

Silhouette of Hope

by Karen T Bird

Chapter One: 'A Friend In Need'

"Morning, Miss Chandler," called Roger, as Catherine approached the reception desk.

"Morning, Roger, any mail?"

"Only the usual ... Oh and this one which arrived late last night."

Catherine looked at the medium-sized lilac envelope, which had a floral motif in the bottom left hand corner. She did not recognise the writing and knew that she did not have enough time to stop and examine it. She had been getting to the office later and later, with only two possible reasons why. The first and most unlikely was that her alarm was not working. The second, which was probably the most realistic (although she hated to admit it), was that she was not hearing it. It seemed she was getting very tired of late. It was true that Joe had told her, even begged her, to take the leave that she had left over from the previous year, but the time just never seemed right. She had a lot of work on at the moment, all of which was equally important. *Anyway*, she thought. *I'll wait until the good weather gets here* - even though it was already 70 F degrees in the shade.

She tossed the letter into her bag, along with the others that she recognised as being bills. Smiling, she left Roger with her usual 'see you later' and made an elegant exit through the revolving door at the front of the building.

When she arrived at the office, she was surprised to see Joe sitting on her desk, looking at his watch.

"You just made it, Radcliffe, I was about to send out the search party." (He could be extremely sarcastic sometimes.)

"Thanks for the concern, Joe, but it's like I said yesterday, my alarm has broken." Catherine was very good at 'expanding the truth' but she need not have bothered. She had overslept and Joe knew it. She sometimes wondered if she could keep anything from him. She paused and then smiled to herself, realising the stupidity of that last thought. Joe looked puzzled.

"Okay, what's the joke?"

"Nothing, I just love it when you're angry."

Poor old Joe had a tendency to blush at the slightest thing and although she knew she shouldn't, Catherine sometimes played on this. And anyway, he was cute when he was angry.

He put the seven or eight files that he had in his arms on her desk, looked at his watch, shook his head and went back into his office. Catherine felt a little guilty, hoping that she had not upset him. She made a mental note to make it up to him later on in the day.

Three down, four to go. She had been looking at these files for the past two hours and she needed a break. She strolled over to the coffee machine; it did not produce the best coffee in the world, but it would have to do. As she sat back down at her desk she wondered what Vincent was doing at that precise moment. Reading to the children? Helping Mouse to make those new bookshelves that Father kept thinking about? Or perhaps, he was looking for places to expand their secret world. He could be right below her. Before she had a chance to put pen to paper, she remembered the letter, it had gone clean out of her mind.

She dug down deep into her bag (which seemed to contain everything but the kitchen sink) and

rooted out the letter. The handwriting was beginning to look a little familiar, but she still couldn't quite put her finger on it. There was only one way to find out, so she opened the envelope and turned to the last page. It read:

Hope to see you soon,

Sal

Of course! It was from Sal. Sally Wesner had been one of Catherine's closest friends at Radcliffe. They did not see each other very often now, but kept in touch with the odd phone call. Catherine had never received a letter from Sal before, which explained why she did not recognise the handwriting. She flicked back to the front page and began reading.

Dear Cathy,

I imagine you're quite surprised that I'm writing to you. Well it's not with good news I'm afraid, quite the opposite in fact. You may remember that I got married a few months ago, to Steve. He died a couple of weeks ago, he was involved in a freak car accident. I was not there, but they tell me he felt no pain.

I know I should have phoned sooner, but I can't really bring myself to talk about it.

I haven't spoken to anyone since it happened - well not face to face. The funeral was quiet, he did not know many people.

I feel as if I'm cracking up, I don't go out and the truth is I'm finding it really hard to cope. I don't know what to do. Could you come down? Just for a few days. I'd really appreciate it.

Hope to see you soon,

Sal

Catherine was shocked. She had never known Sal to be so frank or mixed up. She was always so headstrong, so sure. Although they didn't see each other very often now, they were still close friends. It was obvious that Sal needed someone, someone that she could trust.

Catherine was going to make sure that she was there for Sal, just as Vincent was there for her, when her own father died.

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Chapter Two: 'A Parting Gift'

The tapping on the window grew louder. Catherine was just waking up, she must have dozed off - again. She really must try to get to bed earlier, she couldn't just keep falling asleep like this.

She ran to her balcony window, just in time to see Vincent beginning to descend over the wall.

She called out to him and he turned, pulling himself back onto the balcony until he was standing in front of her.

"I'm sorry," she said with a guilty grin. "I dozed off and didn't hear you."

"You do look tired. You should sleep more often."

Vincent meant well, but he didn't realise that when you worked at the District Attorney's Office, you could end up working some very unsociable hours.

"Your note sounded important, is something wrong?"

"Yes, but not with me."

"Then whom?"

"I have a friend - Sal - she does not live too far away from here. She has just lost her husband in a car accident. I received this letter today." Catherine handed Vincent the letter.

He stood quietly and read it, taking in every sentence, every word. When he had finished he looked up and turned to her.

"You must go to her."

She was relieved that Vincent understood, but then he knew her heart so how could he not understand?

She explained to him how she had met Sal and how they had been through college together.

Vincent, as always, stood silently and listened. That was one of the qualities that she loved so dearly about him. She could talk, for hours sometimes, about anything and he would listen. Never interrupting, never losing interest. He truly had the patience of a saint.

"I'll go at the weekend, that will give me time to pack. I've got some time owed to me at work, Joe has been pestering me to take it."

"Only because he cares."

"Yes, he has a kind heart. I'll come Below on Friday before I go."

They embraced and Vincent left, a shadow leaving, into the night.

Catherine made an extra special effort to be in work on time the following morning, she wanted Joe to be in an approachable mood when she told him she was going away.

"Have you got a minute, Joe?"

"Sure, come on in."

"I hope I didn't upset you yesterday, you know I didn't mean it."

"Upset? Me? Course not, you know that I can take a joke, once in a while."

"Good, because I have a favour to ask."

Joe's expression changed, as if to say, 'Oh no, what next!'

"You know that you keep on at me to take that leave, well I've decided to take your advice."

"Great, when do you want to go?"

"I was thinking about tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!"

"I know it's short notice but it is important. A friend needs some help."

Joe looked at her, she was always talking about these friends, but how come he never got to meet any of them? Jenny was the only one he knew.

"Okay Radcliffe, you win. How long?"

Cathy dare not ask.

"Two weeks?"

"Okay, just make sure that when you get back, you are here both in body and mind, no more late entrances."

Cathy went back to her desk and got down to work. She had a few things that she wanted to clear up before she locked her desk for two weeks.

By the time she got home that night, she was already tired, but had decided that she would get packed and ready to go. As she packed everything neatly folded into her case, she realised that she did need a holiday and visiting Sal was the nearest thing she was going to get to one this year.

When she had finished, she sank into her bed, surprised at how long it had taken her to throw a few things together in a case. Of course Catherine could never just 'throw things together'. They had to be positioned in the right place to get the maximum space from the case. Although she did not realise it, Catherine was a perfectionist.

As she began to drift into sleep she remembered her alarm clock, she hadn't turned it on. She rolled over and flicked the little switch at the side of the clock. She wanted to spend most of the following day down Below. Two weeks was a long time, too long perhaps. She would miss Vincent terribly. She decided that she would make it up to him and herself when she got back. She wanted to spend more time with her 'family', but sometimes it just was not possible.

When she woke, the morning sun was shining through the window, warming her face. It was going to be a beautiful day. In her mind, she wished that she could take a piece of sun to Vincent, so that it could warm his face too. She chuckled to herself. Mouse had probably explored the possibility of such a task - and if he could not succeed, then it simply could not be done.

She got ready and left her apartment, eager to see Vincent. She had put all of her things together and would collect them later in the evening. As she made her way through the tunnels towards Vincent's chamber, she started thinking to herself. Only a relatively short time ago, she would get lost when trying to find her way through the maze of subways. On more than one occasion, she'd had to be 'rescued' by Pascal or Mouse. And yet now she knew them like the back of her hand.

Vincent was waiting for her, he had felt her presence and was on his way to meet her. They walked arm in arm, close to each other, in silence, until Vincent spoke.

"You are quiet, do you have second thoughts about going?"

"Not really second thoughts. I guess I'm just a little nervous. It has been a couple of years since we last saw each other."

"And you are worried that you will find nothing to say?"

"Yes."

Vincent always understood, no matter what, he always knew how she was feeling. Catherine could also feel what Vincent was thinking and at that moment she felt that all was not well with him. She wanted to ask him, find out what was wrong, but sometimes, even now, he found it hard to open up to her.

"Vincent."

He stopped and turned slowly to face her, as if he knew what she was going to say.

"Is something wrong?"

"It is nothing, please do not worry yourself."

"Tell me, Vincent, please?"

He took her hand and sighed. "Two weeks is a very long time, I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too, but she does need me."

"I know."

They stood hand in hand. There was so much that both of them wanted to say to each other, but didn't know how. The time they spent together was so limited, but in a funny sort of way that made every moment seem even more precious. Catherine wondered if they would ever be together, it was the one thing that made her life worthwhile. Vincent broke the awkward silence.

"Come, there is a new chamber that I would like you to see, Father believes that it will make an excellent guest chamber."

Vincent led the way. It gave him a great pleasure to lead Catherine around the new chambers. He took such a sense of pride in his work and the work of the others. That was something that Catherine hardly ever saw Above; another of the great differences between their two worlds and the people who lived in them.

When they reached the chamber, Catherine was surprised at what she saw. She had expected it to be empty and bare, but it was filled with old antique furniture - a bookcase, a table dresser and a wonderful four poster bed, covered with a silk and lace quilt. It was the most beautiful room she had ever seen. There were ornaments all around, some of which she recognised as coming from Vincent's own chamber.

While Catherine was admiring the room, she had not noticed as Father, Mary, Pascal, Mouse and some of the children had entered through the doorway. When she turned, she was shocked to see them all there. Father came forward and joined Vincent at Catherine's side.

"Catherine," he said, in his typical English manner. "As Vincent has probably told you, this is to be our new guest chamber."

"Yes, it's wonderful."

"It is to be our special guest chamber."

Catherine turned, she was puzzled by his words. What did he mean?

He continued. "We have all agreed that as you are such a dear part of our family, we would like this to be your chamber when you visit us. You are our special guest, Catherine."

She could hardly hold back the tears of joy; it was magical. She was truly touched. Father and the others left.

Catherine spent the rest of the day with Vincent in her chamber. They talked and read poetry together. The last poem that they read was Blake's *To the Evening Star*, Catherine's favourite piece of poetry. She felt like she had never felt before; safe, calm and at peace with the world. She was snuggled close to Vincent as he read and found it difficult to drag herself away from him when it was time to leave.

"Thank you, Vincent."

He stood up and looked down at her. "It was our pleasure. We wanted you to feel that you really are part of our world."

"I do."

He helped her to her feet. Her face was as close to his as it possibly could be without touching. Then Catherine did something that she had only ever done once before, in all the time that she had known Vincent. She gently stroked his face with her hand and kissed him tenderly on the lips.

"I'll be back soon and then I'll be spending a lot more time in my chamber."

Vincent walked with her back to the Central Park entrance where they embraced and said good bye. Catherine was already wishing that she didn't have to go.

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Chapter Three: Like Old Times

By the time Catherine got back to her apartment it was late afternoon. She loaded her things into the car and set off, anxious to be there before it got dark. It was not really a long journey, about two

hours or so, but it was an area that she didn't know very well. Sal lived in a large house that was situated on a massive area of land; it was definitely not the perfect place to get lost.

She was still apprehensive about seeing Sal, but was also looking forward to the break. She loved the countryside, all that open space and fresh air; it was so different to the city. As she drove, she listened to her stereo. It was playing one of her many classical tapes; she found that they helped her to unwind.

She pulled into the long driveway that led up to the house. It was a beautiful place - there were trees and hedges everywhere. On the right there was a paddock with four horses in it. Catherine loved horses. She hoped she would get a chance to ride before she left.

She pulled in by the house, took a couple of deep breaths and got out of the car. She got her bag and case from the trunk and as she turned she saw Sal coming down the steps to greet her. She looked pale and drawn, but smiled anyway.

"I'm so glad you could come."

"How are you?"

"Better, but still not very good."

Sal took Catherine's bag and they both walked into the house. It was magnificent. Everything was designed for comfort and luxury. Catherine remembered that Steve had been an interior designer; he had certainly done wonders for this house, it was like a mansion.

"You like the house?"

"Yes, it's wonderful. Did it take long to finish?"

"Not really, but then Steve was working on it all the time, right up ..."

Sal did not finish her sentence, but Catherine knew what she was going to say. She tried to change the subject.

"Well, what have you got lined up for me then? Is there anything that you want to do while I'm, here? Anything you want to get sorted out?"

"No, I've cleared up all of Steve's personal affairs - well almost. There is nothing urgent." Sal gave a small smile. "Come on, I'll show you your room..."

They walked up the winding staircase. It had a mahogany handrail which was almost too perfect to touch. They came to her room; it was lovely. It was not as modern as her own apartment, more of a Victorian style of room. It reminded her of Vincent's parting gift to her, but of course it wasn't the same. Nothing would ever compare to her chamber, not even this lovely room.

"I've got some food ready downstairs, if you're hungry."

"Yes, starving - I haven't eaten for ages."

As they sat at the large table in silence, Catherine tried desperately to think of something to break up the atmosphere a little.

"I see you have four beautiful horses. Do you like riding?"

"Yes, I love it, I find it very relaxing. There is so much open land here, when I'm out riding I feel as if I'm the only person on earth."

"Well in that case, we'll have to saddle up sometime and go for a long ride."

"You like riding too?"

"Yes, unfortunately the city is not the best place to ride, there are few open spaces and I do not have much time these days."

"We will ride tomorrow. I have the perfect horse for you, her name is Beauty; she is a magnificent

beast."

"Great, I look forward to it."

They finished their meal; it was dark by now and Catherine was feeling a little tired.

"Would you mind if I went up now? I'm starting to feel tired."

"No, go ahead. You must have had a long day. I'll see you in the morning."

Catherine walked up the stairs and into her room. It was a comfortable room but she didn't think that she would sleep well in it. She missed Vincent and felt restless. She got changed into her nightgown and climbed into the massive bed, then took her writing case from the cabinet at the side of the bed and began writing.

Dearest Vincent,

I arrived a couple of hours ago. Sal seems to be bearing up, but she is still not herself. Tomorrow we go riding. There is so much open space here, nature is just left alone to do her work. You would love it here.

Thinking of you always,

Catherine.

She folded the small note and put it into the envelope. It was addressed to another of the helpers; they would take it down to Vincent. She turned off the light and closed her eyes, falling asleep almost instantly.

There was no alarm to wake Catherine, so she did not get up until about ten o'clock. She felt a lot better; the sleep had obviously done her some good. She got ready and changed and went downstairs, glancing as she passed the kitchen window and spotting Sal outside, feeding the horses. They were truly magnificent beasts, having a certain noble quality. Perhaps that was why Catherine found them so attractive.

She made herself some breakfast (well, Sal did tell her to make herself at home!). It was only something light as she was not very hungry. Sal came back into the house.

"Hi, did you sleep well?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Good. I've fed the horses and I'm ready to go when you are."

"Fine, but I'm afraid I haven't got any of my gear with me."

"That's okay, I've got some spare things - you can borrow them if you like."

"Thanks. I'll get changed and we can be off."

It seemed to Catherine that the atmosphere between them was a little easier now that they were getting to know each other again. It had been difficult at first, but then no one said that it was going to be easy. Sal was still very sad, but trying to cope. Cathy saw part of the fighter coming through that she remembered; the old Sal that she once knew.

It was about eleven o'clock by the time they were both ready. The sun was shining and it was quite warm, so Sal suggested that they take a couple of drinks along, in case it became too unbearable. Catherine was looking forward to this. She really did love riding and it was a shame that she did not get to do so more often. She had been about nine years old when she had ridden her first horse. His name had been Silver and he had been very fast; so fast in fact that Catherine had slipped off the saddle. She was not badly hurt; suffered just a few scratches and a bruised ego. She didn't want to get back on; she told herself that she did not want to ride the horse anyway (which was not true). It

had been her Father who had told her not to be afraid and explained that it was no one's fault that she had fallen off and that she should not blame Silver. She should try again until she succeeded. Catherine would always remember her father's words. *When we stop trying and give in, we automatically lose.* She often thought of her father and remembered many of his words of wisdom.

"Cathy!" Catherine turned. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"That's okay, I was miles away - in a different world."

"Shall we go, the horses are getting restless."

They went outside and Sal introduced Catherine to Beauty. She was jet black and had a long flowing mane and her coat shone in the sun. She was quite a tall horse and when Catherine first saw her she wondered if she would be able to ride her properly, but she need not have worried. She mounted up and at once felt the great sense of solitude that Sal had talked about. Although they were the only two people around for miles, she didn't feel lonely, just very relaxed.

Sal led the way, obviously knowing where she was heading. As they rode, they reminisced about the past, especially about their days at Radcliffe. As she remembered, it seemed to Catherine that those days were very far behind her - in another life, maybe. It was true that they'd had some good times, some of which she would never forget, but she still thought of herself as a different person then, with a completely different nature and way of life.

Suddenly, there were two almighty bangs, like shots from a gun. Both horses bolted quite violently. Catherine struggled to keep control of Beauty; it took all of her riding experience, such as it was, for Beauty was kicking and jumping every way that she could. Catherine hung on for dear life, remembering her experience with Silver and what her father had said.

"It's okay, Beauty, come on, calm down, no one is going to hurt you."

To her amazement, it seemed to work. Beauty gradually stopped kicking until she was standing relatively still. Catherine jumped off and looked around for Sal but she was nowhere to be seen. She mounted again, spotting some tracks leading off in the direction they had just come from and rode quite fast, beginning to panic. There was a sharp bend in the track and as she cornered it she spotted Sal's horse, trotting around going nowhere. Her heart was beating fast. Where was Sal?

She looked round and round and there, just partially visible, saw something on the ground, just behind a large evergreen. She dare not look, but knew she had to. It was Sal. She was lying in a funny position.

Catherine felt for a pulse, it was faint but there. She did not have time to stop and think, instinct took over. She hurriedly took her jacket off, knowing she must try to keep Sal warm. She tore the sleeve of her shirt and ripped a strip off, to make into a bandage which she tied around Sal's arm as tight as she could, to try to stop the bleeding. Catherine knew that she had to get help, which meant she would have to leave Sal. She climbed onto Beauty, glanced down at her friend and set off at a gallop.

"Come on girl, ride like the wind."

Catherine had never ridden this fast before. Had it been under different circumstances it would have been an exhilarating experience, but she knew she must hurry, there was not a moment to lose.

As she approached the house she literally threw herself off Beauty and raced up the steps into the house. The phone! Where was it? She glanced around the room and there it was, on a table near the back door. She picked up the receiver and dialled the emergency number.

"Ambulance, please." She gave the address of the house and a rough guide to where it was. She thought this would be better, then she could lead them to Sal, on Beauty.

It seemed like hours before she heard the wailing of an approaching ambulance siren. It had only been about seven minutes, but it was as if everything was happening in slow motion, like on a TV show. Catherine jumped on Beauty yet again and led the way. The track was quite uneven, so she had to slow down a little so as not to lose the ambulance. When they got to where Sal was,

Catherine half-wished that she would find her sitting there smiling, saying, 'What's all the fuss about?' Of course she knew that this could not be and she was right.

The paramedics team set to work straight away. They put a collar around her neck and stopped the bleeding from her arm.

"Hey, Miss!" one of them shouted. "What happened?"

"I don't know, she must have fallen."

The paramedic looked at her sympathetically. "The best thing you can do is go back to the house, get your car and meet us at the hospital. You can't do anything for her here."

Catherine knew that he was right, but how could she leave her? Sal was her friend. She pulled herself together and rode Beauty back to the house. They had not said what was wrong with Sal, but Catherine knew that it was serious. The way her body was twisted, it didn't look good.

She felt like a nervous wreck but she knew that she had to be strong both for herself and for Sal. She was going to need a friend - if she survived.

* * *

Chapter Four: 'Don't Give Up'

By the time Catherine got to the hospital, the ambulance had already arrived. It took her a fair time to get there because she wasn't familiar with the area. She approached the reception desk.

"Excuse me."

"Yes dear, can I help you?"

"A friend of mine has been brought in by ambulance, Sally Wesner?"

"Hang on, I'll see if someone can come and see you." She picked up the phone and turned her back on Catherine, so that she could not hear what she was saying. Catherine did not really want to know anyway. "If you take a seat dear, someone will be along to see you in a moment."

"Thank you." Catherine studied the receptionist as she sat down. She looked middle-aged and had a lovely smile. People needed someone friendly to speak to when they came into a place like this. She hated hospitals - especially now. It brought back painful memories of when her father had died.

"Hello, I'm Dr Harris."

"I'm Catherine Chandler. Is there any news? Will she be all right?"

"Your friend has had a very serious accident, is there anything you can tell us? How did she fall?"

"No, not really, I wasn't there in time. We were riding and there were two loud shots. My horse bolted, I had trouble keeping control. Sal's mount must have galloped off."

"Whatever happened, she is in quite a bad way."

"Tell me."

"Well of course, we can't be sure."

"Just tell me the truth, I need to know."

"Mrs Wesner has lost a lot of blood from the injury to her arm; we have given her a transfusion."

"Is there anything else?"

The doctor looked at her, she could tell that he was keeping something back.

"Please tell me, I have to know."

"It seems that when Mrs Wesner fell she displaced a disc in her back, which is now pressing on her spine."

"What does that mean?"

"If and when she moves, she will be in extreme pain. Of course we can control this with pain-killers."

"Is there a long-term solution?"

"Well, there are two possibilities. The first is that we keep up with the drugs. Mrs Wesner will hardly be able to move, in fact she may be completely paralysed. You see, if she moves from the position she is in now, it may move the disc and cause even more pain and damage."

"What is the other possibility?"

"There is a chance that if we operate, we may be able to slip the disc back into its correct position. But I'm afraid that there is only a fifty percent chance of success. If something happens, one wrong move, it could mean definite permanent damage, or even death. Mrs Wesner would have to be made very aware of this."

Catherine didn't know what to say. She was shocked; not realising that it was quite that serious. It would be better for Sal if she could have the operation.

"Who could perform this surgery?"

"I would be prepared to perform the operation myself, as long as I had Mrs Wesner's consent."

Catherine could not think of any reason why Sal would not agree to the operation, she had always been a fighter. "Is she conscious? Can I see her?"

"Yes, she should be awake by now. If you come with me I'll show you where she is."

"Wait!" Catherine stopped the doctor, who turned in surprise. "Does she know anything about the operation?"

"No, I have not mentioned it."

"Can I tell her?"

"It's up to you. I can tell her if you wish."

"No, I think it is better if it comes from me, we have been friends for a long time."

"Very well."

The doctor led the way down the long corridor. There were rooms on either side and yet it was remarkably quiet. They turned the corner and stopped outside room 26.

"That's where she is. She will probably still be quite out of it, the drugs will only just be wearing off."

"Thank you." She quietly opened the door and crept in. There seemed to be monitors everywhere, all connected up to Sal. Catherine pulled up a chair and sat down next to the bed. Even now she was still shaking. What would she say to her? 'How are you', seemed a little inappropriate at a time like this.

Sal stirred and tried to move. The collar around her neck made this difficult and Catherine saw a wince of pain on her face. She opened her eyes. "Cathy?"

"I'm here." She took her hand and squeezed it.

"What happened? It hurts when I move."

Catherine felt a lump in her throat, she tried to swallow but it wouldn't go. "You had a fall from a horse. We were out riding, remember? There were shots and the horses bolted."

"Where am I?"

"You're in a hospital, in good hands."

There was a terrible silence, until Sal finally spoke. "Tell me, Cathy, the truth. What's wrong with me?" Catherine wanted to turn, wanted to run, but she knew that she had to face Sal and tell her the truth. "I've spoken to Dr Harris who has examined your injuries. He says that when you fell you put a disc out of place in your back and now it is pressing on your spine."

"So what does that mean?"

Catherine did not know what to say. How do you tell someone that they may never walk or even be able to move again? "Are you in pain, Sal?"

"Very much so, I can't move without it hurting."

"Well, Dr Harris says that there are two options open to you. The first is that they can give you drugs to take some of the pain away, but you still won't be able to move properly." She waited for a response from Sal, but there was none. She carried on. "The second is an operation. They can try to put the disc back into place. It would be a very serious operation, with a fifty percent chance of success."

"Great. So with or without the operation I have no life. I can stay like this or die on the operating table. Great choice!"

The lump in Catherine's throat grew larger and her eyes began to sting with tears. "Sal, the doctor says that he would be prepared to perform the operation with your consent."

"Well, I'm afraid he doesn't have it."

"What! Why not?" Catherine could not believe what she was hearing. Surely she didn't mean it?

"What life have I got to look forward to, Cathy? My husband was murdered and now they want me. If I live they will keep coming, keep trying, they will never leave me in peace. I might as well die now and save everyone the trouble."

Cathy did not have a clue as to what Sal was talking about. What did she mean by murdered?

"Wait Sal, what do you mean? I thought Steve was killed in a car accident. Are you saying that it was not an accident at all?"

"You might as well know the truth. When Steve and I moved here and bought the house, we paid the full price. Someone had offered two thousand dollars less, but we liked it so much, we thought it worth the extra." She paused for a moment and tried to move a little. She was obviously in pain.

"Are you all right, should I get a nurse?"

"No, it's okay. I'll get used to it. Anyway, these people that we had outbid, it turned out that they were land developers. They kept hassling us but we didn't want to sell - this was our dream house. They kept on pestering and when Steve was killed I knew that they had got to him."

"Do you have any proof? We can put them away."

"Someone did see it, they said that a car kept ramming into Steve's and then finally ran him off the road."

"Where are they? Will they testify?"

"It's no good. They won't and I don't expect them to."

"There has to be some way ..."

"No! I have nothing to live for and I will not have the operation."

"Sal, you're tired, you don't know what you are saying. You have so much to live for. If you have the operation there is a chance that you will make a full recovery."

"Fifty percent, some chance!"

"But you can't give up hope, that is not the Sal Wesner that I knew."

"Look, people change; I've changed. I just don't care anymore."

"Don't say that."

"Cathy, stop! It's probably better if you go. Go back to New York and forget about me. Sooner or later I'll get fed up enough and decide to do something about my life - like end it. Now just go, please."

"But ..."

"Go and don't come back!"

She left the room, tears streaming down her face. How could this happen to someone that she cared so dearly for? And how could Sal say the things that she did, she seemed to have lost all hope. It was clear that she would not listen to anything that Cathy had to say. There must be something that she could do, especially about the land developers. But to do so she would have to go back to New York and check from there, as not to arouse suspicion.

She left the house, deciding to go back that night. She found it hard to leave, she kept thinking of Sal and all that she had said. Dr Harris had said that they would keep Sal in for at least the next fortnight, until her arm started to heal and then they would make a decision as to what to do next. She drove in silence. It was dark and she had to concentrate hard so that she didn't get lost.

When she got to her apartment she automatically went to the balcony. To her surprise, Vincent was not there. She decided to go Below tomorrow and see him, tell him what had happened.

She was exhausted and flaked out on the bed, not even bothering to change into her nightgown. As she closed her eyes she began to think. Today had been one of the worst days of her life!

* * *

Chapter Five: 'A Favour To Cherish'

It was quite early when Catherine woke. It was good to be back in her own apartment. She thought about the events of yesterday; there had to be something that she could do. There was no telling what Sal would do to herself if she regained any of her strength. It seemed she had lost the will to live. Catherine knew she had the power to do something about the trouble with the land developers, but how could she actually help Sal? Her thoughts switched to Vincent. If only Sal could meet him, see the hardships that he had overcome. Catherine knew that it was not possible, but allowed herself to dream.

She got changed and left her apartment. As it was daylight, she would use the basement entrance deciding it was better to be safe than sorry. She climbed down the steps, expecting to see Vincent there waiting for her, but he wasn't. A flow of panic overtook her as she remembered that he had not been at the balcony the previous night. Where could he be? Was he all right?

She rushed through the tunnels to his chamber, nearly stumbling on the way. She entered but he was not there. Catherine looked around. His cloak was thrown recklessly over a chair. She breathed a sigh of relief; somehow seeing his cloak made it better. She had not been there very long when she heard someone approaching. Vincent turned the corner and came over and sat next to her.

"It's good to see you, Catherine. I knew that you had returned."

"But you didn't come. I expected to see you last night."

"I felt your return, I was coming to you but suddenly I felt a great sorrow in your heart and a tiredness. I thought it best to let you rest."

"Yes, I was tired; still am, really, but I had to see you."

"What troubles you, Catherine? What makes your heart so sad?"

"So much has happened, I don't know where to start."

"At the beginning, where we always start."

Catherine went on to explain about the accident and Sal's injuries and the things she had said. It took quite a while to explain it all.

"So this operation, it can really work?"

"I don't know, Vincent. The doctor seems to think so. But Sal will not listen, she says that she would rather die straight away."

"It seems that she has lost all hope, she believes that she has nothing to live for. Come, we will talk to Father and ask his medical advice."

"Ah, Vincent. Come in. Catherine? I thought you had gone away for a while, is there something wrong?"

Vincent and Catherine both went on to explain what had happened and why Catherine had returned so soon. Father listened carefully until they had both finished and then spoke.

"And you would like my medical opinion as to whether your friend should have this operation or not. Well of course, the final decision would have to be hers and it is quite a big decision to make, but in my medical opinion I think that she should agree to have the operation. There is a risk and I'm sure that Vincent has told you that I am not one to take unnecessary risks, but in this case I do not think your friend has any other option."

"But she has already decided and nothing that I could say would change her mind."

They all sat in silence, each one trying to think of something constructive to say. Vincent suddenly stood up and turned to Father.

"Father, would it be possible to call a meeting of the council and then one with the children?"

"Yes of course, but why?"

"I have an idea, but I would like to discuss it with everyone, including you, Catherine. I'll tell Pascal to put the word out on the pipes."

It was later on in the day when the council were gathered. Father, Vincent, Mary, Pascal, William and Winslow and Mouse had somehow crept into the chamber. He said that it was 'good to listen and learn' and no one could argue with him. Vincent began.

"Thank you all for coming at such short notice. You will no doubt all know by now why I have called this meeting, but for those of you who don't, I will explain. Catherine has a friend who is very ill in hospital, in the world Above. She has had a bad accident and cannot move at the moment. There is an operation that can be performed, but there is a risk involved and she does not want to take that risk. When Catherine last spoke with her, she said that she would rather die now, because she feels that the world has nothing to offer her. She has lost her spirit and her hope. She is young and has so much to live for, but she cannot see that at the moment."

Vincent paused and Catherine continued.

"I tried to talk to her but she would not listen. The doctors said that if she has the operation and it works, then there is a chance that she will make a full recovery and lead a normal life again. But she did not want to hear any words of mine. She sent me away. Right now she is alone and very frightened."

Vincent spoke out once again. "I feel that there is so much that I can do for this woman. If I was to see her, speak with her, encourage her. I am sure that I could help her."

Catherine looked at Vincent, she could not believe what she was hearing. He actually wanted to go and see her? It was impossible. What if someone should see him?

"I know that many of you will think that this is not possible and should not even be considered, but I do not agree. There is a chance that I can help this woman and it must not be ignored. That is why I have called this meeting, I would like to know what you are all thinking."

As Vincent was expecting, Father was the first to speak. "This is absurd, do you realise the risk you would be taking?"

"Yes, I do. You said earlier that some risks are worth taking, well I consider this to be one of them. I know what it is, Father, to lose hope, to lose myself. Fortunately for me, Catherine was there, but who is there for this woman? No one."

Catherine felt herself begin to blush (she now knew how Joe felt). Mary was the next to speak.

"Where is this place? How would you get there, Vincent?"

"I am sure that Catherine could obtain a van from somewhere. We would travel at night, as we would have done, before."

Catherine remembered the joy that she had felt in her heart when Vincent had agreed to visit her 'special place'. And the disappointment when they had both realised that it could not be. She turned to him.

"Vincent, are you sure about this, do you really mean it?"

"Yes. Is there anything else that anyone would like to say before I speak with the children?" Again, it was Father who spoke. "Only this, Vincent. Go with courage and for God's sake, be careful."

Vincent went over to him and kissed him on the brow. "I will."

After the meeting with the children (which was quite hard), Catherine went Above and arranged a van. It worried her that Vincent would be stuck in the back, but he had said that it was a small sacrifice to make.

Meanwhile Vincent was in his chamber gathering some things together for the journey. This would be the first time that he had actually travelled in the world Above. He wondered if it would be the last. Father was right, if they ever found him they would kill him, or lock him up and perform experiments on him. He shuddered. It was best not to think of such things.

He knew it was something he had to do, something he wanted to do. He also remembered the pain he had felt when he had to face Catherine and tell her that he could not leave the tunnels. He still did not know what happened. Was it a dream? It could be nothing else, could it? He would always carry the memory with him, to remind him. Father was right, he must be very careful. In the world Above, there were many frightened people, afraid of what they did not know. Not all Topsiders were as kind, gentle and considerate as Catherine and the other Helpers.

As Vincent was collecting his things together, he came across one of his favourite books - *A Tale of Two Cities*. It had been a present from Devin, many, many years ago. He decided to take it with him and packed it away. He was almost ready and it was nearly dark. Not long to go. He had just sat down when Father entered.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes. Catherine should be back soon and then we will be off."

"You don't have to do this, Vincent. You don't have to go."

"I know, Father, but it is something that I feel I have to do. I know what it is to be alone and to be faced with decisions that can change the way you live your life, but I was fortunate enough to have you and everyone else to help me make those decisions and to guide me. This friend feels that she has no one to turn to, to help her. She will not accept help from Catherine, perhaps she knows her

too well. But if I can just go to her and talk to her, maybe it will help. I can only do my best."

"Oh Vincent, what am I going to do with you?"

"Wish me a safe journey and a speedy return"

"Of course."

They embraced and Father left Vincent to be alone for a few minutes before he began to walk through the tunnels to the Central Park entrance, where Catherine was patiently waiting with the van.

* * *

Chapter Six: 'The Longest Journey'

Catherine had not been waiting long when she felt Vincent's approach. Her heart fluttered with disbelief. It felt like a dream. This is what she had wished for from the first moment she had seen him. She got out of the van, making sure no one was about. It was two o'clock in the morning and if people had any sense, they would be tucked up in bed, somewhere warm. She was still careful, she knew from experience that occasionally young lovers would walk through the park, oblivious to the time of night, or even their whereabouts.

She walked through the tunnel to the subway entrance where Vincent was waiting for her. She took the case that he had borrowed from Father and silently carried it to the van, feeling at a loss for words. She didn't know what to say to him. He was risking everything to help someone that he did not even know. She walked back to him and looked into his eyes. They were like pools of deep blue water, shining in the stars. They were beautiful eyes.

"Vincent, are you absolutely sure about this? There is still time to change your mind."

This time it was Vincent's turn to be silent. Without speaking he took Catherine by the arm and led her to the van. "If we do not start on our journey soon, it will be light."

Catherine threw her arms around his neck and gave him a big hug. "Let's go then."

Vincent climbed into the back. The windows were darkened so that no one could see in; there were pillows and blankets that Catherine had supplied, in case it got cold. She got into the front, turned the key and the engine sparked to a start. This was it! There was no turning back now.

She drove off quickly, wanting to get on the open road as soon as possible. She had positioned the rear view mirror in just the right place, so that she could see Vincent at a glance. He didn't look worried, but then he didn't look comfortable. Catherine still had her doubts about the whole thing, but thought if Vincent was prepared to take the risk, the least she could do would be to get him there. She calculated that it would take them about one and a half hours to get there, taking into consideration that there would not be much traffic on the roads at this time of the night. She glanced in her mirror, as if to make sure that he was still there. He was!

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine, do not worry."

"I can put on a tape if you like?"

"That would be nice."

She fiddled around until she had found the one she wanted; one of Beethoven's symphonies.

Keeping one hand on the wheel and one eye on the road, she fumbled to put the tape into the stereo. After a while it clicked in and began playing - it was quite relaxing. It reminded her of the times when they sat just below Central Park and listened to the concerts and recitals up Above. Vincent must have been thinking the same because he suddenly spoke up.

"The music is magical isn't it? One of my favourite pieces."

"Yes, I knew you would like it."

Before she had managed to say anything else, her heart started to beat faster and her eyes opened wide.

"Catherine, what is it?"

She wanted to speak, she wanted to but she couldn't find the words.

"Catherine, tell me, are you ill?"

She did not know what to do, she had expected it to happen, but how could she cope with it? Ignore it? Pretend it wasn't there?

"Please Catherine, what is it?" Vincent was not shouting, but speaking above his usual tone of voice.

Catherine's voice was trembling, she glanced in the mirror. There is a car coming the other way."

Although he knew he shouldn't, Vincent began to smile. He had thought it was something serious. It was serious really, but nothing that they couldn't cope with - together.

"Don't worry, just keep going. Try to act as normal as possible."

Catherine giggled. What was normal? These days she did not really know, her life had changed so much over the past two years. She did not know whether to slow down or speed up, so she stayed at a constant speed. The car approached, headlights on full beam. It was getting nearer and nearer, her heart was beating faster and faster. She could feel the beads of sweat on her forehead. Then in a second it was over. The car passed by with no reaction from the driver, the passenger or the two children in the back. The family were obviously either going or coming back from a holiday as there was luggage piled high on the roof-rack. Catherine breathed a sigh of relief.

Vincent spoke. "Have they passed?"

"Yes, they are quite a way back now."

"Good, I doubt if we will meet many other cars at this time of night."

"I certainly hope not!"

Catherine was correct about the length of the journey, it took just over an hour and a quarter.

It seemed as if they had been driving for much longer; nearer five hours. She drove down the long driveway, past the paddock and round to the back entrance, then carefully backed the van right up to it, so that there was just enough room to open the doors of the van. Like a flash of lightning, Vincent moved from the van into the house.

Catherine quickly followed and locked the door behind herself. She then made a quick check around the house to make sure that all the doors and windows were secure. Everything seemed to be in order, nothing had changed since she was last there. She wanted to show Vincent the bedroom where she had been staying, but was slightly embarrassed and did not know why. She had shared so much with him; her inner most feelings, her worries and her fears; she had told him her deepest secrets that she had never told anyone else before. There was a trust between them. It meant that Catherine could tell him anything, no matter how personal and yet now, she was lost for words. She struggled with her thoughts.

"Can I show you around, Vincent? Would you like to see the house?"

"Maybe later, but I think I will make my way to the hospital; the sooner the better."

"Okay, do you want me to drive?"

"No, I will go on foot. There is a lot of undergrowth which will provide me with cover."

"I'll drive myself and talk to Sal first, explain who you are and why you are here."

"Yes, that would be a good idea. We would not want to ..." Vincent paused, but then continued, "We would not want to frighten her."

"Okay, if you set off now, I'll follow in ten minutes, it shouldn't take long to get there."

Vincent took Catherine by the hand and looked at her. "If something happens and I don't get there, you must leave. Do not try to find me, it would be too dangerous."

"But Vincent, I couldn't leave without you."

"You must promise me that if I do not arrive within the hour, you will go."

"But ... "

"Promise me that you will go!"

"Very well, I promise."

"Good. I will go now and see you later."

"Yes."

Vincent turned and began to walk towards the door. Catherine called. "Vincent!" He turned to face her once more. "Please be careful."

"I will."

With that he turned and disappeared into the night, leaving Catherine to wonder if she would ever see him again.

* * *

Chapter Seven: 'Light At The End Of The Tunnel'

The last ten minutes seemed like a lifetime. Catherine paced up and down, round and round. There was not much carpet left! She kept looking at her watch, then thought about Joe; he was always looking at his watch and making sarcastic comments. He was a good boss as well as a good friend. Not many people would allow an employee two weeks off without even asking 'Why'.

She glanced at her watch again. Right, she thought. Time to go. She ran down the steps and jumped into the van, wondering if Vincent was all right and hoped that it would not be a wasted journey for him.

This time she drove slower, trying to regain her composure. It wasn't that she was nervous - just slightly on edge. What if something should happen? What would she do, what could she do? She decided not to think about it.

It took her about 30 minutes to reach the hospital. She parked the van in a dark corner, nearly out of sight and walked briskly into the front entrance, which looked deserted. She pushed the door open and went over to the receptionist.

"Excuse me, my name is Catherine Chandler, I have a friend here and I wondered if it would be possible to see her?"

"At this time? You must be joking. All the patients are asleep. I'm afraid I cannot allow you to disturb her."

"It is very important. Her name is Sally Wesner and it is vital that I speak with her."

"Look, I've just told you, the answer is no! You'll have to come back tomorrow, during visiting hours."

Needless to say, it was not the same receptionist that Catherine had spoken to previously and the difference was noticeable. Catherine stood and thought about what she could do next. She couldn't

just walk away, not after Vincent and herself had come so far. She had an idea.

"Is Dr Harris in the building?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think that you could possibly find out for me, please?" Catherine was trying desperately not to lose her temper, but the struggle was becoming too much. The receptionist spoke sarcastically.

"It will probably take quite a long while, he could be anywhere."

"Look, I am a very patient person, but you are pushing me too far. Can you find him or not? I must speak to him, it is a matter of great urgency. I thought your job was to help people."

"It is."

"Well what are you waiting for?"

The receptionist turned angrily and went into the room at the back. Catherine felt awful, she had not meant to be so harsh, she would have to apologise later. She was feeling very tired, perhaps that was why she was not herself.

"Miss Chandler?"

Catherine turned, it was Dr Harris. "Thank you for coming, I need to speak to Sal, but your receptionist seems to think this would be impossible."

"Well, we do try to discourage visiting outside the appropriate hours, especially at this hour."

"Yes, I must apologise for the awkward time, but it is very important. It's about the operation, I must try to speak to her again, try to persuade her."

Dr Harris thought for a while. Catherine could see that he did not know what to do. "Very well, but try not to upset her. Perhaps I should be present?"

"No! Thank you. I would rather be alone with her. Could you see that we are not disturbed by anyone?"

"Yes, of course."

Catherine thanked him and made her way to Sal's room. She quickly glanced around before entering. It seemed that Sal was sleeping. Catherine quietly went over to the window and opened it. She peered out, wanting so desperately to see Vincent. She heard a noise and turned slightly. It was Vincent. He smiled and nodded. Catherine knew that it was up to her to explain to Sal, to calm her. How would she take it?

Sal stirred. Catherine went over to her side and sat down. "Sal, wake up, it's Cathy."

She moved slightly, as much as she could in the neck collar.

"Sal, wake up, we have to talk."

Sal opened her eyes and focused them on Catherine. "Cathy? Wha ... What are you doing here?"

"Look there isn't much time, there is someone I want you to meet."

"Who? What's this all about? If you are trying to make me change my mind, you are wasting your time."

"Sal, I want you to meet a friend of mine, his name is Vincent and he is very dear to me. He has come all this way to see you, to try to make you see sense."

"I don't want to see him, there is no point."

"Please Sal, just agree to see him. He has taken a great risk by coming here."

For a moment Sal was very quiet, it seemed as if she was not sure whether to see him or not.

"Please Sal, just speak to him, let him talk to you, let him tell you about his life."

"Okay, but don't expect anything. I've already told you once."

Catherine decided that now was the best time to explain. "Before you meet him, there is something that you should know."

"What?"

"He is ..." Catherine paused and took a deep breath. "He is a little different - physically. Please do not be afraid, he is the kindest person I have ever known."

"We'd better get on with it, then."

Catherine could see that Sal was tired and obviously irritable. She went over to the window and beckoned to Vincent to come in. He pulled the hood over his head to cover his face and climbed through the window. He went to the other side of the bed, so that when he removed the hood, he would be in full view of Sal. He spoke.

"Please do not be afraid, I mean you no harm."

Sal did not look afraid, but a little concerned. Her voice shook when she spoke. "Show me your face, I want to see you."

Very slowly, Vincent removed the hood and let it drop back. Sal did not move and did not say anything. Catherine watched as she looked at Vincent; studied him. His eyes, his mouth and then his hands as he reached down and clasped her hand. Sal spoke.

"So you think that you can make me change my mind, do you?"

"I would like to be given the chance to try."

"Okay, I'm listening."

Vincent sat down, still holding her hand. "You say that you have nothing to live for, but you have so much to live for. You are young and have friends, you have your whole life ahead of you. Your husband's death has obviously caused you great pain, but it is a pain that can heal and will heal, given time. You have to give yourself a chance to grieve. Catherine has told me that you do have the strength to overcome. Life is full of difficult times and promises that never come true. I know from my own experience that darkness and fear can cause great pain, but you must never lose hope, you must always believe that your life can get better. If you do not believe in yourself, then no one else will. My own life depends on my strength, the strength I use to believe in who I am, in what I am. People have difficulty in accepting anything different, anything that they do not know.

"If I were to walk the streets, as you are able to do, then I probably would not be here today. You have your freedom, you are able to walk the streets with your head held high. You must not lose your will to live. If this operation can give you a chance to do something, then you must grasp that chance. Catherine tells me there is a risk, one which you are not prepared to take. If we do not take risks, then we never progress, we do not move on. I believe that you do really want to move on. I believe that you do want to have the operation, but are afraid. Am I right?"

Sal was quiet, she was thinking. "You are right, I am afraid. What if something goes wrong and I am permanently paralysed? I mean, it is hard at the moment, but there is a chance that it is temporary, but with this operation, when it goes wrong ..."

"How do you know that it will go wrong? What makes you think that?"

"Everything goes wrong for me, I never have any good luck."

"Luck does not come into it - you have to believe, you have to want it to work."

"I do, I really do."

"Well then, the rest is up to you."

All this time, Catherine had been sitting patiently, watching and listening. She had also been watching the door. Not many people had passed by, but Catherine was concerned as the time was going very quickly.

"Vincent, it will be light soon, we should be going."

He nodded. "Please Sal, listen to the voice in your heart that believes. You can come through." With that, Vincent slipped through the window and was gone. Sal took a deep breath.

"Well, I guess that means I've changed my mind."

"Oh Sal, that's wonderful, I knew you would. He really is something special, isn't he?"

"Yes he is. Where did you meet him?"

"Oh, we just met along the way."

"You're very lucky to have someone like him to look after you."

"Yes, I am very, very lucky." Catherine squeezed her hand and left. She met Dr Harris on the way out.

"Dr Harris, I've spoken with Sal and she has agreed to have the operation."

"That is excellent news. I should be able to perform it soon."

"Wonderful, thank you so much."

"I should be thanking you, you are obviously very persuasive."

"I have my moments."

Catherine left the hospital and drove back to the house. She felt as if a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Vincent was right, helping people gave the greatest pleasure and joy after all.

* * *

Chapter Eight: This Land Is Mine

The following day Catherine drove back to her apartment. Vincent had said that he would find his own way back during the night. Cathy was dubious and told him so, but once he had made up his mind, there was no stopping him. When she got in, she ran a hot bath, feeling quite pleased with herself, although secretly she knew that it was because of Vincent that Sal had changed her mind. She had a good long soak, letting herself relax and let her mind go. It took her to a place where she and Vincent could be together - always.

When she considered that she had laid in luxury for long enough, she left the bath and got changed into a suit, deciding to go into work and pick Joe's brains about these developers. She hoped that he would be able to help her after explaining everything to him; to the smallest detail.

Catherine was one of the first in the office, except of course for Joe, who was a workaholic. She knocked and entered his office.

"Good morning Joe, how are you?"

He looked surprised. "You just can't keep away, can you Radcliffe. Don't tell me, you can't bear to be away from me for more than a couple of days. I know that I'm irresistible Cathy, but surely you can manage for a couple of days."

"Ha, ha, very funny. And I was going to try to be nice to you today."

"Okay, seriously, why are you back? I thought you booked two weeks; you said something about a friend being in trouble."

"Yes, a lot has happened since then, have you got a spare hour and I'll tell you about it."

"Sure, sit down."

Catherine then proceeded to tell Joe about Sal and the accident. Of course she missed out the part about Vincent, saying that Sal had just had a sudden change of heart. When she had finished, Joe looked at her seriously.

"Go and see Rita, she should be able to help you. Tell her I said that she can take as much time as she needs . The sooner we get this scum away, the better."

Catherine smiled and turned to go, but before she did, she went over to Joe and planted a small kiss on his cheek. "Thanks, Joe. I really do appreciate this."

He swallowed and blushed. "I know, now get out of here!"

She closed the door behind her, leaving Joe to wonder if the kiss meant anything, or whether it was just a gesture. Poor old Joe - if only he knew!

"Okay, Rita, can you help?"

"The things I do for you. And you say that the old man doesn't mind? I mean we wouldn't want to go upsetting him - you know he has a temper."

"Yes, we've been given the 'all-clear'. Now, where shall we start?"

"Well, if we tap into the computer, we can get a printout of all the land developing companies in the surrounding area, that should give us somewhere to start."

"Okay, great!"

It took them a couple of hours to go through the list and pick out the ones that were in Sal's area. There were only two and they were very much like each other. The same area, the same sort of contract, the same sort of name. One was called 'Smith and Son' and the other was 'Smithsons'. Catherine was very, very suspicious. She pulled the files and asked Rita to go through them and look for anything that didn't look right.

Rita had not been gone for very long when she put a call through to Catherine, asking her to come down to the file room. She raced down there.

"Okay Rita, what have you got for me?"

"I've looked through and you won't believe it."

"Try me!"

"Well, it seems that between them they own just about every piece of land in that area and the only piece they do not have, is that owned by your friend."

"Surprise, surprise. I didn't expect it to be so easy. You've done a great job, Rita. What would I do without you?"

"You'd find someone else to do your dirty work, right?"

"Right!"

Catherine took the files into Joe and explained what they had found.

"That's very nice, Radcliffe, but what about proof? You know I need something to go on."

"I was just coming to that. I think it's about time I went undercover again."

"What!"

"Just listen, Joe. I've had a great idea."

"Quick, write it down, you don't get too many these days."

"That's very funny, Joe - you should be a comedian, but don't give up the day job!"

"Okay, we're even now. What's this idea?"

"I'll go in with two officers - plain clothes - and offer my services as a 'land acquisition consultant'."

"What?"

"I'll tell that I will help them get the land by getting rid of Sal. I can list all of their failures and add a few ideas of my own."

"You're crazy."

"No, it should work. If I wear a wire then you can move in as soon as they admit anything. It's bound to work."

"I can't promise anything, I'll have to clear it with Moreno, but you may have stumbled on an idea."

"Great, what are you waiting for?"

"Excuse me?"

"Go and see Moreno."

"If there is one thing I hate, it's a pushy woman."

"It's a good job I'm not pushy then, isn't it."

Joe went in and saw the boss; he seemed quite impressed with the idea and gave his approval, telling Joe which officers to use and which units to use as back up. They decided that there was no time like the present and that they would make the first move today. Catherine phoned and made an appointment to see the managing director of 'Smithsons'.

She took along some back up, but hoped that she would not need it at this stage. She went up to the director's office and introduced herself to his secretary.

"Good afternoon, I have an appointment to see Mr Harwood."

"Name?"

"Carol Simpson. He is expecting me."

"Hold on." The secretary buzzed the intercom and spoke into the receiver. "Mr Harwood, there is a Carol Simpson here to see you, she says that she has an appointment, but I can't find it."

"Send her in, please."

She turned to Catherine. "You can go in. Would you like anything to drink? Tea, coffee?"

"No thanks."

She entered the office which was very large. Mr Harwood was obviously not short of money.

"Mr Harwood, thank you for seeing me so soon."

"You said on the phone that you may be able to help me in some way, you mentioned Mrs Wesner."

"That's correct. I imagine that like myself you are a very busy person, so I will come straight to the point. I know that by now you would have had me checked out, so we are both on the level. I know all about you and you know all about me."

Joe had thought up a cover name and story for her and had it fed through the computer, so that it could be accessed 'easily' by anyone who knew what they were doing.

"Very well, how do you think that you can help me?"

"I don't think, I know. It has come to my attention that you are having some problems with a certain piece of land that you require."

"That is possible."

"Well, I have come to offer my services as 'land acquisition consultant'. To put it very bluntly, you want her off and so do I. You have tried to get rid of her but it hasn't worked."

"I'm sorry, but I really do not have any idea as to what you are talking about."

"I see. Then let me explain. Firing shots into the air isn't going to get you very far, is it?"

"I really can't help you."

"Fine, put me in touch with someone who can."

Mr Harwood studied her carefully. She was quite impressed with her own performance, she had worked undercover many times before, so it wasn't a new experience.

"I'll call you to arrange a meeting."

"When?"

"Don't question me, I'll be in touch."

Catherine nodded and left. She made her way to her apartment. The idea was that she wouldn't go near the office until the whole thing was over - a wise move!

When she got in, she made sure that the door was securely locked and bolted - she didn't want any uninvited guests. She untaped the wire that was strapped to her. It was quite tiny, no one would ever guess - she hoped. Joe had provided her with a highly advanced answering machine, in case a phone call did actually come.

The next day, she woke to find a small folded note slipped under her door. She wondered what it would say, maybe it was a threat. There was only one way to find out. She went over, picked it up and opened it. It read:

Tonight. Eleven o'clock.

The old warehouse.

Come alone!

Great, she thought, *they have actually fallen for it*. She phoned Joe on the portable phone and informed him that she thought it best not to go out at all; there was enough food to last her a couple of days, but she hoped they could bust them tonight and put them away for good.

The time was ten o'clock. Cathy had by this time prepared herself both mentally and physically. Joe had insisted that she wear some form of body armour, but it was so big and bulky she decided not to bother, besides, it would ruin her figure.

She taped the wire to herself, according to the instructions from the technician. It was quite uncomfortable and she hoped she would not have to keep it on for very long. Joe had told her that there would be two units waiting as back up, all hidden in various places, all armed. This bothered Catherine. She had her own gun but hoped and prayed that she would never have to use it.

The other two officers would go with her. They were both well over six feet tall with bodies like tanks. They would also be armed.

Ten thirty; she had been told to set off at this time so that she would be there at exactly eleven o'clock. She went down to the awaiting car at the front of building knowing that somewhere, someone would be watching her, to make sure they were not followed. It was very quiet in the car, the two officers did not speak too much. Catherine wondered if they had to do this sort of thing very often, or whether it was a routine job for them.

It took about 20 minutes to get to the old warehouse. Catherine was feeling just a little nervous but didn't let it show. They all got out of the car and entered the old building. It was partly

boarded up so they had to knock some of it down to get it. It was a very damp and cold building, they could hardly see a thing.

Suddenly, a deep and menacing voice spoke out. "I thought that you were told to come alone."

"I was, but I doubt very much if you have come alone, have you?"

"Very good, a lady after my own heart. Come up to the office and we'll talk."

Catherine and the other two went in the direction of the voice. It was difficult but they managed to find the door to the office. They went in and at once, a bright light shone in their eyes.

The voice spoke up again.

"We're so glad that you could come. Mr Harwood tells us that you may be able to give us some help."

"Take the light out of my eyes and then maybe we can talk."

The light went out and then a smaller lamp came on up above. "Thank you. Now, I know for a fact that you require a certain piece of land, but are finding it very difficult to get hold of. I am merely offering to do the job for you, for a price."

"What sort of figures are we talking here and how do we know that you will be able to do it?"

"I have seen your attempts to get rid of her and none have worked; people will start to get suspicious, especially if you keep going around firing shots in the air."

"How do you know about that?"

"Like I told your friend Mr Harwood, I have done my homework."

"So it seems. You think that you can do any better?"

"I know that I can do better, I have more resources than you."

With that, Catherine glanced round at the other two with her, as if to show them off. She knew that they were very close to getting them, all they had to do was say that they were responsible for the accident. She would have to work on it. "Before I say any more, there is one point that I would like to get cleared up."

"Oh yes, what's that?"

"The husband, how was he disposed of?"

The man looked around, it seemed that he was deciding whether or not to tell her. He obviously made up his mind that she could be trusted as he began to tell her. This would be it.

Catherine hoped that they were all standing by outside.

"He was rammed off the road, by myself in fact. It seemed to do the trick."

With that, all hell broke loose. One of the officers threw Catherine to the ground and pounced on the other man. The other officer went after Mr Harwood who was trying desperately to get out

of the door. About 20 other uniformed officers burst through the door and began to do battle with the group of heavies that had suddenly appeared out of nowhere. All this time, Catherine could do nothing but stay down on the floor. She had known that she would be pushed down, it was for her own safety, but she hadn't expected to go down so hard. There was a terrible pain in her arm and she couldn't move it. She guessed that she had probably broken it.

Within five minutes or so, all the heavies and the criminals were being led out of the door to a waiting police van. Joe came over and helped Catherine to get up.

"You did a good job, Cathy. We've got it all taped and we are ready to go to court first thing tomorrow."

"I'm glad. It means that Sal can start to build up her life again. She has been through an awful lot."

"So have you by the look of it, what's wrong with your arm?"

With pain written all over her face, Catherine tried to manage a small smile. "I think it's broken. You've got to get me to a hospital Joe, before I pass out."

"Oh God, don't you dare do that to me. Come on, I'll have you there in no time."

He rushed her to the local hospital where they gave her some pain killers and set her arm in plaster. It looked very attractive. When Joe was driving her back to her apartment, she felt quite pleased with herself. She hadn't really expected it to work, but she would never tell that to Joe!

* * *

Chapter Nine: 'Starting Over'

Joe had given Catherine strict instructions the next evening. "Now, I don't want to see you back in the office until that arm has healed completely, understand?"

"Yes, Joe."

"Good and if I hear that you haven't been taking it easy and relaxing, I'll be round to sort you out."

"Thanks, Joe. I'll be all right."

"Right, now take care, okay?"

"Yes, I'll see you soon and thanks for everything."

Cathy shut the door after he had left and smiled to herself; he was such a worrier. She went and sat down and picked up the phone. She wanted to find out how Sal was doing and whether she had had the operation yet. She took the receiver off the set, put it down on the table, then proceeded to dial the number with her free hand, before picking up the receiver again. She could see that she was going to have to change her lifestyle a little, until her arm had healed.

"Hello, my name is Catherine Chandler. Would you tell me how Mrs Wesner is, please?"

"Yes, certainly. Hold the line one moment."

Catherine waited patiently until the receptionist came back to the phone. "Yes, she is doing just fine. Her operation is tomorrow afternoon at two o'clock. She has actually been asking for you."

"She has? Right, tell her I will be there before the day is out."

"I will, thank you for calling."

"Bye."

She put the phone down and smiled again as she remembered Joe's words - take it easy.

Suddenly, there was a faint tapping on the window. She knew instantly that it was Vincent and rushed to the balcony.

"Catherine, what has happened? Are you all right?"

"I'll be fine. It's just broken, it shouldn't take long to heal."

"How did it happen?"

"You remember the land developers that murdered Sal's husband, well, we've got them." She went on to tell Vincent how she had managed to trick them into admitting that they had killed

Steve. She was very proud of what she had done and Vincent could see this.

"You were in great danger and yet I did not feel you fear; how can that be?"

"I wasn't afraid. A little nervous may be, but not afraid. I knew that help was near if I needed it."

"To put yourself in such danger, I worry for you."

"Vincent ... " She paused, trying to think how best she could explain her feelings. "Remember what Father said about some risks being worth it? That is how I see my job. I have to put myself in danger, but it is to help other people."

"Even if it means getting hurt yourself?"

"This broken arm is a small sacrifice. At least Sal can try to start over again now, without any fear of being hurt."

Vincent looked at her, there was so much love and admiration in his eyes. "You are a remarkable person, Catherine. To give so much at cost to yourself."

"But so do you, Vincent. The risk you put yourself in when you went to see Sal. It was because of you that she changed her mind."

The both stared at the New York skyline. It really did look magical tonight. There was something in the air, a feeling that they both shared. It made everything so special.

Catherine turned to Vincent. "I'm going away again, Vincent."

"To see your friend?"

"Yes, she has been asking for me. She has her operation tomorrow."

"That is good news, tell her that she will be in my thoughts."

"I will, but then, she probably already knows."

"I hope so."

When Vincent had left, Catherine went back inside and collected a few things together. She called a cab - that would be the easiest way to get to Sal - and took great care not to knock her arm. The doctor had said that as long as she didn't damage it any further, it should heal quite quickly.

The journey to the house seemed to go very quickly, it was probably because she was not driving. At least the broken arm did have one advantage - she wouldn't be able to drive for a while. As they drove, she looked out of the window at all the lights, sights and sounds. She noticed things that she had never noticed before; again putting this down to the fact that someone else was in the driving seat. When in control of a vehicle, it was vital to concentrate one hundred percent, there was no room for mistakes. She noticed the contrast as they began to drive deeper into the country. The air was so different, even at night. Catherine had always loved the countryside, right from when she was a little child. Her mother and father had often taken her for long walks through the country tracks and for picnics in the fields, pointing out different wild animals like rabbits and field mice and different plants and flowers. How she missed those days. How she missed both her mother and father. The thought that one day they may all be together again in another life may be, made it a little more bearable.

They drove down the long driveway to the house and the driver pulled in at the front. "Could you wait here please, while I put my things in the house. I need to go to the hospital next."

The driver glanced in the mirror at Catherine and her arm and then spoke. "You stay right there. If you give me the keys I'll drop them in the hall, we can't have you knocking that arm."

"Thank you."

Catherine gave him the key and he got out of the cab, taking her bags into the house. It didn't

take very long - it would have taken her twice as long using her one good arm. He got back into the cab and they set off for the hospital. Luckily, he knew where he was going, so Catherine didn't have to keep giving him directions.

When they arrived, Catherine paid the driver and gave him a tip. Before she had even attempted to get out, he had jumped out and opened the door for her, helping her to get out. She thanked him and as she made her way into the hospital, chuckled to herself. If this was the treatment she was going to get with a broken arm, then perhaps she should consider keeping the cast on - forever!

The reception must have recognised her, even with the broken arm, because she said, "You can go straight in, she is waiting for you."

She entered Sal's room as quietly as she could; she didn't want to wake her if she was sleeping. She wasn't and as she saw Catherine, managed a smile.

"Cathy, I'm glad you came."

"Wild horses wouldn't keep me away. How are you feeling?"

"Okay, but a little nervous about tomorrow."

"The operation?"

"Yes. Deep down I'm worried about what will happen if it doesn't work."

"It will work, remember what Vincent said."

"Yes ... how is he?"

"He is just fine. He sends you his love and says he is thinking of you."

"That's nice. What have you been doing - playing gridiron?"

Catherine couldn't help but laugh. Sal looked so much better - even sounded better - and she hadn't even had the operation yet. "No, I haven't been playing football, but I have been playing the property game."

"The property game? I don't understand."

"Yesterday, we arrested all those involved in Steve's death and your accident. They went to court today. I'll give evidence in the trial and we have managed to locate the couple who witnessed what happened, and they have agreed to testify."

"They've changed their minds? How did you manage that?"

"Well, Dr Harris did say that I was very persuasive. I suppose he was right."

"That's really great news. It means that if the operation goes well I won't be troubled by them anymore."

"That's right, you can start to build up your life again. But you must promise me one thing."

"Yes?"

"When your back has healed you must come and stay with me. There is so much I have to tell you and show you. You have to meet my other 'family' and see their world."

"I'll look forward to it, but that may not be for quite a while yet."

"That's okay, I'm not going anywhere."

"Thanks, Cathy."

"For what?"

"All you have done. I haven't had a chance to thank you properly and apologise for the way that I spoke to you - when I told you to leave. I'm glad you came back that night."

"Look, you were in pain. I knew that you didn't mean it. I'd almost forgotten anyway. Don't worry about it."

They talked for a little while longer, until Catherine could see that Sal was beginning to look somewhat tired. She told her that she would be staying at the house for the night and would come back tomorrow, before the operation. She left her room and went to the pay-phone to call a cab. Dr Harris walked by and looked at her with a curious smile.

"What have you done?"

"It's a long story."

"Are you by any chance, leaving now?"

"I will be, if I can get a cab."

"I can give you a lift, where are you heading?"

Catherine told him where the house was. A look of surprise came over his face.

"That is just down the road from me. A big house, with horses?"

"That's right."

"Do you live there?"

"No, it's Mrs Wesner's house. Her husband has just died so I don't know if she will be staying there for much longer, there will be a lot of memories."

"Yes, I can understand that. When my wife passed away, I felt that I needed a change, so I moved up here. Anyway, can I give you a lift?"

Catherine was beginning to think that she was right about her arm, people certainly seemed to treat you differently. They drove to the house and she thanked Dr Harris. She had considered asking him the real risks of having the operation, but thought it best not to tempt fate.

By this time her arm was beginning to ache. She couldn't really complain, she had only felt a few twitches throughout the day. She took a pain killer that the hospital had prescribed and fell asleep almost instantly.

* * *

Chapter Ten: 'Silhouette Of Hope'

Sal was woken early the next morning by a nurse, who began to prepare her for the forthcoming operation. Whilst this was happening, Dr Harris called into her room.

"I found out something quite coincidental, last night."

"What's that?"

"It turns out that you live just up the road from me and I didn't even realise it."

"Really?"

"Yes. I gave your friend a lift back to your house and that was when I realised."

"Well, small world isn't it."

"Yes, it certainly is. Anyway, how are you feeling?"

"A little apprehensive."

"Well, don't you worry about a thing, I'm paid to do your worrying for you."

Sal smiled. Dr Harris was a nice man, she felt better for his words of reassurance. She

wondered what time Catherine would arrive and hoped it was soon, she wanted to speak with her before the operation.

Meanwhile, Catherine was also just waking. She had not had a comfortable night, her arm had given her some trouble but she tried not to think about it. She allowed herself extra time to get ready, seeing as she would be going at half the speed. It was quite funny really, some of the positions that she had to get into - just to put on her shirt. She was glad that she was on her own!

Just a couple of hours later she was sitting at Sal's bedside, listening to what she had to say.

"So you see Cathy, if it doesn't work, just to ..."

"SAL! Don't keep talking like this."

"No, it's all right, it has to be said, just let me finish."

"Okay."

"If anything should happen, I want you to have Beauty, I want you to look after her. You said that you liked horses and they seem to like you, so I want you to promise me that you will take good care of her."

"Sal, I couldn't."

"You must ... if anything happens."

"Very well, I'd be honoured."

Catherine felt a lump starting to appear in her throat. She didn't want Sal to see, she didn't want to cause her any more grief.

The time was going very quickly. A nurse appeared at the door. "Hello. Mrs Wesner?"

"Yes, but please call me Sal."

"Okay, Sal. I'm going to give you an injection which will make you feel very tired, now I don't want you to fight it, just drop off to sleep."

Sal was silent. Catherine could see the worry on her face and felt helpless because there was nothing she could do. Dr Harris had said that within half an hour or so, Sal would be very tired, possibly asleep. Catherine had told Sal that she would stay with her until that time and would wait until she came out of the operation. Sal was obviously very grateful. Catherine just wished that there was more that she could do for her. She decided that she would tell her about the world Below, all of her friends, her family and especially Vincent.

"Sal, do you remember when Vincent came to see you and you asked how we met?"

"Yes, as I remember you evaded the question extremely well."

Catherine grinned, she hadn't meant to make it quite so obvious. "Did I? Well, let me tell you how we first met and how he has changed my life. I know that up until now, it was quite a while ago that we last spoke, well a lot has happened to me since then. You may or may not know that I was attacked; I was mistaken for someone else."

"I didn't know - I'm sorry."

"That's okay, I'm over it now, Vincent has helped me tremendously. It was he who found me in the park that night. He took me down to his world below the city and treated my wounds. His father is a doctor and between them they managed to pull me back to life. I was in quite a bad way. I had bandages on my face and didn't know what had happened. I didn't know the extent of the attack. Vincent reassured me. He spoke so softly, told me to have the courage to go on. I was so afraid. I remember how he would read to me - poetry mainly. He made the words come to life, they began to really mean something. He would feed me soup and tea. I remember

reaching out to touch his hand and I knew instantly he was different. I didn't say anything, it was all like a nightmare, but then part of it seemed like a dream, especially the part about Vincent."

"What did you do when you saw him?"

"I was worried about my face. I wanted to know how bad it really was, I wanted to see it for myself."

"What did you do?"

"I unwrapped the bandages and found a silver dish in which I could see my reflection. Out of the corner of my eye I glanced a movement behind me and turned ... and there he was. I wasn't afraid, just surprised - he was so different. I suppose I did panic, I threw the dish and it hit him. Everything had just built up, all the pain and the worry, not knowing where I was or what was happening. I felt awful. I had hurt him both physically and mentally. He had shown me so much kindness, helped me so much and that was how I repaid him. I just sat and cried."

"What happened?"

"He came back later and told me not to worry - about anything. I still felt terrible but we sat and talked and I began to feel closer to him. It just developed from there. We share this bond, he feels what I am feeling, he knows when I am in danger. Time and time again he has saved my life. We are so close. He has changed my life completely. The people in his world all help each other, they help me and I try to help them whenever I can. We are all one big family, separated by different levels of the earth. I hope that one day we can be together, that is what I wish for most of all."

Catherine waited for some sort of response from Sal, but when she looked, she was fast asleep. Catherine smiled, wondering how much of the conversation Sal had actually heard.

Dr Harris had told Catherine that it would be a fairly long operation, but she was beginning to worry all the same. After they had taken Sal, she decided to get herself a coffee from the machine and went and made herself comfortable in the family room.

She had brought a book with her but couldn't really get into it. This surprised her because she loved reading. Any book, any author, any length, but she just didn't feel like it. She put it down to the fact that she was worried about Sal. Catherine had always thought of herself as a very calm person, able to deal with any situation, but the events of the last few days had changed her mind. She would never forget the experience in the van with Vincent, when she had seen a car coming the other way. That memory would be with her forever.

As she sat, she wondered if they would ever have a chance to walk together, arm-in-arm in the world Above - in daylight. She hadn't believed in miracles, but she was beginning to think that anything was possible. A year ago she would never have dreamed that Vincent would leave the tunnels with her, even if it was only for one night.

Suddenly, a voice disturbed her train of thought. "Miss Chandler?"

"Dr Harris. How is Sal? did it go all right? Is she going to be okay? Will she make a full recovery?"

"Hold on, slow down. Right - Sal is fine, the operation went extremely well, she is making progress already and should make a full recovery within a year or so.

Catherine breathed a sigh of relief. "You cannot imagine how good it is to hear that."

"Oh I think I can."

Catherine smiled. "Can I see her?"

"You can see her, yes, but she will not be awake for a while yet, the anaesthetic still has to wear off."

They both went in. Sal looked so calm and peaceful, it even looked like she had a smile on her face. Catherine wouldn't be at all surprised - that was more like the Sal that she remembered.

She went back to see Sal later that same evening. It was a very emotional affair - for both of them. Sal wouldn't be able to move for a few weeks, she would then have to have extensive physiotherapy and exercise, and in about a year's time she should be up and about again. This pleased Catherine, she didn't know what she would have done if anything had gone wrong. She knew that Sal was going to need friends and wondered if Father would let her stay Below for a while, just so that she knew that she would never be alone. Now that Steve had gone she would have to make many adjustments in her life. Catherine hoped that it would all work out for her.

She travelled back to New York that same night - by cab. Her arm wasn't too bad, just a few more twitches here and there. She dropped her things off at her apartment and went straight down to Vincent who was waiting for her at the tunnel entrance.

"All went well, I can feel it."

"Yes Vincent, it did go well. Sal can now begin to build her life up again."

"That is good to hear, she has had more than her fair share of problems."

"Yes, hopefully that will change now."

"So what happens now? What will she do?"

"Well, she will have extensive treatment and therapy, the doctor says that she should be back on her feet within a year. We have agreed that when the year is over, she will come and stay in New York for a while. I was also hoping that she may be able to spend some time down here; meet Father and the others."

"That is an excellent idea. Father will have no objections, he has been enquiring as to her welfare."

"At least one good thing has come from this."

"What is that?"

"Before I left, Sal told me that she no longer feels alone, she knows that she has friends."

Vincent smiled, it was good news. Catherine was glad that she was able to share it with him. He had seen so many bad things in her world, she wanted him to know that good things happened too - sometimes.

They walked through the tunnels to Catherine's chamber. She had promised herself that she would spend more time there and it was a promise that she wanted to keep.

* * *

One Year Later

Catherine arrived at the office at eight o'clock. Being Friday made it a little more bearable; she always enjoyed the weekends. She had just sat down at her desk when the phone rang. She picked it up. What did anyone want at this time of the morning?

"Catherine Chandler speaking."

"Cathy, it's Sal - how are you?"

"I'm fine, how are you?"

"I'm just great, there is no other word for it."

"You sound wonderful, how is your back?"

"It's nearly healed, the doctors are quite impressed with my recovery. Dave says that I do not need the therapy any more."

"Dave? Who is he?"

"Oh, sorry - Dr Harris."

"So, it's Dave now, is it? That sounds very friendly."

"I can't really talk at the moment. Anyway, remember you said that I should come down?"

"Yes."

"How about tonight?"

"Great - how will you get here?"

"Dave will drop me off."

"I see, it sounds like you have got a lot of explaining to do, Sal."

"Yes, that's true, but you will have to wait until tonight."

"I look forward to it, it seems we have a lot to talk about."

"Right. I'll see you tonight then."

"Okay, bye."

"Bye."

Catherine put the phone down and laughed. Joe was walking past at the time and looked up.

"What's so funny, Radcliffe? Have I got coffee down my shirt?"

"Not today, Joe. But I won't hold my breath."

"Very funny, Radcliffe. Have you got those files ready?"

"They're on your desk."

"What about those statements?"

"I finished those yesterday - I did tell you."

Joe stood, trying to think of something else to say. He couldn't, so he went back into his office, leaving Catherine to smile to herself.

As soon as she got home that evening, Catherine went straight to the balcony; she could feel Vincent's presence. She told him about Sal's visit and enquired as to whether it would be possible for her to spend Saturday and Sunday down Below. Vincent said that he could see no reason why it should not be so.

Catherine asked if he would be offended if she let Sal sleep in her chamber. He insisted quite the opposite, saying that it would show how much the chamber meant to her. They talked for about an hour, mostly about Sal and the events of a year ago. Catherine wondered if Sal had managed to get back into the saddle yet. She may never be able to, it could bring back too many painful memories. She would try to encourage her to carry on riding, reminding her of the great sensation she felt when she was in the saddle.

Vincent had only been gone a few minutes when there was a knock at the door. It was Sal. She looked extremely well - considering all that she had been through. They talked nearly all night. Catherine told her all about the people who lived in the world Below; how they helped each other and cared for each other. She told her about Father and Mary, Pascal and his pipes and Mouse and his inventions. Sal seemed pleased when Catherine told her that they would be spending the rest of the weekend down Below, and was honoured when she told her that she would be sleeping in her chamber.

The next morning was bright and sunny. They used the basement entrance as it was safer. Catherine was surprised to learn that Vincent was not there.

Mary said that he had left the previous night, saying that he would not be back until the following evening. Catherine was concerned. Where could he be?

There were many volunteers who wanted to show Sal their world, but it was decided that Father would make the best guide. It took most of the day, there was a lot to see. Catherine hoped that they were not overdoing it - she didn't want to wear Sal out.

It was late afternoon when Vincent returned . He found them in the Great Hall. He looked concerned.

"Sal, there is someone outside to see you."

"To see me?"

"Yes, they did not give a name."

She looked puzzled; who could it be? Vincent led her back to the tunnel entrance, followed by the others. They stood back as Sal went out. Vincent shielded himself behind some bushes. It was getting darker but the sun was still quite high.

Suddenly, a look of delight came over Sal's face. "Beauty, what are you doing here?"

It was the jet black horse that Catherine had been riding at the time of the accident. There was a clear bond between Sal and Beauty. She turned to the others.

"How did she get here? This is wonderful!"

Catherine spoke. "Have you ridden since the accident?"

"No, I'm not really sure if I can."

"There is only one way to find out."

Sal looked at Father and Vincent who both had looks of encouragement on their faces.

Vincent spoke. "You can do this, Sal, I know you can."

She very slowly put her foot in the stirrup and hoisted herself onto Beauty. She was obviously pleased with herself - her face said it all.

Catherine had a pretty good idea of how Beauty had suddenly appeared, Vincent had a look of achievement on his face. (Catherine dare not think about how the horse was going to get back).

At that point, Father suggested that they leave Sal to be alone for a while - just her and Beauty.

So they turned away and made their way back into the tunnels. Leaving behind a magical sight - a silhouette of hope, set against the dying sun.

END