

A GENTLE RAIN STILL FALLS

by Kathy Bayne

Kanin stood up straight, his head held high. Only his eyes gave any evidence of the apprehension he felt today. He had done what his conscience said he should, yet that didn't still his fear.

The judge's voice was clear and strong as she passed sentence.

"Kanin Evans, you have been found guilty of vehicular manslaughter. Although your attorney tells us you have broken no laws for the past sixteen years, he cannot tell us where you have been, or produce any corroborating facts to back up his statements. It is therefore the judgement of this court that you serve one year in a federal correctional facility. Still, since you have no previous or continuing criminal record, you will serve six months and then be eligible for a community service program. This court is adjourned. Bailiff, will you please remove the prisoner."

Judge Olins rose from the bench and it was over.

Olivia let out a sob, as Kanin was led away. She looked over to Catherine, who was standing with Patricia Davis.

"Excuse me a minute, Mrs. Davis." Catherine touched the woman's arm.

"Of course, Ms. Chandler," she smiled weakly.

Catherine made her way to Olivia, who looked like she would bolt and run any moment.

"Olivia, are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right. The man I love was just taken away from me. What am I supposed to do now?" Olivia's tears fell freely.

"He did the right thing, by turning himself in, you know that. It will probably be only for six months." Catherine knew immediately that she had said the wrong thing.

"Only six months... What if that were Vincent they just took away? Would you feel the same about only six months?" Olivia's face was full of accusation.

Just then Kanin's lawyer George Kingsly came over to speak to Olivia. Catherine knew him from around the court circuit, and thought he had done a good job on Kanin's defense.

"Ms. Chandler," he nodded in Catherine's direction, then turned his attention to Olivia. "I think it went well today, Mrs. Evans, with good behavior Kanin could be out in four months."

"Where will they bring him?" Olivia asked.

"Since he has no prior arrests, I can safely assume that he'll be sent to Downstate in Beacon, New York. It is a minimum security prison, and you can visit weekly."

Kingsly looked with concern at Olivia. "Would you like to see him now?"

"Can I?" Her voice was soft.

"Of course, come with me." He put his arm around her shoulder and began to lead her to the holding room. Catherine returned to her client. She was staring into space, a strange look on her face.

"Mrs. Davis, what's wrong?"

The pale woman turned and looked at Catherine. "Is that it, Ms. Chandler? Do I go home now and continue

life as before?"

"There is nothing else to do here, Mrs. Davis. Justice has been served. Kanin Evans was found, convicted and sentenced. It's over." Catherine looked at her, puzzled.

"Not for me, Ms. Chandler; It will never be over for me. These last few months have brought it all back to me, the enormous loss, the endless grief. I have to begin again, and I don't think I'll make it this time."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Davis. I truly am."

"You've been a great support through all this, Ms. Chandler. Now the rest is up to me. Like you said, there is nothing else to do here. I'm ready to go home."

"Of course, I'll take you." Catherine started to leave.

"That won't be necessary. I can find my way. I'll have to. Thank you for everything."

Olivia stood silently looking at Kanin. His hands were cuffed and he was sitting straight back in a wooden chair, head down.

"Kanin, look at me."

Slowly he raised his eyes. "I'm sorry, Livie."

Kneeling down in front of the chair, she placed her head on his lap.

"I love you."

"How can you love me? How? Didn't you hear what that judge said? I'm a murderer." Kanin lowered his eyes again.

"It was an accident, a stupid, foolish, tragic accident." Olivia held his hands tightly.

"Joey Davis never got a chance to grow up because of me. It doesn't matter that it wasn't intentional. All that matters is that a young boy is dead, and that a woman's life is ruined. I wouldn't blame you if you left me. Maybe I won't come back to the community. I'll just leave you in peace."

Olivia took his face in her hands. "I'll wait for you, Kanin. I'll wait for you to come back to me, and to Luke. I only know the world where I was born. Still.... if you never want to return, I'll stay Above with you. But never, never, would I leave you."

"Mrs. Evans, I'm afraid it's time to go." The baliff was standing behind her. "You can see him again tomorrow, before they move him."

Kanin was led from the room by two guards. He looked over his shoulder at Olivia.

'Never,' she mouthed silently.

"I'll take you home now," George Kingsly told Olivia.

"Okay, just let me wash my face and freshen up."

"I'll wait for you at the door."

Kingsly stood at the door for what seemed like hours. He looked at his watch, thirty minutes. *'I'll give her a few more minutes.'* Finally he stopped a guard. "Have you seen my client, Mrs. Evans?"

"Yeah, she left here at least twenty minutes ago. Went out the side door."

"Thanks."

"No problem," the guard turned and went back to the courtroom.

Ever since he had taken this case, he just couldn't figure out the Evans'. They seemed like a nice young couple, but very enigmatic. He never did know where his client was for sixteen years. Even now, he really had no idea where Kanin's wife lived with their son. All of his checks came from a third party, a mysterious benefactor.

'Hey, what the heck....they never bounced.' George Kingsly shook his head and started home.

Catherine was trying to eat the light dinner she had fixed for herself, but she had no appetite. She thought everything had gone well at court today, from a legal standpoint. Why then, did she feel like such a failure?"

"Catherine," a soft voice was coming from her bedroom.

"Vincent!"

She walked inside and found him standing in her doorway, not quite inside.

"I felt you were troubled. What can I do?"

"You can just hold me."

Vincent took a tentative step inside the room and looked at her. She knew he would go no further. Covering the extra steps to him, she placed her head on his chest.

"What is it, Catherine? What upsets you so?" He stroked her hair lovingly.

"Today I won a court case, and made two people very unhappy."

"Olivia?"

Catherine moved back so she could look at him. "Does she hate me?"

"I don't think so, Catherine, she has a compassionate nature. She knows Kanin did the right thing."

"Olivia asked me what I would do if that were you, being taken away for six months."

"What did you tell her?"

"Nothing, because I didn't have an answer." She put her arms back around his waist.

"You said two people were unhappy. Who is the other one?"

"Patricia Davis, she did not survive the trial well. Too many painful memories resurfaced. I'm worried about her, she is a fragile woman."

"Then you must be her friend, that is what she needs now."

"I suppose you're right. I'll give her a week to settle back from the ordeal, and give her a call." Vincent smiled at her and nodded.

"If you stay right there, I'll make us some tea," Catherine offered.

"Tea would be nice."

When she returned, Catherine found him back on the balcony. With a sigh, she walked outside.

"Here you are." She placed the two cups on the small glass table.

"Catherine, come here and look at the lights." Vincent put out his arm for her to join him.

As she leaned against him, he enveloped both of them in his cloak. No words were necessary.

Hoping to get a chance to speak to Joe alone, Cathy arrived at work early the next morning. She poured herself a cup of coffee, and headed toward his office.

"Joe, are you in?" She stuck her head in the door.

"Yeah, Radcliffe, over here."

Joe was in the corner of the room, riding a stationary bike.

"A turn toward fitness? Does Jack LaLane know about this?"

"Very funny, Cath. It just so happens that I've turned over a new leaf. From now on, I intend to eat healthy, play healthy, and be healthy."

"Right, until the next *'buy one, get one free'* offer at Jose's Taco Emporium!"

"You must have come in early for a reason, besides to annoy me," Joe mused. "What can I do for you?"

Catherine paced the room, trying to put her thoughts into words.

"Have you ever been so involved with a client that you can't let go, even after the trial was over?"

"The Davis woman?"

Catherine shook her head. "It seems we did her more harm than good by bringing Evans to trial. She was forced to relive the whole nightmare."

"Sixteen years is a long time to keep things bottled up. Maybe now she's finally accepting the loss. As long as the guy wasn't found, she could pretend it didn't happen." Joe shrugged his shoulders. "There's nothing on the books that says you can't be her friend, Cath. Just don't let her bring you down into her depression."

"I'll be careful, Joe. I promise." Cathy turned around at the doorway. "By the way, keep up the good work, you're looking better already."

Joe gave her his best boyish grin. "What would I do without your encouragement, Radcliffe?"

Traffic was heavy on the New York Thruway and they had left during rush hour; that would add another forty minutes to the trip. Kanin was uncomfortable in the police van. His legs were shackled to the hard bench he sat on and he could feel every bump in the road.

"You all right back there?" the guard asked casually.

"It's not the most comfortable ride I ever had, but I'll survive. How much longer?"

"About a half hour more. Have you heard about this place?"

"No," Kanin answered half-heartedly.

"It's not too bad up there. You'll do just fine if you keep your wits about you. Mostly white collar types, computer fraud, embezzlement, that kind of thing."

"Why did they send me there, then? I was convicted of manslaughter."

"Maybe the judge figured you've punished yourself more all these years than she ever could."

"Maybe." Kanin leaned against the back of the van and closed his eyes. The rest of the trip passed in silence.

When the vehicle came to a halt, the doors were flung open. A prison guard was standing outside the van, waiting.

"Okay, buddy. Time to get out and stretch those legs." The guard reached over and unlocked the leg restraints.

Kanin Evans got out of the van and looked at what would be his home for the next six months.

Vincent looked at Catherine from the corner of his eye, she looked so beautiful in the candlelight.

"Why are you staring at me, Vincent?" she whispered. "I leave my buttons undone, get lipstick on my teeth? What?"

"I'm sorry I made you uncomfortable," he lowered his eyes shyly.

She placed her hand on his chin and turned his face upward.

"When are you ever going to know when I'm teasing you?"

"I'm learning," he lowered his eyes again.

"Vincent, stop that. Look at me."

He looked up through his lashes and smiled. "No, you've hurt my feelings. I don't want to look at you anymore."

Catherine started to laugh. "You sound like a little boy - how cute."

"Catherine," Vincent was attempting a serious demeanor. "I've been called many things, but *'never'* cute."

Both of them were laughing when Father walked into the chamber.

"I'm glad to see your mood has improved, Catherine. Vincent told me that you were troubled over the trial."

"I am feeling better, Father. Thank you. I've contacted Patricia Davis and made a date for lunch next week. But there is still Olivia to contend with. Do you think she will ever forgive me?"

"Why don't you ask her yourself?" Father moved to let Olivia enter the chamber. She looked at Catherine with guarded feelings.

"Catherine, I know you were just doing your job when you came for Kanin, but it is very difficult for me to be here without him. I don't hate you. I'm just so scared."

"There is no reason to be frightened. You have the whole community behind you, you're not alone."

"I'm not scared for me, but for him. How will he survive in jail? I've heard such terrible stories." Olivia began to cry.

Catherine went to her immediately. "Don't worry, he isn't in a rough place, most of the inmates there are accountants gone wrong. It may not be a picnic, but he is safe. I wish there had been some other way, I'm sorry, Olivia."

"It's okay, Catherine. I'm going to make it. For my sake and Luke's." Olivia gave Catherine a hug. "Do you think you can arrange a ride for Luke and me up to the prison? If that's ethical?"

"No problem. I'll ask some Helpers and if they're all busy, I'll get one of my friends to drive you."

"Thank you, Catherine."

"Now that we've settled that, I'll go make some tea and we can all play a game of Scrabble," Father interrupted.

"I think that we will accept your offer of tea, but decline on the Scrabble, Father. Catherine and I were going to start reading a new novel this evening, one that has been on the best seller list for weeks." Vincent gave

Father that *'we want to be alone'* look.

"Olivia, do you wish to decline also?"

"No, Father, a game of Scrabble sounds wonderful."

"Vincent, I will send one of the children with your tea. By the way, which book are you reading?"

"*Den of Thieves*," said Catherine.

"*Private Eyes*," Vincent said simultaneously.

"Oh, I see. Enjoy them both." Father left the room with Olivia on his arm.

"I don't think we fooled them, Vincent. What do you think?"

"Not even remotely. Now, where were we? Oh yes, you were telling me I was cute," Vincent looked over to Catherine who was just standing there with a grin on her face. "What is it that makes you smile?"

"I'm happy and content for the first time in weeks. And being with you always makes me smile."

Vincent drew her into an embrace. "Oh Catherine, how I love you," he whispered into her hair.

Catherine pulled back and looked right into his eyes. "Did you say something?"

Vincent gazed back at her calmly, "I just said that I love you."

On an impulse Catherine stood on tiptoe and leaned herself toward him, their lips just inches apart. Then she stopped and waited. It seemed like hours before Vincent moved. Finally, he kissed her. Not a kiss of devouring passion, but one of innocence and promise. It took her breath away.

Vincent was too shocked at his action to say anything. Catherine broke the tension. "Maybe we should join Father and Olivia in that game of Scrabble."

"Maybe we should," Vincent took her hand in his and headed toward the chamber door.

"Vincent."

He turned to look at Catherine.

"I love you, too."

Olivia had just visited yesterday, so Kanin was surprised to hear that someone was there to see him.

"Who is it? Did they leave a name?" Kanin questioned the guard, as they walked down the hall.

"No, she just asked for you. Maybe a secret admirer."

The guard stepped in front of him and pushed the buzzer on the door to the visitors' area.

"You know the rules, Evans. Fifteen minutes. Enjoy."

Kanin sat down in the designated cubicle and was shocked at the identity of his visitor. On the other side of the glass was Patricia Davis. She looked like she hadn't slept in weeks. The quiet was uncomfortable as they stared at each other. Kanin picked up the phone provided and gestured to his visitor to do the same.

"How are you, Mrs. Davis?" His voice sounded louder than he had wanted.

"Healing, Mr. Evans. Healing. How are your wife and son?"

"Doing well, under the circumstances. They were just here yesterday for a visit." The conversation was strained and polite.

"I'm sure you're wondering why I came to see you, Kanin. I may call you Kanin?"

He nodded his head in the affirmative.

"I came to tell you, I've begun to forgive you. It will be gradual, but I have started."

Kanin felt the tears slip down his face as he looked at the woman.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry for what happened. Please believe me."

"I do believe you, that's why I'm here." She put the palm of her hand against the glass and smiled.

Kanin returned the gesture and felt a weight lift from his heart.

"Time's up, Evans," the guard's harsh voice broke the moment.

"Thank you for coming, Mrs. Davis."

"May I come again, just to talk."

"I'd like that, would next Wednesday be good?"

"Till Wednesday," she put down the phone and left.

Walking back to his cell Kanin realized that at last he was free from the guilt he had carried for sixteen years.

After spending her morning plodding through files, Catherine was looking forward to her lunch with Patricia Davis. It had taken over a month for both of them to find a mutually-agreeable date. They had decided to meet at a local tavern on John Street. The atmosphere was nothing but the food was great.

Catherine arrived first and was shown to a table in the back room, away from the bar and lunch time crowd. She hadn't been here since her first week at the DA's office, when Moreno offered to buy her lunch.

'God,' she thought, 'that seems like a lifetime ago So much has happened since then.'

Her thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of Patricia Davis. She was looking better than Catherine remembered seeing her in a long time.

"Mrs. Davis, over here." Catherine rose from her seat and waved.

It was hard getting through the crowd, but Patricia managed to maneuver without too much difficulty.

"Ms. Chandler, how nice to see you again. I was rather surprised when you first called and arranged this lunch date. I'm glad we were finally able to get together."

"Me too, and please call me Cathy. To tell the truth, I was a little worried. You looked so despondent after the trial. I wanted to see how you were feeling."

"I'm doing much better, thank you. I've been up to the prison to see Kanin. He has been a great help to me, and I hope I have done something for him. We have both begun to put the past behind us."

"Well, I'm glad that the two of you have come to an understanding." Catherine's relief was genuine.

"You know, Ms. Chan... Cathy, Kanin has had a very quiet life since the accident. *'Self-imposed exile,'* he called it. He told me all about his wife and young son, and how they live in a small community of very extraordinary people."

Catherine tried to control her voice. "Where does he live? Has he told you?"

"Nothing specific, just that it's off the beaten path. Hidden from society. Shall we order?"

Catherine nodded in the affirmative.

Catherine felt lunch had gone very well. She'd been astonished at the announcement that Patricia Davis had visited Kanin in prison. But it seemed to have been the best thing for both of them. Mrs. Davis had even offered to place him in a job with her company when he was released.

"Hey Radcliffe, how was lunch?" Joe's voice broke her thoughts. "Everything go all right?"

"Yeah Joe, everything is fine. In fact, it went exceptionally well. Did you know Patricia Davis is visiting Evans in jail?"

"Really? Sounds like she's finally beginning to heal That's good to hear. Good job, Cathy."

"I had nothing to do with it. Seems she found herself, after all this time. Maybe we have a happy ending for once."

"Yes, maybe we do." Joe smiled his special little boy smile. "We're pretty much caught up here, why don't you give yourself an early day."

"Thanks, Joe. I can get a head start on Saturday."

"Have any special plans?"

"No, just the usual. Catch up on laundry, read a good book, watch TV. A typical Chandler weekend."

"If that's a typical Chandler weekend, how come I can never find you home?"

"I didn't know you were looking for me, Joe. There was no message on my machine."

He turned beet red. "I didn't call. I sort of was in the neighborhood... and, uh, stopped by. The doorman said he hadn't seen you leave, but when you didn't answer the door. Well, I figured you were, you know."

"No, Joe. I don't know. Tell me," Catherine said firmly.

"I thought that you were kind of... entertaining." Joe put his head down and became very interested in his shoes.

"Do you come and visit me often?"

"I'm not checking up on you or anything, Cath. I thought maybe we could take in a flick, share some popcorn. Like friends sometimes do."

"Sound like fun, Joe, maybe next week." Catherine had finished clearing her desk and turned to leave.

He watched her walk down the corridor. "Yeah, next week. If you're not going to some concert with tall, dark and handsome."

Finishing her final load of laundry, Cathy was eager to take a shower and go see Vincent. It had been five whole days since she'd seen him. Five whole days since he kissed her. Just thinking of that innocent kiss sent shivers of excitement down her spine. She lingered a moment in her sensuous musing. Closing her eyes, she drifted into more erotic thoughts.

Suddenly she felt a longing, not her own. "Vincent! Oh God, our bond," he was feeling her need, and adding his to it.

She reflected for another moment. "He does feel the same desire I do, but he won't act on it." Catherine laughed to herself as she conjured up in her mind the most suggestive image and concentrated on Vincent.

FOUR MONTHS LATER

Cathy arrived home from work and found a note on her welcome mat.

Dearest Catherine.

It would be most appreciated if you would come Below this evening. Vincent will meet you at your basement, around eight pm.

Father

Over the last few months, her relationship with the tunnel community had become closer. Only her relationship with Vincent was at a standstill. Even after their first kiss, he was still reluctant to have them continue in the obvious direction.

Vincent was waiting for her at the bottom of the ladder from her basement entrance.

"Catherine, I'm glad to see you," he said as he helped her down the last step.

"Father sent a note. Is everything all right?"

"Everything is fine." He was staring at her intently.

"What is it?"

"Every time I see you, Catherine, you are more beautiful. I wish I could find the words to describe how the sight of you makes me feel."

"Then why don't you just show me, Vincent?" She turned her head up to him.

His kiss surprised her. It was intense and passionate, and he held her in a firm grip. When they finally broke apart neither one could move. Finally, he took her hand and started to walk down the tunnel.

"Come Catherine, there is a Council meeting this evening and you are our guest."

She looked at him dazed, a feeling of unfulfilled desire slowly creeping through her. *'Stop this, Cathy, he can feel everything,'* she thought.

"Soon, Catherine, soon we will be together. I promise." Vincent looked at her with clear blue eyes.

"I'll hold you to that promise," she smiled slightly.

"I know you will." He kissed her hand and made a sweeping gesture to follow him.

The residents of the tunnels were milling around when Catherine and Vincent arrived in Father's chamber.

"Cathy, how good to see you." Father walked over and kissed her on the cheek. "I'm delighted you could make it. We have some very important business and you can be a big help to us."

After all interested parties were present and accounted for, the assembly was called to order.

"I have called this meeting to discuss the future of one of our community," Father said. "Kanin told Olivia that he is to be released into a community work program early next week. We will have the full details when she meets again with Mr. Kingsly tomorrow."

The room began to buzz and everyone looked at Olivia who was unashamedly crying.

"Please, ladies and gentlemen. Please, let me continue," but no one seemed to listen to Father.

"People, Father wishes to continue." Vincent's voice was heard above the din. And then there was silence.

"Thank you, Vincent. Now, as I was saying, Kanin is due to be released soon, but he must have a job and a permanent address before he will be considered for the program."

"He can live with a Helper Above, that's no problem," Cullen piped up.

"Yes, Cullen, that would be the normal way. But Mrs. Davis, the woman whose son was killed in the accident, has offered him a job and a place to stay."

"Why would she do that, Father? What does she know about us?" William was concerned.

"Apparently, Mrs. Davis has been visiting Kanin in prison and they've become friends. I don't know what he had told her about our community, except that he cannot live here right now. Not when he is on probation and being watched."

"He hasn't broken our confidence, Kanin would never do that." Olivia's voice was firm. "It's like Father said, he told her he couldn't go home right now, and she made this offer. I want to know from Catherine what type of woman Patricia Davis is, and can we trust her."

Catherine cleared her throat. "Mrs. Davis is a very lonely woman. Everyone she has ever loved has abandoned her in some way. Her son was killed and her husband left when he could no longer cope with her grief. Sixteen years after she put her life back on track, she was forced to live the nightmare anew. Her job and her home life suffered, and again her life was destroyed. She has found strength in her friendship with Kanin. I don't believe she would betray him in any way."

"Is she trustworthy, Catherine?" Mary asked.

"Kanin trusts her."

"It is time for a vote," Father announced. "All those in favor of Kanin accepting the offer, signify with a show of hands." He looked around the room. "All opposed," he counted again. "Then it is done, the ayes have it. Olivia, will you inform Kanin of our decision."

"Yes, Father."

"Catherine, thank you for your input."

"I was glad to do it, but I just said what I feel."

"That's all you ever need to do, my dear." He looked at her and smiled.

When all the refreshments were served and conversation had died down, Catherine reluctantly told Vincent she had to leave.

"I have a lunch date with Jenny tomorrow afternoon, but I will be free for the rest of the weekend. Maybe I can spend it here Below?" Catherine looked hopeful.

"I would like that, Catherine. Now, let me take you home."

Their goodbye was even more ardent than their hello. Vincent's lips strayed down to her earlobes and neck and she in turned kissed his chin and throat, both of them lost in long pent-up emotion, both of them knowing they should stop but not wanting to be the first to do so. Sheer breathlessness forced them apart. As Catherine began to climb the ladder to her world hesitantly, she looked over her shoulder and smiled at Vincent.

For the first time in months, Kanin Evans was free. He'd been released that morning and was on his way back to New York City.

Olivia was waiting at Grand Central Station and Kanin thought she never looked more beautiful, as she rushed into his arms.

"I missed holding you so much! Stand back, let me look at you with no glass between us," he said, as he released her.

She obliged by twirling around like some intoxicated ballerina.

"Stop that! People are looking at you!" Kanin was laughing as he spoke.

"Let them look. I'm so happy. There's nothing hanging over our heads anymore, and nothing can stop us."

"Kanin, is that you?" came a voice from the distance.

He turned to see Patricia Davis standing a few feet away, waving.

"Come on, Livie, let me introduce you. She's dying to meet you." He gave his wife's hand a tug.

"No, you go. I'll see you in a few days." Olivia's face was etched with stubbornness.

"What's wrong? She won't hurt us, she's a friend."

"She's not my friend. You have to be nice to her. I don't."

"This isn't like you. Ever since I told you about her offer to help, you've been acting strange."

"She took you away from me and from Luke. That's why I hate her."

"Patricia Davis is a victim, not a criminal. I'm the criminal."

Olivia's hand went up as if to slap him but she stopped in midair. "Don't ever say that, ever," her eyes were intense. "You better go now, she's waiting."

"When can I see Luke?"

"Tomorrow, I'll meet you in the park at three pm." Her expression softened as she leaned over to kiss him. "I love you. See you tomorrow."

"I love you too, always."

He made his way across the terminal to the red-haired woman waiting there.

"Where is your wife? I thought she would stay with you." Patricia asked.

"She won't be coming with me. I'll see her and our son tomorrow."

"You did tell her, my invitation included all of you?"

"I told her. But she thought it best this way."

Kanin began to rebuild his life. He saw Olivia and Luke several times a week, always at some public place. The rest of the time he divided between working at the Davis Accounting firm, and counseling at a DWI workshop. Though he had not had a drink in almost twenty years, he was required to join Alcoholics Anonymous. His life was very busy, but every night he thought about how much he wanted to go home, to be Below with his family and friends.

The new closeness in Catherine and Vincent's relationship was not lost on anyone. They held hands openly now, and every so often Catherine could be seen giving Vincent's cheek a kiss.

So it was no surprise to Father when he came into Vincent's chamber and found Catherine and his son in a rather fervent kiss. Suddenly aware of another presence, the couple parted.

"Hello, Father," Vincent said much too innocently. "Catherine was just telling me some good news."

"It must be *"VERY"* good news," Father replied sarcastically.

"In fact, it is. Kanin is coming home."

"I don't understand, Catherine," the older man was puzzled. "I thought he still had two months more of his

sentence to serve."

"Patricia Davis went to the parole board and told them what great work he's been doing for her and the city and they have commuted his sentence to just four months in the work program."

"Why, Catherine, that *'is'* wonderful news. I'll tell Pascal to put it on the pipes."

"I will tell Pascal the news in person, Father," Vincent said. "I could use a walk."

"That will be fine, Vincent, but before you go, just one thing."

"And what is that, Father?" Vincent cocked his head to one side. *'Here comes the lecture,'* he thought.

"Fix your shirt, it is all out of your pants, and comb your hair. You look very disarranged."

"Yes, Father," he sighed.

"And you, my dear, another chess lesson and some tea and biscuits."

"Sounds wonderful. Shall we go?" she said, taking Father's arm. "Vincent, I'll see you later."

Catherine turned to see Vincent had obligingly tucked in his shirt and was now pulling a brush through his hair.

Having packed the last of his things, Kanin sat on the bed. He looked around the small apartment that had been his home since he was released from prison.

"Do you have everything?" Patricia looked absent-mindedly in the closet. "You left your suit, don't you need it?"

"Not where I'm going. We don't often wear business clothes."

"Kanin, please tell me about your home. You've hinted at what it's like. It sounds wonderful."

"It is wonderful. We all help each other and share. Like one big family. I know it sounds corny, but it's true."

"No one is ever alone there, are they?" Her voice was soft.

"Not unless they want to be," Kanin smiled, his mind full of happy memories.

"What kind of people live there? Do you have a leader?"

"Father is the head of the Council, but we all have a say in any decision that will influence our lives."

"Father?"

"Yes, that's what we call him. His real name is long forgotten. And there is William, the cook, and Mary and Sarah, and Mouse. How does one describe Mouse? He's like a mad scientist and a mischievous child all rolled into one."

"How did you ever meet each other?"

"We mostly just drifted together, like ships looking for a safe harbor. Except Vincent, he is like a gift given to us, an anchor in that harbor."

"What makes Vincent so special?"

"Life has given him many drawbacks, but still he takes the time to be there for whoever needs him. Always a word of wisdom for those of us who have lost their way; or comfort for a hurt child. I can't describe the feeling he brings out in people. Yet he always seemed lonely. That was until...." Kanin stopped abruptly, realizing he had said too much.

"Until what? He was lonely until what?" Patricia looked at him and sighed softly. She did not expect an answer. "It's a terrible thing to be alone." She stood abruptly as if trying to shake off a bad memory. "Well, I better let you get back to your packing," she said, changing the subject.

Kanin sensed a sadness in her. "I can never thank you enough for what you've done for me. You were the only one I told my horror stories, all those months in jail. And when I got out you helped me adjust. Olivia would have never understood. It would have frightened her to know the kind of people you meet on the inside. Because of you, I kept my sanity and my dignity. I'm going to miss you."

"I'll miss you too. You will come and visit, won't you?"

"Of course. Just as soon as I'm settled back in, we can have lunch." He put his arms around her and hugged her.

Everyone had gathered in Father's chamber awaiting Kanin's return home. Olivia and Luke stood with Catherine and Vincent at the park entrance. It was just dusk and a light mist covered the ground.

"I haven't been up here since the last snowfall. Kanin loves the snow, we always go for a walk in the park whenever it falls," Olivia remembered.

"But the best part is coming home to William's hot chocolate," said a voice from behind her.

"Kanin!" Olivia kissed him fiercely.

"It is good to have you home," came the deep familiar voice.

"It is good to be home, Vincent," Kanin reached out and hugged his friend. "And Catherine, thanks for all your help."

Catherine looked at him, puzzled. "I didn't do anything special."

"You made Olivia feel safe, with all your knowledge of the legal system. It was a big help to her."

"I was glad to give her all the information she needed, at last my lawyer's skills were of use down here." Catherine gave him a peck on the cheek. "Welcome home, Kanin."

"Let's not stand around here. I can't wait to hear the tapping of the pipes and listen to Father's stories of what went on around here, while I was away." Kanin started to walk into the tunnels.

Father's study was a bevy of activity when the guest of honor arrived. Mouse was the first to see Kanin standing in the doorway.

"Kanin, come in, party is for you. Because you came home. Can't stay there all night," Mouse made a welcoming gesture. "Not afraid, are you?" By now, all eyes were on the entrance.

"No, Mouse, I'm not afraid - just awed by all this. Thank you all."

"No need for thanks, we are just glad to have you back with us." Father took his hand and led him into the crowded chamber.

Conversations were strained as the subjects of prison and Patricia Davis were avoided.

Finally Samantha broke the ice, asking in a loud voice. "Kanin, what's it like in jail?"

"Samantha!" Father scolded.

"Let me answer her, Father," Kanin turned his attention to the girl. "Well, Samantha, jail is not a place you would ever want to be, you have no freedom. And you are far away from those who love you."

"How come when you got out of jail, you didn't come right back Below?" It was Eric's turn to inquire.

"Because, Eric, I was on a work release program, which means people were watching me, and I couldn't let them find out about this place. I had to stay topside until I finished my sentence. Do you understand?"

The bespectacled boy shook his head. "Yes, but I'm sure glad you're home now."

"Me too, Eric. Very glad." He hugged the child tightly.

The festivities went on for a few hours more, but it was discovered that Olivia and Kanin had made a discreet exit some time ago.

"Catherine, I will see you home?" Vincent placed a hand on her shoulder.

Her body involuntarily trembled at the touch. "Yes, Vincent, I think it's time to go."

Catherine was unusually quiet on the way home.

"What is it? What are you thinking?" Vincent's voice cut into the silence.

"I was thinking of Kanin and Olivia and of the love they share." Catherine looked up at Vincent.

"And the intimacy?" He spoke softer than normally.

"That, too," Catherine sighed.

"I'm sorry, Catherine." Vincent held her close to him and nuzzled her hair.

"For what? You made me a promise, Vincent. I know you will keep it."

She placed her hands in his hair and gently brought his lips to hers. He opened his mouth slightly under the pressure of her kiss. Catherine ran her tongue over his lips and teeth, flooding him with all of her love and desire. Vincent held her closer and she could feel his body respond. Their bond told her that finally passion was beginning to replace fear.

Kanin sat in the restaurant waiting for Patricia Davis. He hasn't been topside in two months. He'd planned to visit earlier, but could not tear himself away from the tunnels. Life had gone back to normal for him, no explanations were needed, no questions were asked. It was just accepted that Kanin was home and there were chambers to be built and repairs to be made - and he was the one to do them. Some of the other inmates had told horror stories about returning to the outside, and trying to resume a normal life. But Below, your past was behind you and you never had to apologize for it. He realized how lucky he was to be among such understanding people. His mind began to wander, back to that day so many years ago, when he had followed a young Winslow down that dark alley...

'Hey man, what's your problem? Why are you following me?' The voice was strong and full of authority.

'I'm cold, that's all. I've seen you turn down here a few times and thought you might know of a warm place to crash.' Kanin tried to make himself sound confident.

'Well, you thought wrong. Now, get out of here before I do something stupid.' The young black man turned into the shadow.

'Come on, buddy, can't you help a guy down on his luck? I just need a place to get warm.'

The figure in the distance stopped. 'Why are you so down and out, BUDDY? What's your story?'

'I lost my job about six months ago, layoffs. But this time there are no call backs, this time it's for good. I've been looking for work but haven't had any luck. I don't have any family left, they're all... gone. I just need a friend.' Kanin knew he had sounded convincing.

'What kind of work you in, then?'

'Construction, not the greatest job to have in the winter.' There was a little laugh in his voice.

'You any good?'

'Best money can buy.' He could see his sparring partner clearly now. He was big and strong but with a kind face and a warm smile.

'Ain't got no money. But I do have a fire and some food. Interested?'

'You bet. By the way, what's your name?'

'Winslow, what's yours?'

'Kanin.'

'Nice to meet you, Kanin.'

They walked for about a block and then ducked into an abandoned building. Kanin followed his new friend down the basement stairs to what seemed like a series of corridors.

Suddenly, the big man stopped. 'Can't go no further. I'll get something to build a fire. Wait here.'

'Okay, whatever you say.' Kanin took in his strange surroundings. There was more to this place than met the eye. He was convinced of that.

Winslow returned with some wood and over a warm fire and some not-too-fresh Italian bread, the two men told the story of their lives. Kanin was honest about his being in construction and out of work. Weaving a story of someone truly down on his luck and all alone. He knew he had gained the big man's sympathy. He simply left out the part about being wanted by the police, and the fact his family were all very much alive.

'My story's a little different,' Winslow began. 'Never knew my parents, I lived with my grandmother. That is, till I was seven-years-old. Then she died. My aunt on my father's side came and got me, told me I wasn't gong to be a ward of the state. She knew some people who I could live with, who didn't ask questions, just opened their hearts. It took me a while to get use to my new home, me missing Granny as much as I did. But it turned out to be the best decision ever made for me'

A few short weeks later, Kanin stood before the Council asking for admittance to the world Below. That was the first time he had seen Olivia. She quickly offered her support and good will and he'd fallen in love with her. But she was committed to another, and all he could do was watch her from afar and accept her friendship. After a few years, her situation had changed and Kanin made her his wife.'

He was still smiling at the memory when Patricia Davis arrived at his table.

"A penny for your thoughts." Her voice sounded strained.

"Patricia." Kanin looked up into a face he almost didn't recognize. She looked tired and stressed, and even the makeup could not cover the bruise under her eye.

"What happened? Who did this to you?"

"Uh, it's nothing, Kanin, water under the bridge."

"Please, tell me." He stood up and pulled out a chair for her.

"My husband turned out to be a bastard. After you left, he wanted to come back home. To try again. Foolishly, I let him. One night I started to reminisce about Joey, talking about how he would have finished college by now. And what he might have done, had he grown up." She put her head down as if to catch her breath. "Something snapped in him, he started screaming at me and accusing me of ruining his life by living in the past. He told me that I was depraved, to have made him suffer so, then turn around and become your

friend. Next time I know he was hitting me. He kept hitting me until the neighbors called the police.

"Oh, Patricia. I'm so sorry. I wish I had been there for you."

"It's all over now. A divorce is imminent and I'm giving up the business."

"What will you do?" Kanin's voice betrayed his concern.

"Oh, maybe I'll go to Florida. Get some sun, work on my tan." She tried to manage a laugh.

"Do you have any family or friends there?"

"No, but I'm sure I'll be all right. Enough about this unpleasantness, tell me about Olivia and Luke. Are they wonderful?"

"More than wonderful. Luke has started talking up a storm and walking everywhere. But we have to be cautious, some of the tunnel floors are uneven" Kanin stopped, realizing what he had said. "I mean... we just have to be careful."

"Kanin, please, tell me."

He hesitated, then began. "Under this city, there is a world you can't even imagine." Kanin continued to talk, for the next half hour, about the community and the people in it and how they try to make a better life for each other.

"And what about Vincent? Can you tell me about him?"

"Vincent is our biggest secret."

"Why is that??" Patricia asked.

"Because he is so very special. He has the look of a lion, and the heart and soul of a lamb. To the outside world, his looks may be frightening at first, but once you know him, you can't help but feel drawn to him."

"You mean, he really looks like a lion?" Kanin nodded in the affirmative. "Why is he like that? What's wrong with him?" she seemed fascinated.

"No one knows why Vincent is the way he is, he just is." On an impulse, Kanin added, "Would you like to meet him?"

"I don't know, Kanin. Is it allowed?"

"There are always exceptions to the rules. We're having a celebration next week. It's called Winterfest. I would be honored if you would be my guest."

"I would like that very much. How will I get to the... these ... tunnels?"

"I'll find the shortest, safest route and let you know in a few days." Kanin looked at his watch. "I'd better get back or Livie will think I got lost."

Patricia kissed him on the cheek. "Until next week."

Preparations for Winterfest were well under way in the Great Hall. It looked like this year the world Below would outdo itself. Each year the festivities seemed to get bigger and bigger. More and more Helpers returned for this special day, each bringing another generation or two into the tradition.

"The candles are ready for distribution," Rebecca had entered the hall to make her announcement.

Samantha was the first to run up to the young blonde woman. "I'm ready to made deliveries, Rebecca. Can I go downtown this year, to the office buildings? I'm old enough now. Can I? Please."

"I think that you are indeed old enough, but I would feel better if Geoffrey went with you." Rebecca looked over at the other young face. Samantha knew she really had no choice.

"Okay, if I have to go with him, I will."

"Good, Samantha, then why don't both of you come with me and we'll get you started."

"Rebecca." She turned and saw Kanin coming toward her.

"Hi, what can I do for you?"

"Rebecca, may I have a Winterfest candle?"

"Of course, why don't you come back to my chamber."

Patricia Davis heard the knock on her door but never saw the messenger. There on her welcome mat was a note and a beautiful red, white and orange candle. Picking them both up she read the letter out loud.

"Dear Patricia,

Here is your formal invitation to Winterfest. Meet me at the corner of Eighty-First Street and Fifth Avenue, the steps of the museum, at eight pm Wednesday

Kanin"

At eight sharp she was in front of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She didn't know what to expect from this evening, and worried just how many rules Kanin would be breaking, bringing her to his home. After ten minutes passed with no sign of her escort, she began to worry. Maybe he hadn't been able to leave.

"Patricia, sorry I'm late." Kanin placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Hi. I thought, for a minute, you had forgotten me. Change of heart or something."

"We had some last minute deliveries and it was difficult to get away."

She looked at him. He was dressed in leather and patchwork. She thought how he was right to leave the suit behind.

"I didn't know what was proper to wear to a party under the city of New York. Finally, I decided on something not too flashy, not too plain. I hope I'm dressed proper."

"You look wonderful. Shall we?" He took her hand and started to walk to the subway station.

"Are we taking the train?"

"Not all the way. I hope you have good walking shoes." He looked down at her feet and the black flats she wore. "Yeah, they will do nicely."

After a subway ride of three stops downtown, they walked to the back of the station and, when no one was looking, slipped into the darkness of the train tunnel. A few feet into the underpass the couple came upon a very inconspicuous door built into the wall.

"Here we are, the entrance to my world. Well - one of them, anyway. Ready?" Kanin smiled at the woman by his side.

"Yes." She gave his hand a hard squeeze.

It wasn't long before the clinking sound of the pipes became evident.

"What's that?" Patricia inquired.

"Our communication system. We use the underground pipes to send and receive messages. Right now,

everyone is being advised to get to the Great Hall, because the opening ceremony is about to begin."

Patricia Davis had never seen anything as fascinating as this subterranean city. Kanin explained to her that most living and common areas were not deserted, since all the inhabitants would be at Winterfest. She was so intrigued by her surroundings that she never noticed that they had stopped at the bottom of the long winding stairs. The heavy wooden doors had already been pushed back, and the hall was in darkness. As they stepped inside, Patricia couldn't see a thing in the blackness, but she heard a voice with a soft British accent. Then other voices joined his, and a story was told of trust and new hope. Little by little, candles were lit, illuminating the immense hall. The final lights were lifted into place. And the music had begun. Then Patricia saw intense blue eyes resting upon her.

"Kanin, who is this woman? And why is she here?" The voice was angry.

"This is Patricia Davis, Father, and she is my guest."

"Kanin, have you no regard for the rules of this community? You bring a stranger here, to your home."

"She is no stranger to me, Father, and she's just as much a Helper as anyone else here tonight."

"But, we don't just bring people here, we have procedures. And to Winterfest, no less. What were you thinking?"

"Kanin, I think I'd better leave, this was a terrible idea. I'm sorry if I got you in trouble." Patricia's voice was shaking from nerves, as she realized all eyes were on her.

"Please, Mrs. Davis, I mean no disrespect to you. I'm sure you are a trustworthy person. But we do have very specific rules, of which Kanin is aware."

"Maybe he had good reason to break the rules," Olivia stepped out of the crowd. "Let him speak."

Kanin held out his arms and Olivia came into his embrace.

"Thank you, Livie." He placed a kiss on her forehead, then continued to speak. "During the past year many things have happened to me, that could have broken my spirit. But I had the love of my wife and child, and my family here Below, and I also had the friendship of an extraordinary woman."

He took Patricia's hand and moved her further into the room. "I took away from this woman the most precious thing she had, I took the life of her child. Her son. Afterwards, I ran here, and stayed here for over sixteen years, safe, sound and loved, while she lived Above, alone, except for her memories, with no one to blame and no one to forgive."

Kanin took a deep breath and continued. "Through a quirk of fate, I was thrown back into her life again, and this time I faced her, this time I let her have justice. And you know what she did? She forgave me. Not only did she forgive me, she befriended me and helped me. Now she needs my help. She needs love and friendship and a place to belong, so I brought her to the only place I know that offers all that. I brought her home."

Tears were running down Kanin's face. A strained silence filled the hall.

"Father, I believe that if Mrs. Davis wants our friendship, we should give it. That is what Winterfest is all about."

Patricia looked up to see Catherine Chandler making her way through the crowd.

"Cathy, you live here?" She could not hide her surprise.

"No, someone I love very much does."

Just then Patricia noticed the man standing behind her, and she smiled for the first time that evening.

"Vincent," she said out loud.

"You know me, Mrs. Davis?" His voice was like velvet.

"Of all the people and places Kanin described to me, he depicted you most accurately. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Father, it seems Kanin has already told Mrs. Davis all about our community. I, for one, feel all our secrets are safe with her."

Jacob Wells looked at the faces before him and saw that all were in agreement.

"Mrs. Davis... Patricia, please forgive my display of bad manners. It is only my concern for the things we hold dear, that makes me act so. Come join the celebration. You are most welcome here."

Olivia walked over to the older woman and hugged her. "Welcome! And thank you for all you have done for my family."

"It was my pleasure. Do you think I could see that wonderful son of yours, that Kanin brags so much about?"

A smile lit up Olivia's face. "He's right over here, come." She led the way across the floor.

The rest of the evening was splendid, the music was wonderful, and the food and drink plentiful. Patricia spent most of the evening with Mary and the children, the two women had hit it off immediately.

"Patricia, if you are ready to go, I'll guide you out," Kanin asked.

"Yes, I'm ready. And thank you for what you have done for me. I know now why you brought me here."

"You're not angry, it's not Florida, but you'll never be alone."

"I know."

The next few weeks flew by and the New Year was quickly approaching. Catherine was sitting in her living room when she heard the familiar knock on her window and rushed to answer it.

"Vincent, I wasn't expecting you." She kissed him full on the mouth.

"May I come in, Catherine?"

"Certainly." She was a little startled at his request, but moved out of his way so he could get in the room.

"I can't stay long, but I have good news. Patricia Davis sent word to us today, that she would like to petition to come live Below."

"That's fantastic news, Vincent! I think she will be a wonderful part of the community."

"I agree. I was wondering if you would write a letter of recommendation for her. It is just a formality but it would mean a great deal to her."

"I would be happy to do it. When will she move Below?"

"Her petition will be heard on Tuesday, so right after that."

"Tuesday, that's New Year's Eve. A new life in a new year."

"You will be there? Later, we'll be having a New Year's Eve concert."

"I wouldn't miss either event."

"Till Tuesday." He kissed her goodbye and walked out the French doors.

New Year's Eve in the tunnels wasn't Times Square, but it was a fun evening spent with good friends and family. Everyone made their resolutions, talked about the past year and drank William's homemade wine.

"Patricia, I'm glad everything went well today. Welcome to your new home." Catherine walked over to her and gave her a hug. "What will you be doing, have you decided yet?"

"I think I would like to be with the children. I've spoken to Mary and she's delighted to have help. Can I ask you something?"

"Of course. What is it?"

"Why do you still live Above and not here with Vincent?"

Catherine put her head down as if to avoid the question.

"I'm sorry. It is none of my business. I shouldn't have asked."

"Don't be sorry. Let's just say the time is not right for us to be together. Not yet. Someday, soon."

Catherine had just left Vincent, so she was surprised to hear the familiar voice in the doorway of the guest chamber.

"You know we left before midnight."

"No, we didn't. Pascal sent the word."

Vincent pointed to the clock on the nightstand. She looked over, twelve midnight on the dot.

"Well then, we're just in time, Vincent."

"Happy New Year, Catherine."

He kissed her with such passion and desire, her knees went weak. His hands were in her hair and then traveling down her back, sending waves of delight through her. She responded by pressing herself as close as she could to Vincent's muscular body.

"Catherine." Vincent's voice had become dark and husky. "Remember that promise I made you?"

"I remember."

"I believe it is time to fulfill it. May I spend the night?"

"Oh, Vincent." Catherine's voice was shaking. "Are you sure?"

"Very sure."

The first dawn of the new year was welcomed in many different ways. Patricia Davis was beginning a new life. Olivia told Kanin he would be a father again. And Catherine and Vincent woke up in each other's arms, for the first time.

"Vincent," Catherine said in a sleepy voice. "Now we are together, truly together."

"Always, my love. Always."

END