

Walking Unfamiliar Ground

By Lindariel

With special thanks to my editor
Carole W
for her advice and encouragement

February's icy winds practically tore the precious file folder out of Kanin's hands as he belatedly struggled to put on his mittens, while Catherine waved frantically for a cab at the curb in front of the courthouse.

"Kanin, here!" Catherine shouted above the gale, holding open her leather tote. "Put your papers in here before they're scattered all the way down the street!"

With the folder safely stowed, Catherine resumed her efforts to secure a cab, lucking into one that had just rounded the corner. The two friends quickly piled inside, sighing with relief to get out of the blistering cold.

"Whew! Chinatown, please," Catherine instructed the cabbie. "Pei's Szechuan Palace, 28 Mott Street."

She turned to Kanin and added, "We're celebrating, and I'm buying you an early lunch!"

Kanin smiled bashfully and replied, "Could I maybe just look at those papers one more time?"

"Sure," she grinned, handing him the folder. "But I promise you, nothing has changed. Your probation is officially over, and you are an entirely free man!"

Kanin's year in prison had been difficult to bear, but his good behavior and calming influence on the other prisoners had paid off. At the time of his release, the prison warden had recommended to the parole board that Kanin's probationary period should be reduced from five years to just one, provided he complied with all of his parole requirements and agreed to speak with high school students about his personal experience with the dangers of drinking and driving.

The probationary year went by easily, thanks to Kanin's employment with Dominic Martinelli's salvage and demolition crew, an efficiency apartment above the Peis' restaurant with easy access to the Tunnels from the restaurant basement, and his speaking experiences, which turned out to be meaningful and cathartic for him and beneficial for the students. And today, with Catherine at his side as his *pro bono* attorney and glowing reports from his parole officer Fred Stanwick and from Marjory Henson, the school administrator in charge of the drunk driving speakers program, Kanin finally received the official court papers ending this painful, but necessary, chapter of his life.

"I can't believe it," he murmured, reading the papers over one more time before returning them to Catherine's tote bag. "I can finally return home to stay, not just to visit."

"Olivia's been conspiring with William all week over the menu for your welcome home dinner tonight," Catherine confided. "That's why I have permission to keep you long enough to have lunch at Henry and Lin's. I thought you might appreciate some time to wrap your head around this good news before you get inundated with congratulations at home."

“Thanks, Catherine,” Kanin replied. “At first, I resented not being able to just go back to living at home full time. But you were right about the apartment, and I’m sorry I resisted the idea. Fred dropped by to check on me sometimes during the evenings. Plus, it did make reporting for Dominic’s work crew early in the morning much easier. Most of all, Livvy and I needed a truly private place to talk things through. If I’d been living at home, where everybody knows everybody else’s business, she’d have just bottled up her resentment, and our marriage might not have survived. You called it a necessary cushion between prison and home, and it was exactly that. I’m really grateful you insisted that I at least give it a try.”

Catherine reached over and patted his hand.

“I’m just glad Henry and Lin came to me last year when their cook got married and moved out of their efficiency apartment,” Catherine responded. “I jumped at the chance to take over the lease permanently. At the time, I was thinking of our young people who might want to live there while attending college and still have easy access to the community, but I knew it would be perfect for you during your probation.”

Soon, the cab pulled up in front of the Pei’s restaurant, and Catherine generously tipped the driver before the two friends hurried inside. Henry welcomed them warmly and ushered them back to a cozy private booth.

“I’ll tell Lin you’re here,” Henry said as he handed them menus. “If Vivian is awake and not too fussy, maybe Lin will bring her down for a quick visit. She’s working on her first tooth and hasn’t been especially happy lately.”

“Oh my, I remember when Luke was teething!” Kanin exclaimed. “We tried everything! Dr. Wong sent down an herbal gel to rub on his gums, but he hated the taste. Livvy swore by an old washcloth dipped in freezing cold water. Luke would gnaw away on that to his heart’s content.”

Henry laughed, “I’ll have to ask Lin if she’s tried that yet. Vivian doesn’t like her great-grandfather’s teething gel either! Let me bring you a pot of tea, and then I’ll take your orders.”

Once they had placed their orders and settled back to enjoy the tea, Kanin said, “I have a favor to ask of you. Not for myself! But I’ve been thinking about a potential next candidate for the efficiency – Jamie.”

“Jamie!” Catherine spluttered. “But she and Mouse have finally settled into a workable routine sharing a chamber together, and Father has agreed to stop interfering in the development of their relationship. Is there a problem I haven’t heard about?”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that! Jamie and Mouse are doing well together,” Kanin replied. “But she’s restless and itching for a challenge. She’s gone about as far as she can with her studies Below, and Dominic and I have taught her everything we know from our respective trades. Dominic even puts her in charge of our salvage crews when I’m not available, and I trust her to lead work crews Below. She’s efficient, skilled, knows her limits, makes good decisions, handles people well, and the crews have readily accepted her leadership. I think she should enroll in a good engineering program Above, hopefully here in the City so she could visit the Tunnels regularly like I did while I was on parole.”

Catherine tapped her tea cup with a fingernail as she considered the problem.

“Engineering certainly isn’t my field,” she admitted. “But Stan Kaczmarek could give us excellent advice about a good program for Jamie. I’m sure he’s got contacts we could use. She’ll need to take the SAT and ACT tests and maybe some advanced placement exams as well. I’m happy to look into the testing

schedules and pay her exam fees. Father could consult the contacts he used to help Michael get his home schooling acknowledged by the state. It's certainly doable. The question is – What does Jamie want?"

"OK everybody, I think that's about all we can do for now," Jamie called out to her work crew. "Thanks so much for all your hard work. We've solved several small problems before they could become big ones, and I know Father will be pleased. Let's get all of our tools cleaned up and coil up the ropes properly. Tools that need sharpening or other maintenance should go into this carry box for Cullen's workshop. And please tag any ropes that appear to be rotting or fraying. I'll put together a master repair and replace list to share with Father in my report."

As the work crew shook hands and congratulated each other on a good survey and repair shift, Mouse wandered over to Jamie with a large coil of rope in his hands.

"Jamie, look, not good!" Mouse reported, showing her the extent of rot damage. "Looks like this rope got stored in a wet spot. Rot everywhere, and it stinks! Almost used it for that big pipe, then saw rot. Need to replace the whole thing."

Jamie examined the ruined rope, sniffed it, and took note of the tag attached to the end.

"This was kept in storage room A22," Jamie noted. "I think we should give that room a good going over before I report to Father. We might have a dripping water leak somewhere, but based on the smell, I think it's a leaking kerosene drum, and that could cause a bad fire."

"OK fine!" Mouse replied, then added softly. "My Jamie makes a good crew leader."

Jamie laughed and gave Mouse a quick kiss on the lips. "And My Mouse is a brilliant inventor and a terrific partner," she responded.

Mouse blushed bright red, but still kissed her back before shuffling off to place the damaged coil of rope beside the tool repair box.

"You two are disgustingly cute together," Cullen drawled, as he dropped a dull pair of wire cutters into the repair box.

"Thanks, Cullen," Jamie replied wryly. "I'll take that as a compliment, I think." Then she caught him by the sleeve as he was turning away. "Hey, could you take a quick detour with Mouse and me to check on storage room A22? That damaged coil of rope smells like kerosene. I think we might have a leaking drum, and that could be really dangerous."

"Sure," Cullen replied. "I'll get Kevin and Josh to take the repair box back to my shop for me. We should stop by A15 and pick up a couple oil-based fire extinguishers and a bucket of sand just in case. Let's go."

It was just as Jamie had thought. One of the kerosene drums had a pin-prick leak that had slowly created a pool of kerosene in the area where they'd stored several coils of rope. Two additional coils exhibited similar rot damage to the coil Mouse had found and would need to be replaced. The three friends located a nearly empty drum of kerosene and carefully transferred the remaining fuel from the damaged drum into

the safer container. Then they poured sand over the pool of kerosene to soak up the spill, planning to return after lunch to safely remove the kerosene-soaked sand and mop up the affected area.

Mouse gathered up the two ruined coils of rope, while Jamie made additional notations to her report for Father, and Cullen reorganized the supplies they'd moved in order to take care of the spill.

"We'll have to leave the doors open for a day or two to let the fumes completely air out," Jamie noted. "I'll ask Father to have Pascal put out a 'no torches' warning for this entire corridor. Cullen, would you please grab some of the orange traffic cones from A17? We'll put them at both ends of this corridor as a visual warning."

"You got it," Cullen stated and set off to find the cones, while Jamie and Mouse propped the doors wide open with several large rocks.

"Three damaged coils of rope," Mouse muttered. "Bad, but could have been much worse."

"You're right," Jamie agreed, tapping her clipboard with a pencil. "I'm recommending that we institute a regular storage room inspection schedule, so we can catch problems like this much sooner."

"Maybe use those wooden pallets we found to keep supplies up off the floor in case of other leaks? Easier to clean up? Less damage?" asked Mouse as he shouldered the damaged coils of rope.

"That's a great idea, Sweetheart!" Jamie replied, giving Mouse a quick kiss before gathering up the fire extinguishers to return them to their proper places. "Let's go report to Father!"

Jamie and Mouse arrived at the library to find Father, Vincent, Olivia, and little Luke visiting with Catherine and Kanin.

"Kanin!" Jamie called out happily, crossing the room to give her mentor a big hug. "Did everything go well at court this morning?"

"Everything went perfectly," Kanin grinned, as he shifted Luke to his hip in order to return her hug. "My probation is officially concluded, and I have all the papers to prove it! I'm planning to pack up the few things I have left in the apartment this afternoon. As of dinner this evening, I'll once again be a full-time Tunnel resident."

"That's so great!" Jamie enthused. "We've really missed having you with us."

"We were just telling Kanin that Father put you in charge of today's survey and repair crew," Vincent stated. "Was anything amiss? The rest of your crew returned for lunch quite a while ago."

"There's nothing at all concerning to report from the section we checked out this morning," Jamie replied, handing off her crew-leader clipboard to Father. "We shored up a few pipe supports that were starting to look dicey, and I've marked one false wall in section B35 that needs to be completely replaced. It's getting so thin and ratty in spots that I don't think it can be salvaged."

"Mouse and Cullen already have a new design ready to try out," Mouse added. "Easy to build. Ready in no time."

“I’ll add this wall to the crew sign-up roster for tomorrow,” Father said. “Is there anything else?”

“Yes, there is,” Jamie replied. “When we were cleaning up at the end of our shift, Mouse showed me that one of our coils of rope was badly rotted in a number of places, really just completely ruined.”

Mouse handed the coil of rope to Vincent for his inspection. Vincent immediately recoiled and held the rope at arm’s length for Mouse to take back.

“This reeks of kerosene!” Vincent exclaimed.

“That’s why we’re late getting back,” Jamie explained. “This rope came from storage room A22. We grabbed it as a just-in-case extra when we were picking up a bag of post-hole cement for the work crew. As soon as Mouse showed me the rope, I smelled the kerosene too, and I asked Mouse and Cullen to come with me to check out A22 right away.”

“Good thing we did, too,” Mouse added. “Found a puddle of kerosene from a tiny, tiny leak in a drum!”

“Oh my!” Father said. “I’m so glad you followed up, Jamie. You showed excellent judgment there as team leader.”

“Thank you, Father,” Jamie replied a bit bashfully. She then explained what they’d done to remedy the dangerous problem.

“We’ll go back to remove the sand and mop up after lunch,” she added. “We should ask Pascal to put out a no torch warning on the pipes for corridor A10 through 25.”

Father immediately scribbled out a note for Mouse to take to the Tunnel Pipe Master. As he scurried off, Jamie concluded her report.

“We need to set up a regular inspection schedule for any storage rooms housing liquid containers,” she stated. “Our quarterly inventory inspections just aren’t enough. Storage rooms with flammable products should be clearly marked and inspected at least weekly, and others monthly to limit damage from leaks. Mouse suggested we should also consider using the wooden pallets we salvaged last week to get dry goods and other supplies up off storage room floors in order to minimize this kind of damage in the future.”

“These are excellent recommendations, Jamie,” Father praised. “I’ll add weekly and monthly storage inspection rotations to the volunteer sign-up list right away and put out a call for a crew to make Mouse’s pallet idea a reality. Our community owes you a hearty thank you for preventing a serious problem.”

“I don’t even want to think about what a close call we’ve had here,” Jamie emphasized. “This really was plain dumb luck. If we hadn’t grabbed rope from this storage room for our work crew, who knows how much bigger that pool of kerosene might have gotten before it was discovered? We could have lost the entire drum, five more coils of rope, at least a dozen bags of cement, and all of the quick-set mortar we had stored on the floor beside that drum. Plus, if the fumes got worse, we could have started a flash fire just walking by the room with a torch or even from a static electric charge generated by our clothes.”

Kanin gave the other adults in the room a meaningful glance and inclined his head gently in Jamie’s direction.

“Jamie, please have a seat and join us for a few minutes,” Father said, motioning to a nearby chair. “Kanin has brought up an idea we’d like to discuss with you.”

“Honey, let me settle Luke down for his afternoon nap,” Olivia stated, lifting the dozy three-year-old off Kanin’s lap. “I’ll drop by the dining hall on my way and have William send a lunch tray here for Jamie.”

“Oh yes, thank you, my dear,” Father replied.

Kanin stood to give his wife a quick kiss and drop another kiss on the top of Luke’s head. “I’ll be back as soon as I’ve packed my things,” he whispered, and she beamed at him before leaving the room.

Jamie and Kanin took their seats, and the four adults looked among themselves as though deciding who should speak first.

“OK, you’re making me nervous,” Jamie stated with a little laugh, breaking the silence. “Kanin, what’s this big idea?”

“Well, look, Jamie, today is just the latest example of how far you’ve come with your studies, your trade skills, your good judgment, and your leadership abilities,” Kanin said. “Dominic and I have taught you pretty much everything we know. Vincent says you’ve completed all of your high school-level studies with flying colors, and that you’re probably the best math student he’s ever taught. I really think you should consider going to a college or technical school with a great engineering program. Father says he can contact the same Helpers who worked with Michael to get his home schooling recognized by the state. Catherine says she can help you register for the college entrance tests and pay your exam fees, and she suggested talking with Stan Kaczmarek about using his contacts to help you get into a good program here in the City. But we need to know what you want to do. What’s next for you, Jamie?”

“Kanin is moving out of the efficiency apartment above the Pei’s restaurant today,” Catherine added. “It would give you a mailing address and phone number Above for college purposes and a place to stay with easy access to the Tunnels when you’re taking classes. Mouse could even come stay Above with you from time to time, and you could easily spend evenings, weekends, and holidays Below just like Kanin did during his probation.”

Jamie stared open-mouthed, glancing from one encouraging adult face to another.

“But ... but college is so expensive!” Jamie exclaimed. “Michael was able to go because he won a national merit scholarship. I don’t have anything like that!”

“You haven’t applied for one yet,” Catherine answered. “I’ll bet once you have your SAT and ACT scores, there will be several scholarship programs vying for your attention. Plus, there’s also the Margaret Chase Charitable Trust.”

“M-Margaret!” Father stammered. “*My* Margaret?”

“Yes, Father,” Catherine responded with a sweet smile. “Before Margaret passed away, she spent some time with me and with an estate attorney from my Dad’s firm making a number of changes to her will, eliminating all the nonsense Henry Dutton had tricked her into incorporating. She decided to put her entire estate into a charitable trust, overseen by Peter Alcott and me, ostensibly to fund programs for the benefit of low-income people living in New York City. However, her private intentions for the trust were three-fold: to enhance the nutrition of Tunnel residents, to provide scholarships for young people from the

Tunnels who wish to go to college or technical school, and to provide emergency funds when the community is in need.”

Father stared at Catherine in astonishment, and then snapped his gaping mouth shut. He looked over at Vincent, who gave him a sheepish grin and a nonchalant shrug.

“And just when were you planning to inform me about this, young lady?” Father inquired with mock severity.

“I believe I just did,” Catherine replied serenely. “Margaret wanted the nutrition assistance to begin just as soon as her will was read, and she *instructed* me to delay informing you until you’d already experienced the trust in action. So William and I have been consulting on this for the past two years. The Chase Trust nutrition funds are provided on a quarterly basis to our Helpers with grocery stores and butcher shops so they can greatly enhance the donations they would regularly make. This way, the Trust supports our Helpers’ businesses and enables them to be even more generous.”

Catherine leaned forward and took the old man’s hands in hers. “Father, Margaret wanted the people of the Tunnels to never, ever go hungry again.”

“Oh my,” Father said, wiping a tear off his cheek. “My dear Margaret.”

“I should also confess that Michael Richmond was the first recipient of a Margaret Chase Charitable Trust scholarship,” Catherine continued, leaning back and taking Vincent’s hand.

“But I thought he won a national merit scholarship!” Jamie gasped.

“He did,” Vincent replied. “We can all be very proud of Michael for winning such a scholarship, especially since the odds were stacked against him because of his record as a home-schooled student. But the merit scholarship only paid for his tuition and fees. Catherine arranged for a Chase scholarship to cover Michael’s books, dormitory costs, and meal plan expenses and to provide monthly pocket money for subway transportation and other incidentals.”

“The Trust is also paying for Brooke’s nursing school tuition and transportation,” Catherine added. “She is our second scholarship recipient. So you see, Jamie, if you are accepted to a college or technical school Above, you will have financial assistance to make your studies a reality. We just need to know what you’d like to do.”

Jamie found herself once again gaping at them like a fish.

“I don’t know what to say,” Jamie began.

“I do,” said Mouse from the library entrance. “I say NO! Jamie not go! Not leave Mouse!”

And he turned with a sob and ran off down the corridor, heedless of direction or Jamie’s cries for him to come back.

Stan Kaczmarek huddled down into his winter coat and scarf as he paced the sidewalk outside the building that housed his next appointment.

There are very few people who can intimidate me. He chuckled at that thought. And all of them are women!

Catherine Chandler had somehow reached deep down into his soul and shined a light on all of the compromises and excuses he'd made to serve the ambitions of the Elliott Burch persona he'd created for his determined climb to the top of the New York City development industry. He'd made the mistake of viewing her as the ultimate jewel in the crown of his achievements without recognizing how his tainted principles would forever set them apart. He thanked his lucky stars for her compassionate and understanding nature, which had allowed them somehow to remain friends, especially once he'd come to his senses and abandoned a life that was slowly but surely taking him down a dark path.

Such a tiny person, but even the thought of disappointing Cathy guts me.

Then there was Sister John the Baptist. The formidable nun had looked right through his lost, bitter, roguish exterior and hauled him into her soup kitchen, providing a balm for his battered, grieving spirit in the opportunity to serve the poor people of his childhood community. The prim, no-nonsense woman could be a stern taskmaster when necessary, but she took his teasing in her stride with an unexpected sense of humor that continually surprised him, and her profound faith and generous heart were in evidence everywhere throughout the soup kitchen and homeless shelter she managed at St. Francis Cathedral.

Another woman I cannot bear to disappoint.

Then there was his current appointment, who had him pacing like a nervous adolescent outside the principal's office – Luz Corrales. To say he'd disappointed her was the understatement of the century. He'd done some shady things during his climb to the top – turned a blind eye to possible corruption among his employees, paid off a mobster to keep his projects moving forward. But he'd really stepped over the line when he'd deliberately damaged Luz's reputation and the reputation of her community group in order to stop the class action lawsuit they'd filed to halt the construction of Burch Tower, his dream project.

Cathy Chandler had discovered his treachery, bringing his dream project to an end, and she'd helped to clear Luz's name, but by then the community group had already disbanded. However, Luz was a determined woman and a fighter. Nothing could keep her down for long. She'd learned a painful, but valuable, lesson about the need to investigate the source of philanthropic donations, licked her wounds, developed a new plan, and come back even stronger. Within months, she'd rallied a new group of supporters, including the influential Catherine Chandler, as well as other progressive policy makers, attorneys, philanthropists, and community activists, and had established the powerful Fairness in Housing Coalition. Since then, the Coalition had been instrumental in helping the DA's office to finally and permanently take down Max Avery, establishing tenants' rights associations, identifying and rooting out corrupt building inspectors, forcing slum lords to improve living conditions across the city, and advocating for more equitable property laws and better shelters for the homeless.

Luz Corrales was a force of nature, and he'd wronged her, and now he needed her help, her advice, and her partnership.

Intimidated doesn't begin to describe how I feel. Probably more like petrified!

Stan checked his watch.

No more stalling, or I'll be late.

He reached for the door handle to the Coalition's storefront offices.

Sister J.B., I hope your prayers are answered, and Cathy's fence-mending hasn't been for nothing!

He stepped inside and approached the reception desk with a polite and charming smile.

"Hi! I'm Stan Kaczmarek," he greeted the young man behind the desk. "I have a ten o'clock appointment with Luz Corrales."

Before the receptionist could push the intercom button, an office door at the back of the room opened, and Luz stepped out to lean against the door jamb, her arms crossed in a posture both offensive and defensive.

"Mr. Kaczmarek," she called across the room, bringing the activities of all the office workers and volunteers to a halt in order to watch the obviously tense stand-off between their executive director and the newcomer at the reception desk. She inspected him sternly for a few moments, and to his credit, the stranger held her gaze unswervingly, although clearly he was waiting for her to somehow pass judgment on him.

Finally, Luz stood back from the door jamb and motioned toward her office.

"Come on back," she said. "Frankly, I wasn't sure you'd show up."

As Stan crossed the room, Luz instructed the receptionist, "Jerry, please hold my calls unless there's an emergency."

She waved Stan into her office and closed the door behind them. An awkward silence descended as she gave him another searching glare.

Whew! If I didn't know better, I'd swear Kipper took lie-detector staring lessons from Luz Corrales.

Stan cleared his suddenly tight throat. "Thank you for agreeing to see me."

Luz tilted her head continuing to stare with a slightly less angry and more assessing gaze.

"You can thank Cathy Chandler for convincing me to read your white paper," Luz finally replied. "Now I just need to decide if you're really serious about this project, or if this is some kind of scam."

Stan sighed and dropped his head and shoulders.

"Ms. Corrales, I owe you so much more than an apology, but unfortunately, that's all I have to offer," he quietly stated. "I'm profoundly sorry for damaging your reputation in an ill-considered effort to make my dream project a reality. There's no excuse for what I did. I see that now. I'm leaving Elliott Burch and his blind ambitions behind. I thought perhaps one way I could atone for what I've done would be to devote myself to projects that would help the people your organization serves. That is, if you'd be willing to give me another chance."

He looked up to find he was still the object of Luz's penetrating glance, but he held her gaze, waiting patiently.

Thank goodness Kipper's given me plenty of practice at this!

Finally, Luz stepped back and pointed to the chairs in front of her desk. “Why don’t you have a seat, and let’s talk,” she offered.

“Thank you,” he replied, gratefully, and they took their respective chairs.

“I will say one thing for you, Elliott Burch, or Stan Kaczmarek, or whoever you claim to be on any given day,” Luz asserted. “You may have some underhanded ways for dealing with obstacles in your path, but your buildings are beyond reproach. Properly permitted, union built, above-board inspections, quality craftsmanship, impeccable design. Your financing is completely legitimate. You comply with every city ordinance. You don’t cheat your subcontractors or stiff your workers. In fact, the unions look forward to getting your contracts. The buildings are secure and well maintained, and your corporate and private tenants are happy with the results. You’re a good builder. For rich people.”

Stan sighed. “Well, I thank you for that assessment. It’s certainly fair. Elliott Burch designed and built tasteful, glamorous high-rises for the rich and famous because he was running as far away from his origins as he possibly could. Stanislaw Kaczmarek isn’t a new alias; it’s my birth name. I grew up in a low-income Polish tenement down by the docks. My Dad was a city sanitation worker, and my Mom took in laundry and hired out as a maid. So I am a genuine rags-to-riches story, but it required changing my name and leaving my past behind. Something I have come to greatly regret.”

Another long assessing gaze. *I’m lucky she isn’t Medusa or the Sphinx.*

“OK,” Luz said at last. “So what brought on this supposed change of heart? You lost Burch Tower, but you’ve had other successful projects since then here in the city and in the Caribbean and the South Pacific.”

Well, I lost the love of my life, but I’m not about to tell you that.

“That’s true, but my heart wasn’t really engaged after the loss of the Tower,” Stan replied. “My last project as Elliott Burch was a luxury resort on the island of Santo Irisado. While I was there, I got a good look at the horrors of politically-enforced poverty and somehow found myself embroiled in the growing civil unrest on the island. I tried to help the insurgents obtain the weapons they needed to overthrow their dictator, Dr. Felipe Torreón. It was well intended, but also stupid and arrogant of me, not to mention illegal, and I pretty quickly realized I was in way over my head. Dr. Torreón sent mercenaries after me, so I fled the island. They followed me to New York, and before they could be taken down, they killed my driver and several bodyguards and murdered my Dad.”

“Oh my God!” Luz exclaimed in shock. “I’m so sorry! ... Wait a minute. I don’t recall reading anything about this in the papers.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Stan sighed. “The CIA covered the whole thing up. But if you doubt my story, Cathy Chandler can corroborate everything. They almost got her, too.”

“Speaking of Cathy Chandler,” Luz replied. “I thought you two were no longer an item. Am I wrong about that? After the blistering you took from her over Burch Tower, I’m surprised she has anything to do with you.”

Stan blew out a breath at the deep stabbing pain that flat statement sent through his chest and dropped his head into his hands, elbows to his knees. Luz startled at his sudden collapse.

“Hey, I’m sorry about that, truly,” she continued quietly. “I can see I really struck a raw nerve, and that’s not at all what I intended.”

Stan drew in a few deep breaths and at last raised his head.

“No, it’s a fair question,” he replied. “Losing Cathy was the beginning of the end for Elliott Burch. Losing my Dad before I had any chance at reconciliation with him was the final straw. I cleaned up the Santo Irisado mess and put all my corporate holdings in escrow. Then I moved into my Dad’s ratty apartment and got a job on the docks. I’d worked there during summers off from school as a teen. I didn’t really have a plan at all. I just wanted to go back to the beginning and figure out where I went wrong.”

“Is that where Sister John the Baptist came into the picture?” Luz inquired, smiling at Stan’s stunned expression. “Cathy suggested I give the good Sister a call. She certainly has interesting things to say about a certain Mr. K and the excellent work he’s been doing at the soup kitchen. Apparently, you are her pet project. She sees you as a lost lamb finding its own unique way back into the fold. I liked that image. The fact that Sister John also supports your white paper is what finally convinced me to have Cathy tell you about this appointment.”

Stan nodded and blew out another breath. “Is there any chance I could get a glass of water?” he asked.

“Oh good heavens, where are my manners?” Luz exclaimed, as she rose to pour Stan a glass of water from the carafe on her credenza. “You must think I’m a barbarian! I assure you, my mother did teach me how to properly treat a guest.”

She handed him the glass of water, which he accepted gratefully and practically inhaled. Luz observed him with a much milder eye.

“You’ve been through more than a bit of an ordeal, I can see that,” she said softly. “I do think your ideas have a lot of merit, if they’re sincerely intended. But what you’re proposing is nothing short of a complete overhaul of the current approach to low-income housing. I definitely agree that nothing short of a complete overhaul is what’s needed, but it won’t be accomplished overnight, and you’re going to encounter a lot of resistance from powerful people who are perfectly fine with the status quo. You’re accustomed to big, grand projects and getting what you want when you want it. Are you prepared to start small and deal with a lot of rejection?”

Stan laughed. “Oh, I’m begging to start small!” he replied. “My only experience with the nonprofit world is as a major donor and, more recently, as a volunteer. This is all unfamiliar ground. How about if we start with me?”

“You!” she retorted. “Last I heard, you had a penthouse on Park Avenue. Why would you need low-income housing?”

He chuckled again. “You’re right, I don’t need low-income housing. But I’m selling the penthouse, and I don’t want to continue living in my Dad’s apartment, although it will do for now. I’m hoping you can help me find a modest three-to-five-story building in a low-income community that I could renovate to serve as an office and storefront for the Mathilde Kaczmarek Innovations in Housing Foundation on the lower levels, and as my personal home on the upper level. Depending upon the size of the building, we could also incorporate a community center, or a free medical clinic, or mental health services, or a drug rehabilitation center, or a legal aid office, or any combination of those resources. What do you think? Is that small enough?”

Luz snorted and then laughed in surprise. “Well, I wouldn’t necessarily call that a small project, but I suppose it is from your point of view. And you’re right, it’s a good way to start. You’d be bringing real value into a low-income community by reclaiming a deserted building and refitting it to provide services the community needs. I like that you intend to live among the people you’re serving. It’s a good, positive image that will help build trust in the community.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking,” Stan replied.

“One word of caution,” Luz added. “As you well know, any deserted building you purchase won’t be truly deserted. There will be homeless people living there, and I’ll insist that they must be provided with a safe place to live, not just turned out onto the streets, or I won’t support the project. I assure you, that’s not going to be an easy task. Or, it may be gang turf or a shooting gallery for drug addicts, and these are all very different and very difficult problems.”

“Well, let’s be choosy then, since we’re starting small,” Stan responded. “I think I would prefer to help out homeless people and avoid properties with gang or drug problems for this first project. I have some experience working with homeless people at the soup kitchen, as you know. Some of them have drug problems as well; others have mental health challenges, and some are fleeing gangs or have been victims of gangs. These issues really are all inter-related. But let’s try to steer clear of drugs and gangs for now.”

“I agree,” Luz smiled. “Well, let me make some calls. I can think of several neighborhoods with the right zoning for the kind of building you’d need and that would really benefit from a project like this. In fact, your Dad’s neighborhood is one of them. It might be the perfect place for you to get your feet wet, so to speak, and the name of your nonprofit would have special resonance in a Polish community.”

Stan smiled his first genuine smile in her presence.

Well, Cathy Chandler certainly has an eye for good-looking, charming men, I’ll give her that. Be on your guard, Luz. He knows the power of that smile.

“Thank you, Ms. Corrales,” Stan replied. “I really like that idea. Why don’t we concentrate on buildings in my Dad’s community first? I have two possibilities already in mind. If we don’t find anything suitable, we can move on to others. But it would mean a lot to me if I could start this new foundation in the community where I was born.”

“All right, I’ll call my real estate contacts in your neighborhood,” Luz said. “Am I right in assuming that Mathilde Kaczmarek was your mother?”

“Yes, she was,” Stan replied, softly, his love and sadness plain on his face and in his eyes. “She passed away from cancer while I was off becoming Elliott Burch. My Dad never forgave me for changing my name and not being there when she died. In fact, he was fond of telling people that I killed her. Mathilde Kaczmarek was a good woman and a loving mother. A devout Catholic. She didn’t have much education, but she was smart in her own way and as generous as sunshine. She understood why I needed to leave my name and my past behind, even though it hurt her. I think this foundation is something she would appreciate and support, and she’d really like it if this project brought me back home.”

“It does feel right, doesn’t it?” Luz responded, as she fished inside her desk drawer for a business card. “Cathy gave me your new business card, so I know how to reach you. Here’s mine in return. And since it looks like we’re going to work together on at least one project, why don’t you call me Luz, and I’ll call you Stan?”

Stan accepted the card and looked at it wordlessly for a moment. Then he smiled another of his trademark grins.

“Thank you, Luz,” he replied, standing to shake her hand. “This means the world to me.”

After Jamie quickly excused herself to run after Mouse, the remaining adults in the library looked at each other with varying degrees of regret.

Vincent sighed, “If only Mouse’s errand had been longer.”

“No, we should have included Mouse in this conversation,” Catherine replied. “This decision affects him every bit as much as it affects Jamie. Mouse is an adult, and he should have been part of the discussion from the beginning.”

“I don’t believe it would have made any difference in his initial reaction, my dear,” Father stated. “Mouse has a difficult time accepting change. It’s easier for him to welcome newcomers, because he understands and likes the concept of helping others. But he doesn’t like for anyone to leave the community and live Above.”

“Perhaps not,” Catherine agreed. “But at least he wouldn’t feel as though we were all plotting behind his back. It’s unfortunate that he overheard only part of our conversation. Now, we have bridges to mend, rather than just confused feelings to soothe.”

“Well, hopefully Jamie will find Mouse and talk him around,” Kanin replied. “She’s pretty good at getting him to see reason.” He rose, picking up his coat. “I’m sorry! I feel a little bit like I’ve set off a bomb and left you to clean up the mess, but I need to go back Above and finish packing my things. Thanks again for lunch, Catherine, and for standing by me in court. You’ve given me courage and lots of great advice throughout this whole process, and I’ll be forever in your debt.”

Catherine and Vincent rose to hug Kanin goodbye. “You owe me nothing, Kanin,” Catherine replied. “I’m just glad both you and Mrs. Davis were able to find some healing through this program. Reconciliation between the accused and their victims is a new concept in prisoner rehabilitation, but in your case, it really did have merit and produced obvious benefits.”

“Yeah, I was so scared to meet her,” Kanin admitted. “But I owed it to her to hear how my actions devastated her life and to learn about her son. She was good enough to really listen to me talk about my problems back then and how I had already gotten sober and turned my life around. I can’t believe she actually petitioned the judge to show mercy in his sentencing decision. She even came to some of my speaking appearances at high schools so we could talk together with the kids about the dangers of drinking and driving. Those were probably the most impactful appearances I made, based on the kids’ reactions. We spoke with Mrs. Henson about continuing these talks after I’ve had a chance to get resettled at home. Would it be OK if she contacted you about setting those up? I told her I probably wouldn’t be able to afford a telephone for a while.”

“That would be fine,” Catherine replied. “I’m happy you want to keep doing this. I think it’ll be good for you and for Mrs. Davis to find ways to keep turning this tragedy into something positive.”

“We’ll walk you part of the way out,” Vincent said, as Catherine gathered up her coat and tote bag. “Father, please let us know if you hear anything about Jamie and Mouse.”

“I’ll do that,” Father replied. “And I’ll see you all at dinner this evening. I believe William and Olivia have something special planned.”

After bidding Kanin farewell at the tunnel intersection, Vincent and Catherine wandered on toward his chamber.

“Are you planning to tell Father that you’ve diverted funds from your own inheritance into the Margaret Chase Charitable Trust?” Vincent asked, turning down the chamber’s access tunnel.

“Only if it ever occurs to him to inquire,” Catherine replied slyly, as he opened the beautiful double doors and welcomed her inside.

The doors had barely closed when Catherine tossed her bag and coat onto a nearby chair and threw her arms around Vincent’s neck, pulling him down for an eager – almost greedy – kiss. His surprised chuff against her lips drew giggles from her, which he easily kissed into submission before continuing a sensual, nuzzling exploration across her jaw, over to nibble on her ear, producing a thrilled gasp, and then down her neck to mouth the sweet pulse point at the enticing curve leading to her collar bone.

“**Must you return Above soon?**” Vincent murmured in the darkened voice of his second nature, placing the softest of kisses on this favored spot before easing back to card his fingers through the silk of her hair.

“Not at all,” Catherine responded huskily, leaning into the gentle kneading of his fingers against her scalp. “I took the entire day off for Kanin’s court appearance. You never know when there might be procedural delays. And it’s Friday, Vincent. *Friday*. I’m here for the rest of the weekend.”

Mine! He exulted inwardly, his heart racing. But he tempered his more passionate inclinations.

Talk to her. You must tell her.

“Well, you’re surely not planning to spend the weekend in those shoes, **lovely though they are**,” he commented, appreciating the graceful arch of her undoubtedly uncomfortable heels, and her shapely, toned calves.

My stars, she has such alluring legs.

He frowned a bit, clearing his wandering thoughts.

“However do you manage to walk through the tunnels in those beautiful things without breaking an ankle?” he asked, leading Catherine over to her wingback chair and kneeling to remove the fashionable torture devices in question and replace them with her soft moccasins.

“Ha!” she snorted. “It’s a skill acquired over years of dedicated practice and building up a tolerance for pain. And believe me, if I were taller, I’d wear flats all the time!”

Catherine sighed in relief as the soft, warm moccasins caressed her aching arches. Vincent considered her for a moment, and then slipped off one of the moccasins to begin gently massaging her feet and ankles.

“Oh my!” she exclaimed, slumping back into the chair and closing her eyes. “That’s *heavenly!*”

He laughed quietly at her reaction. "I've been informed by a very wise woman that caring for a loved one after they've returned home from a long day at work is a privilege," he murmured, returning one petite foot to its soft moccasin and starting in on the next.

"Hmmm, she must be a paragon indeed," Catherine responded, teasingly.

Vincent restored her other foot to its slipper and then fetched a soft knitted afghan to cover those oh-so-tempting legs. *Out of sight at least, if not out of mind ... ever ...*

"**Yes, you certainly are,**" Vincent replied, sliding his chair closer to hers and taking her hands in his. "Catherine ... I'm glad you'll be with me this weekend. I ... I've been thinking ... a *lot* ... about the last time you stayed Below, waiting to hear from Joe that the human trafficking case had been resolved and it was safe for you to return Above ..."

"So have I," she responded, when he seemed hesitant to continue. "We haven't had much private time together since then with the endless paperwork and statements that we're *still* plowing through for that case. I lost track of all the federal and international agencies that were ultimately involved. Then, the holidays, Winterfest."

"I know ... and I know it must seem that things between us are always one step forward, followed by three steps back," he added. "I ... I want to assure you this is *not* so. I just ... when you ... *cared* for me after the pipe emergency ... my invitation for you to bathe with me ... I ... I have been trying to figure out what *madness* possessed me to make such a bold request ... I think ... **I may have been reacting to ...**" He dropped his head, embarrassed, the long fall of his hair hiding his face. "... **Elliott's presence ... Below.**"

Catherine smiled gently, leaning forward to cradle and lift his face with her soft hands. "I thought something about those circumstances might have pushed you to take a giant leap way beyond your comfort zone. Danger, fear for me, exhaustion, pain, a desire for comfort, maybe a need to make a grand gesture, to offer me something ... intimate ... that you knew I would never accept from *Stan*."

"**Jealousy is an *inexcusable* emotion to have regarding you,**" Vincent gritted out hoarsely, burying his face in her hands. "**It implies a lack of trust in your love, when I *know* the strength of your commitment to me in the furthest depths of my soul. It mocks our Bond.**"

"No, it implies a lack of trust in *Stan's* motives, not mine," she countered. "Besides, you're hardly alone in having a capacity for jealousy in this relationship. I'm more than a bit jealous of anyone who gets to spend time with you while I'm Above."

Vincent glanced up at her. "That's an entirely different situation, and you know it."

"I was jealous of Lena," she replied, solemnly.

His eyes widened, sensing the truth of this confession.

"I was jealous of the tender feelings you had for Lisa years before you even met me," she continued. "We're *human*, Vincent. These are human emotions. Please believe me, whatever the reason, your invitation to bathe together was every bit as lovely as it was unexpected."

She kissed his forehead.

“I was delighted to accept it.”

She kissed his eyelids.

“I have no regrets about our time together in your bathing pool.”

She kissed his left cheek.

“None at all.”

And then his right cheek.

“You gave us a beautiful gift.”

She placed a butterfly kiss on the end of his nose.

“One I hope we can share again sometime ... when you’re ready.”

She nuzzled her lips against his lightly and sweetly, then pulled back to look into his dazed, wondering eyes.

“**I want ...**” he whispered.

“Yes ... please ... tell me what you *want*,” she murmured. “You cannot begin to know how it thrills me to hear you say that word. You so rarely express a need or a desire.”

He chuckled softly. “At times, it seems I want the *world*, Catherine.”

“And I want to give it to you,” she responded. “But what do you want *here* and *now*?”

“**I want ... I want to slowly undress you,**” he whispered, recapturing her hands and kissing each finger as he spoke. “**I want ... to lie on my bed fully clothed ... and hold you naked in my arms ... and prove to myself that I can behold your beauty ... and touch and kiss the satin of your skin ... without losing control.**”

She was stunned. And utterly, utterly enchanted by his words and the images they evoked. And fairly quivering with anticipation.

With shaking fingers, Catherine gently raised his hands, laid them on the delicate silk scarf that twined sinuously about her neck and tucked into the top of her blouse, and released him. Her hands floated down to the armrests of her chair, her posture open and welcoming, her face serene, although her breathing was elevated, her eyes dilated.

Vincent’s fingers caressed the rich, almost liquid, texture of the scarf, following the graceful, fluid lines of the silk as it crept across the sublime sculpture of Catherine’s collarbones and disappeared into her blouse. He slowly freed the scarf from her neckline and savored the whisper of the silk as it slipped and slid around her neck and under her hair until it fell into a feather-light puddle in his large hands. He laid the silk, still warm from her body, to his cheek, slowly stroking the side of his face several times against its unique luxury, breathing in the remnants of Catherine’s perfume and shampoo and soap and lotion and underneath those delicate, floral scents ... *woman ... Catherine.*

He carefully laid the scarf across an open book on his table and slipped Catherine's suit jacket slowly, slowly off her shoulders and down her arms until it was his to drape neatly across the chest at the foot of his bed. She shivered slightly in expectation, and Vincent, thinking she was chilled, immediately retrieved another light afghan to place lovingly around her shoulders.

"I'm not cold," she whispered, her voice breathy and quavering with pent-up desire.

"No?" he asked, leaning down over the back of her chair to murmur in her ear, only to be drowned in the aching wave of longing that passed over her and into him.

"Not at all," she breathed, drawing his hands over her shoulders and laying them on the first button of her blouse, once again returning her hands to the armrest.

Now *his* fingers were shaking, as he negotiated the tricky art of slipping the tiny pearl button through an equally tiny buttonhole without puncturing the gossamer fabric of her silk blouse with his sharp nails. The weight of the little pearl button, once freed, pulled the right side of the blouse down about two inches, revealing the lacy edge of her camisole and just a hint of the upper swell of her breast.

So many exquisite surprises ...

Gently and carefully, he freed each successive tiny pearl button from its enclosure, allowing the furred backs of his fingers to trail down every inch and curve of her warm skin and the smoothness of the delicate undergarment as it was revealed. To reach the bottom two buttons, he leaned over the back of her chair, laying his head next to hers. Their increasingly labored breaths mingled as together they watched the progress of his hands, eyes drinking in every newly discovered hill and valley, light and shadow, the chain of her necklace, the crystal pendant laying on the silk between her breasts. At last his hands reached the waistband of her skirt, and he slowly drew the hem of the blouse out of its confinement, off her shoulders, down her arms, lifting each wrist to open more tiny pearl buttons on the cuffs before it could join her jacket.

He returned to kneel at Catherine's feet, captivated by her transformation. She perched almost regally in her wingback chair with her elegant boarding-school posture, head high, perfectly balanced on her long, graceful neck, her arms relaxed along the armrests, yet she was the very picture of eroticism. Her skin, flushing a pale pink, glowed in the candlelight, her breasts, still enticingly concealed by her camisole and bra, rose and fell, her rosy lips parted with her elevated breathing. And her eyes ... unabashedly devoured him in return.

She reached for his hands once again, but instead he surged forward into her arms to lay his great head between her breasts, his arms encircling her waist, breathing in her scent, trembling.

Catherine ...

It was the only word remaining in his universe at the moment, all others having fled. But it was more than enough.

Her arms softly enclosed his head and shoulders, hands lightly stroking his hair, voice humming wordless endearments. She soothed him for uncounted minutes, treasuring the gift of this embrace without any expectation beyond the beauty of that moment, letting her love and acceptance flow into him through their Bond.

At last, with a long shuddering sigh, Vincent rose, nuzzling a warm path up her sternum, along one collarbone, and up the side of her neck, gathering and lifting her into his arms, leaving the afghans to pool onto the seat of the chair and the floor, forgotten. He settled her among the pillows on his bed as though nestling a priceless gem into its velvet cushion. She relaxed completely, gazing at him with absolute trust, her arms draped gracefully to either side, palms up, inviting.

Time ceased to flow, suspended.

He settled on the side of the bed by her legs and once again removed her moccasins, one by one, placing them on the floor at the foot of the bed, soon joined by his boots. Laying one large, warm hand on her right instep, his eyes and fingers traced a lingering path up the inside of her ankle, savoring the silky texture of her winter tights, over one of the beguiling calves he'd admired ... it seemed a lifetime ago, but had been much less than half an hour ... until he encountered the hem of her skirt just below her knee.

His hand stopped, but his eyes travelled up the length of her body, searching, until he spied fastenings at the top left of her wide waistband. Both hands skimmed up the side of her skirt to carefully negotiate three small buttons, then two tiny inner hooks, finally sliding a zipper from waist to mid-hip. He lifted her just high enough to slide the skirt down over her hips and legs, consigning it to the top of the chest.

Vincent's gaze returned to her lithe form, taking in the next confounding clothing obstacle, his head tilting from side to side, considering, a small frown gathering between his eyebrows. Catherine's hands reached hesitantly for the waistband of her tights, but he caught them gently, kissing each hand and returning it to her side. After a moment's hesitation, he gingerly slipped his fingers inside the top of the delicate tights, curling his nails into his palms to grip the waistband firmly between the first knuckle of each thumb and the sides of his index fingers, gradually drawing the stretchy fabric down, with Catherine lifting her hips so he could slide the filmy garment down her body and at last toss the inside-out tights over his shoulder in the general direction of her other clothing.

She did her best to suppress a grin at that triumphant gesture, until she spotted the little smirk at the corner of his mouth. Then they both beamed at each other, a tiny chuff escaping Vincent's lips and a slight snicker from Catherine's. However, his mirth faded into awe as he took in her scant remaining attire, her bare legs, a creamy scrap of silk and lace that scarcely concealed the treasure at the apex of her thighs, the matching camisole and bra, the crystal pendant nestled between her breasts.

Time ceased to exist.

A rumbling purr quietly sprang to life in his chest, and he glided sinuously on hands and knees until his entire form encapsulated her body. He bent his head to nuzzle the pendant at her breasts before placing a kiss at the base of her throat and another on her lips and then reclining at her side to gather her trembling form into his arms. He was shaking as well, but he slowly rose up to pull her across his lap laying her head against his shoulder, tracing one hand from the side of her neck down over the sweet peak of her breast, relishing the shuddering gasp this intimate touch engendered, to the camisole's hem at her waist.

While he drew the undergarment up her body, Catherine raised her arms gracefully into fifth position over her head, thanking her lucky stars for the muscle memory she'd developed during childhood ballet classes. Vincent's resonant purr rose in appreciation for the pull and twist of her body, the lift and graze of her breasts against his side. The camisole glided over her shoulders and arms to disappear somewhere off the foot of the bed. As her arms floated back down, Vincent captured and directed them about his neck, resting her head against his shoulder. He watched as his hands skimmed across the curve of her waist, up the planes of her back, around the winged buttresses of her shoulder blades, to caress the base of

her neck and draw her up for a long, lingering kiss. His rolling purr vibrated through their bodies in waves.

As the kiss ended, she drew back to gaze tremulously into his eyes. Based on the evidence beneath her legs, they were both obviously almost unbearably aroused, and yet the importance of restraint to him in this moment was palpable. She tenderly gathered his hands and laid them on the front clasp of her bra. With one deft twist it opened, falling away down her arms. Gone.

His hands hovered, quivering, for a moment before lightly settling over the warm satin of her breasts. Her head dropped back, and they both moaned softly at the sensation of this new connection. The purr threaded through their ragged breathing, the swirl of arousal drawing about them tighter and tighter. Vincent again gathered her into his arms to lay back upon the bed and cradle her against his side.

His eyes and hands glided smoothly over her shuddering form, tracing every peak and valley from the tips of her breasts to the slope of her ribs to the rise of her hips, sometimes with the furred back of his hand and others with the warmth of his palm. He lifted her face to claim yet another lingering, gasping, yet reverent kiss, and then rose on his elbow to slide his thumb beneath the band of her sole remaining garment and draw it down her legs and away. At last.

With a hoarse cry, Vincent clasped Catherine to him, his rumbling purr the only words he had to offer in gratitude for this intimate gift, desire pulling them further into its inevitable vortex. She stroked his hair with shaking hands, coaxing his head down to rest between her breasts to soothe him once again. But the touch of her softness against his cheek elicited moans from them both, and he nuzzled her breast, taking the sweetness of her nipple hungrily into his mouth, his fingers brushing through and cupping the soft curls at the juncture of her thighs.

It was enough.

The twisting gyre snapped, and a blissful electric shock shot through Catherine's core. She groaned her release, cradling Vincent's head to her breast, her body shaking and twitching in an ecstasy that flooded through their Bond and swept him along with her. He clutched her tightly, throwing one leg across her hips, rocking against her body as wave after wave of pleasure washed through him, tearing a long, low, grumbling roar from his throat that shook them both like an earthquake.

At last, they lay wrapped in each other's limbs, panting, the pulse of desire gradually waning as their breathing began to return to normal. Catherine stroked his beloved face only to discover tears on his cheeks. She drew in a shocked breath, fearful that their beautiful, startling climax had been too much for him, her loss of control igniting a response in him that he couldn't countenance. But he grasped her fingers, pressing them gratefully to his lips, and gazed lovingly into her eyes, still wordless, shaking his head to refute her fears.

"Not too much?" she whispered, finally daring to break the intimate cocoon of silence they had created once words had deserted him.

He kissed her deeply, his rumbling purr returning, then he cleared his throat, trying to speak and failing.

"No," Vincent finally rasped, words returning to him after a few more attempts. "**Just ... more than I had planned, My Catherine ... I didn't expect ...**"

She smiled drowsily at his dazed, bemused expression. "Neither did I," she replied. "It took me by surprise as well."

The implication of her words slowly dawned on him, and he returned her smile with a bashful, but nonetheless triumphant smirk. And then a sudden yawn. He cuddled his beloved closer to his side, covering the sweet pliancy of her naked form with a blanket. Ignoring the stickiness inside his trousers. He could bathe ... Later ... He was too sated and content to move.

“I’m glad to be proven right,” she whispered once they had settled comfortably.

“**About?**”

“We *are* something that has never been,” she breathed into his ear, as they slipped inexorably toward the sweet oblivion of sleep. “And we are glorious ...”

Mouse fled along the tunnels, slipping in and out of each one of his many secret shortcuts as he encountered them, muttering and whimpering, running as though the giant dark grotesque monster of his nightmares was practically on his heels. He only knew that he had to get away, wherever away might be.

“No, no, no, no, no,” he moaned, tears coursing down his cheeks. “Jamie not go! Not leave Mouse all alone again!”

Without any plan or map in mind, Mouse didn’t realize that taking each secret shortcut in order ultimately had him running in a long looping arc that kept bringing him back again and again to the same destination. After constantly running for over an hour, only to find himself back at the Mirror Pool for a third time, Mouse finally collapsed by the pool and wept.

“No, no!” he moaned. “Not go there! Not go back! Go away! Mouse go away!”

Minutes later, Jamie found him at last. She’d caught sight of Mouse several times as she searched the tunnels, but he always managed to duck out of sight. Twice she’d spotted him around the Mirror Pool, so she’d kept her search close by, just in case.

Sprawled in an exhausted heap, Mouse lay twitching and whimpering, curled in upon himself, arms protecting his head as though escaping a beating. She’d seen this nightmare before and knew just what to do.

Standing at the chamber entrance, Jamie began softly humming the lullaby she’d learned from Catherine one evening as they’d shared nursery duty. She slowly stepped closer to him, continuing to hum the sweet melody, watching as his limbs began to relax. Once she got to the end of the lovely tune, she knelt down by his side to gently stroke his hair and began singing the simple lyrics Caroline Chandler had invented for her daughter so many years ago:

Sleep, my pretty one.

Rest now, my pretty one.

Close your eyes,

The day is nearly done.

Rest your head.

Tomorrow will surely come.

As she alternately sang and hummed the song, Mouse snuggled closer and closer to her, eventually laying his head in her lap and circling her waist with his arms, sighing in relief.

“Jamie not leave her Mouse,” he murmured plaintively when she paused for a breath.

“Never,” Jamie whispered back. “Even if I do decide to take some college classes, I will never leave you Mouse.”

“But they all talk about Jamie going Above,” he responded. “Leave Mouse and go Above.”

Jamie sighed. *Patience. That’s his fear talking.*

“Mouse, you’re upset because you didn’t hear everything we discussed, and I think you also misunderstood what you *did* hear,” Jamie replied. “No one wants me to leave you. They just want to help me learn more, like Michael and Brooke.”

“But Michael went away!” Mouse whimpered. “Only visits sometimes. Doesn’t live Below anymore.”

“But Brooke still lives Below, doesn’t she? She goes to nursing school during the day and comes back Below at dinner time,” Jamie reasoned. “And Michael may come back when he finishes his studies. Or he may live Above and become a Helper. That would be a good thing, wouldn’t it?”

“Catherine wants Jamie to live Above in an apartment like *she* does,” Mouse argued. “Not with Mouse.”

“I think you misunderstood her,” Jamie replied, patiently. “You went Above sometimes to visit with Kanin in his apartment over the Peis’ restaurant, didn’t you? One time, you wanted to ask him about building a sandbox for the playground by the Maze.”

“Yes!” Mouse brightened, remembering. “Kanin said use a plastic kiddie pool, not bricks. Better for the little kids. No boo-boos.”

“That’s right!” Jamie responded. “Kanin lived in that apartment for one year because he needed to obey the rules of his probation. Now his probation is over, and he can come be with us all the time. But we did see a lot of Kanin even while he lived Above, didn’t we?”

“I guess,” Mouse admitted. “On salvage jobs Above and big projects Below, sometimes at dinner on weekends. Not enough!”

“I agree. We all missed Kanin a lot,” Jamie replied. “But sometimes we have to compromise, right? We have to accept less than we might want in order to help someone else or make them happy, and then sometimes it’s the other way around, or sometimes it’s an equal trade.”

“Mouse and Jamie com-pro-mise,” he noted, proudly. “Jamie came to live with Mouse, Mouse helps keep chamber neat.”

“Exactly!” Jamie said. “If I go to college, we might have to talk together and figure out other compromises. For instance, I might need to live in the Peis’ apartment Above during the week to take my classes, but Mouse could come stay with me at night. Then, we can live together Below on the weekends and holidays.”

“Mouse would sleep Above with Jamie?” he asked, doubtfully.

“Yes, we would never need to be apart at night,” Jamie assured him. “And I could tell you everything about what I’d learned Above during the day, and you could tell me all about your projects and work Below so I don’t miss out on anything. Could you help me with that? Could we compromise so I can go to college?”

“Jamie would always snuggle and sleep with Mouse? Keep the nightmares away?” he whispered, his eyes pleading with her.

“I will never, never, *ever* leave Mouse to face the nightmares alone,” she responded, kissing his forehead.

“Jamie!” he cried out, surging up to throw his arms around her and cover her entire face with passionate kisses. “Jamie, Jamie, Jamie, Jamie, Jamie!”

She laughed softly and kissed him back. “I love you so much, Mouse! Never forget that,” she whispered. “Come on! I’m hungry, and I know you must be, too. Let’s get take-out lunches from William, and then we’ll go to our chamber where we can be more comfortable.”

Mouse helped Jamie up, giving her another soft kiss, and replied, “And have pri-va-cy?”

“Exactly!” she grinned, returning his kiss. “Pri-va-cy.”

Father had finished his lesson plans for the next week and was working on a new work crew sign-up roster. Figuring out how to add Jamie’s suggested storage room inspection schedule, the false wall replacement project, and Mouse’s wooden pallet idea to their already busy work routines was going to be a challenge. Then he heard Jamie’s identification code sound out over the pipes, followed by: *Found Mouse. All is well.*

He sighed in relief. He’d been livid when he’d discovered that Mouse and Jamie had been living together for months without his knowledge or permission. He’d been convinced such a relationship was beyond Mouse’s limited emotional maturity and would certainly end disastrously for all concerned. But the two young people had surprised him and ultimately proved him wrong.

Every time he’d visited them – well, intruded upon them, as Jamie had angrily insisted and Vincent had later pointed out in no uncertain terms – he’d been shocked to find Mouse’s nest/den/hoarder’s paradise had been transformed into a comfortable, neat living space on one side and a cluttered, but organized work space on the other. The relationship certainly had not negatively affected Jamie’s remarkable academic progress, which had been his greatest concern, and Mouse actually seemed much calmer and more likely to listen to reason under her influence. Catherine had proclaimed Jamie “The Mouse Whisperer” and calmly suggested to him that adults should be left to work out their own relationships, knowing they had respected elders who could be called upon for advice when needed.

Father chuckled. *I pity any attorney who has to face Catherine Chandler in court!*

He turned back to the work roster quandary only to hear another message sing out over the pipes. Joseph was reporting in from his sentry post: *Stan at C12 to see Father. Needs escort.*

Within seconds, a response came from Cullen: *On my way.*

Well now! This is sure to be an interesting visit.

Father immediately set aside the work roster and busied himself with brewing a fresh pot of tea. Soon Mary scurried in with a basket of pastries, exclaiming, "I heard Stan is coming for a visit! I wonder how his meeting with Ms. Corrales went today."

"We'll find out soon enough," Father answered. "Catherine said she'd at least been able to convince Ms. Corrales to read Stan's prospectus, speak with Sister John, and offer him an appointment. That's certainly a promising start."

"Well, I hope she gave him a fair chance," Mary replied. "He has some wonderful ideas that could really help improve living conditions for poor people Above."

"And opportunities that could be helpful to us Below as well," Father added. "Stan mentioned wanting to incorporate medical clinics and other services into his projects that would be available to us. It would be a relief for me and for Peter if our people could easily access medical and pharmacy services Above, not to mention laboratory tests."

Soon they heard Cullen and Stan's voices coming down the corridor, avidly discussing ways to incorporate Tunnel workers and Helpers into Stan's eventual construction projects.

"Oh, I know Dominic Martinelli well," Stan was saying as they entered the library and descended the short flight of steps into Father's study area. "He runs a tight ship, and his people do great work. I'd certainly call upon him for demolition and salvage contracts once I start up my renovation projects."

"You'll probably see several of us among his crews, then," Cullen replied. "In exchange for our sweat equity, Dominic lets us salvage anything we might need for our projects Below. He transports our stuff to a storage area he's set aside for us in his warehouse, and we can use his freight elevator to bring stuff Below after hours."

"That's good to know," Stan responded. "It'll be great to see some friendly faces at my building sites."

He reached out to shake Cullen's hand. "Thanks for guiding me down. I don't think I've been escorted Below the same way twice."

"Well, there's method in our madness," Cullen replied, laughing. "We frequently have to change the pathways Below through an intricate system of false walls and doors. Sometimes it's to re-route passage around repair or construction crews from Above; sometimes it's because of intruders or kids thinking it's a cool idea to explore the access tunnels."

Stan shook his head. "Every time I'm here, I learn something new about your lives that just amazes me."

"It's great to see you again, Stan," Cullen responded. "I need to get back to my workshop. I'm building the substructure for a new false wall Mouse designed. Are you staying for dinner?"

"You're more than welcome to dine with us, Stan," Father added. "We're celebrating Kanin's homecoming this evening. He got the official papers ending his probation this morning."

"That's wonderful news!" Stan responded. "Thank you, Dr. Wells, I'd like that very much."

“I’ll see you then,” Cullen replied. “Oh, by the way, Father, I took care of mopping up A22. No more problems there,” he added, departing with a wave.

“Please, Stan, come sit down, make yourself comfortable,” Father invited. “I’m glad you were able to come visit with us. And do call me Jacob. Enough of this Dr. Wells business! Oh, let me get that Helper list you requested while I’m thinking about it.” He wandered over to search among the stacks of papers on his desk.

“Jacob, have you ever considered training someone to be your executive assistant, or file clerk, or librarian?” Stan asked with a grin.

“Many have attempted that monumental quest, Stan, including Catherine and me, and all have eventually given it up as a lost cause,” Mary stated, coming to Stan’s side. “The man is permanently set in his ways. Would you care for some tea, dear?”

“That would be lovely, Mary,” Stan replied, laughing and hugging the older woman, giving her a kiss on the cheek, and taking a seat beside Father’s chair at the Council table. “I have good news to report, and questions to ask, and a nephew to visit.”

“I’ll go see what Kipper is up to,” Mary said, pouring tea for both gentlemen. “I’m surprised he isn’t already here with a million questions for you, which means he’s probably off with his friends trying out that new skateboard contraption Mouse built and didn’t hear the message announcing your visit.”

She settled the basket of pastries at Father’s place and then bustled out to go wrangle one pre-teen boy.

“I take it your meeting with Luz Corrales went well?” Father inquired, handing Stan the Helper list he’d unearthed from his messy desk and offering his guest a pastry on a small dessert plate.

“Better than I had any right to expect,” Stan replied with a sigh, placing the list to the side for later reference, cradling his tea, and accepting the treat. “Luz Corrales is a tough, formidable lady, a real scrapper, and not about to take guff from anyone, especially someone who really wronged her. I respect that and figured I’d have to grovel on my knees for hours. But she was willing to listen, if initially skeptical of my motives. I owe Cathy and Sister J.B. big-time for paving the way and for advising me to sincerely apologize to Luz right away and just tell her the unvarnished truth about my life, what I’ve been through, why I’m making this big change. She was ... moved, sympathetic. I didn’t expect that.”

“I don’t know Ms. Corrales personally,” Father responded. “But everything I’ve read about her in the papers and learned from Catherine and Sister John certainly paints an impressive picture of an intelligent, tenacious, knowledgeable, and determined activist. I felt certain she would respond positively to your ideas, if she could get past her negative experiences with you.”

“To a certain extent she has,” Stan continued. “She’s willing to work with me on a start-up project. Something to get my feet wet, as she puts it. Clearly, it’s a test to see whether I’m serious about my ideas and determine if we can work well together.”

Stan described the proposed start-up project to renovate a building in his Dad’s neighborhood and turn it into foundation headquarters, community services, low-income apartments, and a new living space for Stan.

“How wonderful!” Father enthused. “There are several Tunnel entrances in that area. I imagine it wouldn’t be too difficult to connect whatever building you select to the access spaces beneath and map out a path from there to our community. You’d have your own threshold Below then.”

“Exactly the first question I’d planned to ask,” Stan grinned. “I want a building your community could easily and safely access from Below. I plan to give Kipper a building pass and the code for my private elevator, so he can come and go even if I’m not home. Do you have underground maps of the area we could consult?”

“I do indeed,” Father replied, limping over to his map stand and searching for the correct scroll. “Here we are!”

“I already have two buildings in mind – an old warehouse and an empty commercial building,” Stan stated, eagerly examining the map Father rolled out across the Council table. “Let’s see. Here and here. Both buildings would give me plenty of space for this project. Luz is getting in touch with her real estate experts to inquire about those two buildings and scout out other locations in that area.”

Father considered the map carefully, checking a few addresses on the Helper list, and then tapped one particular location. “The commercial building you mentioned is ideally located for Tunnel access, and you’d be directly across the street from one of Lucinda Draper’s thrift stores, which already has a Tunnel entrance in the basement. Its access corridor runs directly under the street and beneath your potential building, so you should be able to tap into it easily. There’s a city bus stop right in front of the building and a subway terminal just two blocks away. That would be helpful for your foundation employees, volunteers, community service clients, and tenants.”

“2181-89 Juniper Street,” Stan murmured. “That sounds very promising.”

“Uncle Stan!” called a familiar voice over the sound of thudding feet coming down the corridor. Soon Kipper burst into the library at a dead run, vaulting down the stairs and leaping into Stan’s waiting, open arms.

“Hey there, Buddy!” Stan replied, hugging him soundly and patting him on the back. “What have you been up to today?”

“I got a B+ on my math test,” Kipper reported proudly. “That’s my third B+ from Vincent this month!”

“That’s sensational, Kipper,” Stan enthused. “You’re well on your way to earning a seat in the Mets Skybox this Spring.”

“All of the children have really been applying themselves to their studies since you announced your Skybox program,” said Mary, who had followed behind Kipper a good deal more sedately.

“I’ve lost track of the number of times I’ve been asked to read ‘Casey at the Bat’ during story time,” added Father. “Most of the older children can probably recite it by now.”

“Vincent’s teaching us how to calculate all of the baseball statistics, and we’re going to keep our own progress chart on the team during the season,” Kipper stated. “That should be fun!” Then his face fell. “I really wish Vincent could come to the games with us.”

“Who says he can’t?” asked Stan, looking to Father for an explanation.

“Well, Vincent can hardly be seen Above at a baseball game,” Father stated as though this was a perfectly obvious conclusion.

“I don’t see why not,” Stan replied evenly. “As a Skybox owner, I’ll have access to the VIP entrance for the Skybox section. I’ll simply tell security in advance that I’ve arranged for a special costumed entertainer for my private Skybox guests. Vincent will be that entertainer. I’ll hire Ron Pleasants, your Helper who owns a car service, to drive Vincent, Catherine, Kipper, you, and me to the games in a limousine with full tinted windows and to provide private bus service for the rest of our group. I’ll escort Vincent and our entire Tunnel party through VIP security myself. No one will ask a single question. He’ll be perfectly safe.”

“YAYYYYY!” Kipper cheered. “Oh, please say yes, Father! It would be great if Vincent could come along!”

Father just blinked from Stan to Kipper and back for a moment, nonplussed. “But ... well ... we’ll need to think all this through very carefully.”

“Of course, Jacob,” Stan replied. “I know how concerned you are for Vincent’s safety. But with careful planning and caring people at his side, there are many things he could do Above. I can already think of ways for Vincent to have private museum tours, attend the theatre and concerts, go to the movies, sporting events, even university lectures. There are many possibilities, if you have the right connections, and it just so happens I do.”

“Stan, that’s ... that’s extraordinarily generous of you,” Father responded. “You can’t imagine how much we all have wished to be able to expand Vincent’s horizons, Catherine most of all. It’s certainly an important topic of conversation, which should include Vincent and Catherine if we’re to go any further with such discussions.”

“Absolutely, I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Stan replied, recognizing the need to change the subject, for now. He turned to Kipper.

“Hey, Buddy, come take a look at this map, and let us show you what Jacob and I have discovered.”

Kanin tucked the last few items into his duffle bag, and then took one last pass through the little efficiency apartment, checking every drawer, cabinet, and closet for anything he might have missed. He’d boxed up the few nonperishable food items from the kitchen cabinets to take down to William. Lin had said she’d clear out the few remaining bits from the refrigerator – some condiments, a half-carton of milk, maybe three eggs, some butter, and an unopened quart of orange juice.

All the dishes were washed, dried, and put away, and he’d taken the bed linens, bath towels, and dishcloths down to the laundry room earlier before he’d started packing. The dryer should probably be finished by now. He smiled on his way down the stairs to the basement laundry room, thinking of the number of times he’d passed up and down this staircase over the past year.

Henry and Lin had been wonderful neighbors. He’d taken hope from their happiness and excitement as they anticipated the birth of their first baby. He laughed quietly, remembering how he’d talked Henry down off the ceiling when Lin’s water had broken right in the middle of the dinner rush, ushering the nervous couple into a cab, Lin’s suitcase in hand, and taking over Henry’s hosting job for the rest of the

evening. He'd been the first Tunnel resident to see little Vivian when they brought her home from the hospital two days later. Their joy and hope for the future had been so contagious.

He'd needed that hope. Things hadn't exactly been easy with Livvy when he'd first been released from prison. As supportive as she'd been when the news first broke about his drunken hit-and-run accident and the death of Mrs. Davis' little boy, his year in prison had given her time to nurse quite a few grudges. And he couldn't blame her. He hadn't exactly lied to her, but he had concealed the truth from her and from the Tunnel community – a really big, devastating truth. A lie of omission, Father had called it. He'd broken their rules and taken advantage of their kindness and Livvy's love. And then he'd been forced to leave her to raise Luke on her own for two years.

Those first few months in the little efficiency apartment had been more difficult than he'd ever imagined, but he was so grateful for that private space away from the Tunnel community. It had given Livvy the freedom to finally express her anger and disappointment and frustration and sense of betrayal to him. He'd owed her that, and she would never have said a word about it to him Below out of concern for the inevitable gossip that flew faster than messages on the pipes. Tunnel folks were kind and caring and well-intentioned, but good heavens, they could be nosy!

He'd had plenty to say as well. It wasn't until after everything had finally come out into the open that he'd realized he'd been living in a kind of purgatory for years, hiding what he'd done, constantly worried about being discovered, feeling unworthy of the love and respect he'd been given by the people Below, especially Livvy. Actual prison had been much worse, of course. A frightening, sometimes even brutal ordeal. But finally being honest about everything had been liberating in an odd way, even if it had temporarily taken away his freedom.

Those little apartment walls had given him precious quiet time alone to come to terms with everything that had happened. He never would have had time for introspection Below, where he was expected to be so many things – husband, father, stone mason, crew leader, decision-maker, community member. It was enough to make a man's head spin and leave him too tired to think of anything besides how badly he needed just a few hours of sleep.

The dryer buzzed, and he enjoyed the simple pleasure of folding up fresh, clean, warm linens. He smiled, remembering the first time Fred Stanwick had shown up out of the blue to check on him. He'd just finished a load of laundry and ran into Fred on the stairs, practically dropping the basket of clean work clothes in surprise. He'd known that he would be expected to show up at Fred's office for regular parole check-ins, but here he was, doing a surprise room inspection. Catherine had warned him that Fred was by-the-book, but he'd heard so much from other prisoners about how busy parole officers were because of their huge caseloads, and how you could get away with so many things as long as you kept your parole office appointments. But nope, there was Fred, larger than life, in his stairwell.

It was the first of many visits. It turned out Fred had a personal policy of checking in on all of his parolees at their homes of record at least once per month. Catherine had been so right – the apartment was a Godsend – otherwise Fred would have violated his parole, and he'd have been right back in prison to serve five more years. He grew to appreciate those visits after a while. Fred was a good guy, strict, but genuinely committed to making sure his parolees had a chance to escape the endless prison-parole-relapse-prison cycle.

He took the clean linens back upstairs, hanging fresh towels in the bathroom, making up the bed, and storing the dishcloths in the little kitchen. He took one last look around the sparkling clean little apartment, slung the duffle bag's strap over his shoulder, and picked up the small box of canned and packaged food. It was a nice little place, all set for its next occupant.

Yes. He was finally ready to go home and find out what new things life had in store for him next.

Vincent slowly swam up through the undulating currents of sleep to find himself ... in Paradise.

My stars, she's still right here. And she's mine!

They'd barely moved since falling into a boneless, sated sleep, except to snuggle even closer, if that was indeed physically possible. If either of them had needed to rise while the other slept, it would have required a miracle. Their limbs were completely intertwined. Catherine lay sprawled across his chest, clinging to him like the curling ivy in the carvings on the doors and their mantel clock, her fragrant hair fanned beneath his chin.

As though summoned by his thoughts, the mantel clock softly chimed four times. Four o'clock already. If he was going to bathe and have any chance of being reasonably dry before dinner, he needed to get moving now.

Right now.

Really ... now.

But how could he move, when he held her, warm and languid and naked and still sweetly sleeping in his arms?

Impossible!

He'd resigned himself to the idea of them being late for dinner and enduring the endless speculation about why they might be late and why his hair was still damp and what had they been doing, when Catherine began to stir and stretch, yawning with that adorable little kitten sound she always made. She blinked at him for a moment, and then smiled.

"Hi there," she murmured drowsily. "What time is it?"

"Just after four," he replied with a sigh. "I hate to disturb our cozy nest, but I need a quick bath before dinner, and I'd prefer to be at least visibly dry by then."

"Hmmm, trying to mitigate the gossip?" she asked with a grin. "I'm afraid wet hair will be the least of your worries."

"What do you mean?" he inquired, certain there was a joke coming his way.

Instead, he got a sweet, lingering kiss. "You're glowing," she whispered against his lips.

"**Am I? I wonder why,**" he purred, gathering her in for another, steamier kiss.

She hummed happily into the kiss, then pulled back to observe him closely, tracing the dear lines of his face. "Oh yeah. Definitely glowing," she replied with a grin.

“Well, so are you, Madam Assistant District Attorney Chandler,” he beamed. **“Whatever will we do?”**

She laughed heartily. “The only thing we *can* do, under the circumstances,” she replied. “Brazen it out. Say nothing. Let them talk. They will anyway. It’s just like dealing with the tabloids, except there’s no option to sue them.”

He sighed. “This is all so ...”

“New?” she asked. “Unfamiliar?”

“Oh yes!” he agreed. “We’ve been a topic of conversation before, of course, but not in such ... suggestive terms. I never expected these circumstances to ever apply to me.”

“Well, who knows? Maybe everyone will be so fixated on Kanin’s homecoming, they’ll never notice us?” Catherine theorized, less than confidently.

“If we’re to pull that off, then I need to go quickly bathe right now,” he said. **“Although I’m reluctant to leave your side.”**

Vincent kissed her soundly and then rose to select a more festive change of clothes for Kanin’s welcome home dinner, observing with a bit of amusement the scattering of Catherine’s undergarments that had flown rather wide of their mark, collecting them as he made his way to the wardrobe, and dropping them to join the rest of her clothes.

“Shall I come scrub your back?” she offered playfully, snuggling down to enjoy his warmth and scent still lingering in the blankets. Then she sobered, suddenly wondering if it was too soon to tease him in such a manner. They’d just taken a huge step forward in their relationship toward a new kind of intimacy, and Vincent surely would need time to consider and absorb everything that had happened.

For once, she needn’t have worried.

“That is a lovely and tempting offer, My Catherine,” he replied, every bit as playfully. **“But then we’d never make it to dinner at all.”**

And he *winked* at her!

As Vincent sauntered down the tunnel to the bathing pool, he couldn’t contain the broad, toothy, almost stupid grin that spread over his face.

I’d best get that smile out of my system, or we’ll never slip under the Tunnel gossip radar.

Would that necessarily be a bad thing?

Vincent and Catherine, both in festive Tunnel attire, carefully timed their arrival in the dining hall to coincide with Kanin, Olivia, and Luke’s entrance through the opposite door. They slipped quietly into the cheering crowd to go stand by Father and Mary, surprised to see Stan surrounded by Kipper and his gaggle of friends over by the serving line.

“When did Stan arrive?” Vincent asked, instantly wishing to bite back a remark that might instigate other questions from Father, who could be far too observant for his own comfort.

But Father was readying to make his customary remarks for such celebratory occasions, fussing with his notes, and Mary was too preoccupied picking up the inevitable dropped notecards to pay much attention to the implications of Vincent’s question.

“Oh, he arrived around mid-afternoon to tell us about his meeting with Luz Corrales,” she commented absently, as she reordered Father’s notecards just in time.

Any further conversation was tabled as Father launched into his welcome home speech, talking about how much they had all missed Kanin’s amiable presence, steady leadership, superior skills, and warm friendship.

“So let’s join together in a round of hurrahs to welcome back our friend Kanin!” he concluded, waving his hands to conduct three loud cheers of varying sorts, from “Welcome home Kanin” to “Hurrah” to “YAYYYYYY” from the direction of Kipper and his pals.

“And now, I believe William and Olivia have arranged a veritable feast of all of Kanin’s favorite foods,” Father added.

“That’s right!” William boomed from behind the serving tables. “Come on and dig in everybody! But be polite! Guest of honor first!”

They all laughed at William’s jovial directions and fell into easy conversations as they formed the usual serving line. The dinner was indeed lavish by Tunnel standards: a huge roasted turkey with all the trimmings, roast beef with potatoes, carrots, and little pearl onions, a giant honey-glazed ham dotted with pineapple rings and cherries, a selection of vegetable side dishes, and a dessert table featuring a large cake and four different kinds of pies.

Father turned to Catherine with a raised eyebrow to inquire, “Do I detect the contributions of the Margaret Chase Charitable Trust to this extraordinary spread?”

“You might,” she smiled. “I told William to ask Olivia for a list of all of Kanin’s favorite things, and then made sure our Helpers would be able to provide the necessary ingredients. They were more than happy to oblige.”

Father shook his head. “I pity the man – or woman – who tries to say no to you, Catherine. One day, they will find themselves soundly out-manuevered and somehow thanking you for it! It’s shocking to me that you aren’t a better chess player.”

“Who says I don’t let you win, Father? Besides, I’m more of a poker player,” she countered with a cheeky grin, selecting some sweet potatoes and asparagus to enjoy with her serving of glazed ham.

As Father spluttered, Vincent laughed and commented, “She’s got you there. You would never know.”

“Just be careful, son,” Father rejoined. “One day, those tactics may be turned on you.”

“When that day comes, I’m sure I shall be infinitely grateful,” Vincent replied, taking Father’s plate to carry for him over to the head table.

Further down the serving line, Kipper tugged on Stan's sleeve and stated, "Let me guess. We're sitting at the head table again, aren't we."

"Would that really be so bad?" Stan replied. "I'd like to get Vincent and Catherine and Kanin's opinions on the potential site for my foundation. I'm hoping Kanin will agree to take charge of Dominic's salvage crews for the project."

"Oh, I'm sure he will," Kipper responded. "Kanin's the best, and everybody likes him."

"Ummm, Mr. Kaczmarek? Uh, Stan?" came a quiet voice behind them.

Stan turned to see Mouse and Jamie next in line. "Hi ... Jamie, isn't it?" he responded.

"Yes, that's right," she replied. "Um, Mouse and I were wondering if we could sit with you at the head table. We have some questions you might be able to answer."

Stan paused, a bit surprised, but quickly recovered. "Well, sure. The more, the merrier."

They quickly made their choices from William's bountiful feast and claimed the four remaining seats at the head table with Father, Mary, Vincent, Catherine, and Kanin and his family. Father was about to say something about Mouse's unexpected presence, but Mary tapped his hand under the table and shook her head.

"Stan, I understand from Father that your meeting with Luz Corrales went well," Vincent stated, hoping to open some pleasant and interesting conversation that did *not* involve his relationship with Catherine.

"Yes, I owe a big debt to Cathy and Sister J.B. for getting Luz to consider my proposal," Stan replied. "We're going to work on a smaller project together first, renovating a building in my Dad's neighborhood to serve as headquarters for my foundation, storefronts for community services, some low-income apartments, and a loft home for me on the top floor. I want a building with potential for a Tunnel threshold, and Jacob and I just may have identified the perfect building this afternoon."

"It's that empty commercial building opposite Lucinda Draper's thrift store on Juniper Street," Father added.

"Oh yeah!" Mouse perked up, immediately engaged. "Good deep Tunnel access there! Easy, smooth walk back to the Hub. Good choice!"

"Mouse would know," Kanin added. "He probably has the best grasp of the maze of subway tunnels, utility access corridors, and natural pathways of anybody in our community, except Vincent, of course."

Vincent pointed at Kipper. "Don't discount your nephew, Stan. Kipper knows the tunnels in that neighborhood very well. He grew up there."

"I know," Stan responded, smiling. "Speaking of my nephew, I did have one other bit of news to share with all of you. I've been given a court date to start the guardianship process." He elbowed Kipper gently. "So you'd better speak up now, if you want to back out."

"Not a chance, Uncle Stan," Kipper replied, elbowing him back. "You're stuck with me."

“What’s the date?” Catherine inquired, savoring a bite of ham and placing a piece of pineapple on Luke’s high chair tray.

“April 12th,” Stan replied, then looked up when he heard various gasps around the table. “What? Is there a problem with that date?”

“No,” Catherine assured him after a moment, grasping Vincent’s hand under the table.

“No, not at all,” Vincent added, squeezing her hand right back.

“You might even say it’s a very lucky date,” Catherine continued. “It will be the fourth anniversary of the day Vincent found me in the park.”

“Oh my,” Stan replied. “I had no idea. Should I request a change in the date? I’m sure you must have plans for such an important occasion.”

“No, no, that’s not necessary,” Catherine responded. “I’m sure your family law attorney has explained that it will be a very *pro forma* appearance just to officially file your statement of intent and start the inquiry process. You won’t need your character witnesses until later on. The date just seems . . . providential. A good date for new beginnings.”

“Well, I’ll take any and all luck I can get,” Stan stated. “I’m going to be juggling three oranges, an anvil, a live chicken, and a chainsaw over the next few months.”

“And I suspect you’ll thrive on it,” Vincent laughed. “Tell us more about your plans for the building. I’ve seen it, after dark, of course, from the top of Lucinda Draper’s store. It’s an older building that used to be a multi-story department store – an Altman’s, I believe – then a Woolworth’s before they went out of business. Lots of nice art deco architectural details, big windows, about five stories, a flat roof.”

“Well, I want to transform most of that flat roof into a patio area with a big community garden for my staff and tenants and the Tunnel community to enjoy,” Stan stated. “I’ll keep a small private corner for myself, so Kipper and I can grill hot dogs and watch the July 4th and New Year’s Eve fireworks or catch some rays on a Saturday afternoon.”

“That’s a splendid idea,” Catherine responded. “You should get in touch with Green Thumb, a great nonprofit organization that specializes in setting up community gardens. My late aunt helped champion them when they were just a small start-up, but they’ve done wonderful work converting rooftops and vacant lots all over the city into food sources and green spaces for low-income communities. Your project would be perfect for them.”

“You should put in a good grocery store, too,” Kipper piped up. “There’s little corner shops here and there in the neighborhood, but if you want anything much beyond expensive, lousy apples and oranges and bananas, you have to take the subway or a bus to the Village. That’s a long way to schlepp groceries, especially for the little old ladies and mothers with little kids.”

Stan gaped at his nephew, astounded. “Well, out of the mouths of babes,” he murmured.

“Hey! I’m not a baby!” Kipper retorted, elbowing Stan a little less gently than before.

“No, no, Buddy, that’s not what I mean,” Stan replied, rubbing his ribs. “It’s what folks say when a young person comes up with something unexpectedly wise beyond their years. Kipper, that’s a *terrific* idea!

Why didn't I think of it? There are five commercial entrances on the ground level. Two of them would provide plenty of ground floor space for a large community supermarket. The building has a suitable freight entrance for refrigerated trucks around back."

"George and Shirley Robinson have been wanting to expand their grocery business for some time, but they haven't been able to find the right property," Father noted. "They're wonderful Helpers, and you would be providing an important opportunity for an African American-owned family business, rather than a giant supermarket chain."

"See, that's what I want to do!" Stan enthused. "Anyone involved in my new foundation projects needs to be committed to helping improve the community for everyone. I want to work with Luz to canvas the neighborhood, find out what they really need, and make decisions based on those results about the kinds of community services to provide through the other three storefronts. Do they need a free medical clinic? Dental services? Legal aid? Part of the second floor will be reserved as office and meeting space for my foundation, but the rest can be used for other community services like day care for children or seniors, meeting space for community support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, or mental health counseling. The third and fourth floors will be converted into low-income apartments of various sizes from efficiencies to two-bedroom apartments for families. The fifth floor will be divided into a management office for the apartments and a large residential kitchen and dining hall on one side, and my private loft apartment on the other."

"Wow!" said Kanin. "And you call this a *small* project?"

Stan spread his hands and laughed, "Well, compared to building a 30-floor high rise from the ground up ... yeah! By the way, once I've acquired a building, and I'm almost positive this is the one, I plan to hire Dominic Martinelli's firm to handle demolition and salvage. I'd really appreciate it if you'd take charge of the salvage crews and bring in anyone Below who'd like a paying job at union rates. There's bound to be lots of great materials you could repurpose here."

"Oh! Oh! Mouse will come. Jamie too!" Mouse interjected, looking over at Kanin. "If Kanin says OK good, OK fine."

Kanin gaped, staring from Stan to Mouse and back, and then turned to Olivia. "What do you think, Livvy?" he asked. "I'm just getting back home to you, and this will be a really big project."

Olivia beamed, pleased to be consulted about this important decision. "I think it's a perfect job for you, Sweetheart," she replied. "And it won't start right away. You'll have some time to spend with us and get used to being home again. And then, you'll have meaningful work that will really help a lot of people, including our community. I think that will be important for you, and I'd be so proud."

Kanin kissed her cheek and then reached out to shake Stan's hand, "Well, Mouse already said it. OK good, OK fine!"

Stan laughed and then looked over to Father. "I should probably also consult you, Jacob. How does your community handle the salaries of members who take paying jobs Above?"

"A long time ago, we agreed as a community that members who earn paychecks or sell their art and handcrafts Above will contribute a portion of those proceeds to a community account at the First National Credit Union," Father noted. "We have a Helper there, Lois Stevens, who establishes individual accounts for community members who receive paychecks. Our community account is used to purchase supplies, medical equipment, prescriptions, and other things we can't salvage or our Helpers can't provide."

They continued chatting about the many things that could be achieved through Stan's first project as they enjoyed their meal. Soon, it was time for Kanin to cut his welcome home cake, and the children lined up for their first turn at the dessert table. The adults laughed as Kipper took off to join his friends in line, and then Jamie summoned up her courage to talk with Stan.

"Stan, Mouse and I have some questions about a subject that came up today with, well, most of the people at this table," she began. "It's been suggested that I consider applying to an engineering school here in the city, and we were wondering if you had any advice."

"Whew! That's a big field with lots of sub-specialties," he replied. "Depending on the size of the program, you might be the only young woman in some of your classes. You're gonna get push-back from some of the guys."

"Oh, I can handle myself," Jamie replied.

Kanin chimed in, "She certainly can. Jamie already leads work crews both Below and Above with Dominic's salvage operation. She knows her stuff, and the guys pretty quickly come to respect her authority."

"Jamie is one of the finest students I've ever taught," Vincent added. "We've had to call on one of our Helpers to provide an advanced calculus course just for her. There's no question about her ability to handle the academic rigors of any college program."

"There are lots of good engineering programs in the state – especially the University of Rochester and the Rochester Institute of Technology, Cornell University in Ithaca, and SUNY Syracuse," Stan said. "Here in the city, there are terrific programs at Columbia and NYU, but I think the best match for you would probably be my alma mater – The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art. It's in the East Village at Cooper Square, so you'd have easy access from the Tunnels, and the class sizes are small, more like what you're accustomed to Below. I got my degrees from their Irwin S. Chanin School of Architecture and Albert Nerken School of Engineering."

"That's a private college, isn't it?" Father asked, turning to Catherine. "The tuition would be very expensive."

"Well, hang on, they do have a great scholarship program," Stan continued. "How do you think I managed to study there? I got a full tuition scholarship and lived at home rather than in the dormitories. I'm more concerned about how to certify Jamie's education. Have you taken the SAT and ACT exams yet?"

"Not yet. I hadn't even considered college until Kanin and Catherine brought up the idea today," Jamie answered. "But Father has friends who can certify me as a home-schooled student, and Catherine will pay my exam fees."

"There's study booklets to help you prepare for those tests," Stan noted. "I'll be sure to get you some. You can even take a practice test to get used to the timed format. And if you're a math whiz, you should definitely take the mathematics advanced placement test as well. That will score big points with the admissions committee. You won't be able to apply for the Fall semester; that application process closed back in November. But you could apply for the Spring semester, and I'd be happy to provide an alumni legacy recommendation and sponsor your application."

“Oh wow, thank you!” Jamie replied with a grin, and then turned hopefully to a very silent Mouse.
 “Mouse, what do you think? I’d be able to go to college right here in the city, just off Bowery. That’s not far at all, and it wouldn’t be until next January. We’ll have time to figure things out.”

“Com-pro-mise,” Mouse murmured. “Jamie stay with Mouse and still go to school?”

“That’s right, just like we discussed,” Jamie replied. “How does that sound?”

Mouse studied her earnest face, struggling with his fears and his love and hope for her.

“Jamie so smart, brilliant, like Vincent says,” Mouse said, taking her hands in his. “Jamie should have everything. Go anywhere. Do anything.” He looked deeply into her eyes, pleading. “Just always come home to Mouse.”

“You know I will!” she replied, sweetly, fervently.

“Oh! And share school books!” Mouse added. “Mouse likes science books and how-to-build-things books and what-things-are-made-of books.”

“You bet!” Jamie answered, laughing. “We’ll read everything together!”

“Then I say, OK good, OK fine! Jamie goes to college and does better than *all* the boys!” Mouse announced, firmly.

Everyone laughed at that final proclamation, and Stan raised his glass, “A toast! Welcome home Kanin, and congratulations Jamie on making an important decision! It’s a big night for everyone!”

Later on as the evening was winding down, Mouse crept over to Vincent’s side and the two of them watched Jamie, Catherine, Father, and Stan engaging in an involved conversation to map out a plan for Jamie’s entrance exams and college application. Catherine had her day planner open on the table top, flipping back and forth between the calendar and To-Do sections, circling dates and making notes, and Stan made similar notations in a pocket diary. Information flew back and forth about the Peis’ apartment, the Margaret Chase Charitable Trust, Father’s New York City Board of Education contact, and Stan’s various connections with Cooper Union board and faculty members, as well as the alumni association.

“How do you do it, Vincent?” Mouse asked quietly, nodding over to the preoccupied group. “How do you love Catherine, and let her go Above? Hurts so much just to think about Jamie Above without me!”

Vincent sighed, considering his answer carefully. “You love Jamie very much, yes?”

“Yes, yes!” Mouse agreed immediately. “Love so big, sometimes Mouse might fly away! Or blow up into little pieces. Hard to tell.”

Vincent laughed. “That sounds about right. Love means lots of different things. It means sharing a life together, talking about everything, sometimes even disagreeing about things. But above all, love means accepting change. It means holding that person in your heart while also giving them room to grow. Sometimes that means being apart for a while.”

“It’s hard,” Mouse said. “Jamie makes Mouse feel better. Safe. Not alone.”

“Oh, I know,” Vincent agreed. “Loving Catherine was the end of my Aloneness. But even if Catherine isn’t here Below, I know that I’m still not alone. And neither are you. Catherine is always in my heart, just like Jamie is in yours. And when they have to be Above, then you and I must lean on our friends and stay busy until they return. How does that sound?”

“We could hang out?” Mouse asked.

“Of course, don’t we always?” Vincent replied. “And here’s an interesting thing. Jamie going to college will also help you to grow. You’ll learn new things, both together and apart, and then share those things. You’ll find yourself becoming stronger on your own.”

“Hard to imagine,” Mouse admitted.

“I know, but growth and change are a part of life,” Vincent responded. “In fact, if we don’t continue growing and changing, we start to die inside. Just look at all the changes happening around us right now. Kanin is coming home after a challenging experience in prison and on parole, and now he’s starting a new job. Stan has practically turned his entire life upside-down, changing his name, closing his business, starting a foundation, and becoming Kipper’s guardian. Jamie is planning to go to college, and you are helping her. Catherine and I are growing closer every day.”

He paused, looking over at the happy, intense group of planners.

“Think of it this way,” Vincent continued. “We can only grow by walking on unfamiliar ground. We have to try new things, meet new people, explore new ideas. It can be scary, but we’re both very lucky. We can take courage in the knowledge that, whatever changes may come, we have the support of people who love us and who will walk into the unknown beside us.”

THE END