



*Behind Cathy's Smile*

Thank you for buying the fourth 'All's Wells',  
'Behind Cathy's Smile.'

It was written solely for enjoyment by fans of  
'Beauty and the Beast.'

U.S. readers are usually happy to tolerate the many minor linguistic differences in U.K. writing; it adds colour, or color. Tweaking your judicial system, however, may cause a wince or two, so I'll apologise in advance. {You could be kind and call my ignorance 'artistic licence.'}

There's a senior executive lawyer to whom the D.A.s in his area may refer an exceptionally complex or unusual case, for assessment and advice. It was on this desk that Joe's file landed 'in error' and as far as I am aware it exists only in my imagination.

Thanks to Barbara Gipson for permission to use her artwork.

Book 1 - 133pages	\$20 U.S.A.	£8.50 U.K.	£10 E.U.	} <i>Out of print.</i>
Book 2 - 119pages	\$15 U.S.A.	£7.00 U.K.	£ 9 E.U.	
Book 3 - 84pages	\$14 U.S.A.	£6.50 U.K.	£ 8 E.U.	
Book 4 - 79pages	\$13 U.S.A.	£6.00 U.K.	£ 7 E.U.	

All are A4, clear print, comb bound with acetate over card covers.

Available from:-

Edna Grice,  
26 Somerset Avenue  
Harefield  
Southampton  
SO18 5FL  
England, U.K.

*You will remember that while Joe was driving Vincent to Catherine's bedside at the hospital, they made a brief stop at the restaurant so that Vincent could get word to Father. This story follows from that incident.*

## *Behind Cathy's Smile*

The message from Henry Pei made little sense to Father, but it was sufficient to let him know that Vincent's delayed return was not the direct result of his capture or harm. That was some comfort, of course, but 'not to worry' was an impossible direction for him to comply with. He *had* been dreadfully worried. His son was safe, now. He knew this for certain, as he gazed at his grandson, who was curled in the relaxed contentment of slumber, at last.

It had been a difficult evening for the baby. Whenever Vincent felt the need to visit Catherine's grave, Jacob seemed to sense his father's turmoil and he became restless, fractious, until he returned. Tonight had been no different and while Father had done his best to provide

solace, the baby had become inconsolable. By midnight Father was at his wit's end, and was contemplating asking for Mary's expert assistance when there was an unexpected, very marked change in the little one's demeanour. The pitiful whimpers ceased. The child went still, alert, as if he were listening intently to something beyond his grandfather's perception. After a few brief, immobile seconds he resumed a squirming, wriggling motion, his little face beamed his usual sunny smile and he chortled in glee as he succeeded in grabbing two handfuls of beard before his unsuspecting grandparent could react. The two of them laughed together in the shared joys of this familiar game. To Father's relief the long-refused bottle of warm milk was eagerly accepted and drained before the sleepy child happily settled into his nearby crib. Sinking back wearily in his own comfortable armchair once more, watching the peaceful rise and fall of the small torso, it was not long before Father also dozed off.

This was the heart-warming tableau which Vincent beheld at the end of his dazed, euphoric stumble home through the silent tunnels. Joe had dropped him off near Central Park, promising to pick him up there the following evening and to take him again to Catherine's bedside.

Was it, could it possibly all be true? It was only an hour or so since he and Joe had said their goodnights to one another but that reality had receded as he followed his feet back to the hub. He must have been dreaming, surely? The dramatic events of this night were the product of the longing of his over-taxed heart. His Catherine, his reason for living had been taken from him. Grief had caused him to hallucinate; he had lost his reason; had become delusional. Afraid to believe, terrified of waking to the void of desolation into which he had fallen since that dreadful night, Vincent was a statue on the entry stairs, immobilised by dread that he might have been dreaming and would awaken again to the nightmare. As he looked across into the crib at the tiny miracle who lay there so peacefully, he became aware of a tendril of warmth within his heart. No. Not one. *Two* filaments of love, twining round his soul, keeping his heart safe. He dared to

open himself to that second tie, holding his breath until he was sure, then a flood of warmth swept away all doubt. Catherine lived, she loved, she was becoming stronger with every breath they took and . . . she would come home , soon. It *was* true! He could feel her, feel the bond.

"Father!" He shook the old man's shoulder to rouse him. "Father! She's alive! She's coming home!"

"Wha . . . Vincent? What? Who?" he asked in sheer bewilderment.

"Catherine," he breathed. "She's alive. I saw her tonight. She will come home. Soon."

Alarm flooded Jacob Wells at those words. Grief had driven his son over the edge, into insanity. This he had feared, for months. Now the irrational ravings confirmed that his worst fears had come to pass. In despair, he clasped the huge form to him, running his hands over his son's head, tangling his fingers in the shaggy mane and weeping silently as his heart broke. Not knowing what to do, what to say, he simply held him close.

"Joe has explained that I must wait. Peter can arrange for her to be officially transferred into his care, as he is her own physician and she no longer needs to remain in protective custody. Once she has been released into Peter's care, he will bring her home to us. Joe says this will avoid another police investigation into Catherine's disappearance, which would happen if I were simply to bring her home myself. Oh, Father, it's so difficult to have to wait! Do you think that Peter will manage to do it tomorrow? How long will it take to lay a paper-trail and put up a smoke screen as Joe says we must, to keep the dogs off the scent? How long, Father?"

He pulled his head free to gaze in eager entreaty at his father, just as he had done so often in the years of his boyhood.

Stunned, Jacob Wells realised that much of what Vincent had said was quite alien to his normal manner of speech. The terminology, the concepts, even some of the vocabulary were not Vincent's. Playing for time, he answered the immediate question.

"I . . . I really don't know, my son," he told him gently.

"I'm going to her again tomorrow night. She's getting stronger. I can feel it. I was almost too late." He shuddered at the memory. "She was so weak, Father, so *very* frail. That was why Joe was looking for me. He said that secrecy was no longer any protection for her. I was his last hope, but he could not find me."

"And how *did* Joe find you?" asked Father.

"He had been keeping watch at Catherine's grave, night after night, knowing that I *must* go there. He truly loves her, Father, to seek for me in such a manner. He had almost given up hope. And then, I accused him of mocking my grief. I did not believe his words. I thought he sought to punish me." He shook his head in sorrow. "I feel so ashamed of the way I spoke. The way I behaved. Joe understood, though. He is truly a good man, as Catherine has always believed. He kept me safe from discovery, at the clinic; made me leave when he knew that the night nurse was about to check on Catherine. He has not asked about where I live, or pressed for any information. I trust him, Father. Joe will not betray us. I feel certain of that."

"Good . . . good," Father murmured slowly, thoughtfully, watching his son's expressions, and finding himself less ready to dismiss his words as evidence of delusion. Could he allow himself to hope for one more miracle?

It was approaching dawn and at Vincent's urging, the weary old man shuffled off to bed, while his son effortlessly lifted the crib and the child within, softly repeating a litany of the one, fervent prayer to his son's sleeping form.

"She's coming back to us, Jacob. Your mother is coming home. Soon you will be in her arms, my son. Soon."

And as those sounds faded along the passage, so hope began to fill Jacob Wells' heart and his fears for Vincent's stability receded.

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*

"It was quite a shock, I can tell you."

Peter Alcott was sitting with Jacob Wells, the ubiquitous tea-pot ousted for once, in favour of something a little stronger. Neither one could decide whether the drink was for celebratory or medicinal purposes, but both were agreed that a stiff brandy fit the bill perfectly.

"Not only was I woken from sound sleep by a call from that persistent whipper-snapper - he's like a bulldog when he gets hold of something - but he insisted on joining me at home for breakfast. A very *early* breakfast, I might add!" laughed Peter. "He nearly *was* breakfast, when he started his cock-and-bull story. I was ready to bite his head off!"

"You, too? I truly thought that Vincent had lost his sanity when he came home last night. I don't think I shall really take it in until I see her safely here, where we can look after her ourselves.

"How is she, Peter? Did you see her? How is such a thing possible?"

"They've kept her well, physically. Muscle tone quite good. She's lost weight, of course, but on the whole she's a lot better than I would have expected, considering."

"Conscientious nursing staff, then," Jacob put in.

"I'll say," Peter agreed. "I've been through these," he indicated the file of Catherine's medical records, "and I'll leave them here for you. You'll see that initially there were some anomalies in her blood samples, which they were unable to classify. The conclusions were that some unknown factor from the baby's blood had partially neutralised the effects of the morphine, which would otherwise have been a fatal dose. As the child had disappeared, and the anomalies in Catherine's blood were temporary, no-one has been able to research into either cause or effect."

"Thank heavens for that," was the heartfelt interjection from Jacob Wells, always aware of Vincent's vulnerability. Hughes and Gould were not the only scientists who might view his son as an 'interesting lab. specimen.' He shuddered. "Do you agree with what's in there, Peter?" he asked, nodding at the file.

"No. Not entirely. From what Catherine told me, and you'll understand that our conversation was brief - privacy

was limited, she's still weak and rather disoriented - she had excellent pre-natal care, in spite of her circumstances. My personal belief is that it was the mental trauma, rather than any physical cause, which led to her comatose state. To have their son taken from her at birth was the point of over-load. Her mind simply shut down. She could bear no more."

Both physicians were silently weeping by now, contemplating the hellish nature of Catherine's experiences during her incarceration.

"The initial effects of the morphine had temporarily lowered her vital signs, to the extent that she was certified as dead, but her recovery was sufficiently swift for detection before autopsy," Peter continued.

"Dear God!" came the gasp from his colleague. "The whole story is absolutely incredible! For her to have been so close to death, so many times . . ." his voice faded as emotion choked the words.

"She always *was* a fighter, Jacob. She just needed something to fight *for*. With Vincent's absence and the baby lost to that devil incarnate, her will to live was ebbing. She almost gave up."

"Vincent said he reached her only just in time," Jacob acknowledged. "He told me she was very, very weak. He feels her strength returning and he's confident of her recovery."

"The bond?"

"Mm-hm. Its an amazing thing, this connection between the three of them."

"Three?"

"Oh yes. My grandson knew that all was well, long before Vincent's return. It was astounding to see the change in his behaviour, from distress to happiness. No words were needed, believe me."

"But that's incredible, Jacob. Are you sure?"

"Incredible. Inexplicable. But its a fact, Peter, not merely the ramblings of a doting grandfather. Truly." Vincent called from the top of the entry just at that moment, bringing his son before he intended to meet Joe, as arranged the previous evening.

"When, Peter?" He overlooked the usual courtesies, driven by his need to know.

Peter had been more than a little uncertain of the wisdom of allowing Catherine to undertake a strenuous journey so soon after her awakening. He would have been far happier for her to take a week or so to recover her strength, but he knew it would have been a battle which he had little or no chance of winning. There was not only Catherine's determination to get home to contend with. He knew the impossibility of keeping Vincent from her, and each visit would be fraught with danger of his being discovered. So far, fate had been kind to them but the odds were not good. He was not a superstitious man, but a third such venture would really be pushing their luck. Telling himself that delaying her transfer to the tunnels would do more harm by causing severe mental stress both to Catherine and Vincent, he viewed the present plan of action as the lesser risk.

"Tomorrow evening, as soon as it is dark," was the reply, his reward a beam of joy where only misery and despair had been evident for so many long months.

"Tomorrow! Thank you, Peter, thank you," and he passed the baby to his grandfather before wringing Peter's hands in gratitude.

"Don't thank *me*, Vincent. It was Joe who almost frog-marched me to fill in the paperwork, immediately the administrative staff were available this morning," he laughed. "You appear to have found yet another champion. He was quite a bully on your behalf."

"He was afraid I might carry Catherine away myself, in my impatience to have her home, if he allowed any delay to occur," explained Vincent.

"No. You don't say. Whyever would he think that, I wonder? As if you would be so foolish!" Peter teased him. Vincent shyly lowered his gaze before admitting that Joe had needed to be quite insistent in order to prevent him from attempting that very thing.

"He explained the wisdom of not bringing the might of the whole New York Police Department about our ears by causing them to investigate another disappearance. He was so forceful in his argument that I had to concede." He raised his head and smiled in spite of his gross understatement that it had been 'difficult' to leave without Catherine.

Difficult. That was a concept which Vincent had fully assimilated during his problem-filled life, or so he had thought. He had also learned that there were twenty-four hours to each day. Both terms now proved to be relative; inconsistent; for the next twenty-four hours were never-ending, and endlessly difficult. All he had to do was wait, and Peter would bring Catherine home to him. Simple. Easy. No problem.

Since the night prior to his first meeting with Joe, Vincent had not slept. Neither had he been able to force any food down. He felt the tension within himself mounting by the minute and he was far beyond merely pacing the home chambers. He had to run, full pelt, as fast as his legs had ever taken him. Cloak flying from his shoulders, boots pounding the stone-floored passages in a desperate tattoo, chest heaving with effort, hair caught in the slip-stream of his momentum, heedless of anyone or anything other than this one, all-consuming urge, he ran.

It was probably several hours later - though he could not be certain - when his marathon had brought him to the bridge over the abyss. There he slowed at last and, leaning for support over the handrail, he drew in a long breath, filling his lungs to bursting, before the tunnel world shook, echoing and re-echoing to the roaring of the one word which retained any meaning for him at that moment. "Catherine!" As that cathartic roar left him, so did the demons which had plagued him so relentlessly.

Calm now, but exhausted, he walked in his characteristic, dignified manner, back to the hub, where he soaked his sweat-sodden body in the bathing chamber before a cursory swipe or two with a towel, then he fell asleep as he collapsed on his bed.

Father, careful not to disturb him, had covered the damp, un-clothed body, and looked in on him several times during the day. Pascal had kept the pipes quiet of all but necessary messages. Mary made sure the children did not play anywhere near Vincent's chamber. William kept a hearty meal braising in the oven, in hope that it would be

needed. An air of hushed anticipation pervaded the tunnels, waiting for time to pass, for the sun to go down Above so that at last it could shine Below, with Catherine's return.

Vincent awoke refreshed and ravenous. As he was getting dressed, Father called from the entry and was greeted with an unusual request.

"What time is it, Father? I seem to have lost track, somehow."

"Plenty of time yet, my boy. It's just gone five. William is keeping something hot for you, if you think you could manage it?" he asked hopefully.

"I could eat a horse, as they say," was the welcome answer. "I'll go to the kitchen as soon as I'm dressed."

"Good. Good," murmured Father abstractedly, while running his professional eye over his son and deciding that all was well with him, after all. "I'll leave you to your meal, then. Will you leave Jacob with me this evening?"

"I would like to take him with me," said Vincent uncertainly, "but . . ."

"I should think a cosy crib and a warm bottle of milk would be infinitely preferable to damp, draughty passages, don't you?" Father suggested firmly. "And I rather think you may be a little . . . distracted from Jacob's care," his eyes creased in a smile, "just for a moment or two, hmm? You might need *both* your arms to make sure Catherine knows she is welcome."

Vincent flushed at Father's teasing but the image it drew to his mind . . .

"To hold her in my arms again . . ." he said, brokenly. "Oh, Father, to hold Catherine . . ." and the two men hugged one another joyfully. Father urged him once more to go and eat.

"You'll need your strength," he joked as his son left.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a marked change in Vincent from the moment he gently took possession of Catherine's debilitated body. Raising her from the wheelchair into his strong arms, cradling her securely against his heart he sobbed out all his pain and grief as he leaned his back against the tunnel wall and slid slowly to the ground. One arm held her close while with the other hand he lightly brushed her hair from her face before gently tracing her beloved features over and over, as if he was trying to feel reality within a vision.

Catherine clung to him in her frailty, silently wiping his tears, dry-eyed herself, searching intently as if she, too, feared that her sight was betraying her, that he was not really with her but just one more illusive dream of all she had yearned for during an eternity of separation.

Peter stood inside the open cage of the freight elevator, tears flowing unheeded, the physician understanding that this bonding between the couple was more healing for them than any medical care possibly could be. But the area was unheated, draughty and damp and the blankets which had kept Cathy warm during the journey had been unwrapped in the need to see, to feel, to know the reality of her body. Reluctantly, he spoke.

"She needs to keep warm, Vincent. Perhaps you should take her home."

Peter was unsure whether his own presence had registered, but at least one of his words had penetrated, had been understood.

"Home," breathed Vincent. He rose carefully, wrapping the blankets around Catherine and set off, on auto-pilot, his pace brisk and surefooted in spite of him not once looking away from her face.

No-one intruded on the cocoon of love which encapsulated the couple, but they were there. All of them. Lining the passages to see their Vincent bring his Catherine back where she belonged; giving heartfelt thanks that at last she was safe; knowing that Vincent would come back to them, would be whole again. They melted away as

silently as they had waited, knowing that their time for greeting her would come later.

Not until Vincent had carried Catherine through the entry to his chamber did she lift her ear away from its resting-place over his heart, or take her eyes from his beloved face. As they entered she craned her neck anxiously, like a fledgling bird blindly seeking sustenance from its parent's bill. Weak as she was, one last all-consuming need caused a surge of adrenaline to hold exhaustion at bay for just a few more necessary minutes. She turned in Vincent's arms, raking the chamber with eyes desperate to find the tiny, precious form which had been so cruelly wrenched from her sight, without her aching arms ever being filled. Her gaze locked onto the movement as Father rose from a chair, and she gave a heart-rending, inarticulate cry as she saw his burden. She eagerly held out her painfully thin arms for Father to place her baby in them, and Vincent helped her to hold him securely.

*Now* her mind could allow her peace, could let her rest, knowing that all she held dear was safe, and her body shut down into a healing slumber before Vincent had finished tucking her into his bed.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was brought home to Jacob Wells that he had not one, but two patients on his hands when he prepared to give Catherine a shot of vitamins. His mouth dropped open in astonishment when Vincent snarled at him fiercely.

"Well *really* Vincent! What's got into you?" he burst out indignantly, stopped by Catherine's hand laid on his forearm as she whispered weakly,

"Is he able to, Father?" Her eyes searched his face earnestly.

"Well . . . yes, I suppose he is," he spluttered, quite taken aback by her query. She squeezed his arm gently.

"Its what he needs," she told him.

Suddenly, Jacob Wells knew she was right. Catherine understood, where he himself had not realised, that his son had only the most tenuous hold on his equilibrium at the moment. They must tread cautiously until he had adjusted. He patted her hand to signify his assent, then removed himself from her bedside, where Vincent immediately replaced him.

"Vincent," he began, choosing his words with great care, "you know that a shot is a quicker, more efficient way of getting treatments into the bloodstream. Catherine could take her vitamins orally, if you prefer, but if you wish you may use the syringe which I have ready." He waited quietly for his son's response.

"Will you give me my shot please, Vincent?" Catherine whispered.

"Of course I will, my love," he replied, as if it was the most natural thing in the world. He gently turned her onto her side, lifted her nightdress to bare her bottom and reached for the alcohol swab. Father handed him the syringe and supervised the injection swiftly and efficiently administered. He watched as Vincent settled Catherine back against the pillows, with a napkin tucked under her chin, ready to feed her the waiting bowl of soup. It was almost surreal. With Catherine, Vincent was functioning perfectly rationally, but, Father knew she was his entire reality; his mind could encompass nothing and nobody beyond her, just now. He was unaware of Father's presence in the chamber, his focus solely on Catherine.

Father slipped away silently to make sure that everyone would be aware of the need for complete privacy. There must be no disturbance, however well-meant, for the next few days. He would arrange for meals to be left outside Vincent's chamber, for it was evident that there was no likelihood of his son leaving Catherine's side, not for food, or rest, or anything else until she had begun to recover. That was no problem, Jacob Wells reflected, for Catherine would

see to it that Vincent's needs were met, just as Vincent would take care of hers. They would help one another heal, far better than either he or Peter could, he was certain.

Catherine slept the clock round, secure in Vincent's arms, so it was not until mid-morning that a call came over the pipes, to ask for the baby. Jacob had been in Mary's care overnight to allow his parents a few hours of much-needed, undisturbed sleep. Father took little Jacob himself, hoping for a chance to check Catherine and to assess how Vincent was faring. He called, somewhat hesitantly, from the entry, and relief swept over him as he heard good-morning greetings and an invitation to come in. He handed Jacob to his father, calling across to Catherine,

"How are you, my dear?"

"Just fine, thank you. Did you . . . ? She peered hopefully across the chamber and Jacob senior knew that now was not his time. Vincent's detachment seemed far less marked and Catherine was bright.

"I'll come back later, my boy. Your family has waited for far too long to be re-united." The strong arm around his shoulder and the filial kiss on his brow were unexpected, but so very welcome, as was the murmured,

"Thank you, Father," and he left with a much lighter heart than when he had arrived.

Later in the day Mary went to leave fresh diapers outside the chamber, but Vincent had heard her footsteps and, with a finger to his lips and an arm around her back, led her inside. They stood together for a few minutes, watching over the young mother, fast asleep, her body curled protectively around her sleeping son. Not a word was spoken as Mary brushed a maternal hand over his shaggy mane, kissed his cheek in benediction, then left as quietly as she had arrived. Her heart was filled with warmth at the sight she had never expected to behold, overflowing with happiness for the young man whom she loved like a son.

Geoffrey was just as quiet when he brought the basket of fruit which Long had sent down on the grocery cart for Catherine, as was Jamie with her bouquet, and Sarah with the gown which she had been sewing ever since she heard.

Elizabeth had not allowed the children to bring their cards, but had made the journey herself to leave the pile of youthful good wishes. During the day one after another of the community had crept to the shelves outside the chamber, left their gifts and messages and stolen away silently. No one disturbed the couple; everyone thought about them and prayed for their well-being.

They held a quiet ceremony of marriage at the bedside as soon as Catherine was well enough, with a promise of a celebration in the Great Hall later, when everyone would be able to enjoy a large party. For now, it was enough. Vincent knew that Catherine was his wife, and both she and Jacob were his; his family. He was overjoyed. It was a major step forward in his recovery, giving him a sense of stability, just as Catherine had hoped. 'He saw no shadow of another parting from her.'

At first Catherine had, understandably, been reluctant to let Jacob out of her sight. Too weak to manage his care herself, she had been content to watch Vincent bathe her son in a small, portable bath, which he brought as close to the bed as was practical. She admired the competent way he changed and dressed the baby and watched very carefully to learn how to do such things, which were entirely outside her previous experience. She longed for the time when she would be able to help and that served to increase her determination to regain her strength quickly. She was thrilled and excited when, on her third day home, Vincent propped an extra pillow under her arm and gave her Jacob and his warm bottle of milk, so that she could feed him.

"He's so strong!" she exclaimed in delight.

"Try to keep the bottle tilted, Catherine, so that there is milk in the teat, or he will suck in too much air."

"Like this?" she appealed to him anxiously.

"Just like that," he encouraged her. "That's just as Mary showed me, when I first tried," subtly letting her know that he, too, had felt incompetent at first. "I was terrified," he confided, "the first time I changed his diaper. I was certain that I would injure him with that huge pin, or scratch him with my claws, or drop him . . . or possibly *all* those things." He laughed at the memory.

"I can't imagine that," said Catherine. "You look as if you've had years of practise."

"And so will you, my love. I promise. Soon."

He reached to lift the baby from her, patting his back to coax a very gratifying burp of air before laying him back in his mother's arms to finish his bottle.

Once Jacob was asleep in his crib, Catherine insisted that it was time for her to try standing on her own two feet.

"So long as I have your arms as well I can't do much damage, can I, Vincent? At least let me try?" He was uncertain, but she was right, he would not let her fall.

"Just for a moment then Catherine."

She tossed the covers back eagerly and Vincent helped her to swing her legs around, to drop her feet to the rug.

"Ready?" he asked.

"You'll catch me, won't you," she said confidently, to reassure him, "but let me do this bit by myself." And with that she pushed herself upright, smiling triumphantly as she stood unsupported for a short time.

"See? I can do it, Vincent! I'm getting better aren't I?" as her legs refused to co-operate one second longer and she crumpled into his waiting arms.

That was the first in a long series of small triumphs as Catherine battled fiercely to regain control of her own body. She stood several more times that same day, both of them counting aloud as the seconds passed, collapsing into joyous laughter when her muscles rebelled. Ten was a celebration. The next day she stepped forward a pace. Then two. Each step was a milestone, as she pushed herself on, gritting her teeth with the effort. Within a week she had borrowed two of Father's spare canes and took her first unsteady steps leaning heavily on them. Always, in those first weeks, Vincent was close, ready to support her when her strength failed. Not once did he allow her to fall and her confidence in him allowed her to push herself to the limits, until her muscles strengthened and began to obey her more readily.

The first evening she successfully hobbled from their chamber to join the community for the evening meal earned

her a spontaneous standing ovation. Vincent's proud smile as he pulled out her chair was echoed on every face and Catherine was so pleased with her achievement that she would have forgotten to eat but for William's personal delivery of both her meal and his congratulations. From there on, life began to return to a more normal pattern for the young family.

With time, Catherine became comfortable in allowing Jacob to be with the other children while she was doing her chores or exercise regime. Vincent was confident that she could manage without his constant presence and gradually he took up his previous duties. It was good to heft a sledge-hammer, wield a pick-axe, feel his muscles working so powerfully again. Good to work up the sweat of honest labour and to know he had earned the half-hour of strenuous swimming in the deeper far reaches of the falls, to wash away the grime of a day's work before returning home. He once more enjoyed the stimulus of the lively minds in his literature classes and the warmth of the responses from the younger children during story-time. He had missed the social interaction of communal meals; the huddles around Father's map-strewn desk as he and his companions tried to solve an engineering problem; the snippets of news or secret confidences offered as he moved around his home.

Always, underpinning these joys was the certain knowledge that both Catherine and Jacob were nearby and that they loved him. No man could ask for more.

\* \* \* \* \*

One night as Catherine was preparing for bed, Vincent, a little reluctantly if he was honest, was getting into his outer clothing ready to take his turn on sentry duty.

They had had a rather long, somewhat heated discussion about this, earlier in the evening, prompted by Catherine's innocent query,

"Who will you be with tonight?"

"I shall be alone. No-one else is scheduled to be there. We expect nothing untoward at the moment," he replied casually. He quickly raised his eyes from cross-lacing his boots at an audible gasp, and a wave of fear through the bond.

"But Vincent suppose something *does* happen? Don't sentries work in pairs, for safety? Its not right for you to be on your own! I'll bet the others don't do that," she burst out.

He stayed still, analysing her indignation, her protectiveness and . . . a strong sense of resentment at what she presumed to be his unfair treatment.

"I choose to be alone, Catherine, as do many of the others. In times of disturbance it is usual to double up for added safety, as you suggest. But at other times those who wish to have company do so. Two friends may prefer to work a four-hour shift together, instead of each taking a two-hour stint alone. What suits one person may not be right for another, but I enjoy the solitude, the peace. Its a quiet time to reflect, to meditate."

He felt her emotions calm down. Choice was acceptable to her, where a supposed imposition was not. But the fear remained. Patiently he awaited her response.

"You can take care of yourself, I suppose," she conceded doubtfully, "but what of the others, the younger ones? Jamie or Zach, or Kipper, even. They all take a turn don't they?"

"Indeed they do. All our young people are expected to help, as soon as we judge them to be capable of doing so. This is their home. They have a right to protect its security, but we take great care to ensure their safety while they do so."

"By letting them take sentry-duty *alone*?" she came back at him sharply, bewildered that this should be so.

"What if some gang or something were to invade the Park Entrance by chance and only *Kipper* was there?"

"That is one of the more vulnerable parts of our home," he explained calmly. "A primary sentry point, well-hidden from any intruder and manned by an adult, always. *Kipper's* post, like any other young person's responsibility, would be much nearer the hub. No-one would allocate a primary sentry point to any but the most capable supervisor."

"Of course. I should have known," she said, feeling rather ashamed of herself. "None of you would be careless of any member of your family. I'm sorry Vincent. Its just that I was frightened, thoughtless."

"You need to understand how our community is run, my love, but you can't expect to learn all there is in just a few short weeks. There's no need to apologise for wanting to know that the sentries are safe. Have no fear. The one rule which applies to us all, and it is rigidly enforced, is that *any* circumstance which seems unusual, whatever it may be, is reported on the pipes immediately. No further action may be taken until help arrives. The sentry stays hidden, and thus safe, until the resources are in place to deal with the problem."

"Even you?" she asked anxiously. He laughed as he reached for her.

"Yes, my little worrier, even me. How could I expect the others to obey the rules if I did not?"

"Does that mean you'll only be gone for two hours?" Her tone was much brighter now. His eyes were dancing with humour and he could not suppress a smile as he hugged her and replied,

"Unless you think Kanin and I should combine our shifts for company, for four hours?"

"I think I'd appreciate your company far more than Kanin," she gave him a quick kiss, "and I suspect Olivia would endorse that whole-heartedly." She wriggled free from his embrace and feeling much happier that she had been, "You'd better get ready, then. Its not fair to be late."

"You need your rest, Catherine," still mindful of how ill she had been, "Please, don't wait up for me."

"O.K." she agreed, "I'll wait for you here," patting the bed.

Vincent had another reason to need solitude this evening. A small project of his own, for Catherine. He had been finding it a little more taxing than he had expected but he had persevered and now it was almost finished. Just in time, he hoped. He sensed that she would have need of it very soon, so he worked diligently by the light of his lantern. His eyes and hands were busy but all his senses remained alert to the official reason for his being here and he made frequent visual checks of the area. He examined the completed article critically from all angles. Yes, it was a pretty thing, he decided. It was sure to please her when she discovered it.

Footfalls alerted him to Kanin's approach and he quickly put everything away in the pockets of his cloak. The two men chatted briefly after Vincent called in the sentry change and 'all's well' on the pipes.

He went to his chamber via Father's study through their shared bathing facilities where he left the gift for Catherine to find in the morning. He spent a few moments at the crib, tucking the coverlet securely against the chill. His lady was soundly sleeping when he joined her, but she wriggled into her usual place under his arm, with her head on his chest, and gave a contented little sigh as she snuggled in. He smiled and kissed her brow, watching her face for a few moments while thanking the powers that be for her warm, loving presence here in his arms. Vincent knew that if ever a man was blessed, it was himself.

Catherine woke early next morning, and she listened, expecting Jacob's cry. No, he was still asleep. Then she became aware of a dragging ache in her lower abdomen and although it had been a year or so since she had last experienced this particular discomfort she knew at once what had caused her to wake so early. She slipped quietly from Vincent's side, hoping not to disturb him, and made her way to the facilities adjoining the bathing chamber, scolding herself for not having foreseen and prepared for her situation.

*'I suppose I can improvise with one of Jacob's diapers for now,' she thought, with a smile, 'I don't suppose he'll mind just this once.'*

As she was washing, her glance was caught by a small, very pretty, circular container which had certainly not been there previously. The cotton material had tiny sprigs of flowers printed all over. It was trimmed around the lid with gathered lace and there were large, decorative stitches holding it all together. She gazed at it for a moment or two before giving in to her curiosity and opening the lid. Her mouth dropped open in surprise. Sample packs of a variety of sizes of tampons and pads all nestled neatly together in the satin lining. *'Mary,'* she thought. *'But however did she know? Co-incidence I guess, but it was very astute of her and thoughtful. I'll thank her later,'* as she made use of the very timely gift. She stood for a while trying to puzzle out how she could explain things to Vincent without causing him, or herself for that matter, too much embarrassment. Poor Vincent. He was having to cope with so much, so quickly, and he had been absolutely mortified to discover her underwear in open view. He had tried to hide what he felt but the flush on his cheeks, the helpless look on his face, the way he avoided looking at the offending items had been a clear indication of his acute discomfort. She had been more tidy since then, to prevent any similar reaction. But this . . . couldn't be avoided. She wondered how much he knew. Probably he had learned about menstruation . . . but that was not quite the same as meeting the fact on a personal level. *'Oh well, no point in staying here!'* she decided.

When she returned to their chamber Vincent was awake. Again her mouth fell open in surprise as he greeted her, then,

"Did you find what you needed, Catherine? I wasn't quite sure of your preference so I just brought a few of each, for now. Was there something suitable?"

"Yes," she got out, after a second or two. Then she regained her wits and tried again. "Yes, thank you, Vincent. I had completely forgotten and I was so grateful to find them - and the lovely little box to keep them in. Its so pretty and

feminine - I knew it had to be for me," and she climbed in alongside him, to give him a hug and a goodmorning kiss, and a thank-you kiss, one for sheer relief that he was untroubled and another for - who needs a reason?

"I was afraid I might not have it ready in time," he told her, "I only completed it last night."

Stunned, she thought she must have mistaken his meaning but . . . the large, decorative stitches were not, it dawned on her, Mary's handiwork.

"The box?" she asked.

"Mm. I finished it during my time on sentry duty and left it as a surprise, when I returned."

The thought of him struggling with a needle, each stitch put in with love so that she might have something pretty to keep her things in just overwhelmed her suddenly and she buried her face in his chest, unable to keep back her tears.

"Catherine?"

"Don't mind me, Vincent. I'm just so happy," she sobbed, "You make me feel so cherished. I don't deserve a man like you, but I love you so much."

He had read about hormones and heightened emotions, so Vincent just rocked her gently until she was calmer. But he was thrilled with her words nonetheless and proud that his gift was so appreciated.

Catherine did wonder how Vincent had known but she did not ask, and he did not offer any explanation, not at that time.

While they were preparing for another busy day Vincent was turning over in his mind how to approach the rest of his mission. The success of the first part was gratifying, yet he was far more hesitant about the second. He was pulled strongly in opposing directions. He knew from Peter that it would be unwise for Catherine to risk another pregnancy so soon, yet for both of them this was part of their dream. To share in all the experiences which had been denied them with Jacob. To somehow compensate for that great loss and to ensure that Jacob would not be an 'only child.' These things were of great importance, he knew. But they had so much already, he reasoned. Had they the right to ask for even more? Was it foolhardy to risk Catherine's health? It was not solely his decision he realised. He had a wife to

discuss such matters with, so why did he continue to struggle alone?

"Catherine, Peter thought it would be wise to make these available for you at this time," he told her, as he lay the small package on the table. She half-expected to see the familiar little boxes which had not been a part of her life since she had known Vincent. They glowered at her from the table, where she had replaced them after a quick glance into the bag to confirm her suspicions,

"Oh," she said flatly, folding her hands into her lap as she sat back in the chair as if to distance herself from the package. But she did not take her eyes from it.

Vincent could feel the painful emotions roiling within her. They matched and echoed his own. He swept her out of the chair and into his arms, holding her closely as he sat on the bed, rocking her as if she were one of the children.

"Its not what either of us want," he tried to offer comfort, "I know that Catherine, but do you think we should at least consider Peter's advice?" After long moments of silence she disentangled herself from his embrace and began pacing the floor, with her arms crossed just above her abdomen and her head bowed, as if in great pain.

"If its not what you want, why would you bring them here?" she snapped in an accusatory tone.

"Because to do otherwise would be to preclude your right of choice and because I have no wish to be responsible for endangering your health," he replied gently.

She looked at him, saw the anguish which he had managed to suppress from his voice in his haunted eyes and knew that his pain was as great as her own. And that she was the cause of his pain. Again. She went and sat beside him on the bed, turning his face towards her.

"I *want* us to have another child, Vincent," she said fiercely. "We're *going* to share all that we missed with Jacob. But," she added gently, "if Peter has convinced you that we should wait, then now is not the time. I won't have you upset and fearful when you should be looking forward to a happy event. It would spoil everything. For all of us." She went over to the table and reclaimed the bag, emptying

it out on the bed, beside him. "Three boxes. That's three month's supply." He looked at her determined expression and wondered what was coming next. "After they're gone, you'll have to hold me down and *force* me to take any more," she pretended to threaten him, "I'll fight you all the way," she warned, "and I'll be even *stronger* by then." She wrestled him down onto the bed, tickling his ribs mercilessly until they were both breathless with laughter. As the horseplay died down, he answered her.

"But I'd let you win, my love, even if you were not." He kissed her gratefully. "Thank you, Catherine," he murmured.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was ridiculous really, she mused, but rather endearing. After several months of marriage they had given one another such shy smiles of greeting this morning. Not shy or uncomfortable with each other, precisely. More a stunned, confused sense of something wondrous having transpired, and neither of them being quite able to grasp the reality of it, just yet. Catherine had given a small, nervous giggle and had hidden her blushes in the curls of his broad chest. This brought a chuckle from Vincent and within seconds they had both erupted in peals of happy laughter as he enclosed her in his strong arms, until they had been able to regain a sense of control.

She chewed her pen, oblivious to the files strewn across the desk. Joe was not there to tease her about her wool-gathering. It was Vincent's desk, for much of her work was done at home these days. She went to the office only when necessary, usually two days in a week.

It was not that their love-making had ever been 'inhibited,' in the common usage of the word, she reasoned. More a case of 'coals to Newcastle' as Father would say. All it had needed was for them to be alone together for banked embers to quickly blaze, become a conflagration which swept all before it to a glorious consummation and re-birth, time after time, never seeming to become less intense.

When she had first returned to the tunnels from the hospital, each of them had desperately needed physical contact with the other, constantly; a re-affirmation that they were no longer apart. They drew strength from one another, from each gesture of affection; comfort from simply touching or holding each other. It had been a consuming need, for weeks, as Catherine gradually built her physical strength, re-learning to walk, to co-ordinate her movements. There had been simply nothing which Vincent had not helped her with in those first few days of helplessness. His reticence where she was concerned had been totally eclipsed by her need of him, by his possessive need to be with her, to do all that he could for her. Perhaps his fears of any intimacy had been put into a different perspective, dwarfed by the horrific events of the previous months. But the infinite tenderness which had characterised those intimate weeks of living together had no sexual element to it. The needs were for healing, for both of them. Each night they slept securely in one another's arms and gradually the nightmares had receded because always there was the comfort of a loving presence to drive them away. Each day was spent in happy co-operation, sharing in providing for Jacob's needs and stretching Catherine's abilities by walking a little further each day, increasing the scope of the physiotherapy as her muscles regained their tone, using the gym equipment which Peter had obtained for her. She worked with determination, eating well, sleeping well and exercising with such dogged tenacity that Father remonstrated with her about 'over doing things.'

It had been an idyllic time outside time where there were no fears, no tensions, no duties other than getting Catherine well again and caring for Jacob. Gradually life

had begun to return to normal. Vincent began to resume teaching, to the joy of the children. He put himself back on the roster for sentry duty, then for the workgroups which undertook repairs, maintenance and building projects, as called for. Catherine contacted Joe and made herself available to do such work as could be covered without recourse to office resources - and she found there was plenty she could do to help. A few weeks later she was back in the office part-time, on an ad hoc basis, having made it clear that family needs had priority and any untoward demands on her time would lead to her resignation. Joe quickly capitulated, seeing by the set of her jaw that she meant exactly what she had said. Part-time was infinitely more attractive than no Cathy, and after all she had endured he counted himself fortunate to have her back on any terms.

Peter had been quite clear about his views when Catherine had suggested that she might return to work. He had completed a very thorough medical exam. a couple of days previously and had just brought down the results of various tests which he had completed Above. Everything had confirmed that she was fully recovered; that there was no longer a question-mark over any aspect of her physical health.

"So what do you think then, Peter? Is it a sensible idea?"

Peter shook his head doubtfully.

"Its not that its a bad idea, per se. I think going Above again, taking up the reins of work you've always enjoyed, meeting friends and colleagues - all that would be good for you," he said thoughtfully, "... but ..."

"But *what* Peter?" she pressed.

"Honey . . . I *know* what you're like. You're so headstrong. So ready to give everything you have . . . And that's a *good* thing. To throw yourself into something you believe in, to strive to make a difference."

"But you think I shouldn't?" she asked, puzzled. Peter pursed his lips, wondering just how far he should intervene when there were no medical grounds for his intervention. But then, he was not merely a physician here.

And Catherine's decisions would affect far more than just herself. A friend would help her to consider all aspects.

"You say, now, and I know you *mean* it now, that you will work part-time. But, Cathy, I can't see you staying on the periphery for long. You *will* get involved, because its your nature to, in any case that tugs your heart-strings. And if it means twenty-four hours and seven days, to get a result, that's what you'll give. One hundred percent." He lowered his eyes, playing absent-mindedly with the pens on the desk.

"And I don't have a hundred percent to give, any more, do I, Peter? At least, not to any 'job.'" She also fell silent, thinking over the truth of Peter's fears. "So I have to think very carefully about the parameters of any involvement in office affairs. Work out where I want the limits to be, and stick rigidly within the scope of those restrictions. When I've worked out what I can offer without encroaching on my life here, Joe can look at what I'm prepared to do and decide whether he wants to agree, or whether I stay out of the office. Its a case of self-discipline, Peter, don't you think? And enforcing what I've laid down, or being prepared to resign if my terms are not honoured?"

Peter brightened considerably at her words.

"That's my gal!" he laughed. "Lay down the law *before* you get involved, then enforce it if anyone tries to break the rules. What was I worried about?"

"That I might jeopardise all that matters to me? Forewarned is forearmed, Peter. Thanks for the advice." As she gave him a warm hug of appreciation, Peter told her,

"It would break my heart to see anything spoil what you and Vincent have, Cathy. For the first time in over thirty years he has a rosy future ahead of him. The things he's had to endure . . . " he shuddered and fell silent. Somewhat hesitantly, and with a slight flush,

"You could help him to be even happier," Catherine told him.

"I could?"

"Well," she giggled, "I could, if you would just give him a little encouragement, nudge him in the right direction, underline the fact that his *wife* is completely fit, or something. I promise to waive my rights to 'patient

confidentiality,' . . . but I am finding it progressively difficult to remain 'patient,'" she confided in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Oh dear! We can't have any patient of mine running out of patience," he quipped, "Bad for my reputation!" His levity faded as he continued, "I hadn't realised how afraid and uncertain he is, even yet. He'll want to know every detail about your medical status, with your permission," he gave her hand an affectionate squeeze, "and I'll try to sow a few seeds of suggestion among the facts."

"He probably just needs reassurance that I'm well enough," replied Catherine, "and that will be more effective coming from you."

They both turned at the sound of a worried voice.

"Peter. Catherine. Is everything all right? Its been so long . . ."

"Come in, my boy. Everything's fine. Sorry, we didn't realise you might be worrying. We've just been chatting for a while."

"I'll go for Jacob, then make us all some tea," offered Catherine, "while you bring Vincent up-to-date on my results," and she gave her husband a quick kiss on her way out.

"I'm going to ask for your help, Vincent, if you wouldn't mind."

"Anything, Peter, if I can. You know that."

Peter began outlining precisely what he wanted Vincent to do, then concluded,

". . . and it doesn't matter if you haven't, or don't, take any precautions before then. I just thought its your place, rather than mine, to help her with this."

Vincent managed a dazed,

"Of course, Peter. Thank you." He was relieved to see Catherine in the entry, and rose to take the tea-tray from her, bringing the private conversation with Peter to a close.

The discussion may have been finished, but the mind-searching, the assessment of what it all meant, the anticipation . . . and the apprehension . . . Poor Vincent was in a turmoil, a real, prolonged tail-spin as a result of those few minutes with Peter. It took him many hours of introspection, analysing the situation, working out where he

needed to be and how he might get there. Slowly but surely he came to his decisions, made his plans and prepared to put them into action. As soon as he could marshal the courage to do so.

A life together . . . their dream had become a reality almost without them realising it. 'Truly together' or not, they found their life to be fulfilling beyond their hopes. Once they were apart for much of the day the need to be together was more acute, particularly pointed when Catherine had been Above all day rather than working at home, where they could often share meal-times or brief conversations during the workday.

It was always good to reach their chamber after a day at the office. To kick off her heels, get out of 'Above' clothes and soak away the day's grime and stress, soaking in the tranquillity of home before dressing in her 'tunnel' clothes, fetching Jacob from the nursery, and eagerly anticipating Vincent's return.

One evening she was somewhat startled to find the bathing chamber occupied, and she turned to avoid intruding, before she heard a quiet entreaty in the soft, husky tones she loved.

"There has always been room for both of us, Catherine."

True enough; many, many times Vincent had bathed her, gently supporting her when she had been far too weak to manage by herself, too ill to appreciate that magnificent body other than in the role of caretaker. That was no longer the case. She struggled in vain to control the heat that suddenly suffused her body, aware that she was blushing and furious with herself. But . . . to retreat would be so hurtful to him. It would be construed as a rejection. She could do no other than accept his tentative invitation and try to curb her reactions. So she turned back into the chamber, shed her robe as nonchalantly as she could manage and stepped down the ledges into the pool, one by one, determinedly keeping her eyes on her footing to avoid the sight she was yearning to see. He took her hand to steady her and all her good intentions were forgotten.

"I've missed you so, all day," he groaned as he took her into his arms. "It seemed never-ending." And as at last she dared to look up at his face he took her lips in a tender kiss which sent her senses into overdrive and she clung to him as if she were too weak to support herself.

Again, he bathed her, as so many times before, but now, he kissed her, ran his hands reverently over her limbs with a lover's touch, caressed her body with his eyes and murmured words of love. He made her feel beautiful, desirable, and she was filled with a desperate need to give to him what he had given to her.

She took the soap from him and gently pushed him to lie back on the ledge behind them.

"Its my turn now," she whispered. He started to remonstrate but she prevented his words with a kiss and then began to wash his face, his neck, the broad, powerful shoulders. Slowly, gently, as if in a trance, she lathered the golden curls on his massive chest and at long, long last she lost her fingers in his fur, as she had dreamed of doing. The way the curls flattened with the water, then sprang back into coils as it drained, seemed to mesmerise her. She was lost in him, no longer self-conscious, in awe of the power, the strength, the sheer masculine beauty of his torso.

"So beautiful," she whispered as she passed both hands across and down, feeling his rib-cage expand with each indrawn breath, bending to listen to his heart-beat, kissing and laving his nipples with her tongue and feeling the vibrations against her cheek as he growled in response to her caresses. She continued, to wash each arm in turn, each massive thigh and down to his feet, her eyes never leaving his body.

"Catherine, no more," he gasped breathlessly, urgently, before he carried her to the poolside where he wrapped her in a large towel then found another for himself, to tuck firmly around his waist. He gathered her into his arms once more and crossed the short distance back to their chamber. Only now did Catherine notice what she had overlooked previously. The bedclothes were already turned back, ready to welcome his precious burden. Fleetinglly she wondered whether this whole encounter had

been pre-planned, before rational thought deserted her as Vincent, kneeling beside the bed, partially unwrapped her still-damp body and began patting her dry with gentle, seductive care. Not with *her* towel. The heat of desire rushed through her, knowing the figure beside the bed must be entirely nude. She moved sinuously across the bed to make room for him to join her, lifting her arms in bold invitation.

There were unison gasps at the heady, long dreamed-of sensations as their naked bodies made contact, twining together as if created to be this way, made for one another. This was where they belonged, how they were meant to be, together. The rounded cheeks fit perfectly in his hands as he drew her hips closer to his groin. So soft, so perfectly satiny smooth and warm as he ran his palms gently over the ripe, full curves. So firm yet so malleable, seeming to move with him, into his hands, moulding to meet his caress as if in welcome. The slim waist, as he stroked upward, curving tenderly inward, allowing his hands to span her completely here. But he could stay but a moment, for other treasures beckoned and he slid upward, palms and fingers flattened to skim the planes of her back, her shoulder-blades, before curling once more to fit the tighter curves of her shoulders, so delicately rounded. Then, as one hand cupped her head, fingers lost in the silk of her hair, the other wrapped lightly at the base of her neck, as he sought her lips.

Velvet. Warm, soft, delicately fragrant velvet. Like rose-petals, her lips, and as he ran his tongue over their contours his rose blossomed, opened to him, calling him into the moist depths of her mouth. He shuddered in ecstasy as he felt her respond to his first, shy, tentative touch of his tongue to hers, welcoming him in a dance which made his every nerve-end vibrate in electric, erotic excitement, drawing an incredulous cry which was lost in her depths.

He wanted to stay, savouring every texture, every sinuous movement, every last secret corner of her mouth, over and over. But he had to take a breath, and he had to

taste the vibrant pulse which had been calling to him, as it lay beating under his palm. He kissed his way down her neck, turning her to her back in order to reach the base of her throat, but he couldn't stay long. His palm had found another luscious curve which fit his hand to perfection, and the bud which crowned it was already blossoming in anticipation of his touch, calling him onward. He looked in awe at the ivory beauty of her breasts, withdrawing the ugly clawed hand which had no right to mar such perfection. Her cry of dismay made him look up, startled, and to his astonishment, Catherine took his hand and replaced it, holding him firmly to her breast.

"*My hands,*" she breathed, reminding him of her love, and that his hands were beautiful, because she loved them, loved *all* of him. And, he realised now, she wanted, yearned for his touch, here, more than anywhere. He knelt beside her and ran both his hands sensuously up her torso, until each was filled with her and his thumbs gently stroked over her nipples while his palms and fingers kneaded and smoothed her breasts. He lay beside her once more, drawing one globe into his mouth, his hand caressing the other, thrilling to her cries of ecstasy as he suckled strongly, each in turn.

He had become painfully aware of his own arousal at the first touch of Catherine's tongue on his own. Each erotic call from her had caused a fresh surge of fire until he thought he must surely go mad if he did not find release shortly. He was so full, so turgid, larger than he had ever experienced and he was afraid of causing her pain; he dare not follow his instincts. But neither could he stop. She would not allow him to stop, her body seeking his, every movement evoking deep responses within him which he was incapable of suppressing. He couldn't stop and neither, he knew, could she. It simply wasn't possible for them *not* to love.

Arms, hands, legs, mouths writhed in an ecstasy of exploration, until they both became aware of an anguished cry, repeated as if the exquisite torture were too much to bear.

"Please, Vincent, oh, please . . ."

The fear of hurting her was overcome by the imperative to alleviate the urgency of her need. His need. Their need.

He sought to enter her and in her frenzy of passion she guided him to where she had to have him or surely she would not survive. Never in her life had she needed anything so desperately as she needed him to fill the empty, clamouring void. Each second without him was simply unendurable.

He growled as he sank into the moist warmth which had beckoned him, compelled him to enter, to make them one. He stilled, attempting to control his instinctive urges, to savour the moment.

The strength of her hold on him amazed him. He was captured in a vice-like grip, surrounded by her tiny body and he marvelled that it was so, that her desire for him was beyond all reason, beyond imagination. As he tensed to withdraw he felt her legs tighten around his waist, her arms clasping his rib-cage and back, the tension around his manhood incredibly strong. He took her lips in a deep, passionate kiss as he pulled out a little then gently re-entered, waiting for her to relax her hold, to allow him freedom of movement. She gave a wailing cry as his body took over control of them both in an instinctive rhythmic dance as she responded to his every move, as they both sought the release they had denied themselves for so long. It was impossible for either of them to hold back. As he drove Catherine over the edge, her climax demanded his own and he shivered in ecstasy as he released the essence of his love into her keeping.

As their breathless sobs died away and they both calmed down a little he could see that she was smiling widely, eyes sparkling as she exclaimed,

"Wow!" then thumped back into the pillows, grinning from ear to ear. That said it all, really, and feeling more light-hearted than he could ever remember, Vincent began an infectious chuckle, and they held one another gently laughing at themselves.

Some time later,

"Jacob!" Catherine exclaimed suddenly, moving to leave the bed.

"Its all right, Catherine. Brooke and Jamie are happy to look after Jacob this evening. He will be enjoying himself, I have no doubt."

She fell back into his arms, her earlier suspicions confirmed. This evening had indeed been pre-planned and it was definitely not over, yet!

Both of them had been driven, in the thrall of desperate need for completion, with an urgency which had swept them swiftly to their goal, during that initial exciting, deeply satisfying encounter. Now they were free to pursue a more gentle enjoyment of their lovemaking. Catherine's lightest touch on any part of his body was enough to engender a deep response in Vincent, for he had never felt a lover's caress in this manner. For her to run her fingers through the curls on his chest with such obvious rapture set him afire. When her tongue danced with his he was almost mindless from the exquisite sensations. To feel the incredibly malleable, soft firmness of her beautiful breasts pressing against him aroused him beyond any control. The emotions were exquisitely potent; unbearably potent.

So closely attuned were they that Catherine knew without thought when he was at the threshold of his tolerance. She revelled in his responsiveness, his sensitivity, but she would not push him beyond endurance. She sought his pleasure, not his defeat. For her this was love-making as she had never known it; it was a revelation, a joy, a fulfillment she had not come anywhere close to, had despaired of ever finding. It was infinitely precious.

Over the years, experience had convinced Catherine that there was something lacking in her, that her sexual drive was below the norm. She knew herself to be one of those women she had read about, lacking in passion. Frigid. She lived in fear of anyone else discovering her secret for she felt deep shame, guilt, at her lack of response. She had never been promiscuous. It was not sex she searched for but a loving relationship matching the one she had seen in her

mother and father. With Steven Bass she had thought that that was what she had found. Their time together was happy, full of fun and play, exhilarating, as they made plans for their future. But he became petulant if she did not allow him to have his own way, became more and more demanding, spitefully critical if she crossed him or expressed an opinion contrary to his own. As time went on she found herself submerging her own personality in an effort to conform to his expectations of her, to be the person he wanted her to be. She had begun to feel a failure, her self-confidence undermined and particularly vulnerable to his scornful remarks about her lack of competence in their physical relationship. She found his coarse terminology, his leering jokes, his crude personal remarks, offensive. True, she had found pleasure in his love-making up to a point. It had been his insistence on her indulging his every whim, whether she wanted to or not, which increased her reticence. Some of the things which he insisted 'everybody did,' she found repugnant, but he would fly into a rage, calling her all manner of less than loving epithets, should she give any indication of reluctance. She was increasingly unhappy, feeling trapped, with no-one she could confide in. The only person she could discuss the situation with was Steven, and every time she tried, they quarrelled.

One evening she had asked him to explain what he meant, never having understood his cackling laughter each time he used her nail-file on what he referred to as his 'sample finger.' She still burned with humiliation at the memory of his graphic demonstration and un-answerable question, "How else d'ya think I'd know when I can ram it in?"

As he snorted with laughter, Catherine had run to the bathroom, locked the door and lost the last remnants of any illusions about a 'loving' relationship, along with her dinner. Then she did what she knew she should have done much earlier. She packed her bags, and left.

From that time, what she had once thought of as 'intimate caresses' had become tinged with mistrust and echoes of the degradation of Steven's words, not an expression of love but rather a means of humiliation.

Perhaps Vincent had sensed that in this particular area his touch would be less pleasing to Catherine, or it may have been that he feared his claws might hurt her. More likely it was the lack of any need to seek deeper stimulation, so responsive was she to his every caress. Sometimes she would reach her first climax as he stroked and suckled her breasts, or when he kneaded them during a passionate kiss. The wonder in his eyes as he gazed at her naked beauty was incredibly arousing to her; he did not even have to touch her physically, to make her senses reel. After that first urgent coupling when all was so new and she had guided him to ease his uncertainty, Catherine had rarely fondled his sex. They so enjoyed her petting his chest, running her fingers through his fur, stroking his muscular torso to feel the rippling movements of controlled power, kissing every beloved feature of his face with loving reverence. He would be fully aroused by then, would reach the limits of his endurance, seek completion, taking them to the heights in an incendiary consummation which left them satiated, usually to fall asleep, at peace in the comfort of one another's arms.

No, Catherine reflected once more, there had never been anything less than absolute perfection in their loving. Not for her and not, she was confident, for him. What had happened between them last night had been unexpected, unsought-for, but there was no denying that they had entered into a world of new sensualities; expressions of their love in directions which neither of them had experienced before. An abandoned, wanton wildness had swept them on an exhilarating roller-coaster ride of erotic exploration, carrying them to heights and depths of their loving which neither had suspected to exist. They had been stunned, overwhelmed at the magnitude of their passion when at last it had allowed them to come back to earth, to where thought was possible again. Exhaustion had quickly taken them into a dreamless, deep, sleep, to awaken in each other's arms to a sense of unreality and a shy incredulity at what they had shared.

The familiar morning routines helped to ground them a little before they joined the rest of the community at

breakfast, but neither was able to concentrate on their work for long. Vincent had been dismissed from Cullen's workshop after two and a half hours of attempting to accurately saw and plane some new benches, and failing miserably, much to Cullen's amusement.

"Vincent, I can manage the rest, no problem. Take your carcass where your mind is." He gave him an amiable shove toward the entry. "You and Catherine . . .," he shook his head, grinning broadly, "Ain't love grand?" Then his grin vanished as he said, "You two have been through hell to reach your heaven. I almost believe there *is* a God, after all, when I see you together at last."

"Thank you, my friend," Vincent acknowledged Cullen's words with a grip on his shoulder, as he turned to leave.

\* \* \* \* \*

He found Catherine chewing her pen, gazing into space with an air of one mesmerised. 'Hm,' he thought, '*I suspect my lady has accomplished as little as have I, this morning.*' She started out of her reverie with a little jump, as his movement from the entry caught her eye. His eyes sparkled with humour as he asked with an innocent air,

"Have you finished Joe's paperwork, my love?" She flushed, reluctant for him to see how little she had achieved, then realised that he had known, and was teasing her. "Cullen has given me up as useless, today."

"Well I don't intend to work my fingers to the bone if *you're* playing hooky. Sauce for the goose . . . or gander, or somesuch," she said with a wave of her hand in casual dismissal as she relinquished her pen and walked round the desk to give him a hug.

"It's nearly lunch-time," observed Catherine, "do you think William would let us have ours in a basket?"

"I'm sure *you* can persuade him, Catherine," he smiled, "and I'll fetch Jacob from the nursery when I've put together some blankets, fresh diapers and towels."

There was no need to discuss where they would spend their 'stolen' afternoon: Little Jacob loved the warm, shallow, children's swimming area and he already could manage an ungainly scrabble through the water from the arms of one parent to those of the other. Each visit, they widened the distance a little as his confidence and stamina increased. It was difficult to say who enjoyed these swimming lessons the most. The cries of encouragement and generous praise from his parents made Jacob laugh each time he swam and he loved to sit on the water's edge, splashing and kicking. He'd seen Vincent and Catherine using their cupped hands to shoot a spray at one another and he quickly mastered that action, though he was not always quite on target - often he caught his own face by mistake but he soon got his breath back, and it didn't put him off trying to soak his parents.

Vincent managed to divest the squealing, excited baby of his clothes before Jacob would have gone in fully dressed, then he removed his own shirt, watching his son's happy splashing, laughing with him, and turning to share that joy with his wife, hearing her trills of laughter as she also prepared to enter the water.

"Catherine!" Vincent suddenly gasped in horror, "I hurt you last night!"

"You did? I'm glad you told me, Vincent - I certainly didn't know about that!" Her eyes were full of merriment, and there was a dimple, as though she was trying to suppress a smile. He couldn't help but appreciate the absurdity of her response. Or the truth behind that absurdity. "If it's time to 'fess up," she continued, "You should be glad that in deference to motherhood," she nodded toward their son, who was still splashing in the shallows just beyond their feet, "I now have a short, rounded manicure. And I'm relieved that as you're not a contortionist, you can't see your own back," she giggled, as

a slight flush coloured her face and she shyly avoided his gaze.

"Am I scarred for life, my love?" he chuckled.

"Well . . . just don't take your shirt off for any one else but me."

"Never! Your guilty secret shall remain covered," he declared with a solemnity belied by twinkling eyes.

"I'd reciprocate, Vincent, if you'd suggest a suitable garment?"

"I think I'm safe from discovery, unless you are planning to wear one of your strapless evening gowns to dinner anytime soon?"

"William would be shocked, and imagine Father's reaction," she giggled. "On second thoughts, it might be worth it just to see their faces."

They both creased up at the mental pictures their silliness had painted, and Vincent's alarm over the four tiny bruises where his incisors had gripped Catherine's collar bone was forgotten.

They joined Jacob in the pool and he kept them well entertained, enjoying the water and the undivided attention of both his parents. Then while Vincent dried and dressed Jacob, Catherine set out their picnic and dressed quickly to help the baby with his lunch, giving Vincent his chance to dry off.

"Wait a moment," she said, as she grabbed her cosmetics bag. Like many young mothers, she kept a tube of antiseptic cream along with the lipstick.

"I'll put some of this on, just in case," aware of how easily even minor scratches were liable to fester if left un-attended, in Vincent's case. Jacob was busy for the moment, mashing pieces of orange, apple and banana into his mouth with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

Vincent sighed with contentment as he felt his beloved massaging his back with evident pleasure.

"I gather my scars are quite extensive then, Catherine," he teased.

"Um, well . . . not really, but . . . its a good excuse to get my hands on you, don't you think?" she asked saucily.

"I see," he dragged out his answer slowly. "I'm sure that cream is just as effective for bruises, but I don't need an excuse. I'm bigger than you, after all." With that he swiftly turned the tables and Jacob chortled with delight to see his daddy tickling her, just as he had so often done to Jacob.

Later, with his son nestled under a blanket and soundly sleeping beside him, while his wife was curled securely under his arm, relaxed and dozing, Vincent lay back in deep contentment, enjoying these peaceful moments. He wasn't entirely at ease with the knowledge that Catherine carried the marks of his ardour the previous night, though he knew they were superficial, would disappear in a couple of days. As would his own, he realised, with a secret smile. Whatever had got into them, he wondered. Analysing what had occurred, he was perfectly aware of the source of his own loss of control - apart from the simple fact of his wife's proximity, but Catherine's responses had been so . . . completely unexpected; unbelievably erotic; breathtakingly intense; raising him to levels of ecstasy which he could never have envisaged in his wildest fantasies.

However hard he tried, he could not restrain his present thoughts to remain detached and dispassionate. The tightening in his loins reminded him that Jacob would awaken soon. Catherine was even now stirring in his arms. It was the wrong time for introspection of this nature so he reined in his thoughts, deliberately turning to more immediate, and more appropriate, concerns.

"We should return soon, my love. There is a concert in Father's study this evening and I would not wish to disappoint the children."

"I'd forgotten," she admitted, "and I do so enjoy these occasions."

"Remember your promise, Catherine," he solemnly reminded her. "No evening gown." Once again the area rang with happy laughter as the young family gathered their things and returned home.

\* \* \* \* \*

By tacit agreement there had been no further mention of those so-unwelcome pills, neither during the three months when Catherine religiously took each one, nor when their use had been discontinued.

Because of her comatose state and the consequent ill-health, it took Catherine's body a lot longer than is usual to adjust to a normal biological rhythm after Jacob's birth. Both Father and Peter had expected that this would be the case; Catherine simply had not thought about it until the morning when she had been woken by menstrual cramps, many weeks after her return to the tunnels. And then, her cycle had been distorted deliberately, to prevent conception.

During the years of knowing and loving Catherine, Vincent had allowed himself few, very few intimacies. He had always considered her presence in his life to be a temporary blessing, expecting that one day she would move on, dream a different dream, with a man from her own world. The love of a woman could never be his, not as a woman loves a man, for he was not wholly man. He could dream; painful dreams because they could never be realised; he would never allow them to be realised. He carefully stored every memory away, deep in his heart, against the day when his memories would be all of Catherine that was left to him.

Each moment he spent with her was treasured. Every time he held her in his arms was a gift, precious beyond price. He would kiss her hair so lightly that, on the rare occasion he allowed himself that contact, she was often unaware that he had done so. Breathing in, he would draw her scent deeply inside. This was an innocent intimacy which he allowed himself. The unique, unmistakable scent of the woman he loved was his to savour.

It was not a static thing, her scent, but infinitely variable to his heightened senses. He was aware of the subtle nuances of the feminine scent which underlay the perfumes of her toiletries and cosmetics. Over time he had learned their pattern, knew their pull to something primeval, instinctive, within himself. Always, Vincent had been

drawn. At certain times that pull had been strong enough to tax his self-control to the limits and prudence had urged that he cut short their time together. Always, he had been able to do so, to remove himself physically from Catherine's presence, though even that withdrawal sometimes failed to allow him to quench the primal need to be with her. He would leave her, leave the balcony and trudge for miles through the darkened alleyways of the city; or seek the deep silence of the lower reaches of his own world, far from the home chambers, where he would vocalise his anguish, solitary and unheard. Sometimes he sought the icy depths, to stroke desperately from shore to shore of some isolated lake; or he would be driven to run as fast and as hard as only he could, through tunnels with which only he was familiar, until physical exhaustion might bring peace from his torment.

Vincent knew her cycles at least as well as did Catherine. This was something that had become part of him. Long-standing familiarity had caused such knowledge to be accepted without thought. He was comfortable with it. He was easily able to discern that after so many months, her reproductive system had begun to function again. This was another indication that her health was vastly improved. One more milestone on the way to a full recovery. Far from the embarrassment which Catherine had feared, Vincent felt elation at such progress, and being able to surprise her with his gift had been a natural expression of his feelings. They were both at ease with this facet of their lives together; it was a minor adjustment, another strand woven with many others, as is usual with newly-weds. As always, Vincent felt that cyclic pull during the ensuing months, but there was no longer any need for him to resist. He was free to follow his heart, to express his love naturally. What had once been a source of pain now became a great joy.

Yesterday, he had sensed that call from Catherine's body to his own and had had the foresight to arrange for Jacob to be cared for in the nursery overnight so that they could have a few hours of private time together. There was nothing unusual in his doing so. Mary and Father had long ago established the principle that parents of young children

needed time apart from them now and then, whether for a few hours or a few days. Child-care was in any case viewed as a community responsibility, for practical reasons, but social and marital needs were also considered to be important. One shortage they had never experienced was a lack of willing baby-minders. To care for the little ones was a shared joy, never a chore.

Vincent had planned carefully. Rebecca had happily provided a box of scented candles. Jamie had secretly obtained a beautiful bouquet of roses for him. William had filled a container with small treats for a late-night supper, and winked as he wrapped a bottle of wine in a tea-towel. A very unexpected gift, and a most welcome addition to Vincent's booty. Mouse had assured him that the batteries in the tape-recorder would last for at least an hour or two. When he left Catherine to finish her after-dinner coffee in the dining-hall, she was probably the only person who was unaware of his plans. Catherine knew only that Vincent had taken Jacob to the nursery. In fact, Samantha had been waiting in the outer passage to collect the baby, while Vincent had raced to lay out his preparations as quickly as possible.

One person after another waylaid Catherine on some pretext or other when she had finished her coffee and made her way to leave the refectory before Vincent had returned. There was a universal sigh of relief when he was seen at the entry, but the young couple were oblivious to that, and to the many affectionate smiles as various members of their family acknowledged the 'secret' tryst which so many had helped arrange for them. It was wonderful to see their happiness after they had endured so much anguish. All were warmed by the reflected glow of their love.

\* \* \* \* \*

A gasp of incredulity was the initial response when Vincent guided his wife through the entry with a gentle arm around her waist. Her eyes went wide with surprise as she took in the flowers, the candles, and became aware of the soft music and subtle scents, none of which had been evident less than an hour ago when they had left for the dining-hall. The comfortable every-day shabbiness of the sofa had been transformed by the impractical beauty of one of Mary's large lace crocheted throws and plump satin-covered cushions, and a log fire burned brightly in the brazier.

"You did all this . . . for me?" she whispered, overcome by the overtly romantic display. Beyond further speech, she turned to hug him tightly, with her head still turned to the room, her eyes drifting to look from one flower arrangement to another.

"Come," he said, taking her hand to lead her to where the wine was waiting on a small table beside the sofa. She seated herself, still a little dazed, and watched the graceful movements of his hands as he deftly withdrew the cork, poured wine into two very fine crystal flutes and put one into her trembling hand.

"I wanted you to know how deeply you are loved," he said. "This time is ours alone." He raised his glass in a toast. "To us. To our dream, Catherine." She echoed him faintly as they clinked the glasses, her thoughts in a whirl.

Vincent relaxed into the couch, closing his eyes to absorb the kaleidoscope of sensations battering his heart from Catherine's shimmering emotions, thrilled that she was so immensely pleased by his efforts. There was much which he could not do for her, could not give her, but how could he regret those things? What he *could* give . . . was enough. She was happy. More than happy. He felt, deep within himself, the truth of this, and the last of his uncertainty fell away, to be replaced with unshakeable confidence. They belonged right where they were. Here. Together.

He could feel her nuzzling kisses along the side of his neck and upward, under his chin, across from one side of his jaw-bone to the other. He smiled as he felt her frustration, knowing that with his head leaning back onto the sofa she could not reach her goal. He opened just one

eye, grinning as looked down at her without moving his head. He saw the gleam of mischief just before her hand moved to assault his most ticklish spot, at the side of his rib-cage and chuckled as he moved to retaliate, checking briefly to ensure that Father's treasured glasses were safely out of range . . .

"Pax!"

"Uncle!"

Breathless with laughter they fell back together, then Vincent re-filled their glasses and started a fresh tape on the player. A few minutes later he stood, and reached for her hand.

"Dance with me, Catherine?"

A waltz. The waltz they had danced together just six short months ago, during their delayed wedding celebration. Silently they came together, remembering that dizzying time in their lives when everything seemed to happen at once and every obstacle melted away, leaving a shining path to their future. Catherine sighed in contentment, leaning her head on his chest and simply flowing wherever he led, her entire being safely in his charge, protected, cherished and invulnerable.

The candles had burned low, the wine was finished and the music died away at the end of the tape. Vincent gently tugged the zip at the back of Catherine's dress as he was passionately deepening their kiss. First she felt the soft fur of his hand sensuously trailing a teasing path from her nape to the base of her spine, then the work-roughened palm slipped beneath the fabric to caress her skin, tenderly stroking her ripe curves before pulling her hips closer, tighter to his own, feeling the involuntary sinuous writhing as she responded to the magnetic call of his body. Still they kissed, one quickly following another as if their lips resented the brief partings for such a mundane necessity as mere breathing. It became a heady intoxication which made their senses reel, and the whole universe condense into this one fragment of time and space which contained everything.

Vincent lay her on the couch, his eyes caressing her beauty from head to toe as, without his even being aware of

his actions, the last pieces of clothing joined the trail on the carpet. This feeling of awe, of something too wonderful to contemplate, never seemed to diminish. Each time they came together this way seemed to fuel their hunger, rather than to assuage it. The most astounding thing of all was that Catherine's need was as urgent as his own. He understood, at last, that only he could fill her need. He joyously accepted the invitation of her outstretched arms, sliding alongside her and drawing her close as he allowed his hands licence to roam 'Before, behind, between, above, below.' He knew Donne's words now, in a most unexpected way. He knew words to be only the faintest shadow of the reality which they could never convey; now he experienced the reality.

Her sounds of rapture echoed around him, within him, driving his own arousal as they always did, fuel to the fire which raged through him. Her scent was driving him wild, more pervasive than he had ever know it, even at those times when its pull had been strongest. There was a ripeness, a fecundity underlying the womanly scent with which he had become familiar and this drew him relentlessly until he kissed his way down her body, driven by primal instinct to seek its source, nuzzling hungrily into the soft, springy curls which pointed his way to the treasures beyond.

Abruptly he drew back, suddenly fearful that this new, deeper exploration of her body might not be right, might offend. He looked up in dazed confusion, unsure whether he could trust in the waves of excited pleasure which reached him through their bond, seeking more direct guidance from her eyes.

"Yours, my love. All that I am is yours," she murmured her answer to his unspoken question. His doubts vanished.

Intensely aware of how careful he must be not to hurt her, he gently caressed her inner thigh until she opened to him, and that sexual siren's call from her body increased beyond all resistance. Tenderly he kissed her mound, tasting the delicate skin along the tendons at the top of her

legs, nuzzling through her curls with a confidence, a freedom which had replaced his earlier hesitancy.

Vincent was not ignorant of what lay beyond the curls which were springing around and through his fingers, as if to return his caress with one of their own. He had long ago learned the words, seen the diagrams. 'Labium, a lip. Labia majora. Labia minora, enclosing the entry to the vagina. At the top of these, a vestigial penis, the clitoris. The external organs of the female mammalian reproductive system.' No he was not ignorant. He learned his lessons well. None of this meant anything at all, did nothing to prepare him for the reality as, for the first time, he beheld these secrets.

He gasped as he gently parted her, to discover the rose pink lining her outer lips, the delicate pearlescent, almost translucent tissue which glistened between them, the radiant glow of the bud which pulsed a deep crimson with a hypnotising rhythm.

"Beautiful," he whispered after a few seconds of stunned silence. "I did not know that anything could be so beautiful," and he bent at last to kiss these new treasures which he had unveiled, delicately, reverently. So fragile they seemed, he was almost afraid to touch, until the mewling calls of ecstasy encouraged him to follow his instincts, to hold her still for this new loving, and to find and explore different sensations, fresh responses. He lapped delicately to absorb the taste, the scent, the textures, thrilling with passion, both his own and that of the woman he loved. He was tuned to her every sound, every wave of pleasure which coursed through her and into him, arousing him even more. Her cries became more urgent, desperate pleas for release as his mouth, his tongue, teased and tormented her into a frenzy of need. She could stand it no longer.

"Please, Vincent, please," as her torso writhed and her head thrashed, her hands fisted into his mane. He took the crimson bud of her desire and suckled gently, then, as he stroked his raspy tongue just once across that sensitive tissue, he was startled to be thrown by the convulsion as Catherine reached an explosive orgasm such as he had

never before felt in her. He had been completely unprepared for such a violently strong reaction to his single caress, and felt a tinge of remorse, contrition, but the pride, elation at his ability to so affect her were much the stronger emotions. He was learning more about making love every time they came together. He knew that another time he would be more circumspect in his pursuit of such deep stimulation. He gentled her down till gradually her cries muted to soft, contented sighing, and he kissed her tenderly, murmured words of love into her ear, nibbled the lobe, blew a stream of warm breath. She gave a soft laugh and wormed her way down his body a little, to tuck her shoulder under his arm and lay her ear over his heart, safely out of range of his teasing tongue. Her mischievous fingers delved through the curls on his chest to find the hidden pap, to begin some teasing of her own.

Vincent groaned as the moist heat of her mouth sought and found his nipple in a caress which, though familiar, never failed to surprise him at the wonderful sensation it evoked. He sighed with pleasure as she moved from one side to the other, rasping and nipping with her teeth then soothing with her tongue. He stiffened suddenly and an involuntary growl escaped him as he felt her gently stroke his manhood. His response was immediate; a surge of arousal causing him to buck his hips, seeking closer contact. She closed her hand around his length, stroking more firmly, thrilled at the growling which indicated his pleasure, trying to prolong that sound, seeking to evoke more. One hand was insufficient. Without conscious thought Catherine moved down his body to reach further, to fondle the heavy sac beneath at the same time as she stroked his shaft. A continuous growling, louder now, and interspersed with incredulous gasps of her name, drove her on to discover new ways of evoking pleasure, different touches. She stroked her cheek against the velvet warmth of his scrotum, felt the tightening as his testicles convulsed at her touch, and heard a startled exclamation, almost a yelp. She quickly raised her head, a panic-filled apology breaking from her, fearing she must have inadvertently hurt him.

As his hands came under her arms, to pull her up the length of his body, a breathless chuckle greeted her.

"No, my Catherine. You did not hurt me. I loved what you were doing . . . but . . . I shall lose my sanity if you continue," he declared, before taking her mouth in a passionate kiss, then, "And I shall surely go mad if I do not come to you this very instant," as he suited action to words, one mighty lunge filling her completely, utterly, body and soul.

He drove into her hard and fast, with a wild exultation, a freedom never before felt or expressed. He called to something wanton, primitively female, deep within Catherine. She urged him on, sensing that at last he understood that this was his right, to take all that she had to offer and to give all that he was, the wild as well as the gentle, in return.

He buried his roar of completion, stifled as he clamped the base of her neck between his wide jaws to hold her still as his seed erupted into her, wave after tumultuous wave, while she clung to him in a rigid seizure, her whole body locking him in a vice-like grip as she drank him in until he was spent, completely drained. Only then did their exhausted forms fall back onto the bed, dazed at the power, the intensity of what they had just shared, panting to catch their breath, soaked in perspiration, numb in mind and body. They held on to one another, each providing an anchor for the other until their pounding hearts slowed to a more gentle rhythm and their breathing calmed. A few shudders, residual aftershocks or the effects of colder air on super-heated bodies, prompted Vincent to pull the covers around them before they fell into a stupor of sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

Catherine took things in her stride when, a few days later, she once more awoke to the familiar dragging ache. A twinge of minor disappointment, no more than that, as she took care of matters.

For Vincent the reaction was much more marked. He had been so certain of Catherine's readiness; he knew she had been receptive; fully expected that she would have conceived. He had hugged his secret elation at the prospect close within himself, eagerly awaiting the time when Catherine would know, and share that discovery with him. Not for anything would he have pre-empted that moment, diminished her pleasure by revealing that he already knew, though his own excitement had become increasingly difficult to hide during the last few days.

Incredulity warred with dismay, then deep disappointment filled him as he realised that his certainty had been dashed. He was bewildered at this entirely unexpected turn of events, and began the morning routine in a perplexed daze, turning things over and over in his mind and becoming more and more worried. His concern was centred around a dread that somehow Catherine's health was subtly impaired. There must be some negative factor bearing on her recovery which neither Peter nor Father had been aware of, something they had overlooked. An irrational fear for her well-being began to overwhelm him, and with it, the urge to flee, to hide away deep in the un-charted realms where he could be alone with his thoughts. Where he could come to terms with his fear, subdue it beneath a veneer of self-control, as had been his way of coping with adversity for most of his life.

"Vincent?" He became aware that Catherine had spoken to him, was awaiting his response, and he swiftly took a grip on his inner turbulence, not wishing to alarm her and unwilling to speak of his concern until he had thought things through.

"I'm sorry, Catherine. I was miles away. What did you say?"

"Breakfast?" She smiled at him brightly, Jacob balanced on her hip. When had she changed and dressed their son, he wondered? He gave himself a mental shake.

"Yes. I'll join you shortly. I just need to get a book from the study," he prevaricated. She looked at him uncertainly, aware of his distraction. His frown cleared as their son stretched his arms with a demanding

"Da! Da!" and as he reached for the baby Vincent smiled, relaxed, and decided the 'book' could wait. With Jacob in one arm and the other around his wife, his temporary panic subsided. It vanished completely when Catherine raised her face for a kiss, and Jacob made it clear that he must have one also. Then the family made their way to the dining-hall and another busy day got underway. The underlying anxiety persisted, but there was no opportunity for introspection while teaching a lively group of responsive, demanding children.

The schoolroom was unrecognisable, covered with newspapers, crayons, scissors, measuring tapes and a variety of cylindrical objects. William was missing several saucepans and a number of different cans of food, having been assured by half-a-dozen earnest faces that 'we'll bring everything back by lunch-time.' He had firmly declined to lend his favourite china mug, however, no matter how many times they explained that it was 'a perfect cylinder.'

"And I intend for it to *stay* that way," he emphasised gruffly, "and there had better be no dents in my pots, either. I'm warning you!" he threatened. The effect was rather spoiled by the presentation of a 'cylindrical muffin' to each visitor, including their teacher, but they already knew that William was all bark and no bite.

Vincent was careful to rescue Mary's tape measure before scissors made shorter work of it, and an hour later each newspaper circle was joined by a strip diameter and a strip circumference each carefully marked in crayon with its length.

"Its always three and a bit."

"No its not. Mine isn't."

"You've mixed them up, then."

"Or done it wrong."

"Have not!"

Vincent quickly intervened, to suggest that they check the one non-conforming circle, and peace was restored once a correction was made and this time the diameter fit 'three and a bit' times around its corresponding circle. Next, could they try a really tiny one? Vincent quickly requested that *he* might be the one to use the cap of his precious fountain-pen, as they suggested. They agreed it was only fair. Every one else had had a turn. There was great excitement when even that tiny diameter fit round the circumference, three and a bit times.

"Now we need a really *huge* one!" came the expected observation. The children racked their brains, to no avail. At last, a query came,

"But Vincent, do we *need* a cylinder? Won't just a huge circle do?"

"Well done, Jason, you're quite right. It was only to make it easier to measure that I used a solid shape. Imagine how difficult it would be to wrap a strip around the edge of a paper circle." They all agreed with him in a chorus.

"But a bin lid would do?" the boy persisted. While chaos was restored to order, and newspaper sheets taped together to make an area big enough for the envisaged 'huge circle,' Jason went to return the saucepans and to relieve William of a bin lid, 'just for a minute,' he was assured.

At last came the delighted, excited chorus of,

"Yes! It fits." "Three and a bit." "They *all* do it."

"So," said Vincent, "if I have a circle five inches across, how far round is it?" and he began to re-inforce the practical lesson with mental calculation, multiplying and dividing by three, receiving quick, confident answers as he matched the difficulty of the questions to each child's ability, to be sure of their success. He tried Jason with 'twenty-three' and praised him for his 'seven and two thirds' answer, noting mentally that it was time to give the boy more challenging work, while Anna needed more help to master division. By then it was lunch-time. Vincent reminded the children to thank William for his help when they put the tins back, as he dismissed his class.

During lunch, Vincent and Father discussed the children's progress, and previewed the idea of some science work which would entail a copious use of water. The outcome was an agreement that the prospective mess would be eliminated by using the tots' paddling pool as their temporary 'laboratory,' and the older children were to obtain permission from the little ones.

"It sounds like fun," Catherine observed, "Can any one join? Or must you be under ten?"

"Jacob qualifies, but he must be accompanied by a responsible adult," suggested Father, hiding his grin behind his hand.

"Of course! Now why didn't *I* think of that? Am I a 'responsible adult,' Vincent?"

"I've no idea, my love," he solemnly teased her, "Perhaps you should consult Father. He is far better qualified to judge your suitability than I."

"Eminently suitable, in my opinion," Father jumped in before Catherine could retaliate indignantly, then he changed the subject. "Remember you promised to help Pascal this afternoon."

"He will be waiting already," Vincent admitted. "I seem to spend much longer having lunch than I used to do. It must be the delightful company." And with a kiss to mollify his beloved, he excused himself to go and continue his work-day.

Father shook his head in amazement at Vincent's flirtatious manner.

"Ah, Catherine . . . my son is a changed man since your marriage. I can never fully express my gratitude to you, for making him so happy, so self-assured."

"He seems to be O.K. again at the moment, Father, but . . . I'd 've sworn something was bugging him this morning." A frown creased her brow as she looked seriously at her father-in-law. "I thought, for a while, that he was ready to bolt again. You know how he goes off to brood when he has a problem."

"I know how he *used* to, my dear," he corrected her gently, "before he had a wife and child to fill the lonely void in his heart. I can't imagine him wanting to leave for any length of time now, whatever his problem. An hour or two, possibly. Not for days or weeks, as he has done in the

past." He stretched across the table to pat her hand. "Have faith, my dear. He's had a lot to learn, but he's always been a very fast study. Look how far we've all come already." She smiled at him.

"You're right, of course. I'm tilting at windmills, no doubt, and I'd be better doing something more constructive, like finishing Joe's work for tomorrow."

\* \* \* \* \*

Peter's visit that evening was fortuitous, to say the least. Vincent quickly appreciated that here was another option. Potentially a much more fruitful alternative to his flight to solitude, where he would have to wrestle with his concerns alone. He would ask for Peter's counsel, if he had the chance to get him alone, to talk.

He waited stoically for the obligatory chess match to end, and offered his services as an escort Above, as the two physicians said their farewells. At last, after churning over ideas about how he might broach the subject, for the first ten minutes or so of walking along the silent tunnels, Vincent tentatively began,

"I wondered, Peter, whether you might prefer . . . that is . . . would it be better . . ." He faltered, unsure how to proceed.

Peter stopped, turned to face him and lay a sympathetic hand on his fore-arm.

"What's on your mind, Vincent?" He had noted how subdued, how pensive the younger man had been all evening. "Can I help? You know you can talk to me, surely? We're alone and private here. Just . . . spit it out,"

he encouraged. Vincent had clammed up, a trapped expression on his face. Peter took a guess and prompted, "Is it Catherine?" A brief, hesitant nod, then,

"Is she well, Peter?" The blue eyes bored into him, as if to read the answer in his face, intent on his reply, holding his breath, immobile and tense.

"I gave her a thorough medical just ten days ago, Vincent. You *know* I did. Everything was fine. Clean bill of health. Fit as a fiddle," he laboured the point, seeing the apprehension still very evident. "Have you some reason to doubt the results, my boy? What has troubled you so? What have you noticed?" Peter was becoming concerned by now.

"If Catherine were living Above, if she were to visit your clinic, are there other tests, other procedures, not available here, which she needs?"

"Vincent! You know better than that! You *know* I would never take a patient's health so lightly. Why do you ask such a thing?"

"I'm sorry, Peter. Forgive me," only now realising that his words had implied a hurtful criticism. "Rational thought deserts me in my fear for her."

"Tell me."

"Catherine is menstruating." No further information.

"Yes, is there a problem? Excessive pain? An unusually heavy loss?" A quick negative shake as Vincent tried to explain.

"She is not with child."

"No. She wouldn't be. She has been using contraception. But you knew that." An urgent contradiction quickly stopped him.

"No, Peter. She took only those pills which you provided."

"I realise that," Peter gave a puzzled laugh, "unless she's changed her doctor after all these years."

"But that was only for three months. She was reluctant to take those, and I'm certain she has had no more. Yet she has not conceived. What's wrong, Peter?" he looked fearfully at his friend.

"Is *that* what you have been fretting over? That Catherine is not yet pregnant?" Relief flooded through Peter

as he realised that it was simply a misunderstanding and that Cathy was not ailing, in spite of Vincent's fear for her. He shook his head.

"Oh, Vincent, *when* will you learn not to bottle these things up? Are you *ever* going to talk about your concerns? Did you discuss this with Cathy?" A reluctant shake of negation. "Or Father?"

"I couldn't," he murmured, head lowered.

In an exasperated, but affectionate tone, Peter explained.

"We, none of us, thought it at all likely that Cathy would conceive so soon. It's not impossible," he told him, "but it would have been most unusual. When I said that she had been using a contraceptive, I meant in the recent past. It often takes several months afterwards, sometimes many months." He clapped Vincent on the shoulder, giving him a friendly shake. "Patience! Give yourselves a little more time. I'm pretty sure you'll hear the patter of tiny feet in a year at most. Now stop worrying. Cathy is just fine, which is more than I would have said about her husband," he laughed again, as they resumed their journey.

Vincent might have felt a little foolish, but it was so good to feel the heavy burden lifting from his heart that he simply thanked Peter and walked on, smiling, and gave his friend a hearty hug as they said goodnight. He ran swiftly, all the way back to the hub, eager to be with his family once more.

Catherine raised her eyes from the book she had been reading in bed while waiting for Vincent's return. It was obvious from the graceful flourish as he removed his cloak, the spring in his step as he crossed to the bed and the happy light in his eyes when he raised her chin for a loving kiss, that whatever concerns had been depressing his spirit had lifted. She watched, drawn inevitably to the gradual unveiling of that magnificent body as he prepared to join her. She could not miss the mischievous gleam in his eyes as he, quite deliberately, stretched upward and outward, flexing and rolling every sinuous muscle before donning his nightshirt. He could not repress a chuckle of amusement at Catherine's gasp of appreciation. Only recently had his modesty given way to the assurance which allowed him to

tease her in this manner. She was deeply happy that he could do so. She joined him in a joyous peal of laughter, and threatened,

"I'm a lawyer, you know. I could bring an action against you." She opened the covers for him to come to bed, as he replied,

"I'll look forward to that, my love," and he took her into his arms, expecting that she would snuggle down to sleep. How wrong can a man be? Those little hands could wreak such havoc and it was impossible to resist the exquisite sensations as they petted and stroked, exploring and arousing his body until he was afire with passion. "Catherine," he groaned, as her mouth assaulted his nipples, suckling and teasing until he was mindless with ecstasy. Had she never heard the admonition, 'Don't start what you can't finish?' But Catherine had no intention of stopping and . . . he was unable to insist . . . his very being was crying out for her to continue, to never stop this sweet torture.

She wanted this; he needed it.

For the first time in her life, Catherine felt a primal satisfaction in loving this way. She revelled in every astounded gasp, every incredulous groan of her name as she ventured further and further into more intimate caresses, drawn onward by the responses of this man she loved beyond life itself. She had learned once before that the startled yelp as she mouthed him was no indication of pain so she continued her ministration, gently nuzzling then drawing a downy globe into her mouth, evoking soft groans from her beloved, sounds of ecstasy which told her that he was as lost to passion as was she. She took her time, seeking to give every last second of pleasure before his calls turned to desperation and she knew he could stand no more. Only then did she take his painfully engorged erection into her mouth once more, fondling his tightly-contracted testicles with one hand while firmly stroking his shaft with the other, loving him to completion, thrilling to every surge of his body as he reached a glorious climax, subsiding at last to sounds of stunned incredulity. There were no words. None were needed as they lay quietly

sharing a drowsy lassitude, a fulfillment which was beyond articulating. No longer was Vincent tense with worry.

As Father had stated, he was indeed a 'fast learner' and 'once bitten' he would not make the same mistake again. He trusted Peter, and life was too full of shining, happy, busy days and glorious, wonderful nights to waste precious time in unwarranted misgivings. He did not concern himself any longer about when Catherine had her period, or when she did not.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jacob Wells lay back in the warm water with a contented sigh. The long soak had eased his aching hip, and though duty called, he was quite reluctant to leave the pool. A few more stolen minutes and then he must . . . He shot upright, mouth agape in astonishment as both Vincent and Catherine shot like twin projectiles across the bathing chamber and into the necessary facilities beyond, disappearing from view as quickly as they had arrived. In consternation he clambered out, hastily wielded a towel then threw his waiting robe around his still-damp body. Out of sight they were, but most certainly not out of hearing. The physician hurried to investigate the alarming sounds reaching him from the lavatory area.

There was a diverted stream which continuously flushed through, and a gully which carried it away. On hands and knees, crouching alongside one another, he found his son and his daughter-in-law helplessly retching over the outlet gully. When Catherine eventually caught her breath enough to speak,

"Close it down, Vincent," she gasped.

"No," the brief but intransigent reply, before he had to turn once more to the run-away.

"Dear God, what have you eaten?" A vision of the whole tunnel community sick with food-poisoning was rampaging through Jacob Wells' mind. "You'd better come to the hospital chamber, both of you, and let me take a look at you. We must isolate you to prevent any spread of infection." Vincent had his breath back, for the moment.

"Don't be alarmed, Father. No-one else will be affected," he tried to calm him.

"Your diagnosis would be more credible if it was based on fact, Vincent," he snapped. "Wait until I have some test results before you dismiss the very real likelihood of infection in so cavalier a fashion, if you please!"

Vincent was unable to answer, but Catherine's spasms had let up, momentarily.

"Please, Father," she panted urgently, "go to Jacob. We've had to leave him alone, in his crib," and she was off again, over the gully.

Horried at the possible outcome of such a virulent gastro-enteritis in a young child, he knew that Jacob had to take priority.

"Of course, my dear. I'll see to Jacob first, then arrange for help for you and Vincent," and he shuffled off as quickly as he could.

Feeling weak and sore, the couple went to freshen up, then they helped one another to stumble back to bed.

"Oh you poor dears!" It was Mary, of course.

"Don't be concerned, Mary," Vincent told her, "if you could just persuade Father to prescribe some raspberry tea, and perhaps William could send us some soda crackers, we'll soon recover."

"Rasp . . ." Mary began, in momentary bewilderment, then, "Oh, how wonderful! Vincent! Catherine! I'm so pleased for you!" So obviously overjoyed was she, she hugged them each in turn, regardless of their fragility. At that moment, Jacob Wells returned.

"Mary! Whatever has got into you? Have you forgotten all you ever knew about barrier nursing?"

"Father," she shook her head at him impatiently, "they're not *ill*. They're *pregnant*."

He looked from Mary to the couple on the bed, then back again, then, still unable to get his brain into gear, back to Vincent and Catherine.

"Morning sickness, Jacob, remember?" Mary quietly got her own back.

"Then you're not . . . ?"

Vincent slowly, gently but firmly, shook his head.

"But you're . . . ?"

Catherine slowly, gently but firmly, nodded.

Jacob Wells beamed like the Cheshire Cat.

"That's wonderful! Vincent! Catherine! I'm so thrilled for you!" and with a distinct sense of *deja-vu*, they hoped their bodies would not rebel at another round of bear hugs.

"Mary?" Vincent's weak whisper prompted her.

"Raspberry tea and crackers coming up," she assured him, "and I suppose," turning to Jacob Wells, "I have your permission to take Jacob to the nursery until these two are feeling better?"

He nodded a little sheepishly, knowing that the baby was at that very moment in the hospital chamber, at his own insistence.

Although Vincent was quite stubborn at first, he accepted Catherine's view that he needed to be in a fit condition to care for both Jacob and Catherine. He agreed to mute the bond rather than to share morning sickness. Catherine was never again as ill as during that shared bout, just a mild 'queasiness' most mornings, for a couple of weeks. It could have been that the bond was re-inforcing the nausea. It enhanced other feelings, after all, in a more welcome manner. One thing was certain. Every soul in the tunnels, and soon every Helper as well, knew of the happy expectation of a sibling for Jacob. And everyone of them was thrilled with that news.

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*

"Congratulations, Momma. When'm I losing you, then?" Joe's warm brown eyes twinkled with humour, and Catherine proceeded in a gold-fish act, opening and closing her mouth while trying to form some sort of response to his wholly unexpected query. Surely Joe was not acquainted with any Helpers? Who could have told him? She had had to come to terms with the lack of privacy Below, with their knowledge of her pregnancy almost before she had been aware of it herself, but surely she didn't have to live 'in a gold-fish bowl' as she had ruefully described it, Above, as well?

"How . . . ?" she began. Joe roared with glee at her obvious discomfiture. He rarely got one across on Cathy.

"Aw, come on, Radcliffe! I haven't gotten to be an uncle this many times without knowing the signs! You're absolutely glowing with it. No mistake."

"That obvious?" A gentle smile had replaced the initial consternation at the thought of a possible breach of tunnel security.

"Clear as crystal," Joe chortled, "and I'm over the moon for you, kiddo. No-one deserves it more." His face went grim as he briefly recalled the sheer hell of her first pregnancy. This time she could have all the happiness she had been robbed of. He knew it was a dream come true for Cathy. A means of closure on all the previous nightmares, the way forward she had long hoped for. Nevertheless . . .

"I shall miss you, Cathy. Not just the work," he confessed, "the friendship. The way you brighten the day."

She had to hug him, knowing that the feeling was mutual.

"I shall keep in contact, Joe. Promise. And you know Peter can always find me in an emergency," she comforted him. "I can't tell you where I'm living. Its not that I don't trust you . . ."

"Oh, I've a pretty shrewd idea of where you are living," Joe assured her grimly. "I've worried about it for months. Even more so, now you're expecting. It can't be easy for you, and it can't be good for your health, either," he asserted.

She looked at him in genuine bewilderment, instinctively needing to defend the community, feeling as if Joe's words maligned their status. A ridiculous response, with hind

sight. Irrational. She would put it down to hormone imbalance, heightened emotions, when she looked back on her unpredictable loss of the self-control which she had honed to an art-form during years of protecting the tunnel world from discovery. She had become a master in the arts of evasion, prevarication and even, when push came to shove, downright mendacity if that was what was needed to keep Vincent safe. But now, at Joe's words, her mastery deserted her.

"Not easy?" she burst out. "To know that they can no longer get hold of him to strap him to a lab. table and use him as a specimen? Or cage him, run their cars at him, chain him up and burn him? To no longer have to look over my shoulder for fear of a sniper's bullet or drugged dart, or some pervert watching us through a telescope? To stop being terrified he'll be spotted on his way to see me, or captured on his way home? Its the *easiest* thing in the world to live knowing he's safe, at last, from our 'civilised' world," she said bitterly.

Joe's mouth was open in astonishment, wide-eyed at the torrent of words which he had inadvertently prompted with his remark. Once started, Catherine could not stop.

"And you can't imagine how 'easy' it is to be able to spend more than a few snatched minutes here and there, to be with him every day. Sometimes, even *all day*." Her tone softened and her expression relaxed at the unspoken thought, '*and to spend every night in his arms.*'

Then she became aware of Joe once more, seeing the shock in his widened eyes. She burst into tears, horrified at what she had said and at the unwarranted hostility of her manner. As if those things were even remotely anything to do with Joe, for heaven's sake!

"I'm so sorry," she sobbed, "I don't know *what* made me say such things," putting her head in her hands, weeping violently and unaware of her friend having come round the desk until he pulled her into his arms. "I didn't mean it, Joe. You, of all people, don't deserve to be spoken to that way. I don't know why I said all those things," she wailed, unable to stop the flow of tears, as Joe held her close, rocking her gently and quietly re-iterating.

"Its all right, Cathy. Everything's all right. Don't worry. Its O.K."

Joe had understood, from those two brief meetings with Vincent over a year ago, that his life must have been one of seclusion and that he must have overcome great difficulties to become the person he was. He realised now that he had not even begun to have an idea of the enormity of Vincent's struggle, merely to survive. He knew that Cathy's words had been aimed not towards himself but at the injustice which the man she loved had been subjected to, and at the frustration of her impotence to affect that injustice, for all her competence in legal affairs. Joe was filled with deep compassion for them both, and with admiration for their tenacious courage.

"Its over now, Cathy. All of it. You have come through it all. Put it behind you," he said fiercely, giving her a little shake, angry again at the cruelty himself, now.

"They *didn't* win; *you* did. You and Vincent. You're a happily married woman with a young son and another baby on the way. Both Vincent and Jacob are safe, and happy, and waiting for you."

Her sobs died away at last, and she took the offered box of tissues as she straightened up to dry her tears.

"You're right, Joe. There's nothing for me to be crying about now, is there?" She managed a watery smile as he offered her a second box, gesturing for him to remove it as he quipped,

"Enough? All done?" with his usual quirky smile.

"All done," she agreed, heaving a happy sigh that Joe held no rancour as a result of her tirade of a few minutes ago. It would take more than that to mar their friendship, and she was grateful for that knowledge. Perhaps, she thought, it was time to re-consider whether there was a continuing need for total secrecy where Joe was concerned. He had never pressed for information, never followed up the many leads which he could have pursued. For friendship's sake he had kept a tight rein on his curiosity, even in the face of his admitted, very real concerns about her welfare. It was past time to show him that his fears were groundless. That could not be an unilateral decision. She would, she

decided, discuss it with Vincent and determine whether they might approach first Father, then the Council, with a view to extending an invitation to Joe.

"Penny for 'em?" Joe asked.

"Worth *loads* more than that!" she laughed. "I was just marvelling at what a wonderful friend my boss is," she told him, "and you couldn't buy that with a fortune."

"Your boss is about to crack the whip. Back to the galley, slave!"

She touched her forelock in mock deference to his command, and grinned as she backed out of his office.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joe had difficulty believing his present circumstances were real; they seemed the product of some fantastical dream; he more than half-expected to waken in his own bed, and to laugh at his over-active imagination.

"Why now, Vincent, after all this time?" he asked.

"I know that you love her too, Joe, and that you have very real concerns for Catherine's welfare."

Joe knew that the frank, open manner of speech was in no way meant to censure him. He had no need to challenge his use of the word 'love'.

"We wish to show you that your fears for Catherine are un-founded, that she is cherished by her family and that we are able to provide adequately for all her needs, including the particular medical needs while she carries our child."

Joe had, indeed, been increasingly worried for Cathy, surmising that she was living in primitive conditions in the tunnels which Diana had spoken of during her investigation, before she had suddenly clammed up, tried to do a U-turn, refused to continue. He had always had his

suspicions and had been tempted to follow them up, several times. Not, however, since that dramatic graveside meeting with this charismatic, powerful, so-vulnerable man whom both Cathy and Diana had protected fiercely. He knew right from wrong. It was right to leave Vincent in peace, but that had not allayed his anxiety for Cathy and her unborn child. The figure striding beside him gracefully, cloak swinging to the rhythm of his footsteps, had acknowledged that fact. Joe was in no doubt that the invitation which he had been given was an expression of the most profound trust, and he took it as a huge, very gratifying compliment to be led through the complicated maze of dimly-lit passageways by Cathy's husband.

"We have long wished to welcome you to our home," Vincent explained, "but Catherine feared to raise a conflict within you, knowing that many of our ways are unlike those of your world. She thought it an unnecessary burden."

"She was afraid I'd want to dot the 'i's and cross the 't's on a handful of unsolved cases," said Joe, matter-of-factly.

Vincent stopped walking, bowed his head, allowing his mane to hide his features, his proud stance changing to one of dejection.

"Yes," he whispered. They stood in immobile silence. Joe could not bear it. He simply could not stand to see, feel the abject shame, the self-recrimination emanating from this honest, upright man who had borne with fortitude so much injustice, all his life. He stretched out both hands in a gesture which was completely alien to him, caused by the urgent need to alleviate the other man's evident torment. He took Vincent's face and firmly turned it until he was forced to look at Joe.

"I did that over a year ago, Vincent. When I became filled with admiration for a man brave enough to protect an innocent woman with his life. Who felt such outrage when faced with a cold-blooded murderer that he could not remain a spectator to another killing. Who acted when inaction would have allowed other innocent victims to lose their lives."

Vincent jerked away as he said,

"I am a murderer, nonetheless."

"Nonsense!" came the immediate rejoinder. "That's . . . *bullshit*, Vincent! Have you *ever*, ever in your whole life, killed anyone who *wasn't* intent on murder or mayhem?" Joe ran his fingers through his hair in agitation, angry, *furious* at Vincent's words. "Hasn't anyone bothered to explain the concepts of 'self-defence' or 'justifiable homicide' to you? You're married to a *lawyer* for Chrissake! What's *wrong* with Cathy, to let you feel this way? Its . . ." His outburst was stopped mid-flow, as Vincent gripped his arm,

"No! You don't understand."

"He *does* understand, my son. Far more clearly than you, yourself, it would seem." Father had heard much of the loud altercation as he was on his way to meet them. "Hello, Mr Maxwell." He offered his hand, to shake Joe's warmly. "Welcome to our home. Thank you for your efforts but, as you are discovering, on the subject of his own culpability my son listens to no-one, not even Catherine. This boy of mine, who is the soul of compassion with everyone else, is an incomprehensibly severe judge of himself."

Joe watched as the old man raised his free hand to cup Vincent's cheek in a gesture not unlike his own, a few minutes before. "The rest of us know, to the depths of our souls, that there is no evil within him."

"Father . . ." Vincent started to remonstrate but he was stopped by a gesture, as Jacob Well dismissed the subject.

"There is tea waiting for us all in my study," he said, "and we should not allow it to go cold." The trio had resumed walking toward the hub as they spoke. "Then Catherine and Vincent would like to act as your guides, to show you around our home, if time permits."

"That'd be great. Thank you, sir," said Joe. And so the uncomfortable subject had been firmly shelved for the moment, but Joe knew of it now. Peter had once observed to Jacob Wells that Joe could be as persistent as a bulldog, once he got his teeth into something. Peter was right.

"Hi, Joel!" Catherine was on her way to the study as the men reached the turning. The toddler holding her hand shyly wrapped himself in his mother's skirt on seeing the

stranger, but Joe hunkered down to Jacob's diminutive height and soon had the infant playing 'peek-a-boo,' both of them using Catherine's fortuitously long, full skirt, to her great amusement. The game hampered her progress only a little, but it held all Joe's attention so that when they reached the entry he almost fell into the study and he was grateful for the timely support from Vincent. When he raised his eyes from his footing, he suddenly had the full fascinating, amazing view.

"Good grief, Radcliffe! Who *reads* them all?"

Her laughter trilled out, seeing his comical expression.

"Everybody, Joe. No television."

"How many of them have you got through then, Vincent?" as he was ushered to a seat at the table.

"I haven't had a chance to look at these, yet." Vincent removed half-a-dozen volumes which were stacked on Father's chair, to allow the patriarch to sit.

"Jenny sent them down yesterday," Mary told him.

"He's read everything else," Catherine assured Joe.

"She's having me on again," he stated, "*No-one* could have read all these!"

Father laughed at his disbelief.

"That was the one threat which *always* made him toe the line, as a boy. I'd warn him that he would be banned from the library."

"Not that he ever carried out his threat," put in Mary, as she poured the tea. "It would have broken both their hearts."

"That's true," admitted Father. "I loved the long talks we'd have of an evening, discussing what we had read that day, debating what the words might mean, as our opinions began to diverge, or sharing something newly discovered."

"Those are treasured memories, Father. All the places we visited, people we met. The different languages, different ways of thinking. It was all so exciting." Vincent's eyes glowed.

"Me too! Me too!" Jacob had decided that he had been quiet for long enough. Vincent found his trainer cup for Mary to fill for the youngest member of the company, adding a little tea to his milk. Joe took the little boy onto his lap and they shared a plate for their cake, cementing their new friendship.

It was all so . . . normal, Joe realised. A warm, cosy living room now the heavy drapes were closed against the tunnel draughts, with an ordinary family sharing tea and talk, in their home. The room was comfortably furnished, well-lit, and the food was good, plentiful, served and eaten in a civilised way. Extraordinary. But what had he expected? What had he feared? He could not have said, now.

Jacob happily curled up with his grandfather, eager for a 'story, please,' while Vincent and Catherine took Joe to show him round the hub.

The kitchen and dining hall. The hospital chamber, where he learned of Mary's expertise as a midwife. He already knew of Father's medical qualifications, and that Peter Alcott was also available when needed. He saw the various workshops, the laundry area. The school-rooms where Cathy proudly told him of Vincent's teaching skills, and of the students who had gone on to higher education, colleges and universities Above, because of his skills. The nursery and the dormitories for older children. He was told of the histories of some of the abused or abandoned youngsters, of the dis-advantaged people who had found a home and a purpose in life here, in this sanctuary. And he met the people. Dozens of people. All ages, all different yet somehow all the same. Confident, friendly folk who welcomed him, made him feel at home. At ease with him, happy to talk about their lives, show him what they did, how they lived.

"Its like a small town, isn't it?" Joe remarked.

"We like to think of it as an extended family," Vincent told him. "Everyone does whatever they can, to help us all to live as well as we are able to. We care for one another and everyone is a valued part of our community."

"You are completely self-sufficient?"

"No, indeed not," Vincent corrected him quickly. "We have many good friends Above who know of us, help us. Without our Helpers we could not survive. We are unable to provide food, medicines, fuel, entirely from our own resources. Much of our clothing and furniture is from Above, either donated or scavenged from what is discarded. Much of the good quality furniture we find thrown out can

be repaired, restored, re-finished or re-covered in our workshops, then it has a re-sale value if it is surplus to our needs. This brings small amounts of money to purchase some of our requirements, but not all."

"You'll have to visit us again, Joe," Catherine said. "You've a fair idea of how the place is run, now, how it *works*, but there's lots more. You haven't seen any of the *fun* things, today."

"Yes," agreed Vincent. "Another time we can show you the Falls and the Mirror Pool."

"The Great Hall. The Painted Tunnels."

"The bridge of magic whispers."

"Chamber of the Winds."

"Pipe Chamber."

"Whoa, there!" Joe put up his hands, palms out as if to defend himself from the barrage of suggestions, grinning widely. "Sounds like I'd need a week's vacation time down here!" he laughed.

"And you still wouldn't have seen everything, Joe. *I* haven't seen the half of it yet, and I *live* here, she emphasised.

"Yeah. I know. One thing I can say about that, kiddo. Before I came down here, I was worried sick about you. Now, I think I envy you," Joe declared. Vincent looked startled at that conclusion, obviously spoken with sincerity but very puzzling to Vincent.

"But . . . why, Joe?" he asked, "When you have so much more Above?"

Joe thought for a few seconds, looking at the piercing blue eyes fixed on his as if to read his mind.

"Not for what you *have* down here, . . . though I can't see that there's a lack of anything that matters. I suppose . . . its more what you *don't* have, in a way." He looked a little sheepishly at Vincent, not yet quite comfortable with the straightforward way of speaking which characterised the community.

"Yes?" An expectant invitation to elucidate. He tried to express how he felt.

"No need to watch your back. Guard your tongue. Worry about the impression you make. Push and shove to make a place for yourself. Fight the clock. Beat up on your colleagues to get a job done. You just take everybody's

co-operation for granted, here. Everyone puts one-hundred-per-cent into their life, takes responsibility without questioning whether its their job to do something. If they can, they do. If they can't, someone else just steps in. No fuss. No argument."

"And these things . . . they don't happen Above?" The concept of deliberate non-co-operation was completely incomprehensible to Vincent. Why ever would anyone *not* help, if they could?

"Believe me, pal, they don't. Its dog eat dog up there. Your Cathy is an exception."

"See, Vincent? I'm an exceptional person," joked Catherine. "Joe's just said so."

"Indeed, my love," Vincent gave her a brief hug as they walked, "he and I are in total agreement."

"We're missing the concert!" Catherine exclaimed as they turned the corner and strains of music reached her from the study. Time had passed more swiftly than any of them had realised. They quietly found space to lower themselves on the entry steps, not wishing to cause a disturbance. Joe was more than ready to sit for a while. He had used his legs for far longer than he was used to. He clapped with enthusiasm as the young musicians took a bow; joined his baritone with the other voices as Jamie strummed a familiar folk-song on her guitar; listened as raptly as any of the children when Father told a story; laughed fit to split his sides when the huge, burly cook chased the nimble, wiry Pascal under Father's table at the end of their humorous skit. He felt no shame at his own tears when those around him were just as moved when Vincent recited a poignant poem. He was aware of the almost constant flux of people in and out, as children were ushered to their beds or adults joined them at the end of their duties while others crept away to take up theirs. Nothing seemed to be formal, or pre-planned. People offered, or were gently cajoled, to provide an item to entertain. A poem, story, song, a magic trick, a few minutes of juggling, an instrumental piece, solo or in groups, child or adult - it didn't seem to matter who or what. All were enjoyed by the care-free group spread around all the nooks and crannies in Father's study. At length William returned

and with the help of some of the older children, hot chocolate and a variety of baked goods were distributed.

The evening wound down as one after another said their good nights. To Joe's surprise, Vincent reminded Catherine that she had had a long day, and that she needed to rest. He was even more surprised when she meekly agreed. No argument. No back-chat.

"See you Wednesday, Joe. Take care," and with quick hug, Catherine also left the study.

"Well, young man, have we laid to rest the worst of your fears for our Catherine?" Father twinkled as he came across the almost deserted room.

"In spades!" exclaimed Joe. "What you have achieved down here is astounding," he went on enthusiastically. "Even if Cathy had *not* been so close mouthed about this set-up - well, I would not have believed her."

"Seeing is believing, though? I hope you will visit us again, Joe, so we can get to know you properly. Its all been a bit rushed today, hm?"

"Its been great fun. Haven't enjoyed myself so much in ages. I was hoping you might allow me to come again."

"We have offered to show Joe the Falls, next time, Father. There simply was not enough time, this visit."

"Yes, well, no diving from the top to show off, eh? I'd prefer he didn't have heart failure."

"Father! . . ." Vincent scolded.

"I'm for my bed," he smiled. "My son will see you safely home, Joe. Good-night."

"What was all that about, Vincent?" Joe wanted to know, as they began the journey to Joe's exit.

"Father has heard rumours, apparently, that I used to dive from the Falls. Fortunately for me, he doesn't really believe them."

*'But I'll bet they are true'* thought Joe.

"Thank you for coming, Joe. It has made Catherine happy that she no longer has to keep secrets from you. She values your friendship greatly, and has found it difficult to be so evasive concerning her personal life. It is not her nature to be other than honest and open."

"I know that, Vincent. I understand it all now, though I'll admit it has hurt, at times, to think that she did not

trust me. But not since that night I met you. Not since then."

Vincent had brought a flash-light to help Joe see his way through the unlit alleyways and Joe returned it as they reached the street. To his surprise, he was within a few hundred yards of his home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joe's desk, as ever, was under a mountain of paperwork which never seemed to diminish however hard he worked. One file, newly put in his overflowing 'in' tray, was drawing his attention, preventing his concentration on the one opened in front of him. He sighed impatiently, pulled his tie a notch looser, ran his fingers through his hair, then jumped as if it was something unusual to hear. The 'phone rang.

"Joe?"

"Yeah."

"Short of work over there?" Joe tensed, not rising to the bait.

"Natch. What's up, Al?" trying to sound as if everything was normal, as if his heart was not pounding in his chest so hard.

"Sent back a file. Didn't log it. Don't know its origin, other than your office stamp flagged 'V.' Track it down and vent the guy's shorts for me will ya? God knows how it got through to my desk in the first place,"

Joe knew. He had put it there. "but it did. Read the whole crock cover to cover. Figured its on my desk, must be *something* needs action. We goin' for a new charge? 'Refusal to turn a blind eye', or maybe you're so short on scum you're goin' for the good guys? Better things to do with *my* time if *you* haven't!"

"O.K., O.K.," Joe broke in. "I'll track it down. Kick some ass." 'Yes!' he thought. '*Bingo!*'

"You just *do* that!" and as the receiver at the other end slammed down, Joe switched off, re-wound his tape and carefully retrieved it, slipping it into a large manila envelope along with the file which had caused the irate call. He had known that Al would be most unlikely to record an un-registered file; relied on their good working relationship to produce just the informal dismissal it had received. Everyone had junior staff who goofed once in a while, after all. But he did feel relieved, as well as elated. It *had* been a risk, however infinitesimal. He was fully prepared for the angry flack, but what the heck? He could put up with a little egg on his face in a good cause. No problem. And his typing must have been good enough to pass muster, he thought.

\* \* \* \* \*

He knew his way to the hub very well by now, having visited that peaceful retreat many times in the previous months. Joe had asked Catherine to arrange for her and Vincent to give him an hour of privacy in their chamber, but they had no idea what he wished to discuss with them.

"You both trust me?" he began, as Vincent carefully assisted his heavily pregnant wife into his own large chair, then poured tea for the three of them.

"You know we do, Joe. What's up?" asked Catherine. She blanched visibly as he took out a very official-looking legal file which he placed in front of them before opening the cover to allow both Vincent and Catherine to begin scanning the contents, at first with a benign curiosity. Catherine's face took on a look of increasing horror as she quickly turned the sheets.

"How *could* you, Joe? How could you *do* this to him?" She was filled with outrage and an overwhelming sense of betrayal.

"Trust me Cathy," he pleaded, "its *not* what you are thinking. Wait. I *had* to do this. He won't listen to any of us, and this was the only way I could figure out to get him to understand."

"Go on," she whispered, barely keeping control. Vincent was still perusing the sheets, his face absolutely expressionless, like granite. He said nothing as he raised blank eyes to look at Joe.

"Its all there, Vincent. Everything you told me. All the things which, according to *you* make you a murderer. Well if you're so sure that's true, you ought to be prosecuted, right? Listen to this."

He started the tape player.

"Joe?"

"Yeah."

"Short of work over there?"

Catherine gasped. She recognised the executive's voice instantly and she felt sick, faint.

"Listen, Cathy," Joe said urgently. They heard the 'phone slam down at the conversation's end, and the chamber was utterly silent for many stunned seconds, before Catherine, tears streaming down her face, struggled out of her chair and held on to the table as she made way around it to reach Joe, and take him into a grateful hug.

"Thank you, Joe," she got out at last. "I can't *believe* what you've done. That you even *thought* of it, let alone pulled it off."

"It was a little un-orthodox," said Joe.

"A *little*!" Catherine rolled her eyes. She sank into a chair, looking at Vincent. He was bemused, not fully understanding yet what the ramifications were, but knowing that whatever this all meant, it had made Catherine supremely happy, and Joe was very pleased with himself.

"But the fact remains, Vincent," Joe began to explain. "All those dreadful things you have been forced to do have been put before the Chief Executive Attorney, for assessment. The highest I can go. You heard him. He read it all. You heard what his reaction was. Anyone would

have to be out of his skull to think you were culpable; that there was ever a case to answer." He looked at Vincent, hoping against hope that the shadow would lift from the man's soul. "You couldn't get a more un-biased opinion than *that* one," Joe pointed to the recorder. "If you can't believe Catherine or Father or any of the people here because they all know and love you, you can't get round *that* one, pall!" he declared vehemently, defying Vincent not to believe what he had been told. "You're innocent," he said decisively, firmly.

"I am innocent," came the dazed murmur of confirmation.

"Sorry I scared you, Cath, but I just couldn't let him go on living with that stigma for the rest of his days. It wouldn't be right."

Vincent shook his head, overcome with emotion.

"That you would open yourself to such criticism, to censure from both your colleagues and your superiors, in order to free me, to make me understand. You can't know what this means to me. I have no words to tell you."

The room fell silent once more. Except for a startlingly loud . . . trickling noise. They looked at one another in surprise. All three seemed to become aware together, what that unexpected sound signified. Catherine's face flushed with excitement, Vincent rose in consternation to help her up, Joe rushed out of the chamber, calling back over his shoulder as he left,

"I'll tell Father!"

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*

Vincent carried Catherine to the hospital chamber. They would both have preferred to stay in their own, but had

decided earlier that the high, well-lit bed would be much easier for both Father and Mary when they attended to Catherine.

He stripped the sodden skirt and underclothing from his wife, sharing a conspiratorial sideways glance with her as he peeled down her warm woollen stockings, each of them knowing that he was about to reveal . . . shell-pink toenails. Catherine had become despondent a few days earlier, tired of the waiting, feeling as if this ungainly body of hers was never going to change, that she would never again be even remotely attractive. She had been unable to reach, or even to see her feet for what seemed like forever. An imp of mischief had made Vincent seek out her nail-polish, settling himself on the bed beside her to seductively peel away the warm woollen stockings, to stroke and pet her legs before grasping first one foot and then the other, and dextrously applying the colour to her toe-nails.

It had become a joke between them that however subtly Catherine applied her make-up, Vincent thought cosmetics merely masked her natural beauty rather than enhancing it. But coloured toe-nails - just toes, not fingers - always piqued his interest. His actions had raised Catherine's spirits, and they laughed together while the varnish dried, wondering when she would be able to relieve him of this new 'duty.' Once he had dressed Catherine in a clean gown, Vincent stepped aside.

"Only just in time!" exclaimed Mary as she saw how far Catherine's labour had progressed. "Whyever didn't you warn us, dear?"

A severe contraction prevented any immediate answer.

"Another one or two like that and you'll be nearly there," encouraged Father.

Vincent was perched at the head of the bed with his arms holding Catherine securely against his chest to aid her in her labour and to support her when she had a brief respite between pains. She had an arm wrapped around each of his bent legs and she gripped him so tightly each time she convulsed that he wondered briefly whether his knees would ever straighten again, as he mopped the sweat from her face and neck with a cool wash-cloth before offering the

sponge soaked in spring-water to moisten her lips and mouth.

"Here we go then!" exclaimed Father. "One good push, Catherine, and we'll see your baby. Now! Push!"

Catherine heard only one voice through the miasma of sheer agony which took her almost into unconsciousness, as Vincent re-iterated,

"Push, my love. You *can* do it." If Vincent said she could, she knew she could.

Suddenly a chorus of joyous congratulatory cries filled the chamber, mingling with the first lusty bawling from their baby. He was lying across his mother's abdomen, held there securely by his father's hand while his grandfather deftly dealt with the cord so that Mary could wrap him and place him into Catherine's arms. He immediately ceased his crying, looked at the beaming faces of his parents, and they were lost, drowning in the unusually clear, deep blue pools of their new son's eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

Less than an hour later Vincent had carefully eased Catherine, her sweat-sodden body freshly bathed, padded and clothed in a pretty tunnel gown, on to the piles of supporting pillows on their own bed. Mary had bathed and dressed the baby after Father completed checking him over, and returned him to his mother as soon as she was settled.

"You need to rest now, Catherine. You've certainly earned it." Mary gave her a maternal smile and a pat on her hand, enjoying the sight of Vincent gently brushing his wife's hair, dividing his attention between this task and gazing in awe at the infant tucked into a niche in the pillows between Catherine's protective arm and her breast.

"Soon, Mary," she assented, "but first . . ."

"Come," said Vincent softly, beckoning to the figures in the entry, "this little one has been waiting patiently to meet his big brother." Jacob's eyes were wide with anticipation as he slipped his hand from Joe's restraining clasp and his first tentative steps became an eager run into his father's outstretched arms.

"Its O.K., Joe," Catherine called to him as he hovered hesitantly in the doorway, "you can come in too." She smiled brightly at him before returning her attention to her family.

Vincent propped Jacob on the bed, between his own thighs, and held him securely as Mary helped Catherine to re-position the baby across his brother's lap, to be clasped so gently, so carefully. It was a magical, heart-stopping moment. The room was absolutely still, completely silent as every-one held their breath, watching. The two boys were each gazing at the other in wonder, identical pairs of wide blue eyes seeming to be communicating volumes between them, until Jacob released his breath with a whoosh of sound, an incredulous

"Oooh," then a reverent whisper, "hello, little brother."

A second later he looked, a little uncertainly, into his mother's face.

"He can't talk yet, sweetheart," she answered the unspoken question.

"Oh," he looked back to the baby, "we'll have to teach you then," he said decisively, "our daddy's *specially* good at that," he told the baby earnestly, nodding his head in emphasis.

The words reverberated in Vincent's mind, as his eyes filled with tears. '*Our daddy . . . Our daddy . . .*' He was so overcome with the enormity of it all that the chamber seemed to recede from his perception. He remained as he had been, seated at the very top of the bed, one long leg supporting him on the floor, the other curled with his foot tucked beneath him. He made no response to the congratulatory clasp on his shoulder as Joe leaned across him to kiss Catherine's cheek and utter a brief,

"Well done, Momma. I'm so happy for you, kiddo." Father's admonition that Catherine should be resting came only vaguely through the daze, and Vincent was barely aware of Mary taking the baby to the crib, or of Joe helping Jacob down from the bed.

"Let's you and me go find some breakfast, sport, shall we?"

"My brother's very tired, Uncle Joe."

"Yeah. Your mom is, too. Its hard work, you know, having a baby."

"My daddy will look after them." The confident assertion faded away down the tunnel. A gentle laugh from Catherine brought Vincent from his reverie and he smiled as she wiped his face. He blinked, realising that the chamber was suddenly empty except for himself, Catherine and the baby soundly sleeping in the nearby crib.

"Peace at last," she sighed. "Lie down here beside me and rest for a while, Vincent. Its been a hectic night. You must be exhausted."

He shook his head in wry amusement. *He* was exhausted? He silently removed his boots, helped her to move down from her half reclining position and took away the extra pillows, then complied with her suggestion. She snuggled in to him with a sigh of contentment and about half a second before Vincent, Catherine was fast asleep.

A short time later Father returned and found them curled together in a poignant tableau of tender love. He carefully laid his stick aside and tiptoed to quietly top up the charcoal in the brazier, then let down the heavy drapes over the entry. After a proud, lingering perusal of his new grandson, a tender smile creased his face as he shuffled round, snuffing all but one or two of the candles. As he took up a spare blanket to cover his sleeping son, his breath caught at the sheer beauty of that extraordinary face in repose. He looked so peaceful, and, somehow, so much younger, so reminiscent of the boy he had been.

Jacob Wells stood quietly for a while, deep in thought. He remembered how fearful his younger self had been; afraid that the enormous task of safely rearing the tiny being thrust into his care would be beyond him. The fear

had never left him in over three decades, always a counterpoint to the joy of sharing Vincent's boyhood, his youth, his development of mind and body into this man sleeping before him. He knew he had made many mistakes, both large and small, during those years. He had been forced to muddle through as best he could, working from intuition, trial and error, driven by an enormous compassion for the painful and difficult problems unique to his son, and by an equally profound love and admiration.

As he retrieved his cane and crossed to leave by the exit to the bathing pool, a short-cut to his own bed-chamber, he paused to unhook that door-curtain also, to keep in the warmth. He looked back over his shoulder for one last glimpse of the peaceful scene in the mellow half-light of the stained-glass window and realised that he was no longer afraid. Somehow all the muddling through the years of confused hope and despair had come out right. All any parent longs for is to see their child happy. Jacob Wells knew that despite every obstacle fate had thrown in his way, at last Vincent had found true happiness.

*In spades!* as Joe would have said. He chuckled quietly to himself at that thought, as he settled into bed at last for his own well-earned rest.