

Thirty-Eight Pearl Buttons

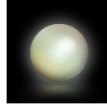
By Cindy Rae



For the April 12th Challenge on Treasure Chambers, 2018.

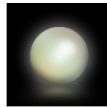


A pearl is a beautiful thing that is produced by an injured life. It is the tear that results from the injury of an oyster. The treasure of our being in this world is also produced by an injured life. If we had not been injured, then we would not produce the pearl. ~ Stephen Hoeller



Chapter One

Disarray



“What’s this?” Kanin Evans asked his wife. Their reunion was not going particularly well. He’d been home for only a few weeks, and things between them were still very... awkward.



Given the contents of her sewing things, Kanin realized (and not for the first time) that “awkward” might be an incredible understatement.

“Livvy?” he asked, holding up an open tin full of buttons.

At first, Olivia wondered that he asked the question, or needed any explanation about such a mundane object. *Surely over a year in jail hasn't blunted his memory that badly*, she thought. It was the metal container she used for keeping buttons in. Most of the tunnel women had a similar one, as for that matter, did anyone who sewed. There was nothing special about a repurposed tin that had originally held cookies, but now held cast-offs.

Except that Kanin seemed to think there was.

Following his gaze into the collection of scattered buttons, she drew a blank, initially, as to why he should be asking.

“It's my button tin. Why? Did you need one? For a ... shirt or something?” She picked up a stuffed pincushion sewn to resemble a ripe tomato. A couple of threaded sewing needles were jabbed in through the top of it, and her message was clear, as she set it on the table, near him, then moved back to what she'd been doing. If he needed a button sewn on a shirt, he could do it himself. She was busy.

He glanced at her offering, and ignored it.

“Liv?” His fingers ran almost idly through the huge collection, making a soft, clattering sound, as the objects inside the tin shifted. His strong hand moved through the contents. He scooped up a handful, and scattered them across the table, between them.



She recognized much of the contents. Olivia had been a good seamstress for all of their married life. She'd made almost all of Luke's baby clothes from the softest fabric she could scavenge, and had sewn impossibly tiny buttons here and there on those, to help keep their baby warm, or decently covered. She'd made other things, as well. Almost constantly. It always seemed she needed the tin, either to put something into it, or take something out.

When their clothes became worn or stained beyond saving, the buttons on those were cut off and relegated to the sturdy receptacle. When something was outgrown, it had a similar fate. Many of those incredibly small buttons were here, Luke have long outgrown the infant clothes he'd worn before Kanin had "gone away."

Kanin passed his broad hand over the colorful display before him. *Gone away.* Kanin considered the phrase. *It sounds like I*

was on a trip, somewhere, like a vacation, he mused, knowing that was absolutely not the case.

Kanin Evans had “gone away” to a penal institution for sixteen months, three weeks, four days, and some odd collection of hours. He’d felt every one of them. So had she.

She watched him select out a particular button from the large assortment. Then one of several similar ones, in the old container.

Oh, she thought, realizing.

Just that. Nothing more.

She turned away from him as she picked up a small darning egg, and set to work on her latest project. Their son had learned to walk, while Kanin had “gone away.” Now he was an unsteady runner who hated wearing shoes, and was hard on his socks.

For the last year, he’d “run” to Vincent, or Pascal, or William, or Father, or Mary or Rebecca, or any one of the other tunnel residents. Now, he was learning to run to Kanin, again. It was a thing he did, at first reluctantly, but now with more confidence. Olivia was fine that it was so. Luke seemed to have forgiven Kanin for his long absence, and had, after a few awkward (there was that word again) days, accepted “Daddy” back into his life. Olivia was struggling to do the same.

Kanin wasn’t sure if his wife was ever going to do that, really.

“Olivia? Why are these in here?” Kanin asked the question more specifically, as he sorted through the hodge-podge.

Olivia didn’t look up from her chore as he began picking small, white, pearl buttons out of the tin. It was quite the task, considering. They were smaller than many of the other residents of the container, and there were a good many of them. The amount made them stand out, somewhat, from their salvaged brethren.

While most of the buttons inside Olivia’s tin appeared in sets of four or five, there were some duos, and even a goodly number of unusual singles to be found. Even some of Olivia’s deceased husband’s buttons were in there. These were none of those.

Kanin knew that with eight matching buttons, Olivia could finish a decent man’s shirt. With ten, you could throw in matched cuffs.

But these particular buttons had never graced a man’s shirt. They had never graced a man’s clothes at all, grown or child.

Eight... nine... ten, He steadily counted them out, moving over a heraldic looking brass one to find number eleven.

Olivia clearly didn’t want to talk about those buttons. She felt she could add it to the very long list of things she never wanted to discuss with Kanin, ever.

So along with “Why did you lie to me?” and “How could you?” Olivia scowled that apparently, she could now add “buttons” to the list of forbidden subjects, between them.

Twelve... thirteen... a pair of wooden coat buttons got shoved aside, so he could push what he wanted forward, with his searching index finger. *This might be easier if I just dumped the whole thing out*, he mused, knowing he wasn't half done.

"I knew things were bad. I didn't think they were this bad," he said softly, not losing count.

She raised her head, and the words were out before she could call them back. "How bad did you think they were?"

Her brown eyes threw the accusation, but then she watched him at his chore. He said nothing, in reply.

After another minute, she had the good grace to look a bit embarrassed, as he hunted and pecked. She didn't like the feeling watching him gave her, so she jabbed her darning needle into one of Luke's athletic socks, mending a hole in the toe closed.

"I swear that boy needs a hacksaw taken to his toenails," she said, changing the subject. It was what they did when the topic of conversation threatened to turn combative. They talked about Luke. Or Father. Or Vincent. Or anyone else. But mostly, Luke.

Kanin continued his search. *Is that what you used to take these off with? A hacksaw?* he thought, knowing better than to say it out loud. There was nothing to be gained, by the jibe.

But no, Olivia clearly had not been quite that hasty, or furious, or vindictive, or whatever it was she'd been, at the time the

buttons came off. White thread still remained in some of the holes, and gratefully, so far, none of them were broken. She might have been angry, when she'd done it, or beyond sad, but she hadn't been careless. At least, he prayed she hadn't. He knew he needed to find all of them.

He pocketed what he had, then tilted the tin to the side and dumped a few buttons into his hand, searching for what he hoped had fallen through to the bottom of the tin. A large, old brass metal button bearing the word "Honor" across it fell into his palm. It looked like some crest or other, complete with a pair of deer flanking the word. He had no idea where it had come from, or if the original garment it had graced had been as precious to someone else as the article of clothing he was thinking of right now was, to him. To them.

"Tell me you didn't cut it up," he begged, still counting, still finding what he sought. *Eighteen, nineteen...* "Please, Livvy."

"They can be used for something else."

"No. No, they can't be." His disagreement was sudden, and unequivocal. It was the way things had been, between them, since his return.

She kept her eyes on the sock. "I ain't sewin' 'em back on, Kanin Evans. Don't even think I will be. It was work enough the..." Her voice caught, and she pushed back what he swore was a half-sob. She forced her voice to steady itself. "It was work enough the first time," she concluded, paying far more attention to her simple task than it warranted.

If she says she's not sewing them back on, that means it still exists. Maybe there's still hope after all, he thought, continuing with his chore. *Twenty-one... twenty-two... twenty-three,* all beautifully matched, and Kanin swore he remembered every single one of them, intimately. There would be a reason for that.

He fished around in her tin a few moments more, and he could tell the sound of the shifting buttons was making Olivia a bit nervous. *Twenty nine, thirty.* A pair of them were nestled under a wooden coat button, hiding from him until he shoved it aside. *Thirty-one, thirty-two...*

She glanced up again, as he pushed the contents from one side to the other, causing wood, metal and plastic to clash together. He didn't care that it did.

Thirty-three... thirty-four... thirty-five... He kept digging, finding another pair of them, as he went. The last one was hiding under a mother of pearl fastening that had once graced a rich lady's sweater. Neither of them (and no one else) realized that it had once belonged to a certain Margaret Chase, come across when she'd donated a pile of clothing to the Salvation Army, years ago. Such was life. Even button life.

Thirty-eight. Kanin slid his bounty into the now-bulging pocket of his patched cords, amazed (still) that he now had pockets, again.

Prison garb didn't have that. It was too easy to hide something, if it did, be that contraband or a shank. For sixteen months (and

more) he'd lived without pockets. And he was fairly sure that that had been the least of what he'd lived without.

He placed the blue, dented lid (the one decorated with chocolate chip cookies and a baker's logo), back on the tin, and in so doing, covered up the rest of Olivia's cast-off treasure. A wealth of artwork vanished, and history disappeared, including some of his and Luke's. The pair of buttons that had held Luke's first overall straps in place slipped back into shadow, as did one from a coat he'd torn beyond repair, one day, when he'd been swinging the hammer especially hard. It had been just before his wedding day. They'd all been enlarging the chamber he now stood in.

The one where he felt he no longer belonged.

The closed tin rattled, as he set it aside. Olivia's shoulders relaxed at the restored quiet in the room. Luke was gone to communal bath time with the other children. Lena had fetched him, and taken him down.

Kanin had come to realize (much to his sorrow) that any time he and Olivia spent alone in the room together was always the most difficult part of their day.

Kanin's hand strayed over the lid of the sturdy metal tin.

It's like pieces of our lives are in here, he thought. All we'd need is one that says New York State Correctional Facility, and we'd be complete.

But he knew that there was no such button, at least not one on inmate clothes. Inmate clothes were plain, the pants usually fastened with drawstrings or a tab and zipper, and the blue chambray work shirt buttons were cheap white plastic. They were thin, unremarkable, and prone to breaking, in the prison laundry.

He stood there a moment, pondering the contents of the round metal receptacle the same way he'd been pondering everything else, lately. Quietly.

He knew that he now wore plaid shirts with better made (if oft-used) buttons, regular, patched pants with pockets, and a man's belt. Tunnel things. "Normal" things, for him.

But things were not back to "normal" yet, for the two of them. He sometimes wondered if they ever would be, or even could be.

Olivia shifted in her seat and eyed her finished project, the sock now entire, again, and patched, where Luke's big toe had poked the hole. He was growing so fast. Kanin knew he'd need a new pair of shoes, before long. And that he'd probably like those just about as much as he'd liked the old ones.

His wife glanced up at him, and then back down, disappointment unintentionally flashing in her deep, brown eyes. She didn't like the way things had been between them since his return, either. But like him, she wasn't quite sure how to bridge what now seemed like a huge gap. One neither of them knew how to close, but constantly tried to fill with either

menial chores, talk of Luke, or some such. More often than not, they just sat in an uncomfortable silence.



“Give her time, Kanin,” Vincent’s soft voice had advised. “Olivia has been very... angry, and heart-sore. It is not easy to be told you must give up every dream you ever possessed. Even for a while.”

The stonemason in Kanin wanted to fix this disaster. Fix it with a hammer and a chisel, perhaps, the preferred tools of his trade. He wanted to let swing, and build her something, something new, something large; build her some way to start over. Another chamber, maybe. Something. *Something* so that they no longer felt so... separate.

But a hammer and chisel took things away, as they chipped at stone. They didn't bring things back. And they'd already lost enough. Kanin knew that much.

Olivia rose and set the darning things aside. "I'm gonna go get Luke. Lena should be done giving him his bath, by now." She pocketed the socks, clearly meaning to use them on Luke's growing feet.

As she moved around the table, Kanin realized that the big apron she wore over her tunnel dress couldn't hide the fact that she'd lost weight, during Kanin's absence. Weight she wasn't putting back on, now. She was barely eating. And even though they slept in separate beds - her in their marriage bed and him on a folding cot near Luke's crib - he'd bet his last dollar (if he had one) that she also wasn't sleeping well.

He offered to accompany her to fetch their growing son. "If you want, I'll come w—"

"No," she interrupted quickly – too quickly, smoothing down her apron with nervous hands. She was clearly about to bolt, and glad she could get away from him. When Luke was in the room, it was easier for them to be distracted, and focus on the baby, now grown to toddlerhood, and right in the middle of the terrible twos. But when it was just the two of them....

"No,... no, I'll do it." Olivia tried to hide her quick refusal with more explanation. "Fetch him a snack. Maybe... eat with the others, in the dining hall." She tried to say it casually. They both knew she hadn't quite succeeded.

Kanin nodded, his blue eyes tracking her every move, and trying not to. *She'd rather eat with the others than bring some food back in a basket, and eat with me.* He understood. He said nothing, as she left, then considered the now much-too-quiet-room, as her nearly silent feet padded down the tunnel hallway.

Kanin sighed. They were imploding. He knew it. He even understood it, with the same kind of impotent understanding that marked the rest of his days. He knew things were “wrong.” He just had no idea how to fix them.

Three weeks back in the tunnels, and they were beating themselves to death, just trying to stay in the same room. After his third night home, he'd tried to make love to her, praying that would help restore the “connection” between them. But she'd wept at his touch, and simply shaken her head “no.” He'd understood then, too.

Head low, at the time, he'd tugged an army surplus cot out of the storeroom, and made it up in the nursery. He'd follow Vincent's advice. He'd give her time. *Surely, that was all they needed.*

Unless it wasn't.

Fear gripped his heart. On the one hand, he'd only been home for three weeks. On the other...

On the other, he'd felt closer to her the day he'd left for jail than the one when he'd come back. Or any day, since.

It seemed so unfair. And yet, he knew it wasn't. He'd lied to her. He'd lied to all of them. For years. She'd had a long time to process that, and consider all it meant, consider the depth of it. And what an ugly, terrible lie it had been, thanks to the ugly, terrible thing it had concealed. He'd accidentally killed a child. If there was a worse (even unintentional) offense, he didn't know what that was.

So, he'd tried to fix it – after it had been revealed. He'd even gone Above and turned himself in, as both Vincent and Catherine had suggested. He'd served jail time.

Mrs. Davis (he knew) had never forgiven him for what he'd done, nor had Kanin forgiven himself. But she'd gone back into therapy, and two months ago, she had written a letter and given it to Catherine. It was for the parole board. It said she felt there was no real point in keeping him detained longer than necessary. That it wouldn't bring back her son, Joey, and as far as she knew, Kanin wasn't a bad person. She'd written that she couldn't offer him her personal forgiveness. But if the state was in a forgiving mood, she wouldn't fight their judgment.

That was as good as he was going to get, from Mrs. Davis, and more than he had a right to expect, Kanin figured.

His behavior had been exemplary, while in jail, and Catherine herself had gone to bat for him, after the letter had been delivered. His incarceration had been his first and only brush with the law. That helped, too.

An appeal to the Parole Board for an early release hearing typed on District Attorney's Office letterhead was a rare thing. Kanin knew that had helped, as well.

An overcrowded prison system had even assisted with his unexpectedly early release. The governor had fast-tracked pardons for first-time offenders with good behavior. He'd gotten lucky, and he knew it.

He wished for some of that luck, now.

The loose buttons shifted in his now much-fuller pocket. While Olivia was gone, he knew he had to find the thing they belonged on.

It wasn't hard.

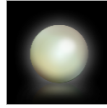
Without the buttons, a coat hanger was impossible to use. No hook, no hanger, no matter how wide, would hold the article of clothing aloft. He bypassed their makeshift closet and opened the heavily scratched steamer trunk that lived near the foot of their bed. It was where Olivia sometimes stored their winter clothes, among other things. He shifted through the contents, then dug for the bottom. It was there.

He inspected the fabric, thanking God she hadn't taken the scissors to it and simply shredded it to bits. Grabbing the tomato pincushion and a spool of white thread, he went to the one place he knew she'd never look for him: The Anniversary Chamber.

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Chapter Two

Where Lilacs Once Bloomed



A year (and more's) worth of dust had collected on the stubs of the candles that had remained in the wall niches. Some had been taken away and returned to Rebecca for recycling, but many remained, for no reason Kanin could name.

Someone had put a beige sheet across the bed, letting it act as a dust cloth, trying to save the pretty comforter he'd found. It had been a king size one, once, now cut down to a full, thanks to burn damage on one side. He'd rescued it from a dumpster and made it work, for them.

Sure would be nice to be able to do that, now. Rescue something. Make something work.

The room looked lonely. He knew the feeling. The one and only time it had been used, Vincent and Catherine had prepared the tapers and pillars for them. He'd brought Olivia in, blindfolded.

Well, she sees now, he thought glumly.

The entire space had the feeling of a place that had been devoid of human occupation, for too long. Thin, tensile cobwebs draped across the headboard of the bed. He cleared

them away, then brushed some of the dust off the bed with his hand, before he moved to sit down.

There were lilacs in this room, once.

There had been. But that seemed like a thousand years ago, and no trace of them remained, not even a ghost of their fragrance. He knew the night after he'd gifted her with them, Olivia had taken them back to their chambers, and put them in a milk bottle she used for a vase. The flowers (out-of-season and courtesy of Catherine) had been pretty, there, for a while.

Then all he'd done had come to light, while the fragrant blooms had faded and crumbled to dust. Much like his dreams for his marriage had. Olivia was blindfold-less in every way. And he never wished she (and everyone else) had one, more. Especially Mrs. Davis, who couldn't seem to forget that she'd seen him.

Kanin sat down on the makeshift dust cover of the once pretty bed, lit a taper, and pulled a candle stand over, letting a trio of dripping wax stubs light the area closest to him. He threaded a needle with white cotton thread, and let his memories take him backward.

Not to their anniversary. To their wedding night.

They were in their own chamber, rather than this one. This one hadn't even been made, yet. Luke wasn't even a twinkle in Kanin's eye, and Olivia... Olivia was luminously beautiful.

To this day, he had no idea where she'd gotten the cloth from, to make the dress. It was white, gauzy, and somewhat plain, as

wedding dresses went. It was embroidered, in spots, thanks to Olivia and some of the other tunnel women, but it was all but devoid of any kind of train, or lace. The long sleeves were puffy and gauzy, and ended in a wide cuff, at the wrist. But the thing that had made the dress stand out, the thing that made it truly exceptional, were the buttons. Pearl ones. A row of them, all the way down Olivia's small back, and four at each cuff. Thirty-eight in all, and every one of them ended up being a way to tell her how much he'd adored her.

"What's this?" he'd asked, the first night they'd been together as husband and wife. He'd known the buttons were there, of course. He'd known it since their joining ceremony, that afternoon, had known it when he'd danced with her, after that. Conversation had been a way to belie his own nervousness.

"Do you like it?" she'd asked shyly, turning in a circle for him. He had no need to answer. Not when actions had spoken so much louder than words.

She'd needed his help to undress. It had taken Rebecca, Mary and Brooke to get her buttoned into the pretty white frock she'd made into a wedding gown. It would take her handsome, somewhat anxious bridegroom to get her out of it. It was a thing he very much planned on doing. Slowly.

He'd tried to swallow, but had a bit of trouble getting past the lump in his throat. Thirty-eight pearl buttons. And she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

"I had to remake the dress," she said, turning, to show him the back. "I really didn't want to put in a zipper or anything in, so... buttons." She was nervous, too, if they were discussing her seamstress work, right now. She turned back to face him.

He had no idea how she'd found thirty-eight buttons that matched, much less ones that were as beautiful as these. But he knew he wanted to take a very sweet, long time undoing them. He planned to kiss every tiny inch of bare skin, right as it was revealed to him. Thoroughly.

"You're a beautiful bride, Olivia. My beautiful... wife." He picked up her hand and turned it over, noting the line of buttons at her wrist.

"I hope you're not in a hurry." She'd smiled as she'd said it. Nervously. Shyly.

"Well... let me see, now," he'd said, trailing his hands up her arms and delicately tracing the line of her shoulders with his strong fingertips. "I do believe these buttons will need some attention." He'd stepped around her, and unfastened the ones at her neck. "One.....two....." he counted.

And with each number, there had been something of a long pause, between heated kisses. Something so she'd know his lips were coming to worship her skin, coming to worship her. It was her second marriage to his first, but something about her had radiated virginity, and he'd treated her like the precious thing she was.

By the time he'd gotten to "seven," he knew she was trembling. By the time he'd gotten to "twelve" he knew he was.

Eight of them were at her wrist, four on each side. They'd cuffed her wrist tightly, and the pearl button on her left arm closest to her wrist had made contact with the simple confectionary sugar frosting William had used to decorate their wedding cake. It was a thing that had probably happened while they were serving their guests.

"Oh!" she'd said, spotting it for the first time, just as he'd unlooped the beautiful button closest to her wedding ring. Two different shades of white captured their attention. Kanin had brushed the fabric covering her wrist open, then taken the hard, pearl button into his mouth, tasting the sweetness that had accidentally collected there. He'd brushed his lips across her pulse point, just for the pleasure of feeling her racing heartbeat under them. Then he'd given the sugary flavor to her, in a senses-numbing kiss...

Kanin shook his head to clear it. Those were days gone by. Days destroyed, thanks to him.

He was content that he should pay for Joey's death for the rest of his life, either in a cell or out of it. But he hated that Olivia had had to pay for it, as well.

He evened the white sewing thread at the ends, knotted it, and set to work sewing the buttons back on.

Nearly an hour later, and with six of them done, he realized part of why Olivia had refused to do the chore again, even as he knew he had it a bit easier than she had, when she'd done it the first time.

He could tell where each tiny bit of beauty went, thanks to the hanging threads her dismantling of the dress had left behind. He knew she'd had no such advantage, and had had to measure the tiny distance, carefully, with a measuring tape. He tugged the thread through the small silver shank of the button, and kept working.

Kanin was no tailor, either by nature or by skill. Stonemasonry, in the tunnels, was the art of "subtracting" from a thing, in order to make it usable. Whether he was hacking out chunks of a wall, tapping niches into granite to hold candles, or the underwater job of carving stone "benches" into the sides of the bathing pools, it was the process of "removing that which wasn't needed."

This was the opposite. This was adding something that was.

After two hours of steady labor, he realized he'd be here all night, and that his index finger was getting sore. He stopped a moment to lift his head, realizing his neck ached, a bit, from keeping it bent, and looking down at his fingers, ones that seemed too large for this delicate task. He'd jabbed his thumb a few times with the needle, the last stitch through the hole always being a very tight one. The small metal shank was mostly "closed" by then, thanks to the stitches that had gone in

before the last one. He had to force the needle through, especially when the shaft of the needle reached the threaded eye, its thickest part.

His discomfort, like so many things to him these days, didn't matter, either. He knew the small pearl treasures had originally been put there to be snug, and secure.

Then they'll go back that way, he resolved, navigating his way through the tiny silver metal loop that held the button on.

In two and a half hours, he was not half done, and he remembered Olivia telling him what a chore this was, originally. *"I'm putting the finishing touches on my dress. Oh, Kanin, wait until you see. It's a ridiculous amount of work, but it will be so worth it..."*

And it had been. To both of them.

Kanin tried decreasing the time it took to do the chore by putting in fewer stitches, but found he was displeased with the flopping result. Then he tried making the white thread longer, so he wouldn't have to stop to re-thread the needle, so often. But that had caused a knotted tangling of the thread, as he'd tried to sew, so he'd simply had to cut the aborted work away, and start all over.

It seemed there were few short-cuts to doing this, other than having many hands to do it with. He had only two. And one of them needed a thimble he didn't have, and a decent pair of

scissors, rather than the pocket knife he'd been using to cut the thread.

And again, he felt none of that mattered. This was his mess. He'd clean it up. One button at a time. He was just mercifully thankful Olivia had left the dress intact.

I danced with you in this, he thought, as the line of buttons cleared where her slender waist had been. His hands had been there, while they'd waltzed.



Kanin glanced at the area of the dress where his left hand had gently rested, guiding her in the steps of their first dance together, as husband and wife. The simple gold wedding band he still wore had been very new to him, then, and he secretly kept glancing at it all that evening, amazed that it was there.

He knew he'd been nervous, as they'd taken a turn around the room, and that his palm had been a sweaty one. He fancied he could still see the outline of his bridegroom's fingertips, on the gown.

The Concert Chamber had been filled to overflowing, and lilac colored ribbon had trailed down the stairs. There had been candles, everywhere. Jamie had played the violin, and Olivia had laughed, and looked impossibly pleased. She'd mentioned loving the candlelight. So, a year later... The Anniversary Chamber.

Kanin heard the soft rustling of the gown, as it moved. So much had happened, between them. But that first night, the entire community had wished them well, and Father had given away the bride.

Olivia had been an only child, conceived late in life, by a couple who'd thought their chance of being parents had long passed. She'd been a surprise baby, a little miracle, according to her mother. Her parents had doted on her until their passing, a thing that had happened right around the time of her first marriage.

Kanin remembered her saying that her father had been a coal mine worker from Virginia, her mother, his constant wife. They'd been poor, and not destined for octogenarian status, or anywhere near it. But Kanin had known them, and how devoted they'd been to their daughter. They'd been good

people. And Tunnel-born Olivia had been their brightest treasure.

And then... she'd been his.

The day Luke was born, Kanin realized it had been a very long time since he'd actually thought of Joey Davis. Living the lie of being a young adult who'd needed a safe place to stay had worked. He'd become that person, that "in need of shelter" person. He never drank, and had remembered the boy far more often, when he'd first come down.

He'd been scared, then. It had taken him a while to settle down, and become comfortable with the lies he'd told.

At first, when a much younger William or Pascal had offered him a mug of ale at Winterfest, or other holidays, Kanin had looked down into the cup, smelled the alcohol, felt his stomach pitch, and steadily refused it. Those were the times when he saw the little boy's startled, frozen-in-place form, right before Kanin's too-fast car had hit the sedan Joey and his mother had been riding in. So the smell of alcohol brought the memories back, and he'd remember Joey Davis, then. Then, and in his nightmares, for a while after.

But the bad dreams would pass, and his companions learned that for his own reasons, Kanin Evans never drank. The offers of ale or hard cider had diminished, along with all the other bad things about the night that had changed his life, so thoroughly.

It was all right that it had changed his life, Kanin had reasoned, even then. It had ended Joey's.

Kanin realized that the longer he stayed Below, the more he became the Kanin Evans they all knew, the Kanin Evans he'd "created," to some extent. At first, he'd worked incredibly hard, to show them he had worth, feeling that he had to convince them that they should let him stay here, in the World Below.

After that, he'd labored hard just because he'd discovered an affinity for working with stone.

The first week Kanin had realized he'd not thought of Joey even once, it had been something of a relief for him.

He now realized it was something closer to a sin.

But at the time, he hadn't looked at it that way; hadn't considered that it meant his conscience was giving him a free pass on constant guilt and suffering. *The old Kanin Evans was dead, or at least he'd disappeared. Long live the new Kanin Evans.* He remembered thinking it, one day. He'd made a life, here. And then... a family.

The eighteenth button went in, and two of the three candle stubs began to sputter. He'd been here for over three hours.

Kanin set the chore aside, a moment, and rubbed his aching neck. Reaching for a half gone pillar, he attended to his decaying source of light.

My decaying source of light, he mused, replacing the fluttering tapers with slightly better ones.

For a reason he couldn't name, he wanted more light than "just enough to see by." Just a little more, and he gathered a few more of the half-spent pillars together and set them at the wall niches near the head of the bed. He remembered carving the flat-bottomed depressions in the wall, just like he remembered undoing Olivia's buttons, on their wedding night.

He knew he'd wanted some light near the bed, some soft, gleaming bit of ethereal luminescence, so he could see her, just a little, as he'd made love to her on their anniversary. Her fair skin had shone like pearls, in the candlelight. It had been such a beautiful night. Such an amazing one.

So different, from this one.

Kanin rotated sore shoulders as he thought of his current circumstances. His son was now a steady two year old child, with sandy hair, a head full of teeth, and a preference for toy trains. Kanin had missed so much of Luke's development. Luke now ate (mostly successfully) with a spoon, and drank from a cup, exclusively. He talked far more. Babble, still, sometimes, but he had a much larger vocabulary than the simple wail of "Mama" or "Dada" or the request for "Dwink" or "Wawa."

Olivia read him picture books, and he patted the pages, identifying certain animals, and the color "blue." His first steps had been toward Mouse, of all people. Kanin realized that though a little more than a year might not sound like so much, he'd missed more than half of his son's life, as he'd been confined in that jail cell. Luke had been ten months old, when

he'd "gone away." He was twenty-six months, now. Almost twenty-seven.

Kanin didn't want to miss another day of it. He knew that.

But his wife...

With Olivia, he wasn't quite sure what it was he'd "missed." But something had happened, with her. Or his absence had caused her to reassess them, and to hate him, which was not exactly an unreasonable reaction, considering.

She'd been close-mouthed about much of the last year of her life, her gentle nature not given toward complaining, and her very person not inclined toward talking, overmuch. Olivia showed her affection by making something for you, or by doing something for you. She showed her displeasure by withholding that.

Until now, Kanin realized that "affection" was all she'd shown him, before. It was all she'd had to.

Like the day she brought you lunch. Right before the world caved in.

Kanin recalled her standing with his lunch bucket, her wavy hair pulled to one side, and tamed down into a single braid. He'd told her how pretty she'd looked, and meant it. She'd given him a lovely smile for the compliment, and left him to his labors.

He'd already bumped into Mrs. Davis, accidentally. Memories of a long ago night were already starting to crowd back in on him.

How long since I'd thought of Joey, until then? Kanin wondered, knowing he had indeed thought of the little boy after Luke's birth, but once again, had banished the sad memories. They had power. Power to taint his happiness. And as a new father, he knew he wanted nothing to do that.

Kanin wiped the remaining dust off the headboard and lit a few other tapers, then put the candle back in its niche, sat back down on the sheet-covered bed and resumed his task.

Woolgathering wouldn't get this done, and it was a task he felt charged with.

In some way, and for some reason, it was *his* fault Olivia had sheared off the buttons on her wedding gown, and tossed them into the tin for scrap. *His* fault he'd never seen her plait her hair again, but simply kept it tied back in a ponytail, or hanging-loose. *His* fault that Luke ran to Vincent with a joyful squeal, but approached him with a more cautious sense of discernment. *His* fault that while he'd created an elaborate fantasy for his and Olivia's first anniversary, he'd been able to do nothing for their second one. *His* fault Joey Davis was still gone. *His* fault for... all of it.

As he picked up the next button, he realized that of all the long list, it was Joey with whom he now felt a strange sense of peace.

Maybe finally accepting my punishment helped me as much as it did Mrs. Davis, he mused, knowing nothing would ever settle that score completely, but also knowing that he could walk the

streets Above as a free man, again, if he chose to. The debt to society, at least, had been paid. And though none of his Above world family wanted anything to do with him (and that feeling was fairly mutual – the shame in that direction was still too great), with Joey, he seemed to have developed an understanding. One that meant he was sincerely and deeply sorry, and that for whatever it was worth, he'd sat docilely inside a cage for as long as it had pleased the state of New York to keep him there.

Another hour slipped past, and five more buttons made it onto Olivia's gown. Kanin realized that the ones near the waist were hardest to sew on, thanks to the thicker material, there.

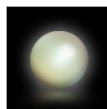
But not for nothing had his hands wielded mallets over chisels and stone, and he knew his fingers were strong ones, as he forced the needle through.

More than half done now, he thought, gratified by his progress.

**

Chapter Three

At the Gate Between the Worlds





“Vincent? Have you... have you seen Kanin?” Olivia asked, from the tunnel intersection behind him. It was Vincent’s turn at watch, and he’d chosen the park entrance for his duty, as he so often did.

Vincent, seated on what could best be described as a stone bench carved into the wall, courtesy of Kanin Evans, slid his big body over and made room for her.

“Kanin?” he asked, surprised the stonecutter wasn’t with his wife.

“I mean... has he come this way? Did he go out?” Brown eyes looked nervously toward the heavy gate. Vincent took in her willowy form, seeing nothing but tension, in her slight frame, and an anxious look in her eyes. It was a look he’d seen almost

exclusively, the last few weeks, and he was sorry to see it persist.

Before, she'd been weighed down by her sorrow. But now... now she looked like a nocked arrow, all but ready to fly.

"No, Olivia," he answered. "Kanin has not come this way. And I've heard nothing about him on the pipes." Vincent stood, and gestured to the bench, indicating that she should sit. She stepped hesitantly forward.

"Oh. It's just... well, he's not in our chambers, and after a while I thought... I thought maybe..." she couldn't finish the sentence, as she sat down. He did the same.

"You thought perhaps he had left the tunnels. Gone back Above." Vincent knew it was the one place Olivia was not apt to follow. She had no curiosity about the Topside world, and some fear of it, healthy or no. Her parents had raised a true tunnel child. She'd grown into a lovely young woman who was far more at home inside stone walls, than out of them.

Olivia nodded guiltily, at Vincent's assessment. "Things... things betwixt us aren't ... well, they aren't going so well," she confessed unnecessarily. "I thought maybe..." she let the sentence trail, as she looked toward the huge set of doors.

Vincent kept his voice steady, and convincing. "Olivia, Kanin is many things. But a man who wants to leave you, he surely isn't," Vincent stated, certain of the words.

Olivia shook her head, and lowered it. "I shouldn'ta thought it. It's just... I don't know. He's been home, in our chambers, every night since he got back."

"But now he isn't?" Vincent asked. Olivia shook her head again, as nervous fingers picked at her apron.

"Have you checked the dining chamber?" Vincent suggested. "Perhaps he was—"

"That's where Luke and I had supper." She admitted, continuing to pick at her apron. She knew how much the statement revealed. *Luke and I. Not "All of us." We didn't eat together, tonight.*



Vincent weighed her words, deciding it best not to comment on them, directly. "I've been here all evening. There's been no

message on the pipes of his coming or going, from any exit. Be at ease on that score, at least.”

He reached over and picked up her pale hand. She dropped the apron. Nerveless fingers entwined with furred ones. “I’m sorry to know things are not going well. It grieves me to see you... struggle.”

Olivia gave Vincent’s unique fingers a grateful squeeze, then dropped them.

“It all happened so ... sudden. Him going Above. Then... him getting sent home... Catherine came down and said they were letting him go in just a couple of days. I feel like... I feel like I’m still trying to get ready for it, sometimes.”

Vincent sat in the companionable half-light, and tried to offer what comfort he could.

“I believe Luke has become accustomed to Kanin’s presence, again. And slowly... I think Kanin is becoming accustomed to being... home, again,” Vincent tested the water, trying to perceive the source of her disquiet.

Olivia greeted that comment with a shrug of her small shoulders. One followed by a confession, albeit an almost needless one: “I was mad at him. Real mad. Catherine, too, for a while, and even you.” She glanced up at him, then back down, as she admitted it.

“I’m sorry,” Olivia apologized, brushing at her clothing, as if she could brush away her disquiet.

Vincent understood. All of it. "You were... trapped by forces you had no control over. Of all of us... I think Kanin's falsehood hurt you the most. You... and Mrs. Davis," Vincent said the other woman's name softly. Olivia knew neither he nor Catherine bore her any ill will for her feelings toward them. It had been a very difficult time.

Olivia nodded at that, then rose. "Well. I guess I'd best go look for my husband. I put Luke down in the Children's Room, with Lena and Brooke. Once he gets to sleeping hard, he doesn't like to be moved."

Vincent rose with her. "Luke is growing tall, and broad shouldered. He'll be strong one day. Like his father," Vincent said, knowing the strength in the stonemason's arms.

Olivia agreed with that. "Yet... Mouse was the first one he walked to. And you... you were the first one he ran to. Laughing all the way." There was sorrow in her voice; sorrow for the lost months and lost milestones that would never come back.

"I treasure the memory. And you," Vincent said sincerely. "Perhaps Kanin is talking with Father. Or sitting with Cullen, both of them sorting through their chisels, planning some project, together," Vincent offered, still trying to help her locate him.

"Maybe," Olivia said, doubting either scenario. Kanin hadn't been close to Cullen, and Cullen worked with wood, not stone. And Father... well, facing Father had been difficult for her disgraced husband, all things considered. Things were getting

better, between Kanin and certain members of the tunnel community. But they were not quite back to what Olivia would call “normal” just yet. Mary, for instance, who knew what it was to lose a child, was quiet, when Kanin was near. Not rude, nor unwelcoming, just ... quiet. Kanin understood, and let her have her space, out of respect. It was something the two adults would have to work through, in time.

Olivia knew that Kanin seemed most at ease with Vincent, and then with William. Now she knew he was with neither man.

“Would you like me to send a message on the pipes? Ask the other sentries if they might have seen him? Or if someone else has?” Vincent asked.

Olivia shook her head. For a married woman, she was having a very difficult time keeping track of her husband, it seemed. She was embarrassed enough that she was having to go hunting for him. She didn’t want to increase that feeling.

“No. No, he might... he might not want to be found, right now,” she admitted glumly. “Best to... best to give him his privacy.”

Vincent’s eyes flickered at the mention of the word. “There are... some few places I’ve known Kanin to seek that,” Vincent said, giving her a nudge. The Anniversary Chamber had been built as a “private place” for the two of them.

Either Olivia didn’t quite catch on, or he wasn’t sure if she did. Her concerns seemed to weigh her down too much.

“Never mind.” She waved a hand at the declaration. “He’s probably just... wandering around, somewhere. Good night, Vincent. For what it’s worth, I’m... I’m sorry you won’t be able to see Catherine, this evening.” She knew his shift wouldn’t end for several hours yet, by which time it would be very late, indeed.

The blue eyes softened immediately, at the mention of his love’s name. “There will be ... other nights, Olivia. For us.” *And I pray there are, for you and Kanin.* “Go with care,” he added, momentarily glancing toward the large door and seeming to see everything that lay beyond it. Everything, including a certain balcony. He turned back to her. “The path you walk is an uncertain one, I know. But I think it is the right one.”

“I know. I don’t know why I feel so... uncertain,” she confessed, knowing that Vincent, more than anyone, knew what it was to walk on an uncertain path. Every step he had taken with Catherine had been on one, since their beginning.

The deep voice dropped low. “Perhaps it is because walking with anger is difficult, as a companion.”

Olivia knew the charge had merit. “I don’t want to be angry. But I don’t want to be... what I was before, either.”

Vincent understood the devastation that Kanin’s actions had wreaked on Olivia’s life. How overwhelmed she’d felt, and how powerless. Of course she wouldn’t want to feel that way again.

“Then... perhaps... let your anger go, and see what rushes in, to fill the void it leaves. Try to do no harm, in the action. There is strength in you, for whatever lies ahead. Go with *care*, Olivia, he repeated, emphasizing the word.

“I’ll try,” she said, not quite sure what that meant for her, right now. She turned back toward her chambers.

Maybe he’s there. Maybe he came back, and he’s sitting there, waiting for me.

And maybe he isn’t.

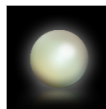
Olivia’s small, soft-booted feet were nearly noiseless, on the sand and stone pathway, as she walked back to see which scenario was true.

I think Kanin is going to leave me, again. I think I’m all but making sure he has to. That he has to go out the same gate I just sat near, she thought, hating that she felt that way.

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Chapter Four

... And All is Mended



His neck was aching and his index finger throbbed, just a bit. But he was at the point in his self-assigned task where he could see real progress. Three quarters of the back of the dress was

done. The pile of pearl buttons sitting near him on the bed was growing ever smaller.

He ignored the twinge in his thumb and thought that perhaps he'd have to leave the cuffs until morning. Or at the very least, that it would be morning before he *got* to those, considering his progress.

He was slowing down, in the long job, owing to fatigue, more than anything else. The stonecutter in him realized just how tiring this sort of work was. He swore that four hours spent carving rock didn't leave him feeling this weary.

Who knew sewing could be hard? He thought, threading the needle for what felt like the fiftieth time, but in truth couldn't have been much more than the tenth one.

From the doorway, Olivia watched him concentrate, as he tied off the thread and poked the needle in. The pearl button settled itself on the back of her wedding gown, a thing that was originally a gauzy summer dress, bleached white then lined and remade to bridal splendor.

Olivia thought Kanin looked uncomfortable, with his broad shoulders hunched, and his back bent into the shape of a pretzel. The light of the nearby candles was pushing back the darkness to some degree, but Olivia knew that a decent lantern was better suited to this task, or at least some multi-wick pillars, kept close. They burned faster, but they shed a good amount of light. Threading a needle was tough as it was, in

whatever light was available, and Kanin had brought no needle threader with him.

His face was a study in concentration, and Olivia knew there were a few lines that hadn't been there, before he'd "gone away." The wings of grey at his temples also seemed larger, though most of his hair was the tan color she'd always known it to be. His hands were steady, and his thumb was red, from pushing the threaded needle through.

He wasn't humming, or talking to himself, or doing anything Olivia knew she often did, when she sewed. He was frowning, as he eyed the placement of the latest button, then slipped the fastening loop over it, making sure it was sitting in just the "right" spot.

He must have been content with the results, because he picked up his open pocket knife, sliced the white thread off, and began to knot it, again, readying it for its next assignment.

Olivia was torn, for a moment. *Do I just go away? Or come in?* "Go with care," Vincent's voice came back to her.

But "care" could be more than one thing. It could be "caution" as in "to go carefully," or it could be "care" as in "caring." She was unsure of what to do.

The man she'd once loved more than any other, and even pledged her life to, was sitting on an old sheet that acted as a dust cover, re-assembling her wedding dress.

Does he even want me in there? Lately, when we're alone, all we do is... realize how far apart we are.

"Go with care."

Cautiously, she stepped into the room. One she hadn't been in since "that time."

He never heard her enter. He wasn't even thinking about her, specifically, when she did.

"Kanin?"

He looked up. Not just for the sound of his name, but for the way she'd said it. Not in anger. Not in resentment or even sorrow, but just as a question. The way she used to say it when she asked one of those of him. Like from... before.

She came to sit beside him, carefully. Some of the buttons shifted on the bed, when she did. He scooped them back toward him.

"I didn't want it to stay ruined," he explained, as if his actions needed explaining. They both knew he was talking about the dress. And they both knew he was talking about more than that.

He finished sewing on the latest button, then cut the thread with the blade of his knife, again, and brushed the fabric smooth. Picking up the needle and eyeing it, he mentally measured the dangling white thread. He figured he had enough left for one more button, before he'd have to re-thread the eye of the needle.

The eye of the needle. Is that what we're passing through? It was an almost idle thought, on his part.

She watched him set aside the knife, and she reached inside her deep apron pocket. "Little scissors work better than a pocket knife, for this. You want to cut the thread close to the button, so the end doesn't show," she said, picking up the first button he'd sewn on at the bottom of the dress, and demonstrating.

He stilled his hands, and watched her. Then he held the dress, while she cut all the stray threads he'd left behind, thanks to having come in here armed with nothing more than her pincushion and the wrong tool for cutting small threads.

"I swear I always said you could hide a bureau drawer in that apron of yours," he commented, not telling her anything she hadn't heard, before. *Normal. This is normal conversation, for us.*

He went to tie a knot in the bottom of the thread. As it turned out, he was even doing that wrong. Or at least, he wasn't doing it the easiest way.

"You waste thread treatin' it like it's a shoe string. Like this," she said, wrapping the trailing strands of white thread around her fingers a few times, then pulling the loop down so that it tied its own knot, near the bottom of the thread. It was a something he'd seen her do countless times before, in their marriage. He only just now understood "why."

She handed the needle back to him, silently.

"Thank you," he replied, realizing hers was the better, faster way. "I think I've seen you do that a thousand times, when you were mending. I never stopped to think."

You're guilty of that in more ways than one. They both felt her think it. For that matter, they both thought it themselves, in one way or another.

But she didn't say the words, and she reached for the red cushion that held her pins and needles. She selected one she wanted, threaded it, and picked up one of the now button-less cuffs, while he continued repairing the back of her dress.

They were quiet for a pair of buttons each.

"I got mad, one day," she admitted, drawing the needle through the hole. "I don't even remember what about. I think Luke was teething, maybe. Kept me up most of the night, and I was just tired." He didn't look up, but he did look over, and realized how much more suited her small, delicate fingers were to this task than his longer, thicker ones. Her stitches were closer to the shank, and she was steady, with the chore. Her needle was even smaller, making the last, crowded stitch that much easier.

"I mean, I thought I was doing okay. Then I... I dropped a pitcher, or tipped over a basket of yarn," she continued, as her hands worked. "Forgot to bring in fresh wood for the brazier. Somethin'," she said, explaining the day she'd taken every

button off the gown with a seam ripper. They both knew she'd been furious, when she'd done it. Furious and in despair.

"Being mad... it just felt better than bein' sad."

"You don't have to explain," he replied, continuing with his self-assigned job.

They both sat there, working, with her wedding dress between them. She glanced at his fingers, just as he'd glanced at hers.

"One thing I've got in this 'bureau drawer' is something you're needing," she said, fishing out a silver thimble from her pocket.

"It'll take the sting out of that finger," she said, offering it to him.

"You use it. I can—"

"Take the damn thimble, Kanin. Your finger's so raw it's about to bleed all over my wedding dress."

'Damn.' She swore, now? Olivia never swore. At least she hadn't, before. Kanin was sad when he realized that life with him – and without him – had obviously changed that. And her voice had that edge back in it.

"Yes ma'am," he answered meekly, accepting the metal cylinder. He put it on his first finger. The work became easier, immediately, as they both returned to their tasks.

Olivia inhaled, deeply, then let it go. "Got mad. Stayed mad. It was better than the grieving. I guess you could say it gave me... strength," she said, snipping the thread she'd just tied off so it wouldn't show.

“You had every right,” he replied. “I never said different. I never will.”

He was sewing past the place where the thin line of her bra had been revealed to him, when he’d opened the dress. He couldn’t help but recall the moment.

God, how I remember that night. I unwrapped you... like a present. He now greatly feared she was one he couldn’t keep, ultimately.

“I just wanted to... explain it. Tell you... I guess you know I’ve been... angry, for a while. Not just... not just since you came back,” she said, picking up another one of the few remaining buttons. She put the next button on the left sleeve, while he continued making his way up the back of the dress.

“I guess I do,” he answered. “You had... have a right to be, Livvy,” he repeated the claim. “After what I did.”

Her hands stilled. “What is it you think you did that made me mad, Kanin?” she asked.

Kanin knew she wasn’t a cruel woman. That she wasn’t the kind to rub his nose in a thing. Indeed, as impossible as it seemed, they’d barely discussed the huge lie, or Joey Davis, or his mother, or Catherine Chandler’s involvement in either his incarceration or his release. They’d barely talked about anything, really, other than Luke, and using him as kind of a buffer, while they’d tried to fit their lives back together.

He didn't need to ponder her question for long. *Maybe she wants an apology. Make that another one of those. Lord knows, she's due.*

"I lied to you. I lied to everybody. From the moment I came down."

Olivia barely glanced up, as she looped the thread around a finished button and tied it off. "That ain't why I was mad, Kanin. That ain't never why I was mad." She snipped off the thread, then set about sewing on the next button.

Kanin watched as she pulled the thread through the lovely fabric smoothly, using a raised index finger to keep it from tangling. She was clearly the better of the two of them, at this. And she added not a word more.

Kanin stared at her, watching her make another stitch. *Not be angry because he'd lied to her, lied to all of them? How can that be?*

She stared at the button, as she worked. Her voice was low, but steady, with her memories. "Luke learned to walk to other arms than yours. Learned to talk more, hearing other voices. The others... they ... they brought him toys, and treats, and strawberries in the spring, and always told me 'let me know if there's anything I can do.' Fine." She tugged on the thread, pulling it tight. "And when Winterfest came... I took him into the Great Hall, by myself."

Yes, yes, that was true. She had done that. He knew she had. It made sense. It was what he'd expected of her, and what he'd hoped for, that she would continue to participate in her community, and be sheltered by them.

"I was sittin' at the table, the candle in front of me, Luke in my lap." Her brown eyes flicked upward, and her brow knit, with the memory. "That wasn't right." She looked back down and jabbed at the sleeve. "It should have been *you* sitting there, holding the candle for our family... or none of us there at all."

She stabbed the fabric and kept talking, while Kanin simply watched, the back of the dress clutched in his hands.

"Luke got fussy and there was no one to give him to, because you were gone." It wasn't an accusation so much as it was a statement of fact. "I didn't want to just hand him off, and most of the adults were at the table, anyway. So I had to get up and let Brooke sit in my stead. Had to... step back, while Brooke touched the candle to Sebastien's, and then to Elizabeth's. It wasn't *right*, Kanin."

"I know. I should have been there, Olivia. I'm so sorry."

"No. No, it wasn't right because *I shouldn't have been there*. Not because you should have." She knotted the button in place, and snipped the remaining thread with her scissors.

"Livvy, these are your people. I never expected you to miss Winterfest because of what I did."

Her reply seemed like a change of subject.

“I never visited you, up there. I couldn’t.”

Kanin struggled to shift gears, and keep up with her. “Don’t you think I know that? You were *born* down here, Liv. You’d need ID to get within a country mile of that prison. And do you think I even wanted you there? *Seeing me...* that way?”

Is that why we’re so... separate? Is that what this is all about? She never came to see me, in the year I was gone, so she feels guilty?

Her next words didn’t support that idea. “Didn’t make any sense me going to see you. Not when you’d lost faith in us.”

She trimmed a loose thread with her little scissors.

I’d lost what? Kanin couldn’t believe she’d said the words.

If anything, faith in them was the only thing that had gotten him through the last sixteen months and more, as a sane man. Faith that he loved her. Faith that one day, maybe, she would be waiting for him, when he got out. If she wasn’t, she wasn’t, and that would be fair, too, all things considered. But that she was...

“Livvy, if there’s one thing I *always* had, it was—”

“No!” She shot off the bed, clattering one of the buttons in her lap to the floor. “No you *didn’t*. You *never* did! And you can’t say different!”

She picked up the button and tossed it back on the bed. Then she took a deep breath, and punctuated her charge. “I’m not

smart like Catherine, or good with a bow, like Jamie. So you thought I was less.”

He couldn’t believe the turn the conversation had taken.

“Olivia, that’s crazy talk.” He shook his head at her, bewildered by her charge.

But there was blood in her eye at his denial, and she wasn’t backing down an inch.

“You think I was mad because of the *lie* you told?” Her voice rose. “Kanin, I *knew* about that. Remember? It was all *out*, we all *knew*. *Everyone* knew.”

He did know. He did remember. He remembered the incredibly awkward meeting, where everyone stood around and talked about his past sin like there was something they could do about it, some way to save him. Even Mary had been on his side, then. Mary, William, John... And on the other side, Father, Vincent and Catherine.

Kanin had gone from desperately hoping there was a way to avoid punishment, to being desperately certain there wasn’t.

Olivia, it seemed, remembered the day, as well. “Vincent was asking questions about ‘what was justice and what was right,’ and Catherine was talking about Mrs. Davis like she was somebody I was supposed to *care* about. More than Luke, more than you.”

She gestured toward him and Kanin tried to keep up.

“And Father didn’t know what to do but say this put us all at risk, and William said you should just stay, and I was the one, *me.*” She pointed back to herself. “I *knew* what we should do. I *said* it. And *you agreed.*”

She pointed an accusatory finger at him. Something he never remembered her doing in all of their married life, even the horribly difficult days before he’d turned himself in; even in the days when one was warranted.

She was out of breath, and her face was red, as remembered anger mixed with current ire. It was clear that she was furious all over again, thanks to reliving the memories.

Kanin kept his tone low, trying to steady her. “I do remember. You said we should go live at the perimeter. Livvy, that’s no life for y—”

“You don’t get to tell me what *my life* is! You don’t get to *make* that choice for me! Poor little weak Olivia! Can’t go up Above and can’t move out to the edge! Well I got news for *all* of you!”

She was pacing, trying to burn off the rage that was clearly boiling out of her. It seemed to help, a little. And Kanin knew better than to interrupt her.

“It’s like nobody remembers... I *buried* a man I loved, one sad day. And it nearly took me to the ground. Then I got back up and lived my life, *hoping* for something better, for some kind of second chance. And then... there you were. And then... Luke.

She slowed down her pacing, and faced him. “Our boy. Our son.”

She held her arms as if she was cradling the infant Luke had been, once upon a distant time ago. Then, she dropped them.

“And if living out on the edge is what I have to do to keep this family together, then I will damn well do it, and so will my son, and *you will, too!*”

She was fierce in her vehemence, and spitting mad. The furious fight she’d never gotten to have, before.

“I wasn’t sure until Winterfest,” she explained. “Then I was.”

Kanin tried to explain his position. “Livvy, it was *my* mistake. It didn’t seem fair to you. Or Luke. I couldn’t ask both of you to--.”



“It was my *choice*, Kanin! It was *our* choice. We talked about it. Then you decided something different, and just went up!” She waved her hand in an upward motion, to encompass the Topside world. A world she was never a part of, full of places she’d never wanted to go.

“I even offered to go Above with you. Somehow. We knew it wasn’t possible, but by then I was just... grasping at straws.” She let the hand drop to her side.

Kanin struggled to make her understand, in the face of her anger. “I thought I was doing the right thing. The best thing. For you. For Luke. For everybody. I *owed* Mrs. Davis. I owed *everyone*, for—”

“What about what you owed *me*? I’m strong, Kanin. I can take what comes. In spite of how... ridiculous and prissy this dress looks.” She gestured toward the gown, and thought how absurd it was. *Thirty eight pearl buttons. Madness.* It looked like feminine silliness at its most inane, right now.

I should have just asked Mary to help me put a zipper in it. For that matter, I should have just worn something else.

Kanin could all but see her thinking it, as she glared at the dress. She was as readable as a book. In a way, she always had been, for him.

He kept his voice low. “Not for the world would I have you change a thing about this gown. Not for the world, Livvy.”

"It helped you think I was weak." The fight was fading out of her, but the anger still simmered.

"*Go with care.*" Olivia knew she was trying to. She wasn't sure if she was succeeding.

Kanin blinked, and stared at his wife. Her generous lower lip was held firmly, in a stubborn pout. She clearly wanted to kick something. Probably him.

"I didn't... I didn't mean to imply you weren't strong. I was just... I thought I was doing the right thing, Olivia," he repeated.

She wiped at eyes that couldn't stop tearing, knowing there was sorrow mixed with her anger. She knew she wasn't heartless about what Mrs. Davis had been going through. She had Luke. She had a way to measure the devastation that losing him could wreak, on a life. She'd just never had a way to balance a strange, Topsider woman's grief, against her own needs, and her boy's. She told him as much.

"I don't say I know I was right, for Mrs. Davis, or for her son. I know it probably wasn't," she admitted. "I just say I knew it was the only way to keep us all *together.*" Her brown eyes beseeched him for understanding.

"I know, Liv," he said.

"I'd have done it," she maintained, determination in her stance. "I'd have lived with it. For as long as we had to. A year, two years, more... until Father figured out what to do... I don't care. You didn't give me a *chance*, give *us* a chance, me and Luke, to

show you how strong we were, how strong we could be, *for you.*”

She sat back down on the sheet. “You thought I was weak.” She couldn’t seem to let go of that word. “Somebody that needed protecting. But it was *you* who needed that, *you* who needed protecting, needed sheltering. Don’t you *see* that? And you didn’t let me.”

Kanin remained sitting before her, utterly stunned. He now recalled that it was Olivia who had first said they should move out to the perimeter, and solve their problems that way. Then, the two of them had just started packing, as he’d tried to navigate the disaster his life had become.

But even as he was putting things into baskets and boxes, he felt the wrongness, in the decision. It plagued him until he’d made a different choice, entirely. The one he thought was best for Mrs. Davis, for his tunnel home, but mostly, for his wife and son.

It was true that he *had* consulted with Olivia about the decision to go Above, and turn himself in. He tried to replay the conversation in his head, but could only see her seated before him, in sorrow. He knew she’d said “no” to the idea. But then... he’d persisted.

He’d concluded that he was unwilling to allow her to make such a sacrifice for him. And that he owed Mrs. Davis the justice she craved. He’d had to go Above. He knew that. He’d told Olivia as much.

Now he realized just that. He'd told her. He hadn't asked her. He'd stated his intentions. Unable to change his mind, she'd hugged him good-bye, and told him "Come back to me." It was all he'd left her with. All he'd left them with. Then he'd followed through, overtop of any reservations she'd told him she had.

What had been his decision to make had been all of theirs, to live with.

Once he'd gone Above, there had been no turning back. He'd gone immediately into custody, and then into the system.

He literally had not seen nor heard from his wife until the day he'd returned home. He'd not written her, too riddled with guilt for the accidental death of Joey Davis, and then about lying about it, for so many years. He'd felt like a fraud. He'd felt like he'd married her under false pretenses. In a very real way, he had done just that.

When he'd returned, he could think of many reasons why Olivia was angry with him.

Releasing her from a life spent living out on the edge of the perimeter wasn't one of them.

"It would have been hard," he said. "Beyond hard. Lonely, for you. Lonely for Luke," he reasoned. There was more than just him and her to think of, in this.

“We’d have managed.” She said it with the stubborn conviction of a woman who’d once sewed thirty-eight pearl buttons by hand onto a wedding dress.

“Livvy, this... way you’re talking about, this solution... running from what happened ... that’s what I did. I went and left... everything I knew, and lived on what most people would call ‘the edge.’” He was being reasonable. She wasn’t sure she wanted him to be.

Do no harm. Vincent’s steady voice was a caution, in her ear, and she let him continue, uninterrupted.

Kanin glanced up at the stone walls he himself had carved, but she knew he didn’t see them. Not the beautiful niches he’d spent hours hammering out, nor the white candles he’d begged from Rebecca.

“I tried to wait it out,” His voice was a memory. “And I ended up carrying it with me. I know you think running would have worked. But I... I’m proof it doesn’t.” He sighed. “You say two years. What about when two years turns to five, and five to fifteen? It did, for me. It would, maybe... for you. For Luke.”

She hated the notion that leaving for the perimeter, that keeping them intact, as a family, wouldn’t have worked. It had helped stoke her anger for sixteen months. One for every year he’d avoided justice.

Her tone grew more reasonable, even though she resisted his logic. "We could have tried it. We could have tried... anything," she said.

"Maybe we could have," he allowed. "But... I needed to go, Liv. In the end, I would have, anyway."

The lower lip tightened, just a bit. She didn't like to accept that possibility. Or she did accept it, but she didn't care for how it made her feel.

"Let your anger go... And try to do no harm."

"Maybe," she allowed. "But if you did, that would be what *we* decided together. Not what just *you* say, and I have to live with. Especially not when you did it because you think I'm too soft to live hard." She picked up a stray button off the bed, as she said it. It belonged on the cuff, and was hers to fix. She glanced over toward the rest of the dress. Amazingly, the chore of repairing it was nearly done.

She no longer felt like doing it. But she knew she would, anyway. *That's what it is, sometimes, to be a wife, to be a mother. You do the things you don't feel like doing. Because they need done.*

She picked up a threaded needle and set about putting on the button. Something that had once seemed so important, and now seemed so... inconsequential, in the face of everything.

She jabbed at the fabric, again, and he knew if she wasn't careful, she'd leave a hole.

He dared to venture an opinion about the comment that she was “weak.” “I don’t think you’re—”

“Vincent has more faith in Catherine than you do in me.”

He had no idea what she was talking about. But he was positive she was wrong.

She continued sewing, jerkily, as she stated her case. “When Father went missing, who did Vincent turn to? Who brought Eric and Ellie down, when he told her kids were being hurt?”

Kanin shook his head in the negative. “If you think I want you to be like Catherine Chandler —”

She cut him off. “Vincent knows he sometimes asks her to go where there’s trouble. But he trusts she can fight her way clear, or he can be there, when she can’t.”

She stabbed the fabric a few more times, tied it off, and picked up the next pearl button. “She can help others, help everyone. I don’t know why she couldn’t help us. Or... maybe she did, and I just couldn’t see that, then,” she admitted, not quite sure of anything, at the moment.

“I don’t want you to—”

“Not to *be* like her. We both know I’m not. But to *trust* me. To trust me like Vincent trusts Catherine. She knows what to do. She’s smart. He has faith in that. He knows it’s his, to call on.” Olivia was sure of that much.

“Olivia, you —”

“You think because I’m tunnel born, I don’t know how to fight for my family? For my *family*, of all things?” she emphasized, passing the needle through an increasingly small hole. She scowled at the task.

Her tone became self-denigrating. ““Poor little weak Olivia. Mends the socks and brings lunch. Never goes Above. Too sweet for such things.”” She was mocking herself, and he didn’t care for it, as she finished the last button on the right cuff.

She cut the thread, but left some dangling. Kanin thought it looked like one of his clumsy attempts. Her hands clutched the fabric, tightly.

“Does it ever occur to any of you I never go Above because none of *you* are there? That you’re my *family*, and that’s all I *care* about?” She was trying to explain that what many perceived as a weakness in her, her unwillingness to go Above, she held as a strength.

“How I’m gonna keep an eye on Luke, and on you, if I go up there? And how can I watch *both* of you when you’re in jail up there and Luke’s down here?”

Kanin had to admit that her logic on that point, was flawless.

“I had to stay with one of you. So I stayed with the baby.”

She picked up the scissors, then set them down. “And I never felt so alone, so *separated* from where I needed to be.”



It was a feeling he understood only too well, and he told her as much. He dropped his voice low, and kept his tone very gentle. He wanted to reach for her hand, but he was afraid she'd just shake him off. So he used his voice, and prayed it was enough.

"Now *that*... *that's* a feeling I know. And it hurts." He paused. "I know others, too... Like... I love you and I'm never going to leave you, again." He dared to take her hand, then, turn it, and place a quick kiss on her wedding ring, before he let it drop. "But that one, well..." He picked her scissors up off the bed and trimmed her hasty work. "That one... *that* feeling...I understand."

He set the scissors back down on the sheet. "I never *felt* more... separated, than when I was up there. Never ... more like I was in the wrong place, the whole time." He carefully stroked the line of buttons down the back of the dress. They seemed like a path, to him. A path made out of almost incandescent light.

Pearl breadcrumbs in the dark. To find your way home, he mused.

“It’s like when you’re heading for the junction, and you turn wrong, and end up in the maze,” he said.



Yes. Yes, that’s exactly what it was like, she thought.

He shook his head. “You know it’s bad. You know you’re in the wrong place. But you’ve taken one turn too many... and you can’t get back.”

He held up the dress, and watched the sleeves fall, then settle. It was a lovely thing. And holding it brought back so much...

“Catherine told me I should write to you,” he said, looking at the gown but not 'seeing' it, not really. “All I could think was... it wouldn’t fix nothing. Wouldn’t make me be with you, be with Luke, when we both knew I had to stay there.”

She nodded her simple agreement, at that. "I know. I felt the same."

He knew she did, as he set the dress back down on the bed, between them.

"You're not weak, Livvy," he stated, running a rough hand across the fabric of the gown beside him, just for the pleasure of touching it. "You're not Catherine Chandler, or Jamie, or Rebecca, or anybody else. But I wouldn't want you to be any of them. You have your own strength. Different from theirs."

He smoothed down the fabric on the dress, again, and checked the sleeves. Thirty-eight pearl buttons were back where they belonged. "I wish we were as easy to fix as this gown. I wish I could... dance with you in it, again. Make it so... so the last year never happened."

She looked at the lovely dress sadly, and then at him. "I can be strong, Kanin. I know dresses like this don't make me look it, but —"

"Don't say bad things about this dress, Liv." His eyes looked back to a very distant day, and this time it was Olivia who could read Kanin, clearly. She knew he was thinking about the day they'd been joined. The day he'd held her hand, and they'd taken vows, together.

"Some of the most... beautiful, most important moments of my life happened when you were in this dress. In it, and... and coming out of it," he said, his face reddening at his candor.

It surprised Olivia that he would look embarrassed. Especially considering how they'd spent the last hour, arguing. Or maybe she'd been the only one doing that. She wasn't sure.

"Kanin Evans. I do believe you're blushing." That, she was sure of.

The charge only made him blush further. "I guess I am."

He left the gown where it was, and gathered up the few things he'd brought into the room with him. He returned her thimble to her, and her scissors. She stood up as she pocketed them. Then he picked his pocket knife back up, folded it, and returned it to his pants pocket. He collected the red pin cushion, then began blowing out the candles farthest from the bed. Some of them were dripping white masses of wax, barely worth the recycling. Others had held up fairly well, considering.

He blew out a trio of clustered tapers, realizing he was going to have to come back in and chip the old wax off the stone wall, to clear it. *Oh, well. A job for another day.*

The room grew increasingly dim, as he moved around it. He felt her eyes on him, and it made him chatty.

"You're stubborn, I grant you. But weak... no. That you've never been. It's me that was. I... underestimated you." He didn't want to turn around and face her, as he admitted it, so he simply continued with his chore, knowing she still stood where she had been.

“I was so caught up in my own guilt... I guess I forgot to even try to understand you. That’s all. I didn’t mean it as an insult. For you, or Luke,” he said, still feeling it was best to protect his son from hardship. “I love you both. That’s all.”

Vincent’s words filled Olivia’s ears. *Perhaps... let your anger go, and see what rushes in, to fill the void it leaves... There’s strength in your for whatever lies ahead.*

Olivia took only a moment more to consider what that might be. Then she reached for the thing she wanted most: Her husband. And she did it by not taking a step, toward him.

He heard the shifting sound of her removing her clothing, before he heard the layers drop. The apron tied in the back, and the sound of cloth running against cloth as she tugged the bow free, was one he would know anywhere. It was a familiar sound, and one he’d enjoyed often, as her bridegroom, before he’d ‘gone away.’ It was a sound his body remembered, almost on instinct. He heard her soft boots gently drop to the floor, as she toed out of them. *Olivia. God. How I love you.*

He stayed where he was, his back to her, giving her privacy. He heard her tug the dust cover off the bed, and then heard the deep rustling of the layered fabric of her gown, as she slid into it. He could all but hear the moment she pulled it over her hips, then slid her arms into the sleeves.

Her voice was hesitant. At first. “I’m thinking I need... I need a strong... a patient, strong m-man to help me get into this. I need someone to fasten all these buttons,” she said, invitation

in her words. “And I want to dance. It’s been a while,” she added.

From a shelf he’d absolutely forgotten about, he heard her wind up the music box. The one he’d gifted her with. The one he’d put in the chamber to dance with her. The one he’d meant to collect, when Vincent had come in and told him he needed to face Mrs. Davis, so they could both begin to heal.

The old music box began to play, the soft sound of it a familiar thing, in his ear. He wasn’t sure if he was supposed to move. So he didn’t.

Her soft, feminine voice continued. “Then, after I dance, I think I need that same strong man who got me into this dress to get me back out of it.” This time, her voice had more confidence. Strength was a thing Olivia had a very particular relationship with. It was something she walked up to, as much as she carried inside her.

Well? she thought, grateful for the low light. If he was about to refuse her, she wanted the comfort of it.

“I know one who’s willing,” Kanin replied, daring to look around.

She stood near the bed, the dust cover cast aside and rumpled at its foot, the soft bed linens still there, and still beautiful. The shimmering white gown covered Olivia’s milky torso, and her dark hair was the perfect foil for it.

She turned around, exposing a deep “v” of skin down the center of her back. The dress was undone, and her hair was hanging down, covering part of her from his view. She dropped her head and her hair came up, just an inch. She was buttoning the cuffs, herself. The sight of the naked small of her back made Kanin’s body tighten, with remembered passion.

“I had Luke. It might not fit the same way,” she cautioned. Now she was the one who wasn’t looking at him.

He knew she was correct in her assessment, but only that the dress would fit looser, not tighter. It was true that her hips had broadened, some, since giving birth to their son. But it was also true that she’d done nothing but lose weight, the last year. And Kanin knew that she’d never been large, to begin with.

“I expect we’ll manage,” he said, swallowing. His throat suddenly felt very dry.

He walked to her as she moved her long brown hair aside, offering him the bare line her nude back. She’d removed her bra. He could still see the pink lines it left. His mouth watered, longing to kiss the slight abrasions away.

To Kanin, it seemed like a sin to cover such beauty. But she stood there patiently, clearly expecting him to button her into the dress, then dance with her.

His fingers slid along the fabric, then encountered his... their handiwork. He heard her catch her breath, as he began

fastening her into her gown, trailing his fingers up her bare skin, warming it, just before he concealed it.

“My wife. My *strong*, beautiful wife,” he said, emphasizing the word as his fingers went to their assigned chore. Fastening them was clearly easier and faster than sewing them on. He kissed the skin at her shoulder blades “good-bye” before he hid it from view.

“Will one dance be enough, do you think?” he asked, listening to the tune, as it tinkled a memory, around them.

She turned her head, and he caught the view of her pretty profile. “Are you in a hurry, husband?” she asked breathlessly, enjoying his ardor even as she enjoyed teasing him about it.

This felt familiar. This felt right. Not the uncomfortable stepping around each other they’d been doing since he’d returned.



“No ma’am,” he replied, not liking how easy it was to fasten her into the dress, thanks to her weight loss. There was a little too much space between her and the fabric. He remembered the gown fitting her like a hand to a glove, before. *I’m gonna feed you breakfast, lunch and dinner. In bed. See if I don’t*, he vowed silently, knowing he would, and she’d protest.

“I am many things, Livvy. But I am surely not in a hurry,” he insisted.

He planted his mouth on her neck, just before he concealed it from view, fastening the last button through its fabric loop. She trembled, and he held her against his strong form, knowing how much she liked it when they touched each other this way. She'd always loved the sensation of leaning back against his stonemason's chest. He put his hand around her waist, and held her there, letting her feel his form, feel the familiarity of it.

I'm still here. It's still me, he thought to her. Then: *I came back to you. I said I would. Just like you told me to. I do listen to you, Livvy.*

She sighed, in homecoming. *We're going to be all right.*

He felt her think it, felt her relay the thought with every muscle she owned. And he agreed. *I know we are. For the first time. I know we are.* He traced her shell of an ear, with his lips, wandering for a few breathless moments, near the lobe. She leaned her head back, accepting.

I should have brought you back into this room the first night I came home. Fought with you here, then made love with you, after. I love you, Olivia. I love you so much. He traced his long fingers across the tops of her shoulders, and settled his hands on them, feeling her collar bones with his fingertips. Beneath his touch, Olivia exhaled contentment.

"Kanin... husband..."

He kissed her cheek almost chastely, then set his mouth very close to her ear. "Not in a hurry at all," he whispered, turning

her in his arms so they could begin to waltz around the candlelit room.

And thirty-eight undone pearl buttons later, he proved it.

**

*No matter where you are when scattered buttons bring back
a memory, I wish you love. ~ Cindy*



*Button photographs by Angie, and many thanks for the
inspiration. We are all a part of each other, and we fasten
together in so many different ways ...*



Pacem Muros

