

## MOUSE'S GARDEN

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A Season 3 Mouse Story.

Mouse stood in front of Father's desk and proudly deposited a handful of wadded up cash in front of him.

"What's this?" asked Father, looking first at the money then at Mouse.

Mouse glanced over at Vincent and rolled his eyes, as if to say *Father's been Below too long if he doesn't recognize money.*

"It's money, Father," he pointed out reasonably.

"I realize that, Mouse, but where did it come from?" Father asked suspiciously.

"Mouse earned it!" he stated emphatically. "Didn't find and take. Earned it, fair and square."

"I hope so... How did you earn it?"

"Gardening," came the simple answer.

Father breathed a sigh of relief and looked over at Vincent who just smiled and shrugged.

"You've been helping someone Above? Who is it? One of our Helpers?"

"Kind of like that," Mouse agreed, "but the garden is Below. Geoffrey asked if there was a way to grow stuff Below. He said Vincent said that there might be a way with special lights. Mouse asked Diana and she said that they were called *grow lights*. She had one that she used on a rose bush she found. She said she would give it to me. She brought it, some books and some seeds for herbs. Said that if I could grow something, I might as well grow something useful. William liked the herbs."

"But where did the money come from?" asked Vincent, as he leaned forward, taking an interest in the story.

"Was getting to that part," said Mouse in an exasperated tone. "Fred came down for Winterfest and went to help William in the kitchen. He asked William where he got the fresh herbs and William said Mouse grew them."

"Fred?" questioned Father, not recognizing the name. But it was all starting to make sense to Vincent.

"Fred Alberti. He owns a garden supply Above. He sells a lot of small plants for window boxes, indoor gardens and small yards," Vincent supplied.

“Vincent knows,” agreed Mouse. “Fred asked me if I could grow more. I said I could, but not much because I only had one light. He said that he could give me more lights and everything I needed to grow lots of plants and then he would pay me to grow them so he could sell them in his shop. Said his supplier was getting too expensive.”

“So what did you grow for him?” asked Vincent.

“More herbs, green plants, flowers and roses. Fred calls them miniature roses.”

Knowing Mouse’s penchant for leaving out the details Vincent thought that he’d given a pretty good description.

“How long have you been doing this?” asked Father, “and where are you getting the electricity for the lights?”

“Couple months. Ran a wire from the box near the Columbus Circle Subway station. Worked it in behind the wires that feed the station lights. No one will ever notice.”

Father shook his head and looked over at Vincent. “Do you think it’s safe?” he asked.

“It’s the same way we get most of the power for the other electrical things down here. We’ve run wires from the work lights in the upper tunnels to supply the few lights we use, and for the refrigerators in the kitchen. We use the same kind of wiring the utilities use and let them blend in with the existing wiring.”

“Then I suppose this is all right.” He looked at Mouse and smiled. Mouse grinned back. “But you earned this money, Mouse. Why are you giving it to me?”

Mouse dug into his pocket and pulled out another wad of cash. “Kept what Mouse needs. Share the rest. Fred says that there will be more every two weeks when he comes back for more plants and brings more seeds.”

Mouse turned and left the chamber.

“Sounds like Mouse has developed quite the entrepreneurial spirit,” observed Father. He counted out the bills on the desk in front of him.

“There’s over two hundred dollars here!” he exclaimed.

“It would be nice to have a nest egg of cash on hand for emergencies,” observed Vincent. “Now you’ll have a use for that hollowed out book Zach found and gave you.” Vincent rose and went to the bookshelf, retrieved the book and carried it back to Father.

Father opened it, folded the bills and placed them in the hollow then closed the book and handed it back to Vincent. “Just don’t let me forget where I’ve put it,” he told Vincent.

The children, Geoffrey especially, were all fascinated by the idea of growing things Below. In addition to starting plants for Fred, Mouse let the children have the use of one table and a set of lights where they grew herbs, tomato plants and pepper plants for William. They didn't produce a lot, but they were proud to be able to provide something for the kitchen and William made sure to praise every bit of produce they brought to him.

The money started rolling in, or at least that was the way it felt to Mouse. Fred provided all the equipment, potting soil and seeds needed, Mouse provided the labor, water and fertilizer from a compost bin William had started. Fred took the plants up to his store, sold them and split the profit from them with Mouse. After the initial cost of the equipment, the potting soil and seed cost very little and the profit was good.

Diana knew about Mouse's venture and was surprised when he came to her one afternoon when she was Below for dinner.

"Mouse needs a bank account," he told her.

"For the money you've been making growing your plants?" she asked.

"Yes. Split all the money Fred gives me with Father, but still have a lot in my chamber. Need a bank account to keep it safe."

"I doubt that you'd have to worry about anyone down here stealing it," said Diana, "but I'd be glad to help you." She thought a moment. "I might have to deposit it in my name, though."

"Mouse trusts Diana," he told her. "Be right back." He ran out and was back five minutes later with a large pickle jar full of bills.

"How much is in there?" she asked as he set the jar down in front of her.

"Stopped counting at \$528," he told her.

"OK," she said as she glanced across the table at Vincent who just smiled back. "I'll count it and see what I can do about opening an account for you."

They were back in Vincent's chamber with the money spread out on the table in front of them then a thought struck her.

"Hell, I'm a cop, if I start making cash deposits in even small amounts, someone might think I'm on the take."

"Even amounts as small as this?" Vincent commented. "You're not serious, are you?" he asked.

“Well, yeah. I know Mouse isn’t likely to have huge amounts of money, but it just might make someone ask questions. I have a safe in my place where I keep my gun. Do you think he’d mind if I just stashed it in there and kept track of the amount for him?”

“I think he’s just nervous about having it in his chamber,” Vincent told her. “Arthur is very inquisitive and Mouse was keeping the money in one of those zippered bank envelopes, but the raccoon learned how to open the zipper. Mouse went in and found the money scattered all over the chamber and a few of the edges looked as if they’d been nibbled. I think that worried him.”

“Then I’ll keep it at my place. The safe is set into the wall in the back of my closet, it should be fine there. It won’t earn interest, but then banks don’t pay that much anyway. I can give the combo to you and Mouse and if he needs something and I’m not available he or you can just go up and get it.”

“That will be more convenient and will keep you from running back and forth to the bank all the time.” Vincent chuckled. “How much is there? He’s been at this since last December.”

“That’s only six months. He’s made a tidy profit in that time. There’s almost \$1,500 here. That’s over \$200 a month; not bad for a little gardening.”

“Actually, it’s more than that, because he’s been giving Father half of everything he earns. Father has been stashing it in a hollowed-out book on the shelf in the study.”

“Oh, good God! Are you sure it’s safe?” she asked with a look of horror. “With all the stacks of books sitting all over the place it could get mixed up and misplaced. Are you sure he doesn’t need put that money in the safe too?”

“He’s careful with that one. It goes right back on the shelf with his precious medical books after each deposit or withdrawal.”

“What has he been using the money for?” she asked as she stacked the bills neatly.

“Vitamins for the children, prenatal vitamins for the pregnant women, over the counter drugs and first aid supplies and some has gone for meat so that our diet has been better. The money doesn’t sit around like Mouse’s part does.”

Diana fished a rubber band out of the pencil cup on Vincent’s table and put it around the roll of bills before she tucked it into an inside zippered pocket of her oversized tote.

“Let Mouse know the change in plans,” she said as she wrote a series of numbers down on a piece of paper. “That’s the combo, just in case.”

Every two weeks Mouse would find Diana and give her around \$200. If he didn’t see her, he’d give the money to Vincent who took it to her. The money just sat in the safe and continued to grow. He never asked for any of it back. Diana kept a close tally of it and it was adding up fast.

Almost a year after Mouse first started growing plants for Fred Alberti, Fred asked Mouse to come up to the store; he had a new venture in mind.

“You want me to grow something else?” Mouse asked as Fred turned the sign in the front window to CLOSED and locked the front door.

“Sure do. I’ve been growing some special plants for a special customer, but the space I use is small, I can only grow a few at a time and the customer needs more than I can supply. You’ve got pretty much unlimited room Below, and you’ll be able to grow more than I can here. I can send the equipment I’m using in my basement down to you and we won’t even have to spend a lot on more equipment.” He led the way toward the back of the store. “Come on down and I’ll show you the set up and how it works. These plants require a little more attention, but it’s not all that much more once you know what you are doing.”

Mouse didn’t notice that the room Fred took him to had a padlock on the door.

“No one knows about this room. My employees think it’s just extra storage.”

He opened the door and Mouse followed him in. There were two tables in the center of the room with two lights over each and five plants on each table. Each of the plants was about a foot tall, Mouse could see another table with peat pellets Fred used to start seeds.

Mouse went over to one of the plants and looked closely at the leaves.

“It’s kinda pretty,” he observed brushing his fingers over the almost lacy looking leaves. “Does it get flowers?”

“It can get something like a flower,” Fred told him, “but we want to avoid that. It’s the leaves we want, and if we let a plant flower and produce seeds, then the leaves won’t be as good. I’ll show you how to do that.”

“How many do you want me to grow?” asked Mouse.

“We’ll start with those pellets on the other table. These,” he gestured at the larger plants, “will all be gone by tomorrow afternoon. I deliver them to my customer when they are about this size. But as you can see my room is limited down here. I have some more seeds you can start, and from what I saw of the chamber you’re using, you should be able to fit in thirty or forty plants.”

“As long as they don’t get any bigger than those,” Mouse agreed.

Fred packed up the peat pellets and a bag of seeds into a small duffle bag and handed it to Mouse.

“You can start the seeds and I’ll see to it that the pots, tables and lights are delivered Below as soon as possible.” He handed Mouse a spiral notebook. “These are the

instructions for the new plants. There are pictures of what the plants look like at different stages of growth. I'll be down before they get to the point where the male plants will start sending out pollen to pollinate the female plants. We want to keep them from doing that. I keep a few plants in here that I allow to pollinate, that way I'll keep a good supply of seeds."

"There are boy plants and girl plants?" Mouse asked, disbelieving.

"Only in some species. This is one."

Mouse followed Fred out into the main part of the basement.

"What kind of plants are they," Mouse thought to ask as they went back upstairs.

"A lot of people call it Maryjane," Fred told him.

Mouse went back Below and set out all the new supplies. All his lights were in use, so he decided to wait until Fred delivered the new ones and the new tables before he started the new seeds. He had to read the book Fred had given him anyway. He didn't want to plant the seeds too deep or give them too much or not enough water.

"Always read the instructions," he repeated to himself as he headed back to his chamber to do just that.

The rest of the lights and tables were delivered a couple days later and Mouse spent the rest of the afternoon setting everything up and putting seeds into the peat pellets that he'd lined up in plastic trays. This part wasn't any different from any of the other plants he'd started. As far as he could tell, most of it wasn't much different, except for the part about keeping the male and the female plants apart. It was even easy to tell the difference. Fred's notes said that he generally sold the plants when they were between a foot and two feet tall, and that usually took four to six weeks.

Fred suggested that Mouse start about 20 plants every two weeks; that would give him a steady supply.

The first crop was ready and Mouse loaded them along with the other plants that were ready on the flatbed cart. Fred would meet him at the freight elevator below a warehouse owned by another Helper. They'd been using this method of delivery since the first batch of plants, but this was the first time Fred had arranged the pick up after hours. He told Mouse that the warehouse was usually so busy during the day, that he was always worried that the plants would be damaged, so he'd arranged with the owner to come in and pick up his plants after the warehouse closed at 6PM.

He was pushing the cart when Lena caught up to him.

"Aren't you going to dinner?" she asked, eyeing the cart.

"Got a delivery to make," Mouse told her as she fell into step next to him.

She looked at the plants on the cart. "The roses are beautiful," she told him. "Every time you grow them they look better. And I love those pansies." She reached out and touched one of the taller plants in the center of the cart. Her brow wrinkled. "These are new."

"First crop," Mouse agreed. "Takes longer than some of the other plants, but Fred says that they sell real good."

Lena leaned forward and looked at the plant more closely. "What is it?"

"Fred says it's called Maryjane," Mouse supplied.

"You're selling pot plants?" she exclaimed.

"Sure." He waved at the plants on the cart. "They're all potted. Fred says that some of his customers will plant them in window boxes, or in gardens, but they all start out in pots."

"That's not what I meant," she told him. "Do you know what the Maryjane is used for?"

"It's a pretty plant," Mouse said. "No real flowers, and the leaves aren't as pretty as the coleus, but Fred says that someone buys them."

"I imagine," said Lena, realizing that Mouse had no idea what he was doing. She doubted that telling him would do any good; maybe she should talk to Vincent about it.

"I have to go pick up Caty and take her to dinner. I'll see you later."

She turned off at the next junction that would take her to the nursery where she left her four-year-old daughter every day. When she saw Vincent in the dining chamber later she asked if she could talk to him after dinner.

"Certainly, I'll stop by your chamber," he told her.

"Thank you."

She was reading Caty a bedtime story when Vincent arrived later.

"I'm not interrupting, am I?" he asked.

"No, she'll be out like a light as soon as I put her to bed. Have a seat and I'll be right back." She carried Caty to the small bed behind the screen at the other end of the chamber.

Vincent sat down and made himself comfortable. He was looking at the book she'd been reading to Caty when he came in. He closed it and put it aside when she joined him.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Well, I'm not sure, but there is potential for something to go very wrong."

That got Vincent's attention.

"Tell me."

"It's Mouse. You know that he's been growing stuff for Alberti's Garden Supply." At Vincent's nod, she continued. "Do you have any idea what he's growing?"

"I've only been down to the garden chamber a few times. I saw mostly house plants, herbs, some roses."

"And pot," she added.

Vincent looked a little confused. "Pot?"

"He said that Fred told him it's called Maryjane. Actually it's marijuana, cannabis, hemp, pot, weed..." she trailed off as she saw understanding dawn in Vincent's eyes.

"He's growing an illegal substance?" He sounded shocked.

"It's not like he's growing and harvesting poppies and making opium, but yeah, he's growing pot, but I don't think he realizes what it is. I have a feeling Alberti put him up to it. He was delivering it along with the regular plants this afternoon."

Vincent shook his head. "If there is trouble to get into, Mouse is the one most likely to just fall into it," he said resignedly. "I'll talk to him. Thank you for letting me know, Lena."

Mouse met Fred in the warehouse. When they finished loading the plants onto his truck, Fred handed over the usual envelope of money.

"The usual amount is in there," he told Mouse. "But once this batch is sold, the amount should almost double."

"Double?" Mouse said in shock. "That's a lot of money."

"The new plants sell for a lot of money," Fred told him. "It's a good profit for not much more input than the other plants require."

"What's so special about the new stuff? What's it used for? Is it just for looks or is it like the herbs?"

"People use it for a lot of stuff," Fred told him. He wondered how much he could tell the kid. He might be naive but he was far from stupid. "Some actually use it like herbs and put it in stuff they cook, but most people smoke it like a cigarette or put it into a pipe, but I'm selling to a guy who's using it for medical research. He's extracting a chemical from it."

"Father will be pleased," Mouse commented.

Fred's head snapped up and he spoke sharply. "You haven't told Father about these new plants, have you?"

"No, but I give him half of all the money you give me. He'll be pleased to have more. He's been buying food and vitamins."

"Maybe it wouldn't be such a good idea to give him any more than you've been giving him," suggested Fred. "He might ask questions and I want to keep this new batch of plants a secret until I'm absolutely sure that they will do well."

"Sure..." said Mouse, slightly puzzled. "OK. Won't tell." He wondered momentarily if he should mention that Lena knew, but he was distracted when Fred turned toward his truck.

"OK, I'll see you here a week from tonight to pick up a load of regular plants and then again two weeks from tonight for the regular delivery and a load of the new plants."

Mouse nodded and started pushing his cart back to the elevator that would take him back Below.

Mouse was surprised when Vincent caught up with him the next morning while he was on his way to the dining chamber for breakfast.

"Mouse, I'd like to talk to you," Vincent called out.

"Sure," Mouse agreed, "but have to hurry or I'll miss breakfast."

"You can get your meal, I'll meet you at the table."

Vincent had eaten earlier so he stopped at the end of the serving line and got a mug of tea, and was sitting, cradling the warm mug between his hands when Mouse sat down across from him.

"What do you want to talk about?" asked Mouse, straightforward as ever.

"I was just wondering how the gardening is going?" said Vincent after he took a sip of his tea.

"Going good. Got more money for Father." He pulled the envelope out of his pocket and handed it to Vincent. "Can you give half of that to Father and half to Diana for the safe?"

"I'll do that," agreed Vincent. "What are you growing?"

"Same stuff, herbs for cooking, flowers, roses and some green plants," said Mouse between bites. "The children are still growing green peppers, tomatoes and herbs for William. Eric got some new seeds and is growing something called a Habanero pepper. William wanted it for some chili."

"Anything else new?" Vincent asked.

“Nope.” He continued eating.

“Lena said she saw you taking some unusual plants Above yesterday.”

“Nothing unusual. Fred gave me some seeds for some new herbs.”

Mouse didn’t like lying to Vincent and he remembered that Fred had said that some people cooked with it.

“Mouse, Lena said she was afraid that you were growing something illegal and she mentioned it to me.”

“Illegal?” Mouse was clearly shocked at the idea. “Fred didn’t want me to tell anyone, but he didn’t say that anything was illegal.”

“Well, I doubt that he would, but there is something called marijuana; it’s sometimes referred to as Maryjane. People smoke it and it affects them something like alcohol.”

“Why’s it illegal, if alcohol isn’t?” asked Mouse, reasonably.

“I have no idea,” admitted Vincent. He’d done some reading after talking to Lena, and he’d learned what the plant looked like, and verified that it was indeed illegal in the United States, but while he was reading he’d wondered why.

The article had said that it was considered a “gateway drug.” That people who used it often went on to use and become addicted to the more dangerous drugs like the opiates. But the writer had added that he’d personally seen very little of that. He knew people who had used marijuana for years and had never gone beyond it and they used it the same way most people used alcohol; preferred it over alcohol. It wasn’t addictive like alcohol. He’d also met people who used and were addicted to other substances, who had never used marijuana.

“But it is illegal, nonetheless, and you need to tell Fred that you can’t grow it here Below, because it puts the whole community in danger.”

“How?” asked Mouse.

“If Fred is caught selling the plants, then the police will question him and he might be tempted to tell them who is growing them for him and where.”

Mouse looked thoughtful. “Fred said that they sell for a lot of money. Father would be happy to have more money.”

“The money is nice, Mouse,” Vincent agreed, “but not at the expense of the safety of the tunnels.”

Mouse nodded thoughtfully. “I’ll tell Fred,” he promised.

“Thank you, Mouse,” Vincent finished his tea and set the cup down. “I’ve got to go, I have literature class in a few minutes.”

After breakfast Mouse went straight Uptop to Fred's store. Fred was at the cash register ringing up a customer and Mouse waited patiently for him to finish.

Fred noticed the frown on Mouse's face. "What's up, Mouse?" he asked as he waved an employee over to take over the cash register and led Mouse back to his office.

"You didn't tell me that the new plants were illegal," Mouse said accusingly when Fred closed the door behind them.

"You didn't ask," Fred pointed out reasonably. "How did you find out?"

"Lena saw the plants yesterday, she told Vincent. Vincent told me I have to tell you that I can't grow them for you. It endangers everybody Below."

"What authority has Vincent got to tell you that?" asked Fred belligerently. "Did Father tell him to tell you that?"

"No, Father doesn't know. Vincent is in charge of security."

"And he has no right to tell you what to do. You are your own person. You can do whatever you want to. Besides, if you stop growing the Maryjane, I'll pull the contract for all the other plants too and then you won't be making any money."

"I don't know," said Mouse thoughtfully. "Mouse disobeyed the rules once before and no one talked for days."

"Look," said Fred in an unusually hard voice, "let me be blunt. I have too much money in this to quit now. I've promised to supply live plants to this guy and he won't be real pleased with me if I back out of the deal, and I have no intention of backing out. If you don't keep supplying me, then I'll just have to tell him where he can find you and he'll probably show up on your doorstep for some direct negotiations, and he won't be nearly as pleasant as I am." At the blank look Mouse gave him Fred tried to make it clearer. "Someone could get hurt or even killed. The tunnels would be in more danger from him than they would ever be from the police." Fred walked to the office door and opened it. "Now I suggest that you go on back home... you have work to do."

Fred knew that his customer was very unlikely to do anything close to what he'd just threatened Mouse with, but he wanted to scare Mouse into continuing to grow the plants. Everything he'd taken delivery on since starting to do business with Mouse had been consistently strong and healthy. He figured it had to be the even temperatures and maybe the cleaner air Below.

Mouse left in a quandary. He knew he didn't have much of a choice, he had to continue what he was doing, but no one could know. He spent the rest of that day and most of the next moving the marijuana plants and all the equipment needed for them to a different chamber. A secret chamber that only he knew about. That way no one Below would be able to find it, but neither could anyone from Above if they came looking.

He met Vincent at dinner a few days later and Vincent pulled him aside.

“Did you talk to Fred?” Vincent asked him.

“Yes, he wasn’t happy,” Mouse admitted truthfully.

“Whether or not he is happy isn’t important. What’s important is that he understood,” Vincent said.

“He understood,” Mouse told him.

Over the next few weeks, Diana noticed that Mouse’s deposits to the safe had gone up; more than doubled, in fact, but she didn’t think much of it. It was almost Thanksgiving and she knew that he had been growing mums and had mentioned that Fred wanted some poinsettias. Vincent had described the large chamber full of the red and green plants. The seasonal plants were probably bringing in more money.

She mentioned the increase to Vincent one evening when he visited her on her roof.

“He’s been giving you more money?” he asked. “He’s still giving Father the same amount.”

“Quite a bit more,” she told him. “More than twice what he was giving me.” She named the total in her safe at the moment and it made Vincent’s jaw drop.

“That’s a lot of money!” he exclaimed. “I had no idea.”

“It must be the chrysanthemums and poinsettias. He said that some of the children have been helping him, maybe he’s paying them out of what he usually gives father.”

“The children do like to take on small jobs and do errands for Helpers this time of year. No matter how much we stress that it’s the feelings behind the gifts, and that we all love the handmade things, they still like to be able to earn some extra money to buy some of the Christmas presents they give.”

But Vincent still wondered. The next morning right after breakfast he went in search of Mouse. He wasn’t in his chamber or in the growing chamber where Kipper and Geoffrey were carefully watering plants.

“Kipper, have you seen Mouse this morning?” Vincent asked when the boy passed in front of him.

“He was here for a little while,” Kipper told him, “but he said he had something else to do.”

“Do you know where he went?”

“I’m not sure, but I think he has another growing chamber. He doesn’t let any of us go there, but I know he moved some of the lights and tables and a bunch of the seedlings there.”

“Do you know where the chamber is?”

“I think it’s up that side tunnel just past the entrance to Mouse’s chamber. I’ve seen him go that way a few times.”

“Thanks, Kipper. Oh, and I was wondering, has Mouse been paying you for the help you’ve been giving him?”

“Yep, he gives us each a dollar an hour for watering, turning, rotating, and pruning. We don’t all work every day, but one or two of us manage a couple hours every day.”

Vincent left the main growing chamber and went in search of the other one that Kipper had mentioned. He used his acute sense of smell and followed it when he caught a whiff of vegetation. As soon as he walked into the chamber he knew his worst fears had come true. The tables were groaning with beautiful, healthy plants. The only problem was that they were marijuana plants. Vincent recognized them from the pictures he’d seen in the books he’d read.

Mouse saw Vincent first and came running over.

“Vincent shouldn’t be here!” he said adamantly as he tried to turn Vincent and push him out.

“Why shouldn’t I?” Vincent asked.

“Because you’ll make Mouse stop. Then we’ll all be in trouble,” Mouse moaned, looking panicked.

“Why will we all be in trouble?”

“Fred said that he’d tell his customer where we were if I didn’t keep growing these plants. He said he was a bad man and he’d want to know why I stopped. He said that he might even tell the police.”

“When did he tell you this?”

“Right after you talked to me. I went and talked to Fred.” Mouse looked like he was in physical pain. “Don’t tell Father,” he begged.

“I won’t, but you have to stop growing this stuff, and we have to convince Fred... I’ll talk to him. When I’m done, you and I are going to carry all these plants to the Abyss and drop them off the bridge.”

“You sure, Vincent?” asked Mouse.

“As soon as I talk to Fred.”

Vincent was sidetracked by a minor emergency and didn't get up to talk to Fred that day, but as he worked to help clear a small cave-in on one of the lower levels he thought about it and he decided he'd go talk to Diana about it first. She might have some insight, because of her job.

Diana was going over a case file her Captain had given her earlier in the day. She wasn't sure why he'd given it to her. It looked pretty cut and dried to her. All the leg work had been done and the detectives on the case had made an arrest. Case solved, but the Captain had said that it had been too simple. He swore something wasn't right.

She was reading through it a second time when she heard a light tapping on the skylight above her head. She looked up and motioned to Vincent to come down.

"Too wet to hang out on the roof tonight," she told him as he came through the laundry room.

"Am I interrupting your work?" he asked as she put the file into her tote.

"A welcome interruption," she told him. "Just a hunch the Captain has. Seems like since I showed up in the offices of the 210 everyone there has started playing their hunches." She smiled across the room at him as she rose and headed for the kitchen. "How about some tea?"

Vincent nodded and removed his damp cloak as he crossed the room. He hung it over the back of a chair before he settled on a stool at the breakfast bar.

"Is this a social visit, or something else?" she asked once the kettle was on and the teabags were in the mugs.

"Something else," he admitted. "It's Mouse."

"Oh-oh. From that tone, it sounds serious. Should I be sitting?"

"Probably. It might take a while to explain."

The kettle whistled and Diana turned away to fill the mugs. She handed one to Vincent then she circled the counter and went to sit on the couch. After a slight hesitation, Vincent followed.

"OK, so tell me the whole story," she said once they were settled.

"He's been duped into doing something he shouldn't be doing," Vincent began. "He didn't realize what he was being asked to do, and I'm sure that if he had he wouldn't have gone along."

"Does this have something to do with his gardening?" she asked. "I know he hasn't been conned out of his money, because most of it's still in the safe."

“That’s the problem. Seems Fred Alberti has had a side business and he’s talked Mouse into helping,” admitted Vincent.

“What kind of side business?” When it came to Mouse’s escapades she’d come to expect just about anything.

“He sells marijuana... well, not exactly, he sells the plants. The whole, growing plants and he has Mouse growing them Below.”

Diana almost laughed at the serious look on Vincent’s face. Pot was small change, especially when it was sold like Vincent said Fred was selling it.

“And you’re concerned that Mouse might get caught if the PD comes down on Fred?”

“Or that Father might blow a gasket if he finds out what Mouse is growing,” Vincent admitted with a slight grin.

“That might actually be the more dangerous of the consequences,” she agreed. “As far as the police coming down on Fred, it’s not likely. Mouse said that Fred splits the profit from everything and from the amounts that he’s been giving me, it doesn’t look like Fred has a very large operation.”

“Not very large. There were probably fewer than a hundred plants in the cavern Mouse is using. He delivers maybe 20 plants every two weeks or so.”

“And how does Fred sell those plants?” she asked.

“From what Mouse told me, he sells the live plants. He doesn’t process it.”

She nodded thoughtfully.

“Do you want me to talk to him? Fred, I mean,” she asked.

“No, I’m asking more for guidance on how I should approach him. I don’t want to try to tell him he has to quit selling the plants. I just want to get Mouse out of it.”

“Fred’s business isn’t in much danger from the cops,” she confided. “They tend to go after the big importers and dealers, but if one of his customers happens to be one of those then there could be a problem. Most likely he sells to people he’s known for a long time... But I agree with you that Mouse probably shouldn’t be growing it for him. If Fred was to be picked up, he just might tell the cops where he’s been growing it, just to get some of the heat off himself, and that would put the whole community in danger.”

“That is what I thought. I told Mouse to tell Fred that he couldn’t grow it any longer, but Fred won’t let him out of the deal. He threatened to expose the community, if not to the police, to his customer. He insinuated that his customer might not be a very nice person and he might go Below and cause trouble.”

“Sounds kind of vague,” she pointed out.

He nodded. "But we don't know how serious the threat is. I want to talk to him myself, but I wanted to know a little more about the legalities of what he's doing before I did."

"Well, pot *is* illegal. Personally, I've never figured out why. It's less intoxicating, wears off quicker and isn't addictive like alcohol, but that's just my personal opinion. I'm sworn to uphold the law... But it pretty much depends on the city administration how it's enforced. If the mayor and the commissioner are gung-ho against it, then the NYPD makes more busts for pot, but otherwise the cops don't pay too much attention to it and try to focus on the real crime. Most of the time the pot dealers don't sell the hard stuff and the dealers of the hard stuff don't bother with pot."

"So Fred's threat to tell the police was an empty one," suggested Vincent.

"Probably, and I doubt that any of his customers are in the category of 'not so nice people.' They are more than likely middle aged hippies or people who use it for medical purposes."

"Medical purposes?" questioned Vincent.

"Yeah, there is research being done on using it to relieve nausea. There's a chemical, tetrahydrocannabinol, THC. It's what causes the high, but it's also seems to have some beneficial effects."

"Father always did say that anything can be used for good or bad, it just depends on the person or people using it," Vincent commented.

"Yeah, like opium. Very effective pain killer if used one way, but also a very addictive, deadly, illegal drug if used another way... So, what are you going to say to Fred."

"I've known him for years," Vincent told her. "He's not a bad man. I guess I'll just appeal to his better nature and tell him that Mouse can't continue this. If he has to, Mouse will stop growing anything for Fred."

Not long after leaving Diana's loft Vincent was knocking on the back door of Fred's brownstone.

Fred answered the door and immediately went on the defensive.

"I don't want to talk about it, Vincent!" he maintained, as he blocked the door.

"Be reasonable, Fred. At least hear me out."

"No. I made a deal with Mouse and it's none of your business, or anyone else Below!"

"It's the business of everyone Below if it puts them in jeopardy," insisted Vincent.

"I won't talk about it!" and with that, he slammed the door in Vincent's face.

Vincent was stunned that Fred was so adamant. He'd never seen this in him before. He'd have to take a different approach.

Diana came Below the next afternoon to deliver a box of medications that she'd picked up from Peter. She stopped in Vincent's chamber after she left the study.

"How did your meeting with Fred go?" she asked.

"Not well. He wouldn't talk to me. Shut the door in my face."

"You want me to talk to him?" she asked. "I can flash the badge in his face and maybe make an impression."

"I don't know that it would do any good," Vincent admitted.

"We won't know until we try," she told him. "Give me the address of the shop and I'll stop in this afternoon."

Vincent wrote the address on a scrap of paper and handed it to her. "Good luck," was all he said.

Diana walked into the shop and spotted a kid restocking a shelf.

"Excuse me, is the owner here?" she asked.

"Who's askin'?" he said belligerently.

"Detective Diana Bennett, NYPD." She held out her badge for inspection as the kid suddenly became Mr. Helpful.

"He's in his office," he told her. "I'll go get him."

"Don't bother, just point me in the right direction and I'll go to him," she said in her toughest cop manner.

The kid pointed to an arch in the back. "First door on the left," he told her.

She walked confidently across the store and into the hall. She stopped in front of the first door on the left and knocked.

"Since when do you knock, Matt?" called a voice from inside.

She opened the door.

"Since I'm not Matt," she told him as she stood there.

"And you are...?" Fred asked.

"Are you Fred Alberti?" she asked.

“In the flesh,” he said with a cocky grin.

“I’m Detective Diana Bennett, NYPD.” She held out her badge again. “I need to talk to you about a matter.”

The grin disappeared, but Fred remained relaxed.

“What can I do for you, Detective?” he asked. “Have a seat.”

She closed the door before she sat down. Fred hesitated a moment then sat back down behind his desk.

“I’m here about the marijuana,” she said.

“What marijuana?” he asked.

“The marijuana you’ve been selling to some *special customers*,” she said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, detective,” he insisted. “You must have me confused with someone else.”

“I’ll be frank with you, Mr. Alberti,” she said. “I came in here intending to give you the benefit of the doubt, and just give you a warning, but now that I see your attitude, I’m thinking I just may have to be a little more forceful... Do you know the penalty for distributing an illegal substance?”

“Depends on what it is,” he said sarcastically, “but none of the plants I grow here are illegal.”

“I didn’t say anything about growing anything,” said Diana as she sat back and crossed her arms.

“I just assumed... since I grow other things...” he stammered as his face went white.

“So, you are growing pot?”

“You trying to trick me into a confession?”

“No, I’m trying to give you a chance to tell the truth, and I’d like to know what is going on... Look, I’m a Helper too. Vincent is worried about Mouse. That boy is like a son to him. This little deal you have with him is putting their whole world in danger.”

Fred leaned back and put his hand over his eyes. He took a deep breath and dropped them into his lap.

“That was not my intention,” he admitted. “I just had an opportunity and I grabbed it.”

“An illegal opportunity,” Diana pointed out.

“Well, yeah, but for a good cause.”

“Huh?” She was confused.

“OK, an explanation. It’s the truth, I swear... My wife left me a couple years ago. She pretty much took me to the cleaners. The only things I managed to hold on to were the shop and my house. She got everything else: all the investments, alimony and child support. I’m also supposed pay for insurance and put money into a college fund every month for my son. What I was paying out every month because of the divorce settlement was coming to a little more than half of my profit from the shop. That didn’t leave me much money to live on. There’s a mortgage payment on the house, utilities, maintenance. I barely had money to eat.

“Then out of the clear blue, this guy walks up to me when I was out making deliveries one afternoon. He asked me if I was a horticulturist. I told him that I’d gone to college, but I’d studied business, I’d learned the plant business from my dad and grandfather. He told me that he was affiliated with one of the universities and that he was doing medical research. He asked me if I’d be willing to grow some plants for his research. He said he’d pay me well.

“Anything to make a buck, so I agreed. He provided the seeds and instructions on the plants’ needs. I grew several different things for him: cactus, some herbs I’d never heard of before. Then one day he showed up with an envelope of seed and told me he wanted me to grow marijuana. I was hesitant at first, but he explained that he was exploring medical uses of it, and he doubled what he was paying per plant, so I said I would do it. At first he only wanted a few plants every couple weeks, but then he started asking for more. I didn’t have the room. I’d already turned one of my growing rooms into a marijuana room, that was when I got Mouse to start growing the other plants Below. But when this guy said he needed more, I didn’t have any more room. That was when I decided to get Mouse to do it. I thought it would be safer Below; I was always afraid one of my employees would stumble on it here.”

“Do you know who this guy is?” asked Diana.

“He never gave me a name or told me where he was doing his research,” Fred admitted.

“But he knows who you are and where you work,” prompted Diana.

“Not exactly,” Fred told her. The truck I use for deliveries isn’t marked. We don’t make many deliveries so I rent it out when I’m not using it. All he knows is my first name, and he told me to call him Ed. He always paid me in cash.”

“And that didn’t strike you as odd?” she asked. “If he was using grant money he would have to account for every penny, and would be paying by check or at least asking you for a receipt.”

“He never asked for a receipt,” he admitted.

“You’re sure he was legit?” she asked.

“He dresses like a college professor, nice but not too nice. Conservative, you know. He talks like he’s educated; seems to know his stuff.”

“And all you got is his first name, if that is his name.”

Fred nodded.

“Not too bright, Fred,” she stated. “If he was doing the kind of research he said he was, at least if it was legitimate research, he’d have permits for the marijuana or any other illegal substances he needed for the research. He would probably have someone at the college growing it for him.”

“I can see that now,” he told her, “but the money was clouding my judgment. I wasn’t getting rich, but I was making ends meet for the first time since the divorce was final.”

“To be honest, Fred. I don’t care what you do; I’m not here in any official capacity, and I’ll be willing to forget what I know, but you’ve got to let Mouse out of the deal. Not only is he putting the whole community in danger by doing this, but if Father finds out he will have Mouse’s head on a platter.”

“But Mouse said he was giving half of everything to Father.”

“He is, and Father has been very grateful, but I’m pretty sure if he finds out where it’s coming from he’ll have a fit.”

Fred drew in a deep breath. “OK, tell Mouse he’s off the hook,” he finally said.

“What do you want to do about the rest of the plants?” she asked as she stood and picked up her bag.

“I don’t have room for that many plants anywhere up here. In fact, I just took a delivery from Mouse and I haven’t delivered it yet. Tell them to do what they need to do.”

She nodded. “Where do you deliver it to?” she asked.

“Different places. He always calls and leaves an address on my home answering machine. This time it’s the alley behind a liquor store not far from Battery Park tomorrow night.”

“Sounds rather clandestine for a man who is doing legitimate research,” she said as she turned and left the office.

She went straight to Dr. Wong’s shop and asked to use the threshold there. She was halfway to the main hub of the community when Vincent caught up with her.

“How did it go?” he asked.

“He’s agreed to let Mouse out of the deal. He claimed that he was selling the plants to a research scientist.” She went on to tell Vincent the whole story.

“And you don’t believe it?” he asked when she was done.

“I believe that someone told Fred that story and that he believed it, but I don’t believe that the guy is genuine. So, what are you going to do?”

“What I told Mouse we would do. We will dispose of the plants in the Abyss. It’s the only safe place to do it. If we take it Above we run the risk of discovery. We could just let what Mouse has left grow and deliver it to Fred as he has been, but that idea makes me uneasy. I think it’s just better if we dispose of it all at once.”

“Need some help?” she asked.

“We will use the cart, but it will take several trips. You can help us load.”

They changed direction and headed to the lower level where Mouse’s chamber was.

Diana was surprised at how healthy the plants were. She’d heard that marijuana was difficult to grow indoors. Mouse really was good at this. It took over an hour and several trips back and forth, but in the end the chamber Mouse had used was stripped bare except for the tables and the lights.

“And Fred still wants me to grow the other stuff?” asked Mouse as they walked to dinner.

“He didn’t say he didn’t want you to,” Diana said. “So I guess the original deal still stands. Maybe you should go up and talk to him.”

“OK good, OK fine. Still gonna grow stuff, just not *that* stuff.” He seemed rather subdued as he wandered off on his own once they reached the dining chamber.

“He’s OK, isn’t he?” asked Diana as she and Vincent sat down.

“He’ll be fine. He’s probably already thinking about his next invention.”

Several weeks later Father was reading the newspaper when he startled Vincent with an exclamation.

“What is it Father?” he asked, looking up from his book.

“An old colleague of mine has been arrested, for selling marijuana, of all things.”

“How did you know him?” Vincent asked.

“We both worked for the Chittenden Research Institute. When he left he went on to teach. I heard he was continuing to do research.” He handed the paper to Vincent and pointed out the story.

## **NYU Professor Arrested for Peddling Pot**

NYU professor and researcher, Dr. Edward Phillips was arrested yesterday and charged with possession with intent to distribute marijuana. He was found to have 25 mature plants in the back of one of the university's maintenance trucks. When a search of his office and research lab was conducted several more plants were found.

Phillips claimed to have been using the plants in research into possible medical uses of the illegal substance, but several students at NYU claim to have purchased small amounts of marijuana from Dr. Phillips. Police said that it did appear that he was doing research on the plants; he had obtained a permit to do so, but both the permit and grant had expired.

When asked where the pot came from Phillips told police that he grew it himself at a location that he refused to name. He claimed that he rented the property and didn't want the owners of it to get into any trouble.

Phillips is being held pending arraignment. Bond has not yet been set.

Vincent wondered. Diana had told him the story that Fred had told her. Was it the same man?

Diana was reading the same article at about the same time. She came to the conclusion that this Dr. Edward Phillips was probably Fred's *Ed*. At least it sounded like he was an honorable man. He may have actually started out doing legitimate research, but that somewhere along the line, probably when his grant ran out, he'd found that selling a little bit of the subject of his research could bring in enough money to support the research.

She smiled and wondered what kind of defense the professor's lawyer would use. She'd like to be in the courtroom to hear that one.