

SECOND CHANCES, TOUGH CHOICES

by Louise Hyde

She was missing ...

Nobody knew where she was ...

Not Joe, not Edie, not Jen, not Nancy, not Escobar.

Nobody ...

Nobody knew ...

Nobody Goddamn knew ...

Everybody was worried ...

Joe and Jen had been liaising and sharing information and ideas but so far had drawn a blank. Joe assured Jen that the police were involved and that they were thinking of bringing in some woman cop, quite good apparently, called Diana, if things got worse ... or at least didn't get better. This lady was picky about her cases and things had to be bad.

Joe hadn't told Jen much about that side of things and Jen wasn't very interested in hearing it, she wasn't worried about the why's and wherefore's, she just wanted to hear her voice on the line to say:

"Jen? Hi! How about lunch?"

Jen dropped her head into her hands and ran her fingers through her thick, dark, curly hair. How could she think about lunch at a time like this, she chided herself ... So she just kept searching, and worrying, and thinking ...

* * *

Oh God, it was so cold! She had been cold before but this was ridiculous! It gave 'Chilled to the bone' a whole new meaning! ... [Good God, what had they given her?] She realised she was on a rooftop and suddenly her consciousness was filled with noise and lights. *Oh God, how much more?* She just wished it would end and she felt utterly defeated. In the nigh-on three years she'd worked with the DA's office, all the low-life cases she'd been involved in she'd never felt like this ... the legend 'Stop the world I want to get off' wasn't in it! Just then, she realised that the noise and lights were a helicopter loading up with Gabriel's Goons, the nurse, the doctor, the security guys and finally Gabriel himself, and he was, Cathy noticed, carrying a bundle.

"No ... not my child ...!" It was what felt to her like the loudest scream, but was in fact, a barely audible whisper. She tried to move towards the lights, but there was no strength left. No matter how hard she tried to move forward, the helicopter seemed to be further and further away.

Just then, the rotor blades reached full power and the helicopter lifted into the air and moved off, out into the city. This action seemed to release Cathy and she began to go towards the place where the helicopter had now put several miles between itself and there.

Cathy heard a strange, clunking, metallic and mechanical sound from the air and turned her face skyward just in time to see part of the helicopter catch fire; the fuel tank ignited and seconds later engulfed the helicopter in a ball of flame. Almost simultaneously the whole machine erupted into

explosion after explosion and the air was filled with chunks of helicopter and flame, like some macabre, bizarre firework display.

Cathy realised the implications of what had just happened - no survivors - "No!" she screamed and this time, really did scream, for all she was worth.

At that moment, inside the tunnels, Vincent's head snapped up ... *Catherine!* His sense of her was overwhelming as the bond which had been closed for so long, opened up between them once more and he ran to be with her ...

Meanwhile, as the last embers of the explosion died away and police sirens began to sound in the distance, Cathy lay on the rooftop and the thought crossed her mind that the police would come now and she would be taken to safety. Then she slipped once more into unconsciousness.

When Cathy regained consciousness all she could see was white . White walls, white ceiling, white floor, white everything, and her heart sank ... but then she remembered. The helicopter, the rooftop, the explosion, Gabriel ... and her son. She began to sob loudly ... Something else ... *Vincent! Oh yes!* ... her sense of him had been so strong, the feelings that were almost words; it was just as though their bond was back - if anything, stronger than before, as though to make up for lost time. But it could not be so ... and she began to sob once more.

At that moment, a nurse came into the room, noticed Cathy was crying and rushed to her bedside to comfort her and, somewhere within herself, Cathy realised this was not the usual order of things and turned her tear-stained face upwards.

"Miss Chandler, my name is Nurse Wexford - Lizzy Wexford. You're in hospital, you're safe here. We'd like to keep you here for a while, you need lots of rest ... The police are outside, they want to talk to you about what happened, but I can send them away if you'd rather ... The Doctor will be with you quite soon. Miss Chandler?"

Catherine nodded dumbly, but she hadn't really taken in what the nurse had said.

The nurse left and soon after some policemen arrived at her bedside.

"Miss Chandler, we know how difficult this must be for you, but please try to tell us as much as you can of what happened, in your own words ... and in your own time."

Cathy had already begun to speak; by the time the sound of her flat, expressionless, monotone, monosyllabic voice reached her ears, she heard herself tell of her months of captivity, about Gabriel, his goons, her room, the roof, the helicopter, the explosion ... and Vi ... "Virtually right away I lost consciousness and the next thing I knew, I woke up here," she finished, almost apologetically.

"That's fine, Miss Chandler, you don't have to say anymore, you've helped us a lot already. May be now you should get some rest ... we'll talk to you later."

"Wait! I answered your questions, now I'd like you to answer mine ... the helicopter, no one could have survived ... but there would have been ... what I'm trying to say is ... was there any trace of a child ... a young child ... a baby ... please, I need to know."

"I assure you, nothing of that kind was found ... why do you ask?"

"There must have been! There was a child at the warehouse, I thought I saw him being carried into the helicopter ... please think, I must know!"

"Miss Chandler, I'm sure we would know if anything like that had been found ..."

"Then he must still be in there ... tell your men to search that warehouse from top to bottom because he must still be in there!"

"Miss Chandler, we scoured every inch of that warehouse and we found no baby ... alive, or otherwise."

"But there must be! I don't understand ..."

At this point Cathy lost it completely and began to sob uncontrollably. The despondency she felt on the rooftop washed over her in wave after wave, while the policemen looked at each other and shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

"Miss Chandler, you have helped us greatly, but we see you need to be alone."

No I don't! screamed every fibre of her being.

"We'll tell the nurse we're leaving and if there's anything else we need to know we'll be in touch."

Cathy was aware of her head nodding, but wasn't really taking any notice.

A few minutes later, the nurse joined her at her bedside.

"The police have gone now ... They say you were asking about a baby, in the warehouse ... Can I help? Do you want to talk about it?"

"Yes, I think I would. Nurse Wexford, when I was kidnapped I was pregnant ... my baby was born just before the men left in the helicopter. I could swear I saw Gabriel taking him into the helicopter ... but the police say they found no trace and, well, there would have been some trace so he must still be in the warehouse but the police say they searched it thoroughly and found nothing, but that can't be ... I don't know what to think."

"Cathy ..." The nurse sat on the bed and took her hand. "When you were brought in, we gave you a very thorough examination and we found no evidence to suggest that you'd just had a child, or indeed had ever had one ... I'm sorry Cathy, I know how real it must have seemed to you, if it's any consolation you were far more heavily drugged than you may have realised."

"It isn't very consoling and forget about it seeming real, it was real, I'm not the kind of person who imagines things, especially pregnancy and childbirth, please, this needs further investigation, this is driving me crazy! You're telling me I'm imagining things and I know my son is either dead or in danger and I need to know which!"

"Look Cathy, I'll tell you what we'll do, we'll give you another test, looking for specifics this time; get in touch with the police and see if they can't check out the wreckage and the warehouse again, properly this time. We should have some answers by the end of the day ... Meanwhile there's someone I want you to talk to, he's a member of our staff, his name is James Grafton, he's a ..."

"Psychiatrist ... I know. Okay, I'll see him ..."

"Cathy! Hi! I thought it must have been you! How have you been? I gather you have a couple of problems . Care to talk about it?"

"You're damn right I have a problem. I gave birth to a son not forty-eight hours ago and I have a bunch of people telling me I imagined it! Meanwhile, I don't know what has happened to the child I know I had and nobody seems to want to help me find out and I'm having a little trouble dealing with that!"

"Okay, Cathy, that's understandable. Now, where I'd like to start is where we left off last time when you came to see me regarding your feelings about the twentieth anniversary of your mother's death and your relationship with Vincent. How did things progress after that?"

"Well." She sighed deeply, inwardly gritted her teeth and dived in. "A few days later I was feeling somewhat better and my father invited me to a benefit recital of Grieg's Piano Concerto and I discussed plans to visit a friend in West Port and then drive up through New England. I really was feeling so much better, then the man started to play and as the notes filled the air and the piece progressed, all the sadness I felt came back and I started to cry. I actually ran from the building and kept running until I reached Vincent and I told him about the doubts I had about our relationship and he said we must end, but I didn't want that ..."

"I went up to West Port and stayed for a couple of days. I discussed with Nancy - who I was staying with - whether my mother would be proud of me, did my life honour her memory. Nancy spoke about

choosing marriage and a family above going to Europe to study her photography, which would have taken her to wonderful places and finally, we realised that we all have our tough choices to make.

"One night I had a dream about Vincent and myself. When I woke, I knew I wanted him above anything else, my tough choice was to stay with him and endure, whatever came. It all ended when I borrowed Nancy's car and drove back to New York at 4 a.m.! I went straight to Vincent to tell him my decision and ... well we're still here!"

"Did you find the Happy Life you were looking for?"

"I guess, there were times of great joy and great sadness, times when our relationship put us both in danger, a number of times Vincent actually, literally, saved my life, but despite everything, we will endure, forever."

Just then, Nurse Wexford entered the room. "Cathy, can I speak to you for a minute?" James Grafton stood up. "Here, use my office, I was just about to call time out anyway. Anyone for coffee?"

Nurse Wexford answered in the affirmative for both women and James left the office, whilst Cathy remained seated and Nurse Wexford took the seat he had just vacated.

"Cathy, I guess you know what I'm here to discuss with you. Firstly, the tests. Once again, we found no signs of pregnancy or childbirth, none whatsoever. We have to conclude that you haven't had a child. We also got back in touch with the police. They had their best forensic people check out that wreckage. They conclude there was no child in that helicopter and the guys who checked out the warehouse say they didn't find a baby or any trace of one, but they found a lot of needles and the drug used has a similar affect to morphine, but it is kind of hallucinogenic. That is to say, if when you were drugged you wanted a baby, and you were given enough, it could really make you believe you had one. It's as simple ... and cruel as that ..."

"This is so hard to believe. The only thing is, I did want a child. I had consummated a relationship and had begun to wonder if I was pregnant. I was about to tell him of my suspicion ... I guess I'd rather believe this than that he was dead. I just don't know, I feel so foolish ..."

"I'll send Dr Grafton back in. I'm sure you could use that coffee ..."

Over the next two weeks, Cathy received counselling from James Grafton and medical care from Nurse Wexford and finally, she was ready to go home.

The apartment seemed cold, still and un-lived in. She busied herself with switching on lights and turning up the heating; switching on the television so there was some noise; making coffee; slowly going from room to room; moving this and that; refamiliarising herself with her home. She had to keep telling herself that this was indeed her home and she was sitting on her couch, drinking her coffee from her mug.

Finally, she took a very deep breath and, with eyes closed, opened the terrace doors and a tear sprang to her eyes as a chill breeze stung her cheek. She opened her eyes and as the tear rolled down her face, the feeling was one of *deja vu*, as if she only remembered seeing this scene but never actually had. This was all very strange!

As she looked around and her eyes become accustomed to the dark, she noticed something white and something dark on the small wrought iron table. Her heart leapt. She picked up the 'something dark' and discovered it was a fresh - He knew! - perfectly formed, red rose. She picked up the 'something white' and that was a note in Vincent's own fair hand:

My Life,

What can I say to you? What Hell these weeks have been. Your pain has been my pain and I know they must have been the darkest you have ever known. I have been close to you at the hospital and

left these, anticipating your return. These words are but a shadow of what I wish to express. Know that I will be watching over you through our bond and will be waiting for you Below ... when you are ready.

Be Well,

Your Vincent

Cathy could have burst! She concentrated on their bond and acknowledged Vincent's gifts and bade him know she was well and felt secure in the knowledge he was watching over her. A few seconds later, his joy and relief resonated through their bond, back to her and a tear of sheer joy scorched her cheek.

Cathy went back into the apartment, switched off the TV; put her favourite Chopin on the compact disk player; made fresh coffee; slipped into something soft, warm, fluffy and comfortable; sat down on the couch and just let the emotions happen. She spent the evening alternately laughing and crying. As the evening progressed, her thoughts turned away from herself and towards her friends and she decided to ring Joe and Jen so, lifting the phone, she dialled.

"Jen? Hi! How about lunch?"

A scream and then a sob issued from the other end of the phone. "Oh God Cathy, tell me that's you. Joe said you'd been found ..."

"It certainly is me. I was discharged from hospital today and I mean it. How about lunch tomorrow?"

"Hospital! Cathy, what happened? Are you okay ...?"

"Look, it's a long story. I'll tell you over lunch."

"Are you sure you're strong enough? Listen, I'll bring some take-out, I'll be over at noon."

"Sounds great to me, see you then."

"See ya. I love you, Cathy."

"And I you. Bye!"

"Radcliffe! Hi ! You outta hospital now ...?"

"Yes Joe, I am. I came home today and it feels a little strange ..."

"You betcha. Listen Radcliffe, if you want me to come over, I will and we'll talk. I got nothin' doin' for the next few hours ..."

"No Joe, really, I want to find my feet here first. I'd like to be alone tonight, but I think I really will need a friend on twenty-four hour call this week or so ... you up for it?"

"Of course, Cathy. Any time, day or night, you know my number."

"Thanks Joe, you're a real friend. Now, about work ..."

"Ah, ah Radcliffe, you said the bad word. I'm giving you at least 'til the fifteenth. There's no hurry, you take your time."

"Joe, this really isn't necessary, I'll be fine for Monday, honestly ..."

"Radcliffe, it's no use. You need a little time. I want you one hundred percent when you come back .. besides, we got someone real cute covering for you!"

"Joe!"

"Okay Radcliffe! Look after yourself, huh? See ya kiddo!"

"Bye, Joe ..."

Cathy was still smiling to herself when she'd replaced the handset ... got up, gone into the kitchen for more coffee and returned to her seat with it!

Suddenly she felt tired and decided on an early night. She took her favourite send-me-to-sleep tape through to the bedroom and played it on the small, good quality tape deck she kept for this purpose and soon fell into a deep, sweet, healing, dreamless sleep.

Not surprisingly, she awoke late next morning and found herself with only one hour and counting, before Jenny's arrival with what she was sure would be a huge lunch, so she decided to have coffee and juice on the terrace.

A few moments later, tray laden, she opened the terrace doors with her foot and took that first sweet lungful of fresh morning air. On the table was another note from her beloved:

Catherine,

I could not keep away tonight. I wanted to see for myself that you were well. When I arrived your home was in darkness and I thought you were not yet returned to me, then I noticed that the note and rose had gone and a very soft light emanating from your bedroom. I peered in and beheld a vision of peace. Your sleep was one of such tranquillity I could not have disturbed it. I contented myself with watching you for a few moments, a soft smile was on your lips. You are so beautiful.

I love you.

Your Vincent

Cathy brushed away a tear. How lucky she was! She finished her liquid breakfast, already behind schedule and prepared for Jenny's visit.

Sure enough, on the dot of noon, there was an urgent knock at the door.

"Jen! You'll knock it down! I'm coming ...!"

The door opened and the two friends flew into each other's arms, hugged their hellos and then unpacked the predictably huge lunch which was eaten on the terrace in the mild, warm early afternoon sun.

Cathy discussed her experiences, strangely leaving out the episode concerning the child. It was becoming easier for her to accept that reality.

The two friends spent a few happy hours talking girl talk and making plans for future meetings. Finally, Jenny noticed Cathy was tiring so she left, leaving her love and best wishes.

Cathy was indeed tiring and she decided to have a coffee and then a nap. She woke just as dusk was falling. Thank heaven for dark autumn evenings!

She felt it was time to go and see Vincent, so she dressed warmly and took the long way across the Park to the drainage tunnel. She greatly enjoyed the walk; the feeling was one of meeting up with an old friend you haven't seen for some time and rediscovering just how much you enjoy their company.

As she approached the tunnels, her heartbeat quickened and her mind began to race. Would he be there? Would there be an awkwardness between them?

Just then, Vincent sensed her feelings and through their bond, assured her she had nothing to fear. She was so relieved that she broke into a run and began to call Vincent's name as soon as she entered the tunnel.

"I'm here." His voice of velvet steel emanated from the shadows.

"Vincent. Where are you ..."

He stepped from the shadows, resplendent in what he knew was Cathy's favourite outfit of his. He

extended his arms towards her and she stepped into the warm, safe circle of his embrace.

"How are you, my love? This has been a very dark time for our whole community. We are all overjoyed that you are returned to us. Catherine, when you were on the rooftop, our bond returned. In the following weeks I felt a great turmoil within you. Sometimes you were almost lost to yourself. What was happening with you?"

"Vincent, when we consummated our relationship, which I will never regret, we lost our bond and I began to wonder if I had fallen pregnant. I was actually thinking about a test, then I was taken and to me the pregnancy became real and then when he was born and they took him away in the helicopter, I lost consciousness. When I woke up in the hospital, I tried desperately to discover what had happened to him. I was examined and no evidence was found that I had given birth. The wreck of the helicopter was checked very closely and no trace of a baby was found. It was the same story with the warehouse. I found it so hard to believe. When I spoke with the psychiatrist, I came to realise that the thing I had wanted most in the world was your child. When we loved, I began to wonder if that dream could happen and when I was drugged, for me, it did become real. I guess it was the way part of me dealt with what was happening, something for my mind to devote itself to completely, something to keep a grip on ..."

"Your pain must have been awesome, Catherine ..."

"Yes Vincent, it was; almost more than I could bear; so great that I have reached a very difficult decision. I don't quite know how to tell you; the pain of losing a child that had only been created within my dreams and imagination was so great that I don't think I could ever allow that to happen for real.

"Vincent, since we consummated our relationship there is, between us, less of a barrier and in that spirit, I have to tell you that I don't think I could bear your child. If anything happened, I couldn't stand the pain of losing something so precious; for you to have something you thought you never would and then have it taken away from you ... I couldn't be responsible, I couldn't take that chance ..."

"Catherine, you have spoken from your heart. I feel honoured that you have shared something so painful and personal with me. You are right when you say I thought I'd never know the miracle of being a father. I never even thought I'd know the miracle of love. You are that miracle, Catherine, more than I have the right to expect. You are all the miracle I need. I too, do not regret the time we loved and I hope that is not the only time we will know that joy and I sense that you feel the same. You have always had that feeling for me and I am grateful you trusted that emotion and led me through that experience. You were right then, the other did not consume me; it did not harm you and I am sure you are as right in your decision, Catherine, as I am in mine. To this end, may I remind you that my father is a doctor and there is a treatment I can have that would ensure your peace of mind; that your fear would not be realised. Let me talk to Father ..."

"Vincent, you're not suggesting ... I couldn't let you make that sacrifice ..."

"Catherine, you have made countless sacrifices for the sake of our love ... let me make this one so that we can love each other as fully as we both wish. You are everything to me. To do this for your sake is no sacrifice ..."

"Then it's settled. I know how difficult this will be for you. I don't want you to feel pressured so I will stay away until you've spoken to Father. When a decision has been made then come to me and we will sit on my balcony and discuss it. I want to give you all the freedom you need, besides ... I don't want to be around when Father hears of this!"

They both laughed. Vincent sensed her tiredness and suggested she go home to rest, so they linked arms and began the journey to the sub-basement beneath her building.

They crossed the sandy floor to the iron gate. Vincent opened it, pulled the hidden lever and the heavy steel door slid to the right and Cathy moved forward to step once more into the tunnel world. Vincent placed a restraining hand on her shoulder and she turned to him to wait for his words and

although he did not speak, his eyes said much.

She was engulfed by his eyes, she felt herself rise into the air, her breath almost failed her, then she was moving and with a bump she realised that Vincent had actually picked her up and was carrying her across the threshold into the tunnel world! On the other side, the door slid shut behind them and he put her feet to the soft, sandy, tunnel floor, took her hand and they walked in silence, taking the very quiet route to her building basement, where they would part.

"We have such great things ahead of us, Catherine," he said, as he folded his arms about her and rested his chin on her head.

"I know, Vincent and I'm looking forward to every minute of it."

They turned to each other and Catherine put her arms around him, smiled up at him and buried her head in his chest as she had so many times before, but then something happened which hadn't occurred before: She felt a long nail, then fuzzy finger under her chin. Her head was being lifted upwards and she was looking right into Vincent's beautiful face, and it began to come closer.

Vincent kissed her! A warm, tender, loving kiss, without a hint of shyness, embarrassment or self-doubt.

Cathy thought she had died and gone to Heaven! Her knees almost gave way. She would have fallen if it were not for Vincent's strong arms supporting her.

"I love you, Catherine, I know that now and I have confidence in that love. You have dared to love me openly whereas I have refused to admit it even to myself. Well, no more, I will follow your example and my own heart from now on ..."

"Oh, Vincent, I love you so much ..."

The two stood in a close embrace, letting their bond speak for them. After several minutes, Catherine leaned back and looked up into his face. It was time to go home.

"Goodnight, my love," said Vincent and brushed the top of her head with his unique mouth. Catherine smiled, squeezed his hand and took her leave of him.

It was Vincent's practice to watch her disappear in the pool of light and listen to her as her feet ascended the iron staples which formed the ladder up to her world. It was her practice not to look back and as she made her way to her apartment, to imagine Vincent making his way back to his chamber, or may be to play chess or read with Father.

Over the next couple of days, Cathy spent some time walking around New York, re-introducing herself to her Home Town and it was looking good! On the night of the fourth day since their reunion, Cathy was sitting on her couch reading a favourite book, when she heard a tapping at the terrace doors and, for a moment couldn't identify the sound. Then she remembered and her heart skipped a beat and she rose from the couch with his name on her lips. She opened the doors and stepped outside to be with him.

"Vincent ..."

"My Catherine ..."

"Did you talk to Father?"

"I did. I told him what we discussed and the decision we reached and how he could help us.

He was horrified and I had to battle long and hard to make him see the sense of what I was saying, but finally he did." He slipped his arms around her waist. "You know, Catherine, my love for you has instilled in me a new confidence in myself I never thought I'd have; I was quite forceful with Father, I quite surprised myself - and him! He agreed to help in the end, but said he wanted to give me a thorough examination and carry out certain tests before he gave his final consent and I agreed. My general health is excellent, but the test ... Catherine ... When I was lost to myself ... I had a similar experience in my adolescence but I could not be sedated because it made my condition worse. My

biology is different, the drugs affected me in a different way than others; the result of this test, Catherine, told Father and I that I cannot father a child. I never will be able to. Father checked the test several times so we could be sure. There is nothing left for us to fear ..."

By this time Cathy's eyes were glistening; all her fears dissolving. Vincent smiled as broadly as his unique leonine feature would allow.

They sat on her balcony talking the night into submission; all barriers gone, the last ghost of their love laid to rest. Now they could truly embark on their Happy Life ...

END