

Born out of love

by Christine Cunningham

Catherine walked from Peter's office in a cloud of happiness, her hands spread across her still flat stomach. There was life inside, conceived from a love that was perfect.

Making her way along the tunnels, she contemplated on how to tell Vincent. There would be problems, that much was clear to her, but they would overcome them in the same way they had before, with honesty and love.

Vincent was waiting in their chamber, knowing she was coming to him and knowing too that she was happy. To see his wife walk towards him never failed to make his heart beat that little bit faster and he would never take for granted all she had given up for him, even though she always insisted that he gave her much more.

His arms spread wide and Catherine ran the last few steps to be enfolded in an embrace which made her feel protected from everything.

"Welcome home, Catherine." His lips slid over her hair and came to rest in the hollows of her neck.

She shivered. *'How did he do it?'* she wondered. Just one touch and she melted. However, now was not the time to make love, much as she wanted to. Now was the time to talk.

She eased herself out of his arms and crossed to their bed. "I have something to tell you, Vincent. And I think you had better sit down."

One eyebrow was raised and he quipped, "Sounds ominous. What is it?"

There was only one way to say it and that was straight out. "We're having a baby, Vincent."

She said no more and just waited for his reaction, and to her amazement he nodded his head, almost as if he knew. His beautiful blue eyes rested on her waistline and he realized what the strange sound that had been flashing through his head for days now, was trying to tell him. It was the sound of their child's heartbeat.

"I had a sense of it, Catherine, but how do you feel about it?" He knew she wanted a child, he wasn't worried about that, but their circumstances made having a family a problem.

Catherine and Vincent had made a painful decision when they married, namely that the idea of a family should be sacrificed. Given that neither of them would knowingly risk bringing a child into the world which might carry more of Vincent's genetic makeup. It was a sacrifice to both of them, because their love was so strong and true that children seemed a natural extension of their lives. And so, Catherine had taken precautions and advice from Peter and for a year, all had been well. Until now.

"Vincent, when Peter told me, I was so happy and I knew you would be too, and I got to thinking on the way here. We did all we had to do to prevent this happening, but it happened anyway, so I believe our child is meant to be, despite everything that could happen. I'm not sorry, Vincent. I want our baby and I want you to want it too."

Vincent looked into her clear loving eyes and was utterly defeated. Any doubts he may have had fled in the face of her certainty.

"Our child will have all the love and laughter in the world. I adore you, Catherine. You complete me, make all my hopes and dreams come true."

She was so blessed to have him. He gave her so much happiness, in spite of the loneliness she sometimes felt in having to keep their secret. And now she was to be doubly blessed.

Vincent drew her back onto the bed and became a concerned father-to-be. "Promise me you won't start doing crazy things, like lifting heavy objects. I can't be with you all the time and I don't entirely trust you to do as you are told."

She sputtered with laughter and decided that it was no wonder the women had the babies. Men fell apart at times like these.

"Don't panic so. I would never do anything to harm this precious bundle. Now, I'm in need of some tender loving care. Will you do the honours?"

He drew back at once, alarmed. "Catherine, I might hurt you or the baby. I'll just hold you, that's enough for me now."

She, however, was not content with holding. There had been more than enough of that before they were married.

"It will never be enough just to hold you, Vincent. You won't hurt either of us, I promise. Love me slowly, make it last forever."

All the time, her hands moved over his heated skin, burrowing beneath his vest, playing a tantalizing game on his chest. It was no good, he could not resist touching her back.

His fingers stroked her hair, then drifted slowly down one side of her cheek and then, like a whisper, grazed her softly parted lips. He would allow himself just a few more minutes, he promised himself, but feeling her hands moving lower, his resolve weakened alarmingly, until finally he looked into her passion-drenched eyes and was lost. Their lovemaking was always precious and special, but this time each felt the significance of what their unique loving had brought, and made them forget for a time, the immense problems they now faced, not least the reaction of Father when they broke the news to him.

Catherine had always tried to do anything and everything to gain Father's approval and yet, she always got the impression that it would never be quite enough. Oh, he was always kind to her and valued her help and friendship to the community as a whole, but he seemed to hold that last little piece of himself from her.

She knew the reason, of course. He would never entirely trust her love for Vincent. It wasn't anything he said as such, just a silent disapproval which she could not dispel, try as she might.

Laying beside Vincent, who had drifted off to sleep, his arm lying protectively over her, she thought back to their wedding day. It had happened on the spur of the moment and there had been no one to witness their vows, or so they had thought. Vincent had taken her to his special place, and she remembered her awe at the sight of the huge waterfall cascading down to a gently flowing river, and of her certainty that God was there. No cathedral could have been better. They had made their vows to each other, not knowing that Father stood silently above them giving his blessing, albeit reluctantly.

When they returned to Father's chamber that day and told him what they had done, he merely nodded his head in such a resigned fashion that she realized he would have stopped them if he thought he could. She also realized that Father was a little jealous of the fact that Vincent's affections had shifted from him to her and she had done her best to reassure him.

"Father," she said, "I love Vincent more than my life and I will never knowingly hurt him, because when he hurts, I hurt too. Loving me does not mean he loves you any less, only differently."

She recalled how he had listened to her words without comment and finally muttered, "We shall see." She'd left him then and returned to Vincent who had told her not to worry about Father.

"He will come around, Catherine, when he sees how happy we are. He would not begrudge us that."

That had been a year ago and as Catherine came back to the present, she smiled, thinking how hard she had worked to win him over to her side, and of what had tipped the balance in her favour. She hadn't even been aware of it at the time.

Catherine slipped back into remembrance of Father's Day. Her own father was gone and she wanted to give something to Vincent's father, to show him how she felt. Just a small token, nothing expensive but something she had made herself. And so, she had baked him a chocolate fudge cake, being over generous with the ingredients, so that when it was finished, she didn't have a container big enough to accommodate its size. When she had taken it Below and solemnly presented it to him, she couldn't understand why everyone, including Vincent, had roared with laughter. She wasn't that great a cook, but it didn't look that bad, surely? Even Father relaxed his guard and laughed. She looked out on all the people gathered around, some with tears of laughter in their eyes and was completely bemused.

"What's the joke? It's only a chocolate fudge cake," she said, whereupon fresh gales of laughter started up again. She turned to Vincent and asked helplessly, "Help me out here, will you?"

Vincent wiped the tears from his eyes and looking to Father said, "Shall I tell her, or will you?"

Father was eyeing the cake greedily, as though it might disappear. "You tell her. This may vanish if I look away."

Vincent took pity on his wife and draped an arm casually across her shoulder. "You had no way of knowing, but Father has what can only be described as a terrible weakness. Most of the time he can control it...." He gave Father a pitying glance. "....But bring him face-to-face with chocolate fudge cake and he's a lost cause to avarice. He can't resist it, can you, Father?"

Catherine did not believe one word of it. *'Father! A closet chocolate fudge cake fiend? Never!'*

Everyone was looking at him, waiting to see how long he could hold out and Catherine found herself giggling, as she watched him scoop a dollop of chocolate off the top of the cake and pop it into his mouth. The dreamy expression which came over him finally convinced her that he really was a chocoholic.

Mouse nudged her and whispered, "Done it now, Catherine. Won't stop till it's gone. He'll be sorry, worse than sorry."

Ever since that day, Catherine felt that she and Father came to understand each other fully.

Vincent stirred beside her and she leaned over to kiss him awake. "Hi there. Enjoy your nap? I was lying here thinking of chocolate fudge cake and thinking that maybe I'd better bake another one."

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and muttered, "Why on earth would you do that? You know he's a slave to it and he only makes himself ill."

She laughed, remembering how sick he had been the next day, but she sobered when she said, "I know, but maybe it will soften the blow when we tell him our news. It's no good thinking he will be overjoyed. Let's face it, Vincent, he's a practical man. He's had to be in order to keep your world growing and thriving for so long. All he will see is that we broke our promise and that we are taking a terrible risk. He's going to be furiously angry and I will be back at square one with him again."

Vincent sat up and gave her such a glare that she was taken aback, and for the first time she could recall, he disregarded Father's feelings completely.

"Listen to me, Catherine. I love him true enough, but this is our life and our child. Whatever he says won't make any difference to how we feel. And in the end, it will be his loss if he refuses to accept his grandchild. If anything, I will feel more sorrow than anger for him. All I care about now is that you look after yourself and see Peter regularly. I want to see him too. I want to be involved as much as I can. Will you arrange for him to come to your apartment?" He felt apprehensive about his next words, but they had to be said.

"I'm sorry, but you know you will have to have our child Below."

She hadn't thought of going anywhere else. Silly man.

"Vincent, I know that and I wouldn't have it any other way. You will be the first person to see our baby, the first person our baby will see."

Making plans for their family was a joy when they had all but abandoned the dream.

Vincent sighed. "Remember the very last dark time I had, Catherine, when I saw our child? Didn't I tell you then that he was the future for us?"

She shuddered when she thought of that terrible time. "Yes you did, and you were right. It will be Father's loss. We will be family, whatever happens, whatever comes."

Catherine left work the following day and went to see Peter. "How did Vincent take the news? I've been dying of curiosity."

Catherine smiled. "Hello to you too!" she teased and gave him a quick hug. Sitting down on the plush velvet couch, she slipped off her shoes and wriggled her toes. "Oh! That feels so good!"

Peter gave her an impatient look and she relented. "He was very happy and do you know, he said he had an idea I might be pregnant. Anyway, he wants to see you to discuss the arrangements for the delivery. I will be going Below and we both want you there," she sighed. "Just in case, you know what I mean? Mary might not be able to cope if there should be complications."

Peter came and sat beside her, taking her hand in his. "I didn't want to burden you with technicalities yesterday, but I have to tell you that there is more than a fifty percent chance that the baby will inherit Vincent's features, and any other children you may have will run the same risk. Have you thought about what that will mean?"

Catherine knew that he was tactfully trying to tell her that he would be willing to terminate the pregnancy, if that was their wish, and she shook her head emphatically. "We want our child more than anything. Our baby will be loved so much, despite what could happen. We just need to know that you will support our decision."

Peter heard what she said, but more to the point, what she didn't say. "I take it you haven't told Jacob yet." The wary look on her face gave him his answer and he squeezed her hand full of admiration for her courage in going ahead with the pregnancy.

"You have it, Catherine, and you can tell Vincent from me, that I get to be godfather and have the privilege of spoiling my godchild no end." Catherine's eyes filled up and she could only nod her head in gratitude. "Okay then, young lady. Off you go home and put your feet up. I'll come for dinner tomorrow night and the three of us can discuss what's to be done over the coming months. Don't worry, Catherine, you and Vincent will make wonderful parents. The best any child could wish for."

Down Below, Vincent and Father sat in one corner of the communal chamber, engaged in a game of chess which Father was winning comfortably. Vincent usually gave him a much harder time and he was puzzled.

"Vincent, you've left yourself wide open with that last move. Do you want to reconsider?"

Vincent was staring off into space, his mind no longer on the game. He still couldn't quite believe he was a father in waiting, but that sound in his head, his child's heartbeat, kept coming back to remind him it was true.

"Vincent, wake up, will you?" Father was watching the expressions on his son's face and wondered what he could be thinking about so deeply. He had noticed all day that Vincent was almost serene in the way he moved and in the tone of his voice when he spoke, like he was on a higher plane than everyone else around him. Strange it was, and not a little unnerving. It was like he was privy to some momentous discovery denied to all but him.

"Sorry, Father. I was miles away. What did you say?"

Father pointed to the chessboard and said. "If you are aiming to let me win for once, you might try to be a little more subtle than that."

Vincent looked along the length of his opponent's finger to see the clumsy move he had made. "I always play to win, Father. Granted, I was not concentrating, but the move stands. Make your play and I will take the loss like a man."

Father eyed his son and then with a shrug, made the winning move. "Checkmate."

The game over, Vincent helped to pack the pieces away and, looking around the communal room, saw that people were beginning to drift away to their own chambers for the night.

"Goodnight, Father. Sleep well." He leaned down to kiss the top of Father's head and turned away.

Father watched him walk away and was even more sure that Vincent knew something he didn't. His feet hardly seemed to touch the ground. There would be no sleep for Father this night as he wondered what could have caused Vincent's distraction all day.

The next night at Catherine's apartment, she, Vincent and Peter spent a wonderful evening enjoying their dinner and sharing a bottle of wine, although Vincent only allowed her one glass. All too soon, it was down to business, as Peter launched into details of her care during the coming months.

"Normally, I would only need to see you once a month, but I think every week would be best. I'll need to take regular blood tests, Catherine, and as you know, I will have to check them at home. We can't risk sending them to the lab, seeing as how we won't know what might be found."

Vincent listened quietly and began to understand the enormity of what Catherine was having to face more or less alone.

"Are we going to be able to see this through, Peter?" he asked softly. "Catherine and you will be taking all the risks and I feel responsible."

Peter smiled. "Don't you worry, Vincent, nothing is going to happen. You will enjoy this time, just like any other couple. I feel it in my bones."

Catherine really felt for Vincent then. Most fathers were left out in the cold during pregnancy, but for him it was even worse. Crossing to his side, she gave him a reassuring hug.

"Peter's right, Vincent. This is going to be a wonderful time for us, the fulfillment of a dream."

He prayed that she was right. "Very well, Catherine, the next step is to tell Father." He smiled as he watched her face fall. He knew that this was going to be her worst ordeal, worse than morning sickness, cramps, heartburn and all the other symptoms synonymous with her condition.

Peter offered to be with them when they told Father, but Catherine squared her shoulders and

refused. "We will have to do this ourselves, Peter, but thanks for the moral support. I should warn you though, that you will probably find him on your doorstep breathing fire."

Peter laughed uproariously at the images that conjured up. "I've known Jacob Wells for a long time and I can handle anything he cares to throw at me." He looks at his watch and regretfully announced that he had to go. "I'll see you again next week, Catherine. Take care now. Goodnight."

After he had gone, Catherine sighed heavily. "Well, when will we tell him? Do we leave it as long as possible or do it right away?" Personally, she preferred the former option.

Vincent smiled, knowing her every thought. "I'm not the least worried about telling Father. I told you, Catherine, it's our life and he has no say in how we live it. Truly, my love, he can be as pleased as we are or he can rant and rave for a month. Either way it makes no difference, so don't look so worried. We will tell him now. Get your coat and I will meet you Below." He tipped her face to meet his descending lips and whispered against her mouth. "Have courage, my love."

Father's reaction was worse than either of them could have imagined. '*Worse than worse,*' as Mouse was so fond of saying. He crashed his hands down on the table and literally exploded with anger.

"How could you have been so careless, knowing the tremendous risks involved? What happened to the promise you made when you married?" His eyes blazed with fury and all directed towards Catherine.

She trembled, but stood firm and stared back defiantly. "Father, we did not break our promises, believe me, but it happened anyway and we are happy."

He waved her words away as though they were nothing. "Happy!" he shouted. "How in the name of all that's holy can you be happy? Don't you realize what you have done? Possibly condemned another human soul to these tunnels forever. That's what your carelessness has done."

Vincent had had enough; more than enough. He put Catherine behind him and turned on Father, all the anger that had been building up while he listened to his tirade. No one, not even Father, spoke to his wife that way.

"Enough!" he roared. "Enough. Why do you look to Catherine when apportioning blame? This is just the opportunity you have been waiting for, isn't it? A chance to blame her for ever coming into my life. There is no blame here and who are you to judge us? Say what you will to me, but I warn you now, Father, do not ever speak to my wife this way again. She has done everything in her power to gain your approval. Well now it stops. No more, do you understand me? Either you accept us as a family, or you do not. There will be no more trying to please you at the expense of our happiness."

He stared at his father, still loving him, but also not liking him very much.

"I will say no more about this except to express my sorrow at your attitude. Our child will have loving parents and it will be up to you whether he or she has a loving grandfather. Think about it, because in the end, it will be your loss."

Drawing his wife's trembling form to his side, he said. "Come, Catherine. There is nothing for us here," and he led them both out of the chamber, leaving behind a part of his childhood. The time when he would defer to Father's decisions now gone forever. Part of him was sad that it had come to this, but looking down at his beloved Catherine, he knew the best was yet to come.

Everyone else in the community was thrilled when they heard the news and not a little disconcerted at their leader's stand against it. Every member down to the smallest child, stood with Vincent and Catherine and some even went so far as to recommend the '*silence*' for Father, but Vincent was

appalled at such an action and he had to use all his persuasive powers to placate them.

"My friends," he said. "We thank you for your love and support and it means more than you can know. Father will learn of this and that will be punishment in itself. We have no wish to alienate him from our lives. It is his choice. So you must promise me that there will be no '*silence*'."

They talked amongst themselves, arguing for and against, until reluctantly they agreed, although they were not happy about it. To their way of thinking, Father's actions ran contrary to what their world was all about, and maybe he needed to be reminded that anyone who came below, by whichever route, was welcomed and befriended. They were his words after all.

The weeks turned into months and Catherine literally blossomed under all the lavish attention she received. She was spending more and more time Below, and was a frequent visitor to Mary, who was the community's nurse and midwife. Mary fussed over Catherine like a mother hen, making sure she was doing all the right things and keeping to a proper diet. Catherine wasn't sure who was looking forward to the birth more. Bless her. Mary was a true friend.

The baby's layette was becoming mountainous and Vincent joked that if much more was forthcoming, he would be forced out of his own chamber. The cradle, which had seen many a newborn over the years, was brought out from storage and refurbished so that it looked brand new. Nothing was too much trouble for the new arrival.

Peter also became a regular visitor and he and Mary were often closeted away in the Hospital chamber, checking supplies and making sure that everything would be on hand when Catherine was due to deliver.

Father still clung to his stubborn belief that he was right and everyone else was wrong, but it was a lonely time for him as he felt the continued disapproving looks from the family. He was dismayed to find that even Mary had defected to the '*other side*,' when she, more than others, must know of the terrible chance Catherine was taking in continuing with the pregnancy. Vincent and Catherine still acted lovingly towards him but never spoke about the baby in his presence. He had to acknowledge though - but only to himself - that their happiness spread through every tunnel and chamber, so that there was a sense of contentment Below that had not been there before.

Catherine was about ready to finish her work at the DA's office for a few months and Joe was sorry to see her leave, if only for a while. He had given her such a hard time when she first arrived, but being the battler she was, had persevered and won him over, to such an extent that he knew she was the best partner he would ever be likely to have. He was one of the few people who knew her secret, and only because he had gotten himself into strife with a gang boss he was trying to put away. Catherine had had no choice but to take him Below until the trial and so he had met Vincent and learned the secret. He could still hardly credit what went on beneath his very feet and sometimes, he went back with Catherine to re-charge his batteries when life Above stated to get him down.

Catherine's pregnancy had proceeded as normal and Peter had told her that from the scans he had taken, there did not appear to be any outward sign that the baby would carry Vincent's features.

"However, the baby's blood is the same as Vincent's which could raise a problem, but other than that, I think we're home free."

Catherine was relieved to hear it and any problems could be overcome. Down Below, anything was possible. She and Vincent had cherished this time and some of her precious memories were of the times when he had laid his tawny head against her swollen belly and felt the movements of their child. He never ceased to be awed at the fact that part of him was in her and growing.

They hadn't even begun to think of names for the baby, but the whole community had put in their suggestions, with the exception of Father.

Catherine closed up the apartment and took just one suitcase with her. Reaching the tunnel entrance, she took her last look at the world Above and then, with a slight smile curving her jaw, turned her

back and entered the half light of the world Below, her home for the next few months.

Vincent felt her coming and taking a quick glance around their chamber, he satisfied himself that all was ready for her.

Mary and Elizabeth had worked overtime on this chamber to the detriment of all their other duties, but nobody minded because this was for Vincent and Catherine. They had made new covers for the bed and the cradle was now bedecked with satin and lace, ready for its occupant. Elizabeth had made and painted a brightly coloured mobile to hang above the cradle, made up of the cutest baby animals.

Flowers took up every remaining space and their scent was sweetness itself, taking away the traces of candle smoke and dampness from the air.

When Catherine reached the communal chamber, the first person she saw was Father, who jumped up and relieved her of her suitcase.

"Let me take that, Catherine. Come, Vincent is waiting in his chamber." He just could not bring himself to say '*your*' chamber.

She caught the inflection though and shook her head sadly. He couldn't even bring himself to look at her below chest height. It was almost as though he were trying to tell himself that if he didn't look, he would not have to acknowledge the reality. She said nothing. He had missed so much by denying the truth and she could only feel sorry for him. Maybe when he saw his grandchild, it would be different, she hoped.

When she stepped across the threshold to their chamber, the scent of all those flowers assailed her nostrils and she breathed deeply.

"Oh, Vincent! This is lovely."

He came towards her and said; "Mary and Elizabeth insisted on flowers, Catherine, so much so that at least one third of my library has gone missing and goodness knows what else!"

She laughed delightedly and walked further into the room and when her eyes fell on the cradle, resplendent in satin and lace, the tears welled up instantly.

Vincent came to stand behind her and together they looked down at the empty space which would soon be filled with their child. His hands came around her, resting on her, by now very swollen belly.

"Come now, little mother," he whispered in her ear, "rest a while," and he picked her up in his arms and gently deposited her on the bed. She certainly tired very easily these days and before too long, her eyes fluttered shut and she slept. Vincent stayed close and watched her sleep, marvelling at the kicks of their baby and surprised that the force of them did not wake her up.

Catherine's days Below followed a comfortable routine of sleeping late and then helping the women with light duties. She was forbidden to carry anything heavier than a saucepan and even though she protested that she wasn't an invalid, she was totally outnumbered and gave in gracefully. Besides, they were under strict orders from Vincent and they dare not disobey, especially when they remembered the tone of voice in which he issued them.

The children cornered her one day and said they had a present for her. Catherine loved surprises and went with them eagerly. Samantha led her to the children's dormitory where Vincent was already waiting. There was much giggling and fidgeting amongst the younger ones, who were impatient for Samantha to present their gift.

Vincent took Catherine aside and whispered, "Have you any idea as to what it could be?"

She shook her head. "None. I didn't even know they were planning anything."

Samantha coughed loudly and everyone quieted down. She reached into a drawer and carefully withdrew two packages wrapped in faded cloth and tied with string. "We wanted to make something for the baby and all of us did a bit each. We hope you like it."

Catherine accepted the packages and didn't care what was in them. That they had taken the time to think of them was gift enough. She handed the bigger of the packages to Vincent to unwrap. "You go first," she said.

He sat on one of the beds and began to painstakingly untie the several knots in the string. Nothing was wasted Below and it could be used again. The package was quite large, rather heavy and was full of odd shaped angles. Goodness only knew what was in it.

"Hurry up, Vincent!" they all cried.

Even Catherine was impatient with him. "What is it?" she urges. He carefully unfolded the cloth and at last the gift was revealed. "Oh, my!" breathed Catherine.

Laid open on Vincent's lap were figures of the community carved in wood. Some were exquisitely done while others were almost unrecognizable except to the little hands that had made them. Vincent touched each and every one of the figures and knew that it must have taken a lot of time and much hard work to produce such a precious gift.

"Thank you all, so much. Looking at these figures, I can see that we have budding artists in our midst." He gently laid the figures down and stood up to allow Catherine to take his place on the bed.

After taking her time admiring the carvings, she then tackled her own package, which was a lot smaller than Vincent's and soft to the touch. Mirroring his actions, she untied the string and set it aside, then, looking into the faces of the excited children, began to very slowly, uncover the gift. When it was revealed, Catherine could only stare at the intricate and delicate design of the shawl which these dear children had made. Lifting the shawl up and very carefully shaking it out, she was able to see more clearly how complicated it must have been to make. In fact, she would probably have to pay a small fortune for this at Saks. It felt like gossamer in her hands and it was so soft, just perfect for a baby's tender skin.

"Oh, children! I never dreamed..." She swallowed the lump in her throat and continued. "This has to be the most beautiful shawl ever made and you know why? Because I can feel love woven into every stitch and you can be sure that these gifts will be cherished because of that. And when our baby is old enough, we shall be able to tell him or her, just how much you wanted to share this time with us. Thank you all, from the three of us."

The gifts were placed with all the others they had received and they both knew they were fortunate indeed to have such friends. Catherine lowered herself awkwardly into a chair and relaxed. She was beginning to feel like a beached whale and wondered if she would ever be re-acquainted with her feet again. It seemed like an age since she could look down and see them. To Vincent, though, she was beautiful, more beautiful than he had ever seen her. He had read somewhere that pregnant women had some sort of aura surrounding them which made them look beautiful, even if they really were not. The same thing was often said about brides, and he believed it utterly.

After all, he told her; "There is so much more of you to love." At which, she melted in the face of such sincerity. Beauty truly was in the eye of the beholder.

Just about two weeks later, Catherine awoke in the early hours feeling most uncomfortable. Trying not to disturb Vincent, she managed to get up and started to walk up and down the chamber, hoping to alleviate her aching back. Suddenly, she felt a tightening across her abdomen, and while it was not particularly painful, it caught her by surprise and she sucked in a lungful of air. It soon passed and she resumed her pacing, taking even breaths, as she had been taught by Mary. When after about ten minutes another pain came, she realized that this was it.

Vincent, even in his sleep, felt the second pain and he was jerked instantly awake. God, what was he supposed to do? Everything Peter had told him fled from his memory, leaving only a blank. *'Think, you fool,'* he told himself. *'Get Mary. That's it.'* Relieved he had been able to remember that much, he leapt from the bed and was halfway out of the chamber before he suddenly remembered Catherine.

Spinning around he raced back to her side. "Oh, Catherine! I'm sorry. Is it bad yet? I felt some of your pain. I am going for Mary. Will you be all right for just a little while?" Part of him was urging haste to fetch Mary, while the other part wanted to stay with Catherine. He was torn in two different directions and at a loss what to do.

Catherine smiled so serenely that he was taken aback. How could she be so calm when he was rapidly unravelling? "I'll be fine, Vincent. Don't panic so. There's hours to go yet. You might get someone to go for Peter, though." She smoothed her fingers over his cheek and then reached up to give him a quick kiss. "Okay now?" she asked.

Feeling her calming touch, he nodded his head and pulled himself together, at least enough to be able to carry out his instructions. Running through the tunnels the sound of his footsteps seemed to say; *'Hurry, Vincent, hurry!'* Vincent cleared his head. He didn't need to be told to hurry. He fervently wished he had wings.

Disregarding propriety and privacy, he burst into Mary's chamber and unceremoniously shook her awake. "Catherine is in pain. You must come quickly!"

Blinking her eyes, Mary came to her senses and moved her jaw, just to check that her teeth were intact after the shaking they had received. "All right, Vincent, I'm coming. How far apart are her contractions?"

He looked blankly at her and shouted; "How should I know? She's in pain, now come on!" He was practically dragging poor Mary out of the chamber and she had to run to keep up with him.

All the commotion finally penetrated everyone's sleep and before too long a trail of half-awake, half-asleep people were making their way through the tunnels having guessed what was about to happen. Someone took on the job of going for Peter, which as just as well, as Vincent forgot all about it.

Mary took charge of Catherine and having satisfied herself that there was no urgency, started to laugh and proceeded to tell her that the way Vincent was carrying on, anyone would think that no baby had been born in the tunnels before. Vincent interrupted with an indignant snort; "It's the first for us."

Each time Catherine had a contraction, he felt it too. They were definitely getting stronger and more frequent. By now, Mary had gotten Catherine to the Hospital chamber and within an hour, Peter arrived to find everything under control.

Vincent could hardly stand to see Catherine in so much pain. He had been present when Lena had given birth, but it was nothing compared to this. *'How can she stand it?'* he thought. The pain he was experiencing was intense, and he could take much more pain than she ever could. He was holding her hand and every contraction she got, she squeezed so hard it was a wonder his fingers weren't crushed.

"I'm sorry, Catherine. Sorry to make you go through this. I promise it will never happen again." He was so scared and so ashamed of what he was making her suffer.

Catherine opened her eyes and smiled. "Darling, Vincent. This pain is nothing compared to the joy about to come. I will go through this again and again for our children and I tell you now, I intend to do just that."

Sweat broke out on his brow and trickled down his face, running into his eyes and it was difficult to tell sweat from tears. "My life is yours, Catherine. Every breath I take, every beat of my heart is for you and our family. Whatever comes in our life, know that one truth." The words were hardly necessary.

She knew it was true.

Peter left Catherine to do her own thing, standing by in case he was needed. "Catherine, you're doing fine. Scream if you want to."

She shook her head. "No way! This baby is going to be born to the sound of laughter. Oh! Oh! Here comes another one!" The pain went on and on and on, never ending and she heard Mary telling her to push.

"Take a deep breath now. Come on. That's it."

Everything was going beautifully and Peter took Vincent aside and dropped a bomb in his lap. "It will be any time now, Vincent, and Catherine has asked me to allow you to deliver your baby. I'll be right beside you, so there is nothing to worry about."

Vincent just stared. "I can't do it. How can she trust me not to harm her or the baby?" He looked down at his clawed hands and cursed them. "These hands are not fit..." He couldn't go on.

Peter took his hands in his and said; "These hands are gentle, loving hands, Vincent. Catherine wants you to be the first person your baby feels and sees. You can do it."

Catherine watched the play of emotions on his face and wondered if she had gone the right thing. Calling him to her, she said; "You don't have to do it just because I want you to. It is your choice. I just want our baby to know you first."

He was undone by her trust and her graciousness, and the honour she was giving him. He leaned down and placed a petal soft kiss on her damp brow. "Thank you for your trust, my Catherine. I will not fail you."

She was panting now, wanting desperately to rid herself of the burden she carried. "I can't wait....Hurry!"

All at once the room was a hive of activity, as Vincent scrubbed up and took Mary's place at the end of the bed.

Outside the chamber the rest of the community waited with bated breath. Mouse was running a book on the sex and weight of the baby, but he had to be careful not to run into Father, who would have his head if he found out.

The man in question finally made an appearance and all eyes turned to him, glad to know that he had relented enough to be there with the rest of the family. The reason he had delayed coming had nothing to do with his previous stubbornness. He had been frantically searching his chamber for a certain something which Margaret had given him, just before she died. He had put it away because the pain was too fresh and he'd had the devil of a time trying to find it again.

Back in the Hospital chamber, Catherine was oblivious to almost everything going on around her, concentrating all the reserves of energy on Vincent's voice telling her what to do. "Keep talking to me," she panted. The sound of his voice was all she heard until suddenly, after one last, mighty effort, there was silence, as Vincent held in his hands, the wonderful miracle of life.

He held a part of both of them in his hands. Exhausted as she was, the sight of Vincent with their child was a picture she would carry in her heart forever. Tears of wonder and joy were running unashamedly down his cheeks as father and son made eye contact for the first time. He finally managed to drag his gaze back to his beloved wife.

"He is so beautiful, so very beautiful," he sobbed. He laid their son across her stomach so she could take her first look too. Laughing and crying at the same time, she and Vincent counted each finger and toe and marvelled at his perfection. "Thank you, Catherine. For all you had to endure, I think you. Our son thanks you." He held the two most precious people in the world and said. "I never believed I could love anyone as much as I love you, but love is a wonderful thing. It grows all the time and

spreads so that there is always enough to go around. Now we have someone else to love as much as we love each other."

Catherine was so tired, but she didn't want to sleep; didn't want to miss one second of this day. Peter and Mary, who had been standing to one side, surreptitiously wiped their eyes and proceeded to clean up the room, feeling very much like intruders.

When the baby made its first cry, a cheer went up from the gathering outside. Mary went to the entrance and looked around for Father. Spotting him at the back, she called him forward. "They would like you to meet your grandson. If you want to, that is," she sniffed haughtily. And she gave him an intimidating stare that dared him to refuse.

He smiled a little when he saw how protective she had become towards Catherine. "Of course I want to see him. I have something for him," and he elbowed his way through to the front.

The sighs of relief were audible to those inside the Hospital chamber. "This is the last hurdle, but I reckon we're home free," laughed Peter. He'd known Jacob Wells longer than anyone, and while he had been known to rant and rave and blunder around, he never failed to admit when he was wrong, and Peter knew that this time would be no different. And as Vincent had to eloquently put it, there was more than enough love to go around. Finally, Jacob had learned that.

Standing at the chamber threshold, Father asked; "May I come in?"

Catherine, generous as always and willing to forgive anybody anything today, held out one hand in welcome. "Of course, grandfather. Come meet your grandson. All nine and a half pounds of him."

Father's eyebrows rose at his new title. "Hmmm! Grandfather sounds good," and he puffed out his chest at his new position.

Vincent looked at Catherine and smiled a smile, which told her that life was back to the status quo. "Thanks be," she whispered.

Approaching the bed, Father - meekly for him - asked if he might be allowed to hold his first grandchild. Vincent lifted the baby from Catherine and placed him into Father's arms.

"We don't have a name for him yet, but here he is. Take your time and get acquainted."

Father nodded his head gratefully and lowered his eyes to meet the bluest eyes looking back up at him. Vincent's eyes to be sure. Father felt comfortable enough now to make a little joke. "There's no doubting who your father is, little one. Those eyes are a mirror image of the one who fathered you and you are a very lucky and special person."

Plans were set in motion for a huge welcoming party. The Naming ceremony was a joyous occasion and one which didn't happen very often. Invitations were sent out to all the Helpers from Above, including Joe Maxwell, who though he wasn't a Helper as such, was Catherine's best friend.

Catherine was discharged from the hospital with firm instructions to take it easy. Safely ensconced in Vincent's chamber again, the cradle accepted its new occupant and Catherine and Vincent set about the task of finding a name. Unbelievable as it seemed, they could not agree and very nearly had their first parental argument. Finally though, it was Vincent who more or less stumbled on the name.

He was becoming exasperated with his wife for dismissing every name he came up with. Throwing his hands in the air, he shouted, "Catherine Chandler Wells. Will you please find a name for our son before he gets too much older." He looked from Catherine to the baby and then to her again. "I've got it," he laughed happily.

Catherine, lying on the bed, studiously doing her post natal exercises, grimaced at him. "Ha!" she sniffed. "Well, I hope it's something better than the crazy ones you've been coming up with so far. I will not saddle our son with a name like Byron and that's final. So okay, then. Surprise me."

He came over to the bed, picked her up in his arms and set her down again in the chair next to the cradle. "I think we should call him after you. What do you think of Chandler? Chandler Wells. Sounds good to me."

A grin of pure delight spread across her face. "Vincent, you are a genius. It's perfect. A strong name and it suits him." Looking into her son's eyes she whispered, "Welcome to the world, Chandler Wells."

The day of the Naming ceremony dawned and the world Below was on a high, waiting for all the guests to arrive. Mouse was up to his tricks again, making bets on the baby's name, only this time he was caught red-handed by Father. But his foreboding of trouble to come was soon replaced by a huge grin as Father put in his own suggestion of a name.

"Mind you, this is the first and last time I will tolerate such goings on. Don't do it again, Mouse."

Catherine had dressed Chandler in the christening gown which was once hers. It was the only concession she had made from her world. She herself wore the clothes of the community and Vincent wore his best outfit of leather breeches and snowy white, frilled shirt, over which he wore a fringed leather vest. She checked him over and decided he was too handsome for words. Not that she was going to tell him that. He was already strutting around like a peacock, telling anyone who would listen that he was a father. She reckoned that all the word and his brother knew by now.

Everyone was waiting in the communal chamber, which had been transformed into a place of sheer beauty. Tables were laid with food that groaned under the weight. Fairy lights, one of Mouse's inventions, twinkled merrily and cast a welcoming, warm glow over the whole room. When the parents and baby arrived, Father called for quiet and began the ceremony.

The words he used were the same as always and he concluded with, "And we welcome the child with a name." Turning to the parents, he asked, "Have you decided on a name?"

"To which Vincent replied, "We name our son Chandler."

The presents were then given to the new member of the community and while this was going on, Peter explained to Joe what the ceremony meant. "There's nothing quite like it in our world, Joe. I love coming here at party time, whatever the occasion."

Catherine had a few words to say and called for quiet. "Our son, Chandler, has the best extended family any child could wish to have. Not only a new grandfather, but also an honorary grandmother." She looked at Mary and said; "If you will accept?"

Mary was overcome. "Oh! Thank you. I should be honoured to accept."

Catherine continued. "Also, we want him to have godparents. Peter for one. He insisted anyway." There was laughter at that and Peter became very embarrassed. "Also, we thought Mouse would make a perfect godfather. There is so much Chandler can learn from him, including getting into mischief. All those gizmos of yours to play with. What do you say, Mouse? It will be a responsibility, but we know you can do it."

Mouse never expected to be included to this extent. He was fully aware that he had limitations, but he would do his very best, he promised them.

Vincent took over from Catherine and continued. "If Elizabeth is agreeable, we would like for her to be Chandler's godmother. There is much Chandler can learn from you, Elizabeth. We hope you will

agree."

Elizabeth agreed with alacrity even before Vincent had finished speaking. "Thank you, yes!" she cried.

The party then began in earnest and later in the evening, Father called Vincent and Catherine to his chamber. Seated at his table, he began to speak.

"I have given you both a terrible time, haven't I? Especially you, Catherine, and yet you loved me anyway. I could feel your love. I was dreadfully wrong and I freely admit it. Will you both forgive a foolish old man? I am truly sorry."

Catherine laid her hand over his and nodded. "Of course, Father. We knew your fears and we understood them, because we had them too, but this time, we had to follow our own way. Now it's forgotten."

Father reached over to the shelf behind him and placed on the table a faded velvet box. "Margaret gave this to me just before she died and I want Chandler to have it. I bought this for her when we married and she wore it for the rest of her life."

Catherine opened the box to find a gold chain. On the end of the chain was a disc inscribed with curious symbols. "What do they mean?" she asked him.

Father pointed to one side and said, "These are Chinese characters. This one means happiness and the other one...." He turned the disc over. "....means love." He looked at the two people in front of him and said, "If you have one, you generally find the other. As you have done, despite all my wicked machinations. It's what I pray Chandler will have in his life."

The three of them sat there in the quietness, realizing that even though Chandler had driven Father apart from them in the beginning, he had brought them back together at the end. And all would be well.

END