

THE RAIN, THE STAIRS AND OTHER THINGS

by Trisha Kehoe

Brushing the hair from her eyes, Catherine muttered under her breath and reached for the book again. Getting down on the floor, she edged under the bed to grab at it, shaking it like something alive.

"Come here, you! Father said Vincent borrowed you two months ago. How in the world did you" Frowning, Catherine got to her feet and looked to her children, holding the book out in front of herself. "Okay, guys, who hid this book under Mommy's and Daddy's bed?"

Looking at each other, then Mommy, the twins seemed totally innocent as they shrugged in tandem. Marca rocked back on her heels.

"We don't know, Mommy. Not US!"

Looking at them carefully, usually able to tell when they were being.... less than completely honest, Catherine nodded her head.

"Okay, I believe you. But, it got under here somehow and it's grandpop's first edition of Robert Browning, too....."

Still not satisfied on how the book got on the floor, yet not quite believing in tunnel gremlins, Catherine put it carefully in the middle of Vincent's desk, turning away just as he entered the chamber.

"Catherine, you are home ahead of schedule. I wasn't expecting you until six this evening."

Laying aside his cloak, Vincent quickly gathered her into an embrace, smiling down at her. "I am delighted to have you home with me early; it's lonely when you are on special assignment." Dropping a kiss to her cheek, he put one hand at her neck, rubbing softly the warm, pink skin. "How did it go? Do you think Joe will be able to work from your notes, as usual?"

She sighed heavily, then hunched her shoulders. "Who can tell? If we win, Joe says my notes are great, if we lose, he says he can't read them! He's a pain in the..."

As she spoke, Vincent had turned to his desk. Taking the book, he smiled at her. "Don't let him bother you, Catherine. You know how he enjoys teasing you."

"Yes, I know; one of these days he'll go too far and they'll find pieces of his tush in the east river!"

Vincent chuckled as he turned the book over in his hands. "Did you find this, Catherine? I have been looking for it for some days now. I knew I still had it and that Father wanted it returned. Where was it?"

"Under our bed, that's where!"

He frowned. "Under our bed? Perhaps the children..."

"No, I asked them." She smiled at him. "And it wasn't me either, so that leaves only YOU, dear heart."

Thinking, trying to remember, Vincent sat at his desk, then nodded. "Oh, I DO recall what happened. I tried to fit it into the bookcase and could not, so I put it on the nightstand to return in the morning. It must have fallen and been kicked, um, under the bed accidentally. I am glad it has been located."

"All the bookcases CAN'T be that full!" She reached to open one before he could warn her off. Out tumbled row upon row of books; three heavy tomes whacking her on the head before hitting the floor.

"Ouch!" Wincing, she turned to her husband. "Why didn't you store those somewhere else; there's no room in here!"

"Neither is there room anywhere else, Catherine. Between my books and journals, your law books and private reading materials and the children's extra books, every drawer and shelf in this chamber is taken."

"Well, you'll just have to begin storing things you don't read on a regular basis, that's all."

"I had already thought of doing that." He looked pained. "But the decision of which to keep and which to store is a frustrating one. I want to keep them all."

"Fine, keep them all." Catherine shot him a rueful look. "I'll get another chamber."

He looked puzzled. "For your books?"

"NO. For myself!"

Vincent's head went down in defeat. "I'll start storing them in the morning, Catherine."

"Uh huh."

Allegra came into the chamber just as Catherine screamed; running towards the twins' room, she found her friend laying in the playpen with her legs hanging out over the edge.

"Hi, comfy, are you?"

Catherine closed her eyes. "You gonna help me up or stand there being WISE?"

Reaching out, Allegra yanked and tugged until finally, her pal stood beside her. Rubbing her rear-end, Catherine kicked the bureau drawer she held, with all her might.

"Stupid, dumb thing!"

Allegra bit back a smile. "What happened?"

"The damned bureau attacked me, that's what!" Wincing, she hobbled over to Marca's bed and sat down to rub her aching toes. "I tried stuffing one more blanket into the top drawer and it got stuck. So, I yanked it. Oh, I pulled it free, all right, without expecting to."

"And landed on your ass in the playpen."

"Exactly. There used to be so much room in here; where did it all GO?"

She looked about the room, shaking her head. "Toys everywhere because there's no room on the shelves anymore. Not even room for quilts and blankets, for crying out loud. Errggh!"

Allegra helped her fix the bureau then followed Catherine into the kitchen for a cup of coffee.

"So, where are the kids, with their father?"

"Yes, he took them for a short hike; they wanted to see the painted tunnels again." She smiled across the table to her friend. "They wanted to see the pictures of daddy as a baby."

"Allegra, what am I going to do; I need more room in here. There's just too much clutter...."

"I don't know, Cath. How about adding on again?"

"One chamber won't do it, not now. I need at least two more rooms. With the twins growing so fast, they should have separate rooms soon, too."

Allegra agreed. "Yeah, I know. Our place is nearly as bad. I had to go and marry PETER PACKRAT! That man saves EVERYTHING! Something NEW he does just to annoy me.

Sitting in the communal dining room alone having a late Friday afternoon snack, Catherine did the crossword puzzle in a newspaper somebody had inadvertently left behind, then began turning pages randomly. Suddenly, her eyes went wide as she picked the paper up to stare at it intently. If anyone had been watching, they would have sworn they saw a lightbulb go on over her head. Folding up the newspaper, Catherine grabbed her purse and strode purposefully from the room.

After putting on his sweatsuit, Devin began the daily game he played with his son, D.J. It was called 'find the shoe'.

"Okay, pal, where'd ya hide 'em? Do I get a hint?"

D.J looked up from his toys. "Huh?"

"My sneakers? Where'd you put them this time?"

"Dunno." The dark-haired boy returned to his building blocks.

Blowing the hair from his eyes, Devin stood over his son. "You....don't...know?"

"Don't 'member."

Narrowing his eyes, Devin went into the smaller, front chamber to begin digging in the one puny closet they had. Pulling out suitcases, an old briefcase, one of 'Lleg's missing shoes, then a broken hobbyhorse, Devin growled as he peered in at the other miscellaneous junk. Great, no sneakers. He nearly jumped out of his skin as Allegra grabbed him from behind, wrapping her arms around his waist.

"Hi, whatcha doing?"

"Yaaa! Jeez, you scared the crap out of me, woman!" Holding one hand at his heart, Devin began tossing things back into the 'black hole of Calcutta'- as his wife called it. "Where did we collect so much JUNK?"

She answered him quite sarcastically. "Junk? But, thought you said all this STUFF was IMPORTANT!"

"Not as important as finding my freaking sneakers. Where'd we GET all this crap anyway?"

"From you moving in here, that's where!" Allegra gestured to the closet. "Devin, all - ALL - of that CRAP is YOUR crap! You're Peter Packrat, not me!"

He grinned, just a bit embarrassed; it was true. He was a hoarder! "Yeah, yeah. Okay, but it's all gotta go or we'll be buried some night while we sleep!"

Allegra said nothing; going into the kitchen, she was back quickly. Standing in front of him, she held out three large trash bags. "Knock yourself out."

Groaning in agony, Devin threw himself backwards to the bed, holding his knee. "Allegra, WHY do you have to keep that damned apartment Above? For cripes sakes, it's on the eighth stinking floor and that miserable elevator NEVER runs!"

Pulling on her nightgown, her voice was muffled, but distinct. "Cuz it's cheap and convenient to the hospital, that's why."

He sat up, still wincing, as the knee reminded him of climbing eight flights - AGAIN. "It's not enough to climb those stairs once, but twice is too much! 'Llegs, you forget your pocketbook again, you go after it, not me."

"Picky, picky." His wife grinned as she snuggled up to him on the bed. "Just because you're all out of condition...."

Fierce ebony eyes locked to hers. "I was never IN condition to begin with, woman." He rolled over, facing her. "Yeah, and another thing. How come every time we go anywhere topside, it pours? Every time! Rain, rain, and more crummy rain, that's getting to be a bad habit."

"Okay, when I'm GOD, I'll take care of it, just for YOU."

She shrugged. "Dev.- if you can find a cheaper place for me Above, I'll take it. Okay? Just to please you...." Allegra lay back against him, satisfied that she had shut his face, at least for now. He'd NEVER find a better deal than - what he called - her AERIE.

Looking up from the tub as he felt Catherine's presence, Vincent smiled and continued his chore.

Bathing two children at once did conserve water, but not energy! He hadn't decided yet which was more disconcerting; having the twins wash HIS face as he washed theirs, or the constant battle to keep the water IN the tub when the children decided to drown him in that water. Like now! He had only lost concentration for a moment, a single brief second in time - that was ALL they needed.

"Yow! Marca, stop that this instant." He clutched her two small hands between one of his own. "J.D - NO!" Too late.

Standing at the bathroom door just in time to see a plastic pail of water poured over her husband's head, Catherine struggled not to tease. Oh, the poor man; he was dripping water all over the place - soaked through his shirt and jeans to the knees.

His words gravelly with pent up anger, he turned to his wife gesturing her to come in. "I cannot come to you, Catherine, at this moment."

Smiling, she walked over and kissed him, then both children as they yelled and held out their arms.

"Mommy's home, mommy's home. Daddy, wanna get OUTTTT!"

Both children scrambled out of the tub before Vincent could stop them and threw their wet bodies at their mother. Catherine sighed and patted the two tousled heads. Oh well, she didn't REALLY like this suit anyway. Taking the towel offered, she began to dry her daughter while Vincent did the same to J.D. Two chubby arms fastened themselves at her neck.

"I missth you. You was gone SO lonnnng!"

Vincent bit back a grin, nodding in agreement. "Yes, Catherine, I also missed you. Why WERE you gone so lonnnng?" Beaming at him, she looked noncommittal.

"Oh, just doing stuff, that's all. I'm home now and I'm starved!"

Lowering his magazine as his wife neared the bed, Vincent threw back the covers, inviting her to lay next to him.

"All tucked in, are they?"

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Catherine Shook her head. "One is." She removed her slippers and lay back on the pillow. "Marca is as she usually is, on top of all the covers. She claims it's too warm under the blankets. She's ALWAYS warm!"

"It would seem our daughter has more of my characteristics than we thought, Catherine. I also used to anger Father by throwing off all blankets as soon as he left the chamber."

A deep chuckle rose. .. "From a never ending contest between us to see who would give in first; it was usually him..."

"You were a brat? I always suspected as much."

Looking quite wounded, his glanced over to her. "A... brat? No, I do not recall Father ever saying that."

She looked at him calmly. "Never SAID it, bet he sometimes thought it, though." She opened her book, mumbling one more witticism. "At times, you still are... "

"What!" Vincent pointed a finger at himself, his voice filled with disbelief. "I, a brat? Is that what you just said?"

She flipped the pages randomly. "You heard me." A grin she could not contain curved her mouth up at the edges. "An imperfection, our children at times, share with their father." She continued turning pages, not looking at him. Not daring to look at him at the moment.

Vincent spoke softly to himself as he turned his attentions back to the magazine. "I've heard the children of this world use an expression..."

"What expression?"

He turned another page, not looking up. "That it takes one to know one...."

Catherine blew out the small candle at her side of the bed. Laying back, she watched him read for a while, then nudged him. "Are you planning on reading much longer?"

"For a while. Why?"

"I don't want you to read."

Catherine ran her toes over his muscled hairy leg; stroking one knee lightly with her nails as her voice turned throaty - more than a little demanding.

Although his heart was pounding in expectation, Vincent wasn't quite prepared to give in just yet.

"Oh?" Another page was turned. "That is too bad."

Without further words, she reached over, seizing the magazine before he could stop her.

"Catherine, I am not finished with that yet!"

"Yes.... you are." Stretching across his chest, she clicked off the small lamp at his side of the bed, holding the magazine out of reach. He tried to grab it from her.

"Let go of my magazine!"

Moving suddenly, she dropped it to the floor and knelt-between his legs, looking down at him. Catherine's eyes flashed covetously in the muted shadows of their bedroom.

"A... brat, as you claim me to be, gets her way....."

Two loving arms held him tightly at the hips at she hovered over him, then began edging closer. "And, right now, you are not going to read...."

Meeting his eyes, she slowly began edging his fleece sweat pants down to his ankles, then whisked them off. Vincent lay back, lifting his hips slightly; not actually helping, but not hindering her, eyeing his lover from beneath long, tawny lashes. His voice was actually coy, almost shy.

"I am not to be allowed to finish the article I was only half way through?"

Moving her hands on his tensed thighs, Catherine began rubbing them with her hands, issuing a direct challenge. "Do you want to continue reading?"

Shifting her hands lower on his body; moving between his legs, she lowered her head. Nipping him, then kissing each soft bite in apology, her mouth began moving slowly on his quickly excited length. Then, she began to move faster.

Reeling beneath her touch, a grunt of pure pleasure was torn from his throat; turning into a muffled growl of sweet suffering as his hips arched from the bed.

"Uhh..."

Her mouth began to suck the warm flesh harder and harder as a piercing sob was torn from the man. Closing his eyes, Vincent allowed sensations to rule him, as he focused with unconditional surrender only on Catherine, and the way she made him feel.

Just as he reached the last boundaries before complete ecstasy, Catherine ceased stimulating him and sat back on her heels; trifling with his passions as only she was able to.

Body trembling, breathing harshly open mouthed, Vincent struggled to form words. "Do... not... stop!" His eyes were beseeching, the pupils smoky black, with the depth of his need.

Entangling his hands wildly in her hair, he urged her down to his spasming body, needing her beyond the point of desperation.

"Please... PLEASE!"

Afloat in a sea of appetites, his hands became anything but gentle as he snarled... enraged to finish. The time for trifling with this man's power was over. Taking him completely into her mouth, Catherine encircled his hardened flesh delicately - moving up and down as he cried out; telling her of all the joy her touch brought to him.

He grew harder; throbbing... swelling, as everything he was, all his energy, intensified into a single aching need - release. It rose as a bloodlust, taking his will. A driving, paralyzing force propelled him as he rose on his elbows to look down. So close, he was so - close.

No longer able to contain himself or focus on anything but sensations, Vincent's eyes went blank... his teeth clenched as he snarled. Roughly twisting his fingers into Catherine's hair, he held her still.... exactly where he wanted her... she **must not** forsake him now. As his head snapped forward, his body erupted; filling her mouth with pulsating jets of heated, musky-scented fluid.

Still trembling, he lay flushed and panting as she rested on his stomach to smile up at him. Vincent opened his mouth to speak, but no words would come. A sated, repleted grin, crept over his face, as Catherine giggled, then buried her nose in his perspiration soaked chest hair. Her words were muffled, but full of love. "Are you all right?"

He shook his head slowly back and forth, still grinning at her. Brushing the hair from his face, she looked into his eyes. Tilting her head back to see him more clearly, Catherine wagged her eyebrows at him... a taunting note crept into her voice, "So.... want your magazine back now?"

A lusty, rumbling laughter filled the chamber; followed by soft giggles, then the sound of rustling sheets.

Friday at noon, Catherine turned the corner, heading for the Merchants Real Estate building. Finally! There was finally a message left for her at the office; a prospective house had been found. About time, too! She'd been looking almost three months and ZIPPO - nothing had even come close to what she needed.

Her mind occupied on all the horrible buildings she'd been shown, Catherine reached for the large brass door handles and found her hand enclosed in a rather large, calloused one. Looking up into a familiar face, she went wide eyed.....

"Devin!"

The man grinned back at her, winking. "Cathy? Hey woman, what's happening? What are you doing here?" He opened the door, standing back to let her enter first.

Inside the lobby, she turned to him, more than a little curious. "Never MIND what I'm doing here, what are YOU doing here?"

Taking firm hold of her elbow, Devin turned her to the elevator and punched the 'up' button...

"Look, if I tell you, do you think you could keep it quiet? It's a secret, Cathy. I don't even want Vincent to know until I spring the surprise, okay?"

Watching him through narrow eyes, she nodded and leaned back against the elevator wall. "Okay. Now, tell me."

At three that afternoon, Catherine and Devin sat huddled over together over a small dining table covered with papers, notes and photographs. Taking a swig of his now cold coffee, Devin shook his head, teasing.

"Never knew you could be as devious as me! Ha, old Vin will lose his mind!"

She needled back. "Thought he already did that, with you for a brother."

Ignoring the crack, he leaned forward, moving the papers. "So, how we gonna do this in a way that won't get us both killed?"

"What do you mean - killed? Surely, when Allie sees that place, she'll be as happy as I HOPE Vincent will be." She looked hopeful. "Won't she?"

"Oh, 'Llegs and Vin aren't the REAL problem." Devin leaned back in the booth, his face unreadable. "It's Father that's gonna hand BOTH of us our asses!"

Trying to get his children fed and not wear their breakfast, Vincent dodged yet another spritz of warm cereal as his blue eyes locked to his daughter's.

"Stop that, Marca. This food is to eat, I did NOT wish to wear it on my vest." Another spoonful was hurled at him quite deliberately.

Wiping his face in a napkin, Vincent took the spoon away from her. "Very well then. If you mean to be uncooperative, I shall to be forced to feed you as I used to when you were still a baby. Open wide..."

Crossing her chubby arms over her chest, Marca shook her head, pressing her lips tightly together. "Won't eat."

Standing at his elbow, Allegra swatted him lightly on the head. "It's a losing battle, ya know!" Pouring herself a glass of juice, she eyed the battle of man versus child with amusement.

"You're losing, Vin. You're bigger, but she's the stubborn one. Hi babes..."

Leaning forward, Allegra kissed her niece, grinning at the cereal spattered face. "Giving daddy a hard time, as usual are you?"

"Yeth, I ARE. Auntie Legra, HE wants to FEEEEEDD me like a BABBBY!" Marca pointed at her father accusingly as her bottom lip curled down in a pout.

Nearly fainting, as for once in her life, Allegra actually took his side, Vincent bit back a grin as she shrugged at his little girl.

"Well, seems to me J.D is doing just fine by himself. Maybe he's more grown-up than you are, huh?"

Taking the spoon, Allegra handed it back to Marca silently, then turned to Vincent, seeming to ignore the child as he now tried to do.

Looking from her brother to her father, then her aunt, Marca thought it over. Sighing deeply, she lowered the spoon into her cereal in a gesture of capitulation.

He set a plate of hot buttered muffins and a fresh cup of coffee in front of his childhood pal as he lowered himself back to the wooden bench. Allegra gestured at herself.

"For ME? Aren't you the sweet thing, though."

"You have earned it.... AUNTIE."

Licking the butter from her fingers, Allegra refilled her coffee cup and Vincent's. "Hey, where's Cathy this morning anyway? I stopped in to see if she was gonna take the kids to the park, but she wasn't there."

"Yes, I know she is not there." Wrapping his hands around the coffee cup, Vincent looked a bit testy. "These last days, when she has not been working, she has been Above."

"Oh? Doing what?" Allegra seemed puzzled. This wasn't like Cathy, leaving Vincent on her time off.

"I don't know what she is doing. Catherine has not confided in me where she has been going or what she has been doing – exactly...."

Sounding a bit hurt, his words trailed off in silence as he gathered up the children's dishes, then turned to take the twins from their chairs.

"I have not seen Devin for almost a week. Is he on the road, making a delivery for Gus?"

"No. He's just.... busy, I guess."

"You.... guess? You do not know?"

Allegra grinned up at him. "Maybe YOUR Catherine and MY Devin are up to a bit of hanky panky. Should we have them WATCHED, do you think?"

Laughing deeply, twinkling sea blue eyes met his friend's. "That shall not be necessary, 'Legra. Catherine would NEVER do a thing like THAT. And Devin KNOWS he would be dead...."

Giggling, she agreed. "Yeah, you'd get him..."

At the doorway, Vincent shook his head, looking back at her. "I would not have to. After facing you, there'd be nothing left - for me!"

Catherine looked up as her husband entered the chamber with her cereal-covered children. "Hi guys." Kissing each child, then her husband, Catherine smiled at him. "The usual WHO'S feeding WHO kind of morning, huh?"

"It began that way. But 'Legra got Marca to eat, in a surprisingly diplomatic manner. It was good having company for breakfast..." Saying no more, he headed for the bathroom, the children in tow.

Catherine frowned as the three disappeared from view. Had there been a slight note of quiet censure in THAT voice just now?

Turning back to her desk, Catherine quickly slid plans and diagrams into her briefcase; out of the sight of Mr. HAVE TO KNOW EVERYTHING. Feeling a bit guilty, she snapped the briefcase shut. Well, in a way, Vincent was justified if he WAS feeling a bit.... put upon, these last days. She had not been home much. Oh, she had very good reasons WHY she hadn't, but NONE she could share with HIM - at least not yet.

Once he had extracted promises from both children of leaving the other alone to bathe, Vincent sat on the edge of the tub for a moment, head down. He could sense sadness in Catherine at this minute; yet excitement also.

Well, he had been patient long enough. NOW - he wanted to know exactly WHAT was going on! A look of firm resolve swept over his face as he stepped back into the living room.

"Catherine, I would like to talk...."

A grumbling snarl filled the room. The empty room containing no one but him. Vincent stood at the doorway, hands on his hips, head down. Oh, wasn't this just perfect? His wife had deserted him – AGAIN!

A gust of cool air told Devin he was not alone in this bathroom any longer. Wiping the soap from his eyes, he peeked out of the shower. "D.J, are you out of that dumb playpen again!"

"Nope, just little old me. Hi babes...."

Opening the medicine cabinet, Allegra stared into it for a moment. "Hey, where did all the band-aids disappear to?"

He stepped from the shower, rubbing his matted hair vigorously with a towel. "Ask our wonderful son."

"Our WONDERFUL son is chewing on a block, fast asleep. I'm asking you." She slammed the cabinet shut. "All I want is ONE lousy band-aid!"

"Awww, poor baby, you got a boo-boo?"

"Devin - boo-boo this!" Allegra gestured at her husband quite emphatically... leaving no doubt at all as to her meaning.

Briskly drying his back, he leered at her. "Want to help?"

"I don't help STRANGERS!" The bathroom door slammed shut behind her.

Devin winced. Okay... she was pissed off at him. Shrugging, he continued drying himself, then reached for his clothes. Oh, 'Llegs just THOUGHT she was pissed off NOW. Wait until he got dressed and left again without explanation. Then, she'd REALLY be happy: Oh, brother!

Catherine and Devin walked towards Father's chamber looking like prisoners ready for the guillotine. He shot her a knowing look.

"We gotta go through with this?"

"Oh shut up, I'm not enjoying this either, you know." She patted the briefcase fondly. "But, this should satisfy MOST of his questions, anyway."

He snorted rudely. "Ha! You WISH!"

Mary turned from the medical supplies as Jacob stomped into the hospital chamber. "Oh! I wasn't expecting you. I'm just finishing with these new supplies Peter sent down. Father, are you all right?"

The man looked positively sinister. "I am far from all right, thank you very much!" Reaching into a drawer, Jacob Wells pulled out a packet of aspirin and ripped it open.

Edging closer cautiously, Mary's loving concern reflected in her voice. "What has upset you so?"

Slamming the drawer shut, he turned to her, an ominous look in his eyes. "You don't know? I thought, as is usual around HERE, I was the last person to be informed of this.... this..... LUNACY!" He threw his hands in the air with an irritated growl. "THIS is not to be tolerated! I will not allow this!"

Finally calming her friend into coherent speech, Mary listened without interrupting. Jacob's voice was harsh, almost disbelieving; he spoke grimly of the visit he had just had with his oldest son - and Devin's partner in recklessness - the usually sensible Catherine.

Holding her carefully by one arm, Devin helped Catherine towards her chamber. "I thought you knew better than to kick rocks, woman."

Limping and mumbling to herself, she glared over at him. "It was either the rocks or that spiteful old fossil! GAAAH!"

"Hey, you knew what to expect. Did you think the old man was gonna say YES without an argument? That's TOO funny!" Devin grinned at her.

"NO, I didn't expect him to say yes. I DID expect him not to stomp off and rudely leave us STANDING there like he did, with nothing settled!" She turned, savagely aiming her foot at another undeserving rock. "The old GOAT!"

Leaving the children with Samantha, Vincent started for his chamber at a flat out run. Something had happened to his wife; she had argued with someone in such a way, it caused a profound shift in the bond that connected him to her. Halfway home, a cruel stabbing pain shot through his foot to the knee, causing him to flinch.

Still rubbing the affected knee, Vincent hobbled into the chamber, calling out. "Catherine?"

"I'm in here." Her voice came from behind the partially shut bedroom door. She sat on the bed, her foot in a pan of epsom salt, as he lowered himself next to her.

"What has happened?"

"I hurt my foot."

"How? Did a rock fall on it?" He captured the injured foot into his lap, scowling at the already purple toes. Rubbing them tenderly until Catherine lay her head on his shoulder, Vincent nuzzled his face into her hair, breathing in her wonderful scent. "Better?"

"Hmmm, lots. Thank you." Shifting, she lay back, resting her foot on three pillows. "Ahhh, God that hurts!"

"You haven't told me how this happened, Catherine." Vincent waited expectantly, but she didn't answer him right away. And when she DID reply, he didn't LIKE the answer.

"No.... I DIDN'T tell you, did I?"

Lunging from the bed, Vincent closed their bedroom door and turned to confront her. "This has gone far enough!"

Standing at the foot of the bed, his voice was soft - TOO soft. "I have never tried to confine you, Catherine, or interfere with your life Above. But, these.... secrets you have lately... the way you have been attempting to conceal things from me, is not to be tolerated!"

Smoothing the bedcovers deliberately, Catherine seemed flustered; her appearance that of a young child caught in a falsehood by an angry parent.

"I didn't mean to hurt you or conceal things from you. I've never lied to you, Vincent, at least not about things of importance." Catherine lifted her small chin defiantly. "Well, I haven't!"

"No, you have not lied of... important matters." One enormous hand closed over her shoulder as the other held her chin; tipping her head back.

Grass green eyes flitted to blue ones, then away again defensively. "So, don't ask me what I promised not to speak of... what I can't tell you - yet? Just trust me."

"I always trust you, Catherine, it's not a matter of trust!" The words were difficult for Vincent, even now. "I just feel left out... jealous.... when you do not share your excitement and joy with... me."

Head down, Vincent struggled to find the exact words. "I... I can... feel such happiness emanating from you, Catherine, especially these last weeks. Yet, you say nothing of that... joy... **to me.**"

Gripping her hand almost too tightly, Vincent put his head back, closing his eyes. "Perhaps I haven't the right - to ask. For so many years I was.... unable to share **anything** with you. My fear would not allow it."

A note of despair crept into his voice. "I dared not open my heart to you for such a long time, Catherine. A time of great emptiness... for... both of us. And now, I would share everything with you; even thoughts that perhaps, I have no right to know...."

Capturing his dear face into her palms, she shook her head at him. "Oh Vincent, don't talk like that, please?"

As she spoke, Catherine began to drop loving, wet kisses on his neck; feeling the pulse leap in the corded muscles as her tongue caressed his flesh. "I just have a... surprise for you, that's all. One I can't tell you of yet because I made... a... promise. Vincent, I love you and would never do anything to bring pain or hurt to you. Do you understand? **I love you.**"

A soft sigh and a shake of his head told her Vincent felt secure; trusting her words. Not more informed, but contented - for the moment at least.

"Forgive me Catherine? I... I should never have.... asked. It was wrong of me." Tilting his head at her in the charming, shy way he had, Vincent drew her towards his chest. Placing his lips gently against her throat, he returned her kisses slowly. "I... am... sorry, my love."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, husband." Trying to lighten the tenseness in his voice, Catherine hugged him fiercely. "You are SUPPOSED to be jealous. That's a man's job, you know."

A sharp snort erupted from him. "Oh? If that is the case, it is gratifying to know that I am... doing a... man's... job correctly."

He began nibbling on her neck forcefully; the feel of his sharp fangs pressed so firmly against her throat caused Catherine to tremble with anticipation as she lay one hand at the back of his neck, attempting to pull him nearer as she felt herself being lowered back to the pillows.

Vincent's eyes were shaded to a smoky blue, almost purple. He traced the outline of one nipple with a fingernail; loving the way she gasped, arching her back to meet his touch. A demanding surge of hunger pulsed through his body as he began opening her blouse.

When she began returning the contact; caressing the solidly rigid flesh between his thighs with delicate feather light touches, a grunt of lethal sexuality escaped him as his head drifted back.

Hips moving in ever broadening circles, Vincent's body surged upwards to meet her probing fingers. Suddenly hurling himself from the bed with a tense snarl, he began stripping off his clothing - sobbing with impatience.

Eyes cloudy with passion held Catherine's as Vincent stood before her in all his splendor - fully aroused, openly sensual and knowing what he craved most in this world. "As a man, there is another thing I will.... have."

Sliding onto the bed to lay half on top of her, Vincent drew his tongue slowly over his lips in an unconscious gesture of nervous excitement. His hands began roaming possessively over her - at last sliding down to claim what belonged only to him with a groan of quiet pleasure. "A thing only you can... give me..."

The next weeks passed all too slowly for Catherine and POOR Devin. Life with their... mates was no picnic right now. Allegra and Vincent noticed, of course, that Father only spoke to Devin and Catherine as necessary or when they spoke first.

Vincent had to fight off a choking laugh when Allegra had looked from Father to Devin, then over to him at supper one evening. "Hey Vin, guess what? I KNOW what the secret IS! They must have told Father we're all moving to Hawaii and we ain't taking him!"

Holding a small boy by the back of the collar, Peter Alcott strode through the tunnel corridors to stand in the doorway of his old friend's chamber.

"Jacob, are you in here?"

A graying head, with glasses perched haphazardly on the end of the nose, peered out around a bookcase. "Yes? Oh, Peter, it's good..."

His craggy-faced, testy friend brushed aside the greeting. Holding out his diminutive companion by the scruff of the neck, Peter waved the boy towards Father like a flag. "Am I correct in my assumption that HE is one of YOURS?"

"Yes, that is Philip. Why, has he done something he should not have?"

Glowing at the boy balefully, Peter urged him towards his adopted parent. "Go on, tell him what you did or I will."

With a small nod, the boy SLOWLY came down the stairs to stand in front of Father, his arms at his sides as he looked up appealingly.

"Lo Father."

For some unknown reason, Jacob Wells was nearly overwhelmed by the need to laugh aloud, but he proved to have great restraint. "Philip, you have something to say to me?"

"Yeah, I guess so." The boy looked back over his shoulder to Peter, then sighed one more time. "It wasn't my fault, though. It was Doctor Peter's fault!"

Jacob looked at Peter, struggling not to smile. "Peter, what have you to say - anything?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I will say something."

Jacob waited. "Yes? Well, man - spit it out!" The words nearly choked him as Father didn't quite meet his friend's - none too friendly at the moment - glare.

Peter stood in front of the boy with one hand on his shoulder, trying very hard to look fierce and failing quite miserably.

"This... this... young MAN.... bopped me in the noggin with a baseball! And... it HURT!" He rubbed his balding pate ruefully. "It still hurts!"

Now, Father looked truly surprised. This child was not one of his 'problem' children and generally was always well behaved. At least around adults.

"Philip, you struck Doctor Peter? I can hardly believe you guilty of such an act of out and out mayhem."

Shoving his hands deep into the patched pockets of his jeans, the boy told the facts - as he saw them - to Father. "Well, see.... it was like this. Me and Jerry was ..." He stopped as the man winced visibly, then began over again.

"'cuse me. Jerry and I WERE playing ball. Doctor Peter came around the corner just as I was gonna throw the ball. He bet-bet me a quarter, he could catch ANYTHING I threw."

Philip hunched his shoulders in a matter of fact manner. "Well, I didn't HAVE a whole quarter, but didn't want Jerry calling me a chicken... so... so... I threw it!"

Settling into a chair, Peter frowned and tried remembering its EXACT words, but couldn't. "Did I say that? I made a wager with you?"

Peter pursed his lips, thinking for a moment, then met Jacob's eyes grudgingly. "Hmmm, well I lost then. Sorry, Philip, my fault, not yours. Accept my apology, will you?" Jiggling into his pants pocket, the physician pulled out a shiny coin and handed it to the child with a smile.

Philip accepted the apology very gracefully for one so young. He spun on his heel to Father. "See, I told YA! Can I go now?"

"Yes, run along. And Philip, do not play ball in the corridors; you and the others have been told that before. See what can happen?"

"Yeah, people LIE about you!" The child ran from the room, holding his loot tightly.

Wiping his eyes, Peter shook his head. "Ah me! I guess the memory IS the first thing to go..."

Sitting opposite his associate in medicine, Jacob scowled at him from beneath bushy eyebrows. "I am quite ashamed of you, Peter." He struggled to hold his voice steady, but it was useless. Laughing louder than he should have, Father offered the man a cup of tea. "That was a wretchedly devious way to avoid the paying of a wager, wasn't it? I never knew before that you were a... a... welcher!"

Accepting the tea, Peter began to object, but he detected a note of sadness in his friend's voice even as Jacob appeared to be laughing freely.

Peter Alcott had known Jacob Wells for a very long time and very well indeed. Not being easy to fool, Peter looked at the man silently for a moment, then leaned forward on the desk.

"What is it? Jacob, what's wrong?"

"Wrong? Why, nothing is... wrong." Randomly turning the pages of a book of poetry, Jacob didn't look up until Peter nudged him on the arm with a teaspoon. "Don't try and hand ME that NOTHING IS WRONG crap! I know you too well, all too well, old friend. Now - tell me."

"..... and that is the whole story, more or less. You see now what I have to deal with!" Jacob looked at Peter for reassurance, but that's NOT what he got!

Peter's cup rattled, nearly breaking as he clunked it to the saucer. "I'll be a son of a" Running one hand through his hair, he fought to stay calm. What Peter wanted to do was knock his asinine friend to the ground and THROTTLE him into a finely powdered PULP!

"Jacob, you're wrong and I think, deep down, you know you're wrong - dammit!"

Angry almost beyond words, Father stared at the man as Peter picked up his teacup calmly. Jacob's voice was hoarse with anger.

"I am NOT wrong in this matter. How can you say that - you don't have all the facts!"

Peter gripped the side of his chair, trying to speak in a normal tone; it was difficult.

"Oh and you DO have all the facts?"

"All I need be aware of - yes, I do" Father's voice was rigid with fury. "I can understand Devin's part in this; him I would EXPECT this of."

His hand slammed against the desk. "But, Catherine? Catherine I do NOT understand and shall not forgive easily for her part in all this... this..."

Peter took a swig of tea. "It's called life, Jacob. LIFE!" The cup rattled again. "It's called HER life and VINCENT'S. Catherine loves your son more than ... perhaps even YOU know. She wants only to give him a life filled with every joy, every happiness, he thought never to BE his! They won't settle for YOUR limits, Jacob; they'll set their own, as they should."

Peter leaned forward as a note of desperation crept into his voice. He knew he had to reach his friend now, before it was too late and the damage was irreparable. "Mother of God, man, will you listen to me? HEAR what I'm telling you, please? Are you such a fool that you've learned NOTHING from the past? Or do you want them to end up hating you? You MUST want that, to be ASSUMING they don't have any choices but those YOU make for them!"

Peter got to his feet and put his cup on the desk, shaking his head in frustration. "They must be free to choose where they WANT to live and HOW they want to live, Jacob. Don't force your sons to choose between you and this world or their wives and the world Above. If you do that, you'll lose and you'll lose a hell of a lot. You'll lose - **everything.**"

Father turned his back on Peter, towards the second level of his chamber. "I have work that needs to be done. Don't let me keep you, Peter."

After staring at his friend's back for a long time, Peter Alcott slumped in the chair, defeated. "Fine. Okay, I'm going. You do what you want - don't let anyone try and help you, God forbid." He got to his feet slowly.

At the steps, Peter turned - trying one more time to reach this uncompromising and very foolish man he loved, as he would love a brother. "It took me a long time to learn something from life, friend. If you don't bend a bit when it's necessary, you break. Life WILL go on, with or without YOUR permission. You can march with it or lose the beat completely; that's

up to you. But, know this - if you lose the beat, life will march OVER YOU, my old friend and it WILL hurt!"

Holding his wife's hand, Vincent walked along next to her a bit puzzled. He had no idea where they were going and Catherine wouldn't tell him. He was to be given a surprise was all she would say. A surprise he could not HOLD in his hands. Glancing over, Vincent caught his wife's eye.

"Is it bigger than a breadbox?"

Laughing, she nodded her head. "Uh huh. You're a pest, you know that?" Catherine hugged him hard, then pulled him forward again. "Come on!"

"Yes, yes, I am coming. Is this surprise going to make me smile or faint when I learn what its cost you..... I mean... us, Catherine?"

Not answering THAT question, Catherine marched along, biting the inside of her lower lip when she spotted Devin and Allegra headed towards them. Allegra greeted them with a wave and grin.

"Hi guys. Where are you two going?"

Vincent was no help. "I do not know, Legra. Catherine has not told me where exactly we are going. Has Devin told you where he is taking YOU?"

"The man's as silent as a grave. And if somebody doesn't tell me SOMETHING SOON, they're gonna be IN a grave - I can't stand this."

Allegra tugged on Devin's arm. Her voice was beyond pitiful as she turned into a five year old; jumping up and down as a natural, healthy curiosity nearly dealt her a death blow. She whined, but got no sympathy from her QUIET husband, merely a look of hysteria as she LOST IT. "Deviinnnn, tell m... m... me!"

Taking a hardly ever traveled path, Catherine felt Vincent pull back as she turned down the uneven corridor.

"Catherine, no, not that way. There is nothing down there except leaking pipes and....."

Allegra pushed by him, giving him a look of exasperation. "Quiet, you! I'll go where the hell THEY say, just wanna get there today. Move out of my way, bulky butt!"

Not dignifying that remark with a response, Vincent turned and spoke VERY loudly to Devin. "Legra DOES know about the rats....."

A few yards down the corridor, the three walking together heard a scream of horror float back to them. "Rats? WHAT RATS! Gaahh, RATS!"

Allegra's feet left the dusty floor, as she flung herself bodily at Devin. Her lower lip quivered slightly as she looked into his eyes, wrinkling her tiny nose in disgust.

"Rats?"

Devin winked at her. "Yeah, rats. those furry beasties. The critters with teeth, that bite..... "

Allegra curled her lip and sneered at Vincent. "I won't say it!"

Stumbling along with only one lantern between them, Vincent was thankful when Catherine spotted a chalk mark on the tunnel wall and let out a war whoop. "Hiiyaah, we're here! Okay, Devin, like we planned it – right?"

"You got it, Sis." He held Allegra's arm, pulling her back against his chest. Dropping a kiss on her face, he grinned at her. "Wait a second, babes..."

Sputtering and waving his long arms as cobweb after cobweb said hello to his mouth, Vincent followed his wife into a damp, gloomy cellar.

"What is this place, Catherine? It has a quite distinct aroma of neglect."

"Lots of old cellars smell like this and you know it. You're just being a pain." She faced him, hands on her hips. "You want your surprise or don't you?"

Laughing blue eyes crinkled as he looked down into her shining face. "As I said, my love, this is truly a magnificent cellar."

Shooting him a look of forbearance, she handed the lantern to her husband. "Here, give this to Dev, will you? They'll need it, too."

"As you wish..." Turning too quickly, Vincent was thumped in the head by an old, rusted, overhanging pipe. A growl of pain filled the cellar as he nearly threw the lantern to his brother. "Here, perhaps this will save YOUR head!"

Scowling and holding one hand to his head, Vincent peered into the murkiness before him.

"Catherine?"

"Right over here at the stairway to the right."

Noticing the double set of stairs, he glanced at them as he joined Catherine. "Where does that lead?"

"Don't be concerned..." She started up the creaking, wooden steps carefully.

His words were whispered - as though speaking only to himself. "That WAS a very polite way of telling me to mind my business."

Sensing the grin she could not see, feeling her husband's eyes drilling a small hole into her spinal column, Catherine's small shoulders twitched as she laughed quietly. "I thought so."

It wasn't until she stopped suddenly that Vincent realized exactly HOW close he had been to her. His nose went halfway up her shapely rear-end as she clouted him right on THAT nose; her tone displeased.

"You just stop THAT and try to behave yourself! This isn't the time or the place to be doing stuff like... that!"

"Believe me, it was an accident, Catherine."

"Yeah, right. How was it an accident?"

The silence was deafening for a moment; then a distinct; resounding chuckle filled the air. "I WAS attempting to bite you and miscalculated."

Reaching out to stroke what she HOPED was his head, Catherine gave him his orders. "Close your eyes now and no matter WHAT I do, don't open them until I TELL you to, all right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Nearly losing his balance as she tugged on his vest, he moved forward slowly as he heard a rasping sound. "Was that a key?"

"Let me rephrase what I said a moment ago. Shut your eyes and your...."

"Do not finish that sentence! Even with my eyes closed, I KNOW where you ARE, Catherine."

Moving one booted toe forward cautiously, Vincent found himself on what he PRAYED was level ground. He grunted a sigh of thanksgiving. "Ah, at last! Now may I open..."

"Not yet."

"Then when?" A small snarl of impatience changed to a loud, startled yelp as his ear was pinched - quite viciously too! "When I TELL YOU!"

He heard the click of a switch, then felt Catherine's arms flung about his neck. "You may open those lovely eyes."

Blinking under the harsh overhead light, Vincent tried to look in all directions at the same time; even HE couldn't do it, though. He was standing almost in the center of a small room. Old wooden shelves ran along one wall, the other was bare; covered only with chipped, peeling paint of a most disagreeable shade of orange.

Taking Vincent by the hand, Catherine pulled him towards the only other door in the room. "This is our pantry." She opened the swinging door slowly. "And this is our kitchen..."

Practically lifting her from the ground when he pulled her back to face him, Catherine turned to find her husband staring at her as though stunned. Face flushed, his eyes searching hers frantically as he unconsciously tightened the grip on her arms.

"Did you just say OUR..."

"Yes. It's ours, my love. Our new home." Tears ran down her face as Catherine threw herself into his arms. "Merry Christmas and happy rest of your life, my beautiful husband!"

On the opposing side of this wonderful old duplex, Devin had just received almost the same reaction Catherine had. With one exception. Just as he guided Allegra to the curving oak steps that would lead her to the second landing, she plunked herself down on the first step and began to cry.

Devin gulped; were these tears of joy or was she so mad, she couldn't talk? "Baby? 'Llegs?" Reaching around her slim shoulders, Devin held her close to his chest until she was only hiccupping and the tears had stopped.

Allegra wasn't the type that was overcome by things, be it life or anything else. Being a doctor and having a background she had survived, she was a tough little cookie ninety-nine per cent of the time. That other one per cent now claimed its day in the sun. In a voice Devin didn't recognize, Allegra began asking her thousand questions, as she tried to melt into his body.

"This is ours? We can... afford something like... this! When did you do this? How did you find it? All THIS is ours, it belongs to US?"

He grinned at her so hard, he thought his face would break. "Hey woman, one question at a time here! We got a lifetime to talk it over, okay? Right now, let's just LOOK at it!" Tugging her to her feet, Devin began climbing again until he stood beside her, on the landing.

He gestured to the right and then the left down a walnut stained, beautifully paneled hallway. "Okay, now - let's see if I got this right. There's four big bedrooms and one small one over there. And two full bathrooms and a linen closet over there and..... "

Allegra peeked into each room as Devin flicked on the lights. She glanced to the right, spotting a door. "Where does that lead to?"

Stealing a look at his watch, he tried to be nonchalant. "Don't know, never noticed it when the guy showed me the house. Maybe it's just an attic; let's find out."

With a slight nod of agreement, Allegra turned the crystal doorknob. "Well, if it is the attic, I don't even care if there's bats in it; they'll just have to share!"

On the other side of this fine old house, Catherine had just shown the same room setup to her husband. He still looked a bit shaky around the edges as his eyes slowly took in each new room. He also noticed the door she appeared to be surprised to see.

Vincent led her up the steps slowly, hoping there were no bats up here. He shuddered visibly; ugly, mean, little things... bats. They had no saving grace and gripping - I love long hair - tenacious claws. Ugh.

Shrieking, Allegra skidded down the long empty room in her socks; like a child turned loose in a playground, as Devin laughed at her with love in his voice. "You're gonna break something you'll NEED later, woman. Take it easy!"

Calling back over her shoulder, Allegra waved at him. "This is fun, come on. OH!"

With a cry of surprise, she rubbed the end of her elbow and found herself on the floor across a very large chest. A man's chest. She looked up again in disbelief as she struggled to get up - only to fall back down with a grunt as her eyes locked into smirking blue ones. She gave him a vicious poke on the arm.

"VINCENT!

"Legra, that hurt! Let me up, will you?" Catherine and Devin held on to each other, laughing until they cried. "Well, Cathy, I think we GOT 'EM, huh?" Devin beamed at her, then winked, like the scoundrel he was.

Tugging him around to face her, Catherine kissed Devin quickly. Allegra just watched; her eyes going from the couple in the lip lock, to her pal on the floor next to her. Vincent said nothing, but he began to blink rapidly as his lower lip curled into a pout.

Catherine held Devin's face in her hands, shaking him gently as she smiled at him

"Sometimes, you're a real pain in the butt, but if anyone asked who I'd want for a brother, I'd have to say YOU. We did it, Devin! We surprised both of them and I could never have done it, without you. I LOVE YA!"

As Allegra giggled and nudged Vincent teasingly, he began to snarl jealously as *his* Catherine kissed his big brother on the lips again! Once was NOT sufficient?

Hearing the four approach from a long way down the corridor, Jacob didn't look up as they entered his chamber. Devin and Catherine had told Allegra and Vincent what their GREETING would most likely BE. They were prepared to do battle. Hell, they were always battling for something around here, weren't they?

Feeling Vincent's eyes on him, Father finally looked up. "Well, if you're coming in - then do it."

"Father..... "

Jacob shook his head. "I don't want to speak of it, Vincent. I am out of patience with all of you." Jacob got to his feet slowly, wincing as his hip began its usual dull, nightly throbbing.

"I have no doubt that both of you have been told by your... spouses, how deeply disappointed I am in them in this matter?"

His gray eyes swept over Devin and Catherine to fasten on Allegra first, then his younger son. "Well, I AM displeased and I feel that this move Above is a foolhardy one, at best!"

Devin finally had to say something, even if the old man handed him his ass for it. "You haven't even seen the house yet, Father! Don't you think it would only be fair to suspend a final judgement on us until you DO see it? We'll take you now, if you're up to the walk."

Holding out his arm to his parent, Devin waited quietly for Father to react either one way or the other to what he had just said. Allegra had her fingers crossed behind her back, as Catherine did. His face still flushed with happiness and excitement, Vincent gave his father a serene look of encouragement.

Confronting four sets of determined eyes, Jacob looked at them without speaking, then closed his own eyes for a moment, shaking his head in frustration.

Devin winced as a grip of steel closed over his arm. "Come on then. I shall see for myself this great... HOUSE that will be my death!"

Taking the other arm, Allegra nudged against the man wickedly. "Watch out for the rats, they're REAAAL mothers!"

When Peter Alcott grabbed him by the shoulder, Pascal was scared half out of his wits.

"Yoww! Oh, Peter, it's only you; what a jolt you gave me. I didn't hear you come into the pipe chamber."

"Sorry, Pascal. I'm looking for Jacob. He doesn't seem to be around and it IS late."

"Oh, there's great news! Vincent told me a while ago. They have a house...."

"Oh, I know all ABOUT the house! But, what's that got to do with Jacob being missing?"

Not being his endearing old self at the moment, Peter's voice was agitated, almost impatient.

Pascal hurried to explain. "Things are good, things are fine." He blushed a bright red. "I must be spending too much time with Mouse - I'm starting to talk like him!"

Relaxing a bit, Peter agreed. "You are, a little. I'm sorry I was so abrupt, Pascal. But Jacob...."

"I know. Mouse overheard you and Father the other day; it scared him."

Answering a message, Pascal wasn't listening for a minute, then turned back to the doctor.

"What did you say?"

"When you spoke with Vincent, did he seem upset or... anything?"

"I think..." The pipemaster's mouth curled into a wide smile. "The only times I've seen Vincent that happy was the day he was married and the day the twins were born."

"Well, that's a relief, anyway. Thank you, Pascal. I'll see you later."

Returning to Jacob's chamber, Peter sat behind the desk for a long time; listening to the pipes for a message of the DEMISE of the four musketeers.

Looking with approval at the splendid built-in bookcases, Father stomped around the den of his younger son's new home; his eyes slowly going over the room. He liked the fireplace, it wasn't one of those modern electric things, it was a REAL fireplace.

Moving to stand at the dirt spattered windows, Jacob nodded his head approvingly. Good - covered with heavy metal, burglar proof bars as windows MUST be, in THIS city. He looked across the street at the other brick homes in this surprisingly quiet area, then turned to Vincent.

"Of course, you WILL install an alarm system?"

"Catherine has had a very elaborate and expensive system installed already, Father. With Devin's approval, it is now in place in both homes. He wants nothing to happen to his wife, as Catherine wants nothing to happen to... me."

"But, if someone DOES get in, what WILL you do? How will you manage the impossible situation of someone seeing you, Vincent?" Father sank to the first step of the curved stairs; a forlorn look of pain and concern on his face.

"Vincent, I am not trying to hurt you, please understand that. I am struggling desperately to keep you from harm. So many things could happen to you, up here."

"As many things could also happen, going to the apartment Above, Father. There is more safety here - for me - than climbing the side of a building, wouldn't you agree?"

The man raised piercing eyes to his son's gentle ones. "I didn't want you up THERE in the first place!"

"Yes, I know." Vincent said that, then nothing else.

Jacob got to his feet as Catherine, Allegra and Devin stood next to Vincent, as though to protect him. Father looked them over.... his two sons, so tall, so sure of - EVERYTHING; it must be grand, to be so sure of life.

A small smile was hidden by one hand tugging at his beard as Jacob Wells exchanged looks with his two 'daughters'. Catherine and Allegra... now THERE was a duo to truly boggle the mind and chill the blood of the strongest man.

Jacob pitied the poor misguided fool that broke into THIS home. Ha. If the men didn't destroy him, the women surely would! And if an intruder was missed by all four of the new tenants and managed to actually get inside the house, that would be the burglar's problem. His young but extremely volatile, grandchildren could make the strongest of men RUN FOR THEIR LIVES.

The four mortgage holders looked at Father, then at each other. Was that a smile on his face? Naah, couldn't be. They looked closer - it WAS a smile. A small one, but still a legitimate, genuine smile! All right, they wouldn't have to put plan number two into effect, after all.

Allegra held out her hand and Devin dropped a small brown vial into it as he whispered in her ear. "I still say we would have been better off feeding him happy pills for a few months!"

Keeping her face composed only by sheer will, Allegra slid one arm through Devin's.

"Watch, you'll see happy; Vincent's going to tell him the rest of the news as we leave."

As they walked towards their home Below, Vincent helped his father over the rough tunnel floor, one hand holding his elbow, as Catherine walked behind them with Devin and Allegra.

They listened, then grinned at each other as Vincent broke the remainder of the news to daddy dear! "And naturally, Father, you will pick the color and decor of your own room without interference..."

"My... own room?"

"Well, of course. When you stay Above, with us and your three grandchildren on weekends, you must have a room of your own to sleep in."

Jacob stopped dead still in the corridor. "Which room?"

"Well, this decision is yours, Father. Every effort shall be made to see to your comfort, isn't that right? He looked back at the others, crossing his eyes on purpose as he stuck out his tongue at them!

Catherine looked at her husband, unable to speak as she nearly peed her pants. Allegra stuffed the end of her shirt halfway down her throat, as she leaned on the tunnel wall, hysterical. Devin? Oh, he was a BIG help, he was. He guilelessly got as close to his baby brother as he could, without Father catching on and kissed Vincent. HARD.

With a horrified expression of being CONTAMINATED, Vincent rubbed his mouth furiously against his cloak, then also rubbed off his tongue - gagging slightly at the vile taste of the suede material.

With watery eyes, Vincent shot Devin a look of pure, unadulterated disgust, as his stomach flip-flopped nauseatingly.

Nodding with seemingly all encompassing, wide-eyed attention as Father half turned to ask a question, Vincent shifted his eyes a bit, giving his brother a final look over one shoulder that spoke volumes.

A look that said Devin had better make out a will and quite soon, for eventually Father WOULD be home and unable to witness the death knell of his oldest child.

Allegra wiped her eyes with exaggerated sadness as she sniffled on Catherine's shoulder, waving BYE BYE to her husband. Why? Because Devin had kissed Vincent as only Catherine was ALLOWED to kiss Vincent; full on his mouth. Oh yes, Devin was A DEAD MAN.

Staring at the back end of the stuck sofa bed that was supposed to be for his den, Devin cursed the thing distinctly, then gave it a swift kick in the slats. "Come on, you miserable piece of fibrous crud - MOVE!"

He went back to the bottom step and looked up to see Mouse's head peek up behind the couch. "Didn't move, huh? What now?"

"NOW? NOW I freelance as a moron... we'll SHARE THE MOMENT!"

Head down, he charged the couch as he scrambled up the stairs, bellowing at the top of his lungs. "MOVE, you motherless scrap of.... YAAAHHH!"

The couch moved. Hearing a crash, followed by Mouse's high-pitched squeaks of terror, then her husband's cries of murder, Allegra bent over the upstairs bannister. "Stop horsing around, you guys, before somebody gets hurt!"

"Oh, sure - NOW you tell us that! I AM hurt, woman!"

Climbing over the stupid couch, Devin rubbed his injured knee.

"You'll live. What about Mouse?"

Devin looked up at her, blowing the hair from his eyes. "Mouse who? You mean that squashed little guy laying trapped under the sofa bed?"

Passing him on the stairs, she punched him in the ribs. "Cretin."

He swatted her on the behind as she tried to duck. "Harpy!"

Reaching the pantry, Allegra found Vincent helping their poor friend out from under the sofa. "Oh poor Mouse. I'm sorry that happened."

Nodding, he rubbed the spot where his head had greeted the floor. "Sorry too. Should have done it my way...." He shook his head, stepping out of the path of danger as Vincent jumped over the sofa and stood behind it, sneering as only he COULD sneer.

He didn't notice Allegra trying to pull it as he began shoving one tensed shoulder into it. With a quiet thud, it lay in the pantry. It also lay on Allegra.

A muffled voice brought his attention to the couch as an arm waved at him frantically.

"Vincent, you simple-minded OX, I'm UNDER HERE!"

"I know."

Getting on his hands and knees, he saw she was more mad than hurt. He grinned that infamous grin at her and got back up!

Allegra screamed at him. "ARE you leaving me HERE?"

"Oh, I must, Legra. Simple-minded oxen simply cannot be trusted...."

Allegra listened for a moment, but heard nothing but her own heartbeat. "Vincent, you still there? Vin?" No answer.

Now, she was pissed off. "Get your ASS back here, you tunnel TWIT! I'll tell CATHERINE on you!"

Lifting the couch, ignoring the tongue lolling out of her mouth as though dead, Vincent helped Allegra to her feet, then just managed to duck the tiny foot aimed quite accurately at his groin area.

"Thanks a big, fat LOT, screwloose!"

Giving him a final swack on the head with a couch cushion, Allegra turned to yell for Catherine anyway; she'd GET him!

"Cathy! Vincent made me break my... boob!"

Giggling, Allegra leaned on Vincent as her husband's voice wafted down from ABOVE - like the voice of some unseen omnipotent GOD.

"Thanks, Vin; now the woman'll walk lopsided the rest of her life and you've RUINED my favorite PILLOW!"

Vincent leaned back on the dining room wall, laughing, almost dumping Allegra on the floor, as Catherine's voice joined his brother's.

"Vincent, are you being bad down there? For HEAVEN'S sakes, put that woman DOWN, you don't know WHERE she's been!"

Wiping the sweat from his face, Vincent reached gratefully for the large glass of lemonade Catherine held out to him. "Ah, my love, thank you; you have saved my LIFE!"

Throwing him a look as she rubbed her still sore booby, Allegra sneered at him. "Too bad she was too LATE to save your SANITY!"

Once in a great while, even with this slightly verbose lady, Vincent DID manage to get in the final word. But, ONLY once in a while. "Quiet, you insignificant, tiny TYRANT."

"Did you hear that!" Allegra threw a piece of ice at him, managing to hit Devin with it instead.

Thinking he was gone, Allegra mumbled, then cursed her 'little bro' quite snidely under her breath as she rested her head on the couch. Nearly jumping out of her jeans in fright, she screamed as a slightly damp, very fuzzy nose snorted in her left ear.

"I said - QUIET!"

In the kitchen, Catherine handed the sandwiches to Devin with a shake of her head. "Those two, I don't know...."

Devin took the plate and gave her a leering GRIN. "Yes, isn't it just dreadful what WE adults have to put UP with from the CHILDREN?"

A strong, muscled arm grabbed him around the neck, nearly choking the life from him as he went bug-eyed. "This CHILD is hungry - FEED ME!"

A strangled Devin held out the plate. "Take whatever you want, oh great and all knowing LORD of the tunnelworld. Let me live, I pray thee!"

Shifting three sandwiches onto a paper plate, Vincent released his deathgrip on Devin. "As you wish, vassal."

Kissing his wife, Vincent returned to the dining room, side stepping with alacrity Allegra's grubby hands grabbing for HIS sandwiches.

Father opened the pantry door as though it would reach out and bite him. "Hello in there?" He edged in a bit further. "Can anyone hear me?"

"I do!" A dark curly head zipped around the door, startling the hell out of the man. "Allegra, don't DO that!"

"Didn't DO a thing - yet. Hi, Pops,"

"And discontinue that dreadful nickname, I am NOT anyone's.... POP."

He looked around the kitchen, then back to his foster daughter. "Well? Where HIDE the rest of this happy horde, may I ask?"

Father threw her a look of displeasure as she gulped a large glass of water, then wiped her mouth with the tail of her shirt.

"Them? Oh, they're having an orgy in the front bedroom. I just came down for a glass of water. All that moaning and groaning can make ya thirsty, ya know?"

Leveling an expression of DISFAVOR on her, Father started up the steps, with Allegra walking behind him, muttering to herself.

He threw the observation over his shoulder without turning around. "That IS a bad habit, my dear - talking to oneself. You must try to overcome it...."

As she copied his tone under her breath and mouthed his words, the man turned quickly and CAUGHT HER this time! "HA, I have you now. I KNEW I'd catch you doing THAT someday!"

Sinking to her knees, her lower lip quivered in a very dramatic way. "Oh, spare me, I beg of you!" Flashing him an impish grin, she wiped the dirt from her knees. "Okay, you caught me. What's my punishment?"

Allegra counted on her fingers as Father ignored her. "Let's see.... you've already yelled at me for about a ZILLION years, you've already told my SON he had a weird mother, you've already drugged me...."

"Allegra!" Father looked at her, horrified she would mention that distressing time at all.

She winked as she ran past him on the stairs. "Got ya!"

FINALLY alone with his wife for the first time since early morning, Vincent took a last look around the new bedroom, nodding his head appreciatively. "This will be a most delightful room, Catherine."

He pulled her against him. "As would any room that had you in it."

Leaning almost completely on her husband, Catherine fought off a yawn. "You're just saying that."

His lips softly nestled into her tousled hair. "It's only the truth. Come, it's late and you are tired."

"I passed tired about three hours ago; now, I'm flat out POOPED..."

"Succinct, if not delicately phrased, my love."

Throwing open the french doors to their balcony for a final breath of cool night air, Vincent leaned back against the brick wall, content and at peace with his surroundings. Catherine stood just in front of him until he urged her back against his chest without turning her around. "All you have given me, Catherine - how can I thank you for all this?"

Sweeping one hand out to the large back yard, Vincent closed his eyes. "Never did I think to live in such a place, with such a woman...."

Pressing back against him, Catherine kissed both of his hands as he wrapped them around her shoulders; oblivious to the fact he was mirroring the way Kristopher Gentian had painted them years ago. Smiling, the lovers quietly turned for the door leading into the bedroom hand in hand. Catherine bumped her hip against him quite provocatively. "Merry Christmas, Vincent."

Two straight, powerful arms reached for her. Lifting Catherine off her feet, a shy, yet proud, golden skinned man lowered his mouth to hers. Vincent's words were soft; he felt euphoric, invincible, as a depth of feeling he could not express seized him. "And a happy rest of your life, my lovely Catherine."

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