

A Dance at Midnight

by Janet Aldrich

The wind off the lake was ice-cold, slicing through my thin coat like a sword cut. Part of me wished I'd worn something warmer, but then I realized how silly that was. If I'd felt better, I'd have laughed.

The city was spread before me in a pattern of dancing lights, alternately hidden and revealed by the blowing snow. At this distance, it was almost beautiful. Of course, the beauty was an illusion, obvious only at a distance. If I stood here until dawn, I'd see the streets below me for what they were. Just as I had, for the past six months, seen life for what it was, finally. Well, no more.

I stepped toward the edge of the building and looked down. Was four floors enough? I suppose there were guides for these things somewhere on the Internet, but even though I had made a New Year's resolution I intended to keep, the thought of Googling "Defenestration proper height fatal" was more than I was willing to do. Heaven knows why, but I just decided to take advantage of what height I had access to and go — go on to whatever there was. I hoped it would be somewhere I could find Martin again.

Out of nowhere, hands closed around my shoulders and gently tugged me back. *Damn it! Who's interfering now?* And then the wind brought me some very familiar scents: Bellagio for Men, good tobacco and the frequently-recalled smell of *him*. "Martin?" And tears sprang to my eyes, tears not caused by the wind.

"Allie, don't. Please don't."

I turned slowly, afraid to look. But there he was, in his black wool topcoat over the charcoal suit that suited him best, black hair tossed by the wind and a loving expression in the beautiful brown eyes I cherished so much. With a cry, I leaped to him and felt his warm arms wrap around me, shielding me from the cold in my heart. "Oh, beloved, I've missed you so!" I wept myself into sobs and finally into silence.

"I never left you. You might not be able to see me, but I've always been there." I felt his lips softly brush my cheek. He rocked me

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gently and then stood back. "But this — if you'd done this, I'd never have seen you again. I couldn't bear the thought. So here I am."

"Everything's so empty without you. People try, they do, but it's just not enough."

"Please don't give up, my heart. I promise you that it will get better, that there is something good waiting for you on the other side of this. The pain won't last forever."

"Somehow, that's even worse — knowing that one day, I won't miss you as much. I love you!"

"I know that. I love you, too. My love for you didn't die just because I did."

The chimes began from St. John's Cathedral. Martin tipped his head back to listen, and I saw moonlight reflected on his face. It was midnight. As the chimes ended, on the street below a car stopped and music drifted up to us where we stood.

"Let's dance, Allie. One last time." He enfolded me and we danced slowly together, my face tucked in the crook of his neck. When the music stopped, he stepped away from me. "Promise me, dear one. Never again. When the day comes that you cross over to where I am, I want to be with you."

I felt a wrench in my heart at the thought of him leaving me again, but the sadness in his eyes moved me to promise. "I'll wait, Martin."

"One day again, Allie. This isn't the end."

He blew a kiss to me and vanished in a swirl of snow.

