

TO REALIZE THE DREAM

Part 3 of the trilogy

(first 2 parts are 'All Things New', and Together Again)

by Tess Freeman

(from CRYSTAL CAVERN ELEVEN)

Catherine Chandler, the woman he loved, did everything well, but it was patently obvious that bringing up their son, Jacob, was the thing she did best of all. That, and loving him, Vincent Wells. Catherine was very good at loving.

She was also very good at pretending everything was okay. But she forgot that he could read her thoughts. Six months had passed since she'd come back to him, after making the difficult decision to live in the Tunnels permanently, as opposed to just visiting a lot. She'd stressed it wasn't really a hard decision. Permanent didn't mean she could never go back. It just meant the Tunnels would be her home and she would visit the world Above on occasion, as did most of the other Tunnel residents. Why should she be any different from anybody else? This way she could have the best of both worlds, except that she would have more of the Tunnels and less of Manhattan, instead of the other way around.

Six months on, she proved that it worked. She was still happy - or was she?

He knew that her excursions Above were lonely ventures, during which she longed for him to accompany her. Not that she would dare to ask him again. They'd been through that once before and had almost lived the dream. She'd gone so far as arranging a van to take them to a special place of hers in the mountains, but in the end he had opted out, too afraid of being discovered, of losing all that they already had, for the want of something more.

And now there was even more at stake. He had her love completely, and their son safely back with them. He would never risk either of those things for the short-lived pleasure of walking on the beach, or standing victorious on a mountain summit. He already had it all, more than he had ever dreamed was possible for him. But as for Catherine, her possibilities had been cut short by choosing a life with him. Had she chosen another partner, she would have done all those things with him. But she had chosen Vincent and the limitations which life with him presented.

There had to be a time when acceptance overcame want, when want should cease and be replaced with fulfillment. But there was something in human nature, and her own, which was incapable of being satisfied conclusively.

She came breezing into the chamber they shared, brandishing a letter in her free hand. Her other hand secured Jacob, who was sitting very sturdily astride her hip. She put him down on the bedside rug and he scampered about on all fours.

"News?" News always worried him, especially news which made Catherine smile with such fervour. News from Up Top, which still involved Catherine and of necessity, excluded him. He was not jealous, but news of that nature only served to reinforce the problem which already existed. The problem of him not being able to integrate fully into her life, the problem which pushed her into seclusion away from him. He sighed.

"Vincent," she smiled softly, taking his hands and leading him to sit on the bed. "We've been invited to Jenny's 35th birthday. She says she doesn't want any celebrations when she turns 40, so by doing it now..."

"You and Jacob?"

"No," she smiled happily. "You and me, Vincent. She wants to meet you, they all do, all my friends."

"Catherine, what have you told them?"

"Nothing. They say it doesn't matter. They know there's always been some big secret, but they reckon it can't be all that bad seeing as I'm still with you."

"Catherine, they couldn't possibly imagine ... what I am. How you could even suggest ...?"

"But they're my friends, Vincent. They won't betray us."

"Catherine, it's just not possible. **Please**, for my sake, please, you've got to let this go, this hope that I can be accepted Above. Our lives together are limited to these underground passages. You go, please, I'm happy for you to do so. Take Jacob, make your excuses for me, sickness, whatever you wish."

Her shining eyes grew sad then, and apologetic, as she laid her head against his chest and he lifted his hand to smooth her hair.

"I won't go either, Vincent," she whispered. "If you must stay behind, then so will I."

"But Catherine, that's not ..."

But she shushed him and in the ensuing silence his despair at the restricted lifestyle he could offer her crept inwards to his soul, until it engulfed him completely. By the time she lifted her head and kissed him, he knew that he had to figure a way to give her what they both craved, at least in part.

He did not have much time to think about it, because within a few days he had a letter of his own. The contents of it did not make sense to him at first, and once they did they shook him.

Dear Vincent,

For many years now I have tried to trace you. At last my search has led me to the underground New York Tunnels which I believe to be your home. I will come on Wednesday next, the 5th, to the 14th Street entrance, at 8:30 pm. I will wait for one hour after that time. If you wish to meet me, be sure that our meeting will be the culmination of my life until now. Do not be afraid. I have reason to believe that you are my full blood brother.

Yours,

Rafael

It was a hoax. It had to be. There could be nobody else like him, a brother, presumably a twin, for how could this, this abhorrence that had resulted in his life, how could this happen twice? This must be a ploy, a trap. And yet who would have known how to get in touch with the Helpers? A private detective? Somebody from the policeman Maloney's family, out to avenge his death. Who of the Helpers would have disclosed his whereabouts, without proof that the investigator was genuine? Proof. And how would they get that proof? With their eyes? Someone like him, a brother ... Rafael. Where did he live? What was his life? On Wednesday night he would find out all.

On Wednesday night, Catherine was on his arm and they walked together through the tunnels towards whatever lay ahead. They were five minutes early, but their visitor, approaching in concealed darkness, was promptly on time. Vincent felt Catherine clutch his arm more tightly and move closer, or was the tenseness he sensed in her a reflection of his own?

The advancing figure was his own height and build, but dressed in standard type Up Top clothes,

dark trousers and casual jacket. He had a neat beard and moustache and his light sandy hair appeared short under the tan cowboy hat. From a distance he looked like an ordinary guy and Vincent moved Catherine behind him.

The man tipped his hat.

"Shoulda changed this for a baseball cap," he said good-naturedly. "Would've looked less conspicuous in New York."

He stopped in front of them and Vincent did see that yes, this man had reason to want to remain as inconspicuous as possible. The wide brim of the hat shaded his forehead and eyes and the beard and moustache concealed much of his mouth, and his mutations were less marked than Vincent's own, but when the midwestern stranger stood in front of him, and was still and silent for a moment so that Vincent could take in all his features, Vincent had no trouble at all in accepting that his man was indeed his blood relative.

"Rafael Toole." He extended his hand, a hand that was heavily-clad in soft light hair, with the nails clipped short and blunt.

"Makes it easier to work, he explained.

Vincent reached for Rafael's hand but, instead of shaking it, he pulled his brother toward him and locked him in a powerful embrace.

"Come," said Vincent, "and meet the rest of our family and friends. Rafael, this is Catherine, the woman I love."

Catherine stepped forward and planted a gentle kiss on the newcomer's cheek.

"Welcome, Rafael."

The first question Catherine had for Rafael, as she and Vincent sat with him near the waterfall, was how he had managed to get from Montana all the way to New York.

He laughed.

"I drove."

She could barely contain herself.

"You drove a *car!*?"

"Well, actually, it was a truck - a pickup."

"Wow! But how? I mean, what did you do when you needed gas?"

Rafael pulled out a pair of shades and fixed them over the bridge of his nose.

"Wore these. Besides, most folks don't even look at you these days, 'less they need to."

"But there must have been risks."

"There are ways of minimizing risks - travelling by night, sleeping when everybody else is rushing about, too busy to notice anything out of the ordinary, choosing quiet spots to rest up."

"What if you'd broken down?"

Rafael shrugged.

"My surname is not Toole for nothing. Can fix most jobs myself. Look," he said more seriously, "I don't go driving interstate every day of the week. I regarded this trip as essential and I took every precaution possible and I got here."

Vincent, who had been quiet until now, stepped forward. "Yes, and you will have to return in the same

manner. The risk you have taken is undeniably enormous, your courage immense."

"And so I hope yours too will be."

"I don't understand."

"I wish for you to come back with me, Vincent, and you, too, Catherine, at least for a visit, to meet my family and see the life I lead ..."

"Vincent, this is the chance we've been waiting for."

She saw him hesitate, then as he looked toward Rafael who raised his eyebrows expectantly, he realized he was outnumbered and Catherine knew the battle was won. It was vacation time.

"I'm not sure about this."

Vincent's dismay as Rafael held up a pair of old denims against him spurred Catherine into rippling laughter.

"You're about the same size as me," Rafael encouraged.

"You'll look good in them," Catherine teased.

Vincent held out his hand for them.

"I will try them on," he conceded. "I am not promising to leave them on."

He went off with the jeans and Catherine gave a victorious thumbs up sign to Rafael.

"Now we just have to sort out his hair," he said.

An image of a pair of enormous shears cutting off Vincent's luxurious locks with one irrefragable snip sliced through Catherine's mind. What she felt must have shown on her face because Rafael quickly amended.

"Maybe we can tie it back. What sort of hat do you think will suit him?"

She realized more so than ever at that moment that she loved Vincent the way he was. The idea of transformation was fast becoming scary. She didn't want him to look different. She knew he would still be the same Vincent, no matter what metamorphosis Rafael inflicted on him. But it would take some adjusting to, when all she really wanted was for Vincent to stay the same forever.

Thankfully, the change wasn't too dramatic, but convincing enough not to cause people to stop in their tracks. And for Catherine, the dark brown chinos they had finally settled on, the matching short jacket and Western hat with golden hair covered up at the back, really made no difference. When he removed the dark shades, they were the same blue eyes which looked back at her, the same intensity and passion was there still, and that was where Vincent's truth was revealed. Nothing could ever disguise that.

He had been right too. There was plenty of opportunity to converse with Rafael, as the truck rolled out of New York City late on the Monday night, five days after his arrival, and as it transported them across State boundaries and land which grew more remote and more breathtaking with each mile further west that they travelled.

Catherine and Vincent took it in turns to sit up front with Rafael, the other going in the back with Jacob. Their little son was too young to realize the adventure he was partaking of, but he sensed the excitement in his parents and was content for the most part. For long stretches, everybody would be silent, and then Catherine would feel in Vincent a calmness, a oneness with this unspoiled nature surrounding them, as though he too had always been a part of it, but had been denied it until now.

After a couple of days, she took over some of the driving from Rafael who was glad of the break, and promised to teach Vincent to drive when they reached his family ranch. They slept in the truck and

picnicked in the dense forests of Wisconsin. They washed in its cold, clean streams and dozed, warming in the afternoon orange halo, which induced rest of body and mind. The two brothers pulled their hats forward to cover their faces and nobody disturbed them.

They drove under the bull-horned entrance of the Low Ridge Ranch late one afternoon, a mile and a half of dust and stones driveway, until Rafael finally parked the truck outside the homestead. Having called ahead on his cell phone, he'd barely switched off the engine, when a dozen or so of a welcoming party emerged from the two-story house. Vincent, in the front seat, ducked reflexively, but Rafael pulled him slowly up, slightly assuaging Catherine's panic.

"It's all right," he assured them both. "They've been waiting for us. Come on." He strode on ahead as Catherine and Vincent left the security of the truck, Jacob clutched between them. Somewhere a horse whinnied.

"Everybody, this is my brother Vincent, and his good lady Catherine, and their son Jacob."

A very pretty girl with long black hair to her waist stepped forward and embraced Rafael.

"Thank God, you are back," she breathed.

"Everything was fine, honey."

Catherine smiled at the native Indian woman. She could understand that sort of worry.

"Vincent, Catherine, this is my wife. She calls herself Teona."

She extended her arms to each of them in turn, even Jacob.

"Welcome. I am so glad to meet you."

Two very attractive children, not quite so dark as their mother, came rushing from the house and hurled themselves at Rafael.

"Daddy! Daddy!"

"My kids," Rafael supplied with a grin that was supposed to be sheepish but came out real proud.

"Jordan and Lisa."

Inevitable, their eyes crept upward toward Vincent and then they smiled.

"Howdy, Uncle Vincent!" Jordan shook hands vigorously, while Lisa performed a little curtsy.

"Pleased to meet you. You too, Miss Catherine."

Catherine stooped down to the children's level.

"And I am delighted to make your acquaintance."

"Say," Jordan noted, "your baby boy's real cute."

"Yes," Catherine agreed, "he takes after his father."

Everybody laughed and moved forward one by one to greet them. Within the next few minutes, they'd been introduced to and welcomed by Rafael's adoptive parents, his uncle, his two step-brothers and step-sister, one of the brother's wives and various trustworthy neighbours from their small community. Soon after, most people filed away to their respective homes, leaving just Rafael and his mom and dad and Teona, when the children had gone to bed.

Mrs. Toole leaned across the table to Vincent. She took his hand and tears formed in her soft eyes as she searched his face.

"Can you ever forgive me for not taking you, too?"

"Forgive?"

"There were two of you," she explained. "I didn't think I could cope with two. We'd been hoping for a

baby of our own at the time, but even then I wouldn't have wanted twins. I know that sounds silly now, looking back, with the tribe I had after Rafael, but back then, Ray and I were so young. We always wondered what had happened to the other baby. And now Rafael tells us you have to hide out underground, I ..." She clasped her hands to the sides of her head. "All those wasted years, you could have been here, with us, living a full life..."

Catherine shot a glance at Vincent. Mrs. Toole was relying on him for her redemption. The calm resonance which covered his face was an expression of the serenity he had discovered within himself and of which he would impart to this woman, who could so easily have been his mother.

"You have nothing to feel guilty for," he assured her. "I was found by a man named Jacob Wells, a kind man, a doctor. He taught me everything I know, educated me, brought me up in a world where trust and goodness prevails. I have a whole family Below, not related by blood, but by purpose."

Mrs. Toole pulled a handkerchief from her apron pocket and blew hard into it. "I'm sorry blubbering like this."

Vincent got up and went to her, embraced her as a son would his long-lost mother. Raymond Toole stood behind, regarding the pair with fond bewilderment.

"You know, we were halfway across town that night when she changed her mind about wanting twins and made me take her back. But when we got there, you were already gone." He shook his head. "You would have thought she'd lost a child."

She managed to compose herself and smile at Vincent. "And now I've found him."

"Good," Rafael said good naturedly, clapping his hands together with a loud smack, "now we can all get some sleep. Early start tomorrow."

It was still the middle of the night, as far as Catherine was concerned, when the tap at their door was followed by:

"Breakfast on the griddle! Gotta eat if you folks want to learn how to round up cattle!"

Catherine groaned, but prodded Vincent in the shoulder all the same.

"Time to get up and earn your keep, cowboy."

"Huh?"

"Don't suppose you've ever been on a horse before?" Vincent flipped over onto his back, his eyes fluttering open.

"Why couldn't Rafael have been a deep sea diver?"

They tumbled out of bed and gnawed their way through a plate of pancakes shared with Rafael and the other riders, all of whom they'd met yesterday. If it hadn't been for the very real and delicious taste of the maple syrup, Catherine would have assumed they were deeply and very consciously ensconced in one of their dreams.

And if she needed any more of this new-found reality, it was presented to her 20 minutes later in the form of a very pretty but substantial stock horse named Ella.

"I've never ridden Western style," was the only protest she was permitted to utter, before finding she had no choice but to swing her legs across the sorrel's flank and settle herself into the deep seat of the saddle behind the protruding horn.

But she was much, much more concerned for Vincent. She didn't know how he would take to riding or, more appropriately, how his mount would react to him. But when she heard Rafael inform him that he was giving him his old horse, Cowcatcher, she relaxed.

Vincent was lithe getting on the leggy buckskin and seemed to possess an innate sense of comradeship with the horse from the start. Anything Vincent did, he did well. And today proved to be no different. At one with the time served cutting horse, he didn't interfere as it did its job, merely pointing it in the right direction and thereafter complementing it in the task of its namesake. He waved to her about midmorning and called across.

"He doesn't need me up here. He could do this work alone."

"Yeah, but you look good," Catherine said silently and smiled. *And you're enjoying yourself. And you're really, truly free, freer than you could ever be in New York City. Don't let us ever go back.*

Just before noon, Rafael drew up beside them.

"You two can head home now. Don't want you too saddle sore on your first day."

"Too late for that." Catherine said, "it's going to take me a month to recover." Rafael laughed.

"Don't worry, soon your butt will be as tough as the leather it's sitting on." Not wanting to laugh out of turn, she looked at Vincent, whose mouth had flexed from a straight line to a curve. The moment their eyes met each others, neither could hold it back and both joined Rafael in a raucous culmination to their first roundup.

The Rocky Mountains. Whoever would have thought he ever would have seen them with his own eyes, least of all himself? And what wonder of creation to behold. Their peaks, gazing towards the heavens, begging for lavish helpings of whipped snow which, when deposited, tongued their way earthwards over sheer blue rock, until met by a rise in temperature and a sigh of hunger satisfied. Vincent felt like that now.

"Hey, how you doing, Vince?"

"Rafael!"

"You were miles away." Vincent nodded and got to his feet.

"I am miles away."

"Well, here's your chance to go even further." Rafael dropped the pickup keys into Vincent's hand.

"Drive me into town. We need some supplies."

Vincent tossed the keys in the air and caught them again. He knew better than to argue with the determined character of his brother. Rafael's instructions were clear and, apart from the expected jerks and false starts and unanticipated halts, they made fair progress along the ten-mile long choppy dirt road into town.

"Don't I need a licence?" Vincent interjected on the approach to what could have been a pioneer town, if it hadn't been for the abundance of pickups and off roaders as well as horses parked in the main street.

"I don't see any cops."

"Good. I've had enough cops to last me for the rest of my life."

Rafael turned to him. "I guess you've had a hard time back in New York, huh?"

"You might say that. How can it be different out here?"

"It's a matter of trust, Vincent. These people trust me and I trust them. I grew up with them, just like you grew up with your Tunnel friends."

"But what if there's a stranger or newcomer in town, skiers? Climbers? Don't they ever make trouble for you?"

"Sometimes, but this is my home, so I deal with it until the problem passes."

"How? Where is there to hide out? It's all so exposed?"

"Vincent." Rafael laid a hand on his shoulder. "Come out here a minute, come on."

With the persuasion that Rafael was particularly adept at, Vincent allowed himself to be lured away from the relative safety of the confines of the truck.

"Look around you. Look at the serene forests, look at the mountain range you were so beautifully contemplating earlier. It is the very exposure of this place that we can find solace, and escape if necessary. We can run faster and move more stealthily than our pursuers, we can burrow deeper into this unforgiving landscape and beg its forgiveness, we can face mountain lions and grizzly bears without fear. Heck, I used to ward off grizzlies where they'd wander down to my neighbour's farms when I was a kid. That's why these folks are all so indebted to me now. Come on, they'll love to meet you."

Vincent pulled his hat down further over his ears and meekly followed. This was one of those occasions when he could have done with with cape and hood and a dark night to do with it.

"Why, it's the prodigal brother!" exclaimed the scarf-clad lady behind the counter of the general store. "And what a fine young man you are!"

Vincent felt his facial muscles relax. One thing was certain. Out here they definitely hadn't been tainted by the rest of the world. They carried the purchases to the pickup and were met by several men, women and children from neighbouring ranches en-route.

"Hold on until we get these sacks out of our arms." Rafael fought off the youngsters with good humour.

"This here's your Uncle Vincent - if he doesn't mind being called that?"

"Not at all." Their enthusiasm and genuine curiosity warmed him, not the sort of curiosity which ignited fear and flight, but the sort which simply wanted to know where he'd lived all these years and how long was he going to stay.

It was a question which had been keeping him awake at night for a week or so now. Rafael had already said that he could stay as long as he liked. And Rafael's parents had made it more than clear that they wished he and Catherine and Jacob would move here permanently. They would be safe and would be welcomed into the community as part of the ever-extending Toole family. There would be work on the ranch, and a healthy and vibrant atmosphere for bringing up children. Healthier and more stimulating than the Tunnels? Was there really any question? But what of Father and the others? The people he knew and loved and trusted, who loved and trusted him.

"That is it." He had not realized he had spoken out loud, until Catherine, lifting herself up beside him in bed, asked him what was. He turned to look at her, at her beautiful face, her loving eyes, and for the briefest of moments wondered why she was with him. He'd forgotten what she'd asked.

"You said 'that is it'," she repeated softly. "What is?"

Her night-dress had slipped off her shoulder. Its bare vulnerability caused him to reach out and stroke her smooth skin.

"Trust," he said. Her eyes were darkened by the shadows of dawn in the room, but he knew that they never once left his face, Catherine's attention was on him completely, never wandering. Her total love of him, her dedication, would always bewilder him. He would never quite comprehend it, although he believed it. He fixed the shoulder of her night-dress for her, then put his arm around her and pulled her to him, so that they leaned back together in unison against the old walnut headboard.

"Before we came here, you asked me to attend a birthday party with your friends."

"I shouldn't have."

"You said they would accept me because you had chosen me. I was afraid, Catherine, I couldn't trust. Then we came here and everybody accepted me on account of Rafael. He has the same relationship with these people as I enjoy with everybody Below. It is because of trust, on all sides, and understanding. There is no reason why others cannot be part of that same trust."

"My friends?"

"I am not without fear, Catherine, but I have learned in this vast place what every other place was too small to teach me."

Catherine twisted in his arms until she faced him. "Tell me."

"That trust is the essence of freedom."

He experienced the full extent of that freedom later that morning, when he took Jacob down to the corral and put him up on Cowcatcher, then hauled himself up behind his young son and rode out into the developing sunrise.

Jacob gurgled and hiccuped, thoroughly enjoying himself. This was the life his son should lead, under the sun and the wide skies, the earth beneath his feet and not above his head. This was the life Catherine deserved: it was the only life fit to meet the passion which fired through her veins and which she had kept dampered down for his sake for far too long. Now he had the chance to provide for the yearning of her soul, he would not walk away without doing so.

And as for himself? He reined in the horse, then relaxed his hand and his body while the animal stood still as Rafael had taught him. Jacob leaned back against him, turning his little head of blond curls and grasping handfuls of air with his fist.

"Da-da."

Vincent breathed deeply of all that was peace and satisfaction, of all that was fresh and clear and clean and wholesome, of mountain and sky and a horizon so far, yet so vividly close that he could reach out his finger and touch its shimmering indigo line.

Another finger joined his there and he turned and saw Catherine, her horse beside him. Their fingers touched and entwined as together they gazed toward the horizon that would become their new destiny. Then Catherine brought their hands back to rest between them, still held together. Her upturned face looked sad.

"What is it, Catherine?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. It's all so perfect, yet ... I worry ... that you could not be happy here. The Tunnels were your home for so long."

"Yes, they were. And we will go back, someday, and meet your friends, I promise. But fate has brought us to this new place. To leave it now would be to deny our fate, to forsake what has been ordained. Only by accepting graciously this truly wonderful gift, can we hope to live in peace."

Her face was thoughtful while she pondered this, then she nodded, smiled gently and gave one of the little nods that she was apt to perform, which he knew and loved so well.

"Let's go," he said, "we should be just about be in time for some Montana pancakes."

And as they rode down the hill toward the homestead, the bright orange circle, rising somewhat higher, illuminated their passage.

".....is to possess it forever....."

END of the trilogy