

***DANCE TO A
DIFFERENT
TUNE***



AMBER JAMES

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CHAPTER ONE

Vincent rescues a mysterious young man in a wheel chair who propelled himself into the river in a suicide attempt. Elliot Burch appears as a helper, a married man. He and his wife are aware of Vincent and Catherine's relationship.

Vincent hid in the shadows. The sounds of someone approaching forced him to seek shelter. The noise was unusual, not footsteps, but a strange swishing sound which disturbed the night as it neared. The volume increased yet again as round the corner of the old warehouse the wheelchair came into view.

The young man propelled himself slowly forwards with determination. His head was bowed, shoulders sagged, this was a body drawn inwards, curled in anguish. Every movement he made was laced with the pain of body and spirit, suffering written in a language needing no interpretation.

Still in the safety of darkness, Vincent wondered what this young man was doing on the docks at this unearthly hour. He did not wait long for an answer.

The wheelchair squeaked and clattered as it crossed the wooden slats of the jetty towards the open water. On reaching the end of the pier, the chair's occupant, with one tremendous effort, sent himself and his chair into the icy waters.

In one swift movement, Vincent cast off his cloak and dived. The chair was located with ease. The man, still fastened in, was unconscious. The strong dark webbing which held him captive,

parted like rotten string in Vincent's powerful hands, and he took the body to the surface.

Although he had stopped breathing, Vincent knew there was still time to save him, if only he could force the life-giving air into the stilled lungs. With speed and skill he began to work on the limp body. Within moments the young man was coughing, gasping and inhaling deeply. He was laid gently down, his rescuer returning to the safety of the shadows. There was a danger in this man seeing Vincent, but he could not be left as he was. His wheelchair being at the bottom of the harbour might mean he had no way of moving. Maybe he would find his way back to the water, to meet whatever he had seen as his destiny. There was also the threat to the community, last time Vincent fished someone out of the water, it had cost them Ellie's life. Every precaution must be taken to protect his home and those he called family. Yet here was a need he could not ignore.

Retrieving his cloak, he swung it round his body in haste, then lifted the barely conscious form over his shoulder. He found little weight in the slim frame, and thought back to another he had rescued and carried in the same way. She had brought him, and his world, only blessings, not all he found Above brought sadness to those Below. Pulling the hood about his face he carried his burden to the nearest tunnel entrance to make his way home.

Drifting in and out of consciousness, the young man saw neither the being who carried him, nor the strangeness of the places they moved through. As soon as he was able, Vincent sent a message along the pipes. Those who lived Below would stay clear of the route to the Hospital chamber, where the message had asked

Father to meet him. The tap-tapping of reply started, the message clear and concise.... *Father will meet... Hospital.... tunnels clear.... pipes silenced.... emergencies only.... take care.... Pascal.*

Vincent hurried to his destination. The quicker he removed his charge from these tunnels and into the safety of a single chamber, the better. Once there he could explain the situation to Father. Vincent knew his decision would not be popular. Father would have much to say about the risk to the community from the helpless man he carried. So sure of the stern reception, Vincent could almost hear the words.

".... Vincent, how could you?" Father asked as he sighed, shaking his head in disbelief.

"How could I not?" Vincent asked in return, smiling inwardly as he recalled the conversation when, five years earlier, he had brought a sick and injured Catherine Below.

He watched as Father examined the tall slim man on the bed. He was so pale, almost as white as the sheets he lay on. Despite the slender body, there were powerful muscles in both arms and legs, his well developed torso seemed at odds with the wheelchair he had used. Sense of another's unease crept into Vincent's mind as he stood quietly waiting for Father to finish. Catherine was worried, concerned for his well-being. He sent his love, his assurance that all was well along the threads of the bond linking them.

In the chamber she now shared with Vincent, Catherine waited with Mary for his return. There were still nights when he felt the need to walk the city alone, in the darkness. Tonight he had done

just that. Catherine now understood how fearful Father had been in the past, when his son had gone Above to her, the risks he took. Now, she too longed for his safe return.

The message along the pipes told her he was Below again, but not alone. Reading in the tapping the need for Father's medical knowledge, she had become fearful. She smiled nervously at Mary. She could not hide her feelings from this woman who had become a second mother to her in the three years she had lived Below. Mary smiled back. "Perhaps he will be home soon. Try not to worry, you will only cause him further distress."

"Too late, he knows," she replied as she felt his love and reassurance wash over her. "All is well, Mary. He won't be long."

Mary smiled again at the contagious joy radiating from Catherine. This bond they shared was a miracle, affecting all around them with its power.

The two women returned to their task. Mary was trying to teach Catherine the basics of knitting, and they laughed as she dropped yet another stitch. Mary was just about to offer to sort it out as Catherine put the knitting down on the small table, her eyes dancing in the candlelight.

"He's coming!"

Both women turned to look at the doorway. As Vincent came into view, they burst out laughing at the sight before them! He came across the chamber, boots squelching, dripping water from his clothes, he was soaked! Mary thought he resembled some mythical sea-beast, as Catherine started pulling pieces of sea-weed and algae from his hair. "Ugh! You're all soggy and you smell awful. Where have you been?"

Vincent smiled. "Oh, it was such a lovely night, I went for a swim in the docks. You should try it!"

"Not if it smells that bad!" he was told.

Never being able to resist an opportunity to tease her, he answered, "But, Catherine, the reason we married was so you could share every moment of my life with me."

"This is one experience I will gladly forego," she laughed again. Reaching for her, he drew her into his embrace. She struggled but stood no chance of breaking free. "Vincent! Let go, you're soaking me!"

"No!" she was told as he lowered his head and kissed her. The struggle stopped.

Mary, not wanting to intrude, gathered her things together, ready to leave. As she passed them, Vincent moved one arm from around Catherine and touched Mary's arm. "Thank you for staying with Catherine until I returned."

"My pleasure," she told him as she walked into the passage, but she doubted he had heard, for his attention returned to his love immediately. Each time Catherine tried to complain about how wet she was getting, his lips silenced her. She didn't complain for long! When he finally let her go, she was soaked, and the fetid odour of the harbour clung to her clothes. His eyes twinkled with mischief as he announced. "We had better do something about this smell. You are right, it is awful! Would you like to go to the Mirror Pool for a swim? It is late, there will be no one there."

"I thought you would never ask!"

Lifting her with ease he crossed the chamber, collected the

towels, and carried her through the tunnels.

The world Below slept and they met nobody on their way to the pool. He stopped at the water's edge, stood Catherine on her feet and started to remove her clothing. "Ah, now I see the reasoning behind all this, Vincent. It's just a ploy to get my clothes off. You'll try anything, won't you?"

Vincent tilted his head slightly as he smiled. "I cannot say I have noticed a reluctance on your part in the past."

"Cheeky!" she scolded. "I can take my own clothes off. I've been dressing and undressing myself for years. "She pushed his hands away.

"Yes, Catherine. I had noticed. You do it so well," he teased, leaving her half-dressed to peel off his own sodden garments. Vincent bent to remove his socks and trousers, and as he stood upright again, he saw Catherine at the water's edge on the other side of the pool.

The sight of her naked body took his breath away. Whenever he looked at her, she awoke desire, but to see her like this resulted in a passionate hunger which would only be satisfied within her.

Catherine was stunned, as always, by the sight of his unclothed body. He was magnificent! She could feel the pull of his need for her as he crossed the gap between them. "Later, Vincent," she pleaded. "Let's swim first," diving into the cold clear water.

He followed and she waited, trying to guess where he would surface. Too late, she felt him rise behind her. With one swift movement, he turned her into his arms and kissed her. The kiss

left her in no doubt that later would not do. He wanted her now and knew she would need no persuading. Lifting Catherine, he carried her into the shallows where the water was warmer and only a few inches deep, then he laid her gently on her side. Lowering his huge body to the ground he lay facing her, drinking in her beauty.

"Vincent," she whispered.

"Hush," came the husky response, as he laid two long fingers over her lips, silencing her.

The tenderness of his touch had its effect on her, and she slipped her tongue between the two fingers, forcing them apart. Slowly, she slid the tip along the length of his index finger, luxuriating in the feel of the work-toughened skin against the softness of her tongue. As she reached the sharp-pointed talon, she sought the tender flesh behind it. The warm tip burrowed down between skin and claw. She closed her mouth and began a gentle, erotic, sucking motion which left him stunned. She heard his sharp intake of breath clearly and, lifting her eyes, they met and locked onto his. Catherine watched in fascination as she read his reaction to the love she displayed for him. She moved her mouth in silent rapture, delighting in the textures of his hands. Her mouth and tongue derived exquisite pleasure, her senses reeled, as she called to mind the intoxicating, tormenting touch of his long sensual fingers on her warm eager body. As the ache began to build deep within her, he closed his eyes, releasing hers, then he shook his head.

"Catherine, it never ceases to amaze me."

"What doesn't?" she asked, wriggling against his body, warm and inviting.

"Your reaction to my hands," he whispered into her hair.

"How could I not adore them? The pleasure they bring me is beyond any words I can only show you."

Propping himself up on his left elbow, he slid his right leg between her thighs. With deliberate slowness he trailed his fingers down her neck, his head lowered and she held her breath. Taking her bottom lip between his teeth, he nibbled with a soft intensity. A whimper, torn from the pain of her desire, parted her lips, and his tongue slid past white, pearl-like teeth to excite the roof of her mouth. His lips began to blaze a trail of fire down the side of her face, neck and shoulder, descending to settle around the hardening pink nipple which demanded his attention. She gasped, her body pressed down against the knee lying between her thighs, a clear message of her desperate need. Vincent could feel the scorching heat of her, strong and demanding as her body straddled his leg in the warm shallow water. He felt himself harden against her in response, and knew she was as impatient as he. Moving his naked body over hers, he took the bulk of his weight on strong elbows and positioned himself between the splendour of her warm, welcoming thighs.

The ache within Catherine became the tortured pain of anticipation, as she felt him hover just outside her body. "Please, Vincent!" she begged.

His lips silenced hers with a ravenous hunger, demanding satisfaction. His tongue filling her mouth as he buried his length within her. There was a sudden intake of breath as her strong muscles tightened around him, drawing him inwards and holding his engorged shaft in a steel-like grip. Thought had left her now, she could only feel. His tongue darted and probed, filling her

mouth with the taste of him, the hard relentless length of him thrusting deeper and deeper. She was convinced the two separate, passionate extensions of him which moved with such power inside her body, met somewhere in the centre of her being as her heart turned somersaults ending in an explosion transporting her beyond time and space.

She lay breathless, trembling as he held her to him in a powerful and warm embrace. Sighing in deep contentment, she snuggled into the soft tawny chest. Words were unnecessary as they gazed at each other in wonderment, glorying in the feel of each others' nearness.

Eventually, Vincent rose, still holding her to him, and waded back into the deeper water. Her arms fastened around his neck as he took his arms from around her body. Reaching up he parted Catherine's hands, his long limbs tensed with power as he held her out in front of him, clear of the water. There was a gaze of infinite longing in the blue eyes as he lowered her, with great care, into the icy clarity of the pool.

He swam round her in silence, his eyes smouldering in the half-light, touching her tenderly from time to time. Moments became hours and they enjoyed the water together as it refreshed and invigorated them.

Meanwhile, under the watchful eye of Mary, a sad young man still slept, unaware of the new chapter in his life which had just begun.

Catherine swam across the pool and turned as she felt Vincent watching her moving through the water. Climbing out, he started

to gather the clothes together, rolling them into a bundle which he tied with his belt. "Come, Catherine, it is time we returned. There seems little point in putting our soiled clothing back on."

She swam towards him as he placed his long black cloak around his shoulders. She held up her hands to his and he took them, lifting her easily from the water to wrap her in a soft towelling sheet. He slipped the bundle of clothes onto his arm through a loop he had made, lifted Catherine and set off for home.

Catherine was set back on her feet beside their bed and, pulling back the covers, she reached for her nightgown. "No!" Vincent's left hand stayed hers, the other began to remove the towel. There would be little sleep for either of them i what was left of the night.

It was almost dawn when, still wrapped in his arms, Catherine fell asleep. Vincent watched her sleeping. '*Why me?*' he thought. '*She could have any man's love, but she chose mine!*' He realized how tired he was, yet rising from the bed, he slipped his cloak around himself and left the chamber. In the tunnels all was quiet. He entered Father's chamber in the dark and, lighting a single candle, he sat in the old chair, wrote a note and left it where Father was sure to find it. Extinguishing the candle, he returned to the woman he loved, to catch up on what sleep he could, before the bustle of the day Below called to him.

Father woke early as usual. Once dressed, he limped into the larger chamber to collect his mug. He picked up the neatly folded note from under it, the author as clear as the neat bold handwriting. Opening it slowly, he reached for his spectacles, then read;

Father,

Do not worry if we are absent from breakfast. Last night stretched far into this morning for Catherine and I.

We may sleep late.

Vincent

He folded the note again, placed it in his waistcoat pocket, then with a smile he set off for breakfast, mug in hand.

"Good morning," William greeted Father as he entered the large kitchen.

"Good morning," he replied as William handed him a bowl of steaming porridge and took the empty mug from his hand. Sitting in the nearest seat, he settled to eat his breakfast and was soon joined by Mary. They ate in silence until William returned with the coffee.

"Vincent and Catherine may not be coming until later," Father told them.

Questioning glances greeted the news. "They had a late night, that's all!" Father continued.

There were knowing smiles and glances exchanged around the large communal room. The last time Vincent and Catherine had both missed their breakfast was the morning after their wedding. Father heard this comment made and a smile hovered over his

lips until he heard William point out not only were they missing for breakfast on that occasion, but also for the communal meals over the next two days. Father thought things had gone far beyond a joke now, and he glared at everyone in turn.

Breakfast was almost over when Vincent joined them, an expectant hush descended on the chamber. "Good morning, Vincent," Father greeted, trying to restore normality. "How are you this morning?"

"Father, I am exhausted!" He looked around the kitchen bewildered as the whole community began to giggle and chatter. He also noticed Father's face was flushed, and held its customary look of stunned bewilderment that everyone knew so well. "Father," he whispered. "What have I said?"

"Nothing really, but your comments have certainly started some wild speculations."

"About what?" he questioned.

Father shook his head. "If you wait, I'm sure it will be broadcast to everyone along the pipes. Pascal is as big a gossip as the others!"

Vincent was still puzzled, but as no one was prepared to explain he would have to let it go. Father rose to leave, and Vincent noticed a small brown paper bag on the table between them. "Don't forget this, Father," he handed the bag over.

"It isn't mine, Vincent. It must be yours."

"Sorry, but I have not seen it before." He pushed it back across the table.

Father opened the bag to ascertain its contents. There was a startled look on his face as he pushed the bag back to his son. "I

assure you, Vincent, this is.... er.... yours."

Mary was getting tired of watching the bag go back and forth between the two men. Before Father could stop her, she reached inside and took out, with a flourish, a pair of fine silk panties.

"Oh.... er.... I see," Mary said. "I assume they are Catherine's."

The murmuring broke out again and the bewildered look returned to Father's face. Jamie came to the table with her coffee, blushing as she saw the soft delicate peach underwear on display. "I tried to be discreet about it," she announced, pointing to the paper bag. Every ear in the room was strained as she continued. "I went for my early morning swim----they were by the pool. Catherine must have left them there sometime last night."

Now it was Vincent's turn to blush, the colour deepened as he realized he had almost answered that he had left them there, not Catherine. He could only guess at the reaction that would have produced. "Yes," he told them instead, wearing a silly grin. "We did go for a.... swim last night. Thank you, Jamie." The chuckles and whispers continued as he hurriedly finished his breakfast, leaving the kitchen as quickly as he could.

Stopping in the chamber doorway, his eyes were drawn to Catherine. She looked so small and lost amongst the covers of the large bed, almost like a child. 'No,' he thought. *'Catherine is no child, she is a warm and passionate woman, and she is mine!'*

Without a sound, he closed the gap between them and lay by her side. Softly blowing into her face, he smiled as her nose began to twitch, she rubbed it with her hand, then slowly opened her eyes.

"Vincent! Stop it!"

"No!" His warm breath tickled her nose again.

"Don't!" her hand threatened a playful slap.

"Catherine, how could you? After all I have just endured for your sake, you offer violence?"

She frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Sitting up, he took the brown paper bag from inside his jerkin, removed the contents and waved them at her. "I was almost ceremonially presented with these at breakfast. It would seem you left them at the pool when we went for our swim last night."

"Hey, just a minute, you took the responsibility for gathering the clothing together, remember? If you hadn't been so eager to carry me off to bed, I might have seen them." Reaching out she snatched the offending silk from his grasp.

Throwing his hands up in mock horror, he told her. "I should have known it would turn out to be my fault."

"It always is," she teased. "If you hadn't come home in such a dreadful state, we would not have gone to the pool in the first place."

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and stood gazing down at her. "So, you regret what happened at the pool, and here, after our swim?"

Her eyes full of mischief, she asked, "Why? What happened? I don't remember anything out of the ordinary."

Reaching for her hands, he pulled her into a kneeling position before him. "Then, Catherine, perhaps you need a reminder?"

"Perhaps I do," she whispered as her hands wound about his

neck, pulling him towards her.

"Remember this?" he asked as he kissed her.

"Feels familiar."

"And this?" As his lips began the journey down her body.

"I think so."

"But what about this?" Hands now joining in the exploration.

"Oh! Definitely that!" She pulled him down on the bed. "I think I shall need to be reminded of every single second."

As he began to remove his clothing, he smiled. "Oh, I think that can be arranged. I do have a few hours to spare. You see, Catherine, it all started when I carried you into the shallows...."

Subtle slivers of sound stole into the sleeping mind, new and unknown. A despairing young man emerged from the entanglement of confused sleep, feeling only the throbbing at his temple, and the banging in his ears. There was a sudden realization that the constant clanging existed outside of him, surrounding him, echoing in his head. Studying the noise, he listened to its rhythms and knew it was not a random sound but planned and structured. Finding deep within the various tones an almost musical beauty. He smiled sadly as the tempo wove a melody worthy of a master composer. His eyes moved slowly round the chamber, its strangeness prompting the silent question, *'Where the hell am I?'* Mark could not guess that the small chamber in which he lay was only a single dwelling place amid many.

During the night which had just passed, faces and voices had assaulted his senses, now he recalled them with ease---the woman Mary, the strange scurrying young man he thought had been called Mouse. Peter, who seemed to have considerable medical knowledge, and the one they called '*Father*.' A man of great depths--this '*Father*.' His accent, clipped and very English, his face lined and worn, eyes which spoke of determination and strength.

He knew that wherever he now lay it was in the land of the living, these were real people, the rock around him solid. Even his desire to embrace death had been refused and he felt cheated! Plans began to formulate in his mind, if he knew nothing about these people or this place, then they might be as ignorant of him and his history. Silence would give him the protection he needed until the opportunity presented itself and he could find an entrance into the oblivion of death. He drifted in and out of sleep as the morning drew to its close, the woman Mary brought his lunch of soup and bread, she was followed closely by Father and his relentless questioning. Staring at the wall's many facets, the young man concentrated on the didactic tapping relayed along the pipes and managed effectively to cut off the demanding voice. Eventually, the frustrated inquisitor left, and Mark knew they were completely ignorant of his identity, as long as he kept his silence they might remain

It was well past lunch time when Vincent joined the others. They were meeting to decide how best to help the young man he had brought Below the night before. His refusal to talk only heightened their worries and concern.

Mary, as always, full of trust and compassion, failed to see anything other than a need her heart would not let her refuse. Pascal and William, concerned for the safety of their world, could only see the threat from the stranger. Cullen even pointed out that maybe Vincent should not have intervened as the young man apparently wanted to die. Torn between the desire to protect those he loved, and all he held sacred as a doctor, Father said little.

Vincent could see they were going over and over the same ground, getting nowhere. "May I suggest," he offered, "that we try to find out who this man is before we do anything?"

William seemed put out. "And just how do you propose we do that?"

"I thought we might ask Catherine to go Above. She still has friends there who may be able to help," he answered.

Mary smiled. "That seems like a good idea."

Vincent looked at the faces gathered around the table. "Then may I ask Catherine to join us?"

There were no signs of dissent, so he departed, returning with her in moments. He moved a chair to the table for her and she took her place by his side.

"Well?" William asked.

"Well, what?" Catherine replied.

An impatient sigh came from William. "Will you do it?"

She smiled. "Whatever it is you want me to do, you know I will. However, it would help if you told me what it is you want of me."

Pascal spoke up now, a thing he rarely did. "Hasn't Vincent told you of the young man he brought Below last night?"

Vincent cut into the conversation abruptly. "Council members were asked not to discuss this with anyone outside the group."

William began to colour rapidly as the anger within him threatened to burst out. "But, she is your wife!"

"Yes, but Catherine is not a member of this Council," Vincent told him simply.

"Then it's about times she was," he snapped back.

Catherine, hearing the anger in both men and fearful that this was becoming unpleasant, interrupted. "You do not need me. Vincent speaks for me in all things. Whatever he decides, I will support him." Her head was beginning throb and she wished this meeting was at an end.

William looked shocked. "You would support him unconditionally, without knowing that the decision implies?"

"Yes," she told him wearily.

"Why?" he persisted.

Catherine cast a helpless look at Vincent. She could see the anger in his eyes and knew he felt the pain building rapidly at the back of her head. "Because I would, that's all." she told him.

"What sort of answer is that?" he came back.

Vincent had heard enough. His fist hit the table as he snarled across to William. "It's the only answer you're going to get. She is my wife, William, and she is not here to be questioned by you."

Father's voice stopped them. "This is getting us nowhere! Please!"

Peace having returned to the table, Father told Catherine of the burden his son had carried Below. They knew nothing of this young man, not even his name, and he would speak to no one. If help was to be offered and the safety of all Below ensured, they needed to know much more about the mysterious stranger.

Catherine told them she would go Above and see how much she could find out about their unusual, but silent guest. It was time for one of her occasional '*visits*' to New York from her '*new home in Canada.*'

As they entered their chamber, Vincent knew he was in for a tongue lashing. The fire in Catherine's eyes almost scorched him as she sent angry glances across the space dividing them. "How dare you treat me like that! I felt like a bone two dogs were fighting over!"

"Catherine, please...."

"Catherine please, nothing! I will not be treated as a thing, some possession, not even permitted to speak for myself!" He walked across the room and tried to hold her, but she hit him in the chest and stormed away. "Don't try to get round me like that. You've all gone too far this time!"

He was getting angry now. "You do not understand, Catherine! I will not have William questioning you. You do not have to answer to him!"

"Who then? You? Is that what you expect?" She came back at him with renewed vigour.

"NO!" he snarled. "You are not.... well!"

"Go on, growl, snarl all you want to. You don't frighten me, Vincent Wells!"

"Catherine, listen to yourself. You accuse me of speaking for you, but now you refuse me the right to speak for myself."

She took two tablets from a small bottle and washed them down with a glass of water, then said, "Go on then, explain yourself, if you can!"

"I cannot," he told her. "Your anger fills me and joins with my own, drowning all the words I would say to you except...."

"Except what, Vincent? Go on, I'm waiting."

"Except that I love you." The intensity in his blue eyes left her speechless as he crossed the chamber and took her in his arms. His lips found hers, anger melted away in the warmth of love.

"Vincent?" she whispered as she lay in his arms.

"Yes?" he answered as softly.

"We can't settle ever disagreement in bed!"

"Why not? It seems to work," he teased. "Anyway, I shall not see you for a few days. We need to make up for lost time, Catherine."

She gave him a playful slap. "That's exactly what you'll say when I return."

"No, I will not."

"Oh yes, you will."

He kissed her again. "Are we going to have another falling out? If so, can we miss out the argument and go straight to the making up?" he asked, his eyes dancing in the candlelight.

"Can't you think of anything else?" she asked.

"Not when I am with you, Catherine. Would you wish it otherwise?"

Smiling, she disentangled herself from his hold to sit on the edge of the bed. "No, I don't suppose I would, but there is a time and place for everything."

"Exactly," he told her as he reached for her again.

"Vincent!" she raised her hand threateningly. "This may be the right place, but we don't have the time. We have arrangements to make."

Reluctantly, he began to dress then moved across the chamber to make them both some tea. Carrying their drinks back, he saw she was dressed and sitting in the chair on the other side of the small table. Such a small table but signifying a much greater barrier she had placed between them.

"Vincent, whose idea was it that I should go Above?"

"Mine, why?"

"You know if I am to find out about this man Above, then I must stay with Elliot. Does that worry you?"

The unease in his face belied the words he spoke. "He is married to someone else now, why should I be concerned?"

"Because you will feel threatened by him."

Vincent sighed. "Catherine, I feel.... threatened by any man you spend time alone with. It is not just.... Elliot Burch."

She reached across the table, taking his hand in her own. "You know there could never be anyone else for me. Please, don't be jealous."

"We've been over this a thousand times, Catherine! This is the one dark emotion I cannot leave in the past." He touched his temple. "I know *'here'* the truth of your commitment to me, to us. But *'here'*...." his hand moved to cover his heart. ".... I envy every moment you spend with those you hold in your heart."

Raising the hand she held to her lips, she asked him, "Will that ever change?"

"No!" The finality in his voice indicated the subject was not to be discussed.

Drinking her tea in silence, she thought back to how wonderful Elliot had been in making the move Below so easy. No one but he had the vast experience to create the false identity she needed to slip away without causing a stir. He had set up the false address in Canada for her, then he had arranged for the re-direction of mail, and left a clear trail of a husband with a job which took them all over the world. They both owed him so much, a debt they could never repay. She remembered Elliot's wedding, the bride he had found in England, and the great love he shared with her. He did deserve to be happy, and he was. No one seeing Mr. and Mrs. Burch together could ever doubt it. The tinkle of china brought her to the present. "Sorry, Vincent, I was just thinking...."

"Yes, I know. We do owe him more than we could repay." HE smiled at her as he removed the cups, then crossed the room and

began to rummage around in the bottom of the tall cupboard at the back of the chamber. He pulled out a long box she had not seen before.

"What have you got there?" she asked.

"Nothing for you. It is for Elliot.... a gift." He placed the box in the centre of the table. She watched eagerly as he opened it to reveal the most exquisite set of carved chessmen she had ever seen. Catherine recognized every piece. Elliot stood a proud king, his wife, the queen, by his side. The thought of Father as a bishop raised a smile, but Vincent as the knight was magnificent. The rooks, all workmen with various tools of the building trade. The beautiful stone tower announced itself as the castle, and she felt a little disappointed that she was absent from this gathering of friends. Her sadness turned to joy as Vincent picked up the stone tower and pointed to the single window. There, framed in the casement, her face gazed out, waiting no doubt for her knight in shining armour and imminent rescue.

"Vincent, these are beautiful!"

"Cullen made them for me. I wanted to give Elliot something special, he has been a good friend. Now you are going Above, you can give them to him for me."

"No, Vincent, they are your gift. Why not save them until Winterfest, then you can give them to him yourself."

He held out his hands in a gesture of acceptance. "As you wish."

"Why can't you always be so agreeable?" She was teasing him again and he knew it. She leaned across, kissed him quickly on the cheek and ran from the chamber, calling back to him. "I'm going to find my suitcase then I'm going to pack and go Above."

Unless you're very, very good and do as you're told, I won't come back!"

Falling in with her mood, he called after her. "Oh, I am very, very good. I had a wonderful teacher. She taught me everything she knew!"

Returning from the chamber which housed many of the things Catherine had kept when she moved Below, she found Vincent waiting to help with the packing. She had managed to find the large suitcase. Vincent insisted the weather Above was warm and she would need only summer things, so they hurried to fill the case with clothes in fine soft fabrics. Firstly, she would need to phone Elliot, but not before she had seen the man whose silence made the trip necessary.

Hand in hand, they walked through familiar passages to the Hospital chamber. Vincent would not enter, although he had not seen the young man since Father examined him, he still felt it better to remain unseen. Confidently, Catherine entered the chamber and stood beside the bed.

"Hello, my name's Catherine Wells." He stared at her, silent, unwilling or unable to speak. Perhaps he was deaf?

Remembering the very basic sign language she had picked up from Vincent and Laura, she signed, *'Hello, are you deaf? Do you need someone to sign?'* His expression changed slightly, not to one of understanding, but rather a questioning of Catherine's sanity. No, he was not deaf! Spending almost an hour with him produced no reaction at all. In the end there was nothing left to try. "I'm *'not'* giving up that easily! I *'will'* be back!" she stated firmly as she walked out of the room and into Vincent's arms. "I feel

completely exhausted," she whispered, close to his chest.

"You tried so hard, no one could have done more." He kissed the top of her head in a tender reassurance, then gave her a quick hug. "It is time you contacted Elliot," he told her. "I suggest you phone from Doctor Wong's shop. There is an entrance into his storeroom and you will not need to risk going outside and being seen before you are prepared."

"Fine," she agreed.

Wrapping one long arm around her shoulder, he felt hers slip about his waist. Together they made their way to the shop.

"I will wait here until you are sure the doctor is alone," Vincent told her as he stood in the basement. Climbing the steps, Catherine opened the door at the top and stepped into the world of the *'topsidors'* for the first time in over a year.

Once the arrangements had been made, and they had taken tea with Dr. Wong, it was with silenced voices and heavy hearts that they returned to their chamber. It was almost nine o'clock. Catherine looked about the chamber, tears filling her eyes.

"Hush, my love," he said quietly as he held her. "I know.... but it will all be here waiting, unchanged, when you return."

"I know it will. This is silly! I'm behaving like a child, aren't I?"

"Catherine, you are many things, but a child? No, never!" He kissed her with love and longing, she felt her heart would break, and clearly from him, came the bitter agony of their separation.

Pulling away from him she felt the reluctance in his heart. Leading

him over to the bed she said, "We have an hour, Vincent, will it be enough?"

"No," he replied. "But if it is all we have?"

"I will miss you so much," she told him as she lay by his side.

"Catherine, this is not the time for regrets, or for words." His lips found hers, and they celebrated their love and mourned their parting in the candle's glow.

The silent man sensed something about this woman that convinced him she was someone to trust, if he was going to trust anyone! He still had no idea where he was, it must be underground, he decided, the cool rock surrounding him made that fact obvious. Everyone he had seen held an air of the past, as if they had walked through some magical door in the fabric of time. There had even been moments when he wondered if he had somehow been transported back to another century, until he saw Catherine. Despite her clothing being of the same strange mixture as the others, this '*Catherine*' was every inch a woman of the twentieth century. She was also a very determined woman and this caused him some concern. Deep down he knew she would reveal secrets he desired to keep hidden. Although he was young, he had seen many beautiful women, but there was something about this one which struck a cord deep inside, she was a woman he wanted to see again.

DANCE TO A DIFFERENT TUNE

CHAPTER TWO

Mr. and Mrs. Elliot Burch had just finished dinner when the telephone rang. Elliot rose from the table to still its strident tones.

"Burch," he said simply.

"Hi, Elliot. It's Cathy."

His face shone as he signalled across the room to his wife. "Well hello, Mrs. Wells! Does this call mean you are coming back for a visit?"

"You know it does! Can you meet me by the carousel about eleven?"

Elliot's wife was waving frantically, indicating that she wanted to know what Cathy intended to do. Seeing her eagerness, he asked, "Can Jacqui come too?"

"Of course, she can," the familiar voice told him. "Vincent will be with me, so it'll be just like a family reunion."

"I didn't expect him to let you wander around the park alone at that time of night. In fact, I'm surprised he lets you out of his sight at all. I wouldn't!"

Catherine's voice suddenly sounded serious. "There's a problem. We have a sick man Below, a man from your world. I need to find out as much as I can about him. We don't even know his name. I wouldn't be coming Above otherwise. Apart from the few friends I like to keep in touch with, the world Above holds nothing for me now."

"You know we will do everything we can to help," he assured her.

"Thanks, Elliot. I knew you would. I must go now. By the way, what's the weather like? I've packed for warm weather. Vincent told me to, but I'm not sure what to bring."

"It's hot, Cathy. Vincent is right, summer is well and truly here."

"Okay. Bye, Elliot. Give Jacqui my love."

"Bye, Cathy. See you later." He looked at his watch, it was eight o'clock."

Jacqui came up behind him and gently kissed the back of his neck. "Well, what's happening?"

"Something's wrong Below. Cathy says there's a man down there, a sick man, and they don't know who he is, so she's coming Above in the hope the answers are here."

"Will she be staying here?" Jacqui sounded enthusiastic.

"Yes, this is the safest place for her, you know that. Here, she can talk without constantly worrying about revealing any of her secrets."

"Good. I'll go and get the guest room ready. You'd better sort out a timetable for her," she prompted with a playful poke in the ribs.

Elliot picked up the phone and dialed Cleon Manning's number. It was answered immediately. "Manning.... Burch here, can you get me some information about flights from Canada?"

The long, dark car slowed and finally came to a standstill. Elliot and Jacqui got out and walked into the park. As they walked to the carousel, they re-lived a journey made six months earlier. Then, Vincent had guided them to their own wedding which had taken

place Below. It was a dear and special memory to them both. The dark and shuttered building loomed before them, eerie and foreboding. Just a few hours earlier, it had been a hive of activity, ringing with the voices of children and their squeals of laughter.

"Elliot, Jacqui?" Catherine called as she spotted them from the shadowed safety of the trees. "Over here!"

Elliot placed an arm around Jacqui's shoulder and they headed for the small cluster of trees and bushes, knowing Catherine would not come to them if Vincent was with her, as there were still people walking in the warm night air. As they neared, a slight movement in the darkness betrayed Vincent's place of concealment. Catherine wore a fine summer dress of delicate pink. She looked as stunning as ever. It had a wide low cut neckline, and Elliot smiled as he noticed the long, fur-covered, claw-tipped fingers resting on her shoulder. He couldn't help but think how out of place they looked, those hands, and yet how right against the pale translucency of Catherine's skin.

"Good evening, Jacqui, Elliot," Vincent's smooth, deep voice greeted them. "You both look extremely well."

"Married life must suit us, Vincent," Elliot responded. "It seems to suit you, too."

"Oh, it does." Catherine cut in, as she held her arms out to the friends in front of her.

Everyone hugged everyone else, news was exchanged and plans finalized. Catherine noticed how Vincent was much quieter than usual, and felt his unease. When the time came to leave, he held her tightly to him as they exchanged a kiss which almost tore her resolve to shreds. "Please, Vincent, don't," she pleaded as the

tears began to invade her eyes. "I'll return as quickly as I can. You know I will."

"I will be here, waiting for you."

"I know."

"Do not venture into the park alone. I expect to be here before you, but if I am not, wait. It might be dangerous," he insisted, in a way which left no room for debate.

"All right," her hesitant voice stammered. She kissed him quickly then walked over to Jacqui and Elliot.

They began to walk to the roadway when Vincent called Elliot back to him. "Watch over her for me. If anything should happen to her...."

"Yes, I know," he told Vincent, watching Jacqui's receding figure. "Believe me, I do understand, now!"

Vincent stayed in the safety of the trees as the three disappeared into the night. He leaned against the tree, silent tears falling, drawn from deep within as he placed the care and safety of all that gave his life meaning into the hands of another man.

Catherine settled herself into the back of the cab and Vincent's sorrow overwhelmed her. His aloneness haunted her again, its icy fingers clutching at her heart as it did his. Jacqui and Elliot looked at each other then back at Catherine. They knew the tears running unchecked down her cheeks were not hers alone.

Once they reached their destination, Catherine was ushered into her room. As soon as Jacqui had satisfied herself that her guest

was as settled as she could be, she returned to her bedroom where Elliot sat in bed waiting for her. "Oh, Elliot! She is so unhappy. I don't know what to do. I feel so helpless!"

"Come here," he held his arms out and she climbed in at his side. Holding her close, he told her, "All we can do is help her find out all she needs to know as quickly as we can, then get her back Below as soon as possible."

The night stretched on into eternity for Vincent. Feeling alone and out of place in the large bed, he tossed and turned, trying to find some position to be at ease. No matter how he lay, there was always the empty space where she would have been. Just before dawn, he abandoned his attempt, to walk the tunnels as he had years before.

Above, Catherine's night had passed more quickly but not happily. Exhausted by her tears, she had cried herself to sleep. The anguish this separation brought with it lay heavily on her heart. Vincent's feelings, added to her own, made a weighty burden. She told herself this first night would be the worst, tomorrow it would be easier, but she had never been good at lying, especially to herself.

The sun rose with the strength and splendor of another summer day. She showered and dressed early then went downstairs. The house was still and silent, she realized with some amusement that no one was awake yet. So used to rising at an early hour, she had woken automatically. Finding the library, she selected a book and settled herself to read. It was about two hours before the household began its day. Elliot couldn't resist teasing her about her change of sleeping habits. She had been a notorious late

sleeper. Breakfast was a hurried meal, and Catherine found herself in the car with Elliot heading for work.

Waiting in his office, Elliot sat with Catherine drinking coffee. They were expecting Cleon Manning to arrive. He was punctual, and after introductions had been made, they sat around the low table.

"Right, Mr. Burch, what can you tell me about this man?"

Elliot looked at Catherine. "Tell Manning all you can. He's the best there is."

"I'm trying to identify a man, a young man, early twenties, dark hair, brown eyes. He's tall, six-two, maybe six-three, athletic. Well-developed arms, legs and body. There is a small scar, perhaps an appendix scar."

"Is that it?" Cleon asked, making notes in a small book.

"Not quite," she said. "He may be unable to walk, uses a wheelchair, went missing a few nights ago."

"Okay, Mrs. Wells, I'll make a start." He stood and moved towards the door.

"Manning," Elliot warned. "No one is to know we are interested in this man, right?"

"Right," Manning answered as he went out through the large oak doors.

Catherine turned to Elliot, who was refilling their cups. "I do hope he can help."

Elliot looked at her with one of his devastating smiles. "I told you, Cathy, he's the best. That's why he works for me."

Lunch time was soon upon them and Jacqui arrived at the office. The two women had planned a shopping spree. So many things were needed Below, Catherine had a list which seemed endless, although Jacqui's was almost as long. The first stop was the bank. Catherine still had quite a considerable sum and, invested wisely, it brought in a fair income. Most of the urgent needs Below were met from this fund, but her money was only used when there was no other way. Father was reluctant to use any money which came from Above, even if it was Catherine's. Purses bulging, the two women came out of the First National and, arm in arm, set off to enjoy their day.

Almost a week had passed, Cleon Manning had four or five leads he had followed up without success. The fact that secrecy was required only served to hinder inquiries.

This morning, Elliot had phoned from his office to tell Catherine about another line his head of security had suggested. It looked very promising, a young man fitting the description, a ballet dancer of some promise, had vanished. He had been discharged from hospital only a week before after long and painful treatment for a spinal injury. His name was Mark Hanson and, because of the mystery surrounding his disappearance, the case had been handed over to the District Attorney's office. She couldn't resist a smile when she was told the section handling the case was headed by Joe Maxwell. "Well!" Catherine told Elliot. "It seems I shall be visiting a few old friends while I'm here. Starting with Joe."

Catherine Wells walked slowly down the familiar long, dingy corridor----nothing had changed, not even the colour of the walls.

Opening the door into the main office, she felt suddenly overwhelmed by the hectic. *'Had it really been so noisy?'* She asked herself, searching for a face from the past, a familiar smile. "Cathy, how are you?" She turned to find Rita standing behind her.

"Hi, I'm fine. I thought I'd better come and say hello while I'm in New York."

"Have you seen Joe yet?" Rita asked.

"No, but that's where I'm headed." She walked to his office door, then knocked and entered.

Joe Maxwell glanced up from the papers on his desk to see his visitor. "Radcliffe!" he exclaimed, a broad boyish grin spreading across his face. "What are you doing here?"

"Does there have to be a reason for visiting an old friend?" she inquired, making herself comfortable on the long couch.

"Hey, no! You're one visitor I'll always be happy to see." He sat by her side.

She smiled at him. "Joe, there is something you can do for me."

"Okay, I'll buy it. What?"

"You can take me out to lunch."

Rising from her side he slipped on his jacket. "Now that sounds like a good idea." They left the office together and made their way to Joe's favorite Italian restaurant.

Tucking into the lasagne with relish, Joe began to bring her up to

date with all that had been happening in his life. Conversation soon turned to work and she looked for the opportunity to question him about the stranger Below. "So what are you working on now, Joe?" she inquired.

"Mostly the usual stuff, nothing ever changes."

Catherine prompted him. "What, no interesting little mystery, there's usually one around somewhere?"

"Nothing special, although we do have a missing person. He'd have been right up your street."

Laughing, she added. "You mean one you would have given me because no one else wanted it?"

"No, believe me, this one's a beauty!"

Hoping this was the man she was searching for, she probed further. "Well, then, what's the story?"

Joe shrugged his shoulders. "This young dancer, Mark Hanson, has a fall on stage and injures his back. Just as he's supposed to start physiotherapy, he vanishes!"

"So what makes this so special, what's the mystery?"

With a broad grin he informed her. "He's confined to a wheelchair! Just how far can you get in one of those things? There's no trace of him, it's as though he simply vanished into thin air."

This, she was sure, was the man Below. "Well Joe, you're right! It's just the kind of case I would have loved. Pity I can't get involved now."

"Cathy, if you can think of anything to help, don't hold out on me!"

Grasping the opportunity to turn the conversation to a lighter subject she joked. "Can't do without me, Joe?"

"Too right, Radcliffe!"

The meal progressed in a relaxed mood, and they enjoyed each other's company. Leaving the restaurant around one-thirty, they returned to Joe's office. The rest of the afternoon passed swiftly for Catherine as she caught up on the general gossip of the office. As more information presented itself she stored it away in her memory.

Around four Elliot came to take her back to his house. Cleon Manning was in the car and the journey back gave her the opportunity to pass on all she had gleaned about Mark Hanson. Manning sounded impressed. "Well done, Mrs. Wells. Now I have something concrete to work on."

"Please, call me Cathy, all my friends do."

"Okay, Cathy it is. I'll get on to this right away."

The long black car halted at Elliot's office block and Manning got out, then Catherine and Elliot continued on their journey.

The next few days passed slowly for Catherine. She enjoyed being in Jacqui's company and the two became closer with every passing hour. Still there was little to do and the separation from Vincent made her restless. Trying to fill her empty hours became a difficult task, she visited everyone she knew Above, but the cold emptiness in her soul remained. She knew how right Vincent had been when he said that she should not see him at all until she had

finished her inquiries. Has she gone to see him Below, nothing would have persuaded her to return Above to resume her search.

Vincent threw himself into the excavation of new chambers and tunnels which were needed for the small, growing community. Exhaustion enabled him to sleep, but his nights were full of fears for her. Dreams as troubled as he experienced now, had all been left behind when Catherine moved Below as his wife. Now that she had returned Above, the old terrors returned, familiar but unwelcome. His days stretched on forever. His sense of her was strong, he shared every moment, the joys of friendship and love but below the surface he also shared her feelings of loneliness and isolation. It was now she who walked in a hostile world alone. His mind travelled back to a time, years ago, when he had told her that he regretted what he was. Now those same feelings haunted him, for if he had been as other men, he would be Above with her now.

Two weeks had passed and Vincent was sitting in the large kitchen, drinking his tea. Father had noticed there was no empty plate before his son. Vincent had missed another meal! "Not eating again, Vincent?"

"No, Father. I have no appetite."

Shaking his head, Father admonished. "You must try to eat. You will only make yourself ill!"

Taking Father's hand in his, Vincent told him. "I cannot eat. Please do not worry. I will be fine."

"Yes, I know you will, but not until Catherine returns home. How is she, Vincent?"

His son smiled, looking thoughtful. "She is well, but homesick. She will be back soon."

"I certainly hope so! You can't go on like this!"

Vincent sighed. "She knows how I am. It is difficult for her, too. She feels so alone, isolated, yet she is surrounded by friends. It is hard for me to explain.... but it is a feeling I have known well."

Father found the same wistful smile touching the corners of his mouth, too. "This link which joins you.... it never ceases to amaze me. The sooner she returns the better, for you both!"

"Yes, without her, I feel.... incomplete."

He rose from the table, dropped his cup into the large stone sink and left for work.

Just after the evening meal, Father was surprised to see his son return. "Finished early, Vincent?" he queried, and was treated to one of his son's rare grins.

"Yes, Catherine is coming home. I want to make sure everything is ready for her. I thought it best to tell you I shall be going Above later, once it is dark."

As Vincent left to wash and change, Father breathed a sigh of relief, knowing things would soon be back to normal, and perhaps the mystery man would remain a mystery no longer.

Above, Catherine eagerly awaited the coming night. Little by little, the minutes ticked by to become hours. Elliot and Jacqui could sense the excitement building in her, and by the time they sat

down to dinner, she was so elated eating was impossible. The car was sent for around ten-thirty, and the three of them set off for Central Park. Cleon had provided the missing pieces of the jig-saw and Catherine was satisfied. Gliding to a halt, the car parked by one of the many entrances. The three emerged from the car and walked across the grass, into the trees.

"Don't leave it as long before you come to see us again, Cathy," Elliot pleaded.

"We'll see," he was told.

Jacqui kissed Catherine on the cheek, then hugged her. "See you at Winterfest. If we're still invited."

"Yes, of course you're still invited!"

Elliot took hold of Catherine's arm. "Come on, Cathy, we'll walk you home."

"No, thanks, Elliot. There is no need. Vincent is already Above and waiting."

They said their goodbyes and she watched as the sleek black car pulled into the traffic and sped away.

The bustle in the tunnels told Mark that something was happening. He longed to ask, but he would not break the silence. A silence which was rewarded as he overheard Mary talking to Mouse outside his chamber.

"Are you sure?" Mary asked.

"Mouse knows everything, hang out with Vincent, good friends. He said '*she is coming home*' Vincent's happy again."

"At last, things will return to normal. Everyone will be happy, Mouse."

Mary came into the chamber and began to tell him of Catherine's return but she stared at her with empty eyes. She could not have guessed how fearful this news made Mark feel. He turned over in his mind all the troubles that might come upon him if the truth of his identity were revealed. His worst fear was that he would be forced to leave the isolation of this chamber, that he would be forced to face the terrors of life in his own world. For him there could be no life there, not without his dancing, for him there would only be death. With this thought came the realization that the desire for the oblivion of death had left him in this strange and alien place. That insight caused him the greatest fear of all.

DANCE TO A DIFFERENT TUNE

CHAPTER THREE

Jacqui and Elliot had gone and Catherine was alone in the park. No, not alone. She could sense him near, very near. Suddenly, he was there before her, his blue eyes caught and held hers. She moved to close the gap between them and he backed away. His voice, almost a whisper, asked, "Your things, where are they?"

"Peter's bringing them with him in the morning," she told him in a dismissive way. "I wanted your arms free to hold me, not my case and shopping!" He said nothing, but the intensity in his eyes spoke of the colliding emotions he was struggling with. Catherine was puzzled. Vincent turned and moved quickly towards the culvert which would take them both home. She had to run to keep up with his hurried pace.

"Vincent!" she called. "What's wrong?" she pulled his sleeve and he stopped.

"Nothing.... is.... wrong," he answered, his breathing becoming laboured.

Slipping her hand into his, she gazed up into his face again to be rewarded with a look of pained confusion. Immediately, he continued, his pace increasing as he neared their goal. Almost dragging her along, he soon reached the drainage culvert then pulled her into the huge pipe which led them to the safety of the steel door and home. Catherine tripped over the lip of the concrete pipe as they moved into the intersection. He reached to steady her and suddenly she was in his arms. The rough surface of the wall at her back was threatening to tear through the fine fabric of her dress as his body pressed forcibly against hers and

his mouth descended with a hunger she knew she would not be satisfied with ease.

"Vincent, please!" she begged breathlessly in the belief moment his lips released their possessive hold. "We must get Below!" It was only with great difficulty she persuaded him to stop the impassioned demonstration of his longing for her. She operated the mechanism opening, the steel door which formed an impenetrable barrier between the two worlds. As they stepped through the threshold together and the door slowly closed behind them, he reached for her again. A noise ahead of them caught their attention.

Father stood at the end of the passage. Catherine cast a worried glance at Vincent. He had regained his composure somewhat, but no one could misread the blatant sexuality in his sapphire eyes which called to her for recognition. She walked towards Father, aware that Vincent was close behind her.

"My dear children, I thought I could come and meet you. I think now that perhaps I should have waited." He held out his hands and smiled.

She gave him a hug and kissed him on the cheek. "No. Father. It is good to see you. I have missed you all."

"Some more than others," he said simply. "And that is just as it should be."

Looking more in control, Vincent added his words to hers. "It was kind of you to come such a long way to welcome Catherine home. We both appreciate your presence, Father."

He smiled at his son. "Still, you two do need some time together without other company. I'm not so old that I can't remember being

in love. If you will walk me back to my chamber, Catherine can acquaint me with her findings, then I shall bid you both goodnight."

The journey, due to Father's hip problem, was slow and she used every minute to tell the two men all she had found out about their mysterious guest.

"Goodnight," Father called back, turning into the opening which would take him to his bed.

As Father disappeared from sight, Vincent took hold of Catherine's hand, pulling her in the direction of their own chamber. He moved with such haste that she found herself almost running in an effort to keep pace with his step. Breathlessly, she stumbled through the doorway. Releasing her hand, he picked up the laminated notice from the small table. **'DO NOT DISTURB'** it announced in block letters. She had purchased it on one of her shopping trips. Above, the only means she could think of to let other members of their family know when they wanted time by themselves. So far, it had worked well.

"Let me," she said, taking it from him and retracing her steps along the passage. Reaching the junction which led to the main tunnel, she hung the notice on the torch bracket where it would be easily seen. With breathless expectation, she walked back into the chamber. Wearing only the bronze silk kimono she had given him on their wedding day, he sat on the edge of the bed, watching her cross the room. As she neared, he stood and pulled her roughly towards him, and with little courtesy and much haste he removed her clothing.

The soft candlelight gave her skin a translucency, and her clear bright eyes held a look of child-like innocence. She gazed at him in wonder as he slipped out of the silk robe. Her eyes held his, the

look of innocence engulfed by the desire to be joined with him, to be where she belonged. Reaching out to touch her, he sent streaks of fire coursing through her body. Lifting her swiftly in his arms, she gazed into the blue eyes filled with unbridled hungry passion, and knew her own eyes spoke as eloquently. The gentleness with which he laid her on the bed belied the urgency they shared. Standing at the bedside, he towered over her like some mythical colossus, and she could only lie mute, beneath his shadow, imprisoned by the hunger in his eyes. As he moved to kneel at her side, she saw the clear indication of just how ready he was. Reaching out to touch him, to hold the growing erection, she was puzzled as he pulled away to sit on the edge of the bed with his back to her.

"Vincent, what's wrong?"

"I am sorry, Catherine, perhaps I should get dressed and walk through the tunnels for a while."

Her anger, born of frustration and need, flared. "Vincent, what is this all about, tell me!" she begged. "You can't just take off, not now!" She tugged on his shoulder and he turned to face her with pain-filled eyes.

"This is no way to welcome you home, Catherine," he told her, near to tears. "These feelings I have are wrong, unworthy of your love."

"Vincent, share them with me please! If I am to understand, I need to know."

Lowering his head, a soft weary sigh escaped his lips. "This separation has been difficult. I felt as if you had been torn from me.... and longed only for the moment when...."

"When what? Vincent, please!" She sounded as frantic as she felt.

"When," he whispered, "I could lie here with you.... crush your body beneath me. Feel the warmth of you surround me as I entered you.... claiming you as mine again. To watch the joy in your eyes.... as the very essence of my being poured itself into you in sweet release. I longed.... to feel you shudder and tremble beneath me.... as your body sought that same release with me. To know in that moment, when all reason is gone, all thought engulfed by the ecstasy we share, you will whisper.... only my name.... see only my face, desire.... only me.... always."

Placing her hand under his chin, she raised his head, forcing him to look at her. "And what is wrong with that?" she demanded.

"What I felt.... feel now.... for you, holds no tenderness.... no affection." His head shook, and a tremor passed through him. "These desires are not worthy, Catherine."

Pulling him down to lie beside her, she told him. "You couldn't be more wrong, my love. My need for you is just as urgent."

As he was about to shake his head again in denial of her words, she took hold of his hand, moving it down her body to rest in the soft warm wetness which indicated the truth of her words. There was a sudden intake of breath and a look of disbelief. "Please, Vincent, don't make me wait any longer. This is torment!"

She pulled him closer as she felt his body relax and saw the disbelief turn to wonder as he felt the truth of her words. The turbulence of their passion took hold and he was right, there was no tenderness, not even a kiss. There was only a greedy insatiable hunger, as with ardent hands she guided him home, to be complete and whole once more. The small chamber echoed

the sounds of their impassioned lovemaking throughout the long night, until exhaustion led them into sleep.

Catherine woke to find Vincent sitting on the edge of the bed, dressing. Still slightly damp, he smelt of the soft soap he had used. Not yet having donned his shirt, she saw three blood-stained furrows on the back of his shoulder. She thought how strange it was, he had always feared hurting her, yet it was she who often drew blood from him in this way. Oh, yes, in the past three years she had some bruises from time to time, and this morning she was sore and stiff, an indication she probably had some now, but the clawed hands had never broken her skin. She knelt on the bed behind him and covered the damage area with soft kisses. "Sorry, Vincent," she murmured. "I've made a bit of a mess here." She kissed the shoulder again.

"I thought it felt a little stiff!" he commented.

"Is that all! I ache from head to toe and some places are extremely sore!"

"You should not be so greedy," he told her. "You would not leave me alone, what could I do?"

"Vincent Wells, how can you say that! If I hadn't stopped you, we'd still be in the tunnel near the park."

He turned in anger. "That is not a subject to make light of, Catherine!"

"Vincent, it's all right." She tried to reassure him.

"NO! It is not all right. Last night, I lost control. If you had not stopped me...."

"You would have done nothing you didn't do here later. Looking at

the state of your back, it would seem that I was the one who lost control."

"That is different!" he stated.

"Oh, I see. You feel it justifiable that I should want you to the extent that nothing else exists, but not the other way round!"

Tears filled his eyes. "That is not fair, Catherine."

"It isn't meant to be," she snapped back. "We've spent about two weeks apart, what did you expect to feel? Believe me, if you had greeted me with only words, I would have been heartbroken!"

She felt him tuck the worry away somewhere in the recesses of his mind, and his attention returned to her. She stretched, wincing as sore, protesting muscles made their objections known.

"Catherine, what is wrong?" There was concern in his tone.

"Nothing. I told you everything hurts, I ache from head to toe."

He seemed at ease again as he inquired. "Would you like me to kiss it better for you?"

Laughing, she shook her head. "I am giving you no encouragement. You only want to pick up where you left off last night."

"I do not," he repeated.

"Yes, you do," she insisted.

"I can assure you I have no intention of continuing last night's.... activities."

Recognizing the desire in his eyes, she found herself responding to the familiar look, which would soon begin to have irreversible

effects on her. "No, you wouldn't want to '*continue*' anything, you'd want to start all over again!"

"For once, my love, you are right," his deep voice whispered.

Laughing still, she told him. "Okay, I give up. I'm no match for you."

Joining her mood, he teased, "Is '*okay, I give up*' the same as *I surrender*'?"

Picking up a pillow, she hit him with it. "No, it means the same as '*I'm going for breakfast*'!"

Rummaging around in the spacious old wardrobe, she brought out one of her track suits and some clean underwear. Soon she was washed, dressed and eager to eat. By the time she was ready, Vincent had finished dressing, made the bed, and was sitting at the table writing in his journal. Catherine couldn't resist the temptation, she leaned over his shoulder and read,

Last night, Catherine came home

Now we are united, one. I am whole

And complete once more

He closed the book, put away his pen, then stood to wrap his strong arms about her. "I love you, Catherine," was all he said, as he placed a soft, chaste kiss on her forehead, then taking her hand, he led her along the tunnels to breakfast.

Peter Alcott arrived just as the council members had settled themselves in their places in Father's study.

An eager group of children had ferried Catherine's luggage and shopping to her chamber. She left it waiting in a corner as she left to take her place at the special meeting to which she and Peter had been invited. Once the doctor had removed his coat, he came to sit beside Father. William provided tea for them all and the meeting was called to order.

"I thought it better that we all meet here while Catherine passes on the information she had gleaned Above." Father looked across the table to give her a smile of reassurance. "She has been very successful."

Catherine began. "The young man's name is Mark Hanson. He is a professional dancer, or I should say he was. Mark was involved in an accident in the theatre which injured his spine. There was a long hospital stay and he regained some of the movement in his legs. However, once he was told he would never dance again, he seemed to give up."

Peter interrupted. "You did say the paralysis was not total?"

"That's right!" she continued. "In fact, he was due to start an intensive physiotherapy course to get him back on his feet. Once he found out his career was over, he wouldn't even try. As far as he was concerned, his life was over. The ballet was his life."

Father sighed. "So he decided not to go on?"

"And he made for the waterfront," Vincent cut in.

Catherine shrugged her shoulders. "That seems to be what happened."

Peter questioned again. "But they did expect him to walk again?"

"The doctors say he could walk now, he just won't."

As optimistic as always, Mary spoke for the first time. "Then we will take care of him until he finds his spirit."

"That may not be an easy task!" Father reminded her. "When you have lost the desire to live, the struggle back is long and hard, many do not make it."

William said quietly. "What can we do that the doctors Above can't?"

"We can give him time to heal," Vincent told him simply.

"But we '*can't*' work miracles, and that's what he needs," William insisted.

Catherine's soft voice commented. "William, that's just what you can do, I should know. When I was left for dead in the park, had I been found by those Above, I could not have lived with the terrors of my experience. Only here, Below, could my soul heal, through Vincent and all of you. That was a miracle. Mark's soul is no sicker than mine was. He has the same sickness, perhaps he needs the same cure, your acceptance and your love."

The assembly fell quiet, each remembering the part they had played in Catherine's recovery. Father broke the silence.

"Catherine, I think you have settled this for us. We must allow this man to stay, hoping that somehow we can rekindle his desire for life. Are we agreed?.... Good, thank you all for coming."

Mary looked across at Father. "I think Catherine deserves our thanks. We all know what this separation has cost Vincent, the toll on her must have been as great."

"Yes," he agreed. "You are right, Mary. We do owe Catherine special thanks." He turned to face his daughter-in-law. "We do

understand the price you paid for this information, it was not bought cheaply."

One by one they left the chamber, each to their tasks whilst Father set off with Peter along the tunnels to the Hospital chamber and Mark Hanson.

Much later Father and Peter returned to find Vincent and Catherine still sitting in the cluttered study. Father shook his head. "He still refuses to speak, even faced with all we know about him, he is silent. It's just as if he's prepared to spend the rest of his life just lying there."

Peter rested a hand on his shoulder. "Jacob, I must return Above. If you need me...."

"Yes, Peter, thank you for everything. What would we do without you?" Father sighed as, leaning on his stick, he slowly limped over to the familiar chair, and sat.

"Catherine and I will walk with you," Vincent told Peter.

"No, thanks. I'll be fine. Samantha has already offered her services, although I feel sure it's the walk through the park that's the attraction Above, not me."

Sadness showed clearly in Vincent's eyes. "Yes, the pull from Above is very strong within her. Perhaps it will call her to leave our world, who knows?"

Peter left the chamber to find Samantha who would guide him through the labyrinth, and back to the world Above. An uncomfortable silence settled on the chamber, and the atmosphere seemed tense and strained. Catherine cut through

the hush. "Well, I think it's time I went to see our young guest again. I told him I would be back."

Father sighed. "Yes, Catherine, do try. Anything you can do will be of great help. Perhaps Vincent would like a game of chess whilst you're with Mark, it would help pass the afternoon?"

"Sorry, Father," Vincent said. "I am on watch. This week I am covering Sam's duties whilst he is recovering from his influenza. I shall accompany Catherine as far as the Hospital chamber, then I must relieve John."

He put his arm around Catherine's shoulder and they left Father to the study of his books.

Catherine and Vincent stopped at the junction of three tunnels, this was where they must part. He took her in his arms and she snuggled into his warmth. "I shall return in six hours," he told her. "At nine. Will you do something for me, Catherine?"

"You know I will, what is it?"

"If you have the time, will you take tea with Father, I feel he needs the company?"

Smiling she inclined her head. "I intended to before you asked." Reaching up on tiptoe she kissed him gently. "See you around nine-fifteen, then?"

"Yes. Until then, take care." His lips brushed the top of her head.

Catherine gazed up into his eyes as he stepped back from her, and she understood why this goodbye was brief. The desire burning within those blue depths told her how little persuasion he

would have needed to forget his responsibilities, and neither of them could ever let that happen. He turned quickly and walked away. She watched as he placed distance between them, his firm stride causing his cloak to sway rhythmically from side to side. The light danced as the passing of his massive body made flames gutter. The sheer presence of him leaving her speechless, able only to stand and stare after him. As he rounded a corner in the distance, the spell broke and her mind returned to the task at hand. Taking the left hand passage, she made her way to the Hospital chamber. Mark was lying propped up in bed, with Mary in the chair by his side, sewing. When Catherine walked in, she looked up and smiled.

"Hello, how lovely to see you again."

"I thought you might welcome a break, Mary. Why not go and have a cup of tea with Father?"

"Thank you, Catherine. That will be most enjoyable. I'll be back in about half an hour." She placed her sewing back in the basket under the chest of drawers and bustled off.

Catherine pulled the chair closer to the bed and sat looking at its occupant. "Well, Mark Hanson, what a strange man you are, a mystery even. But if we're being honest, we have to include words like fake, charlatan, selfish and heartless." Mark's head turned towards her, his dark eyes spitting fire. Catherine chuckled. "Oh, you have a temper, too. That's something we have in common. Father often refers to me as a fire-brand." She glared at Mark, her eyes returning the anger she had been shown. "When I think of the risks Vincent took to save you, he deserves better than this insolent silence you offer."

The man spoke his first words Below. "Who is Vincent?"

She was taken aback, after the hours and hours which had been spent in an effort to get Mark to talk, the first words he uttered voiced the one question most difficult to answer. Taking a deep breath, she replied, "The man who pulled you out of the docks and brought you back here."

"Where is he?" He asked.

Such a simple question, she mused, but what a complication the answers would be. Hedging, she replied, "All you need to know is that this is a safe place, a hidden and secret world where people live together in a loving, caring community."

"Who is the old man, the one they call Father?"

She smiled. "He is exactly what his name implies. The head of our family, a wonderful parent to us all."

Mark questioned again. "So many people have come and gone over the days I have been here. So many names. Do they all live here?"

"Yes."

"Which of those faces belongs to Vincent?"

"None. You haven't seen him yet."

"Why not?"

"Mark Hanson, you ask too many questions! Someone once told me that I asked too many questions. He also pointed out that perhaps, if I had all the answers, the wonder and the magic of my life might be explained away."

"Vincent?" he queried.

"No!" came her answer. "I suggest you rest now, whilst I go and get Father. He is much better at explaining mysteries than I am."

She left the chamber feeling happy that at last the silence had been broken. The knowledge that Father would be pleased sent her hurrying through the labyrinth with a lighter heart, despite the pain building at the back of her head, telling her that another headache was on its way. She was hoping she didn't have to search for Father, the pounding in her head made her long for the quiet, dark chamber and the warm bed waiting nearby.

Time sped by Below, and the weeks quickly turned into months. Mark was greatly recovered and seemed to be fighting the depression's hold with some success. Speaking with courtesy and politeness to everyone, he settled into his new life, but he only ever conversed with Catherine. Little by little she gathered together small scraps of information, which built a picture of his past in the world Above, and acknowledged the devastation his accident had caused. But there was no doubt, he seemed so much better and she felt the time was at hand when Mark would take his place as an active member of the community Below. Passing on all she had learned from Mark to Father, she found he agreed with her assessment. Mark was as ready as he would ever be. What both of them failed to realize was the depths of this young man's feelings for the woman he saw as responsible for restoring his health. They had grown close in the long days of convalescence. She would have counted him as a dear friend, but Mark had fallen under the spell of Catherine's beauty and charm, friendship was the last thing on his mind.

They had never spoken of her life outside the walls of the small

room which enclosed him, and he had no knowledge of the love she bore from the man she shared her life with. Now Mark was beginning to look on his '*accident*' as fate's way of bringing him into her company and, eventually, into her heart.

DANCE TO A DIFFERENT TUNE

CHAPTER FOUR

One frosty Saturday morning, as the chill of fall seeped through the tunnels invading even the deepest chambers, Father announced at breakfast that he felt Mark was ready to leave the confines of the Hospital chamber to become part of their community. He made them all aware of how difficult it would be for this young man, who was only just regaining his desire for life. The world Below would seem hostile and strange, making it harder for him to accept the hand of friendship begin offered. All agree to help in any way they could, but then he had known they would. There was still one major obstacle to overcome, and it would have to be tackled soon.

"Vincent," he called across the kitchen. "Could I have a brief word?"

He noticed, as his son crossed the chamber, a look which passed from him to Catherine, and she followed him. They stood before Father side by side waiting for him to speak.

"There is something which needs to be done before Mark can have the freedom of our world," he told them.

"Yes," Catherine said. "He needs to meet Vincent! We will handle this, Father, don't worry."

"My dear child, you always seem to know just what I am about to say. I shall leave this to you then, but please, be careful. We have no idea how Mark will react."

Smiling with a memory, Catherine told him. "You don't need to remind me. After all, my first impulse on seeing Vincent was to

throw something at him."

She was interrupted by her husband who asked teasingly, "So what has changed? You '*still*' throw things at me!"

The joke appreciated by the three helped ease the tension, which talking of Vincent's differences always carried. "When will you go and see him?" Father inquired.

"There is no time like the present, or so the saying goes," his son responded. "So, I think we should go now."

Taking Catherine's hand in his own, Vincent led her from the kitchen, along empty tunnels towards Mark.

Outside the chamber they halted. "How should we handle this?" she asked him.

Vincent inclined his head as he suggested. "Perhaps you should go in first and talk to him about the way I look?"

"Right, then, you wait here until I call you in."

"There is no need. I will know when you want me to enter."

Catherine shook her head. "No, Vincent. I will call you. I think it better Mark learns about our link a little at a time. This meeting will be difficult enough without trying to explain about our unusual way of communicating, the emotions we feel."

"Then I shall wait here," he told her, leaning against the rough rock wall. "Until you call me."

Mark was sitting in bed reading as she entered and said, "Good morning, Mark."

He mumbled only "morning" as a reply.

"Mark?" she continued. "There is someone I think you should meet, and now seems as good a time as any."

"Vincent?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, I get to meet the mystery man at last! Where has he been hiding all this time?"

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Catherine spoke quietly. "There is more truth in that than you realize. Vincent has been hiding himself away.... from you."

"Why?"

"You have said yourself, many times, that this is a place of secrets. Amongst all of them, Vincent is our most closely guarded one. When you see him, you will know why. He is waiting in passage outside."

"Then, what are we waiting for?"

She smiled at the young man. "Because before you see him, you must understand, things are not always what they appear to be, and neither is he."

He gave her a questioning look, so she continued. "You need to know, Vincent is not like other men, he is different. He does not look like we do, and his unusual appearance has frightened a few people in the past, myself included. I wanted to prepare you."

Mark frowned. "Is he disfigured in some way?"

"No," she shook her head. "Not disfigured. He just looks different.

That is the only way I can describe him."

"Okay," she was told. "Let's get this over with. Bring him in!"

"Vincent," she called. "You can come in now."

Entering the room, Vincent saw Mark's mouth drop open in disbelief, then he looked at her. "Catherine!" Mark exclaimed. "You said he was different. Boy, isn't he just! Does he speak?"

"Yes," she replied. "He does speak, beautifully. You should hear him read Shakespeare, Shelley or Keats. It is a delight, I assure you."

Walking over to the bed, Vincent held out his hand. "I am pleased that we meet at last!"

The soft, velvet, cultured tones left Mark stunned, and it took a supreme effort for him to murmur his "me, too" reply.

He watched in silence as Vincent lifted the large old chair with ease and placed it next to the bed for Catherine. Once she was seated, Vincent perched on the bed across from her. How Mark longed to ask the obvious questions of *'how'* and *'why,'* but knew their answers didn't really matter. He knew instinctively that Vincent was a man he would welcome as a friend and companion.

Catherine's voice cut through his thoughts. "We thought it was time you met the rest of the people who live here, so we need to talk."

He nodded. "Yes, we do. Tell me about this place. Where are we?"

She looked across at Vincent, then began. "We are deep below the city. This is a place forgotten by man, an old and secret world

and it must remain so. If our world was ever found by those who live Above, it would mean the end of everything. We have chosen to live together as one community, some were born here, some came because the world Above has rejected them."

"And Vincent?" Mark asked, his eyes travelling to meet the blue eyes above him.

"For me," Vincent answered. "There is no choice. This is the only home I have ever known. I could not live Above. I would not be 'allowed' to live there."

"No," the young man agreed. "I don't suppose you would. Don't be worried, I'm not likely to tell anyone, and, anyway, I don't think I'll ever go back. There's nothing left for me there. I have lost my ability to dance and there is no other meaning to life for me."

"Right!" Catherine said. "Then will you join us for our evening meal tonight. Vincent will come for you around seven."

As they were discussing their plans, Mary came quietly into the chamber to sit with Mark for the rest of the morning. Setting the breakfast tray on the chest of drawers, she exchanged a few words with Catherine, then the couple left to take up their tasks for the day.

Vincent was again working on the excavations in the lower tunnels, and Catherine was due to take an English class with the younger children. She loved this, and at the moment was especially delighted as they were reading *'The Chronicles of Narnia'* and poor Aslan was still tied to the stone table.

Growing weary of watching Mary's needle weaving its way

through various fabrics, Mark waited eagerly for Catherine's return. She came each afternoon to read to him and he treasured their time together. He watched as Mary began to put away the garments she had been working on, and before long, Catherine was in the doorway. Once again, she was wearing one of her track suits, he wondered what she would look like in a dress, and thought that whatever she wore, the effect on him would be exactly the same.

"Good afternoon, Mark." He was treated to the warmth of her smile. "Ready to delve back into the world of Dickens?"

"As always," he replied.

The two women exchanged a few words in a general way, then the elder left to help William prepare the evening meal. Sitting in the old chair, Catherine opened the leather bound volume of '*David Copperfield*,' and began to read.

"Catherine?"

She looked up from the book. "Yes?"

"Tell me about Vincent."

"What shall I tell you?"

"How can he be content and happy looking as he does? How can he live, knowing that up there he would be a freak?"

Catherine sighed. "He seeks nothing from Above. This is his home. We know Vincent, we see the man he is and the soul within him. That is why he is loved by everyone, believe me, Vincent is beautiful."

"Do you really think '*beautiful*' is the right word?" Mark asked. "He

is strange, unusual, I agree, but you are the beauty, Catherine."

Blushing, she gave him an embarrassed grin. "You certainly know how to flatter a lady, even if she is much older than you!"

They laughed together, breaking the tension. She picked up the book and insisted on continuing until it was time for Mark to get ready for the evening meal. His first meal with the rest of the family.

Entering the chamber, Vincent greeted the young invalid. The only response he got was a curt, "Hello."

"Is there anything I can get you?" Mark was asked.

"Sure," he replied. "A new set of legs."

Vincent ignored the bitterness in his tone and continued. "Father says you are strong enough to get out of bed and join us for your meals now."

"What does Father know about it? What do *'any'* of you know about how I feel? You live down here away from reality, sheltered and safe. You know nothing about the pain and suffering in my world!"

A voice cut into the conversation, it was Catherine. "We all know a great deal about suffering, Mark. For most of us, our suffering brought us here."

He laughed harshly. "Oh, yes, Catherine, I can see the pain and suffering written all over your beautiful face!"

She walked over to a set of small drawers which Father kept records in. Opening the second one, she withdrew a brown

envelope and walked toward the door, giving it to Vincent as she paused. "I'm going to get changed now. Show Mark this and tell him how you found me, then perhaps he will know how well we understand his pain."

Vincent looked at the envelope he held. "Are you sure, Catherine?"

"Yes, very sure," she left silently.

Settling into the chair at the bedside, Vincent began his story.

"One dark night, five and a half years ago, I was walking in the park. Keeping in the shadows of the trees, I watched a van with three men in it. They tipped out of the door what, at first, I thought was a bag of rubbish. Once they had gone, I went for a closer look. It seemed to be a bundle of blood-stained clothing. That bloody bundle was Catherine."

"What had happened to her?"

"She had been.... attacked, beaten.... and mutilated. She had been left where no one would find her to slowly bleed to death." He put his hand inside the envelope to withdraw the photograph he knew was there. Catherine had removed it from the files in her office. She had never been able to destroy it, but it had remained in the drawer for a long time. Now he offered it to Mark.

"This is Catherine?"

"Yes, after Father had stitched her face," Vincent confirmed.

"Why?"

"Why doesn't matter. At first we thought she would die, she was so weak, and death's icy hand held hers for many hours. Within

her though was a strength of spirit even death could not conquer. Much later, plastic surgery removed the evidence from her face. Her courage, her ability to care for others, to give of herself, healed the scars on her soul. Even now she gives so much, it never ceases to amaze me."

Mark was lost for words, and he muttered almost to himself. "I didn't know."

"There was no reason for you to know, until now."

"She is so beautiful, Vincent. It seems hard to believe she could have come through an ordeal like that intact."

Vincent smiled, and his blue eyes shone as he told Mark. "Yes, she is very loved. Each time I look at her, I marvel anew at all she is and of all she has become to me, to us all."

The young man smiled. "You really do love her, don't you, Vincent?"

"Yes," Vincent told him. "Once, years ago, when Catherine saw my face for the first time, I regretted the way I looked, I wanted to hide my face from her because it had frightened her. She even changed that.... and now I am content.... even with my differences."

Mary came into the chamber, carrying fresh clothes. "They say women can talk!" she scolded. "Vincent, you are supposed to be helping our young guest out of bed!"

"I am sorry, Mary. We were talking about Catherine."

Vincent pulled back the covers to lift Mark into the chair. This done, he returned the photo to the brown envelope and replaced it in the drawer. Mary and Vincent helped Mark to wash and dress,

then he was carried through the strange and alien world to join the family.

The large room was full, as it usually was, for the evening meal. Vincent came in, carrying Mark with little signs of the long burdensome journey. Mark was made comfortable in a chair by Father's side, and Vincent sat across the table from them. They were already eating when Catherine arrived, a vision in dark blue velvet, which almost took Mark's breath away.

"Mark, you made it!" she exclaimed.

"With a lot of help from Vincent," he admitted.

She collected her meal and sat next to Vincent, facing Mark.

Mark grinned. "I thought we had missed you."

Vincent explained. "Catherine insists on changing for dinner, even though it is not the custom Below."

"It's a habit I find myself unable to break," she announced.

Father took her hand. "And a charming one, too."

As her hand was released, Mark noticed, for the first time the simple gold band which told him that somewhere there was a husband. How had he missed seeing it before? Perhaps he hadn't wanted to see it, because now he had to accept that there was a husband somewhere. He wondered if this was a husband she had left Above, or one no longer in either world.

By the time the evening meal was finished, Father noticed how tired Mark looked and asked Vincent to take him back to his bed. On the way back to the Hospital chamber, Vincent told him of the

room being prepared for him amongst the chambers of the other members of his new found family. The soft, deep, soothing tones relaxed Mark and, still in Vincent's arms, he drifted off into a deep sleep. Hardly aware of being placed between the warm blankets, he slept soundly and his dreams were only of her, of Catherine.

When Vincent returned to his own chamber, he was surprised to find his wife undressed and in bed. Now, he understood the pain beginning to invade his head, it was her pain. "Catherine, you are unwell!"

"No, it's just a headache, nothing more. I think I'm perhaps a little over-tired, that's all."

He moved to the bed, sat down leaning against the pillows, and lifted her head, resting it in his lap. Closing her eyes, she settled herself as his fingers stroked her frowning forehead. "Is there anything I can get you? Perhaps if I spoke to Father...."

"No, I'll be fine. I feel much better now you're here."

Lifting her in his arms, he kissed her with such tender care, she felt as if she would melt in his hold. Covering her face with kisses, gentle as the touch of butterflies' wings, he felt the tension leave her. Pulling her into his lap, he cradled her against his body and, eventually, she fell asleep. Still able to feel the nagging pain, Catherine's sleep spared her from, he would not risk waking her, so he pulled the covers around her body and, although still wearing all his clothing, left her to spend the night in his arms. When she awoke, his blue eyes were gazing intently at her. Cramped and stiff, she realized the whole night had passed, and she doubted he had slept at all.

"Vincent, why didn't you get undressed and into bed?"

"You were so comfortable, so at peace, I could not disturb you."
He stroked her hair. "The pain is gone now," he stated.

"Yes, you know it has, but you'll be getting a headache next. Did you sleep at all?"

"A little.... enough." He smiled and his eyes twinkled and shone, sending bright shafts of shimmering sunlight into her soul.

"Oh, Vincent, I do."

"Yes, I love you too, Catherine," he whispered. "I think it is time we roused ourselves and got ready for breakfast."

"Do we have to?" she pleaded, lifting her hands to stroke his face.

"Yes."

"But I don't want to." Raising her head, she kissed him, pressing her body against his.

"Nor do I, Catherine. And if you continue like this, we shall miss breakfast and perhaps lunch too." He took her arms from around his neck, where they rested. "It will only cause concern if we are missing. Come.... we really should move now."

Unable to resist the opportunity, she kissed him again. "Perhaps we could come back after breakfast?"

"Perhaps," he agreed, brushing his lips across her forehead. The disentangling himself from her persistent hold, he left to wash and change, insisting she do the same.

They arrived breathless, but on time, in the large communal kitchen. People were milling around, collecting food, exchanging

news and talking, mainly about Mark Hanson. They had been pleased he had joined them the night before and Father was being inundated with questions about him. He sat wearily by his son's side. "Our young man seems to have made quite an impression last night, Vincent!"

"Have you seen him this morning?" Catherine asked.

"Yes, my dear, I called in earlier. He seems rested and I think we should consider moving him into his own chamber soon." He gave his son a questioning look.

Vincent inclined his head. "Whenever he is ready, all is waiting."

Father seemed quite enthusiastic. "Then let's do it, right away!"

Catherine sent a look of pleading across the table to her husband, who only smiled in return. "Could we leave it until this afternoon, Father?" he asked. "Catherine and I have something which demands our attention this morning."

A puzzled look crossed Father's face. "Certainly, if you two have something of importance which will not wait?"

Blushing slightly, Vincent replied. "Yes, it is.... important, and it will not wait." He reached for her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. It was Catherine's turn to blush now.

Mary, sensitive as she always was to the unspoken communications between the couple seated at the table, and seeing Father about to question further, diverted his attention to other everyday matters which needed his involvement. The four finished the meal chatting about the many aspects of the day-to-day cares of the community. A secretive smile spread over Mary's face as she saw Vincent rise, take his wife's hand,

whispering. "Come, we have unfinished business to return to."

Catherine giggled. "Perhaps?"

"No, definitely!" he told her as hand-in-hand they left.

The questioning glance Father sent to Mary would have turned to one of understanding, had he followed the couple out of the kitchen. One they rounded the corner taking them into one of the main tunnels, Vincent swept her clear of the ground and into his arms and, with squeals of delight from Catherine, ran as fast as he could towards their chamber. Just before the passage leading to their destination, he stopped, reached into his jerkin and produced the *'Do Not Disturb'* notice.

"There," he commented, as he hung it from the bracket.

"You should have been a Boy Scout," she teased.

"A what?" he sounded surprised.

"A Boy Scout. You know.... the motto.... *'Be Prepared'*."

"Yes, of course," he laughed. "You are teasing me again. Be careful. You may get more than you bargained for."

Kissing him she asked, "Is that a threat or a promise?"

"Both," he whispered. "Like any other true cub, I always do my best!"

"Prove it!" she challenged.

"With pleasure!" he accepted, carrying her into the waiting chamber.

The same evening found quite a gathering in Father's study. Mark had been carried there by Vincent. Mary, Catherine and Father followed soon after.

The whisperings indicated a secret which was revealed when Peter arrived with a wheelchair. "This should help," he announced. "Access will still be difficult to quite a number of the tunnels, but you can move about the main living areas without having to wait for Vincent to take you."

"Thank you, Peter, " Mark said simply.

"No," Peter contradicted. "It's not me you have to thank. Catherine organized this for you."

Mark beamed. "How can I ever thank you, Catherine, you are always so thoughtful."

"Think nothing of it. I would have done the same for any of my family. You need to be able to get about on your own. This chair was the obvious answer."

Vincent helped him into the chair and he began to propel himself around the chamber. Everyone was delighted, Mark would now be able to regain some measure of independence. Father opened a couple of bottles of wine, by way of a celebration, and time sped by.

"I am sorry to call a halt to the festivities," Vincent told them, "but I will have to take Mark back now. I am on watch tonight."

Father shook his head. "There is no need, Vincent. Mark is more mobile and I think we should be able to manage between us."

"If you are sure," he said, donning his cloak. "I shall be on my way."

Catherine rose from her chair and followed Vincent to the entrance. Mark watched, unbelieving at the scene which was played before him. She slid her arms around Vincent's waist and he held her close in an embrace she clearly welcomed. The kiss which followed left Mark in no doubt that it would not have ended there had they been alone! The words they uttered spun around in his head, leaving him unable to even think!

"You look tired," Vincent kissed her once more. "And you have a headache again! You really should try to rest more, Catherine."

"Vincent, you know I never sleep well when you're not there with me," she replied with undeniable sadness.

"I know, but go to bed and rest. I shall join you about three-fifteen." His strong hands caressed her small slender body, his reluctance to leave her was obvious.

"I'll be waiting," she said.

"You always are, when I'm late." Releasing his hold on her, he lifted his hand to stroke her face, then turned to leave.

With horror, Mark looked around the chamber, but no one seemed to have noticed all he had just witnessed. They chatted away without a break. His mind refused to accept the exchange, yet how could he deny it. He shook with emotions too strong to be pushed back, as he thought of the parodies of hands touching her lovely body, knowing now that she welcomed Vincent's touch above all others.

"Mark, is something wrong?" Father asked.

Shaking his head, he replied. "No, I think it's only tiredness. I would like to go to bed now."

Peter and Mary went with him to his new home. Once in the chamber, Peter left to return to the company of his old friend.

"Mary?" Mark asked.

"Yes?"

"When Vincent left us, Catherine told him she would see him later. She said she would be waiting for him."

"That's right."

"They are.... sharing a bed?"

"Of course. What did you expect?"

"I didn't know. I thought they were just friends." He looked bewildered.

"No one has told you, have they? We just took it for granted that you would know."

"Know what?" Mark sounded desperate.

Mary dropped the bombshell. "Catherine is Vincent's wife."

"When?" was all he managed to say.

"Three years ago, almost four now. It was the most memorable event I have ever witnessed. One we never dreamed would happen."

Feeling angry, hurt, disappointed, he probed, "I know he found her in the park five years ago, and I know what had happened to her. Has she been here since then? I understood she had returned Above. Vincent said something about plastic surgery?"

Mary sat in the chair, knowing she would have to explain things to

him. "Yes, Catherine only stayed with us for ten days, then Vincent took her home. They did not see each other for months, but he could not forget her. A strange link had been forged between them in the short time they were together. We have never understood how this works, but it does. Somehow he experienced all the strong feelings she did, he knew all that happened to her as if he were there with her. After much heart-searching, he went Above to see her. None of us knows what happened that night. Catherine told me it was she who refused to let him go."

"So they have been together since that night?"

"No, Mark, it was never that simple, not for them. For over two years they struggled to live, each in their own world. They met in the darkness, their time together brief and secret. The cost was heavy, the price they paid was too great! In the end Vincent had a sort of breakdown. He lost control and there was nothing we could do. Catherine was the only person he would let near him. She nursed him for months. His mind seemed to know only her. The rest of us, he would attack if we came anywhere near him. Once his health returned, she left him only long enough to arrange her own disappearance. On the anniversary of their first meeting, they married in the Great Hall."

"It all sounds so simple, so easy," he told her."

"No, Mark, not that. Their life has never been simple or easy. But they are together now and Catherine tells me she has all she ever wanted, that now she has a happy life."

Mark tried to probe further but she silenced him. "I think, young man, that you have had enough for one night. It's time you went to sleep!" Mary turned to go, pausing only in the doorway to call to

him. "Sleep well!"

How could he sleep at all, knowing what he knew now?

Senses alert as always, Vincent's mind travelled through the rocky maze of tunnels to Catherine. She lay in the darkness, candles all extinguished, under a heavy blanket of pain. He tried to reach through the pain, to ease tension, relax nerves and muscles, but the blinding agony blocked even their bond. There had been too many of these headaches of late, and too many excuses from Catherine. How could he convince her that she needed help, medical help?

Each time he had tried to persuade her, she refused to listen, to act, all she did was take tablets! Pain eased and softened as the drug took effect and Catherine began to feel taut muscles slacken. She wanted to feel human again, but knew he had shared her discomfort. When he returned, he would once again try to turn this small problem into a major issue and harsh words would flow. Still it was only his love and concern for her which caused him to react as he did, and she was thankful that she was the center of his life. Even if it meant she had to let him play *'Mother Hen'* sometimes. Lighting the candle at the side of the bed, she settled into the warmth of the soft covers, waiting for his return to fill the empty space at her side, as only he could.

DANCE TO A DIFFERENT TUNE

CHAPTER FIVE

The days of summer and fall were long past. The sharp bite of a winter evening chilled Jacqui and Elliot as they walked through the park towards the culvert. This was a night for celebration. Exactly one year ago, in the Great Hall beneath the city, they had exchanged their vows to start their lives together as husband and wife.

The invitation they had received was a surprise, but they were delighted. They both agreed on the author of the words.

*In honour of your wedding anniversary, we wish to
invite you to join us for a celebration dinner on
Saturday next at eight-thirty pm. We shall meet you
at the culvert at eight pm.*

Vincent and Catherine Wells

Catherine would have written with a less formal style, although the tone of the communication held the same warmth for them. On this special night, they could want nothing more than to be within the companionable love of these two dear and trusted friends.

When they reached the point where grass covered the slope down into the dead leaves littering the concrete culvert, Elliot stopped and glanced about him to insure no one was within sight before they walked down to the meeting place. Just inside the large pipe, he saw the black shape of Vincent's silhouette. Nearing the opening, he squeezed Jacqui's hand as he saw Catherine's head peeping out from inside the black cloak. As Catherine managed to

untangle herself from the ample folds, he saw why. She had not dressed for the cold of a winter night. Looking stunning in copper velvet, she treated them to a warm smile. Almost as if he could read the thoughts in Elliot's mind, Vincent said, "Catherine ventures out without suitable clothing, then wonders why she is cold?"

Elliot grinned. "Don't tell me you object to what she is wearing? She looks great from where I'm standing."

"Yes, Vincent replied. "Catherine *'looks great'* from where I'm standing too. But I felt she should have worn something warm over it!"

Jacqui cut in. "What! And ruin the impact of that dress? I'd freeze to death first!"

"Spoken like a true sister," Catherine said. "Men never understand, do they?" She looked at her husband. "And I didn't sense any reluctance on your part when I asked if I could share your cloak!"

They all began to laugh, and Vincent stepped forward to take Jacqui's hand, leaving Catherine to follow with Elliot, who placed his overcoat around her shoulders. Together the four friends strolled through the underground passages to the place Vincent and Catherine called home.

The chamber had never been really large enough, even for Vincent, so when he married Catherine, they had looked long and hard for alternatives. Neither could bear to leave the chamber which held so much of their past within the facets of its walls. After hours of consultation with maps and diagrams, Vincent and

Mouse began the painstaking work on the rear wall, which gave them a series of alcoves, one of which was their '*dining room*.'

Tonight, Catherine had taken great care and the rough hewn area took on the atmosphere of a fairy tale grotto. Dark polished oak gleamed in the candlelight, china and glass sparkled and shone. But most remarkable of all, in the centre of the table, were the exotic orchids and lilies of peach and cream, identical to those Jacqui had carried on their wedding day.

"Elliot, look!" she turned to Catherine. "You remembered! Where on earth did you get them at this time of the year?"

Catherine grinned. "From the same place as last year. You have your husband to thank this time, too!"

A pink blush spread across Elliot's face as Jacqui turned and kissed him. "You are an incurable romantic! Underneath that hard business-like exterior, there beats a heart of pure gold. Thank you."

She kissed him again, then noticed Vincent waiting to take her coat. He removed it gently, then took Elliot's coat from Catherine and laid them both on the bed.

"Come, sit," he invited. "We are, I understand, ready to eat."

The meal was a delight, and Vincent looked at his wife with pride as he told their guests that she had been solely responsible for the evening's provision.

As they drank their coffee, Elliot murmured his, "Excuse me," and went to his coat on the bed. Delving into the inside pocket he produced a bottle of brandy. Catherine looked at the label, she was impressed. Elliot loved quality in everything. She opened the

tall cupboard to produce four tall, slender, crystal tumblers.

The night wore on, and Vincent became aware of a growing discomfort, a strong tightening about his head. When he looked at Catherine, her quickly averted eyes told him how desperately she was trying to hide this fact from him.

Around midnight the guests left, promising to visit again at Winterfest. Vincent led them Above while Catherine cleared everything away. Absorbed in the task and the growing pain which threatened to split her head in two, she was unaware that Vincent stood in the doorway watching her until he spoke, "Another headache, Catherine?"

"It's nothing really, just the excitement."

The glimmer of anger in his eyes told her he had not accepted the excuse. He sighed. "No, Catherine, it is not just the excitement! Why do you pretend this is not happening? These headaches are becoming more frequent. You must do something about it!"

"Please, Vincent, can't we change the subject. I'm tired. All I want to do is get everything cleared away and go to bed."

Raising his voice, he took hold of her arms. "You cannot ignore this! I will not go along with this charade any longer! Please, Catherine, if only for my sake, for my peace of mind, seek some help!"

"All right, I will," she agreed.

"When?"

"Soon."

"No, Catherine," he persisted. "If you do not sort this out right

away, I shall speak to Peter myself! I will not stand by doing nothing while you suffer like this!"

She sighed now. "Tomorrow, Vincent. I'll send a message to Peter asking him to see me as quickly as he can. There, are you happy now?"

"Happy?" He shook his head. "How can I be when I feel your pain. But I will rest easier in the knowledge that it will not continue."

Together they finished putting the chamber to order, settled themselves in the large bed, and were soon fast asleep.

Sensing Catherine's awakening, Vincent also woke. He watched as the woman he adored moved and stretched her slim body. Pushing back the desire to touch the warm smooth skin, he waited for her eyes to open to him. This was always a moment he treasured. The first sight of him each morning filled her eyes with such love, he watched eagerly for that recognition, and swift on its heels the most intense feelings of joy and elation washed over him from her. In that split second of unconscious response, Vincent knew the great beauty she saw in him, understood and felt the truth of it in her heart.

This morning, when the long-lashed lids fluttered, then opened to reveal the deep soft green eyes, the look she gave him left him speechless again. The wonder was there, old and familiar yet new and fresh, and stunning!

"Vincent?" she whispered.

"Yes?"

"What time is it?"

"Early yet, a little after dawn. Why not try and get some more

sleep. You still look tired."

He drew her into his arms and they lay facing each other. "No, I don't want to, and I know you have no work planned for today. You could leave Father a note and we could stay here together."

"Catherine," he said softly. " 'You' have something to do this morning. You are supposed to be arranging to see Peter."

"That will do anytime, please, Vincent!" she begged, as her lips began to travel across his neck, then down the broad chest.

"Please.... love me!"

" 'NO!'" He pushed her away from him and began hastily putting on his clothes.

The green eyes became glassy as they filled with tears. "Vincent, what's wrong? What have I done, tell me."

He turned away, his voice sharp and indignant. "How could you, Catherine? How could you abuse our love in this manner?"

Tears flowed freely now. "I don't know what I've done, please believe me!"

Clenching his fists, he turned again to face her, and the anguish she saw in his eyes frightened her. "You tried to keep me here with you, to avoid facing the fact that you are ill! Rather than see Peter, you would use yourself, and me, in this way, believing I would not.... could not refuse. Well, I do! You will arrange to see Peter and you will do it this morning!"

He picked up his cloak and moved towards the doorway.

"Vincent!" she called, kneeling on the bed.

He turned back. "Well?"

Between the sobs, she told him. "That wasn't my intention, I promise. I will contact him.... today. Please, don't leave me like this! I really did want to. Oh, Vincent, just come back and hold me. Please! I can't bear it when you're angry...."

Determination was stamped on his face as he replied. "I will be back, when you have contacted Peter, and not until then!"

Suddenly, he was gone, and throwing herself down onto the bed she cried until tears refused to come, then lay there, dry sobs wracking her body, until sleep claimed her. Almost two hours later, Mark entered the chamber and was shocked to see the ravished, tear-stained face. He wheeled himself over to the bed.

Lifting himself from the chair, he struggled onto the edge of the bed, waking her.

"Oh, Mark!" she almost threw herself at him and he wrapped his arms about her as she cried uncontrollably. "He's gone!"

This was how Father found them a few moments later. He tried to withdraw but Catherine had seen him, so he could not. "Father, he's gone! He was so angry. What am I going to do?"

He looked at the two of them locked in each other's arms and misread the situation. "Just what did Vincent see?"

"See?" she asked, then realized what Father was thinking. "No! Mark has just arrived. I've used him as a shoulder to cry on, nothing more, you must believe me!"

A sigh of relief left Father's lips and the expression on his face told her clearly that there had never been any question in his heart of her loyalty to his son. Limping over to the bed, he saw Mark move himself back into his chair and turn towards the entrance.

"Well, Father," he said. "I think I have just become redundant."

"Thank you, Mark!" Catherine called after him.

"Anytime. What else are friends for?" came the reply as he disappeared.

Sitting in the old chair, Father noticed, for the first time, how upset Catherine was. By the state of her face, she had cried for hours!

"Catherine, can you tell me what happened?"

Raising her eyes to him, she reminded him of some lost, frightened child. Unsure and hesitating, she told him. "We had an argument.... I have never known him so.... angry.... not with me, not like this! He.... shouted at me.... then stormed out!"

"What on earth did you argue about?"

"I have not been well. Nothing specific.... headaches, tension, tiredness.... that sort of thing. He wanted me to see Peter, and because.... because I didn't jump and run to do it right away, he shouted at me and left. He said he won't be back until I've done what he wants!" She was crying again.

"He's that worried?" Father asked.

"I think so.... no. I know he is!" she confessed. "But I don't know why. What shall I do?"

Taking her hands in his own, he gave them a gentle squeeze.

"First things first," he told her. "Shall I send a message to Peter for you?" He received only a nod as an answer. "Then, my dear, I will go and talk to Vincent. Where can I find him?"

"He didn't tell me. He just went!" Dry sobs caused her body to tremble.

"Catherine, please! Try and remain calm. Think! Use the bond which unites you; reach out and try to find him."

Lying still on the bed, she made a supreme effort to relax her body and pick up what clues she could to help locate him. At first, there was only the bitterness of his anger, then the fine threads of his worry for her, no, not just a worry, more fearful than that. She stayed with him taking his emotions into herself, then she began to probe beyond. A tendril of dampness seeped into her and she could sense water falling from a great height. Something hard and cold beneath him. "He's by the twin falls, Father," she announced triumphantly.

Smiling, he told her. Then as soon as I have sent a note to Peter, that is where I shall go. Try not to worry, this will be sorted out, you have my word."

Leaning on his cane, Father made slowly for the passage leading back to the main tunnel. His heart was heavy and filled with concern for the daughter he had left behind. Knowing she had begun to weep again the moment he left her. He could not stem the flow of her sorrow, nor could he offer comfort and reassurance. Only his son could do that, and for the moment that was impossible. He found it difficult to accept that Vincent had walked out on her, leaving her in such a distressed state, whatever the provocation.

Having seen Catherine's grief, he wondered just how he would find his son, aware that their connection meant that they each felt the other's anguish. The ache in his hip almost turned him back, but the determination in his heart added one more step to the last. Reaching the destination Catherine had sent him hurrying to, he

felt drained and weary. Turning into the opening, Father could hear the sound of falling water ahead, and he saw his son sitting on the large flat boulder, staring into the sparkling white cascade. Vincent didn't move as he sat beside him, and the older man felt almost invisible. They sat together in silence for some time.

"Father, you should not have come." The whisper broke the stillness between them.

"I had to. Do you realize what this is doing to Catherine?" he asked his son.

"How could I not? You know how strong our bond is. Even the breadth of a country could not separate us. Here, there is no chamber deep enough to distance me from her pain. Her tears of sorrow burn into my heart as if they were drops of acid."

Father began to recognize the feelings of anger and frustration building inside him. "Then why do you do this to her, to yourself?"

Sighing, Vincent answered. "Perhaps this is the only way." Tears fell from the pain-filled, haunted eyes.

"Tell me, Vincent. Why?"

"She is ill, Father. There is nothing I can do and she will not seek the help she needs."

Placing his arms about his son's shoulder, he questioned. "Was all this really necessary? A message has gone to Peter, you must know that, but you have made no effort to return. Why?"

"I will, Father, soon. When I am more at peace," he answered softly through the tears.

"Vincent, you know more than you are telling me. What is wrong

with Catherine?" Father persisted. "You know, don't you?"

His son gave a brief nod. "Yes, I do. She is in great pain at times, and then I become aware of some.... invasive presence.... here." He touched the back of his head, just above his neck. "She is so ill, and yet she resists help."

"Dear God!" Father exclaimed. "Does she know?"

"I sense no realization within her," he replied.

"You should have told her the truth. It may have hurt her less than your anger."

"Father, I have found it hard enough to accept myself. I could think of no other way to ensure she would send for Peter, and I could no longer continue denying the implications of this.... problem."

Vincent rose and, offering an arm to Father, accompanied him back to the main living area. He could sense the exhaustion of grief as it carried his wife into sleep again. He settled Father in his own chamber with a drink, before heading home.

A stab of guilt and anguish thrust its way into Vincent's soul as he stood gazing down at Catherine. She lay on her back on top of the covers, one arm thrown, almost protectively over her head as it rested on the pillow, the other arm lay limply by her side. The swollen, tear-stained face pointed accusingly at him. *'This,'* he thought, *'is my fault. Father was right.'* As he was about to turn away, Catherine's eyelids fluttered and opened.

"Vincent," she whispered.

The intensity in her soft eyes riveted him to the spot. The love and

joy in his presence he read there only served to make him feel worse. "Forgive me, Catherine." He knelt at her side and took her into his arms.

Tears shed together mingled, flavouring the hungry kisses they exchanged. Her hands, entangled in his hair pulled him closer. "Hold me tighter!" she pleaded. "Tighter!"

He held her to him with such force, she found it difficult to breath, but still she would not relinquish her hold on him, and he moved to lie alongside her. Wrapped in each other's arms, they lay unmoving, breathing in unison, each drawing strength from the other. Time passed and they began to relax. Soon the pangs of hunger gnawed at them both, they hadn't eaten since the previous day.

Whilst Vincent was away organizing food for them, Catherine washed and changed. On his return, he noticed that she wore make-up in an attempt to hide the remaining evidence of her tears.

Placing the package of sandwiches and cakes on the table, he walked over to the chair she sat in, leaned forward and kissed the top of her head, asking. "Can you ever forgive me?"

"You know I already have!" she told him.

"I had no right to be angry, to treat you as I did. My concern for your well-being made me behave in an unacceptable manner."

Moving over to the table, Catherine opened the food package, then began to make tea. "You only wanted me to see a doctor. I was unreasonable, but it is behind us now. A message has gone up to Peter, you are here with me, and I'm starving. Let's eat."

During the late afternoon, after Vincent had left for his turn on watch, a message arrived from Peter Alcott saying he would come Below after dinner to see Catherine. Because the letter had been delivered by hand, Catherine knew her husband would be unaware of this. Throughout the evening meal, which she ate with Father in his study, she hardly spoke. He had felt her concern and had invited her to a private meal with him to enable her to be more relaxed, to avoid her being asked questions she would prefer not to answer.

Tapping along the pipes announced Peter's arrival Below. Catherine looked at her watch, eight-thirty. Vincent would not be relieved for another half hour. Thanking Father for his company and his understanding, she made her way back to her chamber. She had undressed and was waiting in a towelling robe when Thomas arrived with Peter. Making a thorough examination, he could find no simple solution. He was just explaining to Catherine that she would have to go Above the following morning for tests, and was returning his instruments to the black bag, when Vincent arrived slightly out of breath.

He had hurried to his wife the moment he had been relieved, knowing from the pipe communications that Peter was Below. He rushed into the chamber casting a questioning glance at both Peter and Catherine.

"I have done all I can here, Vincent. There are some tests I need to carry out which are impossible Below."

Vincent nodded in reply and looked at Catherine, who sat on the

edge of the bed putting on her nightgown. Tension showed in her every movement, and he was by her side in three long strides. Gazing down at her, his heart lurched as he saw the sad green eyes gazing back. Kneeling, he took her hands in his, brushing his lips across their knuckles.

"I have to go Above in the morning, Vincent. The equipment Peter needs to finish his examination is all up there."

"I understand," was all he said.

When Peter was packed and ready to leave, Vincent insisted on escorting him out, but Peter told them he was going to see Father first. Vincent still insisted on walking with him the short distance. They left in silence, but once away from the chamber, Vincent asked, "Have you any idea what is causing Catherine's illness?"

"Not yet," Peter replied. "I need the results of more tests before I can make a diagnosis."

"You will organize a scan?" Vincent asked.

"Yes. I think it's going to be needed, don't you?" Peter looked concerned, this could be far more serious than he first thought.

"I do," came the confirmation.

"Then you have already ruled out the more mundane causes?"

"Yes."

"Vincent, if you think you know what the problem is we could save a lot of time."

"And if I am wrong?"

"I don't think you can be, not where Catherine is concerned. What

do you think I should be looking for?"

"Something.... invasive."

"Dear God, I hope you're wrong!" Peter told him.

"No more than I do, Peter, no more than I do."

The two men said their goodbyes and parted company. One to visit an old and trusted friend, the other hastening to the side of the woman he loved. Vincent and Catherine had little sleep that night, the concerns of the coming day lay too heavy on their hearts. Dawn found them walking through deserted tunnels in an uneasy silence.

As the world Below began to stir, the couple made their way home to prepare for the day ahead. Around nine, after breakfasting in private, they emerged in the basement of Henry and Lin's restaurant. Lin was waiting for Catherine and would accompany her during the time-consuming tests. Vincent took Catherine in his arms and placed a single kiss of reassurance on her forehead.

"I will be waiting here when you return," he told her.

"Vincent, there is no need. I could be all day. Lin is with me, it's not as if I'm going to be on my own."

"Catherine," he insisted. "I will be here!"

She knew there was nothing to be gained by arguing with him, he was so determined. So with a quick kiss on his cheek, she said, "I'll see you later then," and left with Lin for Peter's office.

Three tense, awkward days passed before Peter came Below with the test results. The couple waited impatiently as he was escorted

through the labyrinth to their home. Entering the chamber, his body language spoke volumes. The news wasn't good and Vincent went immediately to stand behind Catherine, wrapping his arms around her.

"Well?" he asked.

Peter shook his head. "There is a growth of some kind at the base of the brain. It is swelling and this is causing the pain."

Catherine was horrified. "What can you do?" she asked.

"It will have to be removed!" she was told.

Catherine burst into tears and Vincent turned her in his arms, holding her close to his chest. She seemed dazed, as if she heard no more as Peter continued to explain the risks involved in the surgery she needed. Speed was essential and Peter had taken the liberty of booking her into a private clinic the following day. He had also contacted the Burch's, and Jacqui would be waiting Above to be with Catherine during this difficult time. As it was well after eleven by the time he had finished explaining everything, Peter decided to go straight home. Catherine hadn't spoken at all, but she knew Vincent understood all that was to happen, so Peter felt it best to leave them alone together to come to terms with this sudden change in their lives. Vincent walked him to the nearest exit point, thanked him for all he had done, then hurried back.

Entering the chamber, his eyes were drawn to his large oak chair where Catherine was curled into a small, distraught ball, crying. He strode over to stand before her, reach out, and gather her into his arms. Carrying her over to the bed, he pulled back the covers and laid her between the soft comfort of the blankets. "Catherine, please do not weep, you must go Above to be made well. There is

no other way."

"I don't want to leave you," she sobbed. "I don't want to go through this without...."

"Without me?" he questioned. "We both know that cannot be. You have friends Above. You will not be left alone with this. If I cannot hold you in my arms, I shall hold you in my heart, every moment we are apart."

"I know," she told him. "Even this can't separate us, can it?"

"No, nothing every will. You do believe that, Catherine?"

"Always."

He wrapped the covers around her and lay on top of the patchwork quilt behind her, running his long fingers through the silky softness of her hair. Fear crept slowly into him, her fear, concerns of what the morning might bring. He wanted to assure her all was well, but he could not.

"Vincent," she asked. "Please, get in with me. I need to feel you close. You must know how scared I am. I'm desperate for a cuddle."

Smiling, he rose from the bed to remove his clothes. "Catherine, I could want no more than to hold you to me forever."

As he placed the garments on the chair, she removed her night dress, needing to feel the soft warmth of his body against her own.

Pulling back the covers, he saw she was naked, but she still lay curled up with her back to him. Slipping between the sheets, he lay against her back surrounding her small slim body. They

rested, unmoving, for some time whilst he sent the love from his heart flooding into hers, warming the icy coldness of fear which had settled there. Moving her hair from the slender neck, he brushed his lips over the pale, exposed flesh. A plaintive whimper freed itself from her soul, escaping through half open lips as she began to respond to the naked nearness of him.

Acutely aware of her arousal, he was helpless to prevent his own body reacting. He moved to pull away from her.

"No, Vincent, don't!" she pleaded, wriggling backwards to close the tiny gap he had made between them.

Tightening his hold on her, he found the heat of her body overwhelming him with the desire to bury himself deep within her. He wanted, no, needed to love her, to send her pain and fear back into the darkness where they belonged.

Feeling him harden against her thigh, she moved to let the demanding erection lie between her legs. The feathery softness covering his chest was warm along her spine, its texture enticing and stimulating. She moved slightly, and without conscious effort he found himself inside her body.

Sighing in contentment, Catherine took his hand from her waist, moving it to her breast, he slipped his other arm under her to cup the other breast in his large palm. Strong, adoring fingers caressed the fullness he found, and he barely heard the whispered "Please!"

He moved within her with a slow leisurely motion, born not of a frantic passion, but of a need to comfort and be comforted. Each movement took him deeper into the welcoming heat, his breathing became ragged as he responded to all that which flowed within

Catherine. There was no quickening of the languid pace as he sought release in her. He was aware only of the trembling of her deliverance.

Stillness descended on them, neither moved. He was still deep within her as the silken skeins of sleep gathered them up and carried them away. Catherine slept well for a while, despite the turmoil within. But Vincent woke again in the early hours and found her dreams disturbing. Gently he shook her and she woke with a start.

"You were having a nightmare, Catherine," he explained. "I thought it best to break the hold it had on you."

Breathlessly, she told him, "It was awful! I was dreaming about the operation, they wanted to.... they wanted to...."

"Remove your head," he finished for her.

"You shared it with me?"

"Yes."

Sitting up, she asked, "What time is it?"

"Just after four," came the gentle reply.

She groaned. "Oh, no! I'm not meeting Jacqui until eight-thirty, and there's no way I'm going to get back to sleep now!"

Pulling her back into his arms, he suggested. "Then, why don't we go for a swim? The water may help relax you a little?"

Within half an hour, they were floating in clear, cold water and he could feel some of the stress leaving her body. Swimming length after length of the pool she felt the knots of tension slowly unravel as she pushed herself through the water with as much speed as

she could. Keeping up with her was no problem for Vincent, but after about half an hour of this frantic pace he felt her tiring. Pulling in front, he blocked her way, as she came to a halt she glared at him, angry at his intervention. The depths of concern in his deep blue eyes drowned her temper in waves of love. Standing, she held her arms out and as he reached for her, she began to cry.

"Catherine," was all he said. The intensity in his voice caused her to tremble.

"I'm so frightened!" was all she managed to say between the tears.

"Me, too!" He told her. "Remember when we celebrated the second anniversary of our meeting? You said then that whatever came , we would endure."

Indicating her remembrance with a nod, he continued. "Hold those words to you, Catherine. Draw strength from the knowledge that we will endure. We will overcome the oppression of this testing and be together again."

He led her from the water, wrapped her in a huge towel, then carried her back to their chamber. Together they gathered all the things she would need for the stay in the hospital Above. This task finished, they walked to the communal kitchen for breakfast.

Catherine was not permitted food or drink, but doubted she could have gotten anything down anyway. She watched with concern as Vincent pushed the food around his plate. The room was crowded but silent, and Father looked around unable to believe so many people could be gathered together and make so little noise. Some simply slipped away, others quietly smiled, all too worried to even

speaking. Mouse and Jamie made their way through the tables to her. "Come back soon!" The young man said as he held tightly to Jamie's hand.

"We will be thinking about you, Catherine. We will all miss you." The young woman's eyes misted with tears and she hurriedly dragged Mouse away.

Others came to wish her well, then left. Only Father and Mary remained with the couple. "Catherine," Father said. "There is so much I want to say to you, but so few words to choose from. None of which can begin to express all I feel. I told Vincent once, a long time ago, that I would keep watch and pray for you, for both of you. If my prayers will bring you safely home to us, then you will not be away long." He leaned across the table and kissed her forehead.

Standing, Mary took Father's hand. "Catherine, our prayers and love go with you. Come back to us safe and well." Pulling Father's hand, she ushered him out of the chamber.

"It is time we also left, Catherine," Vincent told her. As they walked from the quiet, empty kitchen, she glanced back and sighed, wondering just how long it would be before she sat with her family again, and her fear told her that she may never.

Reaching the familiarity of their chamber, she collected her coat as Vincent walked over to the glass fronted cupboard and took out a small parcel. "You cannot take a photograph of me with you, so I want you to have this."

She opened it eagerly to find four tape cassettes. He held out the Walkman she had brought with her from Above and two packs of batteries.

"What's on the tapes?" she asked.

"A few old friends," he replied. "Some '*Shelly, Byron, Keats Rilke*' and, of course, '*Tennyson*'."

"Who by?"

With a twinkle in his glance, he answered. "Me. Peter and Father have been helping me to compile them for some time. They were to be a gift for our anniversary, but I want you to take something of me with you."

A deep smile caused her eyes to dance. "How wonderful. I can take your voice with me now!"

"Yes, " he replied, picking up the case. He placed an arm about her shoulders and together they made their way to the basement of Dr. Wong's shop, and the future which destiny would choose for them.

DANCE TO A DIFFERENT TUNE

CHAPTER SIX

Time dragged for Jacqui and Elliot as they waited in the shop storeroom. Jacqui should have come alone, but Elliot had been unable to settle to anything and he wanted these two dear friends to know they had his full support. Just after eight-thirty, they heard noises coming from the tunnel entrance behind the old cupboard which had been moved away to reveal the break in the brickwork. Elliot could wait no longer, and vanished into the opening to find Catherine and Vincent coming in the other direction. They almost collided. The three emerged to find Jacqui smiling at the sounds she had heard which told her of the near accident.

"I'm glad you both came," Catherine told them.

"It's the least we could do," Jacqui replied. "We want to help all we can."

Elliot took his wife's arm. "Come on, we'll wait upstairs. These two need a few minutes alone."

"Don't go!" Catherine pleaded. "If I have time to think about this, I might change my mind!"

The gentle, deep voice of her husband agreed. "Catherine is right, it is time you left."

Vincent held his arms out to his wife, who walked into them and rested her head on his chest. He was facing Elliot as his arms closed about her, and he looked directly at him with pain and longing in the blue expressive eyes. The message to his friend was clear and simple. *'Take care of her for me.'* Elliot returned a silent nod in answer and the blue eyes softened, filling with tears.

The strong arms released their hold and with infinite tenderness, he removed the crystal from Catherine's neck. Placing it in the pouch which hung from his own neck, as he had promised her he would. He turned Catherine to face their friends. She was distressed and weeping. It was obvious that Vincent had turned her away from him because he could not see her pain and let her go.

Vincent struggled to keep his voice from breaking as he said. "Thank you, Jacqui, Elliot, for all the love and care I know you will give to my wife." Sighing, he continued, "Catherine, go now. It is time. Please say nothing and do not look back."

She did as she was asked. Walking up the steps, she followed Jacqui out, then Elliot followed. As he reached the top of the stairs, Elliot paused and looked back before he closed the door. A lump came to his throat from nowhere, threatening to choke him as he saw Vincent lean against the wall, fighting to regain control as tears flowed down his cheeks. Sliding down the wall, Vincent sat huddled on the floor, his whole body shaking with the burden of anguish he carried. Elliot could not remain silent.

"Vincent, I promise you, we will not leave her alone with this. And we will bring her back to you, believe me."

Between the sobs which tore through the mighty frame, Vincent managed to reply. "I know. But I should.... be there, for Catherine. She is my life.... if anything were to happen. Go now, please!"

Closing the door behind him, Elliot made his way to the car with Catherine's suitcase.

No one spoke on the way to the private clinic, and the hour it took to get there was one of the most difficult hours of their lives. The

admission was quickly completed and the patient settled into bed. Mr. and Mrs. Burch were asked to leave and come back after lunch when the doctor had been to see Catherine. The goodbyes were awkward and hesitant. Eventually, a reluctant couple left their friend to the ministrations of the medical staff, promising to return in the afternoon.

A night passed and another day dawned. The sun rose as usual, birds sang, there were joggers in the frosty air of the park. The world Above began another day of noisy activities.

Below, the usual hum of the day was muted by the concern all felt. Work was completed in a haphazard way. Some threw themselves into their tasks with gusto, hoping the heavy pace would help stop them worrying. Others found it impossible to settle to anything constructive, their worry too all-consuming. Father was deeply disturbed by the way his son fled to the depths of their world, alone with his grief.

Finding it difficult to come to terms with the feelings of dread in his soul, Vincent had sought the sanctuary of the secret, quiet places, where even the sounds of his world could not be heard. Darkness enveloped him, wrapped him in eternal night. Statue-like, he sat there, his mind joined to another many levels above his head. Knowing she was alone, he sent all the love and comfort he could, to rest in her soul, to strengthen her spirit.

Aware of her becoming drowsy, he knew it was almost time for the surgery. He held her to him with chains of love, stronger than any links of man's forging, nothing would break their hold. The sense of movement was strong, then a rapid loss of awareness as the anaesthetic took effect. There was a gentle, numbed probing, he

surmised the operation was underway and soon the growth would be removed, then tested to reveal its nature. Even though Catherine was unaware of what was happening to her, he stayed as close as he was able, convinced that somehow she would feel the comfort of his presence, the reassurance of his love.

Surgery took hours, and by its end, the effort he had made to remain with her exhausted him. Sweat beaded his brow and he was breathless and weakened. Alone in the darkness he slept, as Catherine did Above, but as the first fine filaments of consciousness began to creep into his mind, he awoke.

Expecting Peter to come Below with news, Vincent began the long torturous journey back to the inhabited sections of the underworld he knew so well. The combination of his unusual visual abilities and an almost super-human strength, enabled him to cover distances in a few hours which would have taken other men days. Just before the evening meal, he walked into Father's study as if he were returning from a leisurely stroll.

"Ah, Vincent, you are back. Peter has just left, and the news is good." Father greeted.

"Well?"

"The growth has been removed. It was, as you suspected, a tumour, but a benign one."

Vincent let out a deep, ragged sigh, which seemed drawn from the very depth of his soul as he sank into a chair to bury his face in his huge hands. He seemed unable to speak, but the shaking of his shoulders spoke of the tears which flowed under the cover of his hands. Father walked to his son's side and placed an arm around him, holding him to his body. "It's all over, Vincent. She is

going to be all right!"

For some time they stayed there, the father bringing comfort to the son. Eventually, the tears subsided, Father released his hold, and Vincent stood.

"Father, did Peter say when Catherine will be able to come home?"

"It is far too soon to be thinking about moving her. It will be some time before her homecoming can be given any thought. But she will be coming home, Vincent, she will! The crisis is over now, and I find my appetite has returned. Will you join us for dinner?"

"Yes, Father, I think I will!"

Arriving at the huge kitchen, they sat with Mary and Mark. On their way, a stop had been made at the Pipe chamber, and the good news echoed around them, first on the pipes and then by mouth. Smiles greeted them as they joined the happy chattering throng gathered for the main meal of the day. Mark seemed thrilled at the news, saying how much he had missed Catherine reading to him over the past days, and that he looked forward to hearing her voice again soon.

Once the meal was over, the members of the community left in better spirits, and some of the children had managed to persuade Mary to let them stay up late to make '*Get Well*' cards for Catherine.

Walking through the tunnels that night, because sleep eluded him, Vincent checked each sentry post. He was just on his way to have

a word with Simon, when the young man came hurrying towards him clearly out of breath.

"Simon, slow down," Vincent said. "What is this errand which causes you to hurry so?"

"Note," he replied breathlessly. "For you.... urgent!"

Vincent took the neatly folded paper, and Simon returned the way he had come. On the front of the note he read the words, '*For Vincent----Please try to deliver before midnight.*' He knew it was almost that now, so he unfolded the paper and read;

Vincent,

I expect Catherine to regain consciousness later tonight. If you get this note in time, wait at the rear of the clinic. I shall be there from twelve-thirty for about an hour. If this comes too late, then come tomorrow night at the same time.

Peter

Clearly, Peter wanted him to be near when she awoke, perhaps there was more news. His strong legs broke into a run, he stopped once, to send a message along the pipes. '*All is well. I am Above. I shall return before morning. V.*'

Soon Above, he began to negotiate the twists and turns of dark alleys and old forgotten places, until he arrived at his destination with only a few minutes to spare.

Gazing up at the structure before him, he tried to locate her, but could not. Suddenly, Peter's face could be seen at a third floor window. Vincent climbed the fire escape, entering the window under the cover of darkness, and the two men exchanged a

greeting. Vincent realized he was in Catherine's room and his heart skipped a beat at the discovery.

"Vincent, I can only give you a moment or two. I'm sorry it can't be more."

"Peter, this is far more than I expected." He looked down at the pale figure in the bed. "She looks so ill." He touched her cheek and she moved in response to his gentleness.

Peter Alcott pulled a chair up to the side of the bed and gestured for him to sit. "I think she knows you are here, Vincent."

"Yes," he smiled. "She does."

Her eyelids fluttered, then opened, revealing eyes which gazed at him unfocused and glassy. Walking around to the other side of the bed, Peter gently removed the yards of tubing and wires to one side. "I'm sure she would like to feel your arms around her, Vincent. Just take care not to dislodge anything."

"Perhaps it would be better not to take any risks," he refused, looking woefully at his hands.

Understanding his reluctance, Peter told him. "I am the doctor here, and for Catherine, you are just what this doctor orders." He took the long, hesitating arm and guided it through the maze of monitoring equipment to rest on her back. "Now the other."

Vincent complied with some reluctance, but no resistance. The moment his arms were safely around her, he gathered her to him with a gentleness which surprised even Peter. Peter sighed. "I'm sorry I can't leave you two alone, but the moment I leave the nurse will return. I sent her for a short coffee break, that's all."

"I understand," came the whisper.

Catherine's eyelids fluttered again and opened. The cheek which rested against the massive chest moved as if she were trying to burrow into him. "Vincent?" she murmured. The great head bowed and he gently kissed her forehead just below the bandages, tears filling his eyes as she tried to reach up to touch his face and failed.

"Vincent, you're here?" she mumbled, half-drugged.

"Yes, I'm here. Peter arranged it."

Catherine tried to focus on the other figure and found it difficult. "Thank you," she managed just before she drifted back into sleep. Lying her carefully back on her side, Vincent kissed her tenderly.

"Sleep now, Catherine. Sleep and heal."

He turned to Peter. "I will never forget all you have done for us, you have been a true friend, as always. There are no words I can speak which will tell you how much these moments have meant to me.... to us."

Peter rested his hand on Vincent's arm. "I'm sorry, but you'll have to go now."

"How long will it be before I can take her home?"

"We won't know for some time yet. It all depends on Catherine," he answered. "But I shall try to arrange for you to see her again in a few days."

They exchanged a brief farewell, then Vincent melted once more into the night.

Father dozed in the chair, waiting for his son's return. He had no

idea where Vincent had been, only that he had gone Above just after midnight. Almost bounding into the room, Vincent woke the slumbering man.

"Father, Father. I have seen Catherine."

"What?" The question came, as he rubbed sleep from his eyes and stretched.

"I have been with Catherine! Peter arranged everything!" He paced the room with excited energy. "She spoke my name! She knew I was there!"

"Sit down, Vincent, please! You are making me quite dizzy." He pointed to the chair by the large desk. "Now tell me."

Complying with Father's request he sat, but still continued to move his arms around in an animated fashion, which seemed completely out of character.

"Peter had Catherine placed in a room near the fire escape. He sent the nurse to get a drink and said he would call her when he was ready to leave. I went up the fire escape and in through the window next to it. Then I saw it was her room." Stretching out his arms in front of him, he continued. "I held her, I held Catherine!" Tears filled his eyes again. "It was wonderful!" He could contain himself no longer and rose from the chair to begin pacing again.

Father's aching bones and the long wait had all been worthwhile. The joy and happiness radiating from his son had indeed been worth the discomfort and the loss of sleep.

"Well, Vincent, that is news truly worthy of your present excited state, but these old bones need their rest. I don't think you will sleep much tonight, but I shall." He got up to leave. "Goodnight,

Vincent."

"Goodnight, Father. Sleep well."

Once Father had left the chamber, his son extinguished the candles, leaving only one burning in the darkness as he went to walk the tunnels and rejoice.

Catherine woke the next morning to the white-walled room, her head aching and heavy. The nurse at her side smiled.

"Good morning, Mrs. Wells. Doctor will be along to see you soon." She rose and left the room. Opening the door, almost silently, Doctor Sellwood came in and stood by the side of the bed.

"Well, how's our patient this morning?" Catherine managed a groan. "That bad?" he asked. "Well, I have some news guaranteed to make you feel much better. Firstly, the growth we removed was not malignant. You should make a complete recovery. Secondly, there are two friends waiting outside to see you, if you feel up to visitors."

"Who?" she managed, wincing with the pain in her head.

"Mr. and Mrs. Burch. They have been here since eight. I'll get the nurse to give you an injection for the pain. What shall I tell your visitors?"

"I would like to see them, please."

Dr. Sellwood left and the nurse returned to give her an injection. The pain receded straight away, and without a word, but with a broad smile, the nurse left again.

Catherine waited eagerly for her friends and, as the door opened,

she was greeted by a huge bunch of red roses, and knew Elliot was behind them. "Come in, you two," she called softly.

A hand came from behind the flowers and opened the door fully, Jacqui entered followed by Elliot's legs underneath the bouquet.

"Hello, Cathy," Jacqui greeted her, as she perched on the side of the bed. Elliot placed the roses on the table and beamed.

"Elliot, you shouldn't have. I have never seen so many roses in a bouquet before. You must have bought the shop!" Catherine told him.

Jacqui smiled. "He did! You know what he's like. I had great difficulty in preventing him from bringing a champagne breakfast with us."

"Only the best for Mrs. Wells," he joked. "Well, how's the invalid?"

"I feel like the '*Bride of Frankenstein*'!"

Laughing, Jacqui told her. "You look more like the '*Revenge of the Mummy*'!"

They chatted for a few minutes in the light, uncomfortable way which accompanies most hospital visits, until a knock at the door introduced Peter Alcott to the scene. Elliot and Jacqui took their leave, promising to return that same afternoon with a surprise visitor.

Once she was alone with Peter, Catherine asked. "Last night.... was it a dream?"

"It was no dream, Cathy. He was here."

"When can I go home to him?" she asked, green eyes pleading for an answer she would welcome.

"A few days yet, I'm afraid."

The disappointment showed in her face and the full lips turned into the sulky pout which she had used to great effect as a child. It was just as appealing now. Peter spent some time talking about the operation and the need to rest. The morning sped by and he left just before lunch to attend to his other patients.

Catherine had some soup and bread, the nurse seemed pleased. She slept in the early part of the afternoon until Jacqui and Elliot returned with their surprise. When she saw Ella, Catherine was thrilled and watched her cross the room.

No one watching would suspect Ella was blind, or, even with that knowledge, would guess it had been only two years ago that her sight was taken from her in the accident which robbed her of both her parents. Her mother and father had both been Helpers and as Ella had no other family, she had taken a place in the family Below. Once her grief had passed and her confidence restored, she had returned Above. Elliot and Jacqui had been very involved with her recovery and it was Elliot who gave Ella a job on the switchboard in his skyscraper office block, and sent her for training. Catherine had nursed her through the worst moments of grief, knowing the terrible heartache of being left an orphan. Ella's spirit and courage had seen her through the terrible time of testing, and enabled her to come to terms with her blindness. Catherine had often marvelled at the hidden strength in one so young, who had lost everything, including a promising artistic talent which had won her a scholarship in France. It had all gone, vanished with her sight. Yet here she was confident and happy.

"Hello, Catherine. I just had to come." Ella told her as she sat by her side.

"Well, this is a surprise," she admitted.

"I've got an even bigger one for you," Elliot said.

"And what might that be?" Catherine asked.

"Ella is going to take some time off work to come Below, and help take care of you when you get back." Jacqui quickly slipped in.

Catherine smiled, even though it hurt. "There really is no need, but I do appreciate the offer."

Ella looked at her, the smile now gone. "When I needed someone, you were there. I once asked you how I could repay your kindness. You said that perhaps you would need someone to take care of you one day. I told you then that I would be there for you. Catherine, you can't refuse me. You have already accepted."

"Then the matter is settled," Elliot stated.

"It would seem so," Catherine admitted.

"Good!" Ella agreed.

Soon it was time for them to go and, after a light meal, Catherine readied herself for the night's sleep. She dozed fitfully until, around nine, the nurse came to give her the sleeping tablets which would keep her rested throughout the night. The morning came dull and grey, offering nothing to lift Catherine's spirits. Peter called in around eight on his way to his office.

"I can't stay more than a few minutes," he told her. "I have a very busy day. Is there anything you need?"

"No," she replied. "Nothing I can have." Then she remembered the tapes. "But I can have a little of him, if you'll pass me the blue bag from the bottom of the locker."

Casting her a puzzled glance, he did as he had been asked. As he opened the bag to reveal the contents, he gave her a smile of complete understanding. "I thought these were for your anniversary?"

"They were, but Vincent wanted me to bring them so I could listen to his voice when I felt alone and was missing him."

"Then, Cathy, it's time I went and left you two alone together."

Making sure the machine and tapes were close at hand and she was comfortable, Peter left to start another work-filled day. Her slender hand reached for the small machine, a life-line for her soul. A technological miracle that would link her to the man she loved. The tape clicked on and Catherine settled back into the pillows. Nestling into the depths of his voice, she imagined herself lying in her own bed, her husband by her side. '*He was reading to her*', she told herself, as he often did. Reading in that quiet, gentle, smooth, toe-curling way which made her heartbeat quicken. Lost within the velvet tones, she was unaware of the love which poured from her heart to flow into another's beneath the city.

Vincent's hand halted mid-move, Father cast a questioning glance. "Catherine?" he asked.

"Yes," came the soft answer. It told him clearly that nothing was amiss.

"She is all right." It was a statement more than a question.

Vincent nodded his head. "Catherine is listening to the tapes I recorded for her. The feelings they evoke are so strong. I can almost hear my own voice speaking to her."

Father smiled. "Then it would seem our game is over."

"Not over, Father, merely postponed. I am afraid I am unable to concentrate at the moment."

"Then we shall resume our battle later."

Vincent rose from the chair and walked slowly to his chamber, never once leaving her presence. Lying on the bed, he closed his eyes, then his breathing became shallow. He seemed asleep but the dream he experienced was real and alive on the other side of the mighty metropolis, listening to the sound of his voice as he listened to the beat of her heart. The next day came and went, as did the week. Jacqui and Elliot visited twice a day and often brought Ella with them. Vincent had slipped into the hospital again at the end of the week, but his leaving left Catherine so distraught he refused Peter's offer of a third visit, halfway through the second week. By the end of the fortnight, everyone agreed the time was right for Catherine Wells to return home.

The Monday morning dragged by as doctors and nurses finished last minute checks. After what seemed forever, eleven o'clock came and the Burchs arrived promptly. As planned, Catherine was taken to their home by ambulance with a nurse in attendance. Once her patient was comfortable, and clear instructions had been given to Jacqui and Ella, the nurse returned to the clinic. The journey had been long and tiring, so Catherine slept through the afternoon, and had to be woken when Peter arrived at eight. It was already dark, and only when she was told if she did not eat something it was back to the clinic, was she prepared to try the fish Jacqui had prepared for her.

Even the luxury of the Burch's sleek car did not spare her the discomfort of another journey. The fresh bandaging felt tight and

stiff, her head felt as though it had been shaken violently and it reeled. Catherine had to lean heavily on Peter as they covered the short distance from the roadway in the park to the drainage culvert and home.

DANCE TO A DIFFERENT TUNE

CHAPTER SEVEN

Light flooded from the tunnel through the opening usually sealed by the stout steel door. Vincent paced back and forth in the small area where the tunnels met. Seconds became hours, minutes became days, as he waited for the nearing Catherine. Exhaustion descended on him from her weakness. Her longing to see him, touch him, to be back where she belonged, surrounded his soul. His own conflicting emotions, mixed with hers, left him anxious and uneasy, but as he heard the footsteps he froze in excited anticipation.

As they emerged from the tunnel, Peter was almost carrying Catherine. Green, pain-wearied eyes gazed up at Vincent, silently pleading for his hold. One step more and she was in his arms. He held her to him, she clung to his clothing in desperation, whispering his name over and over. Vincent lifted her into his arms to carry her home, repeating the first words she had ever heard him speak.

"You're safe, you're safe now."

Peter followed with Ella, needing little effort to keep up with Vincent, for he carried his burden with great care. Having been warned by Peter not to jar or touch her head, He took no chances with his pace. By the time they reached his chamber, she was asleep in his arms. He walked straight to his chair and sat without disturbing her rest.

Peter gave Vincent very detailed instructions about the care and rest his wife needed, then he took Ella off to see Father. Almost two hours later, after news had been exchanged and Ella settled

into the guest chamber, Peter returned. Vincent had not moved. Catherine, still cradled in his arms, slept peacefully.

"It's time we got her undressed and into bed," he told Vincent.

"Must we? She is at peace. It seems wrong to disturb her rest."

Peter shook his head. "If you are going to take care of her, it must be done properly. Catherine's medication is due. If you do not give it to her on time, then we'll lose the control we now have on her pain."

"I understand. I shall do whatever is necessary."

"Even when it means doing things you are uncomfortable with?" he questioned.

"Yes, I will do as you ask," Vincent assured him.

"Then let's get her ready for bed."

Vincent shot him a possessive glare which clearly said *'hands off,'* then he relaxed and said, "I will wake Catherine and undress her. Do not concern yourself. I will take great care not to cause her any distress."

"Okay, Vincent, but don't put her into bed. I will come back in about fifteen minutes and show you how she must be laid," he stressed as he left the chamber.

"Catherine, wake up," Vincent said softly as his lips brushed hers, then a little louder. "Catherine!"

Slowly, her eyes opened and, as they saw the face before them, love flooded into their depths. Vincent felt the joy which poured from her at being back with him once more. "Vincent, I'm home?" she questioned.

"Yes, you are home," he replied. "Now, You must get undressed for bed. You have to rest.... to recover.... to heal." He carried her over to the bed and sat her on its edge. She noticed the blue night-dress on the pillow and wondered how long it had sat there waiting for her. He followed her eyes. "Since you left," the unasked question was answered. "As I have waited."

The task took time and a great deal of skill, he felt clumsy and awkward, but he was gentle and did not hurry. Once she was ready, she leaned heavily against him for support. Reaching into the pouch lying against his chest, he took out her crystal and restored it to its owner.

When Peter returned, she was sitting in Vincent's lap, held in the security of his arms. Seeing them together like this convinced him that they had made the right decision in returning Catherine to her husband so soon. Contentment radiated from them, and beyond that a unity which defied explanation and understanding. As Peter walked to the bed, Vincent rose with Catherine still in his arms.

"One pillow under her head and the rest behind her," Vincent was instructed as Peter arranged the bedding.

She was laid gently down on her side, as Peter had said. They packed the pillows and cushions behind her to stop her rolling onto her back. Then Peter gave her an injection, explaining that he wanted to be sure she had a long sleep, but he would leave tablets for the night time in future. Catherine was to be turned every three hours and woken at nine for her medication, her only movement from the bed was to be to visit the toilet. Becoming groggy, Catherine reached out her hand. Vincent took it in his own and sat with her as the drug took effect.

Peter insisted he would find someone else to guide him back

Above, as he wanted Catherine to feel Vincent's presence as she slept. He took his leave of them, promising to return the following night. A box of dressings and bandages had been left for Father, and he could come and check the wound after breakfast. There was nothing for Vincent to do now except to sit with her, to keep her safe. He gazed down at the sleeping form knowing now she was home, nothing would hinder her recovery.

DANCE TO A DIFFERENT TUNE

CHAPTER EIGHT

Almost a week had passed, a week in which Catherine had seen few people. Father, ever mindful of her need for quiet, had told everyone to wait until she was more rested before they imposed the stress of visitors on her.

Ella was the most regular visitor, spending each morning by Catherine's side while Vincent slept in the guest chamber nearby. Vincent usually left his wife around nine, after he had helped Father change the bandages. Then he rested until about one and washed and changed, he returned to her side around two. When he returned, Ella would bid her charge goodbye until the next morning. Father permitted occasional visits from others who dwelt Below and Mary tended to Catherine's personal needs with Vincent.

Mark had pestered Father for almost a week. Every day since Catherine had been back he asked for a visit. In the end Father gave in and said he could have half an hour, no more. Wheeling himself into the chamber, he saw the bandaged head on the pillow, she was asleep.

"How is she?" he asked Ella, barely glancing at the girl he spoke to, his eyes were only interested in the sleeping woman.

"She sleeps most of the time, but she is getting stronger every day."

For the first time, Mark looked closely at Ella, thinking what a remarkable young woman she was, and quite pretty, too. He thought how cruel fate could be to take away the sight in her lovely brown eyes, and the use of his once strong legs.

"Why are you watching me?" Ella asked him.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stare, it's just.... well, I couldn't help noticing how well you cope."

She smiled. "We all have to adapt, Mark, to respond to the changes in our lives."

Catherine began to stir and they both turned towards the bed.

"She is getting restless," Ella said. "Vincent will be back soon. Catherine is always unsettled when he has been away for some time."

Ella worked her way over to the bed to take hold of her patient's hand, stroking it slowly. "Have you eaten yet, Mark?"

"No, why?"

"I thought, when I have finished here, you might like to have something with me. I hate to eat alone," she remarked.

"Yes, sure. Why not?" He wondered why he felt so pleased.

"Vincent?" Catherine whispered, opening her eyes.

Ella gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "He'll be back soon, try to lie still."

A few moments later, Mark noticed Catherine's eyes lift to the doorway, just before her husband walked in. With three long strides, he was by her side. "Good afternoon, Lazy Bones," he teased.

"You're back?" she said, stating the obvious, he just smiled.

Ella crossed to Mark, telling Vincent they were off to get some lunch. As always, his thanks for the care of his wife were profuse

and, as always, she told him it was a pleasure, a labour of love.

For Catherine, the second week Below passed with unbelievable slowness. Because she was not sleeping the hours she had previously, boredom set in. Never before had she felt such restlessness, and as she strengthened it got worse. Eventually, Peter and Father agreed to her being allowed to get out of bed and into the chair for an hour or two each day. This was only permitted when Vincent was with her as he knew when she felt tired. Then he would insist she rested. She could fool others, but because of all they shared, she could never fool him.

Fifteen days Below had passed when the decision was made that the bandaging could finally be stopped. Vincent had smiled when, after Mary had brushed her hair and left it in two plaits at either side of her head to keep it tidy for the night, Catherine asked him. "Well, how do I look?"

"From the front or from the back?" he asked.

"From the front where other people see me?"

"Beautiful, as always," he assured her.

"And from the back?"

Tilting his head slightly, he said. "Do I have to answer that?"

"That bad?" she questioned.

"At the moment, yes, but it will heal. The hair which has been removed will grow again. You are well and nothing else matters!"

"Vincent?" He waited for her to continue. "It is almost a month since my operation, and I was wondering about.... er.... about...."

"Winterfest?"

"Yes, Winterfest. It's only a few days away now, and I do want to be there. It wouldn't feel right if I couldn't go."

"No, Catherine, it would not *'feel right'* without you," he admitted. "I will talk to Peter about it, but now it's time for you to take your medication."

From the table he took a glass of fruit juice and the tablets and brought them to Catherine, who was sitting in the bed waiting.

"I hate these!" she told him.

Vincent laughed. "You had better take them. Peter will not be easy to persuade that you are well enough for Winterfest, unless you get your beauty sleep. You do need your rest."

She took the tablets then settled between the sheets, lying on her side, facing him. He placed the row of pillows along her back to stop her rolling over in her sleep, then got undressed himself and slipped into bed.

"Vincent?" she murmured, half asleep.

"Yes?"

"I do love you." She drifted off as the drug took effect. Even in its strong hold, she felt the lips on her forehead and his soft "Sleep well, my love," before the darkness of sleep descended. He dozed fitfully by her side, turning her twice in the night as he had promised.

When he turned her away from him, he moved the few strands of her hair away from the back of her head to examine the wound. It was healing well, and the anger was receding from the scar. Small

shafts of fair hair were beginning to show, as the miracle of nature worked its wonders on the operation site. He was content. She was improving, growing stronger with each passing day, soon she would be well again.

He rose before dawn to sit in his chair and read until he felt her waking body calling to him as it emerged from the clouds of sleep.

Children hurried through tunnels carrying the candles they were to deliver, wonderful smells drifted through chambers near the kitchen, endless lists of *'things to do'* were made. Winterfest was so special, so important, everyone worked hard to ensure its success.

Two days of frenetic preparation, then the big day came. Tables had been laid, wine and beer carried down to the Great Hall where the celebrations would take place. Members of the small community had gone Above earlier and were guiding Helpers Below, when Vincent went for Catherine.

"Well?" she asked as he stood in the doorway of their chamber. He could not speak, could not find the words to tell her how wonderful she looked.

The full-length fitted gown was of satin, the colour of fine jade, plain in design, round-necked, with long fitted sleeves. Flaring her hips the rich fabric fell in deep folds around her ankles.

Catherine's long, fair hair curled about her shoulders, and on her head a deep cream lace veil sat, flowing down her back to hide her scars. Overwhelming Vincent with her stunning beauty, she reminded him of some grand Spanish countess, drawn from a bygone age. As if she knew exactly what he was thinking, from

behind her she brought the large silk fan. Vincent smiled and she laughed. "Like it?" she asked.

"You know I do!" she was told, as he crossed the chamber to take her into his arms.

Just to feel the warmth of her body against his, gave him a sense of sheer delight, and the strength of his hold gave her the reassurance that all would be well.

Carrying her through the tunnels had never been a hardship for Vincent, but he noticed how much lighter she was and he made a mental note to ensure she was eating properly. AS he turned into the opening which gave access to the long stone staircase, the wind hit Catherine with its full force and she gasped as it took her breath away. With a look of concern, he wrapped his cloak tightly around her, almost burying her in its depths. She saw nothing until they reached the large doors leading into the huge chamber.

William, Mouse and Pascal struggled to open the double doors, which Vincent had always done with such ease. But they knew he would never trust his burden to another, so they gave their all to the task and the gigantic panels of oak swung wide to reveal the darkness beyond. Everyone stood waiting, looking at Vincent, their message clear. He and Catherine were to go first. Stopping just inside the chamber, he turned to watch as others followed him in.

All took their places and once again the candles were lit as the story of their world was recounted by those who knew it best. Later, the music started and the sombre reminder of the early struggles was left behind.

One of the large armchairs had been brought down and filled with

cushions. Vincent placed his wife amongst the soft padding, raising her feet with a footstool. She sat feeling quite regal as, one by one, friends and family came to her to talk.

When at last she was alone, Vincent came and sat by her side. "Do you have time for your poor, neglected husband now," he teased. "Or must I wait to be granted an audience?"

"Oh, I think I can squeeze you in at the moment!" she joked back.

Watching the dancing, he felt a pang of regret in Catherine that tonight she would not dance in his arms as she had done in the past, and he shared her momentary sadness.

"Hey, look at those two!" she said suddenly, looking directly at Ella and Mark. They were deeply engrossed in conversation. Ella could not see it, but the young man never took his eyes from her face, and within the dark depths, adoration clearly shone.

"Vincent, I think we have something developing between those two," Catherine commented happily.

"Catherine," he agreed. "I'm sure we have. Ella has taken over reading to him in the afternoon. Once she had sat the morning with you, the two of them lunch together, then they are not seen again until the evening meal. You are missing out on all the gossip!"

Her whole face shone with delight. "How wonderful! We do have a romance blossoming."

Just at that moment, Pascal came down the staircase to speak to Vincent.

"Elliot and Jacqui are waiting at the park entrance. He has just sent his name code along the pipes. Will you meet them or should

I ask someone to go?"

"Thank you, Pascal," Vincent replied. "I shall go myself. There are more than enough people here to ensure Catherine's every need is met."

He bent to kiss her forehead and whispered. "Do not attempt anything you know you should not, just because I am not here to watch you. Father will keep an eye on you, so you would be in trouble with him if you misbehave."

Mark watched Vincent leave the chamber, taking his cloak with him. He suggested to Ella that they keep Catherine company whilst her husband was away on whatever errand had taken him from her side. Ella moved behind his wheelchair and started to push it. Their whole journey across the floor was punctuated by hysteria as Mark gave his *'left a bit.... stop, right a bit.... stop'* instructions to Ella, who was attempting to steer a course towards Catherine. By the time they reached her side, the tears were streaming down Catherine's face as well as Ella's, and Mark was finding it impossible to continue giving directions. If Catherine hadn't shouted "STOP!" in time, the three of them might have ended up in a heap on the floor. They were both good company and chatted, laughed and exchanged jokes with her until Vincent returned with the Burch's over half an hour later.

Elliot had been forced to fly down to LA at the last minute but he and Jacqui, unwilling to miss the celebration altogether, had returned to share as much of the evening as they could. Within an hour of their arrival, Vincent began to sense how tired Catherine had become. He insisted they should return to their chamber. There was almost an argument about it, but he stopped her protests very effectively mid-protest by lifting her into his arms and

announced that she was tired and that they were both retiring for the night.

Once they had left, the party seemed to wind down quickly. Helpers were guided back to the surface and William began the task of clearing everything away. Mary took Jacqui and Elliot to the guest chamber which had been prepared for their overnight stay. Only a handful of people were left in the Great Hall, and once William had made sure everyone had a job to do, he came over to Mark and Ella with Mouse and Jamie. The five left, as they had come hours before. William carried Mark, Mouse half-carried, half-played with the wheelchair, and Jamie guided Ella back to the chambers above. Once Mark and Ella were settled, the three returned to their work. Much later, Vincent smiled in the darkness as his acute hearing picked up the sound of Ella's feet as they made their way along the tunnel in the direction of Mark's chamber.

Mark was unable to settle to sleep, but was surprised when, at almost half-past two, Ella walked into his chamber.

"Mark?" she whispered. "Are you awake?"

"Yes," he replied. "Come in, I couldn't sleep."

"Me neither. I still feel wide awake. It must be all the excitement." She made her way to the bed and perched on the edge.

"It was quite a party." Mark agreed. "I haven't enjoyed myself so much for a long time, and you helped make it an event to remember."

"Well, thank you for the compliment and the company, too. I

enjoyed myself as well."

"Ella?"

"What?"

"When are you going back Above?"

"Soon now. Catherine is improving daily, and now she is getting out of bed more often. I won't be needed much longer."

"Oh, I see," was his only comment.

Recognizing the sadness in his voice, she asked. "Does that tone of voice mean you are not looking forward to my leaving?"

Shaking his head, he told her. "We have become such good friends, you know I have difficulty moving about, so your afternoon visits will especially be missed."

"Then," she said. "I shall come and visit you every Wednesday night and on Saturdays, too."

"Good! But now I think it's time this visit came to an end. You have to be up early to sit with Catherine."

Getting off the bed, she headed straight for the doorway as if she could clearly see the way ahead. She left the chamber, pausing only to call back her whispered, "Goodnight."

Next morning, Ella looked pale and tired as she joined Catherine to sit in the chair by her bedside. Catherine didn't sleep at all in the morning now, and as Vincent left the chamber, the questions were pouring into her mind.

"Well, Ella, you've kept your feelings to yourself, haven't you?"

"My feelings about what?"

"Oh, come on. You and Mark, of course."

"I didn't think anyone knew how I felt about him. He only sees me as a friend, nothing more. He said so last night." Her voice was filled with disappointment.

Catherine reached across to take hold of her hand. "You are wrong, I'm sure of it. I saw the way he looked at you last night. Believe me, he has more interest in you than just friendship."

"Do you really think so?" Ella asked.

"I know so!"

The two women began to giggle, their laughter echoed around the chamber, stilling to an embarrassment hush when Mary entered to change the bedding. Catherine got out of bed and into Vincent's chair. Mary, moving the smaller chair Catherine generally used, so Ella could sit on the other side of the small table from her friend. Catherine sighed, Mary was still insisting on doing everything for her, even though she was quite able to undertake simple tasks if she took her time. Other subjects became the focus of attention as the two women enjoyed the tea Mary made for them, before she removed the soiled linen to the laundry. Jamie joined them for lunch and they talked at length about the night before. By the time Jamie left, it was almost two.

"Well," Catherine said. "Let's get back to the romance, tell me everything!"

"There's nothing to tell, he treats me like a friend, that's all."

Catherine announced. "Then we must do something about it!"

"Do something about what?" Vincent asked as he came through the doorway.

The two women began to giggle.

"Nothing to do with you, Vincent Wells! We were having a private conversation," his wife informed him.

He shook his head. "What are you plotting? I do not trust the mischievous twinkle in your eyes."

"Don't you two start arguing about me," Ella interrupted. "I'm off!"

"To see Mark?" Catherine asked.

"Yes, to see Mark," she was told. Ella took her leave and set off for Mark's chamber.

Vincent lifted Catherine out of his chair to place her in her own smaller one. She quickly wound her arms around his neck, placing small swift kisses across his cheek. Trying in vain to lower her into the chair, he let her stand upright as he reached to loosen the grip of her hands at the back of his neck. Tightening her hold, she sought and found his lips with her own, as the kiss deepened, his arms closed around her. It had been so long since they had last spent the night in each other's arms, in the embrace of lovers, and the separation was becoming too much to bear. Fighting a losing battle to retain control, he was relieved when Elliot and Jacqui came into the chamber.

"Sorry to disturb you two," Elliot apologized. "But Father is almost fostering visits to Catherine. If we don't see her now, it could be years before we get another chance!"

"Then you must make the best of this opportunity before you are forced to the back of the queue. I need to see Father so I shall leave you to amuse each other," Vincent told them and left.

The couple spent almost three hours with Catherine, only willing

to leave when Vincent returned with tea and cakes for his wife around five. During the evening, he was quiet, as if his mind dwelt on other things, and Catherine found herself feeling hurt when he didn't even leave the usual chaste goodnight kiss with her as she settled for the night.

Desperation set in over the next few days as Vincent continued to spend each night walking the tunnels or sitting in his chair. He avoided any physical contact between them, even asking Mary to help Catherine with any personal needs she still had difficulty with. Catherine came to realize she would have to battle her old enemy yet again, the enemy----fear. Vincent's fear of hurting her. He was too afraid to risk the desire he felt growing more demanding each day, breaking free of his tenuous hold. Even touching her was affecting him, so he knew that it was impossible to share a bed and keep a safe distance between them. Catherine began to wonder if she would ever feel the joy of his arms about her again.

Elsewhere in the underground labyrinth, Mark wondered if he would ever hold Ella in his arms, if he would ever have the courage to tell her how much he loved her. They were together more and more, until the time came for Ella to begin to plan her return Above. Two months had passed since Catherine came Below to recover, and Ella's work was finished. Mark had asked Catherine if they could have a talk, as he had a problem, and she guessed he wanted to talk about Ella. One afternoon, Mary had been persuaded to invite Ella for tea in order to give Catherine and Mark time together, so once Ella had left, she went to Mark's chamber. She made them both a drink then sat in the chair facing him, waiting for him to begin.

"Catherine, I asked you here in the hope that you can help me sort out something which is causing quite a few sleepless nights."

With a reassuring smile, she told him. "If it will help you and Ella, I will do anything I can, you know that."

"I know this sounds like a strange question, Catherine, but why do you love Vincent?"

"What a question to start with? You always ask such difficult questions. Why? Well, he is the most wonderful man I know. He is everything I could ever want and more. Sorry, Mark. It is so difficult to put into words. All I can say is that I love Vincent because he is Vincent, and that doesn't sound like a sensible answer, even to me!"

"Yes, it makes sense. Vincent once told me that when you first saw him, you were frightened of him. Were you?"

"Frightened? I was startled! I even threw something at him."

Continuing, he asked. "But in spite of his appearance, you grew to love him."

"Yes, and very quickly, too," she replied. "I know this may not make much sense to you, but in my eyes Vincent really is beautiful. I love everything about him, Mark, and I do mean everything!"

"What made you decide to come and live Below as his wife?"

"Where do you find these questions? she asked, blushing. "He had been ill, very ill. As he regained his health, we realized his memory had been impaired. At first he knew no one, only me, there were times when even my name eluded him. Then he would tell me, '*You are the woman that I love.*' Because he had no

knowledge of our past relationship, he accepted my presence in his bed without question. He had terrible nightmares, things which haunted his mind, things which he spoke of to no one, not even me. As his strength returned our bond did, too, only now it was deeper and stronger than before. I began to experience his emotions just as he had always felt mine. I knew then that I could not return to live in a world apart from him. I knew the time had come for us to be together."

Mark seemed surprised. "So, you gave up your life, your career, everything, just to be with him."

"No, Mark. I gave up a few things I had become accustomed to, and gained everything! When you really love someone, every moment you spend away from them becomes an eternity of waiting for the time you can see them, touch them, hold them again. I took a piece of advice I had been given a long time ago."

"And that was?"

"*'Follow your heart.'* I did and it led me to Vincent."

"Catherine," he sighed. "You make it all sound so simple."

"It is, Mark. Your heart will always lead you to love, never away from it. Have you told Ella you're in love with her?"

"How can I? She deserves so much and there is so little I can give her. She would be better with someone from Above, a man who can be a proper husband to her."

She could feel the anger rising within. "Why do all you men think you know what we want? You sound just like Vincent! Who gave you the right to decide what's best for Ella? Mark, tell her how you feel and let her decide where her future lies. If you don't, you'll

regret it for the rest of your life!"

She left him to think over what she had said, but her anger she carried with her. Mark was so like Vincent in many ways. He could not accept that he was worthy of a woman's love, believing because he was different, he was devalued and unworthy. It was only Mark's fear which kept Ella from his side, just as Vincent's fear had kept them separated, and was doing so again!

Catherine wandered aimlessly along tunnels, unaware of her surroundings. Her deep need to return their relationship back to all it was before her operation was a burden fast becoming too hard to carry. Catherine's feet, moving with an unconscious effort took her to a well loved spot. How she adored this magnificent cavern with its ribbons of bright water streaming over the edge of the high rocky ledge, merging at last with the cold depths beneath. Reflected light danced in the cascades, reminding her of the lights she had watched from her balcony. Those magic moments she had shared with Vincent, from their '*window on the world*,' remained within easy recall. Now the memory brought no solace, no sun shined in her soul, only an empty coldness where his nearness had been. Her mourning knew no time, recognized no passing hours, it left her numb, unable to feel the tiring of her body.

She had been missed and, although Vincent knew her desire was to be alone to think, when the evening meal came and passed without her, he decided to find her. Tentatively, his mind moved along the fine threads of their bond sensing water, space, and light buried deep within her anguish. A little further probing, and he knew which falls she stood before. The deep distress he felt radiating from his wife caused him to hurry. Knowing she needed this time to herself, he had withdrawn from the deeper links which

joined them as one mind. Remaining only at the shallowest level, would ensure her privacy of thought and feelings, but would still alert him to any danger. There were small pockets of fear in his Catherine's soul, but the grief he encountered there shocked him.

Vincent found her sitting on the rocky ledge looking out over the water. The sorrows weeping from her soul saddened him.

"Catherine, what are you doing down here?" he asked gently.

"Trying to recapture something, recalling the past."

"Why, when it awakens such terrible emotions in you?" he questioned.

"Because I have no choice. I need to remember." She moved to sit on the cushions which had been left there where she brought Ella on a visit two days earlier.

"Can you not share this with me? I know you are deliberately shutting me out, Catherine. Why?"

"Because our relationship has taken a step backwards. No, not a step, a leap into the past and I needed to remember what it was like for us in the beginning. This isn't exactly a balcony, but it's the nearest I can think of," she told him.

Puzzled as to her meaning, he commented. "You are not making sense. Our love has never been deeper, our bond never stronger."

"You think so? Then why are we still sleeping apart? Why do you avoid touching me, holding me?" she demanded. He did not answer, only lowering his head, unwilling to meet her eyes. "No! You can't tell me, can you? When you used to come to my balcony, we spent hours in each others' arms. That was the

memory I wanted.... needed to recapture. You were afraid then, afraid to love me, but eventually you did. In that love our bodies joined, as our souls had already done. Now, again, I feel that fear, distancing me, shutting me out. I can understand your fear, but I don't even have the comfort of your arms now." She began to cry. "The fight to overcome your fear then was hard and long. I haven't the strength to fight it again."

"Catherine, " he whispered, the pain in his voice reducing it to almost a strangled gasp. "You have undergone major surgery. If I were to catch your head, I might undo all they have done for you. How would I live with the knowledge that I had harmed you because of my impatience, my selfish desires?"

She was still weeping, but the anger in her tone was unmistakable. "Yes, Vincent. That's the problem. You talk of '*I*' and '*me*.' Where do '*we*' stand in all this? What has become of '*us*'?"

"It is still '*us*,' believe me, Catherine. My concern is only for your safety, your well-being."

Sobbing, she said. "Then hold me. At least give me that much. I need to feel the warmth of your arms around me, to be near to you."

Taking his place, he sat by her side, lifting her hand to his lips, then brushing them across her palm. "My love, you must know that I love you, it could never be otherwise. The morning after Winterfest, if Jacqui and Elliot had not arrived when they did, we would not have stopped with a kiss, I could not, dare not risk."

"Would that have been so terrible, Vincent?" she cut in on his words.

"No, but you were still weak, you are weak yet and Peter has not

said...."

Eyes blazing with the fire of her anger, she challenged. "You think we should wait until Peter has been consulted? Vincent, we are both adults! There is no medical reason to prevent us. It has nothing to do with Peter, or anyone else!"

She raised herself onto her knees, winding her arms about his neck, she reached for his lips. He tried to pull away, but the rock at his back made it impossible. As he reached up to remove her hands, she swiftly countermoved to sit across his lap facing him, with a leg on either side of his body, holding him in a tight grip.

"If you want to move me," she informed him. "You'll have to use force, Vincent. I'll not move willingly."

Entwining her fingers in his hair, she found the lips she sought. At first, there was no response as he called on all his reserves of will power to keep his feelings under control. This was a battle he was destined to lose. Sitting astride his body, she felt him harden beneath her. She knew she had won. When she initiated the second kiss, his heart began to quicken as , with a sigh of surrender, his lips parted and her tongue slid over the sharp white teeth.

"Love me," she pleaded softly, when his mouth released hers.

"Love me, now!"

Lost within the urgency of passion, he could only obey. As she slipped her jacket from her shoulders, his hands slid with tantalizing slowness along her legs to find, beneath the thick wool dress, she wore nothing.

"Catherine," he whispered into the mouth which eagerly sought his again. "I believe you intended this."

"I have hoped for this moment for days. Are you complaining?"

Unable to speak, he shook his head, then moaned as her hands, working at the fastenings of his trouser, released the hardened flesh from the cloth's constricting hold. Catherine ached to feel him inside her again. With a small movement of her hips, she drew him deep into the waiting warmth of her body. Sighing in contentment, her hand slipped between the layers of his clothing, to find the soft, welcome texture beneath familiar against her palms. Her arms closed around his back pinning him in a tight hold of desire. Kisses now were heated exchanges of devouring passions. There was little visible movement, their bodies seemed stilled, but she held him deep inside her with a vice-like grip. Muscles contracted and relaxed in a steady rhythm which, after the enforced celibacy, resulted in a simultaneous climax within moments. They held each other tightly as they struggled to regain their breath, then she began to remove his clothing. Layer followed layer until he wore only trousers and boots. Reaching for the hem of her dress, she pulled it up and over her head. As she threw it to the floor, she felt his stirring inside her and knew he would need no encouragement to continue. She cast him a puzzled glance as he began to lift her clear of him, she struggled to stay where she was.

"Vincent," she begged. "Don't stop now, please!"

He smiled at her panic. "Don't worry," he reassured her. "I only intend to remove the rest of my clothing. These trousers are cutting off my circulation."

With great reluctance, she allowed him to move her from where she sat to a place by his side, to watch the undressing she had started. Lying back in the soft cushions, she waited impatiently for

him to turn his attention back to their shared needs. Placing his socks on top of the pile of discarded clothing, he knelt between her legs, sitting back on his heels. Catherine tensed in anticipation as his hands closed firmly around her ankles, then made their torturous ascent over her knees to rest on her thighs. He hesitated, his concern showing clearly in the bright eyes.

She told him, "If there is any discomfort in my head, you will feel it yourself, so there's no need to worry."

"Then," he said with a definite twinkle in his beautiful eyes. "I shall continue."

Hands moved slowly, claw-tipped fingers tracing lines of soft fire across her thighs then over her hips, to blaze anew as the two large palms covered breasts which had longed for this intimacy. With delight, he felt nipples harden at his touch and continued his tactile exploration across her shoulders. Hands coming to rest on the cushions at either side of her head. He leaned forward, taking the weight of his massive frame on his elbows, mouth descending to nibble, first an ear, then her bottom lip, before the inevitable kiss carried them both away. The long, textured tongue filled her mouth as, with a possessive thrust, he filled her body. The slow steady movement matched the probing tongue, the pace gathering momentum as their control dissolved under the onslaught of their passion. When the urgency of their need to satisfy and be satisfied passed, they loved in a gentler rhythm, the need now only to enjoy the sensations of their bodies touching, joining. Nothing intruded, nor interrupted the precious time they spent re-establishing their physical unity. Their bond fed them, and led them eventually to an exhausted, quiet, timelessness where they held each other and listened to the sounds of water as it cascaded down rocky walls. Only silence remained, and from its

soundless symphony, the music of love reverberated anew in their single soul.

DANCE TO A DIFFERENT TUNE

CHAPTER NINE

That evening, Mark sat in his chair waiting in his chamber for Ella, wondering what she was bringing with her. All she had told him was there was something she wanted him to see. More and more of their time had been spent together lately, but in two days she would return to her home a world away and he would be alone again. Ella was the most important person in his life, the woman he loved, but could never tell. What could he offer her, a man with no future, no hope? All he had was a ruined career and a pair of useless legs. Blindness had not handicapped her at all, the poetry she wrote told of the wonderful insight, the matchless soul and the ability to see great beauty in everything. No, she could never love a man like him. Even his talk with Catherine had not given him any hope. Vincent's looks were strange and perhaps frightening to some, but there were compensations, many things in him which made him worthy of love. Mark knew he was no Vincent Wells.

The sound in the doorway shattered the pattern of his thoughts. Ella was struggling with a large, slim, but heavy parcel. Mark felt even more useless sitting there, unable to help her. Dropping the parcel on the bed, she told him. "These are what I wanted you to see!"

Leaning over, he managed to untie the string and open the brown paper, revealing five oil paintings, magnificent pieces that would stand with the best.

The first was a formal portrait of a couple in their mid-forties. Turning to her, Mark asked. "Who are the couple?"

"My parents," she told him with obvious pride. "It was painted

about a month before they died. There's also a small one of the house we lived in."

He found it, marvelling at the skill of the artist. Next, two larger pictures of a log cabin in the mountains, one bathed in the light of a warm summer day, the other showed the same scene covered in the snows of winter.

"These two paintings of the log cabin?" he queried.

"A favourite holiday spot. We really loved it there. Whenever my father could manage some free time, we would go there."

As the bottom picture was uncovered, he held his breath. There, before him, lay the most stunning sunset he had ever seen. "This," he said, "is unbelievable. I've never seen anything like it!"

"Ah, yes, the sunset," she smiled. "It was the last painting I did."

"You painted this?"

"I painted them all," she informed him. "And many others too. These have been down here since the accident. I couldn't bear to have them near me. Now it's different. Time has made it different. So Catherine thought it was time I took them home with me."

"Sunday, isn't it, when you go home, I mean?" he asked, suddenly realizing how near it was.

"Yes, Jacqui and Elliot are coming for me late afternoon, and I'm due back at work Monday morning." She began to gather the pictures together which Mark had spread across the bed.

"Ella?"

"Yes?"

"Leave them here until Sunday morning," he pleaded. "They really are wonderful, and I would enjoy having them here to brighten up the chamber, even if it is only for a day and a half."

"Okay," she agreed. "Where do you want me to put them?"

"Leave them on the bed. I'll ask Vincent to see to them before I go to bed. Now, what are we going to do tonight?"

"Well, how does Chopin grab you?" she asked. "There's a rehearsal tonight and if we're very quiet, no one will know we're there."

"Then Chopin it is!" He laughed as she got behind his chair to push in the direction he told her.

Much later, Mark returned to the chamber alone to wait for Vincent.

"I shall only be a moment," Vincent had promised, as he stayed behind in the study for a word with Father. True to his word, Vincent followed almost on Mark's heels.

It didn't take long for a suitable place to be found for each of the magnificent paintings, and they sat on ledges and furniture, bringing beauty to the plain rock behind them. "Thank you, Vincent. Do you have time to talk?"

"Yes, Mark. Catherine is still with Mary and I do not expect her to return just yet."

"These paintings of Ella's, they're really good, aren't they?" Mark said.

"Good enough to win her a place at one of the finest academies in

France," Vincent informed him.

"When was that?"

"Just two weeks before the car accident which left her orphaned and sightless," he answered sadly. "She lost everything, Mark, yet she still found the courage to start anew."

"Was that when she first came Below?"

Vincent shook his head. "No, her parents had been Helpers for a number of years. Her mother was raised Below. When Ella was old enough to understand the need for secrecy, she became a frequent visitor."

Suddenly, Mark saw something flicker in the depths of the bright blue eyes. "Catherine's waiting for you, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you talking to me? I wouldn't keep her waiting if she were mine."

"It is not something I do often, I can assure you." Vincent told him, smiling almost to himself. "If you are sure there is nothing else?"

"No, nothing."

"Then I shall bid you goodnight."

Saturday morning dawned, a day like any other, but for Mark it meant the last full day he could spend with Ella. She arrived just after breakfast as they had agreed. Looking tired and pale, she sat on the side of his bed. Without any warning, her hand reached out to find him. She held it gently as she caressed its back with

her thumb. Mark held his breath, it felt so good. Her touch sent nerve endings tingling as his body began to respond. Moving towards the head of the bed and nearer its occupant, she smiled, then found the other hand. So close to her now, Mark could feel her warm breath on his cheek. He longed to hold her, to push her away, to do something, anything, just to break the tension between them. He was helpless, unsure, so he did nothing.

"Did Vincent put the pictures up for you?" she asked.

"Yes, they look great." He was glad of something to say. "I would never have guessed you were such an accomplished painter, as well as a wonderful poet."

"I've not been writing long, Mark, only since the accident."

"You must have written something before?" he insisted.

"No, Mark, honest. Before the accident, there was only my painting, nothing else mattered. When I lost my sight, I thought the world had come to an end. I often prayed to die."

"But you found your poetry," he said.

"It was more like it found me. Now I paint pictures with words. I have learned to paint with a different pallet. Just as you must learn to dance to a different tune."

"It's not that easy."

"I know, it never is." There were signs of tears in the lovely eyes and Mark realized what a struggle it had been.

"I can't, Ella. I don't have your strength, your determination," she was told.

"No," she agreed. "Perhaps not, but if you want me to help you, I

will."

Holding tightly to his hands, she leaned forward, intending to kiss his cheek. He moved his head and her lips brushed across his, then stopped. Unsure and hesitant, he completed the kiss she had started.

Sunday came all too quickly for Mark and Ella. Alone in his chamber, the young man grieved within. Comforting himself with the knowledge that he would see her again on Wednesday night, he managed to hold back the tears.

With Ella, it had all been so different. She was thankful Mark had not witnessed her crying as she breathed in the fresh air of the park. Elliot was waiting for her, and she soon began the journey which would take her away from her heart.

Below, much later, all had settled for the night. Still, Mark could not sleep. In anger, he picked up a cup and threw it at the empty wall where her pictures had been. Within a short time, Vincent, who was checking everything was secure before he settled for the night, came into the chamber. He glanced at Mark, then at the broken crockery on the floor.

"This will solve nothing," he said.

"There is no solution!"

"In that, I am afraid we disagree. There is always a solution."

"Not this time," Mark insisted.

"Ah, yes, Ella. I still think you are wrong," Vincent reaffirmed.

"What do you know! You have Catherine! What use am I to

anyone!"

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Vincent fixed him with deep, intense eyes. "Do you really believe I ever considered myself a worthy suitor for Catherine?"

"You have far more to offer than I do."

"Mark, look at me. Really look at what I am. Look at my face, my hands, and tell me what I have that any woman could love?" Vincent insisted.

"Catherine told me she loves you for who you are, for all you give to her. What you look like has nothing to do with it!"

"And you think Ella does not feel the same way about you?"

"How can she? I'm stuck in this bed, or in my wheelchair like a helpless child," Mark answered.

"Even if that were true, it would not change how Ella feels. It would not lessen her love."

Mark looked indignant. "What do you mean, *'even if it were true'*?"

"There is nothing physically stopping you from walking. We both know that. No one is saying it would be easy, but it is possible," Mark was told.

"I can't. I'm...."

".... frightened of failing?" Vincent completed the sentence Mark seemed unable to.

"Yes," he confessed.

Standing, Vincent suggested. "Perhaps no one need know, but you and I?"

"What do you mean?"

"There are many places here only I travel to, hidden, secret places. We could go together."

"You wouldn't even tell Catherine?"

"Not if you wanted it to remain between us," Vincent reassured him.

Mark cast Vincent a doubtful look, and Vincent was pleased his offer hadn't been rejected at once. "Think on it, Mark. We will discuss the possibility tomorrow," he suggested, as he bid Mark goodnight and left to complete his rounds.

Shortly after lunch on the following afternoon, Vincent appeared in Mark's chamber, to find the young man sitting in his wheelchair, reading.

"Well?" Vincent asked. "Have you thought any more about our conversation last night?"

"I have thought of little else," he admitted.

"My afternoon is free, Mark. If you want to try, my offer still holds."

Again, he seemed unsure. "No one will know?"

"No one," Vincent replied.

Despite Mark's reluctance, the wheelchair was left behind as Vincent carried him through tunnels, caverns and passages. After about half an hour, they entered a large empty chamber. "Where are we, Vincent?"

"Where we will not be disturbed, nor located with ease."

Vincent set him down on a boulder at the far end of the chamber.

"I can do no more, Mark. It's up to you now."

Lifting the young man into a standing position, Vincent held him upright. Once some balance was achieved, he eased his grip until Mark was taking almost his full weight. The exercises Father and Peter had insisted Mark complete daily had kept his muscles fairly strong, and Vincent knew this was the moment of truth. Once Mark was supporting his own weight, Vincent took one step back, leaving Mark standing alone. A look of sheer panic crossed his face, he waved his arms about, fighting to stay upright. Speaking softly, Vincent encouraged. "One step, Mark. Just one."

Dark eyes pleaded as the head shook. "I can't, Vincent! You're asking the impossible!"

"Not for me, Mark. For Ella. Just one step, for her."

Sweat beaded the handsome face as he struggled with his body and his emotions. Slowly, agonizingly, he slid one foot forward, then transferred his weight onto it. A second, agonizingly slow step followed before he lurched forward into Vincent's strong, waiting arms.

"I did it! I did it!" Mark shouted, hugging Vincent fiercely.

"Yes, you did! I never doubted you would. Love always works miracles. Catherine taught me that."

The exhausted man was carried back to his chamber and returned to his bed, where he slept away the rest of the afternoon.

The days became weeks, and the secret journeys became a regular occurrence. One Wednesday afternoon, when they returned, Catherine was waiting for them. "All right, you two.

What's going on? Vincent refuses to discuss the time you spend together with me, but I can feel the immense joy it brings him. He can't keep secrets, not from me, not when his emotions are so easy to read!"

Mark looked at Vincent. "Tell her where we've been today."

"In the Great Hall. I wanted to check that everything was as it should be. We may need to use it soon," Vincent told her.

"Why?"

Vincent turned to his friend, unwilling to divulge more than he had been instructed to do.

"Are you any good at keeping secrets?" Mark asked her.

"I think my track record is good, don't you, Vincent?"

He had to agree. "Yes, Mark. I can honestly say she is. Catherine managed to keep me a secret from an entire world."

The young man took a deep breath. "Okay then. Today is a very special day for me. This afternoon I have walked across the Great Hall, and tonight I'm going to ask Ella to marry me!"

Catherine beamed. "How wonderful! Does she know you can walk?"

Shaking his head, he told her. "No, no one knows. Only Vincent, and now you. I don't want anyone to know, not even Ella."

"Why not?" she questioned.

"Because, if she'll agree to marry me as I am, I'll know she really loves me. Besides, I want to surprise her when I stand by her side on our wedding day. It will be something she won't be expecting to

happen."

Vincent's blue eyes twinkled. "It will be a beautiful wedding gift for her."

"Won't it just!" Catherine agreed.

Catherine was really excited for the rest of the day. She even found it difficult to eat. As the pipes told of Ella's arrival, she could hardly contain her enthusiasm. "Oh, to be a fly on the wall!" she told her husband as they sat by the falls. He only smiled in reply and returned to the book he was reading to her, knowing full well that her mind was far from his words.

In a different part of the community, a young woman entered a small candlelit chamber, little realizing how this night would change her life. "Hello, Mark," she called cheerfully as she entered. She sensed him sitting in the chair and walked in its direction.

"Be careful!" he warned her. "The other chair's been moved. It's in front of me, facing me, ready for you to sit down. I have something to say.

A frown creased the brow of her lovely face, but she said nothing and sat where she had been asked to. "What is it?" she asked.

"What I have to say is not easy. And I don't want you to say anything until I've finished."

Silently, she nodded.

"When Vincent brought me here, my life was over. Nothing was of

any importance. Nothing mattered. I wanted to die. I thought it was the only way out of the misery I found myself buried in. Little by little, I got to know those who have become my family Below. For some time, I thought I was in love with Catherine, but I was mistaken. When I met Vincent, the one thing I couldn't understand was how he could be happy and content with the cards fate had dealt him. I could find nothing to make me understand how easily he accepted what he was, and how much he was prepared to give to others. Eventually, I found out about him and Catherine. At first, I was horrified at the thoughts of him and Catherine together, but once the realization hit me that I was only looking at his body, and ignoring the real Vincent, the pieces began to fit. Even though I could accept Catherine's love for him as the miracle it was, even though I accepted it had changed his life and given it meaning. I still didn't truly understand. Then, I met you. You have changed my life, Ella. I know I have little to offer, but I love you and I believe you love me too." As he lifted his eyes to hers, he noticed one single tear gather at the corner and trickle down her cheek.

"Oh, Mark, if only you knew how I've waited to hear you say those words! And yes, I love you too."

Tentatively, he reached out his hands to place one on either cheek. Slowly he pulled her face towards his. With a quiet hesitancy, their lips met. His hand slipped onto her shoulders, then round her back, drawing her to him. Ella moved from the chair to kneel between his legs as the kiss deepened and became an expression of the love they had hidden for too long. Holding her to him, he whispered. "That is not all I wanted to say."

"You mean there is more?"

"Yes."

He settled her back into the chair. She might not be able to see him, but he needed to watch her face as he continued. "I don't think I have ever been happier than I am at this moment. Knowing you love me in return makes me regret I can't get up and dance around the room. But even that doesn't matter any more. Ella, there is something else you could do for me."

"Anything, Mark. You know that!"

"Wait until you've heard what I'm going to ask before you agree. Ella, I want you to become my wife."

Her face told him all he needed to know. He didn't need to hear the words, but he welcomed them just the same. "I did say '*anything*,' Mark, and I meant it. Ella Hanson has a nice ring to it. How could I refuse?"

Mark drew her into his arms and hugged her. "I love you, Ella. Oh, how I love you."

"Does this mean we're officially engaged? Can I tell people?" she asked.

"Yes, and you can also tell them you're getting married here, a week on Saturday."

"When?"

"You heard, we'll get married here. I know it won't be legal Above, but we can get married there later."

"You mean you're going back?"

"*'WE'* are going back. If you'll have me. I don't think it's a good idea for married couples to live apart, do you?"

Ella managed a small giggle as his mouth closed over hers,

removing any desire to speak.

DANCE TO A DIFFERENT TUNE

CHAPTER TEN

"Okay, folks, this is the plan," Elliot announced, as he settled himself in the chair behind Father's desk. "At least, this is the story they will hear Above. Cleon Manning was working on this case for me. He was in Seattle checking hospitals and clinics, looking for a missing relative of an employee of mine. While he was there, he spotted a face he thought he had seen before. When he returned, he checked it out, and the missing Mark Hanson was found! Mark had been admitted to the clinic as an amnesia case and, as I had met Mark before, I went to check it out. By that time Mark was beginning to regain his memory, but because of the media interest there would be in his re-appearance, he begged me to say nothing. He was brought back to New York and has been staying with Jacqui and me until he was fully recovered. It was at our house he met Ella. Mark is unable to remember anything about the night he went missing. He remembers the suicide attempt, and throwing himself into the water, then nothing until he woke up in the hospital bed."

"Sounds good, Elliot," Catherine said.

"Sounds marvellous!" Mark agreed.

There was quite a discussion as some of the finer points were gone over and every member of the Council had something to contribute. Mouse appeared unhappy with the plan. "Is there something we have missed, Mouse?" Vincent asked, picking up the young man's disquiet long before anyone else.

"Mark should stay here.... Below.... not go Above," Mouse grumbled.

"Why?" Catherine asked.

"Time wasted!" Mouse explained. "Plans no good now!" He threw some sketches onto the table.

Elliot glanced at them. "What on earth are these? They look like plans for some sort of elevator."

"An elevator!" a few exclaimed together.

"Good plan," Mouse persisted. "Mark can go up, down, everywhere."

"Thank God, he's going back Above!" Father whispered to Vincent and Elliot.

"Hey, don't knock it," Elliot said. "These plans are okay."

"See, would work, told you," Mouse said proudly.

Vincent rested a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Mouse, the plans are excellent and would have made life much easier for Mark. But he is going to marry Ella and he wants to live Above with her. We all have our choices to make."

"Maybe I could change them, maybe we need them later. I should put them away, safe."

Vincent smiled. "That seems best," he agreed.

Father pulled the meeting back to the subject in question. "Right, that seems to have a ring of truth about it, Elliot. So after the wedding on Saturday, Ella and Mark will stay here the night and return Above with you on Sunday. Thank you all for coming. Now, William, Mary, Vincent, Catherine, we have a celebration to arrange."

The week flew by with a flurry of preparation. Before anyone had time to think, the even of the wedding was upon them. Elliot had taken Mark Above for the day, in order to buy clothes for the wedding. Everything was going according to plan. The late afternoon found Vincent and Catherine together by the bridge in the Whispering Gallery. She was so excited she found it difficult to concentrate on anything. Vincent sat on the small rocky ledge by her side. They had been ousted from their chamber whilst the last minute touches were added to Ella's wedding dress. Soft sounds filtered up to them. Catherine was lost in the muted tones and the waves of love washing over her for the man by her side. She snuggled up to him. "Let's go somewhere with a bit more space, Vincent."

"Catherine!" he admonished, sensing the rising emotions in his wife. "We have little time."

"Please! We won't be missed," she attempted to tickle him, but he caught her hands.

"Don't," he insisted.

Leaning forward, she began to nibble his ear. "You're being mean."

"Catherine, you're in a very silly mood! You know what a heavy schedule we have, and we have been fortunate to steal this short time together."

"But I want more!" she pleaded.

"I know, but today we do not have the time. We should be thinking about making our way to the kitchen for our dinner."

Reluctantly, she rose with him and they headed in the direction of the large communal dining area.

The last thing on Catherine's mind was the meal in front of her, she intended to make a meal of the man who sat opposite her at the long table in the corner of the kitchen. Deliberately she turned her thoughts loose on him, and he began to blush. He had told her earlier that she was in a *'silly mood. Well, he was about to find out how silly!'* Vincent was in deep conversation with Father about some last minute work that needed doing before the wedding. She could see he was beginning to find it difficult to concentrate as her thoughts filtered through the block he had tried to place between them. Casting her a helpless look only resulted in her giggling. Father appeared quite put out, as he saw this response as coming as a result of his *'And once the ceremony is over?'* question.

Catherine could feel Vincent stopping her thoughts from reaching deeper than the surface. She decided some action was called for! Taking off her shoe, she flexed her toes, then began to slowly *'walk'* them up the inside of Vincent's leg. A startled look rewarded her efforts and the plea to stop screamed at her from his face. *'Stop! You must be joking!'* she thought. There was nothing he could do to stop her without drawing attention to what she was doing, she knew he would never do that. The muscles tensed along his thighs as her toes neared their goal. The ball of her foot settled in his groin and toes slid between the fold of cloth covering the trouser button. As she felt him respond to her attentions, she giggled again, causing Vincent to answer, " *'NO!'*" to Father's "I hope they are making the right decision to make their lives Above."

Slow, stroking movements with her foot wreaked havoc on his senses, and he reached his hand under the table to take her foot in its hold. The look he gave her threatened revenge, and she waited for his reaction. His long slender thumb-claw barely touched, as it moved along the sole of her foot from heel to toe then back again. Catherine tried to kick him under the table. She slipped off the chair to land with a heavy thud on the floor.

"Good God, Catherine. What are you doing?" Father asked, most concerned at her strange behaviour.

"I slipped," she said, picking herself up and glaring at Vincent who found it difficult not to laugh. Now she had to contend herself with the exploration of his leg below the knee, to ensure he couldn't do the same thing again. After what seemed a lifetime, Father left. Vincent rose from the table, pulling her to her feet.

"I suggest you cool off a little!" he told her.

"Does this mean we're going for a swim?" she asked, as he led her from the kitchen.

'No, it means you are!' he replied as, scooping her into his arms, he set off at full speed for the pool where they usually swam together. Catherine giggled and protested every inch of the way, but she hoped he would not *'stop'* or *'put her down.'*

By the time they reached the pool, he was out of breath, and she expected him to lower her to the ground. What she did not expect was that he would carry her, fully clothed, to the edge of the pool and drop her in. Sputtering, she surfaced, he stood looking at her with a smug and satisfied smile on his face.

"Feeling a little.... less heated, Catherine?" he asked as he held out his hand and hauled her out of the water.

"Vincent, I'm soaked!"

"Catherine, I was embarrassed!"

"I can't walk back like this!" she pulled at the sodden garments.

"Then," he replied as he slid down the zip of her dress. "I suggest you take your wet clothes off."

"I might catch cold," she teased.

"I assure you that will not happen," came the whispered reply.

Sliding his hands down her arms, he took the dress with them, and its bodice fell about her waist. Strong wide hands rested around her waist, then he began to peel the fabric from her body, his fingers lingering tantalizingly on her skin. With a slowness which caused her to ache, he removed the rest of her clothing, his mouth barely brushing the soft fair curls with a touch light as a thistle-down. When he took off his jumper, Catherine could hardly contain herself.

"You had better put this one," he advised her. "We can't have you walking the tunnels naked."

"Why where are we going?"

"Back to our chamber. You need to put on something warm and dry. I have a few things to do before morning."

Catherine couldn't believe the words he said to her. She was just about to launch herself at him, when she noticed the twinkle of mischief in his eyes.

"Vincent! I thought you meant it!"

"I do! We can't have you walking about in such an obvious state of

undress, and we will certainly have to go back to our chamber.... eventually."

Throwing her arms around his neck, she kissed him. "Let's swim together, Vincent. We've not done that since I came back."

Removing his clothing, he agreed, and Catherine dived into the cold clear flow. He followed immediately and they swam a couple of lengths together. As they turned to begin another, his hand trailed along her back, halting her mid-stroke. Where they had stopped was shallow enough for Vincent to stand, but not for Catherine. Placing his hands under her arms he lifted her and she fastened them around his neck. Kiss after kiss was exchanged and, almost of their own accord, her legs wrapped themselves around his body. As the fire built within, Vincent held her to him with one hand, whilst the other stroked and teased wherever he could reach. She could feel the hardness of him against her, pushing, probing, begging admittance, and she carried an anguished moan to his mouth. Her need for him was pleading with silent words she knew he could hear, and within the intensity of a hungry kiss, he joined with her again. The soft folds of her body enclosed him, drew him further into her welcoming flesh, and he rejoiced in the shared emotions which passed between them. Wave after wave of fire flowed over her as, with almost a snarl, he climaxed knowing her own release was at hand. Catherine felt her strength ebbing and was glad of his strong arms as her legs dropped from around him to dangle limply in the water. Vincent carried her out of the water and settled himself by its edge, holding her trembling form. As she calmed and recovered, he offered her the jumper again, and his long tunic, which came almost to her knees.

"I think we should return now, or you might just catch that cold you

were threatening me with earlier."

"And what about all the things you have to do before the wedding?" she asked.

"The wedding is not until tomorrow afternoon."

"Does that mean we have all night?"

"Yes, Catherine, I think it does," he answered.

The following morning, everyone rose early, the world Below became a hive of activity as all was readied for the late afternoon's ceremony.

Vincent bathed and changed around four, then left for Mary's chamber where the wedding party was waiting for him to escort Ella to Mark's side. Earlier he had taken the nervous young man down to the Great Hall, leaving him seated on a bench. They had been laid out in rows so everyone would be able to see. The front row being reserved for Catherine and Jacqui, who were to be matrons of honour, and for Vincent who was to take the special place her father would have taken, and, of course, for the waiting bridegroom. Mark sat waiting alone, the mixed emotions of the day flowed through him, making him restless. Before long the huge chamber began to fill. He longed to get up and pace the floor, but that would spoil his surprise, so he sat fidgeting in silence. Many came and spoke to him, some to wish him well, others to share a joke about '*still time to escape.*' All had a warmth in their hearts for the two who would become one in the simple ceremony they had planned.

Five o'clock finally arrived. Mark turned as a murmur ran through

the assembly, to find the wedding party at the top of the staircase. A gentle warmth spread through him as he saw Ella. She looked unreal, a vision of beauty in cream lace. She took Vincent's arm, and they began to walk down the staircase towards him. Mark saw only her, he could not have told anyone who was with her, or what they were wearing. His eyes fixed on the woman he loved and refused to move elsewhere. Arm in arm, Ella and Vincent walked along the aisle between the wooden benches, with Jacqui and Catherine following. As they reached him, they stopped. He noticed how Ella's hand shook as she reached for his and, as their hands met, he rose to his feet. A stunned silence filled the room, and from its depths the whispered "Mark, you're standing!" came from his wife-to-be.

"Yes, I am, and later I'm going to dance with you," he whispered in reply. "I may not be as good as I was at Covent Garden or the Met.... but I will dance with you."

Joy shone from her face, her sightless eyes filled with tears, and Father called the assembly to order, just as he would a Council meeting.

The young couple exchanged their vows, promising a lifetime commitment.

Catherine noticed Jacqui turn to gaze at Elliot, the memory of their own vows flowing between them. As she turned back, Vincent, who was still standing with Ella, took a side step towards her and caught her hand in his own. His thumb gently caressed her palm and the words *'until death us do part'* shimmered along the bond between them.

Once they had been pronounced husband and wife, it seemed as if everyone surged forwards at once, offering congratulations and

asking questions about Mark's new found mobility. William had provided well, as always, and there was more than enough for everyone. When they had finished eating, the music started. Mark took Ella's hand and led her slowly into the centre of the room. Holding her to him, he began to circle the room in time to the music. Ella felt wonderful in his arms, she felt as if she had waited all her life for this. A skilled performance it might not have been but, for Ella, their movements matched every beat of her heart and she wanted to dwell within its pulse forever. Soon they were joined by others, as the celebration continued.

One dance was all Mark managed before tiredness forced him back to his seat. They sat together, holding hands, watching others continue waltzing around the room. Vincent spoke briefly to the couple. He began to feel the strength of Catherine's love calling to him. It started as a gentle tug along the threads of their bond, now it was becoming a pull he found impossible to resist as first one then another of the community sought his help or advice. Little by little, with constant interruption, he made his way across the Great Hall to her side.

"I thought women were supposed to cry at weddings?" he whispered.

"Not this woman!" she told him as she slid her arm around him and began to run her fingers up and down his back.

There was a sharp intake of breath then, "Catherine, don't! Please, not here!"

"Then where?"

He sighed. "We cannot leave yet, it is too early."

"No one will miss us. They're all having too good a time to notice if

we slip away and I want to...."

"I know exactly what you want, Catherine. There is no need for you to go into details," he cut in. "You must be patient."

"Then dance with me," she pleaded.

"Is that wise?"

"It's compulsory."

Taking her into his arms, he moved into the throng. She leaned into him, her slender body moulding to his, her head against his shoulder.

The music took them round and round in its hold, caressing them with tendrils of sensuality. Together they re-lived that first dance, delighted in the memory of that first intimate joy. He remembered the exquisite agony of her body moving with him, against him, joined in a rhythm only they could hear. She recalled the powerful arms which held her, the strong, graceful steps he took as he led her into the steady beat, the beat which had resounded through their souls. The music stopped and they parted breathlessly, the intensity in his eyes held hers. Her heart skipped its beat as he whispered, "Yes, it is time we left."

They spent a few tortured minutes saying goodnight to the gathered friends and family, then he took her hand and they left. Silently, they walked, still hand in hand, along familiar passages. Catherine realized he was not taking her home, but towards their favourite swimming spot. As they walked into the huge cavern, she smiled as she saw the blazing torches and the neat pile of cushions, towels and blankets. "The Great Hall was not the only place you made preparations, Vincent."

"I thought it would be appropriate to bring you here, as this was where we made the decision to marry. And I do know the effect weddings have on you!"

"And what about the effect you have on me?" she questioned.

Unzipping her dress, he told her. "That is something I intend to find out."

With deliberate slowness, he pushed the heavy fabric off her shoulders, its own weight took it to the floor. His lips trailed gentle kisses around her neck then down the centre of her body until they reached the soft fabric of her panties. Running claw-tipped fingers along the silken covering, he removed them, then lifted her into his arms. He carried her to the water's edge, just as he had done the night before, but this time he lowered her gently into the water. Undressing quickly, Catherine watched as the last of his clothing lay at his feet. He took his dive, high and wide he arched above her, the massive frame creating hardly a splash as it vanished into the icy depths. Time held its breath as she waited for him to break the surface. When he did aeons later, it was at the far side of the pool. Swimming towards each other, they met in a confusion of arms and legs, with a kiss promising an entanglement of those same limbs in a passion intense but deeply satisfying. Turning onto his back, he pulled her across his body and swam to the shallows, her added weight scarcely lowering him in the water. Cool liquid rippled against their bodies, heightening the urgent need they shared.

Once in the shallows, he laid her by his side, brushing wet strands of hair from her face. He gazed at her in wonder, blue eyes met green holding them captive. Long, textured fingers stroked the pale soft cheek. Catherine sighed. Fire flared in the sapphire

depths of his eyes as the force of her desire flooded his soul. Tenderly, he took her lips in a gentle kiss which he returned to again and again. Each kiss drawing forth sensations of ecstasy as they intensified. Tighter and tighter he held her, crushed her to him as his body responded to the need to possess her, to bury himself within her, to share a union of body and soul. Releasing her from his arms, he began to leave trails of fire across her shoulders where his lips strayed. The rough tongue moved to white breasts, circled pink nipples which responded immediately and encouraged him to further explorations. Downwards the lines of fire extended, until he reached the soft fair curls, a curtain hiding his destination. With knowing hands, he parted her thighs, again she sighed as his tongue probed into soft depths, then a moan.

The warm sweet taste of her assaulted his senses, he probed further, his name came back to him as a whimper. Carrying the taste of her back to her lips and into the waiting mouth, he moved to slowly slide himself into her body. Catherine gasped, her slender frame arching to meet him, needing to feel the power of him within. Fascinated, he watched as her eyes widened then glazed over, her breathing laboured as she fought for control.

"Hush," he whispered as he nibbled an inviting ear. "Let it go, Catherine, let it go, we have all night."

"Oh, Vincent!" she moaned, as her body shook and trembled.

Muscles tightened then relaxed, as warmth surrounded him, and he drowned in her release. The pace of their lovemaking slowed to a languid easy rhythm, she stroked his arms, running her fingers through the soft covering, glorying in the feel of him moving within her. Gradually, from the centre of her being, tears

welled into her eyes, tears of joy, of love, emotions beyond words. Following in their wake came the fire, the consuming heat drawn from the flames of joint desire. With sharp clarity, she felt every touch of his skin and its tawny covering, felt it around her, against her, within her. The quickening pace of their joining excited her anew, raised her to heights of expectation, to new planes of passion. Gripping his arms, her legs wound themselves around him, and he thrust deeper. From his lips the sound of her name came, as he found himself at the limits of control. Catherine responded to his call and the force of their shared climax shattered the silence. He held her to him as they fought, merely to breathe again, his hand began to move along her back, stroking her spine, calming her quickly as they always did. She reached to entwine her fingers in his hair. Pulling his head down her lips found his in a breathtaking exchange.

Lifting her with accustomed ease, he carried her over to the towels and set her on her feet. Spreading one of the blankets amongst the cushions, he smiled, then wrapped her in a towel. Pulling her gently down, she curled into him, he covered them both with the large woollen square. Content and at peace, they drifted on the edges of sleep, then slipped into the darkness as one.

Elsewhere in this magical world, another couple found the same contented realms of dreamless wonder, wrapped in each other's arms. For them the enchantment had just begun, for them the path lay ahead unmapped. Hand in hand, they had started on a journey which would take them into the future together, secure and at one in the power of their love, trusting in the fulfillment of dreams.

Mark Hanson had indeed learned to dance to a different tune, and he knew this music would go on forever.