

# DON'T TELL MOM----- THE BABYSITTER'S DAD

by Kate Nickell

It all seemed simple enough when he suggested that Christine come over; but, as Father might say, *'The best laid plans....'*

"You're certain Charlie won't be a problem?" Christine paused in mid-dither to peer anxiously at her friend's reflection in the mirror. "It's just that this dinner came up so fast - and the babysitters in this city act like they should be asking you for references.... Really, Harry, I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't...."

She was off again; Harry let her expound so she could dissipate some of the nervous energy that radiated from her before she reached the party. He glanced at the object in question, which was lying in the portable playpen. Anthony Charles Guilliano, Jr. waved a chubby hand at him, then crammed it into his mouth, and sucked industriously on his knuckles.

"Now, he can have soft food and a bottle at six ... He can really drink from a cup by himself, but it can get awfully messy. I won't put you through that. Then it's bed by eight ..."

"You wrote it all down for me, Christine," he interposed patiently. Gently, but firmly, he propelled her towards the door. "Everything will be fine; I know what I'm doing."

"You'll call if anything happens? The number's ..."

"You already told me three times, and it's down by the phone." He opened the door to usher her out, but she dug in her heels.

"But you *'will'* call, promise?"

He sighed. "I promise. Cross my heart, and hope to die; stick a needle in my eye ..." The grin became wicked as he added. "I've done it before, so you know I ..."

"You don't have to show me; I believe you." She gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "See you about ten. Wish me luck!"

"Good luck..." As he shut the door, he muttered. "And good riddance!" Turning to his charge, Harry called. "Hey, Charlie! Uncle Harry's gonna show you some real magic."

The kid was nowhere to be seen. The playpen was empty. One side had collapsed downward. From the bedroom came a steady chuffing sound. He hurried toward it, prepared for the worst. "Charlie? Charlie! Where are ..."

His shout died away as he took in the damage. The bedspread had tumbled around the foot of the bed; no real loss, since he hadn't made the bed properly in the first place. The trash can had been gutted; paper and trash was scattered in a widening circle near his closet.

Now the baby sat in front of his latest target. The lowest bureau drawer was tilted to the floor; seated in front of it was Charlie who solemnly pulled every one of Harry's precious t-shirts from the drawer. A bundle of crumpled shirts and pullovers lay around the boy. From where he stood, Harry could spot lumps of variegated material jumbled inside the drawer.

That'd teach him not to make sure drawers and closets were shut tight. Still, after watching the

process repeat itself a few times, Harry lost patience. "Charlie - what d'ya think you're doing?"

Blue eyes met his innocently. "Clean house - make house neat and clean."

"Some other time, sport." Harry disengaged his ancient pullover from the toddler's grubby grip and tried not to wince at the smears of baby goo on the white cloth. "Let's go into the living room; we'll find lots of neat stuff to play with in there."

Hastily stuffing the clothes back into the drawer, he tried to keep an eye on the kid. He tried so hard that he yelped when he suddenly shut the drawer on his right hand.

"Good thing I'm a southpaw," he muttered, sucking on the hurt fingers, as he rose to search for his errant charge.

Just as he reached the living room, a chill breeze brushed his face. "Oh no, not the balcony - Christine'll kill me ..."

"Are you looking for this, Harold?"

Vincent held the object of his search tucked under one arm; Charlie cooed and kicked his heels against the strong arm. Cradled against his chest was Vincent's son, Jacob. The inevitable diaper bag dangled from one cloaked shoulder.

Too relieved to speak, Harry grinned at his friend, who carefully lowered the children into the playpen, set the diaper bag beside it, then meticulously adjusted and locked the playpen's supports into place.

"Just make yourself at home, Vinnie.... Looks like you're prepared to stay awhile. What's the occasion?"

Vincent glanced at his friend, opened his mouth, then shut it as his eyes dropped to inspect the carpet at his feet. As the silence grew, Harry became convinced that, if his friend could blush, he would. Finally, Vincent said softly. "Dr. Campbell said that he needed to examine Catherine in his office."

"Yeah, the tunnels aren't exactly sterile." Jumping to his feet, he slapped his friend on the shoulder. "Congratulations, Vinnie! This calls for a drink. Name your poison."

"Your well-wishing may be premature." Vincent wondered whether Harry could hear him over the rattling that came from the kitchen. "Catherine is not certain ..."

"She moody?"

"Yes, on occasion...."

"Started moving things around - suddenly talking about needing more space?"

Vincent considered it a moment. "She has mentioned it."

Harry's head popped around the corner. "Take it from me, pal, she's pregnant." He disappeared into the kitchen once more.

Glancing at the babies, Vincent debated on whether to follow his friend into the other room. Jacob lay on his back, staring raptly at the moon and stars mobile dangling across one corner of the playpen. The older child had clambered to his feet, holding onto the side, he rocked back and forth while burbling to himself in a language that only babies and mothers understood.

Finally, he compromised by leaning against the doorjamb where he could keep an eye on everyone.

"I was unaware that you were so knowledgeable in family matters."

"I'm a judge, ain't I? Comes with the territory.... You still take yours straight?" Harry handed him a glass of milk; lifting his chocolate milk in a toast, he grinned. "Besides, I was around when Christine had Charlie."

"Charlie?"

"Yeah, Charlie." Harry tossed back the rest of his drink and walked to the playpen; picking up the older boy, he gestured to his friend. "Charlie, I want you to meet Vincent. Vincent, this is Charlie."

The baby stared at the stranger without fear. "Hairy...."

"But aren't we all?" quipped the judge, ignoring his friend's grimace at the old joke. "How about some grub?"

\*\*\*\*\*

A half-hour later, he had to admit that it wasn't one of his more inspired ideas. For every bite that the kids got in their mouths, another two hit the floor - or the table - or the walls. His white-and-blue tile kitchen had been redone in late baby food.

Vincent brushed a pea green strand of mane from his eyes. "Catherine makes it look so easy," he said ruefully.

"I guess we just don't have the knack." Harry sighed, and considered where he could stow two young hellions while they cleaned up the leftovers. "Maybe they'd like to watch Sesame Street ..."

Missing the connection, Vincent frowned.

"You know, television? The electronic babysitter?"

"Under normal circumstances, I would disagree, Harold.... but this time, my friend, I think you have something there." Vincent picked up his squirming son, who gurgled.

Harry heard a soft *'pop'* as he picked up Charlie, just before the unmistakable aroma of dirty diapers filled the air. "Yours or mine?" he groaned.

"Perhaps we should check them both; it is the safest course of action." Vincent carried his offspring into the bathroom; Harry followed closely, holding the toddler at arms' length.

He knew that changing diapers would be a grim task, even with disposable diapers, but this outdid his worst imaginings. Vincent, though more experienced, was little better off, since he had some cloth monstrosity to fold and pin in place. "Maybe we oughta ..."

The phone cut off his thoughts.

"Maybe it's Christine ..."

"Catherine?" Vincent sounded as hopeful as he felt.

"Keep a lid on things; I'll check it out." Harry beat a hasty retreat.

"H'lo, talk fast; it's our dime." He cradled the receiver on one shoulder and kept a wary ear cocked for trouble. *'Two on one - poor Vinnie!'* He hoped his friend could handle it.

"Harry? It's Christine. How's Charlie?"

"Fine, just fine. He ate all his dinner... How're things at your end?"

"Oh, he's such a good boy! Things are great! I may have two major contributions for my next campaign. I don't know who I can ever thank you ..."

"How about a day's maid service?" he muttered. Vincent's voice rumbled through the hall, but he couldn't make out what his friend was saying; the tone sounded a little desperate, though. He had to go to his friend's rescue.

"Uh, Christine, I gotta go - I think I hear Charlie calling."

"All right, Harry. See you - I may be a teeny-weeny bit late. Is that all right?"

Harry shut his eyes, but he forced himself to say that it was fine with him. As soon as the phone clicked in his ear, he tossed the receiver onto its cradle and raced for the bathroom.

Vincent met him in the hallway. Instinctively, Harry knew there was trouble; Vinnie was tugging his cloak into place.

"You aren't going to leave me with them, are you?"

His friend ignored the hysterical note. "She needs me. You understand, don't you, Harold?"

He shut his eyes and mustered all his strength. "Yeah, right. Go - just get back here as fast as you can, okay?"

"Of course - I would never abandon a friend in need."

With that, Vincent vaulted onto the balcony and disappeared over the railing, leaving Harry alone with his miniature nemeses.

As he started down the hall, he heard the commode flush. Harry hesitated, wondering how the kids had reached the handle. It flushed a second time, and a thin sheen of water flowed toward his feet; that galvanized him into action.

The carpet squooshed under his shoes as he neared the bathroom door. "Oh, no...."

Toilet paper festooned the tile floor. The toddler tugged on the handle before he could react; once again, the commode overflowed its sides, adding to the pool already expanding into the bedroom. Jacob splashed in the water, his hands full of toilet paper. Seeing Harry, he gurgled happily and reached for him.

Charlie met his astounded expression with an innocent smile. "See, Uncle Harry? Charlie clean house good."

\*\*\*\*\*

Nothing could go wrong for her tonight. Even the two strangers in her elevator barely disturbed Christine's exuberant mood. Everything had gone so well! And it was all thanks to Harry; with Charlie in such good hands, she had had nothing to worry about.

She glanced at her fellow passengers. The cloaked figure barely acknowledged her; he seemed lost in his thoughts - and probably the mask was hard to talk through. The dark-haired woman returned her smile, then gazed at the elevator numbers. She looked familiar, but Christine couldn't quite decide why.

Then the car slowed and stopped with a gentle jerk. "Excuse me," she sidled from the button panel as the doors opened. "This is my floor."

The woman smiled in reply. "Nice to see you again, Miss Sullivan."

She jerked to a halt and whirled around, but the doors had shut. That voice - she ought to know whose it was. Still puzzling over the mystery, she rang the bell.

There was no answer. Perhaps Harry was asleep.... Maybe he was sick! If he was ill, then Charlie might catch something!

Hastily fumbling in her bag, she found the spare key that Harry had given her. She thrust it into the lock and managed to get the lock to open without breaking the key inside. But her anxiety escalated with each passing second. Even as she worked on the door, she called. "Harry ... Harry! What's going on? Open up, you stupid door!"

Finally the door swung open, and she was inside. "Har ..."

She stopped and gaped at the sight before her. Judge Harold T. Stone was sacked out on the floor, snoring lustily. Beside him was a pallet of crib blankets and cushions, on which two babies snoozed peacefully. They looked so cute and innocent....

*'But why were they all sleeping in a cage?'*

END