

A SIMPLE LIFE

by Trisha Kehoe

Swiping disheveled strands of hair back into a ponytail, the slender woman stood just outside the bathroom door. Folding both arms over her chest, she leaned against the jamb and called out.

"So, have you decided what you'd like for supper tonight? It's my turn to cook, so choose what form of heartburn you're up to dealing with, okay?"

The only response was a muffled, unclear reply. Then the sound of a hair dryer went back to deafening volume.

"Vincent?" Grimacing as the sound of the dryer masked his words a second time, Catherine sighed and peered around the edge of the bathroom door.

"Hellooo! I couldn't hear what you just said. Can you turn off the dryer for a minute, please? I asked you...."

"Yes, I heard...." As Vincent turned from the sink to face her. Catherine's mind went somewhere and forgot where it lived.

The dryer clicked off. "Allow me a moment to removed the rest of this soap...."

The heady earthiness of who and what stood before her, took away the ability to draw an unaffected breath. Eyeing him up and down, she absorbed the certainty of Vincent as one would something beyond the realm of mundane possibilities. Here truly, was a force to be reckoned with..... Unsnapped, low-riding jeans seemed to adoringly embrace his slim hips as he reached out and pulled a large towel free of a nearby rack.

As he turned back to the sink, Catherine thought, *'Oh Gawd, he's got the best set of walking away buns I've ever seen!'*

Vincent stood there innocently (*Innocently?*) drying his hair as her eyes drifted down over his body. In profile, the softly plump bulge at the junction of his thighs shifted slightly with each move he made. Further teasing her senses, when he bent over the sink to rinse specks of soap from his face and ears, the pliant mounds on either side of the jeans center seam lifted, as though sweetly cradling their prize.

His ablutions done, Vincent turned and found his lady staring at him quite wantonly. Acknowledging her look of admiration with a flash of splendidly sharp teeth, he smiled. "Hello."

"Hmmm.... ah.... hi."

Lowering her head for a moment, Catherine shook herself free of his mesmerizing gaze. But when she looked back up, she found him still smiling at her indulgently, as though he knew exactly what she was thinking. He usually do.

Concentrating, she managed to speak intelligently - but only just barely. "I wanted to know what you'd like to have for...." She couldn't stop herself. She was *'STARING'* at him again. "... supper."

"I answered you, my love." Vincent gestured to the hair dryer. "Due to Mouse's tinkering, this is much louder than I'd expected it to be. I'm sorry you didn't hear me." Frowning, he eyed the lethal-looking weapon he was holding. "I still cannot fathom why Mouse assumed making this portable and adding so many batteries, would be any sort of an improvement."

Laughing, she agreed. "The day I '*UNDERSTAND*' Mouse, lock me up, okay? The funny farm will have a nice room all ready for me on that day!"

She sneered at the dryer. "And now, with the batteries and only God knows what else he jammed in there. I can barely lift it at all! And that.... that.... '*THING*' you're holding, is nearly as deafening as Father's bellows when he's in one of his snits."

Tossing Vincent a sideways look, Catherine dared him to contradict her.

Sure that it would prove safer - for him - and that discretion was the better part of valor, Vincent didn't dispute his lady's remark - at least not out loud. Being brighter than most men, he changed the subject altogether.

"Oh, I nearly forgot. I apologize for not mentioning it earlier, but I may be quite late for dinner this evening. Why don't you cook whatever pleases you and save me some of it." He hesitated. "... unless it's spaghetti."

"You '*detest*' my sauce!" Catherine accused indignantly. "When you make it, you always load it with so much garlic I think my teeth will melt! Garlic '*HANGS ON*' to a person's breath, you now. '*Forever*'." She grimaced. "Your taste for so much of that stuff on food is beyond me. Blech!"

Bending from the waist, Vincent flipped his hair forward. Rubbing at it vigorously as he tried to dry it a little more, he answered without looking up.

"Hm... I must admit, I do love the taste of that particular seasoning. The tang is rich on the palate. Sadly, over the years William was never able to use very much of it in preparing meals Below."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Father agrees with you," came the muffled response as Vincent remained at his task. "He's said many times that the taste of garlic tends to be overwhelming. It would seem he doesn't care for it either."

Catherine eyed the ceiling (*Daddy, it's the 'big one!' Get my wings ready. Father and I 'agree' on something*)

Peeking out from under the towel, Vincent threw her a distinctly rakish look. "But if what you say is true...." He moved towards her.

Straightening to his full height - which was considerable - he put one hand on her arm, whispering. "The next time I ask you to kiss me, if I've eaten garlic, then you must refuse."

Thrusting his bottom lip forward into a sensuous pout, Vincent slowly moved his tongue back and forth over it. Standing so close to her, she could feel the heat of his body, he reached around Catherine to retrieve a large, bristle hairbrush from the shelf of the linen closet she was leaning against.

Smoky with desire, radiant blue eyes drilled hers for a moment, then he bent towards her, swept his eyes over her mouth and repeated the challenge. "Simply refuse to.... kiss me."

Shivering a bit, Catherine met his openly lustful stare with one of her own. '*Oh, how he 'looked' at her!*' Trying to steady her heartbeat, she arched one eyebrow at him (*So, playing games, are we? My love, it would seem you haven't learned yer not to mess with a lawyer, much less 'any' female. Okay then, let's just find out how good you are at games, bright eyes....*')

Gasping as though horrified, she put one hand to her breast. "What! Say '*NO*' to you, and give you a way out of our pledge of '*forever!*' Why, we vowed to always sustain each other and share our lives completely. Well, I won't break '*my*' promise to be your loving and '*COMPLIANT*' partner. No way, Vincent. Find another way out!"

Not waiting for a response, she tossed her head saucily, turned on her heel and quickly scurried back into the dining room.

Once safely out of sight, Catherine smothered an outburst of giggles behind one hand. Although she didn't see the appalled look that followed her from the room, she knew it was there. She knew Vincent. Even now, after all this time, some of her jibes just didn't strike him as things one joked *'ABOUT!'*

Plunking into a dining room chair, Catherine picked up a pencil and waited, counting to herself, *'one, two....'*

Sure enough, in strode the titan of the tunnels with a look of extreme displeasure on his face. "An *'OUT'*, you say!"

Standing behind her, hiding a knowing smile, Vincent reached down and began to run his hands over Catherine's work weary shoulders, feeling each muscle leap instantly in response to his gentle probing.

"So, you think to be rid of *'me'* that easily then, do you?"

Resting her head back against his firm tummy, she gazed up into that majestic face, scanning it for a moment; loving it beyond anything in the world. Shrugging her shoulders, she pulled Vincent's upper body forward over the chair, teasing, "Can't escape from you, huh? Okay. It's just as well, I guess." Reaching behind the chair, she ran one finger suggestively along the zipper of his jeans. "The *'FORM'* of retribution I'd demand in council if you ever tried nullifying *'me,'* would leave even you speechless."

Vincent winced as every muscle along his groin went into immediate spasms. *'OUCH.'* Ah, but he hadn't been studying Catherine's *'Precepts Of Law'* books all of these years for naught.

Resting his mouth at her ear, he whispered, "It would seem your *'demands'* would be something of a.... dilemma, in more ways than one. Would someone serve me with some sort of a legal document?"

Not missing a beat, she nodded. "Naturally." Her tone turned terribly professional. "I'd sue your magnificent butt!"

Vincent blinked, looking slightly startled. *'She'd sue what!'* After nipping at her ear gently, his response was in a quite ominous tone, almost hissed as a matter of fact. "This person you would serve papers on me; be certain it is not someone that you would *'missss....!'*"

Bursting into laughter, conceding defeat, at least temporarily, Catherine kissed the side of his fuzzy jaw. "I'll remember that. so, tell me why you'll be late for supper this time?"

Sighing, Vincent's tone was tinged with just a hint of frustration. "As I recall, it was you who asked me to research a new computer course so that I could then teach it to our son. *'I'* was quite satisfied with the one we'd been using."

Running long fingers through his still damp hair, he tried in vain to smooth the tangles. "Catherine, surely you realize that these modern binary mathematics are not easily or quickly learned, even by me."

A curved nail tapped the shiny new computer textbook laying open on the dining room table.

"General Calculus was one course I never found enjoyable even when young, for it's a thoroughly tedious curriculum. And, these new dual configurations that Brooke calls *'improved math,'* will be the end of me entirely."

Looking up at him, Catherine waggled her eyebrows. "I thought you were her brightest pupil? Brooke must love it when you keep her from being with her family. I'll bet her husband loves it too."

Nodding, he agreed. "At times she does tend to be a bit.... contentious with me," adding, "Yet she insists I need the extra tutelage." The confession was followed by a lengthy groan of martyrdom.

Focusing on her grocery list, Catherine bit back a grin. "Oh, poor you' being kept after school, huh?"

" *'AGAIN'*." Vincent answered wryly. Folding his long body into the chair next to hers, he peered over at the shopping list. "Did I tell you that we're running low on conditioner and shampoo?"

"Uh huh, and don't blame me. You're the one with *'bad hair days'*." She pointed her pencil in his direction. "And, the next time *'your'* son decides to give the cat a bath, please remind him that Shakespeare doesn't *'like'* being bathed, will you?"

'His son?' Vincent eyed her furtively. *'Why was it when Jacob misbehaves, he was 'HIS' son?'* In an attempt at appeasement, he patted her hand. "I don't imagine Jacob will do that again, Catherine. Will's yowls of chagrin must still be ringing in *'OUR'* son's ears, as is your chastisement at his dastardly act."

She glowered at him. "That pathetic cat. When I think of how wild-eyed that sappy animal looked when he came streaking out of the bathroom with Jacob hot on his heels waving the damned hair dryer at him! Your son scared Will half to death!"

Vincent's eyes narrowed. She'd said it again in that same tone. *'His son!'* "As I remember, the soap in the cat's eyes did appear to exacerbate the situation somewhat." He chuckled low in his throat. "Watching Jacob chase that unfortunate creature around the room was a bit disconcerting, but once I'd determined that he hadn't hurt Will, I admit it was a rather amusing spectacle."

"Amusing!" Catherine retorted. "I don't recall you being quite so *'AMUSED'* when the cat leapt on top of your head to escape the dryer."

"Nuh," Vincent grunted derisively. "The malicious thing opted to choose that precise moment to shake himself dry. I received the full brunt of the water, and the residual soapsuds. " He shuddered at the memory.

"Jacob apologized to you for that. The look in your eyes told him that he'd better." Settling her chin onto one hand, Catherine tapped the pencil on the middle of her forehead. "Can you think of anything else we're low on before I finish the list?"

"Yes." Vincent flashed her a wounded look. "Your friend Jennifer devoured all of my chocolate ice cream last Wednesday night."

"Oh, I nearly forgot that." One item was scribbled down, then another added as she reminded him. "And you and Joe guzzled all of my root beer watching that endless baseball game Sunday, and snarfed up all of the frozen pizza snacks, too!"

Although he tried looking contrite, Vincent didn't quite pull it off. "The snacks were quite spicy. I simply couldn't resist them."

She shot him a baleful look. "You have all the willpower of a.... a.... desiccated *'SPONGE.'* Next time, resist harder! Besides, I thought you loathe the ones with anchovies? That's why I bought those in the first place, so *'I'd get'* some this time." Exasperated green eyes narrowed as they locked to his. "The pizza snacks were mine, Vincent."

"Yes, I know. That fact made eating them even more enjoyable." Reaching out to touch Catherine's arm, Vincent yanked his hand back as she drew a bead on it with her pencil. *'Feisty wench, this.'*

Hastily grabbing the computer manual, he stood up and headed for the refuge of the couch, thereby saving both his dignity and his fingers. Stretching his long legs out in front of him, he dug his bare toes into the carpet and settled in to study his *'MISERABLE'* homework.

Keeping her eyes focused on the rapidly growing shopping list, Catherine sneered softly. But not 'TOO' softly, "Men can be so selfish...."

Talking to herself, which Vincent seemed to do a lot since he'd met this woman, he muttered, "Why on earth did I fall in love with such an irascible female?"

She grinned over at him. "I guess I just out-stubborned you, huh?"

"So it would seem." Opening the box of chocolates on the table beside him, Vincent began poking through them, searching for one that was still intact. Holding up a piece of the candy, he pointed to its mashed in top. "Catherine, why in God's name must you pulverize 'all' of them in this odious manner?"

She didn't look up. "So I can find all the ones you like, and eat them first."

"You're incorrigible!"

She ducked as a candy wrapper whizzed by her right ear. "Ha, you missed!"

Vincent's response was a distinct threat. "That was merely a practice shot."

As they settled down to their varied chores, an harmonious silence settled over the room. For a few minutes, tranquility reigned. The only sounds heard were the scratch of a pencil on paper, and the sluggish flipping of pages in a 'beyond' boring book of higher mathematics. Each turn of a page was accompanied by the groan of frustration until....

" 'GKKKK'!..." A half strangled grunt was followed by the sound of Vincent choking.

Turning in her chair, Catherine spied him hunched forward on the edge of the couch digging furiously at his teeth with a forefinger.

"Are you all right?" When he shook his head and pointed to his mouth, she asked, "What is it?" and rushed toward him.

With a thunderous look in his eyes, Vincent tried to breathe normally as he slammed the lid on the candy box closed, then glared at it as though about to bite a chunk out of its nefarious velvet dome.

Finally understanding his predicament, Catherine rubbed his back sympathetically. "Oh, did you get another caramel?"

Nodding rapidly, he held up two fingers. "Mmfff." Eyes pleading with hers, he gestured frantically towards the kitchen.

"Right," Catherine nodded. "One glass of warm water coming up. But really, love. I think the next time It would be wiser if you ate the ones I'd already squashed...."

Reading her notes for Monday's trial, Catherine glanced up now and then, watching and listening as the two men in her life had their third dispute in as many minutes over a game of Nintendo.

"No, daddy!" Jacob wailed. "You just can't move your man like that!"

Leaning forward, engrossed in the game Vincent thought he was on the verge of winning, his expression was one of utter innocence.

"I can't? But why, it worked, didn't it? Your men are mired in my swamp. I have you now!"

Giving him a rueful look, Catherine turned to the next page in her summary. *'Brother, when he gloated over something, Vincent seemed just about the same age as their son.'(Oh well, the poor dear wins so few games, perhaps he deserves his small amount of triumph. Even if he did probably connive his way into it)*

She watched surreptitiously as their son took his turn, grinning to herself as she caught on to exactly where he was leading his father. *'Oh, oh (Get him, Jacob! It will serve daddy right if he loses. Bragging over defeating a child, for Lord's sakes!)*

Startled by the boy's sudden and thoroughly unexpected ploy, Vincent gasped. "No!", horrified as Jacob outmaneuvered his remaining game pieces and sent them to their doom in the Swamp of Pern.

"Gotcha, daddy!"

He stared at the screen in disbelief. "How did that happen? What have you done to me?"

Fighting off the urge to howl, Catherine bit her lower lip (*'My' son just whipped your gorgeous rear end, that's what he did. The little dear.*).

As though he'd read her mind, Vincent glanced over at her. " *'That'* was uncalled for, and quite unworthy of you."

Burying her nose in her paperwork, she whispered. "Sorry."

"Untrue," he charged. "You are not sorry in the least."

"You got it."

As the smell of Jacob's popcorn teased her nostrils, Catherine's tummy began rumbling. She decided to get something to eat. On her way into the kitchen, she patted Vincent's arm in a gesture of commiseration, knowing how much he hated being clobbered by his son in the games they played. "I'm going to make a sandwich. Would you like something?"

"Yes, please."

Quite aware that this latest round of father-son competition had indeed been abysmally lost, Vincent eyed the heretofore cherished boy who now grinned wickedly as he marched around the room, boasting in a sing-song voice, "I got daddy, I *'GOT'* daddy...."

Wondering from exactly *'who'* his child had inherited such pedestrian genes, Vincent sneered. "I would like something to drink. If you can find any, a nice, cold glass of hemlock would be ideal at the moment."

Flipping him a thumbs up sign, she bit back a giggle. "I'll see what I can do."

At seven pm, there was a soft tapping at the front door of the Chandler-Wells apartment.

"That must be Kipper!" Jacob flung his backpack over one shoulder, kissed his parents goodnight and started to open the door. Drawing back, remembering the rules always used while Above, he stood on tiptoe and peered through the peephole. "Yeah, it's him."

When Vincent barely looked up from his book to acknowledge the knock, Catherine smiled, remembering how that sound would have had him vanishing into the night seven years earlier. Hugging her son, she reminded him.

"Behave for your grandfather, okay? Daddy will come and get you tomorrow night around eight."

Just as he turned to hug his father, Jacob beamed at her, his face glowing with excitement. "Daddy will get me? *'AW RIGHT!'* I want another ride on top of the elevator with him! Did he ever let you ride up there, mommy? It's awesome! Huh, daddy?"

"Hmmm...." After hugging his son, Vincent sent him on his way.

With that, Jacob opened the door, greeted Kipper, and was quickly gone. As the door slammed,

Vincent closed his eyes and winced. Oh, blast his *'sure daddy, I can keep a secret, son!'* The jig was most definitely up.

"What...." Standing over him, hands at her hips, so angry she was sputtering. ".... where...." Catherine nailed him with a fiery scowl that was so powerful, he swore it was burning into his belly button. "Where did my child say he'd been allowed to ride!"

Edging back in his chair, Vincent wished she would make up her mind. Now, it seemed Jacob was her child. He returned her look with one of trepidation. "On top of the...."

Hunkering down to eyeball him, Catherine breathed the words right up into his bristly nose. "I *'HEARD'* what he said!"

Now, this man had indeed led a somewhat sheltered life. He'd never actually seen a *'conniption'* before. He hoped never to see one again. From the look on his beloved's face, his goose was not only cooked, it was basted, carved and ready to be served up on a platter - as was his arse.

"On *'TOP'* of the *'ELEVATOR!'*" Catherine shrieked, and whomped him roundly on top of the head. "Vincent, how could you!"

"Now, love, let me explain...." He held his hands up in a gesture of apology. "It was only the one time, and he did ask so politely."

Whatever he was telling, she wasn't buying. "I see. Jacob can do whatever he wants to, as long as he's polite about asking? Ohhhh....!"

urning, Catherine strode towards the kitchen with a very determined look on her face.

Rubbing his assaulted noggin, Vincent jumped to his feet and followed her. "What are you going to do?"

Her answer was in a tone of a very out-of-patience mother who had finally lost her mind. "Do? *'DO?'* I'm going to *'FIND'* that hemlock you wanted earlier and *'FORCE FEED'* it to you!"

Not being dull of wit, he kept his thoughts private (*why not simply give me some of your spaghetti sauce instead, Catherine? That would finish me off.... much, much faster*).

'LATER THAT SAME EVENING....'

Silently praising his perfect sense of timing, Vincent leaned back against the bedroom door. Arms akimbo, he watched through gleaming, lustful eyes as Catherine bent over to tuck in the end of a bed sheet. *'Ah, yes, what a splendid view.'* He was certain that the Grand Canyon had nothing on this. After admiring the sight for a moment more, he moved with catlike grace to stand behind her. Right behind her.

"Would you like some help?"

"No, thanks." Poking a finger through the hole in the bedsheet. she wriggled it back and forth , shooting him a look of impatience.

"You promised to cut your toenails yesterday. I see you forgot - again. Excuse me...." Nudging him to one side, Catherine grinned to herself. *'Oh, the look in his eyes was priceless.'*

As she moved to the upper end of the bed, her slightly bouncing bottom called to Vincent - loudly. When two huge palms closed over her rear end, Catherine jumped, startled, and slapped them away.

"Stop that! If you're through studying, I'd appreciate it if you'd load the dishwasher for me." Knowing exactly where this was leading, she hid a grin and bent over to reach for a pillow.

From behind her, Vincent's eyes traveled the length of her body. He licked his lips expectantly.

"Dishwasher? Yes, later...."

Stretching the sheet, she wiggled higher on the bed. "But, if you don't put the dishes in water, the food...."

"I said *'later'*...."

As the world spun crazily, Catherine found herself laying flat on the bed, the rest of her words smothered as a hungry mouth claimed hers. Wriggling down happily, she wrapped both arms around her lover's neck and settled her hips down into a more readily accessible position.

"I thought you were the patient type?"

Sliding one hand between them, Vincent quickly unsnapped the single rivet on his jeans. Pushing his body into her fingers, he closed his eyes and buried his face against her shoulder, whispering hoarsely, "Patient? Not anymore. Not when I want you as much as I do now, in the way that I always want you. At the moment, the word *'patient'* is not part of my vocabulary."

Sliding the jeans down over his hips, she edged one finger along the waistband of his briefs, stroking lightly; tormenting the hell out of him. "Oh? What words are?"

Not even attempting to turn aside his eagerness, he pushed her knees apart almost roughly and rose to the full extent of his arms, his tone rough with passion. "Words such as need.... want.... words such as *'hunger'*." Blue prisms of flame blazed into hers. "Pull down my pants, now, or I shall take you without removing them at all."

'Oh, she loved him this way.' Although she enjoyed all of his varied moods, this was the Vincent that really curled her toes. Wanting him just as much as he wanted her, Catherine did as he asked.

Driven by needs he knew would never have to be contained again, and being a healthy male of his exceptional species, Vincent now enjoyed a quite energetic sex life - and he enjoyed it as often as he could. Here, with Catherine, protected by her trust and faith in him, he lived life as fully as any other man would live it.

In her light, through her eyes, he'd finally come to believe that to her, he was beautiful, and that he was also a man. Being able to drink in those truths deeply, to the depth of his soul, had freed him completely. With her guidance these last years, Vincent had learned how to explore all of the ways to both give and receive what passion offered him without fear. He now trod that path with courage, and oh, how he could *'love.'*

Trembling, knowing that he was accepted unconditionally, he tried to be patient. He fought to control his urgency, but it wasn't possible. He'd been too empty for far too many years. He would never again deny either Catherine or himself the pleasures making love could bring. And, he had learned his lessons.... quite well.

Seizing a pillow, Vincent slipped it under Catherine's hips, wanting her at the best possible angle for penetration. Finding his position quickly, he clenched his toes in the mattress, snapped his pelvis down hard, and possessed her with a sinuous, undulating roll of his hips. As her body clutched at him, he jerked wildly. Desperately, he tried to go deeper, needing Catherine to a depth of ardor only she would ever know - or be witness to.

Tensing as her gasped sobs of fulfillment drew him nearer the edge, the intensity of her orgasm swept through Vincent. Unraveling mastery over his body, her completion enticed him towards his own, much needed release. Trembling with the effort, fighting to prolong the pleasure, he locked his forearms and flung back his head. Baring his teeth as her slick heat rippled along his span, he closed his eyes as control became merely a word.

Instinctively knowing that the next drive of his pelvis would be the final one, he lowered his head,

panting excitedly. "One more stroke, just one, just...."

"Vincent," Catherine pleaded. "Now...."

Curling his fingers under her tensed bottom, vanquished eyes locked to her as he lifted her from the bed. "Yes," he gasped. "Now, for I.... cannot.... hold, nor can I.... stop!" Pressing down hard into an urgency that could no longer be turned aside, he thundered into her furiously. Holding her still beneath one last shuddering thrust, her cries of joy mingled with his own lusty shouts of redemption.

The sounds Vincent made were not those of an animal lost in the act of mounting his mate. His cries were those of a man deeply in love; a man now lost in the throes of a normal, healthy ejaculation.

Hearts pounding in cadence, breathlessly the lovers collapsed to the bed as one, sated----replete.

Stumbling towards the bathroom on legs not yet steady, Vincent came back and holding a face cloth and sat down on the bed next to Catherine. Almost shyly, he leaned over her and began to wash away the remaining evidence of his passion. As he did, she reached up and swept long strands of amber hair back from his face.

"You're insatiable."

"For you? Always." He answered with utter candor. "Was there any doubt of that?"

The look on his face was one of utter peace; awash with love's afterglow. "Catherine, since the night I discovered you in Central Park, I have loved you beyond any words that could define the sensation."

Gripping him gently by the chin, she smiled up into his eyes. "In the end, no words were necessary. Seven years ago, we *'went with courage, and we went with care.'*" She moved her palm to the side of his face. "And we ended up...."

Vincent's tone was earthy - sensual. "We ended up in this bed." Laying on the pillow facing her, he shook his head in disbelief. Even now he wasn't always certain he wasn't dreaming; that all of this wasn't just a fanciful illusion on his part. Putting one hand behind his head, he looked over, reminding her, "You told me once that you weren't meant to have a simple life."

"I was wrong." Weaving her fingers into Vincent's hairy chest, she snuggled down on top of his as a child would. When she nibbled on the tip of his nose, she giggled as he went momentarily cockeyed. "If this is a simple life, it's exactly what I want, as long as I can share it with you and our son."

"Forever." He nuzzled her shoulder. "To you, our life together is one of simplicity; the life you were always so certain we could have." Bringing her hand to his mouth, Vincent kissed her fingers in a soft, nuzzling way. "To me, what we share is a miracle, one I never dared to dream of, until you came into my life." Holding her close, he curved one leg over hers confidently, possessively.

Wrapping both arms around Vincent as if to protect him, Catherine shielded her best treasure as she always had and always would. "I love you."

"Yes, I know." Urging her eyes to his, Vincent offered Catherine a flash of sharply glittering teeth, his smile as expansive and serene as his life was. "I've always known."

'SOMETIME LATER....'

Vincent peered up from his book as Catherine came into the bedroom. "Was that Joe Maxwell on the telephone?"

"Uh-huh. It seems the 'GAME' is on for Sunday night." Sighing wearily, she plucked down on the edge of the bed. "You men and your blasted baseball games! I wanted to visit Mary that night."

He looked puzzled. "Why can't you go without me?"

"What! And leave you two chow hounds loose in my refrigerator! No way," she teased. "I'll just stay home and sew or do something else equally boring. Then again, maybe I'll ask Jenny to come over and keep me company."

Vincent turned a page in his book without looking up. "If you do, then I shall be the one guarding the refrigerator."

"You're too late." Just as he glanced up, she stuck her tongue out at him. "I finished the chocolate ice cream earlier, and the rest of William's brownies too."

"Are you saying...." Twin pools of blue nailed her with an appalled expression. ".... that you consumed 'FOUR' brownies?"

Smiling at him, Catherine patted her tummy. "Yep. I was hungry."

"That fact is quite obvious." Turning to the next page of his book, he grunted, "Stingy wench."

"I was just getting even." She nudged him. "'You' ate all of 'MY' pizza snacks a few weeks ago, as I remember. But, I did leave you some of the lemon cookies."

"Of course you did." His voice dripped with sarcasm. "You don't like the lemon ones."

Laughing, Catherine reached towards her nightstand. "Do you remember our discussion a while ago about a.... simple life?"

Catching the odd tone in her voice, Vincent laid his book aside. "Of course I remember it. Why do you ask?"

She gave him a mysterious shrug. "Well, it's coming to an end, at least for a while."

"An.... end?" The concern in his voice was quite evident. "What are you trying to tell me, Catherine?" His eyes searched hers. "Are you going.... away? Has Joe Maxwell talked you into resuming investigative work?"

"No, it's nothing like that. I promised, remember?"

"Yes, I remember," he whispered, nearly choking with relief.

Reaching further into the nightstand, she tugged out a well-thumbed book. Holding it out towards Vincent, she got ready to catch him if or when he fainted. "Do you recognize this?"

Eyeing the title, he chuckled. "Ah, yes, how could I ever forget it? Doctor Spock helped me through many an anxious night when you were.... carrying...."

Smiling at him, Catherine waited.

Vincent jerked upright on the bed. "Are you...." As he stared at her, the look on his face was one of joy mingled with wide-eyed incredulity. He searched their connection, then gasped as he honed in on her emotions. "You 'are' pregnant!"

Nodding her head, Catherine ran one finger over the cover of the book he was clenching tightly in one hand. "Most definitely, and only off the pill for two months. It was hard for me to keep my secret for even the few hours since Peter confirmed it. It thought surely you'd sense something was going on."

Knowing he was babbling like an utter idiot, Vincent couldn't help himself. "I.... there.... I felt nothing until this moment. How can that be? How did you manage to keep me from knowing?"

Tilting her head, his lady gave him a very enigmatic look. "Do you think you're the only one that can *'handle'* the bond when you feel like it? Peter made me a bet, saying that I couldn't so it. Ha! Does he ever owe me a fancy lunch."

Suddenly, as old fears rose like specters, Vincent looked away. "Are you pleased about.... this?"

"Why do you think I wanted to stop taking the pill? Of course I'm pleased." She hugged him as hard as she could. "I've been praying for this, Vincent. I want more children - *'your'* children."

"Oh, my love...." With shaking hands, he enfolded Catherine to his heart. "A child, a sister or brother for Jacob. How marvelous! Wait until we tell Father that he'll have another grandchild to quite thoroughly spoil."

Leaning back to look up into Vincent's face, she did a very curious thing. She waggled her eyebrows at him and then winked! "There's a chapter in the book you'd better study, Vincent, my love. You didn't have to read that one when I was carrying Jacob."

"Which chapter do you mean?" He studied the cover of the book intently. "I read all of them, Catherine; many times."

Taking the book from him, she opened it to the middle and handed it back. "Even this one?"

As he looked down at the title of the chapter, Vincent was immensely grateful that she was holding him tightly around the waist, for he nearly did tumble off of the bed. Swallowing with some difficulty, he read the title aloud. "The C.... Care...." Clearing his throat, he tried again. "The Care and N.... Nurturing of Tr.... Triplets."

His eyes were as round as saucers as they met Catherine's. "Three?" he whispered, as though certain he'd misunderstood her.

She grinned at him ironically. "That's what Peter says." Patting Vincent's stunned face, Catherine laughed joyously and ruffled his tawny hair. "You and your eager, lusty little sperm. Bye-bye, simple life!"

END