

TOGETHER AGAIN

THE SEQUEL TO 'ALL THINGS NEW'

by Tess Freeman

(from *CRYSTAL CAVERN ELEVEN*)

Note: Tess Freeman's trilogy began with 'ALL THINGS NEW', which originally appeared in TAPESTRY TALES, part of the UK Helper's Network fan club. The zine merged with the CRYSTAL CAVERN series (1990-2001), which published the two concluding stories - Together Again and To Realize the Dream (all published separately on the Treasure Chambers).

Catherine slithered out from under the weight of Vincent's arm, unable to sleep. These Tunnels were never completely silent. There was a hushed closeness which filled her ears and closed in on her senses and tingled the hairs on her neck, making them stand coldly on end. She could never sleep in this suffocating atmosphere. It has been a week since she had asked Vincent to bring her here so that they could set up a home together, a week in which she'd slept only in short fretful bursts. And yet Vincent slept, the rising and falling of his vast chest the only sign of life. But Vincent had been sleeping beneath this city for over 30 years. She couldn't have hoped to adjust within one week.

But that was exactly what she had hoped for. In truth, she hadn't hoped at all. In her impetuosity, she had not foreseen, nor even contemplated, any problems. Living and working in New York did not give one time to think, let alone contemplate. Wandering about Below lent plenty of opportunity for reflection ...

She lay back down on the bed again and nestled into Vincent's back, wrapping her upper arm around his warm body. She loved him so much. She had only just reappeared after almost a year of being missing. Now she had 'disappeared' again without any explanation. It wasn't fair on them. And what about her neighbours and landlord? The bank. The police. How long would it be before all these noticed she wasn't around any more? How long before they started to question and investigate her whereabouts?

She turned onto her back, leaning her cheeks against Vincent's mane of coarse-soft hair, its golden strands a pillow and a resting place for her troubled mind. She had to go back. She had to go and cut off all ties with the world Above, make up some story about where she was going, why she wouldn't see them again, something believable, so that if they ever tried to seek her out sometime in the future and did not find her, they wouldn't think it strange.

She turned onto her stomach and propped herself on one elbow. It was almost light. Vincent stirred and opened his eyes.

"What troubles you?" he asked. She laid her palm on the side of his face. He reached up and covered it with his own.

"You're leaving."

"Only for a short while, until I can get away without being followed."

"You're here, now."

"Yes, and people will be looking for me."

"They can't find you here. They can't ... harm us, as long as you stay."

"But is it fair, Vincent?" He flopped his head back on the pillow and sighed.

"No. They will be worried about you. You must go."

She reached over and kissed him lightly on the mouth. "And when I come back, we can put that other world behind us for good."

He held her with the intensity of his blue gaze.

"We can never eradicate it completely, Catherine. We live below it, we depend on it for our own survival. The most we can hope for is that it does not affect us beyond our control."

"That is why I'm going back, to leave it properly, so that I can return here free to live under a new set of principles."

"How long will you be gone?"

"A week maybe. No more." She rose from the bed. At the chamber exit, she turned and hesitated, expecting him to speak. He had sat up and was watching her go.

"I will be here, Catherine, waiting for you when you come back."

She knew he would be. Waiting was all he could do when others made decisions he couldn't partake of. Waiting was a facet of Vincent's lonely and isolated existence. It made her feel more guilty for leaving him. He was more important to her than her friends. He needed her more than they did. He relied on her. And she relied on him, and needed him more than she needed anybody else. She and Vincent were interdependent of each other. So why wasn't she putting him first? Why was she forcing him to wait, *again*, just so her old friends didn't have to worry? It didn't make any sense, and yet she was doing it.

Emerging from the Tunnels into her apartment basement, she felt as though she was deserting Vincent, disregarding his feelings for the sake of those to whom she was going to say good-bye anyway, and she knew she was. Still she carried on, up and upward, away from him and his world of peace to the surface existence of chaos and distraction.

The moment she turned the key in her apartment door, she wished she'd felt well enough alone and stayed Below. There was somebody waiting for her. It was Maloney, the cop who'd interrogated her after Vincent had killed the men who'd kidnapped his and Catherine's baby. He hadn't believed her cock-and-bull story about Doberman dogs then, and she doubted he believed it now either.

He rose off her two-seater settee.

"Miss Chandler, do come in."

"Mr. Maloney, do leave." He chuckled.

"Very good, Catherine. But I haven't camped out here for a whole week just to wish you welcome back."

She threw down her bag and placed her knuckles on her hip bone.

"You've been staying at my apartment?" He pulled a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and fanned it in front of her face.

"It's all above board, Catherine. Authorized by the Chief commissioner himself. Care to read it?"

"No." She flopped down onto the other sofa. Now what? Vincent was right. She should have stayed with him in the Tunnels. Nobody could have unearthed her there. Now she had given them opportunity to pry and probe all over again. Wouldn't she ever learn? Couldn't she stay away from this world long enough to just give them a little peace and security? Anybody would think she was

deliberately inviting trouble. It was a wonder Vincent stuck with her at all. He never had a minute's rest from rescuing her and getting themselves into yet more strife. If she had been a 'nice, quiet girl,' they wouldn't end up in these sort of predicaments. But no, Catherine Chandler meant trouble. Wherever she went and whatever she did, she brought grief to them both.

She got up and slid her bag onto her shoulder once more.

"I'm going out for breakfast." She was going back to the Tunnels, that was what, and never emerging again. The rest of the world would just have to wonder. Eventually, after years of her never resurfacing, they would write her off and forget all about her.

Maloney planted his stocky frame in front of her and pushed his teeth into a grin.

"You're going nowhere, Catherine, not until I get some answers, and realistic ones this time." She cocked her head sideways.

"Realistic, huh?"

"Yeah, like who the slasher is." She wrung her hands together breezily and brushed past him toward the fridge.

"So what you got to eat.

Vincent stood with his head back and his eyes lifted to the ceiling, to the roof of his chamber, to the floor on which Catherine walked. Would she ever truly be a part of his world? Would she ever be fully able to integrate into it, to drink of its hushed silence and let its limitations be enough to fill her soul? Could he ever hope to provide her with all that she needed for life? She was young. Would she soon grow restless, even if not with him, with these walls? It had only been a week and they had failed to contain her.

And yet didn't he know how she felt? Didn't he understand the insatiable yearning which led her on journeys of exploration, the wild urgent which caused her to take risks, to walk directly in the path of danger and look destruction and death in the face? Because such roads, when they spiralled back to calmness, made that calm all the more so.

"Taking a vacation."

"Might I ask where?" She bit into an onion bagel.

"A private spot I go to when I want to be alone." He shrugged.

"Who did you go with?"

"Mr. Malony," she licked butter from her thumb, "I just said I'd wanted to be alone." He shook his head.

"This I don't buy, this 'alone' thing. You seem to do an awful lot of things alone, or so you say, but you're never really 'on your own,' are you, Catherine? There's always somebody lurking about the background, waiting to pounce on anybody who doesn't like you." She took a sip of coffee.

"Maybe I've got a stalker."

He nodded. "Yeah. A prowler. I say you got a damn good prowler, Catherine Chandler."

She set the mug down on the counter and kept her face free of any expression. She wondered if he realized how close to the truth he was, or was it simply wild speculations? Whatever it was, she would have to tread with extreme caution and do nothing to endanger herself, so as to ultimately lure Vincent to her. She would play along with Malony's game. Let him keep her here if that's what he wanted. She regarded the smugness which pulled his mouth into a thin, self-satisfied grimace, the

defiance which made his eyes glimmer with malice. He would expect her to retaliate, and when she didn't, he would grow bored and let her be.

Vincent knew she had business to attend to which may take a few days, so he wouldn't seek her out. When Maloney's superiors get fed up with him wasting their time and money on his own ludicrous suspicions, he would have to drop the case. Then she would make her excuses to all concerned and return to the Tunnels, without worry of ever being missed. It was a waiting game now, a test of endurance between her and Maloney. He had a frantic world out there, one which rushed and raved and was impatient of his return, demanded answers that she would never give. Whereas she had all the time she required.

A whole week passed and there was no word from Catherine. She'd said she would be no longer than a week. It had been the longest week of his life, a week of uncertainty in which he felt she may never come back. She's been away from him for longer periods in the past, the longest and most distressing being the eight months of her pregnancy in which she'd been held prisoner by the evil Gabriel and during which time he had lost his Bond with her. But that had been a time when she had been held against her will and could not come to him.

Then there had been the weeks which followed when she had lain in a coma, her reawakening unsure. And the months afterwards when her memory was lost to her and she did not know him. But their will and their determination had brought them through all those times, their mutual love working as a union to bring them repeatedly back together. But what neither of their individual or combined strengths could do was keep them together. They could fight against outside forces and all sorts of exterior adversity - intrusive investigators, the evil Paracelsus, the mind-sick Gabriel - they'd conquered them all. Why was it that they could not subdue their own interior apprehensions, the fears which, when everything else stood back and allowed them to be together, still rose firm and prominent as a blockade forever erect between them?

He held his pen poised in the fingers of his left hand over his journal. Were those fears in himself or in Catherine? He would have said Catherine, for she was the one who had felt the need to leave. But weren't there fears in him too, fears which made him afraid to believe in her love for him, fears which threatened to consume him with their intensity and threatened to suffocate his own love for Catherine, to shatter destruction?

He pushed his chair back and shook his great mane of hair about his shoulders. Why had she had to go? To say good-bye to her friends! Yes, and to provide herself and him with some sort of legitimate passport to eternal peace and happiness. But would they ever have that figurative document? They would never have it as long as Catherine still embarked on walkabout tours of the world Above and he questioned her motives.

Things weren't going according to plan. Maloney was not letting up. He was resolute as Catherine was and he seemed to find a perverse delight in her persisting obstinacy, as though he believed he could outsmart her or outlast her and wear her down.

She got up from flicking through a woman's magazine he had bought her, its pages filled with superfluous stories and gratuitous advertisements. If the magazine carried a message, it was void of any real meaning for her at this stage in her life. It was empty and worldly and unessential. She tossed it into the garbage and wished she could do the same with Maloney. He was wearing her down. It had been 10 days altogether now that he had imprisoned her in her own apartment and she would bet it would be ten or a hundred more if she didn't start pulling some strings herself.

She walked across to where he sat on the sofa and stood over him, snatching the newspaper out of his hands.

"How much longer do you intend to keep up this charade?" she demanded.

He took the paper from her and folded it neatly on the seat beside him.

"As far as I can see, you're the only one playing charades, Catherine."

"And you've got all the clues wrong, Mr. Maloney."

"I don't think so. The fact alone that you've consented to this little set-up here the past week and a half proves me right. You must be really desperate to protect this Vincent whoever he is."

Something lurched within her at the sound of his name peeling off Maloney's smarmy lips. She shook her head.

"Vincent?"

Maloney clasped his hand behind his head and leaned back on the sofa, a cynical smile playing about his mouth.

"Everybody knows his name is Vincent. That's no longer a secret." She turned away. What else did they know?

Maloney stretched out his legs in front of him.

"All we need to find out now is where he's at, so we can ask him a few questions about the method he employs to kill people, and make him pay for his crimes." She faced him.

"Vincent kills only to protect."

"Protect whom? You?" She tilted her chin.

"When the need arises." Maloney sat up and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees.

"And how does that make you feel, Catherine Chandler? Doesn't it make you feel guilty, responsible even, for all those needless deaths?" She felt her chin rise higher.

"They would have killed me."

"Ah, yes, self-defense, but tell me, Catherine, why are you in these dangerous situations so much of the time?" She waved an arm across her face.

"It goes along with my job, Mr. Maloney."

"Uh huh. Working for the D.A.'s office is a shade more hazardous than say, selling real estate." Catherine pressed her fingers to her forehead.

"But we both know your job isn't the real reason why you find yourself landed in all these life and death situations, which you consistently manage to come out of unscathed. I would propose that your lifestyle, and the company you keep, as opposed to your line of work, is what makes people dislike you so much."

"Be that as it may, Mr. Maloney, all it proves is that people should mind their own business, and that includes you."

She strode to the door and shoved her feet into her boots. Maloney leaped off the sofa.

"It's my business when people are being slashed to death. Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going out. I've got a pounding headache.

"I'll make you an aspirin."

"I don't want or need an aspirin. I need some fresh air. You can't keep me here any longer. It's unhealthy. I want to go for a walk."

"Very well. Let's go for a walk. Perhaps it will clear your head enough to release some answers."

They walked in the Park and it did clear Catherine's head, enough to appreciate the cool fresh air on her face, the weak sun warm on the top of her head, the scent of wet grass filling her nostrils. Having been cooped up for ten days inside her own apartment, everything about outdoors seemed so much more vibrant, so alive and clean and fresh, and necessary.

And vital.

And then it struck her. She couldn't live in the Tunnels. She would suffocate, if not physically, then mentally, psychologically, down there, stripped of the sky above her and nowhere to look far away.

They skirted past the Tunnel entrance and she tensed. Maloney seemed to know so much. Maybe he already knew where Vincent lived and he was leading her here to force her to take him to his fugitive. She reminded herself that she, not Maloney, had initiated the walk, but he hadn't put up much of any argument either. They headed for home and she decided it was time to put an end to this sham. Her mind worked out its plan of lies in silence.

"No word yet?"

Father's familiar figure entered Vincent's chamber. Vincent half-turned from his position at his desk.

"Nothing. I sensed her, Father."

"Sensed her?"

Vincent turned fully now, to face Jacob, the man who had been the only Father he had known, the man he had named his baby son after.

"Moments ago. She was close, as close as the Tunnels themselves, and then she went away again."

"Is she in danger?"

"No. She is coming back. I sense a ... withdrawal in her."

"From you?" Father ventured.

"From this place. She does not want to be here. She fears that if she comes back now, I will expect her to stay."

"But that was her own decision," Father said.

"Decisions made can be the wrong ones."

"What will you do?"

Vincent stood.

"I must go and convince Catherine that I do not wish to take away her freedom. I was wrong to think that she could remain happy Below. We are from two different worlds, Father. I cannot live in hers and she is unable to live in mine, except for a short time. Catherine needs space, and room, to live and breath. I must make her believe that I understand or I could lose her altogether.

Maloney turned Catherine's key in her lock.

"Vincent is dead," Catherine said as soon as they entered the apartment.

Maloney shut the door and scoffed.

"I would have expected something a little more original than that from you, Catherine."

"It's the truth!" She'd never told so many lies in her life until she met Vincent.

"You cracking up yet? You ready to talk? I think it's time we went down to the station. Leave your coat on."

At the station the Chief of Police questioned her some more. Unlike Maloney, he seemed satisfied with her answers. He was altogether a more amiable man, older and greyer with soft eyes and heart. But when he addressed Maloney, his face grew stern.

"Be in my office at four. I intend to have words with you about your handling of this case. I'm not at all happy. Miss Chandler," he smiled warmly at her. "Allow me to escort you home by means of an apology. I'm sure you do not wish to spend any more time in the company of Mr. Maloney."

"Not if I can help it," she said.

"Tell me," she queried, clipping in her seat belt into its holster. "I was led to believe that you authorized that whole farce."

The chief pulled out into the lunch time traffic. "I did. I understood that Maloney had proof, solid evidence of your involvement in those killings."

She was thankful he couldn't see her face. He was such a nice man she didn't like to keep the truth from him. But amiable or not, he was still police and it was his job to see the law was not broken. Even if she and Vincent were a law unto themselves. As far as NYPD was concerned, if New York citizens were harmed, you were liable to New York law. Which was fair enough. Just not in hers and Vincent's case. That was an entirely different scenario, one which nobody could comprehend, not even this genial man driving her home.

Vincent stood on Catherine's balcony, his ear close to the glass of the French doors and rapped his knuckles against it. No answers came. She was not inside. He would have felt her if she had been there. Slowly, he twisted the handle and felt the door open in his hand. He let himself in and closed it behind him. Her scent filled the apartment, but that was that of another too, unfamiliar and masculine and unfriendly. They had been here for a long time and until very recently and probably they would return soon.

He must not be here when they came through the door and yet he must stay, find out who was with Catherine and why he must try to speak with her and tell her that he did not wish to snatch away her freedom and hold back her wings from their full expansion. He went out onto the balcony again and sat, leaning against the brick wall, one leg outstretched, the other bent at the knee, waiting. He was used to waiting and his own silence.

They came not long after, Catherine, and an elderly man by his voice, not the same man who had been here earlier, the man whose scent the apartment reeked of. This man posed no direct threat and Catherine felt relaxed and relieved. But relieved of what? The departure of the other man, whoever he was? His ears strained to pick up what they were saying though the glass.

"I can only apologize for Maloney," the elderly man's voice tricked to him. "He turned every case into a personal vendetta and this particular case had been eating away at him more so than others. He just got so caught up in the whole thing that he forgot to separate fact from fantasy. I warned him to let it go if he couldn't prove anything. But you've got my word, Miss Chandler, he'll be dealt with savagely."

"Apology accepted on Maloney's behalf." Catherine's voice coursed through him like some sweet thing to savour, the days in which he had not heard it adding to its intensity. "And don't you worry, Chief, no harms been done."

Vincent's head collapsed back against the wall. The Chief of Police was here. They had been investigating him, and Catherine had been pulled into the thicket by that young officer, Maloney. Catherine had told him about the cop's incessant questioning regarding Vincent's latest spate of

killings and the lies she had been forced to make up on the spot to cover them. It had been the officer's clever calculating persistence to win and reveal the truth for his own glory, and his very likelihood of doing so, which had finally pushed Catherine over the edge and into her impulsive decision to leave her world Above for good and settle Below on a permanent basis.

Now it seemed that the Chief was overruling Maloney's well-founded suspicions and was releasing Catherine back into her own, free life again. As soon as the Chief left, Vincent would break through and tell Catherine that he was releasing her too. Releasing her to work and live and meet with her friends and stroll in the sunshine and the snow in New York City and to come to him whenever she wanted. The way it had always been, the way they could make it again, the only way that Catherine, and ultimately himself, could be truly happy.

He didn't get the chance to tell her just then, because the sound of a key in the front door lock interrupted everything.

"Forgot to give Miss Chandler's spare key."

Maloney! Vincent sucked in a huge nasal breath and smelled him, even through the glass doors. He stood and pressed the door handle hard into his palm, ready for action. There was going to be trouble.

"Put the gun away, Maloney," the Chief was saying.

Vincent quieted his breathing, intent only on what was happening and about to happen in the adjacent room.

"Why don't you let Miss Chandler come on over here?" Maloney said.

"I'm a faster shot than you," the Chief reminded him.

"She was about to talk until you butted in and took over. You're too old and soft to be in this Force. I think its time you stepped aside. Know what I mean?"

"No!" The gunshot belted his eardrums at the same time as Catherine's voice sang out to them. He burst through the door in an incited, protective rage, knowing not where to look or attack or shield first, only that the three occupants of the room were as momentarily surprised and disoriented as he, and that silence prevailed a brief moment before chaos again took over and Catherine was reaching toward the raised gun in Maloney's hand. He saw her in a premonition, dying against him with her own blood, which dripped from her fatal wound and pooled out in deep dark redness to cushion her lifeless form as she fell.

The second gunshot he awaited, when it came, sprang and reverberated, ricocheted back and forth a dozen times off all the walls and the ceiling and the floor and every object in the apartment, like a great quarry blast recoiling into every diminishing spirals of a tragic, yodelling echo. Sounds such as were known to him which the Tunnels' walls had offered up to him as their music and their epitaph.

When Maloney's body hit the floor, Catherine ran to him unharmed and thrust herself against his chest and flung her arms about his neck, he did not understand. He held her lightly, afraid to believe that this time she was not dead, she was here with him, clearly still loving him. And then another fear took over, the fear that they were not alone and that he was fully exposed to another person, the Chief of Police no less.

The uniformed man back stepped until his knees and then his seat hit the sofa and the gun which had killed Maloney turned limp in his fingers. Disbelieving eyes stared at Vincent.

"Maloney was right." Vincent released Catherine and edged toward the balcony.

"Wait!"

Vincent turned as the Chief's command, only too aware fo the lethal gun still in his grip. But the gun was not raised. It lay forgotten about on the seat pad beside the Chief.

"Please," the Chief intoned. "I mean you no harm."

"Nor I, you."

A gasp. Clearly the Chief was surprised at his ability of speech. Vincent was used to it. Was he really so abhorrent, so inhuman that people consistently expected him to communicate solely in a series of grunts? He should have found it upsetting, but he had been through it before, time and time again. He knew what people's reaction to him was. His own response to that was immaterial any more. What mattered was how Catherine saw him, and she had already erased his fears in that department. But what mattered most now, was leaving here before the Chief could alert a whole posse to come after him and track him down. He made for the window again.

"Please," the Chief repeated. "Stay a few moments, I promise not to turn you in. I promise."

He caught Catherine's eyes close briefly and her head gave a succession of small, affirmative nods. He sighed and stood.

"What do you wish to know?"

The Chief, somewhat recovered, replaced the gun in his holster and sat up, wringing his hands together.

"Off the record, you are this lady's protector?"

"In the sense that you refer to, yes."

"You are our mystery killer?"

"I did what was necessary."

"I believe you did."

Catherine ran to the Chief and knelt in front of him.

"Vincent wouldn't hurt anyone for no reason."

He waved her away with a dismissive hand.

"Sit down, please," he gestured toward the facing sofa. "You, too," he motioned to Vincent.

Out of courtesy, Vincent took Catherine's cue and sat beside her, opposite the Chief.

"You two are ... together?"

Vincent looked at Catherine and she looked back and smiled and took his hand.

"Yes."

The Chief nodded. "It is good to have someone to love. Twenty years ago a gang of four thugs broke into our suburban house. They killed my wife and maimed my son. I never loved another woman. Instead I joined the Force. My son was taunted throughout his teens, because you see, they didn't just shoot his leg off and leave it at that. They cut him up real bad so that even his friends couldn't recognize him or bring themselves to hang out with him anymore. They just couldn't see, that inside this was still their buddy, with exactly the same feelings as before.

"Who did this awful thing?" Vincent asked gently.

"Jealous, bitter young men, resentful of our happy family and Brett's popularity. Men who wished to destroy, the same class of men who have undoubtedly attempted to destroy what you have. Am I right?"

Catherine nodded for both of them. Vincent's anger and sorrow for the man sitting opposite and the innocent boy who had been brutally hurt and the wife and mother who had been shamelessly slaughtered, burned away any words which might have formed in his throat.

"So you see, I understand about love and hate and crime and destruction and who is guilty. All I ask

is that you go someplace, if there is one, where it is safe and where you will not get that sort of malicious opposition with which I deal every day."

Vincent dropped his eyes from the Chief and turned them to Catherine. She was still holding his hand.

"There is such a place," she said.

The Chief nodded.

"I thought there must be. Maloney was right. I am getting too old and soft for this. Maybe some day when I get older and softer still, you can let me know where this place is."

Vincent extended his free hand, the one Catherine was not holding onto, and the Chief took it, and grasped it firm in a handshake and a pact.

"You will always be welcome there," Vincent told him.

After the Chief left, Vincent stood up too. "I must get back," he said.

Catherine clutched his arm. "You're going alone?"

"You heard what he said."

"He meant both of us should go and keep out of trouble."

"Catherine, you do not belong Below. I came here today to tell you that I think you should stay here, Above, where you are happy. Come to me, to us, as you have always done, but do not give up what is so much a part of you."

"I'm so confused, Vincent. I want to go with you, to live my life as fully as you do within the tunnel walls..."

"Even I feel the need to walk the streets, Catherine. None of us can stay Below without ever surfacing. Some need it more than others. There is no shame in that."

"But you are there, and our son. I should yearn to be there too. Why don't I?"

He had no answer for her, only another question.

"Have you managed to see your friends yet?"

"No."

"Maybe once you do and decide what to tell them, your mind will find its own way."

"Oh Vincent!" She threw herself at him. "I'm sorry."

He held her close before he had to let her go, knowing he had done the right thing. Catherine did have to find her own way, on her own, with no outside influence to invalidate her conclusion. Only when she sought and found, purely independently of all and everyone else, would he be content that she was sure in her choice. And he would have to accept, if she chose that way, that her choice may well be a combination of both worlds as before. He could not presume to take pre-eminence over her former life, no matter how much she loved him and little Jacob. She would still come regularly, probably daily, most nights he was certain, and he would be selfish beyond the extreme to expect any more when she had already given her all.

Catherine slumped back on her sofa, her apartment still and quiet now that she was alone in it once more. It did not seem like home now. Her thoughts and her longing strayed to the Tunnels, where she wanted to be right now, not only with Vincent and Jacob, but with Father and Mary and Mouse and Jamie and Pascal, and all the others who were her extended family members, good people whom she could trust, who loved her and cared about what happened to her and looked out for her, and she them. And what of her friends up here? She loved them too and did not wish to cut them out of her

life. Perhaps Vincent's suggestion was the most sensible and practical one, the one which would cause less problems all round. What had he said? Everybody needed to spend part of their time Up Top. The question was, how much time did she, Catherine Chandler, resident New Yorker, need to spend Above, and how much time Below? And it was not simply a matter of hours, but of lifestyle. She was very tempted to cease the tenancy on her apartment and move Below. But if she intended to live out a fair chunk of her life this side of the ground, then she would need some sort of abode to put to her name.

And what about work? Strangely enough, her subconscious had already made up her mind for her on that score. She really had no option but to give up her job, whether she remained Above or not. It placed her in far more scrapes and sticky situations than she and Vincent could afford to contend with, after their meeting with the Chief of Police. He couldn't keep covering for them. So what should she do instead? Look for another job with no potential danger aspect? Or do this thing which was calling her more insistently as each day passed? She had missed most of her baby's first few months, so much so that her maternal instincts had not had time to develop. It was something she could not reverse, just like the months lost could never be returned. And yet she wasted more and more time staying away, building on her resentment, rather than nurturing what was still available while it was.

In the morning she drove up to visit her friend Jenny.

"I'm going away for a while, Jen," she told her. "There's been a lot going on with my life lately. I really need a break."

"Where will you go?"

It was a reasonable enough question and one which Catherine had prepared for.

"You might say I'm going on a personal discovery trip. Everything will be pretty much as it comes, no well laid plans or expectations."

"Gee, you are needing to get away, aren't you?"

Catherine laughed and hugged her friend.

"You will come back and tell us all about it?" Jenny checked, her eyes not so sure.

"I promise to keep in touch."

"Good." Jenny held her by the arms. "Because we couldn't bear it if you just disappeared out of our lives again, Cathy."

Catherine nodded sincerely.

"I promise, I won't."

As she drove home she knew that she intended to keep her promises to Jenny. Her home from now on would be Below with her family, but like all folks, she would take time out to go on vacation once in a while.

Joe was not quite so understanding as Jenny had been.

"You *can't* quit, Cathy, we need you. *I* need you!"

"Thanks for the flattery, Joe, but this time it's not going to work."

He smiled ruefully. "It never did."

She pulled a face. "Poor Joe."

"Poor Joe indeed. So what's the deal? Your music man finally won you over?"

"Something like that. I'm going away."

"Where?"

"To another world, Joe."

"Well, half his luck," Joe said.

"I'll come and visit you sometimes," she said.

"Make sure that you do."

She went back to her apartment for the last time and used her phone to sort out her outer business, then she sold her car to a dealer on the outskirts of town and took a cab back to Central Park. She breathed in the invigorating smell of wet grass once more and the nature-scented air as she crossed to the Tunnel entrance, but she was not sorry to leave it behind. She would see it again.

Vincent was not in his chamber. Neither was Jacob. She found Mary who was taking very good care of the baby and who informed her that Vincent was reading to the children.

"Here," Mary smiled, handing her the infant, "he will be pleased to see you've come back. You **have** come back?"

"Yes," Catherine assured her, "for good this time."

Mary went on her way and Catherine stood looking down at her young son, hers and Vincent's child. A warm shudder crept through her and she cradled little Jacob closer. Here in her arms lay her destiny, to bring up this child in the very best manner that she could, to love and respect and to give and to seek for himself what she and his father had sought and had found.

Vincent's rasping voice filtered along the tunnel, as she approached the classroom. And when she got there she waited in silence, until some of the children saw her and waved. She smiled and waved back and then Vincent turned too and she caught the unguarded surprise on his face. She walked to him and kissed him lightly on the cheek and all the children cheered.

"Go on now," Vincent admonished them gently. "Same time tomorrow and we'll finish the book."

They scurried out of the hall, leaving the three family members together.

"Your presence always give me such pleasure, Catherine."

"Good," she said, allowing him to take part of Jacob's weight as she stood closer to embrace him. "Because you're going to be seeing an awful lot of me around here."

"Catherine?"

She kissed him on the mouth.

A wolf whistle and some giggles sounded from the side of the room. Vincent made a mock run at the straggling children and they scampered in squeals of delight. They were wonderful children. When Jacob was older he would join them and perhaps she could read to them sometimes, or have some part in their education. There was plenty to occupy a mind Below.

"I've severed all ties with Above," she told him. "Oh, I'll still go back and visit, but I've given up my apartment, my job, closed my bank accounts..."

He stopped her with the deep sadness which assailed his intense blue eyes.

"It is unfair that it must always be you who has to give up everything and make all the sacrifices. You who show of your never failing generosity while I reap all the benefits."

"But I'm happy to do so."

"Catherine," he shifted Jacob into the crook of his arm and gripped Catherine's shoulder with the other hand.

"I fail to see how you could be happy here, truly happy and content, when you've left so much

behind."

"But I have so much here."

"But your freedom, Catherine."

"My freedom is inside me. Being with you is what truly liberates me, Vincent. Anywhere else, without you, I'm in prison. I'm being denied all I need and want to exist. You. I do crave you, you know, and only when the craving is satisfied by being this close to you, is my mind truly freed."

He gathered her closer still to him, sandwiching Jacob between.

"What did you tell your friends?"

"That I was going on a journey."

"And now here you are, starting out."

She stood back from him a little to peer up at him and hold his cheek in her palm.

"No Vincent, I've arrived."

END of Part 2 of the trilogy