

He saw quiet tears trickling down her cheeks and stood up, pulling her to her feet, wrapping his arms around her. He kissed her forehead and cheeks, tasting the saltiness of her tears which now mingled with his own. His voice was huskily low when he spoke, his lips against her face.

"I felt your sorrow, Catherine, and I was so afraid it would mean we were to part forever." He moved to look at her, his eyes so tender she was filled with a warmth that engulfed her. "But if something should happen to me, then what could you do?" He sounded so anxious.

"I haven't had anything taken away," she explained softly. "Just fixed. I believe it can be reversed if you really want it to, but for me there will be only one man in my life and that's *'you,'* Vincent."

"I wish there could have been some other way than to deny yourself the chance of motherhood," he said, shaking his head in wonder. "How do you feel?"

She laughed a little. "I'm fine, really I am. I had it done three days ago and got back here this morning. That's why I sent you the note. I wanted to see you alone so much to tell you the news."

"There is grief still in your heart, Catherine," he told her sadly. "I feel it even now."

She suddenly pressed her face against the warmth of his woollen top and let out the pain of her loss in the circle of his arms, his cheek resting on her silken hair, her tears running down her face, until he felt the convulsive sobs die down, then he kissed her temple. Her eyes held such a tragic, haunted expression when he attempted to look at her, and he blamed himself for being the cause of this sacrifice.

"Oh, Vincent, you'll never be a father!" She told him thickly, swallowing the lump in her throat. He considered this to be a blessing in his case - but what could he say to comfort her? Finally, he stroked her hair and touched her cheek, his heart beginning to race when she smiled up at him.

"You should be resting," he said, picking her up easily to carry her through to her bedroom.

"Operations must make you weak."

He pushed the sheets aside and laid her on the bed, then sat on the edge and looked down at her, noticing that some colour had crept back into her face in a becoming flush. Her eyes held a warmth and invitation as their gaze locked.

'He has such a rugged beauty,' she thought, tracing his features with her fingers until he took her hands and kissed them. She extended her arm and placed it around his neck, bringing his face only inches from her own.

"Don't worry, Vincent," she whispered, her eyes on his mouth, "lots of women have it done. I can live with it but *'not'* without you."

She raised her head from the pillow and her lips met his for the first time. She had intended it to be a brief kiss to test his reactions, but as soon as their lips touched, the flame roared into a fire which had long been held back with a hundred and one sensations, and a greater one of urgent desire. She could feel the crease in his upper lip as his mouth moved slowly and caressingly over hers and she responded with every fibre of her body. Her arms encircled him and it was more than she could bear to end this embrace.

When they drew breathlessly apart, he looked into her eyes and knew the real moment had arrived. Somehow, they managed to free themselves of their hampering clothes, then he joined her under the sheets, pulling her close to hers, kissing her throat and cheeks before finding her lips

again, his hands moving down the curves of her body, revelling in the softness and fragrance of her skin.

Catherine pressed her face against him, breathing in his familiar scent, feeling the warmth and strength of his arms around her. She wished it would never end.

When Catherine stirred at last to look at her clock, she saw it was nearly four o'clock and the night sky was beginning to lighten. Her slight movement caused Vincent to adjust his position and free her from his arms.

"I don't want you to go, Vincent, but it's getting light," she told him ruefully. "It would be difficult for you to get away if you stayed till morning, as much as I want you near me." She smiled. "One day you won't have to leave me."

He sighed and raised herself up on one elbow. "I never thought the day would come for us," he said, touching her face. Then he leaned down to kiss her gently before he left the bed. She slid into her robe and padded on bare feet to the bathroom to fetch his cloak. It was almost day now.

Vincent dressed quickly and was almost ready. She watched as he sat down to heave on the knee boots then stand up to wrap the cloak round himself. She went to him before he reached the door.

He looked happy and confident with her now that the barrier of fear and apprehension had gone.

She laid a hand on his arm. "Do you feel better now, Vincent?" she said, her eyes searching his face. "You know I would never, ever leave you, don't you? You're much too important to me. You're my life! I love you!"

He looked down at her and half-smiled. Her hair was tousled from the pillow and the robe was only loosely tied about her waist, so that he could see an expanse of her smooth pale skin in the half light. Her lips and skin still burned from the touch of his lips and now he gazed at her with so much love and tender concern, her heart swelled.

"Do you think we can plan our wedding, Catherine?" he asked, sliding his arms around her waist. She felt her body stir and momentarily closed her eyes. She had never experienced such happiness or such bliss in the last few hours he had shown her.

"OH, most definitely, I should say!" she replied, her eyes alight with love and a fire he couldn't ignore. "You don't have to ask. It's what we want."

"Catherine, beloved!" His voice was huskily low. Then he bent to kiss her, taking time over it, loath to leave her and go back to his world. Her response was distant and for some minutes time was forgotten.

"I had a bad dream while I was at the clinic, Vincent," she began. "I was standing on my balcony and four or five men, I can't remember exactly, climbed up to kiss me. But all I wanted was you. You were across the road, watching from the park, but you vanished and they found your cloak and a letter on the bridge. It kinda upset me."

When Vincent told her about his nightmarish dream, she shivered violently. "Maybe we dreamt them on the same night," she suggested and smiled up at him. "Don't be sad for me now. I'm glad you're happy. What I had done was well worth the price."

"Tomorrow night, Catherine?" His hands on her shoulders were gentle.

"If you can," she said, opening the French door for him. The rain had dwindled to a fine misty drizzle. "Please take care, Vincent." She reached up and kissed him briefly before he pulled the hood over his head to cover his hair and shade his face. She watched as he climbed over the edge of the balcony. One last look at her, then he was gone.

Sighing a little, she returned to her bed and tried in vain to catch up on some sleep before her alarm would wake her for another day, but she was too excited to sleep and lay recalling every tribute of the past few hours spent in Vincent's arms.

She felt so supremely happy to know that there would be many other times and that, one day in the not too distant future, she would become more than just a visitor to his world Below.

Catherine sorted through her mail and selected the official one. It was from the clinic and she wondered what on earth they wanted. It had been three weeks since she had paid the bill for the sterilization treatment.

Opening it, she read the typed letter, then read it again more slowly, sitting down in shock as the message sank in. They were asking her to make an immediate appointment to attend the clinic, as they had reason to believe that the sterilization was not conclusive and offered their profuse apologies for any distress....

She smiled and tore the letter to pieces. She knew it was too late now - Vincent '*could*' be a father one day. Then she would have given him everything he deserved!

PART TWO

Catherine's suspicions were fully confirmed after a visit to her doctor. Two weeks had passed since she had received the letter from the clinic, informing her that the sterilization treatment was inconclusive. She had found out she hadn't been the only one to discover she had become pregnant soon after the operation.

They were all suing the clinic, but Catherine was content to receive the same amount she had paid them for the treatment, no more! The other women were married and did not want any further children.

Her problem now was how she was going to tell Vincent the news he never expected to hear. He was going to be a father next spring. She knew him well enough to know it would worry him and she decided not to break it to him until after the wedding.

Vincent had paid numerous visits to her apartment, unafraid to enter her rooms, thinking that the barrier had gone and each time they had spent a few hours in each other's arms. It had felt like the first time and just as special.

Peter had been busy on their behalf arranging the wedding, which had been fixed for June. Only a month away.

Sitting at the table in her dining area, drinking a last cup of tea before she dressed to go Below to see Vincent, she remembered the evening when Peter called round to collect her and accompany her to the meeting Below to discuss the wedding plans. He seemed very animated and thrust a week old newspaper into her hand, pointing out an article he wanted her to read.

"This could solve your problem, Cathy," he said, then waited for her to read it.

It was headed; '*Bizarre Weddings Become a Cult*,' then went on to say that many young couples were opting for unconventional dress and ways to marry instead of adapting the tulle clad bride and morning suit traditional dress. Just recently, the bride, groom and guests were all dressed in clown outfits and hired a small circus tent for the ceremony. Others had got hitched wearing diving gear or become married in a hot air balloon floating some height above ground level. There were other examples listed. Catherine read it, smiling and returned the paper.

"Do you want us to dress up as clowns, Peter?" She laughed at the vision it conjured.

"No, I wouldn't recommend those particular outfits, but we could all wear different fancy dress. Vincent, for instance, could wear a disguise to suit his appearance. I've been to the costume hire store and there are some which would be fine, if you are agreeable, Cathy."

He smiled, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "You could come with me to choose them and especially yours. What do you think? Would Father agree?"

"It's a great idea," she enthused. "But would Vincent be safe?"

"Well, of course, there is a risk, but when the people see us all in costume, he wouldn't look out of place and different. I'll raise this at the meeting. Ready?"

And so, from then on, the plans were put into operation. All but Father and Pascal applauded the idea and Vincent was enthusiastic and willing to take the risk to marry his Catherine.

As the days passed, he was aware of a kind of inner tension in her. He could feel she was happy and content, yet he knew there was something. Sitting Below with Father, he looked at her face, studying her expressions.

She felt his eyes on her and turned to smile warmly at him, reaching for his hand under the table, stroking the back of it, feeling the mat of soft hair. Her eyes told him, *'I love you'* and for a long intimate moment they held his until Father broke the spell.

He had seen the intent gaze of the two people he loved most in his life and sighed inwardly, remembering the love he had shared with Margaret, his wife, now sadly gone. He wasn't happy about the wedding taking place Above, as he thought it would invite unwelcome publicity, but he didn't want to spoil their thoughts of the special day.

Peter worked hard to make everything possible. He found a wedding chapel where the minister actually enjoyed conducting services for couples wearing unorthodox costumes. He was young and unconventional himself.

Catherine had wanted Father to give her away, but he pointed out that he would find it difficult walking with her up the aisle with his painful leg and holding a stick. He proposed that Peter should have the pleasure of standing in for her father and that he would be truly delighted to be Vincent's Best Man in charge of the rings.

Catherine chose Mary to be her only attendant, which thrilled the older woman enormously. When Peter suggested to Mouse he could borrow his instant camera for the photographs, he wanted to practice with it so he could *'make it good'* on the day.

The six costumes were chosen and Peter was to pick them up the day before the wedding. All but Catherine's to be taken Below.

The reception was to be held in the Great Hall and the Helpers were sending down gifts and food for the occasion. They had been invited to the wedding and to wear fancy dress.

Joe, at the office, had not approved of her taking a break at such short notice, but he didn't prevent her. She hadn't told him about the wedding after thinking long and hard about it. It would cause too much curiosity for the well being of Vincent. Later, but not right now, she decided. When she left to have her baby it would undoubtedly shock and surprise many people she knew in the DA's department, Joe especially.

The nearer the day came, the uneasier Father grew, until he could barely eat or sleep, but said nothing. The dreams he had been having were the cause of his unrest.

They were similar in content and followed the same path. They were leaving the chapel in Peter's car when they were followed by another with jeering men calling for *'the freak,' 'the monster.'* Their

car had been pelted with bullets until forced to stop with burst tires. Vincent sprang out to confront them wherein they either shot or managed to subdue him, then carried him away in chains in a large cage fastened to the back of the men's car. The look on his face had wrung Father's emotions. His pillow was wet with tears. His biggest fear was that people could suspect that his son's appearance wasn't entirely due to fancy dress. It wouldn't go away.

Catherine, unaware of Father's anxieties, had showered and washed her hair. She had just wrapped a towel around her head when she heard movements in the sitting room. Her heart beating furiously and afraid, she crept cautiously out of the bedroom and saw the very welcome sight of Vincent shedding his cloak.

'Vincent here tonight?'

Pulling the towel off her head, she dropped it onto a chair and rushed into the comfort of his arms, holding him tight against her. His cheek rested on the top of her wet, tousled hair and he could smell the fragrance of the shampoo she had used.

"It's so good to see you, Vincent, but I didn't expect to before tomorrow. Is anything wrong?"

He released her slightly to look down at her face. His blue eyes held a troubled expression; his hands dropped away from her and he took a step backwards, a detached air about him.

"Catherine, do you still want to go through with it? There's time to change your mind." Pain filtered through his gaze. "You could have so much more in life if you married someone else. Consider what you will be missing." He made a gesture. "You don't have to do this for me."

"I *'do'* want to marry you, Vincent," she cried, a slight panic in her voice. "It's what I've always wanted since the time I realized how much I loved you. No man could ever give me more."

She stepped closer. "You've already given me so much of yourself. Why should I want for anything more?" She smiled. "How could I ever *'want'* to marry anyone else?" She tilted her head, surveying his face. "Is something bothering you, Vincent?" She touched his hands. He let her hold them. "Have *'you'* changed *'your'* mind about it? Please tell me."

He sighed and looked away and her heart thudded in alarm, her eyes wide and unhappy.

"There is something about you that puzzles me," he began haltingly. "I can sense a certain difference and I would like to know what it is that mystifies me so much. Is there something you have to tell me? I thought we had no secrets from each other?"

"I guess you'd better sit down, sweetheart," she said, leading him to a chair. "I *'have'* got something to tell you about me, about us, but I was planning on telling you *'after'* the wedding. You'll never believe this!"

He glanced up into her face and saw the doubt written there. He half hoped he was wrong of what he suspected, but he would wait to hear what she had to tell him. He could be just imagining the kind of confession she was about to impart. She had had medical treatment, so it couldn't be that at all!

She stood a little behind him, a hand on his shoulder and explained about the letter she had received from the clinic, then told him about her visit to the doctor's to confirm the knowledge that she was pregnant.

"And you *'will'* be a father after all," she concluded softly. "By the time I got the letter, it was too late."

She leaned over him, putting her arms around him, her cheek against his, but his body remained tense and unyielding. The news had been a shock to him and for what seemed like long seconds, he was silent; barely able to take in the fact that the one thing he had dreaded and feared, had happened to his beloved Catherine. He didn't want a child born in his image and to live the same

kind of life he had had to live since he was born; never seeing the light of day, to watch a sunset or walk through the park in the sun, smelling the flowers and living a normal life.

He covered his face with his hands. "Oh, Catherine, what have I done?" His voice held choking tears. "The very thing I had avoided is a reality. I thought it would be safe, but now.... what can we do?"

"Listen, Vincent," she implored him, tears pricking her eyes. He could feel the warmth of her body against his back. Her hands stroking his mane of hair, was soothing. "Please listen to me. I admit I was shocked when I realized I was expecting the baby. I had been assured it was okay to make love, but obviously, something used at the clinic was faulty."

She pressed a kiss on his cheek. "But you know, I've gotten used to the idea of having the baby now. Every day it grows more precious, as you do, and I wouldn't want to end its life. It would be like destroying a gift you have given me."

He didn't say anything so she continued. "I know you're expecting the worst, Vincent, but the odds are *'for'* us, not the other way. I have a very good feeling that everything will be fine."

She moved around to the front of him and gently pulled his hands from his face. There was a wetness under his eyes. He looked at her helplessly, touching her to the very core.

"What would they do with it if it looked like me, Catherine?"

New tears slid down his cheeks and dropped onto his woollen top. The pain of what he was and what could happen was too much to bear. Sobs jerked from deep within, tearing him apart knowing he had no control over the destiny of any future child he had helped to make.

"They wouldn't do anything with it," Catherine told him softly. "The child is ours to love and take care of. Try to look on the bright side. We shall give it everything it needs."

He stood and took her hands in his. "You never fail to comfort me," he said, his eyes moving over her face then down to the towel covered form, her hair wet and tousled touching her shoulders.

There wasn't a part of her he hadn't touched and caressed in their special times together, he reflected, noting that her robe had fallen apart, revealing a smooth expanse of skin. The glimpse stirred him strongly and he slid his hands into the robe, touching her warm, glowing flesh and, sliding his fingers around her waist until they met and linked in the small of her back, pulled her to him.

Her arms reached up and encircled his neck. For one moment caught in time, he looked at her gently smiling lips, then bent to kiss them, his whole body on fire and needing her. Just when she was on the verge of giving in and suggesting he stay the night, the telephone rang, bringing her out of the woozy state she was feeling. Vincent withdrew his hands and let her go. Adjusting her robe, she went to switch the machine to answer-mode.

"I think you'd better go, Vincent," she said, laughing a little, as she picked up the discarded towel. "I've got to dry my hair. I don't *'want'* you to go, but we shouldn't be thinking about it until after the wedding." She tilted her head. "Will you tell Father about the baby or shall we wait until later?"

She glanced towards her bedroom where the beautiful gown was hanging covered with a large polythene bag. *'He mustn't see it yet,'* she thought, as he swung the cloak around his shoulders.

"I think we should wait until after our honeymoon, Catherine," Vincent said, pulling the hood over his hair. "He has much on his mind right now and he's worried about the idea of being Above for so long."

"Then we'll let it ride for a while," she said, following to the balcony to watch him go. She reached up and briefly kissed him, the warmth of her lips burning his. "Please don't worry, Vincent. I'm sure things will work out fine, you'll see. I feel it here." She touched her heart. He turned before he

climbed over the balcony wall and his eyes smiled.

As she lay in bed on her last night as a single girl, she thought about the months to come; waiting and wondering in her female intuition about their baby would prove to be right. Most of the time, she felt optimistic that Vincent's fears would be unfounded, but there were other moments when apprehension stole into her thoughts clouding her happiness. She knew she had to keep looking on the bright side, for both their sakes.

After a restless start, she eventually fell asleep thinking of Vincent and tomorrow.

The short service in the chapel was over and the car with Peter at the wheel and carrying Vincent, Catherine, Mary, Mouse and Father was on its way back to their community. Father still felt as if his stomach was tied in knots and he wouldn't breathe easy until they were all Below again. His eyes had been on the alert from the moment they had entered the little chapel, up to this minute.

He had been in a haze during the ceremony and nothing seemed real somehow. His nerves were so strained, he heard little of the vows and the music.

Suddenly, a truck came speeding up behind them and drew parallel after they had banged into the rear of Peter's car. A hand came out of the window and threw a quantity of glass toward their station wagon wheels. Peter spun off the road to avoid it and the car tilted over. Somehow they all managed to scramble out feeling bruised. The blue station wagon lay half over in the ditch alongside the road. The men who had done this were laughing at the accident. Fury rose in Vincent and he made for the truck loaded with wooden crates bearing labels of some articles they contained. He pushed the truck over onto its side and the three youths yelled in anger. Getting out of the cab they went for the big man, who picked one up and threw him as far as he was able to into the adjacent field. He hit a tree and fell with a broken back. Another of the men was fiddling with a large net. He tried to throw it over Vincent but he successfully ripped his way out of it. The little wedding group stood in silent horror at the event. They couldn't get away because the car was on its side and needed strong hands to move it. They could only watch as the horror unfolded. The third youth fetched his rifle and took aim. The second youth crept around to the other side of the truck and produced a knife. When he threw it, it arched over slightly and caught Vincent in his neck. A river of blood flowed down his full cream shirt. The police patrol seeing this incident, stopped and rushed over. Vincent saw the police, halted his next action and ran off through the fields towards the bank of trees. One of the police took aim and Catherine leaped forward to deflect it. There was a sharp report and Vincent went down, a gathering crimson on his back.

The sudden bang jerked Father awake from the latest of his current nightmares. This one had been the worst he had dreamt since the wedding plans had been arranged. The book he had been reading had fallen from his bed, hitting the floor and breaking the dream. He passed a hand over his face, wiping the moisture away with a weary sigh. A feeling of dread went through him as he remembered the wedding was today. His heart was racing and he felt violently sick. He knew this couldn't go on. Something must be done to avoid the threat of discovery to Vincent. His son must be protected at all costs, even if it meant cancelling the wedding. His life would not be worth living if anything should happen to break his cover. Vincent had lived in safety all his life with him.

He called one of the children and wrote out a note for Catherine. The child would pass it to a Helper who would deliver it to her in person. He managed to do this without alerting Vincent, who was still sleeping.

When Catherine received the note and read it, she was worried and concerned. She managed to contact Peter, who promised to come over as soon as he could.

Still fretting at what was happening Below to warrant such urgency, she waited for the doctor to arrive, unable to settle. She ate a scanty breakfast, her insides feeling like a host of butterflies doing aerobatics.

'Whatever did Father want to see Peter for?' she kept asking herself. She hoped nothing was wrong Below. *'Was Vincent ill or was it Father?'*

She wondered if she shouldn't cancel the wedding and whenever she had thought about Vincent walking around in the daylight, amongst so many people with only his costume as cover, she felt uncomfortable somehow.

'Was she expecting too much of him?' To be married legally, you had to have a minister of a church or a qualified official from the civil office, but no one could be taken Below to perform this without complete trust on his part and they were not prepared to let anyone go Below and expose their way of life to complete strangers.

Catherine suddenly remembered the article that Peter had shown her in the newspaper about the different ways that couples employed to get married. They hadn't bothered with a chapel or registry office in the civil building. As long as there was someone who could sanctify it, it was perfectly in order and legal.

She knew in a flash what could be done and she jumped up excitedly as the idea took shape. Catherine hoped that the minister would agree to come here to her apartment to marry them. She could hardly wait for Peter to arrive to relate her plan, knowing Father would approve.

Peter went straight to see Father and saw with his own eyes what a state he had got himself into because of his dreams and concerns for Vincent's safety.

Vincent had failed to comfort him and he wanted Peter to have a talk with Catherine in the hopes of postponing the wedding for a while until they knew of some other way.

"I'll have a little talk with her, Jacob," Peter promised. "But she'll be very upset. I'll return when I hear what she has to say."

When Peter rang Catherine's doorbell, she let him in quickly, a glow in her eyes. She grasped his arm and led him to the settee.

"What's wrong Below, Peter?" she began. "Is Father or Vincent ill?"

"Vincent is fine. He sent you this." From an interior pocket he produced a deep red rose, just barely out of bud. "With love," he added, watching the expressions on her face.

She smiled and touched the rose to her lips.

"I've just come from talking to Jacob and believe me, Cathy, he's ill with worry. I've had to give him something to calm him." He hesitated. "He wants the wedding postponed. He's sick with worry about Vincent being so vulnerable Above in the daylight. He's expecting trouble and won't be mollified. What do you say to him?"

"I think we ought to have it here, in my apartment, if the minister will agree to come," she said, and outlined the thoughts she had which would protect Vincent.

"I'll call Mr. Dixon right now and ask him if he could perform the marriage here," Peter said, rising from his position. "It would be better if he could make it in the late evening, even if we have to pay him extra for working outside normal hours."

"That'd be great, Peter, but shouldn't we speak to Father first to see if he agrees with us?"

Catherine didn't want Father to think they were riding roughshod over his feelings. He must have his say in the matter, after all, Vincent was his adopted son.

"You're right," Peter said, going to the door. "I'll go down now and see what he thinks."

After he'd gone, Catherine couldn't settle to anything positive, but her mind rolled on as she looked around the sitting room, re-arranging things, trying to make it resemble an altar of some kind.

'I'll get some candles and flowers and arrange the few chairs I have,' she thought, as she slipped Vincent's exquisite rose into a narrow vase.

A few hours later, Peter returned with a wide smile. "Jacob agrees and he thanks you for thinking of it. He knows how much you care for Vincent."

"And Father too," Catherine smiled, pleased that he hadn't objected to her idea.

Peter called Mr. Dixon, the young minister and explained that they had decided to have the wedding ceremony in the apartment of the bride and groom, as the groom's father was too unwell to go to the chapel.

Catherine held her breath, fearing a polite refusal, but when Peter replaced the phone and smiled, she knew the answer was the right one.

"He's coming here at eight o'clock."

She was immensely thrilled and grateful for Peter's help and flung her arms around his neck and kissed him, her eyes alive with the love she felt for Vincent and the knowledge she had so many good friends.

"We must get this place looking something like a chapel, Peter," she chattered on, hardly daring to think in case it was all a dream. "Are you going to tell the good news to those Below while I do some shopping?"

"Yes, I'd better," Peter said, glancing around the clean and cheerful apartment room.

"Tell me, is Vincent as nervous as I feel, Peter?" She took a deep breath to steady her nerves. They were beginning to take a hold now.

"I've never seen a man so nervous as he is. It was impossible for him to hold his mug of coffee without spilling any of it. I offered to give him something to calm him but he refused. He told me he wanted to experience all the emotions of a normal bridegroom."

He stroked his chin thoughtfully. "You know, I've always considered I love my wife very much, but Vincent's feelings go much deeper and rarer than anyone else I've known. He's incredible! You've given him a lot of happiness and hope for the future, Cathy."

She smiled, a glimmer of tears in her eyes. "As he gave me too," she sighed. "I'm the lucky one to have found him or rather, have him find me as he did that night." She paused and went right on.

"I'm pregnant, Peter!"

"I know that Vincent had always avoided any personal contact with you that way. What happened?"

Briefly, she told him about the failure of the sterilization operation and her subsequent discovery that all was not well in the days that followed Vincent's visits.

"Does Vincent know about it?" Peter looked at her as a doctor would in his surgery. "When is it due?"

"In February they tell me. Vincent was upset at first but I think I've managed to make him feel that everything will be okay."

"Well if there's anything you want to do, I'll help you any way I can as a doctor and friend."

"Thanks a lot, Peter. We're lucky to have you."

"Think nothing of it!" he said, smiling. "Just glad to be of service to both of you."

After Peter had gone, she hurriedly dressed and taking her car keys and cheque book, she left her

apartment to head for the parking lot. Her step was light and springy a smile filled her face and she felt totally optimistic. She would like to have seen Vincent before this evening, but she knew they would be busy down Below fixing the king-size bed into place and preparing the tables for the reception in the Great Hall.

As she drove to the market, her warmest thoughts flowed out to him, hoping he would pick them up whatever he was doing.

An hour later, she was back in the apartment carrying a huge mass of beautiful red roses their subtle fragrance filling the sitting room. She fetched out all the candle holders and placed them on the mantle in readiness.

Catherine only had the four dining chairs and a bedroom basket one. The stool in the kitchen was hardly right for the occasion but many weren't needed as only the main six would be in here to witness the brief ceremony.

She had several visits from the Helpers known to her offering their assistance. Peter called in to see her in the late afternoon to give her the latest news.

Father was feeling much better and Vincent was glad they were getting married in the very apartment where they had consummated their love. *'It was fitting,'* he had told Peter.

After a light tea she scarcely tasted in her excitement, she began to rearrange the room to accommodate the chairs in a semi-circle. The tall candles were placed in the holders, three on the mantle, so that the Reverend could stand with his back to it and let the light fall onto his service book. Others were positioned artistically around the large room. She cut down and arranged the roses in bowls and vases, everywhere there was a space. The room smelled like a flower garden.

At seven, she began to get herself ready and after a refreshing shower protecting her hair she sat at her dressing table and carefully applied her makeup; hands shaking a little. It was still light in the evenings up until nearly ten, so she intended to draw the drapes when Vincent and the party arrived. She wanted a candlelit ceremony. It would please Vincent, she knew. Catherine had grown used to the *'dancing lights'*, when she had been taken care of by he and Father, in the days she had spent in his world, after she had been found lying injured and half-conscious by Vincent that night. The candles made her sentimental about him and gave her a warm feeling whenever she lit them.

She uncovered the beautiful white lace Spanish-style gown and slid into it. It hugged her slender form down to just above her knees where it flared out into three rows of frills. The neckline dipped in a V-line at the back, accentuating the curve of her spine and it was wide and scooped at the shoulders and front barely covering her ample cleavage. Three rows of frills dropped gently from her upper arms. She was about to fix the white lace mantilla, with its tortoiseshell comb, into her hair when the doorbell rang twice - the pre-arranged signal signifying it was Peter who waited for her to answer it.

She let him in grinning at the spectacle he presented as Dracula complete with fangs. "You look great! Real terrific, Peter," she enthused, her eyes taking in the black nylon slicked down wig, pale makeup with shadowed eyes pencil red-rimmed for effect. His teeth had been polished with cosmetic toothpaste leaving the gums red in contrast. He wore a stark white shirt with black bow and black suit and cape. When he smiled at Catherine, the two false fangs made him look fearsome. He was unrecognizable as the debonair Doctor Peter Alcott. However, he had added a small red rose to his lapel for this special occasion.

"How are Vincent and Father?" she asked, slipping back to her bedroom to pick up the mantilla. Her insides were doing overtime and she took a steadying breath. "Are they ready to come up yet? I'm almost through here."

He stood by her bedroom door to talk to her. "Yes. I've just called to see if you've finished dressing, Cathy."

"How does Vincent look in his costume?" she wanted to know. "How are you all getting up here?"

"Interesting but the hat spoils him," Peter told her, watching as she fastened the tortoiseshell comb securely on the circle of curls she had effected on the top of her head, with a false piece she kept for times like this. She slipped into white satin shoes trimmed with a tiny red bow and turned around.

"I'm ready as I can be, barring my nerves," she told Peter, whose admiring gaze raked her from head to toe.

"You look absolutely breathtaking, Cathy," he said, smiling. "Vincent is going to be knocked over when he sees you."

She smiled and touched the crystal pendant that Vincent had given her on their first anniversary. It nestled against her skin, glinting as the light caught its many facets. She had purchased some crystal earrings to match and they hung from her ears, but were slightly obscured by the lacy white veil of the mantilla.

After the ceremony here and they had gone Below, they all intended to change into their ordinary clothes, because they didn't want anything to happen to the costumes when they were eating and drinking.

She glanced at the dainty little wrist watch and noticed that it was nearly twenty minutes to eight and the minister should be arriving any minute. Her heart flipped over.

"I'm all jittery, Peter," she told him, as they stood in the sitting room. "I want to thank you for all you've done for us to help us achieve our dream." She reached up to kiss his cheek, but he stopped her.

"Thanks, Cathy, but not now. You'll ruin my makeup and yours too."

She laughed. "Sorry, didn't think, but if you knew how funny that sounds coming from you."

"I'll bet it does," he chuckled and went to the door. "We'll be up in five to ten minutes time. I'll bring them around in the car to the front entrance. Can't have them climbing up the fire escape in daylight, can we?"

"Especially not Vincent," she laughed. "And Father would never make it." She locked the door, then gazed around at the sitting room which had been temporarily transformed. Her hands were beginning to shake as she walked around touching the flowers and adjusting a candle.

'I'd better light them now, they'll soon be here,' she thought and lighting the taper, she visited each candle and applied the flame to each wick until all twenty tall candles were flickering gently.

Catherine drew the drapes across to cover the evening light from the room. Two of her lamps were switched on to produce a little more light for the men to be able to read the service book and for them to sign their names in the registry book.

With a gasp, she realized she had almost forgotten something extra. She dashed into her bedroom and found a pin. She willed her hands to stop shaking until she had fastened on the beautiful red rose that Vincent had sent up for her. It lay against her heart where the dip in her dress accentuated her cleavage. It was the ideal place for it and she knew Vincent would approve.

Catherine was just about to spray on her favourite perfume and one that he liked too, when the doorbell rang twice. She managed a couple of sprays on her neck and wrists then hurried to answer the door.

It was a unique experience for Vincent, going up to Catherine's apartment the right way, and he savoured it. From the car ride with Father, Mary and Mouse all in costume with masks, to walking through the main entrance and stepping in the elevator to go to her floor. Fortunately, there hadn't been many people about at this time to see them. They had eyed their appearance in costumes with an amused smile. Masquerade parties were nothing out of the ordinary. The feeling was usually one of envy, rather than scorn at fancy dress affairs.

The elevator stopped at Catherine's floor and the little party of five followed Peter to her door and let him ring the bell with the usual two press signal.

Vincent's heart was thudding as they waited for her to open the door. He was wearing mustard trousers tucked in high brown suede boots and a brown suede waistcoat. A heavy gilt belt emphasized his perfect physique and the full-sleeved cream shirt with open neck was decorated by a patterned neckchief knotted at the throat. On his head was *'the hat'* which he didn't like - a brown felt trilby with two orange-coloured furry ears pointing upright. He had declined to stick the artificial whiskers on his cheeks to make it clear he was Puss-in-Boots. The hat was quite ridiculous enough as it was, without further foolish adornments. He found the mask uncomfortable and couldn't wait to take it off inside the apartment.

The door opened suddenly and Catherine stood there. His heart turned over at the vision in front of him. She was smiling, and taking his hands, drew him in personally, as if there were no one else. His eyes smiled deeply into hers as he noticed the rose.... his rose.

"The minister hasn't arrived yet," she told them, as they all came inside. "Would you like a drink whilst we're waiting?"

On a tray stood bottles of wine and fruit juice and a selection of glasses covered by a cloth.

Father looked at the clock on the wall and saw it was almost eight on the dial.

"Are you feeling better now, Father?" she asked, angry with herself for not asking sooner.

"Yes, thanks to you, my dear Catherine," he said, a wry smile on his lips. "It was rather magnificent of you to give up your cherished dream of marrying in church with all the trappings."

"It doesn't matter," she reassured him. "My first thought was for Vincent's safety and marrying him here is just as important and even more special to us both."

"You've done wonders," he said, waving a hand at the candles and lamps. "I feel at home." Father was wearing a monk's habit, cross and sandals over socks. On his head he had a wig with a bald patch. It was obvious to Catherine he was Friar Tuck, as Mouse was dressed as Robin Hood, complete with a quiver full of fake arrows. He was walking around gazing at everything, especially at the gadgets in the kitchen. Mary wore a gay-flowered skirt and white billowy blouse with a black velvet bolero decorated with sequins and heads. Around her waist, she had a stretch black belt tied with thongs at the front. Although she was dressed as a gypsy and had fixed earrings to her lobes, she was not wearing a scarf, but had fastened a couple of large flowers to her hair at the back where she had looped it somehow.

At two minutes to eight, the bell rang and Peter answered the door to find the two Helpers known to everyone. They had alerted the others not to go to the chapel and all but these two had gone Below. Catherine welcomed them; a local stall holder and barber.

She was getting a little anxious at the seemingly late arrival of the preacher.

Pouring drinks for everyone, she drank a glass of fruit juice standing up. She didn't want to sit down and crush her gown. Vincent had hardly taken his eyes from her since his arrival, and now she stood close to him by the kitchen, while the others sat together in muted conversation as they drank from their glasses.

"I've never seen such beauty," he said, his voice low and whispered. "Today means more than anything I could ever say to you, Catherine."

"It does to me, Vincent," she said so only he could hear. "I've loved you for so long. Do you think he's coming? I'm getting worried. I hope he hasn't forgotten us."

He maneuvered her very slowly into the kitchen. "He's coming," Vincent reassured her. "He won't fail us." For one moment, he stood looking at her his eyes taking in her every feature, filling his memory with the picture she presented in her Spanish lady's costume.

"Have you considered how life would have been for us if 'you' hadn't found me that night?" she asked him, his warmth filling her body and his nearness, her senses. " 'I' have and the very thought of it horrifies me and leaves me so cold."

"It was our destiny to meet, Catherine," he said, his fingers touching her cheek. "There would have been no other way. We have to fulfil it and soon we'll be as one."

"I hope so," she said, glancing at her watch again. "I'm beginning to wonder."

"He is on his way up now," he promised and dipped his head to kiss her. She reached up and their lips had only briefly met when Peter's voice called to them that the Reverend had just arrived.

"What did I tell you?" Vincent chuckled softly. "You must trust me."

"How did you know?" she asked, mystified. His intuitive powers always intrigued her.

"It's hard to explain," he told her, taking her hand. "It was a sure feeling."

They left the kitchen and rejoined the others.

Mouse was fingering the instant camera as Catherine and Vincent went forward to greet the young minister, who extended his hand to shake theirs very warmly, and introduced himself, a light of admiration in his grey eyes when he looked at Catherine.

"So, this is the beautiful bride I've been hearing about," he expressed, then looked up at the big man next to her. "Congratulations on finding such a gem, Mr. Wells."

"No one could be more fortunate." Vincent said, his eyes on Catherine, revealing the depth of love he felt for her.

"I'm sorry I'm late here, but I lost the paper with the floor and room number. Do forgive me."

"As long as you're here now, it doesn't matter." Catherine told him, smiling, touching Vincent's nearest hand.

Roy Dixon gazed around the dimly lit room at the array of candles and flower arrangements.

"You've sure made this room very special for this occasion. You appear to favour candlelight. Is there any reason for it?"

"Yes, well, we both love candlelit rooms very much," Catherine briefly explained, hoping he was not going to ask any more personal questions.

"Well, I'd like to hear about the time you both met sometime, but for now, we'll begin your wedding service."

He arranged the little group to his satisfaction. Peter stood beside Catherine and Father was placed next to Vincent on the other side. Mary sat with Mouse and the two Helpers.... the woman dressed as an Indian squaw and the man in a Batman costume.

Catherine and Vincent stood half facing each other holding hands and the service began with a short prayer, then came the most important and moving part.... the vows.

Vincent had discarded the silly hat he didn't like and his hair looked like burnished gold in the

subdued lighting.

The sacred vows were solemnly and tenderly repeated, Vincent's eyes never leaving her face as he promised to love and to cherish her, and Catherine's eyes spoke volumes when she uttered her words to him.

Roy Dixon was having some difficulty with a lump in his throat. He had conducted numerous weddings in all kinds of places, as well as his chapel, but never had he felt the impact of such love flowing from one to the other. It was so tangible, it filled the room with this new sensation, which he tried to control, knowing he was incredibly near to tears.

Father produced the rings, which had had to be slightly altered before being engraved and gave them to the minister to bless before Vincent and Catherine pushed them gently but surely onto each other's wedding fingers. Then, when he declared that they were now husband and wife, Catherine saw the tears on Vincent's cheeks and her own eyes brimmed.

"You can kiss the bride, but careful with those fangs," the man instructed, smiling, feeling a wetness under his own lids. "They look lethal. We don't want her lips torn today."

Vincent threw him a strange look, before bending to kiss her lips very gently. She responded, briefly closing her eyes with the sudden joy of knowing they were united in name, as well as body and soul for eternity. Father wiped his eyes and Mary had just blown her nose, her eyes blinking furiously to chase away her tears also. Father turned to smile at Mary and she returned it, her face lighting up. The minister finished with another prayer and it was all over apart from the formal job of signing their names in the register. Catherine switched on another lamp, so they could see to write and Mouse was able to take some flash pictures of the group.

It seemed strange, but felt good to sign herself as Mrs. Catherine Wells. She had been practicing at odd moments, but to write it legally produced a different feeling over it. She could see that Roy was fascinated by Vincent's costume, face and hands. His eyes had been studying him as he read out the vows to the big man.

"Would you care for a drink before you go, Mr. Dixon?" Catherine invited, hoping he would refuse and go so they could all leave for the world Below, but he smiled and asked for a glass of sweet white wine.

For a few minutes the Reverend chatted to each one then he stood in front of Vincent, gazing intently into his face.

"Y'know, I've seen some swell costumes in my time, but yours is by far the best and most realistic, Mr. Wells." He looked down at the dull gold furry-backed hands with the claw-like nails holding his bride's arm. "Where did you get your extras?"

"What do you mean by 'extras'?" Vincent queried, the crease deepening between his brows.

"Oh, the fangs, the hairy mats and the long pointed nails. They're so life-like, aren't they?"

"You think so?" Vincent was playing this cool.

"Sure. They're nothing short of fantastique! They give the character that extra something I've never seen before. Have you got the address of the place where you hired them? I'd like to use them for the next Halloween party?"

Catherine didn't know whether to laugh or be offended for Vincent. Peter came forward having heard part of the conversation.

"I was the one who hired the costumes and accessories. I had them sent by mail order." He grinned at the interested minister. "I'd give you the address, but I don't have it with me right now."

"Well, I'd be real grateful if you'd drop me a line when you find it," Roy said, rubbing his hands

together, reverting his gaze to Vincent, who was beginning to feel uneasy at such close scrutiny.

"Those fangs are something, aren't they? Much better quality than Dr. Alcott's," Roy nodded to Peter. "Say, are they awkward to wear? Will they come out easily when you're ready to take them out?" He shuddered. "Imagine being stuck with them for the rest of your life. Real tragic!"

He laughed and slapped Vincent's shoulder. "Hope you didn't use too much glue."

Vincent gave what sounded like a laugh, the tips of his canines showing. The reverend stepped back a pace or two.

"I hardly know they're there and they are firmly fastened in," Vincent said, a gleam in his blue eyes.

"Well, I'm sure you'll be taking them out before you eat otherwise it could be tricky. You could skewer your tongue." The young man peered more closely at the big man's face. "Your makeup job is a work of art. Was it done by a professional? It's worthy of Hollywood itself." He glanced at Catherine. "Is it your work, Mrs. Wells?"

She smiled at being addressed by her married name for the first time. "No, but we have friends who are useful," she told him. This was quite true.

"Well, I must be going now. I've got a meeting at nine-thirty. I'd sure like to say that your wedding has given me a whole lot of pleasure and a very memorable occasion. You have an abundance of love there and, one day, I hope I'll be lucky enough to match it myself."

He offered his hand and once again clasped Vincent's palm, registering the fact that the mat of hair felt quite warm and soft, as if it was natural.

The little group were quite relieved to see him go and placed their empty glasses on the tray. Catherine would wash them when she returned from her honeymoon. They waited until she had carried the tray into the kitchen and stacked the used glasses on the side of the unit and found a bag to carry the undrunk bottles of wine and fruit juice down Below for the reception then they left her apartment, Catherine locking up everything securely.

On the way down to the basement, they hardly saw anyone for such an early time in the evening. The nightlife usually began after ten until past midnight.

No one was more relieved to be back Below again than Father and as Catherine walked into the Great Hall on Vincent's arm, a warm-hearted cheer went up from the crowd who were glad to see them back safely. Some of the Helpers threw coloured rice paper confetti and rose petals over them. Father smiled, pleased, and draped an arm around both of them. Catherine kissed him and hugged him close.

"Welcome to your new home, my dear Catherine," he said, gripping her hard. "I hope that you and Vincent will have many years of happiness ahead of you."

She thanked him and turned to look at Vincent. She saw his face had the look of pure happiness and contentment as he gazed at her.

"Let's go and change, Vincent," she said, glancing down at herself. "I don't want anything to happen to this gown."

"I think we all must," he agreed, then looked at Peter standing talking to Father and Mary. "He'll return them tomorrow. We'll go to our chamber now, before we eat."

He took her hand and they headed for their own private apartment with the king-size bed dominating the large chamber. Vincent's old bed had been given away to another couple.

"Do you know the custom of the groom carrying the bride over the threshold of their new life together, Vincent?" Catherine asked, smiling up at him. He stopped and quietly surveyed her.

"Father has spoken of it," he told her, "but with that gown you're wearing I was afraid I could crush it."

"We can chance it, don't you think?" She squeezed his hand. "It would be well worth a few creases."

His eyes smiled as he bent to lift her up, her arms encircling his neck, entwining in his hair, bringing his face so close. His left arm around her shoulders, and his other under her knees, he carried her the last few yards to the curtain which marked the 'door' to their nest of love.

Once inside, he still held her. His eyes level with hers, locked for a long, long moment, then his mouth touched her lips and the warmth rushed through them as they kissed for the first time since they were joined in name. Very slowly, without releasing her lips, he lowered her to the floor until her feet felt the thick rug under her. They broke apart for the briefest of seconds, then she sighed and met his lips with a hunger that surprised her. For an aeon it seemed they embraced closely, but when the kisses began to arouse them; needing more than just a kiss and a caress, they both knew they had to stop. It was not the proper time to be going all the way. There was a hall full of people to entertain them at the reception.

"Perhaps we can sneak off before too long," Catherine proposed, finding it difficult to move away from him. "I'm sure they'd understand."

He sighed heavily, also reluctant to break up this feeling of passion that had begun to override them, but knowing it would have to wait until later, when the celebration were over.

"I'm finding it impossible to believe you're really my wife, Catherine," he said, as they disrobed together. "It's as if I'm dreaming and I'm going to wake up and find you're not here or that the wedding never happened."

"Yes, I find the idea rather overwhelming, but we are linked together now." She held up her left hand. "And we do wear our proof."

"I'm going to miss you when you return to your apartment," he confessed, laying his outfit on the bed to be folded. His clothes hung on a hanger outside Catherine's big wardrobe.

"We'll have our usual late night trysts and see the world from our balcony," she said, admiring the lines and grace of his body standing there in his trunks, before he donned the white frilly shirt and tan cords and boots he wore on special occasions. "You'd miss the view from there, wouldn't you?" She laughed softly. "We shall have every weekend and holidays down here completely."

"Yes, we must savour all our times together." He watched her wearing just her white silk underslip trimmed with lace and felt himself stirring again. She was small and her figure was neither fat nor thin; her waist slender, her bosom ample for her height and size. Her legs were shapely and lightly coloured in the stockings she wore. The white satin shoes had been discarded and she chose a pair of ordinary cream coloured courts. She took out a cream georgette dress with a few diamante sprinkled on one shoulder, then asked for Vincent's help to fasten her back zipper, which he managed successfully.

Suddenly, she felt his lips on the side of her neck sending little shivers of delight through her. She leaned her head back against him and his mouth moved slowly along her throat until it reached the pulse throbbing there and kissed the spot above it. Her legs felt as if they had turned to jelly and she groaned in pleasure, her eyes closing in sheer ecstasy. He moved the hair away from the nape of her neck and his lips continued their emotional onslaught; sensations racing through her body, weakening her resolve.

"We're ready for you two," Father's voice just beyond the curtain brought Vincent's lips to a halt on her partly bare shoulder.

"We'll be right there, Father." She called, hoping her voice didn't sound too breathless.

She turned around to look at Vincent and saw his eyes held a glazed expression. She reached up and kissed him then picked up her little evening bag.

"We'd better go," she said, smiling. Her heart was beating a little too fast for comfort and her legs didn't feel quite in control, as she took her husband's arm and left their chamber for the Great Hall.

It was a splendid, unforgettable reception. The Great Hall, lit by a myriad of candles and oil lamps lent a glow which amply illuminated the vast chamber. The borrowed trestle tables, covered with several white cloths and supporting a fine array of food and drink to satisfy all the guests and inhabitants of the tunnels, were supplied by the eager Helpers, some of whom were sitting at the tables with them.

There were speeches from various members from Above and Below, including Dr. Peter Alcott and Father.

Peter's speech had been pretty brief because he knew long ones were embarrassing and usually boring. He raised his glass of wine to Vincent and Catherine and hoped that many untold joys would exceed their trials, throughout their lives together.

Father thanked everyone for coming and making it such a perfect day for his son and Catherine, whom he loved as a daughter. He thought they were a perfect match and both had brought the sun into his life. He wished them many happy days ahead.

Lastly, Vincent stood up to speak, his eyes on Catherine, his hand clasping hers. "When I was found and brought Below, and then given to Father to protect me, he taught me many things. I have felt the love and care he bestowed on me throughout my growing years and I was content, but when I reached my older years. I realized there was another kind of love that I knew would be denied to me because of what I am. I have good friends in the world Above as well as Below and it seemed enough for me.

"Then Catherine came into my life bringing a joy and such pain I've never felt before. I was complete as any man who finds the love of his life. She gave me her love and trust and we have an unbreakable bond that will last though our lives and eternity." He pressed her hand. "There is nothing else I could hope to wish for than to have Catherine share my life as my wife. Dreams 'can' come true."

He looked over to Peter who was finding it hard to swallow. "And I owe Peter so much for all the time and trouble he's taken to arrange this special day for us. We can never repay you enough. I must say a simple thank you."

Peter felt himself blushing and was incredibly touched by Vincent's words. "It was a pleasure and, to see you both there, wearing your rings, money couldn't match it."

Catherine leaned sideways and planted a kiss on the doctor's cheek. Peter smiled at her.

"That makes it all worthwhile, I guess." They all laughed at that!

Father had surreptitiously wiped his eyes. He was too deeply moved by his son's speech. He could see that not only Catherine and himself were near to tears.

Presently the tables were cleared away for the games and the dancing. She glanced at her watch, noting it was almost eleven. Vincent had been cornered by some of the men and Peter danced with her for a couple of numbers, then she felt Vincent's eyes on her and looked across to see him standing leaning against the wall watching her, his arms by his sides, waiting his chance to dance with his wife. She looked so beautiful, he could hardly believe she was his to have and to hold from this day forward....

Finally, he came across and Peter relinquished her to her husband. They danced slowly, holding

each other close, happy to be together again.

"Have you had enough of the party, Catherine?" he asked, his voice low, his eyes exploring her face. "Do you think we could leave? Is it selfish of me to want you to myself now?"

"No, it's not selfish, Vincent," she whispered, glancing around. No one was taking much notice of them. "I think they'd understand if we silently crept away. We couldn't go and tell everyone we're off to our room now could we? It's too obvious!"

"Yes, we *'have'* already given our thanks," Vincent pointed out. "How can we do it without arousing their notice?"

"Dance me over to that wall near the tunnel entrance to the hall then we'll see," she directed, a smile covering her face. "We must be casual about it."

He turned her back towards the spot she had indicated and very casually moved over to the place, hoping no one would want to claim another dance with her.

Her heart was racing and the flush under her skin heated her whole body. Quickly, he pulled her around the corner and they walked towardd their chamber, hardly daring to breathe in case someone called after them.

Catherine gasped in surprise when they stepped through the curtain to see that the large bed was now covered with a beautifully crocheted counterpane. She looked up at Vincent and saw the knowing gleam in his eyes.

"Mary!" she murmured and went to touch it. It would have taken her some hours of work to get the item finished in time for their wedding night. "I must go and thank her tomorrow, Vincent. It's beautiful!"

"I'm glad you said *'tomorrow,'* Catherine," he said coming towards her. "I don't want to lose you for another hour." He paused then. "Are you tired?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't think I could sleep for a while yet. I feel as though I'll never sleep again, by the way I'm feeling tonight."

He half smiled, filling her with a warm delight as always.

Quickly they undressed then visited the washroom to refresh themselves. She re-entered their chamber wearing a new peach-coloured silk nightgown with a low V-neck line fastened with four small covered buttons. Lacy frills lay in four rows down the bodice and another frill encircled the hem. The peach silk robe was loose and tied at the neck.

Vincent was wearing plain mid-blue pajama bottoms; the jacket - over his arm - he didn't intend to wear. His bare top showed his firm body and muscles. The dull golden hair almost like short fur, spread across the width of his chest and down the middle of his stomach to disappear below the waistband of his pants. His arms from elbow to fingertips were furry and his legs - hidden under the pajamas - also possessed the golden-coloured hair from mid-thigh to toes. The rest of him was as smooth and unhairly as his neck and parts of his face. His long shoulder length hair shone from the vigorous brushing he had just given it and was a perfect frame for those unique and beautifully male features.

He pulled aside the covers and slid into bed, then held out his arms to invite her into them. Smiling, she untied the bow on the robe and let it slide over her shoulders, barely concealed by the narrow strips. Laying her robe over the large chair near the bed, she joined him under the blankets, nestling up against him, using his left shoulder as a pillow, his cheek touching her temple.

He sighed in pure contentment and was silent as his thoughts ran back to the time when he had been taking care of her in this very chamber, before she had left him to go back to her world, her face neatly stitched by Father, after her brutal attack.

"What are you thinking about, Vincent?" she asked him, sliding her fingers up and down his furry chest feeling the soft mat beneath them.

He told her. "And when you had gone Above, I thought I would never see you again and that you wouldn't want to once you had begun to live again. My heart was dark and empty without you all those days ahead. I wanted to see you, but held myself back until that night I brought you the book of poems and you didn't want me to leave you."

She laughed softly. "When I said I was glad to see you, I really meant more than glad. You were very welcome. I had never forgotten you, y'know. I found myself looking for a glimpse of you at night, and the social engagements felt so empty and meaningless somehow, when I remembered the days and evenings when you kept me company, reading and talking to me. I missed all that and the sound of your voice, your care and your nearness warming me, encouraging me that I could go on with my life as I knew it."

"If you could have known the pain I felt when I saw you go and the times I had to turn away when I was holding you, afraid of what could happen if we had.... kissed...."

She peered up into his face noting the moistness in his eyes.

"It was just as painful for me, Vincent," she told him, her own eyes beginning to glisten. "And do you know? I'm still glad I had the operation even though it didn't work. It's brought us together in the way we've always wanted and we're starting a family. I'm very happy about that, aren't you?"

"More than I can say to you, my dear beloved Catherine," he said aloud and sighed. "I've dreamt of nothing else from the day I knew I loved you. It has been a part of me as you are and I am a part of you."

She moved and leaned up on her elbow, gazing down at his face with such a consummate expression of love, it enthralled him completely.

Momentarily, he closed his eyes. He suddenly felt her lips touch his forehead, his cheeks, then move to his ears. She gently kissed his eyelids and planted little short kisses down the length of his furry-topped nose. He opened his eyes when she reached his chin and traced a pattern around his cheeks and down his neck to his throat. She laughed softly and carried on upwards again. When her mouth met his, his eyes closed as he responded with the fire he possessed. She moaned at the warmth in her body from the touch of his hands caressing her.

He drew the straps away from her shoulders and unbuttoned her nightgown, her lips against his throat, feeling the pulse beating rapidly in tune to his heart.

"Catherine, do we need these on?" he murmured, tugging gently at the material. "Let's take them off."

She could barely answer him and merely nodded, letting him pull the garment down, until it reached her feet, then she grasped it and threw it out of bed to land on the chair alongside the robe. He quickly divested himself of his pants and tossed them sideways to the bottom of the bed where they hung by one leg before dropping to the floor.

Once more his arms were around her as they kissed and caressed, her body moulding to his, absorbing the heat and fed by the fire in his kisses, moving together in harmony.

"Vincent, no other man could ever love me better," she whispered, her lips a fraction away from his. He didn't answer, but gave a throaty chuckle before his lips claimed hers again. There were no words for a long time.

Out there in the Great Hall, the party went on regardless forgotten and unheard by the two lovers in the king-sized bed, as desire closed their ears to all but their own passion. The honeymoon had well and truly begun....

PART THREE

A NEW LIFE

Catherine and Vincent sat by the side of the clear water lake, with its magnificent waterfall, sending up showers of froth and mist in a never-ending spray. It was one of their special places, and more than once during the week, they had brought rugs to sit on for lengths of time, just being content to be together and marvel at the very nature of this cavern. They had made love in that dim light, the movement of the water reflecting off the walls and roof, and the sound of the fall in their ears as a musical accompaniment to their passion.

Now it was the last day of their honeymoon, and both felt a sadness knowing this. It had been a wonderful and unforgettable week, despite the disappointment of not being able to go and see the Crystal Cavern and all its enchanting beauty, because of the growing child within her. Vincent would not take the risk of taking her there until their baby had been born. The journey was rough and hazardous, without any comfort, but he had promised that one day when the time was right, he would take her there. She was content with that assurance.

Tomorrow would see her back at the DA's office, so tonight she would make the journey up to her lonely apartment without Vincent. There were things she had to do before her working week began.

She sighed heavily, nestling even closer against his chest, whilst his arms enclosed her more tightly, as if he didn't want to let her go for one moment. He laid a cheek on her hair.

"I wish we were just starting out on our week together, Vincent," she said softly. "It's gone so quickly. I wish I'd asked for two weeks, but Joe wouldn't have liked it. We have so many cases on, I don't think he would have been willing for me to be away so long."

Vincent threw a small pebble into the lake, and they watched the ripples widen then fade. He gently kissed the top of her head and she moved to look up at him.

"It's been the most magical week of my life, Catherine," he told her huskily. "Nothing will ever replace the memory of it."

She smiled archly at him. "Not even when the baby's born?"

"No," he asserted, then his eyes smiled at her. "It will be special, yes, but in a different way."

"I know what you mean," she said, and stretched out her left hand to look at the precious gold band on her wedding finger, a symbol of their unity. "I'm going to have to put that ring on my right hand during the day, Vincent," she told him, a tiny frown creasing her forehead. "I know I'll hate doing that, but if I keep it on my left hand, there'll be a whole lot of questions to answer and it will cause complications. Do you mind too much?"

He sighed and took her hand. "You must do what you have to, Catherine. I understand why it's necessary. As long as you wear it on the right finger for me when we're together."

She laid her other hand over the top of his dull, gold, furry hand and stroked it, then pressed it against her cheek, kissing the back of it.

His face came closer, and their lips met lightly in a sweet searing kiss that filled them with a yearning. Her arms stole around his neck and for one long, time-stopping moment, they clung together, as if it were their last kiss together.

"There were times when I ached to kiss you like this, Catherine," he whispered, his arms still around her, lips a fraction away. She could feel the warmth of his breath on her lips. "Every night I tortured myself with thoughts I knew I had no right to have. Life had so much pain and yet the

sweetness of knowing you loved me in the same way, helped me to rise above it, but...." he shook his head. "But now I have everything."

"And so have I, Vincent," she assured him. "So have I." The kiss that followed blotted out any other thoughts and he pulled her down near him onto the rug. "Let's not part until it's late," she whispered. "I want to make these moments last."

"I'm going to miss you," he murmured, his fingers beginning to undo her buttons.

"I'll be down tomorrow evening, you can bet on that," she told him, feeling breathless and excited at the touch of his hands on her bare skin. "Tomorrow's going to be a l-o-n-g day." She met his lips with such eagerness and fire, his heart pounded, and his own tumultuous tide of emotions answered her with equal passion - and for some time, tomorrow was forgotten.

After the evening meal together in their chamber, she reluctantly kissed Father *'goodnight'* and Vincent walked her very slowly to the basement entry. They stood in the shadows, listening to footsteps passing by, until it was silent and the coast was clear for Catherine to step out; but before she took that lonely first step, Vincent pulled her to him and kissed her reverently, taking his time over it, hating this moment of separation. She clung to him, savouring the warmth, his strength and the magnetism he exuded to all who met him.

"Maybe Joe will have too much work for you," he said, frowning, his fingers tracing down the side of her face, a gentle and tender caressing touch she loved.

"I hope not, Vincent, but it depends on what's on my desk," she said, hoping that the work hadn't piled up since she began her honeymoon. "I may have to work over to get it cleared. You know how Joe is keen to keep things running without too many holdups."

"Well, take care, Catherine." Vincent said, stepping back to let her go, or they would be there all evening. "You have two lives to protect for me now."

She smiled warmly, tapping her stomach. "I promise. Maybe I should tell Joe about the baby, then he won't send me on all those dangerous assignments."

"That would be very wise," he said, his blue eyes shadowed by the fear of anything happening to Catherine, who means more than life to him. Soon, she would be showing her condition and would need loose clothing. He half-smiled at the vision she would present.

One last brief kiss, she had gone from his arms into the basement, heading for her apartment. He sighed and turned to retrace his steps down the tunnels towards Father's chamber.

"Isn't there something you should be telling me, Vincent?" Father wagged his stick at him, after some minutes of silence between them.

Vincent stared at him. Surely, he can't have guessed? But he was a doctor, after all. "About Catherine?" He tried not to smile, assuming an air of innocence.

"Yes, about your wife, Catherine." Father pulled his lips and shook his head. "She is expecting your child, Vincent. Didn't you know this?"

"Yes, I knew, Father, but we wanted to wait until another month had passed." The big man half-smiled at the older man's expression. "We didn't want to worry you so soon."

"Well, I am worried now, and concerned for Catherine's future health." Father regarded him thoughtfully. "Did you not tell me that she had had an operation to stop any chances of babies? What happened?" He frowned deeply, his knuckles showing white as they gripped his stick.

"Something went wrong at the clinic and Catherine wasn't the only one to conceive." Vincent explained and sat back, a bemused look in his blue eyes as they rested on Father.

"Yes, I know these things can happen now and then, but for Catherine to be the unlucky one, Vincent!"

The old man leaned forward, his grey eyes full of love and pain. "You don't need me to tell you about the possible consequences of this. You didn't want her to bear the brunt of what might happen when the baby is born." He shook his head. "All we can do is wait, hope and pray that what you and I fear will not occur." He smiled at his son. "Maybe you will be lucky."

"Catherine is sure that everything will be fine. She.... feels it," Vincent tried to explain. "I was too shocked and upset when she told me, but now I am beginning to look forward to the day when we can hold it in our arms and know we are a complete family."

"You will make a wonderful father, Vincent," Father told him, smiling. "And I, a doting grandfather. It will be born into a world of love.... our world Below, but hopefully, he or she may be able to journey into her mother's world too." He tapped Vincent's hand. "Mary will be delighted, I'm sure, and she would make an excellent nanny, if Catherine wants to go back to work or go Above without the child."

"That's what I believe too, Father," Vincent said, sighing a little. "I do wish Catherine would not work in such a dangerous job as hers. I may not always be able to save her from dangers in time."

"Well, the sooner she leaves the DA's office, the better I shall feel," Father said, and began to move the chess board pieces into place. "Care for a game tonight?"

Vincent agreed, but his mind was on Catherine, alone in her apartment. He so wanted to be there with her, but he knew she wanted to tackle some personal chores before her working week began. Already he had begun to miss her....

Catherine had a number of chores to do before she could shower then fall into bed. Her first job was to change the water in all the vases. The roses she had bought for the wedding were wilting a little and the water smelled rather dank. She popped a sachet of powder into the water to make them last longer, then started on her laundry, throwing some items of clothing into the washer. She vacuumed the carpets while the automatic spun the garments around for a while, then washed the glasses left over from the wedding party, smiling as her memories took her back to the precious day when she became Mrs. Catherine Wells. She had a husband now, but who sadly couldn't always be with her in their married life.

She sang as she moved around her apartment, thinking longingly of Vincent and of the precious past seven days spent together in a cocoon of love and mutual discovery.

At night, they had roamed in the park after midnight, enjoying the moonlit walks, hand-in-hand under the stars. The air had been cool and fresh after a very warm June day underground, yet there had always been a current of air blowing through the tunnels. He had taken her to parts of the park she had never visited before, but both were alert for any signs of strangers around. They had often paused to kiss under the moonlit sky, savouring the delight of this, because they felt like any other romantically inclined couple out for a stroll. They had carved their initials on one of the trees like so many others in love.

She had touched it afterwards and said, "This will be here forever, Vincent, for all the world to see."

"Yes, long after we have gone, Catherine." He had looked down at her. "Perhaps we could return here just to see it again."

"We'll be invisible then, so it won't matter," she had smiled. "No one will see us." A long absorbing kiss had followed before they had walked on, hands warmly clasped.

After a couple of hours, the room was smelling much more fragrant now that the unclean water had

been changed to fresh. The delicate perfume of the deep red roses filled the air, stirring her memories anew.

She pressed the clothes she would wear tomorrow, then had a little light supper, feeling rather deflated on her own, having been used to having the constant company of Vincent and the ever-accessible Father with the others Below. She sighed and undressed, standing sideways to the long mirror. She looked for the tell-tale bump which she knew would be more noticeable in the next couple of months. Right now, she could hardly believe that Vincent's child was there, growing by the hours, bit by bit. It gave her a funny feeling to know that. She patted her stomach and hoped everything would be all right as she felt it would - but was her intuition right? Only time would tell.

After all, she reflected. Vincent wasn't your regular kind of man. Even normal men produced babies that were cruelly deformed, so what chance had Vincent, being the way he was? There was one thing, the child would have lots of love and care lavished on it no matter how it looked.

She decided not to do any shopping for baby gear until after the sixth month had passed, just in case.

Catherine glanced at the clock and saw how late it was, but she was reluctant to go to bed just yet. She drew the drapes and lit the lamps, illuminating the room with a soft light that made her long for Vincent even more. Just one look at the wide empty bed made her ache for him to be there. She felt so alone now, she was missing his presence acutely. It was like a pain.

She tried to focus her thoughts on tomorrow and what her working day would bring. She realized she would have to tell Joe about the baby and ask to be put on lighter and safer duties. She owed it to Vincent and her unborn child to protect herself as best she could. Losing the baby would be a disaster and in a panic, she wondered if Vincent would return to the days when he wouldn't even attempt to kiss her, let alone make love again, if the child proved to be identical to its father, or lost its life before it had properly begun.

She knew she couldn't bear that at all, whatever happened. Surely now that Vincent had tasted intimacy with so much love and passion passing between them, he too wouldn't want those old days of restraint to return for both their sakes, but he had such strength of will, it wasn't easy to forecast what he would do in such circumstances.

Before she slipped beneath the sheets, she wrapped her thick flowered robe around her and padded onto the balcony to stand for a few moments, gazing out at the thousands of twinkling lights from so many windows and then looked up at the starlit sky, with just a few clouds slowly moving across the moon, wishing Vincent was here to share it with her.

Being down Below so long, she had missed their late night trysts here on her balcony, amongst the potted plants. She smiled, wondering what he was doing right now. Strange how she felt so incomplete without him, his warm nature and protective love, his husky voice and those deep blue eyes filled with such feeling whenever he looked at her. Their eyes would lock for long moments, making her breathless and quite headily excited; she found it hard to describe in words.

Thinking of the wedding and the poignant beauty of the vows they had given to each other, her eyes misted over, then she laughed, remembering how the Reverend Dixon had been completely fooled by Vincent's appearance, and he had complimented him on the 'extras' to his costume, thinking they were part of his disguise as *'Puss-In-Boots.'*

'How little he knew,' she thought, stroking the edge of the wall.

For some minutes she lingered there, her mind a kaleidoscope of memories, then she shivered and realized she was in her night clothes in a cool breeze from the park. She turned to re-enter the room and the telephone rang, jarring her out of her reverie. Quickly, she left the balcony and closed the door before picking up the receiver. It was Joe; she wasn't surprised.

"So, you're back, Radcliffe." He sounded flippant as always, but there was also the caring under his words. "Ready for tomorrow?"

"I'll be there," she assured him. "But is anyone ever ready for work when they've just returned from a vacation?" She twiddled the curling wire around her fingers.

"No, I guess not, but it all depends on what kind of time you've had. Has it been okay?"

"The best ever." She smiled into the phone. "I'll tell you all about it sometime, but I'm tired now. I'm just going to get some rest."

"Yeah, well, you'll be needing it, but your voice tells me I'm not going to like what you have to tell me. Am I right?" His easy tone was gone. He sounded a little upright.

"I do have something to ask you, but it'll wait till tomorrow. I can't discuss it here. Goodnight, Joe." He recognized the dismissive message and sighed. "G'night, Radcliffe. See you."

Smiling, she replaced the phone and went towards the bedroom. She eyed the empty bed with distaste, sighing as she discarded her robe and slippers. Once under the sheets, she tried to settle down, closed her eyes, but found herself wide awake. She reached for a book and sat for half an hour trying to read it, but all she could think about was Vincent, wondering how he was doing. Did he feel as lost without her as she did here?

'Well, I guess I'll have to get used to this when we can't be together,' she told herself. She tried the television, but what was on wasn't suitable to get her into a sleepy frame of mind. Another half an hour passed as she wriggled about finding a niche to curl into, like a dog in a basket.

Suddenly, she heard the door open on the balcony. Her heart thumped as she sat up, hardly daring to breathe, then a voice called to her, a voice that she knew and loved above all others. Her heart leapt for joy and she hurriedly left her bed and opened the door to see Vincent standing there like a dream come true. She flew into his arms and he held her tightly, his cheek rubbing against her hair.

"Catherine, I felt I had to come," he whispered at last. "I knew you needed me and I couldn't sleep without you by my side. I was torn between letting you have a good night's sleep on your own and missing you as you are missing me, but I couldn't stand it any longer." She clung to him happily, her eyes closed, hoping she wasn't dreaming.

"Oh, you're so welcome anytime, Vincent." She smiled at him, leaning back a little to look at his face in the soft light of the one lamp still burning. "I've tried to sleep, but all I've done is toss and turn."

She was thrilled and happy he had made the effort to come to her. "I've gotten used to having you near me in bed." Her voice was low and seductively soft, and he recognized the tone, but he thought she should have a good night's rest, ready for the busy day ahead of her.

Her sheets had already been flung back. Vincent bent slightly and lifted her up. Very carefully, he placed her in the bed and covered her. He then shed the cloak and his boots and lay stretched out beside her on the top of the bedclothes, his left arm draped around her.

"Aren't you undressing, Vincent?" she asked, her voice full of disappointment.

"No, Catherine. You need rest and I can't promise that if I am wearing nothing but the pajamas you have here for me." He smiled. "I'll stay until you are sleeping."

"Mmmm, you're wonderful!" She kissed him lazily, but felt her body stir. "And I love you."

For a short while, he talked to her in a low, quiet voice and she could feel her eyelids growing heavy and her body relaxing in the warmth of his light embrace. When her breathing grew steady and her movements were still, he withdrew his arm. She stirred slightly and turned over, presenting her back to him. He waited a little longer, anxious not to fall asleep himself. He must go before the

sky began to lighten. The danger of discovery on leaving her apartment in the morning light would hold him a prisoner here until nightfall, with the fear of someone calling during the day while Catherine was out.

It wasn't long before he realized that she was very deeply asleep and now was his chance of going home Below. Very slowly and gingerly, he inched his way from her closeness and carefully rose from the bed to avoid any sudden movement which might waken her.

For a moment, he stood gazing down at her sleeping face, with her hair spread across the pillow like a fan, and longed to reach down and kiss her; touch her cheek with his fingers, once again realizing how lucky he was to have her for his very own, for the rest of their days.

'She is so beautiful,' he told himself. *'How could she possibly want me; love me?'* He turned and stared at himself in the long mirror and grimaced at his reflection, noting his slanted deep set eyes under equally slanted brows he could hardly discern; his flat, wide, furry-skinned nose, with the big cat's top leading down to the indentation of his upper lip. He pulled his mouth in a smile and the long, almost pointed canine teeth revealed themselves. He smoothed his long hair flowing down to his chest with furry backed fingers and pale, claw-like nails; hating them for what they stood for, but they had saved the life of his beloved Catherine many times and his own when it was fight or be killed. The dull gold strands on his hair gleaned in the soft light of the room.

Regretfully, he picked up his cloak and boots and padded from the bedroom, turning the lamp off in the room, hating to leave her again. On the balcony, he donned his boots and cloak then quickly skimmed down to ground level. He was soon back down Below and hurrying to his chamber to try and salvage what was left of the night, in sleep for himself.

The king-size bed seemed enormous without her and he longed for the weekend when she could return to it and his arms, under the blankets.

'What would I do without her?' he had often asked himself. He knew his life would be over as far as he was concerned, if anything happened to Catherine.

He sighed and reached for one of his books of poetry to ease his mind, as sleep seemed to be evasive for him, too. It was going to be a long week without her in his arms during the night hours. He missed her more than he could bear but he knew it couldn't be any other way until she had left her job. He smiled and settled down, thinking of possible names to try out on Catherine when he saw her again. His one constant hope, was that the baby would be more like Catherine. He was deathly afraid of another being coming into the world with the same reflection he had seen looking into her mirror tonight. His stomach always churned in fear whenever he thought it might happen that way. He didn't want a child that had to hide all his life from the world Above.

There was so long to wait until they would discover. Catherine hoped to have the child Below, with Dr. Alcott, Father, and midwife – Mary - to help her. He wanted to be by her side so they could see the result of their union, together. He could hardly wait for the day and silently counted the remaining months. There were just over seven left, almost a lifetime, before the special event.

He lay back at last, reminiscing over the past week of their honeymoon spent Below in his world, showing her everything he thought would interest her, except the Crystal Cavern, which he had promised to show her after the baby had been born. He was looking forward eagerly to the time when he could show her the wondrous, breathtaking beauty of his favorite place.

Dreaming dreams of the future, he sank into a heavy sleep until morning, and awoke to find he was holding Catherine's pillow to his chest. Her scent filled his nostrils, and he pressed it to his face for a few moments, bringing her to him.

When Catherine's alarm startled her into waking, she wasn't quite sure where she was. Had she dreamt that Vincent had been with her last night? Then she realized that she was back in her lonely, but sun-filled bedroom and her husband was Below in his world, now part of hers too. Finding some strands of his golden hair on the pillow reassured her. The nausea she always experienced on rising these days, filled her suddenly, and she had to make a dive for the bathroom.

After a short while she was fine again and managed to eat a light breakfast and drink some tea. She found coffee was a little heavy on her stomach since she had become pregnant. She wasn't looking forward to going into work today. What would Joe say when she told him about the baby and that she wanted to be put on lighter duties from now on?

On arriving, she made for the ladies' room, drank some cold water and then noticed the wedding ring when she dried her hands on the towel. Quickly, before there was time for anyone to notice, she slipped it off her left hand and onto her right one. She didn't like having to change it over, but she had to do it for their peace of mind.

When she finally approached Joe, he was sitting on the edge of his desk, with the phone in his ear. He saw her tentative expression and signalled for her to sit down. It was a case of extortion and he was having trouble persuading one of the victims to come forward and reveal who the men were who had almost ruined his business by demanding money with menace; threatening his family. He wouldn't take the risk of grassing. Catherine listened sympathetically and waited patiently until Joe had replaced the receiver on its cradle, heaving a heavy groan of frustration and smoothing his forehead as if he had a headache.

"What can you do, other than offer them protection, Radcliffe?" Joe looked distinctly out of tempo and Catherine wondered if it was the right time to tell him. She had just about decided to wait a little longer until this case had been dealt with, when he suddenly stared at her face and sensed her indecision to talk to him. She stood up to leave, but he planted both hands on her shoulders and pushed her down onto the seat again.

"Whatever it is you've got to unload on me, you'd better do it now, so I can go and have my screaming fit all in one go." He paused, seeing her expression. "Go on. I can take it, I guess."

Her lips felt dry even with the lipstick on them. She found it much harder to tell him now he felt so harassed.

"I'm going to have a baby early next year."

His face was a study of a variety of expressions. Disbelief, surprise; even amazement and was it shock and hurt, mixed together? He sank slowly into his chair, still staring open-mouthed at her, unable to take it in all at once. Had he heard her right?

"You're telling me, Cathy, that you are having a baby? Was that what you said just now?"

She smiled. "Yes, you're right." She felt the sadness and disappointment coming from him so strongly, she couldn't mistake it. "I.... we would hope that you would put me on lighter duties. He.... he doesn't want me risking my life now that I'm in this condition. I.... thought I'd better tell you the news now and let you get used to the idea that I'll be leaving in a few months, so you can find someone else for this work."

He stared down at the pad on his desk, not wanting her to see his eyes, which had suddenly misted over. The news had obviously stunned him.

"Look, it's been a kinda shock this, so would you go and let me have this sink in for a while? There's some filing on your desk to tackle. I'll talk to you later, okay?"

She nodded, slowly getting up and noted the tightness of his lips. She could tell only too well that he was under some emotional stress and left his office without another word.

All morning, she waited for Joe to invite her back into his office for the inevitable showdown, but he never attempted to speak to her until late afternoon, when she was preparing to leave for home and dear Vincent.

"Can you spare me five minutes, Radcliffe?" he asked, coming up behind her suddenly, startling her. She thought he had left the building without the little confrontation she had been waiting for since this morning.

He took her arm and led her into his office and closed the door behind them for complete privacy. There were still some stuff working on late, as usual.

"How are you feeling today?" he asked, perching himself on the edge of his desk. He gestured to the spare chair in front of his desk. "Not too tired?"

"Er.... no, I'm fine right now." Catherine told him, sinking down apprehensively, wondering what he was going to say.

He reached forward and lifted her left hand; a look of amazement swept across his face when he saw there was no wedding ring, or even an engagement ring on the important finger.

"Look, Cathy, it's none of my business whether you have the baby first, then get yourself married, but I'm surprised you would do it this way. Why? And who is this guy who's kid you're carrying? Is he serious about you?"

"Oh yes, he's serious all right, Joe. He's told me often enough the way he feels about me." Catherine's face smiled and her eyes glowed, knowing the full extent of Vincent's love and deep feelings for her.

"But are you going to get married in the future?" Joe leaned forward and watched her eyes. "He's not just stringing you along with false promises like so many guys in this world? Mention marriage vows and they're off up the trail to hell knows where."

"No, he's not like that at all," she said, wishing this interview was over.

"Is there any chance of my meeting him, or will I have to wait for a wedding invite?"

"I expect you will meet him one day, but he travels around and he's hard to pin down. I.... I'll mention you to him the next time we're together and see what he comes up with."

"Sure, do that!" Joe gave a short laugh. "I'm anxious to see what kind of guy you've committed yourself to for the rest of your life. Doesn't that kinda scare you?"

"Quite the opposite," she said, her lips twitching in an effort to control her smiles. "I couldn't think of a life without him. He's incredibly special to me and always will be. He is everything I could ever want and more."

"But why all the damned secrecy about him during the past months?" Joe wore a rather bleak expression. "He doesn't work for the FBI or CIA, does he? Why have you never talked about him?" He shook his head. "All the other girls here, chat about their conquests, but not you? What's so different about him?"

Catherine shrugged, her mind searching for a perfect answer. "He is different." Her smile was back. "He is tall, broad and strong in body and in spirit. He has such compassion and loves to help people as he goes through life. We have a special bond, and we know how each other feels when apart. I can't tell you any more about him."

"What's the guy's name and what does he do to earn a crust these days? What is he in?"

"Steam pipes, and his name is Vincent." She glanced at her watch and stood up to go.

"So, when are you going to leave us, Cathy?" His voice carried such regret, she felt sorry for him.

"Oh, I'll only be gone temporarily, Joe. I'll need the money and the apartment I have. I'd be loathe to give it up, I love it."

"At least that's something in my favour," Joe grinned suddenly. "And you want me to find you a lighter job here? Well, I can't promise, but I'll try. I sure don't want your guy stormin' in here threatening me if I don't look after you properly."

He slapped her shoulder. "I'll take care of this. Relax! Uncle Joe will watch over you."

She laughed and hugged him close, impulsively, feeling his heart beating quickly under his light shirt.

For an all too brief moment, he held her close as he had always dreamed of when alone, imagining that after a few kisses, she would be his to call his own, but now someone else had stolen his dreams.

"Haven't you got some kind of picture of him I could look at, to see if he's more handsome than me?" he joked and then held her away from him.

She looked up at his good-looking features and shook her head. "No, he hates his photo being taken. He avoids cameras whenever possible."

"What's he gonna do when you marry then? Wear a bag over his head or something?" Joe gave a little laugh. "He can't be that ugly, surely. Otherwise, you wouldn't have fallen in love with him." He moved away from her and walked to the door. "I kinda know the type who interests you."

"You do?" Catherine opened the door. "Yes, it's true, we share the same interests and beauty is only skin deep as far as looks go. The beauty of Vincent is in his nature."

"No wonder you look so happy," Joe commented, half-smiling. "He's a lucky son of a gun. Go on, don't keep him waiting. G'night!"

"Thanks, Joe, for everything." Catherine hurried left the building with a song in her heart, anxious to be with Vincent for a few hours in his world.

The pattern of their lives was set in a special routine for the next five months. During the week, she would spend most evenings down with Vincent, until it was time to return to her apartment for the night. He would join her for a few hours until the summer sky showed an early dawn, then later when the fall arrived to shorten the days and lengthen the nights; were bliss spent in his arms, especially at the weekends, Below in their chamber and enjoying the company of her other friends in this world.

Somehow, she had managed to keep Joe from meeting Vincent. She had successfully managed to fend him off with all manner of excuses, blaming her husband's pressure of work for his continual absences from home.

She had some hairy moments when she sometimes forgot to change the wedding ring to her right hand. On being questioned about it, she had told them it was her mother's and she had decided to wear it instead of leaving it in her jewelry box.

One evening just before Christmas, she had been cleaning the apartment rooms when she had a visitor. She was now wearing loose dress-smocks to cover the large shape she had developed. The regular kicks from the interior of this egg-shaped bump proved that junior was exercising its legs. The intercom phone announced it was Mr. Roy Dixon. When Catherine realized it was the minister who had married them, she felt a slight panic, knowing the questions he would be asking, obviously hoping to meet her husband without his fancy costume and 'extras' as he had called

Vincent's hairy hands and claw-like nails. She couldn't help but laugh at the memory. He had applauded his makeup.

She gave the minister coffee and had tea herself. He looked around the pleasant and attractively furnished room, puzzled as to why he could see no photographs of the couple's wedding. She could see he was disappointed and smiled.

"My husband is away on business," she told him, sinking down onto the nearest chair.

"Oh darn! I was hoping to catch him. I was just passing by here and thought I'd call to see you both."

"He'll be sad to have missed you, but he has to go abroad on his schedule." She passed him the sugar dish. "He's never in one place too long."

The young man nodded to her figure. "When is the little one expected, Mrs. Wells?"

"Oh, next February, they tell me, but the way it behaves, it could be next month." Catherine gasped when a foot hit her again. She smiled at the minister's incredulous expression, as she knew he had now deduced that the child had been conceived before the wedding.

"You sure look very well." He stirred the sugar briskly. "Will you be wanting me to christen it in due course?"

"I don't know." She stared into the cup of steaming liquid. "We haven't discussed that yet, but if we do, we hope to have you."

"By the way, how's your father-in-law these days?"

She frowned, then her mind cleared. "Ah yes, Father. Yes, he's fine and away visiting at present."

"Does he live with you, or have I got that wrong?" Mr. Dixon sipped the frothy drink, enjoying the cappuccino coffee. "I understand that he lived here in your apartment."

"No, he visits here, but he has other friends to stay with at times." Catherine began to wish he would finish his drink and leave. She didn't like having to lie about the way things were, but she had to, to protect the people she loved from inquisitive outsiders.

By the time the visit was over, Catherine had developed a tension headache and longed to lay down on her bed for an hour. She hadn't given much away to the young minister, and all he knew was that Vincent's career was in steam pipe maintenance and he had to travel far afield. They had met each other in the park one night and then gone to a candlelit place to eat and talk. She told him that the instant photos had been too poor to exhibit around the room, but Vincent kept them with him.

Vincent quickly climbed up to her balcony terrace and hesitated at the door. He could hear a man's voice coming from the sitting room but no sound of Catherine. He listened for a moment and then entered, closing the French windows behind him. The male voice was issuing from the radio, but there was no sign of his wife. For some seconds his heartbeat rapidly as he went into the bedroom to find her on the floor, her face deathly pale.

Swiftly and gently, he lifted her up and laid her on the bed, then fetched a sponge from the bathroom, wrung in cold water to wipe her face and bring her round.

"Catherine, can you hear me?" he asked, his hair swinging forward as he bent over her. Tenderly, he stroked the cold sponge over her beautiful, but very white features. Her lips were slightly apart, and he glanced temptingly at them. Should he kiss her?

She stirred and opened her eyes to see a very worried looking Vincent gazing down at her. She

tried to sit up but fell back feeling weak and giddy, closing her eyes again.

"I'll call Peter," he told her, feeling sick with new anxiety about her. She had never looked like this. "Please, don't move, Catherine. I'll be here with you."

"I only fainted, Vincent," she told him tiredly. "I'll be okay in a few minutes. My head began to spin, and I just fell here. It's nothing to worry about."

He softly kissed the smooth forehead and stroked her hair from her face, then moved to use the telephone extension by her bedside. He spoke directly to Dr. Peter Alcott, who fortunately, was at home. He promised to come as soon as he could manage it. He didn't tell Vincent that he and his wife were holding a dinner party.

"Just keep her comfortable and cool. There's no pain at all?"

"No, just giddiness and the fainting. She's resting now." Vincent told him, his eyes on Catherine, who seemed to have drifted off to sleep.

"Has she lost any blood?" the doctor asked him.

"I don't know, Peter," Vincent frowned at the question. "She didn't say. Will she lose the baby if she has?"

"Don't be scared, Vincent," Peter assured him. "I'm just asking the routine questions. As her to check, will you?"

Vincent hated to have to waken her now that she seemed comfortable, but he had to know. He knelt by the side of the bed and touched her hand as he spoke her name in a tone loud enough for her to hear without startling her.

When her eyes dragged themselves open, he asked her the question the doctor wanted to know the answer to, to ascertain her condition and if she needed hospital treatment.

"I'm okay. Really, I am, Vincent," she explained softly. "I'm not losing the baby. I just felt giddy and fainted. That's all. I'm pretty much tired, I could sleep for a week right now."

He relayed Catherine's words to Peter, who promised to call round in the next hour, then left her to go into the sitting room to turn off the radio, which was now playing music not conducive to sleep. He heard her calling him, and hurried back to see her sitting up and pushing her fingers through her pillow tousled hair.

"Don't go, Vincent," she begged him, still looking pale and rather fragile. "I need you so much, I.... I'm real sorry we haven't been able to make love for the past couple of weeks, but it won't be for much longer." She smiled wanly at him. "The doctor says it is unwise during the final few weeks or so, and I get so tired quickly, these days."

"Yes, I forget that you haven't my strength, and I have more than a normal man," he said, holding her close to him. He half-smiled at her and she took his hands and placed them on the swelling, holding them there for a few moments so he could feel the movements inside. It thrilled him to the core, and he bent to kiss her.

"I love you, Vincent," she whispered, as she lay down on the bed again, holding his hand while they waited for Peter to arrive. "When Peter's been and gone, we'll go home."

Her ankles and wrists were extremely puffy and her kneecaps undefined. She was rather anxious for Peter to come and give his verdict on the way she was feeling now, to free her mind of any worries she had for the baby's welfare.

"Hold me close," Catherine appealed to Vincent, then lifted a hand to her mouth to cover a yawn. "Just stay with me."

He pulled off her leather knee-high boots and draped his cloak over a chair, then stretched himself out alongside her, enfolding her in his arms, his lips touching her forehead and cheek. He kissed her ear and began to recite a poem he had remembered.

"That was lovely," she said, her eyes half-closed. She turned her face and their lips met accidentally. Feeling the warmth of his mouth against hers, she let her lips stay in contact, sending sensational currents of tingles through her body. The kiss lingered, moving, caressingly gentle and undemanding. His long fingers entered her hair and felt the soft silkiness of the strands. It was a beautiful moment, but it had to end. His body was hardly able to contain itself and he fought for control. The long, slow kiss ended, and he had to get up and leave her to go into the bathroom for a while.

Catherine smiled to herself, knowing she had stirred him far too much for his peace of mind and body.

The doorbell rang and Vincent strode from the bathroom to answer it, after Peter had identified himself.

To Peter's practiced eyes, Vincent looked rather flushed. "Are you feeling unwell yourself, Vincent?"

"No, I'm fine." He waved a hand towards the bathroom. "I'm just worried about Catherine. She hasn't been like this before."

"And I guess you're having some difficulties with your relationship with Cathy in that state of development. You know what I mean?" He patted Vincent's shoulder. "You're a red-blooded man, but things will be back to normal I'm sure, after all this is over." Vincent nodded, understanding everything and followed him to the bedroom.

After a thorough examination, with Vincent hovering in the sitting room, Peter put away the stethoscope and the blood pressure pack and wrote out a prescription. "You have a slight case of high blood pressure, and the tablets should help lower it. If your blood pressure remains high, you might have to be hospitalized, and have the baby earlier than due. The tablets should reduce the puffiness too, Cathy."

"Can I go Below, to our chamber, Peter?" Catherine asked him plaintively. "I feel okay now."

Peter smiled, closing his medical bag. "There's no reason why you can't, Cathy, but get that prescription made up as soon as possible. Take someone out shopping with you when you go next time. I'll see myself out now. Goodnight you two. I'll come down as soon as I can. I want to have a talk with Father about you."

Still feeling a little weak, she sat up and watched Peter take his leave to go back to his dinner party guests.

Vincent turned to Catherine after the outer door had closed. "Lock up the apartment until our child has arrived. Every minute you spend away from our home concerns me, especially now, Catherine."

"But there are certain things I have to do here, Vincent," she explained to him. "There's my mail to pick up and my answerphone to reply to. I like to keep things clean and pay my bills. I'll bring one of the girls up with me if that will ease your mind."

"Yes, that would be the answer, but don't stay too long up here from now on, will you? Your time is getting near, and I have a strong feeling it will arrive early." Catherine gazed up at Vincent in some concern.

"There is another two and a half months before we expect it, sweetheart!" She shook her head, hoping he would be wrong. Apart from the touch of high blood pressure, the clinic had scanned her, and everything was proceeding smoothly and correctly. She wanted to have the baby in the

Hospital Chamber Below, so that Vincent could be near her, not in some hospital where he wouldn't be able to see her. She frowned at the thought of it.

"What's wrong, Catherine?" He held her arms. "Something bothers you."

"No, I was just thinking about having the baby without you around to comfort and encourage me."

"If it happens that way without me, I will have to bear it, Catherine, beloved." He crushed her to him, and she lay against his chest, her eyes closed, loving to feel of his strength holding her close. "As long as you are safe and well. Without you, my world would be meaningless to me. I need you more than life itself. Please take care of yourself."

His words choked her throat and she found she couldn't answer him. Tears brimmed in her eyes and slowly rolled down her cheeks, as her arms encircled his neck, entwining her fingers in his long, burnished gold hair.

He kissed the wet cheeks and picked a pink tissue from a box by her bed to wipe away the tears still trickling as she sobbed into his woolen top. For a few moments he let her cry, then leaned back to look down at her. She managed a smile and brushed away the rest of the tears with the tissue.

"I'm sorry, Vincent. I feel better now." She blew her nose and began to stand up from the bed. His arms held her steady as she reached the floor and pushed her feet into her flatties nearby. "It was just the tension of the worry, that's all. I'll be okay. I'm sorry too, for all the times I've snapped at you over the past month or two."

"It's forgotten. Let's go Below." He stood apart from her. "Are you sure you can walk without my help, down to the basement? I'll meet you there."

"I know how much you want to accompany me, but it's much too risky, Vincent." She still felt a little doggery on her legs, but she was determined to go ahead. She wanted to be at home in their own chamber, among her special friends. "I'll manage it. Just pass me my coat and bag off the chair in there, and we'll go."

Vincent brought them to her and helped her into her thick, warm coat then gave her the large holdall containing some items of clothes she had ironed. To his anxious eyes, she still looked very pale, and her eyes were tired. It was too late to have the prescription made up now, but Father could be relied upon to give her something. He often visited a Chinese herbalist for his own medicine, so perhaps they could help Catherine.

After Vincent had gone over the balcony, she locked the French windows, then picking up her bag again, she left the apartment to go down and join Vincent at the basement wall entrance. In five minutes, they were together again. He held her close for a moment, then without hesitation, picked her up and carried her right to their chamber, regardless of her weight.

Once Vincent had told Father of Catherine's collapse and Peter's diagnosis, the older man paid a visit to the Chinese herbalist Above, and came back with a couple of mixtures; one to bring down the blood pressure and the other to ease the fluid retention.

She took her first dosage, then she slipped gratefully into bed and Vincent's comforting arms, the only place on earth she wanted to be. She knew that her closeness brought him a physical problem that hadn't occurred during most months of her pregnancy, but now as the time drew nearer and her body had expanded in keeping with the growth of the life within her, their moments of passion and love had been curtailed and was now non-existent. Catherine felt heavy and ungainly and so tired, but she had a healthy appetite, and the baby was said to be in good health too. It was to be a boy, according to the scanner. They had been thinking of suitable names, but so far, hadn't really decided on any particular ones.

'Who will he look like?' she often wondered, lost in thought. *'Vincent or me? Perhaps a mixture of both of us.'* She could hardly wait to find out and the time seemed to drag even more slowly as the weeks passed.

Catherine felt quite well during the day, except for her tendency to swollen ankles towards evening time. Vincent encouraged her to rest for at least half an hour every afternoon while he read to her. Listening to his beloved low, husky tones, she would grow sleepy and doze off. Sometimes, if she had difficulty in relaxing, he would gently caress her temples to ease the tension. When she began to show signs of waking and stirred on the couch, he loved to bend over and kiss her to full awareness. Her arms would slide up and around his neck holding him near, then stretching his great length alongside her, held her close to him, whispering softly, his lips so teasingly brushing hers now and then.

She tried to make it up to Vincent for all her irritable moods that had caused her to be snappy and unresponsive. She winced now at the memory of the hurt look in those wonderful expressive blue eyes when she had rounded on him. She hoped he understood why she felt that way at times.

She also knew that because he couldn't touch her in the way he wanted to, in the close confines of the bed, it was very hard on him. Having found each other and tasted the intimacy he had always dreamt of with Catherine over those two precious years together, he had to once again, restrain his feelings, after just a few months of completeness. When the desire to love her grew too strong, he had to leave her and go running through the tunnels until the feeling subsided, then he would only lay on top of the bed, afraid of re-awakening his passion again by the warmth and perfume of her body next to him.

Just before Christmas, Catherine went Above to do some Christmas shopping. She was feeling well and happy. The herbal medicine given to her by Father had been successful, and although she had felt slightly giddy once or twice, she hadn't fainted. The puffiness around her ankles, wrists and knees had subsided and she could see the shapes of the bones. Her eyes held an inner sparkle and happiness oozed from every pore.

They had settled upon the first name of Winslow and added Jacob as the second honorary name. Father approved the choice. Winslow, a black man, had given his life in helping Vincent in one escapade and he had bravely died in his defense of his dear friend, when Catherine had been abducted from her apartment one night and held captive for a while. She was confident that Vincent's prediction that the baby would be early was wrong. She felt better now that her blood pressure trouble had been taken care of and Father kept a watchful eye on her, encouraging her to rest every day for so long.

She wanted to shop for Christmas gifts and didn't want anyone with her to hinder her concentration. She left a note for Vincent and left the familiar sanctuary of their chamber to go to the shops via the basement entry. Catherine found her cheque book safely hidden in her apartment, then collecting her car keys she walked slowly to the parking lot hoping she would be able to get behind the wheel in her present shape.

She really enjoyed herself buying things for Vincent, Father, Mouse, and the others. Halfway through, she went into a coffee shop and rested her body and feet while drinking a cup of tea and eating a jam doughnut. She felt guilty at being so long and hoped that they wouldn't worry too much about her.

Glancing toward ladies and gentlemen's toilet facilities doors, she almost died when she saw Joe just emerging from the man-signed one. She tried to slide down further into the seat, but she couldn't. Hurriedly she pulled a daily newspaper from her bag and held it up in front of her face for cover. It wasn't that she didn't want to see him, but he would ask too many questions about her.

She hadn't seen him since she had left the office at the end of November, after a presentation shower for the baby.

'Don't forget,' he had begged her. *'I still want to meet this guy who's taken over your life. Send us an invite when you set the date.'*

'Yes, I will,' she had replied, tears misting her view of him, guilt flashing her face.

'Promises, promises.' He shook his head, contemplating her. *'Promises should be met.'*

But so far, they hadn't because she wanted to protect Vincent's anonymity as long as she possibly could from outsiders such as Joe, who could inadvertently blurt out to anyone about the life and inhabitants of Below, and, especially if he had been drinking, and alcohol was famous for loosening the tongue.

Her heart was beating so loud, she thought he would hear it. His voice drew nearer. Now he was talking to someone. Not daring to peek from behind her cover, she kept up the paper until she knew he had passed her. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw a female by his side as he directed her to a table. Apparently, she had just arrived and they were going to spend a little time here, so she quickly finished the tea left in her cup, pushed the newspaper into her bag and hoped she wouldn't be noticed when she finally got up to leave the diner. Her heart was thudding heavily under her chest as she surreptitiously crept out of the place without calling in the powder room to make herself more comfortable. She had to find another diner and use their facilities. She had three more gifts to buy then would head for home.

Vincent paced up and down near Father. He was angry because Catherine had gone without taking someone with her as he had wanted her to. The note she had left him pinned to their bed head was simple enough. It read; ***'Gone shopping for gifts. Don't worry about me. Be back in a couple of hours. Didn't want anyone to know what I'm getting. All my love, Catherine.'***

"Supposing she faints again, Father, or the baby decides to arrive while she's Above!" Vincent agonized, his hand bunched together, nails digging into his palms, bringing rivulets of blood to the surface. "She's alone out there with no one to watch her."

"Do you feel she's in danger now, or in distress, Vincent?" Father watched his son's concerned face. The utter helplessness and anxiety were openly written across his features.

"She feels happy, but a moment ago, she had been experiencing some inner discomfort, some alarm in herself I can't account for."

"Well then, she appears to have weathered her afternoon's shopping fairly well." He reached out a hand and placed it on Vincent's. "Try not to worry. Catherine wouldn't have gone Above if she hadn't felt confident about herself."

"I have a strong feeling that our baby will arrive before its time, Father." He shook his head. "And every moment she spends out of my sight and care worries me. How can I go to her in the daylight without revealing myself?"

"That would be inadvisable for you, Vincent." Father gazed at the unhappiness in his son's eyes. "I will have a little chat with Catherine when we are together again."

"Thank you." Suddenly, he smiled slightly, his face lit up. "She is on her way down now."

Father grinned to himself as he watched Vincent spring into action, turning to set off at a run towards the basement entry. *'What a unique bond those two have. Incredible.'*

The lightness of his heart was tempered with his anger because she had caused him some worry

and exposed herself to unforeseen circumstances.

Stepping into the brick-built wall entry to the tunnels, Catherine carried three large bags filled with an assortment of parcels. The happy sparkle in her eyes and the look of love on her face when she saw Vincent waiting for her, made her drop the bags to the floor and fling her arms around him, holding him tight in her joy to be home with him.

Oh, I'm glad to be back again, Vincent," she said, her arms sliding up and around his neck.

He felt his anger melting at the closeness. Her lips were only inches away. "Did you get everything you need, Catherine?" he managed to ask her, keeping himself under control quite admirably. "Please don't leave on your own again. Anything could have happened."

"I told you in my letter that I didn't want anyone." She smiled. "I just can't concentrate if there's anyone with me on such a delicate mission as Christmas shopping."

"I've been out of my mind with worry at what was happening Above with you." His eyes were on her flushed cheeks and compelling lips. "You're so near your time, Catherine. I don't need to spell out what could happen when you're not here with us."

"But it's not due till February, Vincent, and it's not Christmas until next week." She protested at the cotton wool treatment. She guessed he was overanxious because the child is partly his and he wanted everything to so smoothly for her. "There are two whole months ahead yet to wait."

Looking down at her, that surge of knowing he was right, overwhelmed him, yet he knew he couldn't hold against her will. He was also afraid for the coming boy. If the child was born too soon, would it survive without proper hospital care - the kind of intensive care that Father and even Peter Alcott couldn't give the baby here? He sighed heavily as he stared into her green eyes, eyes full of happy anticipation of the important even to come for them.

"Look, Vincent, I'm feeling fine, so there's no need for you to worry so much." She tenderly kissed his mouth in a butterfly brush of her lips. "Let's enjoy our first Christmas we have had really together, shall we? We have little time to ourselves before junior Wells arrives."

Her lips touched his gently and softly, but as Vincent's last resistance melted away under the warmth of her kiss, he responded with the fire she provoked within him and for a long moment, time seemed to stand still as they stood and enjoyed the sweetness of contact in the shadow of the basement walls, their contented sighs echoing around the empty place.

"There are such times when I wish that Winslow wasn't so far advanced with you, Catherine." He whispered, his lips hovering tantalizingly close.

"Yes, I know it is hard for me not to refuse you, sweetheart," she said, her eyes glinting in the half light. "But we have to be careful. Both Father and Peter and the clinic say it is unwise at this late stage. We'll just have to be patient. It won't be long now."

"More than you realize," Vincent whispered, before his lips descended on hers again.

Suddenly, she broke apart from him, laughing a little, placing a finger on his mouth. "I think we'd better move along from here, Vincent. I'm finding it hard to keep my control."

He nodded his agreement and stepped away. She picked up the three bags and he took them from her, then with his free arm, he draped it around her shoulders as they set off towards their chamber and some dinner.

On the way, she told him she had seen Joe in a diner and of her deliberate avoidance of him.

For some months now, she had been foisting him off whenever he tried to make a date to meet the guy in her life, but she knew she couldn't keep up the excuses forever. When she returned to work after the baby was born, with Mary to take care of him in her absence, she knew that Joe would still

be offering invitations for dinner for her and Vincent.

"I'm almost dreading going back," Catherine confessed and sighed. "You know, I would love to show you off, but Joe is so quizzical, he wouldn't rest until he's turned you over and raked all the info on you. How can we risk it? I can't keep telling him you're away on business. I'm running short of excuses."

"Yes, we're going to have to meet him halfway, Catherine," Vincent said slowly, deep in thought. "I can't put the lives of Father and all who live here in danger, so he can't be allowed to visit Below. Neither can we accept invitations out to dinner. The meeting must be in your apartment."

"'Our' apartment, Vincent," she gently corrected him. "It's as much yours as it is mine. That is where we made love for the first time. It's a special place to me and I hope to you. I'll make dinner and we'll have a great evening, but I must insist he doesn't bring one of his lady friends to make a foursome."

"It would present a difficulty, but we must arrange together what we intend to tell him in the manner of personal information. We have time to think about it and make it solid." Vincent looked rather anxious. He wasn't looking forward to the delicate confrontation, but he hoped Joe Maxwell was someone he could trust to keep all he would learn to himself.

"Do you have to go Above again?" Vincent asked, then strange feeling filling him.

"I have to go once a week to the clinic for a medical checkup until the baby's born, but I will take one of the older girls with me next time, sweetheart."

"You worry me so, Catherine," he told her, looking at her profile. Her cheeks were a trifle plumper and her bosom pushed against the warm coat she wore. The loose clothes hardly covered her extended shape.

He watched her stowing the parcels into the bottom of their wardrobe and felt her wince as a quick pain stabbed through her. The pain took him by surprise, but it quickly passed.

"Is it the baby, Catherine? Shall I get Father?" He looked so anxious, she smiled at him.

She straightened and shook her head. "No, it's just a bit of backache, now that the baby is so low. It'll pass."

"As long as you're sure." Vincent picked her up and tenderly deposited her on the bed. Her weight had increased somewhat from their earlier times. His little son was in there, he acknowledged. He smiled inwardly, thinking of the nights when he held her against him, his hands resting on the mound of flesh that covered the miracle of life steadily growing to completeness, feeling the movements of the tiny shape as it embarked on its daily exercise. Always overawed by what he was helping to create, he could never speak of his feelings during those special moments.

Catherine cherished his touch, her fingers enfolding and caressing his in the darkness of their chamber. It was the best part of the day as far as she was concerned, and she looked forward to being able to please Vincent as she had before the baby had begun to make its presence felt and seen by her enlarged figure. Vincent's passion had to be channelled into a more tender and careful administration, anxious that nothing should hurt her and endanger her condition. He had been patient before the meeting of their bodies in love, now he had to restrain himself even further, having tasted the intimacy with the woman he loved beyond life.

The festive excitement of Christmas came and went all so quickly - too quickly for some. Catherine couldn't remember one she had enjoyed more, but then she didn't have Vincent to love her and this time, they celebrated it as husband and wife. Last year, she had not known the utter closeness of Vincent's passion, and intimacy had been a long hoped for dream which had seemed destined to

be forever platonic, a condition that had been frustrated and caused great anguish many times when they met and were alone.

Yes, this particular Christmas had been so special because of the extraordinary bond of love they shared and the near arrival of their son to make their union complete. There were the gifts they had exchanged on Christmas morning, the party in the afternoon and the story telling by Father and some of the older members. Then in the evening, those who owned musical instruments gave a concert, playing cards so that everyone could sing along to them.

She had stood by Vincent's side, holding his hand, listening to the beautiful strains of the violins, filling her whole being, aching with love for the man who had his arm protectively around her shoulders. For a long moment, she couldn't sing as the emotion seemed to choke her. She looked up at Vincent's face and noting her movement, he turned his head and their eyes met for what appeared to be a long, timeless moment. A slow smile tugged at his mouth, as he acknowledged the message of love and gave his in return. Her grip tightened on his hand and a flush filled her skin.

"I love you so much, Vincent," she whispered, her eyes still locked with his. "Perhaps you'll never know how much."

"I know, Catherine," he murmured, bending his head a little so she could hear him above the music. "I can feel it. You don't even have to tell me, but it's wonderful to hear."

"I wish we could...." She smiled and her eyes sparkled and fired. "I do miss you that way."

He nodded and scanned her face, seeing the inviting lips, the smooth creamy skin and the curtain of golden-brown hair, now longer and reaching to her chest. He marvelled. "It's been very difficult for me, for us, to be so near and yet, have to stay so cool."

"I'm sorry it has to be like this, Vincent, but it won't be forever." She squeezed his hand again. "I'm sure things will work out fine. We must be patient a little while longer."

Now that Christmas was finally over and the New Year had been let into the chambers by the dark-haired members, all they had to do now was await the time when junior Wells was to make his wailing entrance into this close-knit community.

It was the second week in January when Catherine had to visit the clinic for a late pregnancy checkup to see that everything was in order. Catherine was hoping for some advice her swollen ankles and knees that had occurred over the past week or two. They didn't worry her, but she thought she had better have them treated while she was there. She had a rather heavy feel to her head as though she couldn't shake off a muzzy headache.

Vincent kissed her before she picked up her personal bag and car keys, then kissing him, she left the chamber and went in search of Rose, one of the older girls who was to provide company for her for the afternoon spent in the clinic. She also hoped to visit the stores on their way home.

At the clinic, she was weighed and scanned then had her blood pressure taken as usual. However, there was some anxiety over the high level, particularly after she had told them about her swollen ankles and knees and complained about the long-standing headache. They told her to wait for the doctor and so she and Rose sat in the waiting room, wondering what kind of medication she would be given.

Half an hour later, the doctor arrived to examine Catherine and he also tested her blood pressure, his lips in a thin line as he checked the result. He tested her heartbeat then stood and looked down at her. She found her palms were sweating profusely and wiped them on her hospital smock.

"I guess we'd better have you in now er.... Mrs. Wells, is it?"

She nodded, the blood draining away from her face, her mouth dropping open.

"Your pressure is way above normal, and I don't believe we can bring it down to a more satisfactory level, so for the safety of your child and yourself, we'll induce the birth. Is there anyone you have to call? Your husband maybe?"

In a voice unlike her own, she answered him, running her tongue over dry lips. "M.... my husband isn't able to come. He.... he's away." Somehow tears were too close. *'Oh, Vincent, now you'll never see him born.'* Her anguished thoughts saddened her immensely. Silently, she mourned for him.

"Have you no family you can notify as to where you're going to be for the next few days?" Dr. Perlman surveyed the pale but attractive face of the young woman.

"My family is difficult to reach," she told him. "But I came here with a neighbour's daughter. She's in the waiting room right now. I'll send her home for my things."

"Do that, Mrs. Wells," the doctor agreed and turned away. "I'll have a room prepared and we'll induce it tomorrow morning. On your file here, it reveals that you wanted a home delivery with Dr. Alcott. I'll notify him for you."

"He's away on a fishing trip with friends until tomorrow afternoon, doctor," Catherine informed him and saw his eyebrows jerk up in quizzical surprise.

"You seem to have close links with him," Dr. Perlman remarked, half-smiling. "How come you know his whereabouts as a patient?"

"He was a friend of my father's, so he's known to me since I was born. He keeps in touch with us." Catherine was fascinated by the doctor's eyes. They were so like Vincent's in colour, but his hair was a pale brown and tightly curled and his face was thin. The rimless spectacles enlarged the blueness. There was a suggestion of a moustache above thin lips and under a slender sharp pointed nose. Vincent would tower above his five-foot-ten height, but there was something about him that reminded her of her husband, but she couldn't think what it was just now. Maybe it was just the eyes, she inflected, that reminded her of the man she loved so much, waiting anxiously for her return.

"We'll try his number tomorrow evening then, unless your neighbour is willing to call for you. You'll need some personal effects too. Make a list."

He handed her a sheet of the special clinic note paper and a pen. She sat down at the small table and tried to think what she would need to wear and use for her confinement. After a few minutes, she completed it and went to give it to Rose to take home. The girl was concerned and a little upset that Catherine wasn't going back with her, but she promised to give the note to Vincent and Father as soon as she could. Catherine hugged her, then let her go, wishing she could be with her.

Vincent was growing increasingly restless and anxious. He thought that more than enough time had elapsed since Catherine had set off for the clinic with Rose. He paced the chamber and he had felt the force of his wife's sorrow and disappointment when she had learned that she would have to have the child induced before the high blood pressure became a danger to her health.

He had felt her emotions but did not know why she was feeling that way. He wished they would hurry back to reassure him and know she was safely home once more. It was now nearly six o'clock. They had been gone nearly five hours.

Father tried to pacify him, but it was no use. He could not settle and went to the bridge to be alone for a while. While he was there, Rose arrived, having entered one of the other distant tunnels. She hurried up to Father and burst into tears.

"Fetch Vincent, Jamie," he directed another young woman who was anxious for news of Catherine.

"He's on the bridge, but take care."

She ran off and Father sought to comfort the sobbing Rose. She thrust the list at him. "Sh.... she.... she w.... wants these t.... taken t.... to her."

"Come on now." Father draped an arm around her shaking shoulders. "Tell us what has happened. Calm yourself."

In between fresh sobs, the girl told him that Catherine had to stay at the clinic to have her baby tomorrow. She hoped Vincent wouldn't be too disappointed.

Vincent arrived and Father gave him the news. At least it explained why she had felt so acutely, and he had experienced her emotions.

"When is Peter returning, Father?" He wanted to go to her but knew he couldn't.

"Tomorrow afternoon, I believe. We'll prepare a letter and have one of the Helpers deliver it. He is the most likely one to take her effects and find out what is happening to her. We must be patient now, Vincent. She is in good hands there."

Vincent shrugged and went to their chamber. He found Catherine's suitcase and with Jamie's help, packed a few necessities including a notepad and pen.

Vincent could not eat anything. He was unable to sit down, and he refused a game of chess with Father. All his thoughts and feelings were with his beloved Catherine.

Father wrote the brief letter to Peter Alcott and one of the boys slipped Above and gave it to one of the Helpers. The woman promised to deliver it to the doctor's consulting rooms as soon as she had finished work that day.

Vincent was once again patrolling the tunnels deep in thought, propelling himself to Catherine's side to give her comfort and his love.

Catherine sat by her bed writing a letter to him, all her heart and love in the words, but she didn't know how he was going to receive it unless Rose returned with the effects she had listed for her. Would she return tonight? All she had with her was her makeup bag and one or two extras, but no soap, towel and other little items. If the girl didn't come, she would have to use the clinic's medicated soap and their utility towels.

When her watch showed nearly ten o'clock, she knew that Rose was not coming today. She felt an overwhelming longing for Vincent and the comfort of his arms around her. Looking up from the morning paper she was trying in vain to read, to take her mind off her situation, she gasped in surprised to see the tall, broad figure of Vincent by her bed. The look on his face told her he was suffering from their separation as much as she was. Slowly, she began to awkwardly pull herself from the chair and stood up to move towards him, but as she did so, he vanished from her astonished gaze. Tears of disappointment seeped from under her tired lids, and she sank slowly onto the plain yellow counterpane.

"Time you were in bed, Mrs. Wells." A nurse had entered and marched up to the bed. "We are going to give you an early inducement so there won't be any breakfast. I want to see you under the covers the next time I come around to test your pressure." She passed her a glass. "Fill this with your water before you get into bed."

The young woman left her alone and she quickly washed and performed her last minute toilet before getting into the narrow single bed with cotton sheets that made her shiver at first. The hospital cotton nightgown was simple and basic in design. The vision of Vincent she had seen warmed and reassured her, knowing he was spiritually near her. After the nurse had been to take her blood pressure, she left her alone, carrying the specimen glass to the lab to test.

Catherine tried to settle under the covers, but sleep was hard to come by for a while.

Dr. Perlman stood by her bed surrounded by various members of staff. "I hope you're well rested, Mrs. Wells." He took her wrist and looked at his watch. "An early start in these cases are desirable. How do you feel today?"

"Fine, just fine, but real nervous." Catherine told him, her heart beating furiously fast. Her stomach had the feeling of erratically fluttering butterflies.

"It's understandable. You'll soon be holding your squealing little bundle in your arms."

It wasn't long before the inducement was underway and seen the palms began in earnest, leaving her gasping at each contraction. She had been moved to the delivery ward adjacent to the theatre, who were on constant standby for any complications occurring.

After two hours of pain, the doctor examined her afresh then spoke to the sister. "The uterus isn't opening sufficiently to allow the head through. We'll make it a theatre delivery. Better prepare her for it, sister."

She was given the pre-op needle to relax her, then she was pushed into the theatre for the caesarian she was to have now. Before she lost consciousness, her last thought was of Vincent.

The pains sweeping through Vincent at intervals told him that their child was on its way into the world. He sat on the side of the bed and clasped his hands together tightly, so tightly, his claw-like nails dug into his palms fetching bright red blood which he ignored. His Catherine was suffering, and so he must too.

Father had brought him some breakfast, but it lay untouched on the table. The mug of tea, hot no longer, sat by the plate of cold buttered toast.

The regular bouts of pain seemed to go on unendingly, then suddenly a swirling blackness swept through his vision, and he sank back onto the blankets unconscious, his body half across the bed and just missing the pillows.

Catherine held out her arms to welcome the little wrapped bundle from the nurse as she bent over the bed.

"You have a very unusual looking baby there, Mrs. Wells. He sure looks cute." The girl smiled and stroked the little infant's head. "He just reminds me of our cat, Chester. Real sweet."

Catherine smiled and the nurse left her alone. Pulling the covers away from the tiny face, her stomach dropped a mile or more as she recognized Vincent's features had come out strongly in her son. The slanted brows were deeper in colour, the nose was rather chunky with a furriness she could feel by running her finger down. The top lip was properly formed but the indentation was deep. To make matters worse, several whiskers stood out on either side of his cheeks.

Pulling the wrap away from his head, the hair was thick and a deep reddish ginger like a halo, only emphasizing his leonine features. A sense of shock and horror filled her. She did not want this baby at all. How could she show him to Vincent when she had reassured him that things would work out fine? Vincent would not only be upset, but he would never allow himself to make love to her again. It could be the end of their relationship forever. The tears began to fall unchecked down her cheeks and dropped onto the baby's lips. It felt the wetness and began to suck, then cry when the taste did not meet with his approval. It did not sound like a normal child after birth, but a lion cub crying for its feed. Revolted, she sat up and placed him in the hospital cot. She would ask the nurse to take it

away. The grief and shock filled her, and she buried her face in the pillow and cried for what might have been....

Vincent regained consciousness with tears on his cheeks, having lived through the torment of Catherine. He had felt her total rejection of the child and was sorely puzzled and concerned. She had told him during her growing months that they would love and take care of the child if her prediction of the baby did not work out. Leaving the sanctity of his chamber, he sought Father out in his own chamber and poured out his fears. The older man listened gravely and noticed the dried blood stains on his pants. When Vincent lifted a hand up, Father could see angry red nail marks still evident from the time the claw-like nails had dug in during his dream.

"Her distress was too real to be imagined, Father," Vincent pointed out. "I felt the depth of her unhappiness right here." He touched his heart. "How I wish I could go to her like a normal husband. It cuts me very deeply to have to stand back like this. She needs me right now."

"Look, Vincent. You can't be sure what has happened yet. Let's wait until Peter had been to see her. We shall know the truth before tonight."

Vincent stood up. "I must prepare myself for the worst and, whatever happens, she must not go through this again. I'll see to it."

"What will you do, Vincent?" Father's brow was deeply creased in obvious worry over his son's pain. "Don't be hasty. You two have a kind of love the world would be envious of. It's unique so don't throw it away now. You'll destroy not only yourself, but Catherine too. If you don't have any more children, you have each other and that's worth all the sacrifice, isn't it? Just remember what she did to allow yourselves to become lovers in the real sense. True, the operation didn't work the first time, but it can be done again and next time, I am sure it will be successful." He smiled and touched Vincent's arm. "There are other methods, but you must talk them over with Catherine yourself, when she comes home with the baby, your son."

Catherine opened her eyes wider, but they still felt heavy with the drug. She guessed she was in the recovery room near the theatre. She felt her hands wander down to the bottom of her stomach and her fingers touched the padding over the incision. She looked around the room for the baby and couldn't see him. Over by the sluice sink, she saw three young nurses and she caught snatches from their soft murmured conversation.

"He's sure got the most adorable dinky face I've ever seen."

"Yeah, just a ball of ginger fur. Wish he was mine, Sal."

"Does she know yet? Have you told her about him?"

"Supposing she doesn't want it? Can I have it?"

"Will you let me hold him? He's real cute."

"Well, he might scratch you. Seen his claws?"

"How could anyone not want him? He's beautiful!"

"When are you going to break it to her? It can't stay here."

Catherine heard all this with mounting horror and yet she wanted him, whatever little Winslow looked like to the world. He belonged with Vincent and herself in their world Below. The maternal link had been forged and she wanted to see him now. Her mouth felt dry and unpleasant after the anesthetic and her voice rasped in her throat.

"Nurse, where's my baby? Is he okay?"

The nurses turned and one came over while the others left the room.

"How're you feeling now?" She took Catherine's wrist and timed her pulse beat with her fob watch.

"Tired? You must rest and we'll take you to see your baby later. He's in the tent at the moment."

"Tent?" Catherine queried. She tried to keep her eyes open, but the drug hadn't quite worn off. The last few words from the nurse was almost lost to her.

"The incubator, but he's doing fine. Don't worry...."

The next time she became fully conscious, she was back in her room in her own bed. It was late afternoon and she felt so thirsty. She pressed the bell and a nurse glided in with a reassuring smile.

"What's happened to my baby, nurse?" Catherine pointed to the water jug and glass.

"Er, he's doing fine but he'll have to stay in the tent until he's reached his birth weight. He's so tiny. Just like a kitten." The girl poured a drink for her.

"Couldn't you just bring him in here for one minute to let me see him?" Catherine pleaded, still feeling sleepy. She sipped the cool water gratefully.

"Oh sorry, I can't, Mrs. Wells. He's got a breathing tube in him."

"Breathing tube? Why? Is anything wrong?" Her heart began to pound unevenly.

The nurse smiled at her. "No, it's usually routine when a baby is premature and yours is five weeks early. Dr. Perlman will be coming in to see you soon, so don't go away."

"When will I get to see him, nurse?" She gave a laugh. "Until I've seen him, I can hardly believe it's happened. Do you read me?"

"Yes, you want the evidence right in front of you." The nurse looked at her. "After the doctor's been, I'll see if I can fix something for you."

"Fine, real fine. Thanks." With that, Catherine had to be patient.

Her one waking thought had been of Vincent and what he must be feeling. Now she turned on her side very gingerly and dozed off for a while.

When a hand touched her shoulder, she looked up to see Dr. Perlman by the bed. He talked to her and examined the stitches across the incision. He tested her blood pressure and was satisfied it had gone down considerably. Those blue eyes of his made her long to see Vincent so much, it was like a pain through her.

"You've got a visitor waiting to see you," he told her, smiling. "He's brought you some much needed items and something else, but I won't spoil your surprise." When he had gone on his rounds, the very welcome figure of Peter entered her room.

"How's my favorite girl?" he asked, coming to sit on the edge of the bed. He gave her a bunch of assorted flowers, then a single red rose from Vincent. There was a large congratulatory card signed by all from Below and one from the Helpers who had found out about the early arrival. She thanked him and gently kissed his cheek.

"Rather tired and disappointed. I haven't seen the baby yet and I'm getting impatient." She touched the rose to her lips. "How is Vincent? It feels like a million years since I last saw him."

"He's quite well, but anxious for you, Cathy. This morning he passed out after the pains he was having in conjunction with yours, stopped." Peter's gaze examined her face. He could sense that her unhappiness was not only because she hadn't seen her son.

She told him about the ghastly dream whilst under the anesthetic and he nodded.

"Many people have strange dreams during an operation. It's not uncommon for someone to leave their body and float upwards to see the team working on their body below."

"Ah yes, astral projection." Catherine looked thoughtful.

"You know about that experience?" Peter's eyebrows raised slightly.

"I've read about it." She told him about the brief appearance of Vincent in this room. "He seemed so real. I actually thought he'd come to visit me and had got in somehow."

"I wouldn't put it past him, Cathy. He's missing you more by the hours. Don't rule it out." He stood up and fixed the flowers he had brought her in the empty glass vase. They looked fresh and lovely and colourful. He held his hand out for the single rose, but she wouldn't let him have it. She held it caressingly between her fingers, tenderly stroking the soft, fragrant petals. It was a deep rich red colour and he knew she would know it was a part of him with her.

"I'll just go and see your brave little arrival and let you know how he is before I go."

"Oh, would you, Peter. I'll wait till you return, then I'll get some sleep. I feel a little rough right now."

He returned ten minutes later to find that sleep had overcome her curiosity and the rose had slid down to nestle against her bosom. Vincent had removed the thorns so there was no danger of being injured by them. He wanted to put the rose in with the other flowers but knew that she would not approve, so he left it where it was, nestling against her heart.

Before he departed, he scribbled a brief note and left it near her pillow. It read; *'Baby doing well. Have a good night's rest then you'll meet him. Regards, Peter.'*

After breakfast, she was transported in a wheelchair to the intensive care unit where Winslow lay on his side in the glass tent, a thin tube up his nose, which was rather distorted at the moment. He wore some woolly clothes and a bonnet to keep him warm and he looked like a tiny doll on exhibition. Catherine's heart filled with love for him, and she longed to touch him.

"In a day or two you'll be able to hold him for a few minutes, but for now, you can reach in and hold his hand." The nurse lifted the side of the tent up and Catherine leaned forward to gently touch his tiny fingers. She wanted to cry and fought for control at the sudden rush of emotion. It was almost impossible to believe that the fragile little figure in there belonged to her and Vincent. His eyes were closed, and he would have looked perfect but for the indentation above his mouth. The short nose was rather chubby, but fortunately the cat's tip was missing, which relieved her.

For several minutes she sat in her chair gazing at him, unable to take her eyes away before she was wheeled back to her room. She had plenty of time to think and she wrote Vincent a letter for when Peter arrived to visit her that night.

Later in the day, she was allowed to get out of bed and sit in her chair until full strength returned. Her appetite was poor, and the nurse tutted at the almost untouched plate. She was fretting for Vincent and wanted to see him so much, the ache wouldn't go away.

She paid another visit to the glass tent before slipping into bed for the night. The incubator made its regular clicks as she watched him breathe, his little stomach moving up and down in rhythm. *'What a darling he is,'* she thought. *'I can't wait to hold him. If only Vincent could see him here.'* She sighed and turned away sadly.

"Ready to go back, Mrs. Wells?"

She nodded, tears thick in her throat, the ache heavy in her chest.

She undressed and washed then sat on the side of the bed fingering the velvety rose, closing her eyes as she thought of Vincent at home, unable to take part in this daily routine with her like any other husband visiting.

'He misses so much that others take for granted,' she told herself. Even when she was able to take Winslow home, he would not be able to collect him with her, but wait anxiously and eagerly Below by the basement entrance.

Peter had already been and gone home, bringing a letter from Father and another rose from Vincent. He had looked in on her son still sleeping in the care unit next door.

"Catherine!" A soft, husky voice broke in on her reveries. "Catherine, it's me. Don't be afraid. I had to come. It's been such agony Below, wondering how you were, not feeling you next to me in the night."

She stood up weakly, her heart flooding with such an overwhelming emotion, she couldn't speak but held out her arms, her fingers still holding the rose.

Swiftly but quietly, he enveloped her in his arms, and she collapsed against him, loving the gentle strength of his embrace she had missed so much. His cheek rubbed her hair and for a long moment she closed her eyes in pure bliss at being together.

"Oh, Vincent. I'm so glad you've come tonight. I've missed you so much."

"I know. I've felt your loneliness and ache myself. We share the same feelings. I had to risk it. How is Winslow? Peter tells us he is still under care. Can I see him?"

Catherine moved apart from him to look up into his face - the face she loved. "He's in the unit next door but it's much too risky. There are nurses on duty all the time and there are five babies in there. Three have breathing tubes in them."

"Oh Catherine, this isn't how I had hoped it would be for us and our baby." He sighed heavily. "I wanted to be near you when the time came, but I somehow knew that the boy would come before his time."

She touched a finger to his lips, and he kissed it, then he bent his head and his mouth met hers in a long, searching kiss which seemed to weaken her legs almost to jelly.

"That was worth all the risk I took to enter this place," he whispered, his intense blue eyes holding hers. "How long will you be in here?"

"Just a few days, Vincent." She drew her fingers down the strong and bony contour of his face. "But our son will have to stay here longer until his weight is right."

Vincent groaned at the news. "Then I must contain my patience for some while then." He half smiled in that way she loved. "But it will be worth it to hold him in my arms for the first time."

"Yes, of course it will." Catherine smiled. "I've only held his hand so far, but they will let me hold him for a few moments in a day or two."

"I shall feel your joy then, wherever I am." Vincent said, and kissed her lingeringly, then, when a sound of footsteps sounded on the polished parquet corridor, swiftly left through the window, taking cover in the trees and shrubbery until he reached safety. His mouth still tingled and burned from the sweet contact of their kisses, and he knew they must sustain him until he was able to see her again. He was grossly disappointed at being unable to see his little son, but he knew how difficult it would have been with the clinic staff everywhere and especially in the care unit.

The third day saw Catherine taking her first real steps around her room and she was assisted by a nurse to go to the unit to see her Winslow. Those few precious moments holding his tiny hand with matchstick-size fingers were very special.

She wrote in her notepad to Vincent and when Peter arrived, she passed on the note. Vincent didn't come that night and she was disappointed, yet understood.

Peter brought his instant camera on the fourth night and the nurse on duty took some pictures of Winslow after she had lifted up the side of the tent. She let him take the best one for Vincent. It would be a wonderful surprise and she knew he would treasure it.

Already, she had held the little helpless bundle in her arms that afternoon, and the emotions she had experienced when he had been gently lifted out of the unit and given to her were priceless. True, he had the tube still up his nostril but now, she knew how it really felt to be a mother. She wished Vincent could be there to share it with her, then remembered his words, that he would feel whatever she was feeling and knew he would too.

She sat in the chair gazing down at his small face, scrutinizing every little feature. His chubby nose, his clearly defined lips with only the tiniest indentations above, but fortunately there was no tell-tale cat's tip. The eyes when briefly opened, were blue, but then all Caucasian babies began life with blue eyes which changed in infancy to the permanent colouring. Under his bonnet, the hair roots began to show, and they looked rather coppery in the care unit lights. Very often a baby's hair colour changed too.

She pressed a soft kiss on his forehead and listened to the gurgle and wheeze, as he struggled to breathe. Reluctantly, she handed him back to the waiting nurse who laid him back in the steady warmth of the incubator. Soon, she would have to leave him behind when she returned home, until he reached his proper birth weight. She knew it would be hard when she had been so close to him, to know she was some miles in distance from the clinic, where he would be without her nearness. She would visit him every day to hold and feed him, but leaving him would be doubly painful each time she left him.

Catherine was right when she knew that Vincent would treasure the first picture of their special son. He kept it in one of his pockets and kept fetching it out to gaze at adoringly, hardly able to believe that he was partly responsible for this tiny little figure holding on to life. *'Incredible, miraculous, beautiful!'* were some of the words he had thought of as he surveyed him until the photograph began to appear a little ragged around the edges.

"You'll wear it away, Vincent," Father remarked, holding back a smile when he saw his son staring fixedly at the picture once again. "Why not get yourself an album, then you can put the wedding photographs in with it. I'm sure Catherine will have one somewhere." He peered over Vincent's shoulder. "He looks a fine boy. I never thought that one day I'd be a grandfather. Sadly, Margaret and I never had any children, but I do have the tunnel young ones to take care of and now yours, when he comes home."

"It was good of Peter to take the trouble and let us have some pictures of him. I'll exhibit them all in our chamber, not hide them away in a book." He glanced up.

"As you wish, Vincent. Ask Mouse, and he'll make you a display board, then you can add young Winslow's to your wedding pictures." He tapped his stick on the floor. "I'm quite looking forward to his arrival. We must have a welcome feast and then think about the naming of the child."

"A christening?" Vincent looked so happy, it made him feel good to see him like this. Never in his wildest dreams did he ever imagine that his adopted son would ever find someone who loved him so devotedly, and whole-heartedly as Catherine, and now he was a father. They would celebrate when they brought the boy home Below.

"Well, not so much as a christening, but more a blessing. Children are born free of sin in my belief, so we shall name him and have him blessed." He grinned and sat down to rest his bad leg. "No

child could have any more loving parents and friends."

Vincent nodded, leaning back in his chair to daydream of the future.

Catherine knew it would be painful to leave the clinic without her baby in her arms. All she carried was her small suitcase and holdall. Her car was still in the clinic's parking lot and when she reached it and dumped her belongings onto the back seat, she looked back at the high, wide windows of the place she had been in for the past week and burst into tears, hugging the steering wheel. It had been seeing the other couples walking together with a precious bundle in their arms that had really upset her. She must get home now to Vincent. She had been parted from him long enough, except for those three late night visits to her room, but he hadn't seen his son yet - only a photograph had been provided to sustain him.

Her apartment block was only a few miles away and she tried to clear her mind to concentrate on the driving, carefully negotiating the lunchtime traffic downtown.

Vincent knew when she would be leaving and was waiting for her behind the basement wall once she had packed the car and rode up to her rooms to leave the keys, then briefly tidy the place.

As soon as she stepped into the shadows, she dropped her bags and flung herself into the welcoming arms of Vincent, who quickly gathered her to him, holding her tightly. He rubbed his cheek against her hair and kissed her temple, sending little shivers through her.

For a long moment they didn't speak, but revelled in the closeness of each other. He reached up a hand and slid it through her silky strands, caressing them between his fingers. Leaning back a little to look up into that wonderful and beloved face, she smiled the kind of smile that never failed to send a great warmth of love rushing through him, weakening his legs and sending his heart on a mad chase around his chest. He loosened his hold on her, but their eyes remained magically locked, speaking the silent language of love. Cupping his face with her fingers, she touched his mouth in a butterfly kiss, then her lips fluttered to every portion of his face before winging back to his mouth in a full kiss that left him in no doubt how much she had missed him. His response was equally filled with a passion borne of the time spent apart.

"It's so great to be home again, Vincent," she whispered, her arms encircling his neck.

"It's good to have you here with me, Catherine, even though our son isn't with you. When shall he be allowed to come home to us?"

"Oh, just over a month." She sighed and a cloud passed over her thoughts. "He's a little underweight at the moment, but they say he's doing fine. We'll just have to be patient a little longer on both counts."

"What do you mean?" Vincent looked puzzled, the crease between his eyes deepening suddenly. "Is anything wrong I should know about?"

"Ah, no!" She smiled then lowered her eyes. "We won't be able to have any early nights for just a short time. Once I've had a final checkup, we'll really celebrate when I bring Winslow home. So, I can't really love you until then, Vincent."

"I have waited for you all my life, Catherine, a little longer must be borne, as long as you are well and happy. I'll contain myself until that special day."

"I guess you'll need your running shoes again." She laughed, yet her eyes were sad and regretful. "But we'll make a day of it when I bring Winslow home for you."

"I'll be here waiting," Vincent promised, half smiling at the mere thought about it.

"I have to go every day to the clinic to feed and bath him until the time comes when they discharge

him. I do wish you could come with me, but we know it's impossible."

She reached up and kissed him gently, feeling his sadness because he could not take part in the daily routine of their child. "I love him, Vincent, but you'll always be my number one. Always remember that!" Her eyes suddenly glowed. "I have an idea, let's stay in my apartment overnight the day before I bring Winslow, and we'll have the whole day together.... just us three. What do you say?"

"Catherine, that is a truly great possibility. It will be good to have a day to ourselves before joining the others. A very special time. Almost like a brief honeymoon. Will we....?"

"Will I be fine by then?" She grinned widely at him, a sparkle in her eyes. "I should think so. Well, that's settled then. All we have to do now is to pass the time and make it go more quickly. Are there any more tunnel projects on hand, or are you still on the same one?"

He smiled and slowly they began to walk towards the main habitation where Father and the others were looking forward to welcoming her return.

After the initial goodwill messages and kisses from Father and Mary, who said she was looking forward to keeping an eye on the baby whenever they wanted a change, they had dinner, and they spent the evening both curled up on the couch reading out of one of his poetry books. He loved to hear her read. She had such a soft and easy voice to listen to, just as she loved his husky, gravel tones. With one arm around her and her head resting against his shoulder and holding his free hand, it was like heaven, but she wished Winslow had been with them to complete the picture. It had hurt her to have to leave him there in the day care unit, while he gained the weight he needed and his lungs to mature.

Vincent completed the day's entry in his journal and closed the cover. He felt happy and complete as he did whenever Catherine was around him. No other man could ever be as fortunate and happy as he was, he knew. What he felt for her was far and above any ordinary feelings. He guessed it was based on the fact of what he was, stemming from his animal ancestry. The strong protective love for a mate.... his mate. This was coupled with the normal man's intelligence and desires.

Catherine watched him as he wrote, not wanting to interrupt his flow of thought then, as he stowed the journal in the drawer of his desk, she came up behind him. She was wearing a pair of warm, patterned pajamas under her woolen robe, as it was rather cool Below in the middle of January.

Casually, she pushed Vincent's long hair to one side and kissed the warm skin under his ear lobe, then encircled his shoulders with her arms, hugging him to her. She pressed her cheek to his, closing her eyes in bliss at the feel of his face in hers.

"You must tell me what you've been doing with yourself for the past week, sweetheart."

"Apart from waiting for you?" He sighed deeply. Catherine's lips moving against his cheek, sent little tingles of pleasure through him. "We have been trying to find another emergency entrance but there is a danger the roof could collapse if we dig."

"We don't want any casualties," she said, brushing his ear with gentle lips.

Did she know what she was doing to him with her love play, especially when he was forbidden to touch her for a while?

"Catherine!" He moved and stood up, taking her hands in his. "Do you think I ought to sleep elsewhere until we can love again? You're making it hard for me to contain myself."

"Oh, I'm real sorry, Vincent." She turned away from him. "I didn't realize.... We'd better go to bed now and talk about this tomorrow." She left him to go to the washroom. When she returned, she slipped into bed and waited for Vincent to join her.

For a while, she lay there staring up into the dimly lit chamber, wondering why he was taking so long to appear. After half an hour when her eyelids were beginning to close, he arrived, carrying a large thick blanket and, easing himself onto the surface of the bed, he wrapped the thick woolly blanket around himself. He lay next to her, gazing at the drooping lids and easy breathing. He ascertained she was almost asleep and was thankful for it. He adored her kisses and caresses far too much for his peace of mind and body. It was going to be hard to keep some control of the passion that she fired whenever they began to touch and caress, but he didn't like the idea of having to sleep elsewhere until the time came when she was able to welcome him, in the proper way.

Suddenly, she awoke and saw him watching her. She blushed a little, knowing his thoughts. "It's hard for me too, Vincent," she whispered. "Do you know you appeared in my room at the clinic? I got out of my chair to go to you, then you just vanished. How did you do it?"

"My thoughts and desire to be with you was so strong, I truly saw you for one moment. You looked.... startled."

"I really missed you," she told him, nestling up closer to him until her head came up against his chest. He wrapped an arm around her, and they lay together, yet separated by the bedding. His breath on her face was warm and it was wonderful to be enclosed in his arms once again. She was home where she belonged. His mouth touched her forehead, and he sighed deeply in satisfied contentment.

"There are times when I'm so afraid, Catherine," he confessed, his lips brushing her brow as he spoke, and she heard the fear in his words.

"Why do you say that, sweetheart?" She took his hands in hers and played with his fingers. "You know you'll always have me."

"I don't mean your love," he said, trying to explain. "Moments when everything feels so perfect. I'm afraid for us. Does it make sense to you, Catherine?"

"Yes, I guess so." She squeezed his hands. "You're thinking that the bubble will burst someday. It's very natural to think that, Vincent. All who love will, I'm sure."

"If I lost you...." He sighed deeply and she quickly glanced up to see a wetness on his cheeks. She moved and put her arms around him, holding his face to hers, kissing the tears away.

"I'll never leave you, you know that," she emphasized, gazing earnestly into his electric blue eyes.

"I meant your life." Vincent closed his eyes at the sheer horror of his thoughts. "I would want to follow you, but I know it's wrong."

"Yes, it would be very wrong and please, don't ever consider it. We all have to suffer sometimes in our lives by losing those we love above others. We just have to carry on and wait until it's our turn to join them. Come on now. Be happy again. We're together."

"Of course." He sighed and a half smile pulled at his mouth. "I am being selfish, and I am depressing you. This is no way to greet my wife on her first night back in our bed."

"I know how you feel, Vincent, and I share it. Try not to think about it too much and enjoy the time we have together and all our tomorrows."

She yawned and settled down again, closing her eyes, deeply relaxed now she was with the only man she could love. She smiled at her thoughts and soon drifted off to sleep, feeling the warmth of his arms around her.

Vincent gazed for some time at her sleeping face. She looked contented and satisfied. He was pleased and happy too, that she was back in his arms and in his world where she belonged. Soon they would be joined by their little son - a complete family. He closed his eyes at last and slept at peace with his life.

The following weeks were a trying time for both Catherine and Vincent. Happy to be with each other after their separation, the days seemed to crawl by as they waited for the magic moment when the doctor told her she could take Winslow home after her checkup. Every day Catherine had visited the hospital, making two visits, morning, and evening and soon, the tube had been taken out of Winslow's nose so that she could feed him herself. His nose was rather chubby and possibly a little wider than normal, but it didn't have the cat tip at the end of it. His eyes had a slight slant, and his hair was a nice deep chestnut colour with brows to match. Those deep blue eyes were certainly inherited from Vincent and she was pleased about that. The fingers on his hands were slender with narrow nails unlike the little squarish tiny ones that other babies have. However, they were not claws like a cat's and that was a blessing. The only other worry was the child's teeth. They would not know how these would grow until the proper time when teething began in a few months.

They counted the days on the calendar and excitement grew when the blessed day arrived. Winslow had gained his rightful birth weight from the small three and a half pounds he had been over a month ago. He was now a healthy six pounds, despite two setbacks.

Catherine had just placed him back in the cot when Dr. Perlman came in to see her. He looked at the baby's information file at the front of the cot and then at her hopeful face. He smiled, his blue eyes meeting hers, reminding her again of Vincent.

"Well, I guess you'll be taking him away from us tomorrow, Mrs. Wells. He's a fine healthy boy." He frowned. "The deepish indentation over his lip can be fixed later. We have done hare lips successfully in young babies and this is a similar case."

"Oh great, doctor, thanks." Her eyes lit up. "I'll come tomorrow morning to fetch him."

"Will your husband be with you this time?" the doctor asked her.

"A couple of days, I think now, and we'll be together again." Catherine told him, her heart thudded madly, and a thrill shot through her. "Vincent will be so pleased at the news."

"I don't seem to have a sample of the father's blood for the file, Mrs. Wells." Catherine's heart jumped at this statement. "If you could just send him in to let us take some when it's convenient."

She smiled and answered, her mind going round in circles; how was he going to get out of this predicament. Vincent had had his blood tested but the laboratory could not believe it had come from a man, sensing a mix up somewhere.

"I'll mention it to him when I see him, doctor," she told him, taking one last look at Winslow before leaving. She hoped Father would think of something.

The baby had already had a sample taken and no one had spoken of any abnormality to her. She was happy about that fact. For now, she couldn't wait to get home to tell Vincent the good news, but then she smiled to herself, knowing he would know all about it, having felt the reaction when Dr. Perlman had told her. Vincent always knew how she was feeling, as if they were as one person.

Nevertheless, she hastened back to their chamber to find he had taken out the mobile cot from the bottom of the large wardrobe. It had handles for carrying the infant around and a hood attached. It was white leather trimmed with blue.

She stood in the curtained doorway and watched him sorting the clothes and blankets the child

would need for it. He looked up the moment he sensed her presence.

"Oh, Catherine. Forgive me for not meeting you, but as soon as I felt your joy, I wanted to make ready for his homecoming." He came over and wrapped his arms around her. "This is a big day for both of us. One we have waited so long to happen."

She closed her eyes, feeling the thrill of his closeness and the happiness he felt now that another of his dreams were about to come true.

"I've got a problem, Vincent, and it concerns you," she said, as he stepped away.

"Please tell me, Catherine. I can feel it's a serious one."

She sat on the edge of the bed sorting the little garments she intended to take for Winslow. "They told me they wanted a sample of your blood as soon as possible, for their records, just in case."

"What did you tell them?" Vincent inclined his head, thinking about the last time he had given blood. "How could I possibly do that again when we know what they will say?"

"I said I would tell you when I saw you and that's all. I didn't make any promises."

"Father tells me it isn't a case that the father has the same blood as their child." His blue eyes were thoughtful. "But if we should give them a sample of say, Father's or someone else's blood here, would it solve our problem?"

"Vincent, that is a good idea, and they haven't said anything about Winslow's blood, so it must be normal. I'll ask what group it is, if we should need to know if there's any accidents in the future."

They went in search of Father who was searching through his library of books for a particular copy and told him of their dilemma.

"Ah, my dear Catherine, Vincent has told me of your news, and I must say I am truly delighted and happy knowing I'll be meeting my grandson after all our waiting. When do you fetch him - today?" The older man's face was all smiles as he faced them, clutching the book he had just found.

"Tomorrow morning, first thing, Father."

He frowned, rather puzzled. "Why not today? I thought you two were most anxious to have him home as soon as possible?"

"We have a plan, Father." Vincent explained to him that they were going to stay the night and all next day in the apartment before coming down here the following evening. They wanted to be alone to enjoy their baby for one day before the crowd of admirers descended on him.

"You understand why we're doing this?" Vincent tilted his head at the older man, who appeared slightly deflated at the plan.

"Yes, I can understand it and why not? He'll be here with us for all his young life, God willing. It will be good for you both to share this special time together."

Vincent then told him about the problem of giving blood for the clinic.

"We must consider this," Father said, coming slowly down the steps towards his chair. "Leave it with me and I'm sure we'll work something out to satisfy the clinic. I'll take the sample myself. Do you know the child's blood group, Catherine?"

"I'll ask when I go to get him, Father." Catherine beamed widely, thinking of that special moment. "Will it help you?"

"Undoubtedly, my dear." He tapped his stick on the floor. "Now leave me in peace while I mull it over in my mind."

Later that evening, Catherine left Vincent to return to the apartment, taking the mobile cot and Vincent climbed up the fire escape with the bag of accessories for the baby's needs.

"I'm so glad I didn't get rid of this bed, Vincent," she said, searching for her robe. "We must make the most of our last evening on our own, before we start to tread the carpet when he cries and keeps us awake. We can't expect Mary to look after him."

He half smiled watching her, as she put the cot on the settee. Her figure was now slender again and she felt glad to be able to wear her normal outfits. The loose smocks had been washed, folded, and put in a spare suitcase. She didn't want to see them for quite a while yet.

They had a romantic evening by the light of the many candles Catherine kept in stock. Dinner for two with soft music playing in the background on her CD player.... their favourite orchestral pieces she had listened to with him under the bandstand, away from the rest of the crowd Above.

The food she had stored ready for this occasion, was delicious and the fruit juices to go with it. They finished with coffee, and she was pleased that her taste for it had returned. Throughout her pregnancy, the thought of coffee had nauseated her. After the meal, they relaxed in front of the fire and watched television. Catherine sat in the circle of his arms, his cheek against her hair and they laughed together at the situation comedy; then watched a wildlife programme about the Kalahari Desert.

Later, she made a light supper and then before ending the evening, they stepped onto the balcony for a few moments together to gaze at the twinkling panorama of lights and down across the park opposite. It was like old times when he wouldn't go indoors. He pressed her to him when she shivered in the cold late February wind.

"Who would have thought we would be like this a year ago when you were afraid to come to my rooms, Vincent." Her soft voice broke into his reveries.

"Yes, we've come so far, and look what we have gained." He sighed in pleasure. "I would never have known such perfect bliss as well as the pain without you."

As he held her, he looked upwards to the night sky, but the stars were hidden behind layers of cloud that moved across the great expanse, hiding the half-moon from view most of the time.

"The times we have stood here together before I had to leave you, Catherine, my heart was often torn in two because I had to deny myself the pleasure of.... a kiss." He sighed deeply. "I was so afraid that the fire within me would rise up and conquer my control. Now....?" He held her apart from him to gaze deeply into her eyes and found the stars were there and not in the heavens. "We have loved in a way I never thought possible for me."

"Catherine...."

His head came down and blotted out the night sky as his lips very gently touched hers in such reverence, she felt like crying. She closed her eyes and let him lead the way, feeling the kiss go on and responding eagerly and completely, her arms around his neck, holding him to her, daring him to break away if he could. The cold winter wind swept across the park, but locked in the close embrace, neither lover felt it. The heat of their bodies combining, lightly swaying as kiss followed kiss. Time seemed to stand still.

"Let's go in now, Vincent," she whispered, her whole senses camouring for more of him. "There's a lovely comfortable rug in front of the fire. Come on."

She encountered no resistance from him, but held his hand as they slowly walked back into the room and closed the curtained patio doors behind them and pulled the drapes. They disrobed each other in front of the fire before sinking onto the fur rug. The soft plushness of it against their bodies was an incentive to desire and for once, the double bed in her bedroom was totally forgotten in this

new pleasure of sensuous sensations laying on the thick fur rug whilst the candles burned brightly, their flames flickering in the wind filtering through the patio doors, sending shadows of their moving forms onto the opposite walls.

After a while they lay there, too comfortable and close to get up and make for the bedroom. Catherine reached over and pulled Vincent's cloak from off the chair where he had thrust it and draped it around them for a cover.

For a little while they talked about the baby and Father, then Mary's role in his future, before they felt new stirrings of the passion they couldn't cool in their special '*honeymoon*' night.

"Do you want to go to bed now?" she murmured sometime later. "You're not tired of the rug?"

His answer was a low growl, as he sought her lips once again. They slept on the rug. Her head pillowed against his chest and both his arms surrounding her, with legs entwined. Vincent's hooded cape around them, kept them snug and intimately close throughout the night. The central heating maintained a high 65 degrees temperature, so they had no desire to move until morning light. It was too blissful and rather special.

Vincent awoke first and smiled to himself, glancing down at Catherine's still sleeping form, her lips resting lightly against his chest, her hands on his shoulders. Her body lay touching his along his length, stirring him anew. He could smell the fragrance of her skin and put his lips to hers. Her eyes fluttered open, and she slid her arms up and around his neck.

"Good morning, lover!" she whispered, and kissed him back, knowing she had just encouraged him.

"Morning, Catherine." Vincent's eyes smiled into hers, thrilling her with their message. "Have you seen the time? I would have gotten up earlier, but you were sleeping so deeply, I couldn't bear to disturb you."

She raised her head and stared at the clock's dial. It was almost twenty minutes after nine and still she made no attempt to move away from Vincent's close embrace. She sighed, breathing her lips across his cheek.

"I suppose we'd better get started," she said softly, and kissed the tip of his nose.

"Yes, we've had a rather unique kind of night on your fur rug. '*IS*' it really fur?"

"No, but it feels like the real thing." She caressed the plush nylon pile. "There are so many wonderful, simulated fur skins today, why kill such beautiful animals just to show off?"

"I wish everyone would have such compassion," Vincent said and sighed. "There is no need to kill the creatures in this world. Father has often told me about the cruelty of men."

"Yes, and I'm convinced that the hunters will have a price to pay for what they are doing. Vincent, are you ready for some breakfast yet?" Her question held a change of tone, and he instantly felt her sudden interest in him.

"Only if you are, my Catherine," he said, and sought her lips. For some minutes they exchanged kiss for kiss then slowly and deliberately to tease her, he glided his hand along the soft contours of her body, now hot with the fire her ardour had created for him.

"Vincent!" She whispered his name, her eyes half closed. He kissed her deeply and with such expertise, she knew he was incomparable. She moved against him, feeling the muscular firmness of his body, taut and yet yielding to her every touch and kiss she gave him, almost like a precious gift from one to the other.

"Will we always love like this, Vincent?" she asked him afterward when at last they lay contented and replete.

"In years to come, you are thinking of?" His deep husky voice tickled her ear. "How can we say how we shall be, Catherine. I shall always love you and want you. That feeling in me will never change for you. You are mine from now and beyond. If I die and you marry some other man who would care for you as much as I do, then I will be happy."

"No, Vincent, no, no, no!" She suddenly sat up and he saw she was crying. "There.... will never be.... anyone else in my life for me. Have you got that! There.... just couldn't be. If you do go first, I will be content to wait until we're together again."

He slid an arm around her shaking body and held her to him until the sobs had subsided. He rocked her gently in his arms for some minutes. "You mean the world to me, Catherine. I only want what is good for you."

"I.... know you do.... but my heart is geared to only one.... man in my life, though hell and high water. If you go first, my world will have ended until we're reunited like my mother and father. The very idea is.... is.... abominable, Vincent."

He smiled to himself as he held her, then he got to his feet and put out his hand. "Now we will have breakfast, then I must wait until you bring our son back with you."

They showered and dressed, then breakfasted together before she picked up her car keys, bag, and the mobile cot.

Vincent held her shoulders, gazing into her eyes. "Please take care," he said, such longing in his voice. "I would give anything to be able to come with you, but I must remain out of sight."

"Just give me an hour. I must call for some supplies for here and Below, on the way."

Regretfully, and feeling rather alone, she left Vincent and headed for the parking lot. On the back seat, she stowed the cot and holdall, smiling in anticipation at the very thought of Winslow asleep on the way home from the clinic, but first she drove to the shopping precinct and bought food and other items, including a large stock of disposable diapers and baby accessories. She had already accumulated various items of clothing for him, which were packed in a case in the chamber.

She tried not to put her foot down to speed her journey to the clinic, but she so wanted to collect him and take him back to Vincent, who was eagerly waiting to see and hold his son for the first time. Oh, he had looked at the photograph taken by Peter soon after his birth, but it wasn't quite the same and she knew it.

Fifteen minutes later, the baby was safely tucked into the cot under light but warm blankets, completely oblivious that he was going home. He had been given a clean bill of health from the doctor and a note about his blood group, which was the same as Catherine's, and for that news she was thankful.

The mobile cot was fastened into the harness on the back seat. It had felt so great.... so wonderful to be able to carry him out of the clinic as last and again, as she drove towards the apartment, she managed to resist the urge to drive a little faster. The roads were still wet after last night's rain, so she kept her impatience in check until she reached her parking lot under the apartment building.

She was just reaching in to lift the cot out, having dumped the holdall beside her, when a voice calling her name, made her freeze.

"Cathy. Hey, Cathy!"

She recognized the voice as Joe's. *'Damn!'* she muttered to herself. *'Why 'today' of all days?'* She looked over to where the voice came from and smiled, keeping her great annoyance under wraps. She must get rid of him somehow. He must not follow her up to her apartment where Vincent was waiting.

Joe bounded up to her, his face wreathed in smiles at his pleasure in seeing her. He glanced at her

left hand and saw the wedding ring on its rightful finger and lifted it to look, an expression of hurt and shock flitted across his boyish features.

"You never did send me an invite, did you?" he said, his dark eyes roaming over her face. "I get the vivid impression that you're not pleased to see me. True?"

"Well.... I.... it's such a surprise to see you after all these months. I'm a bit taken aback."

"I'll say, but Radcliffe, is this the baby of the elusive father?" Joe gazed at the sleeping face of Winslow and decided that the child had unusual features. "Pity about the deep ridge over the upper lip, but plastic surgery would no doubt fix that fault."

"I hope so, Joe. Otherwise, I could be up for kidnapping and Vincent wouldn't be too happy." She desperately sought for an idea to put him off. It was daylight and Vincent couldn't escape over the balcony now without being seen down below. She had very few rooms for him to hide in, but then why should her husband have to keep out of sight every time? It was so unfair. Was this the right time to introduce Joe to the man who was her whole life? She decided to risk it. She would have to trust Joe; she turned to him.

"My husband is up there waiting for me. We hoped to have the whole day by ourselves before we showed him to his family. A lovely quiet time with just us three."

"But why hasn't your husband been with you to fetch his own little kid?" He frowned. "I don't get this. What's wrong with him, Cathy? Not on the run for the law, is he? We could help him in that way."

"You're jumping to the wrong conclusions, Joe Maxwell." She locked the dark doors and he took her holdall while she carried the cot towards the basement where the elevator stood empty for a change. "He has unusual features which people find rather alarming, and he is used to keeping out of sight of everyone's critical gaze, and yet he is beautiful to me."

Joe heard the love and reverence in her voice. "I wouldn't want him to change to a handsome prince even if it were possible." She laughed and glanced at Joe, as she thumbed the right button. "You mustn't be too surprised or shocked. He is expecting to meet you."

"But how did it happen? Come on, tell me. This.... guy? He doesn't sound your type."

"It wasn't his looks I fell for." She smiled, gazing down at Winslow. "He took me in after he found me when I'd been beaten up and cared for me. It was then I discovered what a wonderful caring and compassionate nature he has. After I returned home, I tried to get on with my life, but I missed him so much. I never thought I'd see him again, but he visited me one night and from then on, we have been together on and off. His unusual features grew on me, and I realized they were part of him and that I loved them as much as I loved his person."

They had arrived at her floor and stepped out. Catherine's heart thumped uncomfortably, and she said a silent prayer as they approached her door. She swallowed hard and pressed the bell four times; a prearranged signal to mean that someone was with her. They waited briefly, but no one answered the door. She got out her key from her purse and unlocked the door.

"Possibly in the washroom," she commented to Joe, as they entered the neat room. Catherine noticed that all Vincent's outer garments had been removed out of sight and he had also gone into hiding somewhere. The bedroom door was firmly shut, so she guessed he was in there until he knew he was safe.

"You'd better come in, Joe." She said, in an extra loud voice as she passed by the bedroom door. "Were you coming to see me or are you on your way to check someone out?"

"I was on my way back to the office when I thought I'd call and see how life was treating you." Joe grinned and looked around. The cot was now parked on the settee. Catherine could distinctly feel

Vincent's irritation at the interloper in their midst, but he felt helpless tucked away in the bedroom. He didn't know whether to confront the man, Joe, or stay there and hope he would leave sooner than later.

"Would you like a coffee?" Catherine asked, trying not to stare at the closed bedroom door. "I'm sure Vincent won't be long."

"Yeah, sure, thanks." He too, glanced at the door. "Is your invisible husband going to have one too?"

"Yes, he enjoys a coffee. He's just like any other man, Joe." She left him to go to the kitchen and got three beakers out of the cupboard. She almost dropped the caddy of sugar when she heard Joe shout out, then swear. His face was almost ashen when he stumbled into the kitchen, his eyes wide and shocked.

"Cathy, is that.... that creature.... your husband? I don't believe my eyes! What *'is'* he?"

"So, he decided to trust you by revealing himself and you react like *'this'*?" Catherine was incensed. "He must feel he can trust you, otherwise he would have stayed put. I did tell you he had unusual features, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but not *'that'* unusual," Joe gasped. The glazed look in his eyes showed he was still in shock. "Why he's.... he's just like a.... a lion and have you seen his hands?"

"Yes, many times, Joe. Those hands have tended me and cared for me. They hold no fear for me; they're part of him."

Joe shook his head and frowned, carving deep lines across his forehead. "Hell, Cathy. What were you doing to allow him to.... to love you?"

"You mean *'sex'*?" She stared hard at the man who had been her boss and who she knew cared for her too. "Well, I wanted it with him just as much as he did for me. The result is little Winslow. Now look at this, Joe."

She half-opened the door to see Vincent holding the baby in his arms and murmuring to him in his low husky voice. The expression on his face was rapturous and filled with wonder. He swayed a little as if lulling the child to sleep. He was mesmerized by the tiny form. A gentle finger traced the outlines of its little face and stroked the fine baby hair.... a dark chestnut brown in the light from the net curtains.

Tears seeped from under Catherine's eyes as she watched this touching scene, and she was loathe to break the spell of his first encounter with his son.

"I was looking forward to sharing this moment with Vincent, alone." Catherine whispered to Joe, still unable to tear her eyes from the picture of Vincent carrying the infant around the room and talking to him. "I think he's reciting a poem."

"I think I'd better go, Cathy." Joe said and peeked at his watch. "I know when I'm in the way. I.... I've got to get over this and I need time to think about it."

"Please keep this to yourself." Catherine held his arm. "I need to feel I can trust you to say nothing of what you've seen here. Have I your word?"

He looked aggrieved at her plea. "Do you need to ask? Yeah, I'll keep it in here," he reassured her, patting his head. "I'd better get going. The work's piling up again. When are you coming back, Cathy?"

"Not till May. Sorry ya can't stay longer, but this is a special day for us," she said, and they left the confines of the kitchen, Joe following behind her. "Joe has to go, Vincent, but I'm sure he'll be coming back one day. Isn't that right?" Catherine gazed candidly at her boss's rather flushed face.

"We'll have to make a date sometime when he's ready."

Vincent looked at Joe's flushed face. "I'm sorry if I shocked you just coming out like that, but I felt you would be able to withstand the kind of appearance I have." He laughed shortly. "Catherine threw a metal light reflector at me when she first saw me, but she didn't try to run away."

Joe sidled up to the door and gaped at the beastly face of Catherine's husband. *'Hell, how could she fall for something who looked like this? Then to cap it all, have intimate relations with him. What was she thinking of?'* He briefly wondered if she had been on drugs and got carried away by deep sexual urges, but the love he had heard in her voice and seen in her eyes soon swept that notion away.

'There's no accounting for taste,' a voice spoke in his mind, and this was obviously true. *'Love is blind and beauty is in the eye of the beholder,'* passed through his thoughts as he tentatively held a shaking hand out to Vincent. For one moment, he took his left hand away from the child's body and grasped Joe's in a brief handshake. The warm and fur free palm against his perspiring one, gave him a strange feeling. Those nails lightly touched him, sending an involuntary shiver through him. He thought he was going to gag and made for the outer door.

"It's great to have met the elusive Vincent at last," Joe said as he opened the door. "I'll be in touch sometime." His dark eyes went to the baby still resting in Vincent's arms. He wondered if the kid would scream the place down when he opened his eyes long enough to observe his father's face. He wouldn't be surprised.

After he'd gone and they were alone at last, Catherine touched his arm. "I'm real sorry, Vincent. He followed me right up here from the parking lot."

"I could sense your panic, your annoyance and your concern for me." Vincent told her, bending down to kiss her. Then. "Do you feel we can really trust him?"

"I feel we can and once he has thought it all through, he'll want to meet you again." She smiled up at him. "He'll want to know every detail and won't be satisfied until he's got your life story in his personal computer." She tapped her head. "His lawyer's curiosity will get the better of him, but right now, he's stunned, shocked to numbness."

"You should have seen his face, Catherine. When I first came out, and he looked up from our son, to see me standing there, but then, I am used to such reactions; it doesn't bother me too much."

"I'm glad, Vincent," she said, gazing at Winslow's little face as he puckered it up, "We are complete now. It's all been worthwhile, hasn't it? What do you think to your firstborn? Isn't he just beautiful?"

"Just beautiful, Catherine, and I do see a little of me in his face, but your beauty has made him so. I can hardly believe I am holding the precious little bundle you carried for me all those months. It's..."

Catherine noticed the tears on his cheeks. "You don't have to say it, I know just how you feel, Vincent, and I love you for it." She reached up and clasped his chin with her hand. He looked at her and lowered his head until his lips touched hers. The baby suddenly arched itself and cried out.

"He wants one too, daddy," she laughed, then smiled as Vincent touched his mouth to Winslow's forehead. For one tiny moment, he opened his eyes to see who had kissed him. The deep blue eyes were unmistakably Vincent's, then he closed them to settle once more in his father's arms.

Catherine draped an arm around Vincent as they both gazed at the sleeping form and dreamed of all the wonderful days to come together both Above and Below.

"Tonight, he will be surrounded by all those who will also love him. Father, Mary... but today belongs to us, Catherine. Thank you."

END