

ONCE UPON A HOT ROOF

by Rhonda Collins

Diana roamed her loft restlessly. It was evening, and the hot August night sizzled. All her windows were open and she prayed for a hint of breeze, but it seemed the gods of the air had all left for cooler climes. The air conditioner in her building had given up the ghost with the first onset of the heat wave and had yet to be fixed.

Desperate for some relief, Diana had already stripped to jogging shorts and a thin T-shirt, but the material was plastered to her skin with sweat. She stared at her computer ruefully.

She had work to do, but feared a disk crash in the heat. Her computer was even more temperamental than she was, and she couldn't afford to replace that disk. After standing at the window for ten minutes watching the heat curl up from the pavement below, she collapsed, gasping, onto her couch--muttering imprecations upon the slow-moving Super, who never fixed anything if he could help it. "You'd think he'd at least fix something

that'd keep him cool!"

As she lay there, panting and sweating--feeling very wilted--she was a little dismayed to hear a tap on the celestory windows above her. "Damn! Of all nights for a visit. I'm hot enough, thanks!" She and Vincent had grown very close of late. Not quite as close as Diana would have liked, but they were very comfortable with one another. Enough so that Diana knew he'd come up to share her air conditioning as well as her company.

Diana trudged up the stairs, acutely aware of her bedraggled appearance. She wished there was somewhere to hide. But when she opened the door to the roof, she felt a little better: Vincent looked as miserable as she felt.

Vincent mopped at his forehead with the back of his arm. His hair curled in damp ringlets around his face, and he pushed at it impatiently. "It seems that you are as miserable as I."

Diana managed a weak smile. "Yeah. My A/C's out. I figured you'd find a nice lake somewhere down Below and be swimming."

He groaned. "Don't mention it. The Mirror Pool and Falls are crowded with children--and adults. It's not as hot down there as it is up here, but it is warmer than usual."

Neither of them spoke for a few moments as they both thought of splashing in that cool water. Diana thought she'd die for wanting it. When she glanced up, what struck her most forcefully was the fact that Vincent hadn't altered his clothes one bit. He was still layered from head to toe in the heavy clothing he usually

wore. No wonder he looks like he's gonna pass out! Damn the man's insecurities!

"I'm not quite as miserable as you are, Vincent. At least I'm not dressed for a goddamned snowstorm! For Heaven's sake, why don't you shed some of that baggage before you pass out?" She reached out impatiently and grabbed his cloak, pulling it off in one swift, smooth motion. She tossed it aside and reached for the laces of his tunic. She was genuinely concerned...he didn't look well at all.

Vincent backed away from her searching hands...until his back encountered the corner of the roof. He was trapped.

A reckless feeling surged through Diana. She grinned. This is fun, she thought. Maybe the heat's finally cooked my brain! She assessed the situation. Vincent was trapped in the corner with no place to go unless he ran over her...which she knew he wouldn't do. Her eye fell on the hose, which she'd used to clean off the roof awhile back. She grabbed it and aimed it at him.

"Unless you start taking off some of those clothes, you're gonna be very wet, mister! Start strippin'!"

Vincent's eyes widened in disbelief. He braced himself. "You wouldn't."

She nodded.

He grinned then, canines flashing. "I dare you!"

Like the Cheshire Cat, Diana's smile widened. She never could resist a dare, and he knew it. She sidled over, turned the water on, then blasted the water at Vincent with the

sprayer--catching him full in the face before he could duck--and soaking him.

Instantly, Diana found herself flat on the rooftop with Vincent on top of her wrestling for the hose. She managed to wriggle away, but lost the hose. This time, an extremely wet and obviously delighted semi-feline male stalked her across the rooftop, the hose spraying her as he came.

Diana sputtered and backed up, laughing through the water spraying in her face. She hadn't even dared to hope for such a reaction from Vincent. Diana ducked below the spray and sprang, catching Vincent unaware. He'd been so sure he had her trapped.

Once more, he lost the hose.

Diana managed to thoroughly soak him by the time he had her down once more. They were both laughing and panting for breath as Vincent reached across her and turned the water off. She tried to move, but Vincent's weight pinned her down.

He grinned down at her mischievously as she stuck out her tongue. "It seems your ploy was semi-successful."

"Only semi? Damn! I must be slipping." She raised her head to lick the water dripping off the end of his nose. "But you're right. You still have your clothes on. Besides..." she paused as he nuzzled under her chin.

"...um...besides...you have the advantage--there's not much to be hidden under a

wet T-shirt."

He raised his head slightly and peered down. "You're right. I do appear to have the advantage," he commented smugly.

She laughed again as he shook his head, raining water down on her. "Enough, already! Share and share alike?"

The laughter that rumbled through his chest delighted her. He reached for the ties of his tunic. "I suppose it would be the gentlemanly thing to do."

The End