

A Cry for Help

Part One

John walked along the craggy cliff top feeling alone and sad. What else could life possibly throw at him? He used to have an excellent job with a computer software firm, but recently the company had been losing money. Unfortunately his job was one of the casualties. They were cutting down on management staff and although he was very good at his job, a lower paid worker had been kept on and he had been made redundant.

Then his wife had mysteriously disappeared. The police didn't see the need to investigate because all of her belongings had also gone. That meant there were no suspicious circumstances that warranted an investigation. He had no idea why she would leave him like this, as he thought they had a really good relationship. They only occasionally argued, and shared quite a few interests.

His house had recently been sold because John had no wage coming in to pay the mortgage or the upkeep of the property. At 48 years old he was finding it difficult to find a new job: everyone wanted younger, more 'qualified' staff rather than someone with years of experience.

So here he was - alone, homeless and feeling very sad. Even the cold sea breeze seemed to be against him. He looked at the edge and seriously considered jumping over onto the rocks below. That would end all his miseries; no one would miss him or care. Suddenly he heard a thin wailing voice coming from a rocky ledge below him.

John walked as close to the crumbling edge as he could and peered over. To his amazement, perched on a thin ledge was a little girl. He guessed she was about 5 or 6 years old. Tears were streaming down her face; her large blue eyes looked up at John. She had blonde curly hair, framing an oval - shaped face. He could see she was terrified.

"Hello," John called down to her, "are you hurt?"

She sobbed and tried to answer but could only nod.

"What's your name?" he asked in a gentle voice.

When she replied her voice was thin and weak, she was obviously in pain. "Sarah," she said.

"Ok Sarah, where does it hurt the most?" John asked.

"My leg, mister, I can't move it, it hurts so much," and she started to whimper again.

"Listen to me carefully, Sarah. I am going to find help; I will be as quick as I can. I promise!" He said it as reassuringly as he could.

He had to think quickly, he was on a remote part of the coastline and had no idea how far he had walked. John looked at his mobile phone, but to his dismay there was no reception. The only thing for it was to improvise. He looked around in the

undergrowth and found some thick, trailing ivy vine. John twisted several of them together to make a rope. He hoped it would hold his weight. Fingers crossed that this will work, he thought to himself.

John went back to the cliff edge and tied his makeshift rope around a thick tree stump and the other end around his waist. He crept right to the very edge and shouted down to Sarah.

"Stay as still as you can, I'm on my way down to you."

Although the rocky ledge was not that far down, John found it very difficult to climb down. The surface of the rocky cliff had a thin top-soil. Loose stones and gravel occasionally fell below onto Sarah.

"Close your eyes Sarah, and keep your head covered with your arms," John shouted breathlessly. It took a while but John reached her at last.

"Hello Sarah, may I have a look at that leg?" He very gently examined it and decided it was broken. It was twisted at an awkward angle. This of course posed a big problem: how was he to get her up the cliff with a broken leg and without causing too much pain or damage?

John spoke to Sarah in a soothing voice:-

"Sarah, listen to me very carefully. I am going to have to straighten your leg and tie it to your good one. It will hurt a lot, but it's the only way I will be able to get you back up to the top."

She nodded "I'll be brave."

"I will count to three and then straighten your leg. One, two, three." John pulled the leg straight. Sarah started to scream in pain, but mercifully passed out. John worked quickly; he tore off the sleeves his shirt and used them to tie her legs together. He then picked up the unconscious Sarah-luckily she didn't weigh very much and was able to hold her in one arm. He scrambled his way back up the cliff- face. He slipped several times, but finally made it back to the top. John had no idea where the strength had come from and he now felt exhausted.

John gently laid down Sarah; she moaned and began to regain consciousness. Her eyes opened and looked straight at John. She looked so scared and vulnerable.

"Where's your Mummy and Daddy Sarah?" asked John in a soothing voice.

"I don't have any," she replied, "I lived in a children's home, but no one wants me, not even them!"

John put his arms around her and she clung to him- she didn't want to let go.

"Sarah, listen to me carefully, we need to get you to a hospital. Only a doctor can mend your leg for you." stated John.

She nodded, but she still held onto him. He gently picked her up and started walking back the way he had come. He knew he had passed a cottage quite a while ago, but wasn't sure how far it was. It was his only option. John found it very difficult walking on the uneven ground with a child in his arms. He was also trying to walk without jarring her leg. Thankfully the child had passed out again.

At long last he reached the cottage, and to his relief John could see a woman in the garden. She saw him and rushed to meet him: she could tell he was struggling. The woman told John to follow her into the cottage, where he gently placed Sarah onto a sofa. John then collapsed into a nearby armchair. He explained briefly what had

happened, and the woman immediately phoned for an ambulance. She then made John a cup of hot, sweet tea. He felt a little better when he had drunk it. "My name is Sally," the woman said "And I think you are a very brave man!" John had just introduced himself, when they heard the siren of the ambulance. It stopped outside the cottage and a paramedic - a tall blonde man- carrying his medical - box, came to the door.

Sally took the paramedic to Sarah. John told him the story of what had happened. Sarah was just waking from an exhausted sleep and managed a weak smile at John. The paramedic examined Sarah and remarked on the good job John had done - but it was a bad break and she was also suffering from slight exposure: Sarah needed to go to hospital. Sarah pleaded with John to go with her, and the paramedic thought it would be a good idea if John was also 'checked over' when they got there.

John thanked Sally for her help; and then holding Sarah's hand, got into the ambulance. It was a short journey to the hospital.

The hospital staff were fantastic. While they gave John a check up, they whisked Sarah off to the x-ray department. John was pronounced fit and was told to wait in reception for news about Sarah. An hour passed and then a nurse came to find him. "Are you a relative?" she asked.

"No," replied John, and told the nurse what Sarah had said to him.

"Then we have a problem: we need someone to sign a consent form. Sarah has to have an operation; otherwise she will never walk properly on that leg. I will have to involve social services and the police. Is it ok if they ask you some questions?"

John said that it would be fine: he didn't intend going anywhere until he knew Sarah was ok.

The police officer arrived and was satisfied there was no misconduct on John's part. Social services confirmed that Sarah had run away from an orphanage, and signed the consent form for her operation. He then had to wait hours for news on Sarah. Finally a nurse told John that Sarah's operation had been a success and that she was asking for him. They had pinned her leg and it was now in a plaster cast, but because of her mild exposure they wanted to keep her in for a while for observation.

John went up to the children's ward and as he entered, Sarah's little face lit up with pleasure.

"Hello Sarah, how are you feeling?" John said gently.

"I am a little bit tired and sore," she said. "But I am very happy to see you."

For the first time in months John felt that he had a purpose in life. He was going to make sure this child had some happiness in her life for a change.

"I will stay a while," he said.

After about an hour he could tell Sarah was tired. "You must get some rest now, and I promise I will be back soon," John assured her.

"I am a bit sleepy, you will come back and see me won't you?" she said, and gave him a hug before settling down on the bed.

When John got back to reception, Sally was there waiting for him. She wanted to know how they both were. John found Sally easy to talk to and he found himself

telling her all about his recent troubles. Sally said he was welcome to stay with her for a while, at least until Sarah was better. That way he could visit her easily. Sally explained that she had lived there alone since her husband had died. She was trying to manage the small holding on her own, but there was too much work for her to cope with. She suggested that in return for staying there, he could do some jobs on the small holding to earn his keep.

The journey back to the cottage was a bit of a blur for John. He sat there in silence, recapping the day's events. He felt a mess - his shirt was sleeveless, tattered and torn; his trousers covered in dust; and his hair was also full of dirt and dust. Sally parked the car and opened the door into the cottage. She then took John upstairs to the room in which he would be staying.

It was not a very big room, but large enough for his needs. There was a single bed in one corner, a wardrobe along the other wall, and a small window looking out onto the courtyard. The walls were white-washed, and the floor consisted of polished boards. On the floor was a rag rug of brightly-coloured cotton. Sally said he was welcome to make use of the clothes in the wardrobe, but she hoped he didn't mind the fact they were her late husband's. She then left John to settle in. The first thing he did was to clean himself up in the bathroom and change into the clothes: they were a little large but at least they were clean.

When John ventured back downstairs Sally gave him a tour of the rest of the cottage. There were two other bedrooms, a bathroom, the lounge, a kitchen and a small study. John noticed that although the cottage was kept clean and tidy, it was crying out for minor repairs and a coat of paint.

After the tour, they returned to the kitchen. It was a typical farmhouse kitchen: a range for cooking and heating, rustic wooden cupboards and shelves on the walls, and a dresser with the traditional blue and white china placed on it. On the floor were quarry tiles. A large wooden table sat in the middle, with chairs arranged around it. John sat down and noticed that the seat pad was hand-embroidered with an intricate pattern made up of silk threads in shades of blue, green and browns. Sally made a pot of tea and took freshly baked scones out of the oven. She then put home-made strawberry jam and clotted cream onto the table to serve with them.

After they had drunk their tea and eaten the scones, Sally showed him around the smallholding. There were chickens in a run close to the cottage; further away in a field was a small flock of sheep and a couple of cows. She kept the sheep for their wool; and the cows for their milk to drink and to make her own cheese, cream and butter. John could see that the fences surrounding the farm needed repairing, hedges needed trimming and the chicken run could do with enlarging. There was a lot of work to keep him busy. He would start work tomorrow morning, after recovering from the excitement of the day.

At first light the cockerel began to crow and it woke John with a start. For one moment he was confused, and then remembered where he was. Of course mornings started early in the countryside. He washed and dressed then went downstairs to the kitchen. Sally was already up and had a cup of coffee and some porridge ready for him. When they had eaten she told him the routine. Their first job was to round up the cows and milk them. Then, open the hen coup and feed them and collect any eggs.

Sally then showed John where the tool shed was that contained all the tools he would need and spare wood and wire for repairing the fencing.

After she had showed him around, Sally made John a packed lunch and he set off for the top fields to repair the fences. Once he got there he realised just how big a job it really was. The fencing had been neglected for years. There were loose fence posts, broken wire, and sections where the posts had rotted away altogether. It took John all day to make the top field secure. He had only stopped once - and that was for his lunch. He stood back and admired his work, then made his way back down to the cottage.

It was getting dark by the time he reached the cottage. John could smell the lovely aroma of cooking and it made him feel ravenous. The country air and manual work had given him quite an appetite. Sally had made a lamb stew with dumplings and served it with chunks of freshly baked bread. John managed to eat two servings before he felt full. He then helped Sally wash up before they went to the lounge to relax for a while. Sally didn't have a TV, so they listened to the radio. John felt himself dozing off, so thought it was best if he went to bed. He said goodnight to Sally and retired to bed at 10pm. It didn't take him long to fall into a deep sleep.

The cockerel woke John early again, so he got up and dressed and went down for breakfast. His muscles were a little achy but not as bad as he thought they would be. He decided that today he would start on the hen house and make the chicken pen larger. This turned out to be a major job and it was not helped by the bossy cockerel who kept trying to keep John away from 'his' hens. Once again it took all day to complete the task. After shutting the hens up for the night, John cleaned up before going to the kitchen to sit down for supper. While Sally and John were relaxing after supper, the phone rang. It was the hospital. Sarah had been asking for John, so they asked if he could possibly visit her tomorrow. The hospital had cleared it with social services, and all parties thought it was in Sarah's best interests if John called in to see her. He told them he would be able to visit her in the afternoon.

The following morning after helping with the cows and chickens, John did odd jobs around the house. After an early lunch Sally drove him to the hospital and dropped him off. She then went into the nearby shopping centre while John visited Sarah.

The hospital reception desk directed John to the children's ward. He didn't have far to look when he entered the ward. Sarah was sat beside her bed playing with a few of the other children. She looked up when he entered the ward and her little face lit up with joy. He walked towards her and she put her arms out for a hug.

"John, John," she cried.

"My, you're looking much better," John said.

She clung to him for a long time, then remembering where she was, she introduced her friends. He played a board game with the children for a while and he casually chatted to them. Sarah took great pride in showing off her plaster cast and all the signatures she had collected.

"John, they said I can leave here soon, but where will I go? I don't want to go back to the home!" said Sarah, her mouth pouting. John thought she sounded a lot older than her six years.

"Can't I stay with you?" she pleaded.

"I will be a good girl, I promise, please, please," Sarah continued.

John managed to distract her without giving her an answer, and soon a nurse was asking him to leave as it was the children's supper time. He gave Sarah another hug before he left, and promised to visit again tomorrow.

When John was leaving the ward, the sister on the desk called out to him, "Mr. Phillips, could I have a word please?"

He walked over to the neat white desk.

"Mr. Phillips," she began, "Sarah is well enough to be discharged, but she will have to come back in three weeks for another x-ray to check her leg is healing correctly.

Social services have said all the homes are full and there are no foster carers available at the moment. Is there any chance of Sarah staying with you for a few months? You will have to have police checks etc. We feel she would be much happier with you."

John was taken aback at first and then explained his situation. "I will have to ask Sally before I can give you an answer."

"I hope for Sarah's sake that she will agree - and it is only for a short time, then other arrangements will be made," said the ward sister.

"I will give you the answer tomorrow, when I visit Sarah," replied John.

Sally was waiting for John outside the hospital. She had done some shopping and met with a friend for a coffee and chat. She knew that visiting hours would soon be over, so she had decided to wait for John. He was pleased to see her: he didn't feel like a long walk back to the cottage. John got into the car and fastened his seatbelt. He was very quiet on the journey back. Sally sensed that something was on his mind, but thought it best not to say anything: he would tell her in his own time.

Back at the cottage, John helped Sally bring in the groceries. He then offered to help with the evening meal. When they sat down to eat it, John finally got up enough courage to ask her about Sarah.

Sally was quiet and thought for a moment then replied, "She may stay here while her leg mends, but she will be your responsibility. I know that sounds harsh, but should you decide to leave I don't want the responsibility of a little girl at my age."

"Agreed," said John, "I will find out what is involved when I visit tomorrow."

After the meal, John went out to settle the hens for the night and lock up the property. He then read for a little while before going to bed. The early morning starts meant he was going to bed earlier and earlier. He fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

At first light he was actually awake before the cockerel. He got up, washed, and dressed. First, he sorted out the hens, and then got the cows into the barn ready for milking. He had watched Sally milk them, but this was his first attempt on his own. Sally still milked by hand as there was no point in buying expensive machinery for a few cows. John found it difficult at first and it was slow going. At last he was finished and took the milk to the cold store.

John then returned to the kitchen. He had just put the kettle on, when Sally came downstairs. She was very surprised to find that John had finished the milking and that the kettle was on. He told her to sit down while he did the breakfast. He cooked boiled eggs with toast and a pot of tea.

Sally really enjoyed it. "That's the first time for years that I have had a breakfast cooked for me. What a lovely surprise - and the fact the hens and cows are sorted too."

John replied, "It's the least I can do after all the kindness that you have shown me. I

will work on the hedges this morning and then visit Sarah this afternoon. Hopefully we should know more details about her discharge from the hospital."

When John left to tend to the hedges Sally made herself busy with some housework. She was not sure how the situation with John and Sarah would work out. Having a young child in the house would be strange and she was not sure whether she would like it.

That afternoon John visited the hospital, and after seeing Sarah he spoke to the receptionist about her being discharged. She informed him that Sarah would be discharged at the end of next week. That would allow all the paperwork to be completed; and would give the chance for John to sort out some clothes for Sarah, and get her room ready. Social services will send a cheque to cover the costs of new clothes and other necessities.

For the next week John spent most of his time decorating the spare bedroom for Sarah. He painted the walls a pale green; and the door, skirting board and door frame white. The floor he re-waxed and bought a fluffy dark green rug. Sally found a patchwork quilt that she had made a few years ago, to go on the bed. There was a wardrobe, made of oak, which he left unpainted. Beside the bed was a little oak table; and on it a bedside lamp with a pretty white lace shade on it.

Finally, the day arrived for Sarah to be discharged from the hospital. John and Sally were feeling apprehensive about it. When John arrived at the hospital Sarah was full of excitement. She had always lived in an orphanage. This would be the first time she had lived in a house - and she would even have a room of her own.

John signed the appropriate papers and they finally left the hospital. They set off for the cottage. Sally had to drive, as John was still not insured for her vehicle.

As Sally drove up the lane to the cottage, Sarah gasped with pleasure.

"It's so pretty!" she exclaimed.

Sally parked the car and they helped Sarah into the cottage. Naturally Sarah wanted to see her room straight away, so John carried her up the stairs so that Sarah could settle in. Meanwhile Sally made some drinks for them.

John opened the door to her room and a beaming smile spread across her face. She asked John to put her on the bed and she bounced on it as best she could.

"BRILLIANT!" she shouted.

Sally called up to them, "Come on you two, come down for a drink and biscuit, and Sarah, I also have a little something for you."

John helped Sarah to hobble down the stairs as quickly as she could with her leg in plaster.

When they got to the kitchen, they found that Sally had made them each a hot chocolate, and on a plate was a pile of home-made cookies. She showed Sarah where her seat was at the table. Sally had made sure there were a few cushions on the chair so that Sarah could reach the table. Once she was seated Sally told her to close her eyes and hold out her hands. Sarah obeyed trying her utmost not to peep. Sally placed a parcel in her hands. It was about the size of a shoe box.

"Open your eyes," Sally said.

Sarah opened her eyes and looked down at the beautifully wrapped box. It was covered in a floral wrapping paper and secured with a large pink bow.

Surprisingly for such a young child she carefully untied the bow and unwrapped the box. When the wrapping had fallen away Sarah was left holding a shoe box. She looked at it puzzled, but slowly lifted the lid to take a peek inside. To her delight, snuggled up in a pink crochet blanket, was a rag doll. Sally had made it herself, and

she was beautiful. She had long dark hair made from wool; and embroidered nose, mouth and eyes. Her clothes were made from various floral prints. Underneath the dress she wore pretty white vest and pants. Everything was made with elastic or pop fastenings, so that she could be easily undressed. She even had home-made moccasins on her feet.

Sarah gently picked her up and cuddled her. Sally asked Sarah what she was going to name her. Sarah said she would think of a name later. They drank their hot chocolate and then Sarah took her doll upstairs to her room. She was feeling tired and needed to have a nap.

John went out to check on the animals, while Sally prepared supper. Sarah had woken up and was playing with her doll. She limped into the kitchen and told Sally that she was going to name her doll Molly.

"That's a pretty name," said Sally. "Shall we lay the table together and put a cushion on a chair for Molly?"

"Yes," said Sarah. "I think I can manage to help you."

They had just managed to finish laying the table, when John arrived back from caring for the animals. He had bedded them all down for the night, and went upstairs to have a wash before sitting down for supper.

When supper was over they all went into the sitting room and John read a story to Sarah. Sally listened and at the same time was knitting a purple and green striped jumper for Molly. At 7.00 p.m. Sally and John took Sarah upstairs to settle her into bed for the night. Sarah snuggled down into the bed with Molly in her arms. She said she was fine and didn't need anyone to stay with her: she was used to sleeping in strange places.

Sally and John went back to the sitting room and talked about Sarah. They thought it was remarkable how well she had settled in. John said he would get up earlier than usual to feed the animals and milk the cows, so that he could be back to eat breakfast with Sarah. At 10.00 p.m. he went to bed, but found it hard to sleep as he was listening out for Sarah. He needn't have worried, she slept soundly all night.

At 4.30 a.m. John got up to milk the cows and open the hen house. The cockerel didn't chase him this morning for a change. As promised he was back in time for breakfast. When he walked into the kitchen he saw that Sarah was already dressed and she proudly told him that she had done it all by herself! Sally served breakfast and was finding it strange having a child in the house but was adapting quickly.

By the end of the first week Sarah had settled in very well and was getting quite mobile on her crutches. She wanted to go out with John to see all the animals. John agreed that he would get all the jobs done early tomorrow, and after lunch he would take her around the farm. So, the next day John did as he promised and had finished all the chores for that day before lunch.

Sarah was so excited she hardly tasted her food as she ate it so quickly.

"I've finished," she mumbled, with a mouthful of food.

John and Sally smiled and told her to finish her mouthful: then she could get down from the table. Sally and John finished their meal and John went to find Sarah. John found her near the back door; he helped her down the small step and into the yard.

"Where would you like to start?" said John.

Sarah just grinned, and then pointed. "Over there!" she said excitedly. She was pointing to the Hen house.

John hoped the cockerel was in a good mood this afternoon. He couldn't have him chasing Sarah around with Sarah's leg in a plaster cast.

It was quite strange: as they approached the chicken run, the cockerel strutted out to meet them, then paraded around Sarah as if to say: "Look at me, I'm the best looking cockerel in the world." Then, it was as if he was leading them into the henhouse to show off his 'ladies' to her. Sarah told the cockerel what lovely hens he had and how good he looked. John gave her some corn to feed them, and they followed her around pecking at the hem of her dress if she didn't throw the corn fast enough.

Next they went to the milking parlour, and he showed her where they stored the milk and how it was filtered and pasteurised before they drank it. After that, he took her to the pastures. He had to drive her in the Land Rover as it was too far for her to walk, and he didn't need insurance to drive it on Sally's land. John showed her the boundary fences of the farm and the areas where the sheep and cows grazed. He then told her about the birds that nested in the hedgerows, and pointed out a magpie's nest high in the tree; he explained to her that they always build a roof over their nest to hide the contents. It was now nearly lunchtime and he had one more place to show her before they returned to the cottage for lunch.

John drove back to the yard, parked the Land Rover and carefully lifted Sarah out. "This is our last visit before lunch," John said. "It is just a short walk over to the barn."

They entered the barn and John explained to Sarah that a barn owl lived up in the rafters, and if she was lucky she may see it fly out at dusk to hunt; and that she might even catch a glimpse of one of the many farm cats.

"I like cats," replied Sarah.

When John and Sarah entered the barn, they were greeted with mews from six little kittens curled up in the hay. The mother cat soon heard them and came trotting over to make sure they were safe. The mother led down and immediately the kittens nuzzled and kneaded her with their little paws. They were all trying to feed at the same time. It was then that Sarah heard a muffled mewing from under the straw. Sarah asked John to bend down and move the straw. He carefully lifted it, and underneath was a tiny tabby and white kitten. It was about half the size of its siblings. It looked weak, and was unable to suckle because the bigger kittens kept pushing it out of the way. Sarah picked it up; its little pink nose tried nuzzling into her jumper. The mother cat didn't seem to care about this little one. Sarah pleaded with John to let her look after it and feed it. She looked up at him with her big eyes, and he couldn't refuse her plea. John warned her that it might not survive, as it was the runt of the litter. John carried it back to the kitchen for her, because Sarah had to use her crutches.

Sally took one look at the poor little kitten and thought it would not survive, but kept her thoughts to herself. She realised how important it would be for Sarah to have something to care for. Sally showed Sarah how to drip goat's milk into the kitten's mouth using an old syringe.

"In the morning we will buy a bottle and proper teat for it," said John.

Sally found a box and an old blanket. She lined the box with newspaper, and let Sarah take the kitten up to her room. After supper Sarah went to bed. She laid the kitten in its box; but it mewed so much that she ended up picking it up, and she let it snuggle up to her in bed.

The following morning, after breakfast, John asked Sarah to put the kitten in its box so that they could take it to the vet to be checked over. The vet would also be able to supply the correct milk and bottle. They arrived at the vet just after nine o'clock, so he was able to see them straight away. He gave the kitten a thorough examination. Apart

from being undernourished it was in good health.

"It's a little boy kitten," the vet told Sarah. "Have you thought of a name? I need one to put on my record sheet," he continued.

Sarah thought for a while. "I think I will call him Lucky, because it is lucky I found him," said Sarah.

"That's a very good name, Sarah," replied the vet. "Now then, let me show you how to feed little Lucky correctly, and how you must clean him to make him go to the toilet." Sarah didn't like the sound of that bit, but knew that if she wanted to keep Lucky then she had to do it. The vet then showed her how to mix the milk formula and how to put the tiny teat on the bottle. He then demonstrated the way to feed Lucky. Lucky immediately sucked on the teat and his little white paws were trying to bed in, but they only made contact with the air. Soon the bottle was empty.

"My, what a hungry little fellow," said the vet.

He then showed Sarah how to clean the kitten with moist cotton wool to make him go to the toilet. He let Sarah try so that he could check that she was able. A six year old seemed awfully young to be caring for such a little kitten. John explained that he would help and make sure the kitten was well cared for.

John paid for the formula milk, bottle and vet fees; and made an appointment for three weeks time so that Lucky could have his injections. Lucky, with his rounded tummy full of milk, managed to sleep all the way back to the farm.

Sarah made an excellent surrogate mother: she made sure Lucky was fed and cleaned every three hours. By the end of the first day he was already looking stronger.

That evening, Sally said to John: "I think I was wrong about that kitten. It looks like it is going to survive after all. It is just what Sarah needed."

As the weeks passed, the kitten became stronger and stronger and began to wander around the house on his own. Sarah's leg was also healing nicely. The day soon came for Sarah to go back to the hospital to see if they could remove the plaster. John said he would take her so that Sally could look after the kitten. (He was now insured for the car.)

At the hospital, John and Sarah had to wait about an hour before she had her x-ray. Then they finally got to see the consultant after another half an hour. Luckily it was good news. The bone had healed and they could take the plaster off today, but it would still mean several months of physiotherapy before the muscles would be strong enough for her to walk without crutches or a stick. Sarah was delighted with the news: she was glad to be getting rid of the itchy plaster, but also glad she had to have physio. That meant she had to stay with John and Sally for a few more months before social services would be thinking of rehoming her.

Unfortunately it was other hour of waiting before they saw the nurse who removed the plaster. Sarah was a bit scared of the saw that cut the plaster, but the nurse soon reassured her by putting the blade on her own arm to demonstrate it would only cut the plaster and not skin. When the plaster came off the nurse looked at Sarah's leg. It looked very thin, all the muscles had wasted away and the skin was very pale from being covered for so long. There was a scar but the nurse reassured her it would soon fade now that daylight could get to her skin. The nurse told them that the physiotherapist would visit the farm in the morning to begin work on her leg. They thanked the nurse and left the hospital.

Sarah was using her crutches and was refusing to put any weight on her leg: it felt so weak that she was frightened it would break again. She hobbled back to John's car. Once John had her sat inside the car, he shut the door, walked around to his side of the

car, got in and drove them home. Unknown to Sarah, John had popped into the shop on his last visit and bought a collar for Lucky and a new outfit for her rag doll. Sally was there to greet them when they pulled up in the driveway. She had the cat in her arms. Lucky mewed when he saw Sarah, and wriggled trying to free himself because he was so eager to get to her. Sarah was not so confident with walking again without the plaster, and hobbled inside and sat down before holding Lucky. Immediately Lucky curled up on her lap, purring. Once Sarah was settled, Sally brought them all a cup of tea and home made choc chip cookies. John then brought out the parcel he had bought earlier in the week and gave it to Sarah. She took great delight in carefully opening the parcel so that she didn't tear the paper too much. Her face lit up with a beaming smile when she saw the collar and new outfit. She put the red collar on Lucky straight away, and asked John to bring her doll downstairs so that she could change her. After supper, Sarah was very tired so went to bed early. Lucky dutifully curled up on the end of the bed, with a contented purr.

As the weeks went by, Sara's leg became stronger and stronger. She was very good at doing her exercises even when the physio couldn't come every day. Sally and John could see the muscles building up, and her leg no longer looked like flesh covered bone. She still had a slight limp, but that didn't stop her from running around like any other child. Lucky was also growing into a strong healthy cat, and was slowly losing his kittenish looks.

Now that Sarah was able to walk, Sally and John had managed to get her into the local village school. The headmistress suggested that they took Sarah for a visit and for them to stay with her for a few hours. Once she was OK with that, she could begin by going in the mornings for a few weeks, so that she could become used to the routine. Sarah was very excited about starting school and making new friends; she didn't seem at all apprehensive about it. All went well, and she was soon to start on her own.

It was now Monday morning and it was Sarah's first morning at school. She bravely walked through the door on her own and immediately began to chat to some of the other girls. It was a relief to Sally and John, but Sally remarked to John that Sarah was probably so used to going to new care homes, that new situations hardly troubled her at all. When John went to collect her at lunchtime, she looked tired. He spoke to the class teacher, who reassured him that she had settled well, made lots of friends and enjoyed doing the tasks they set her. When she began full-time, she would soon settle into the routine and not feel so tired.

After a few weeks, Sarah got used to being at school all day and looked forward to going home to see Lucky. Everyone was really happy, most of all Sarah, who had stability in her life for the first time. She was developing into a happy, confident little girl. She was enjoying life now, and had her childhood back. She felt loved and cared for: just what a child needs to thrive. If only it could stay that way; but as John was soon to find out, fate had other things in store for all of them.

Three months had passed since Sarah had started school; and John, Sally and Sarah were all extremely happy. Sarah was very settled at school and enjoying her life at the smallholding. It felt like she belonged to a real family at last, even though John and Sally were not in a relationship.

That evening they were sat around the table enjoying their evening meal, when the phone rang.

"I wonder who that can be at this time of the evening?" said Sally. It was very unusual for them to have a phone call this late in the day. She answered the phone.

"Hello," said Sally.

"Hello, is that Sally?" said a woman's voice. "This is social services in Merseyside.

We understand that you are currently caring for Sarah.”

“Yes I am,” replied Sally.

“We understand that she has now completely recovered from her recent injuries.”

“Yes,” said Sally, dreading what they were going to say next.

“Can we come and visit her next week, as her mother has been making enquiries about her?” the social worker asked.

“Just one moment please,” answered Sally. “Sarah, be a good girl: can you check on the hens for me - I think I forgot to lock the pen.”

“Yes, Sally, I won’t be long,” said Sarah, and she rushed out to the chickens.

“Her mother? I thought Sarah didn’t have any relations: that is why she was in an orphanage. She certainly doesn’t know either of her parents,” Sally said in a firm voice.

“I’m sorry; I do not want to discuss this over the telephone. Please may I visit you next week when Sarah is at school, and then she will not need to know what is going on for the time being,” replied the woman.

“I suppose we don’t really have much choice in the matter, do we? Just when Sarah is settling down at school too! Next Tuesday at 9.30 a.m. is the only convenient time, so we shall see you then!” Sally then promptly ended the call, which was just in time, as Sarah came back in to finish her supper.

“The chickens were locked up, Sally, you must have forgotten that you had locked them in,” said Sarah.

John and Sally tried to continue the evening as normal, trying not to raise suspicions. But when Sarah went upstairs to get ready for bed, she could not help feeling that Sally and John were hiding something from her. It took a long time for her to go off to sleep and when she did eventually doze off, it was a light fitful sleep, full of strange dreams of people coming to take her away from this lovely home.

In the morning when she came down for breakfast, she still looked tired and was not her usual energetic self. John had already gone out to feed the animals as usual and Sally tried to busy herself around the kitchen, but Sarah wasn’t fooled: Sally seemed tense, and was not humming to herself as she normally did when she was working in the kitchen. They kept up this pretence for the rest of the week; but as the day of the social worker’s visit loomed, the atmosphere in the house became tenser.

Finally, the day had arrived; Sarah went to school still wondering what on earth was going on. Luckily there was going to be a puppet theatre in school, and after the show they were running workshops for the children. This kept Sarah so busy that she didn’t have time to think about what was going on at home.

Promptly at 9.30 a.m. there was a knock on the farmhouse door. John went to open it. The woman that stood there was very stern-looking. Her greying hair was tied tightly into a ponytail, and she wore old-fashioned wire-rimmed glasses that were far too big for her narrow, angled face. She was wearing the type of clothes that you would associate with an old Victorian nanny. John knew he shouldn’t let first impressions influence him, but he did feel that she would scare Sarah.

He invited her in, and introduced her to Sally. They all sat around the kitchen table, and the woman put a thick A4 folder down in front of her.

“Now then, let’s get straight to the reason I am here and try to come to a solution,” she said, looking directly into their eyes.

“Sarah has been a ward of the court since she was a tiny baby: she was found abandoned outside a police station. The mother has now come forward and explained the circumstances behind the abandonment. We are satisfied that she is now able to look after Sarah with support from us.”

She continued, "Legally we have to see if it will work out. There are conditions that the mother has to abide by. If she doesn't keep to them, then Sarah once again will be taken into care."

John was furious. "Doesn't Sarah have a say in this? I know she may be only a child of six, but surely her feelings and the stability we have provided for her here must be taken into consideration? I was under the impression that the child's welfare should come first! Surely that means her mental well-being as well as the physical? She should be asked what she wants before anything is finalised," John said in an angry voice.

"Her welfare is exactly what we are thinking of. She is living here with a widow and a man who has lost everything in his life. It is true that so far you have catered for her needs, but what happens when she gets older? Who knows what may happen to your relationship with each other? You, John, may decide you have had enough and walk out. Sally, you may find another partner and not want to be bothered with a young girl anymore. She would be much better with her blood mother who wants the opportunity to get to know her own daughter and care for her now that she is able. I am sorry, this is not open for discussion: she will be reunited with her mother in due course," the woman replied.

Sally and John were speechless. At first they were appalled that Sarah could be returned to a mother who had abandoned her; but later that evening, when they were talking they could sort of understand that any mother would want to have their child back; and after all, they didn't know the circumstances or the state her mother had been in.

John tried to find out more about Sarah's mother, but no more information was forthcoming. They had to face the fact that they would lose Sarah forever. They were dreading the moment when she got home from school and they would have to tell her the news. However, just as John was about to leave to collect Sarah from school, another person from social services arrived and informed them she would break the news to Sarah. John was to collect her from school as usual and bring her back to the cottage.

John waited nervously outside the school, hoping that Sarah wouldn't sense anything was wrong when she got into the car. The bell rang and Sarah waited by the school gate for John. He casually went over to collect her. He needn't have worried about her sensing his unease as she was very excited by the fact that she had been chosen to have a leading role in the school play. She chatted on and on about it all the way home. John couldn't get a word in if he had wanted to.

Mary, the lady from social services, was quite different looking from the last person that had visited. She had a round, kind face; and brown, curly hair that framed her face. She was of medium build and height, and her gentle mannerism immediately made everyone feel at ease. Sarah spotted Mary's identification badge and knew immediately where she was from. She stormed out of the room, ran upstairs and hid under her bed, shouting as she went "I'm not going back into a home. You can't make me, I want to stay here."

"Let her go, I will have a chat with her in a moment," said Mary, who had a soft, gentle voice. "First let me give you all the information that I can on the current situation." She handed Sally and John a small file labelled Sarah.

There was only a brief outline of her past, as most of it was confidential. There was also the legal part that stated that if the mother can provide for her child with support then she has the legal right unless the child had been adopted. If however the

conditions are not met, then Sarah will be taken into care again. Although Sally and John had cared for her so far, they had made an exception to the fostering rules because Sarah was obviously thriving at the moment. Given John's current situation he wouldn't have normally been considered as a foster carer.

"Well I suppose we don't really have any say in the matter, but what about Sarah - is this really a good thing for her? She has settled in school and made friends, and will have to leave that all behind," said John. "Surely she needs some stability in her life?" "That's the problem: we cannot guarantee stability with you, despite what you say. You have no home of your own, John; Sally is trying to run her smallholding; and you are not in a relationship with one another except as a business partnership. You can see our point of view on this, I hope," Mary replied.

Reluctantly they had to agree with Mary. Looking from Social Services' point of view, they were not the best of foster carer options.

"This is going to be very difficult for Sarah," said Sally.

"Yes, it is. Let me go up to her and try to explain things," replied Mary.

Sally took Mary upstairs and showed her which room belonged to Sarah, and then went back down to sit with John. They sat in silence for a while trying to listen to what was going on upstairs. At first, there was only Mary's voice trying to persuade Sarah to let her go into her room. Then they heard the shouting and crying of Sarah. "I will not go with you. I'm not going into a home again, no, no, no."

Then they heard Mary trying to get through to her, explaining that it was her mother who wanted to see her, that they were not taking her into a home. Eventually Mary coaxed Sarah out of her room and downstairs to join John and Sally. Sarah was calmer now and Mary was able to explain to everyone what would happen.

"We are not going to take you away from Sally and John straight away. Firstly, we will set up a meeting with your mum and see how you get on together. Then, over the next few weeks, you will spend an afternoon, then a morning, building up to all day with her, until we think you are ready to stay for a few nights. After that, if everyone is in agreement - and that includes us - you can go to live with her. Meanwhile, you will stay here and continue at school. John and Sally will look after you and you will not miss your part in the school play," said Mary."

That seemed to calm down Sarah, and Sally and John were pleased that it was to be a gradual transition. A date during the school holidays was set for Sarah's first meeting with her mother. Mary would take her to, and bring her back from, the meeting.