

UNDER THE TRAVELING CORDLESS MOON

The day had started out so well.

That was about all you could say for it, Catherine thought. It had *started* out well.

She'd woken just before the alarm went off—something that happened infrequently lately with all the late nights on the balcony with Vincent. Usually she was dragged, silently kicking and screaming, into consciousness after all too little sleep by a high-pitched, grating, insistent electronic beep. Today, for some reason, she had drifted easily out of a pleasant dream into the gentle gold of a spring morning before becoming a victim of the alarm clock.

It made a nice change.

There had been ample hot water in the shower—another minor miracle considering the trouble the building had been having with the boiler lately—and a new outfit in the closet just waiting for its first public appearance. When she left home, she looked good, and she knew it. More importantly, she was comfortable, and those were two things that didn't always go together given the current state of fashion. She had been especially pleased with the soft suede boots that seemed to have been molded to her feet. Boots that supported her arches, left ample room for her toes, had heels that were “in” without being punishing and that looked as good as they felt.

Boots that were now completely ruined as they squelched through mud and muck on this ridiculous quest to save Mouse from himself.

It wasn't how she'd thought she was going to be spending the evening.

When Bennie the bicycle messenger had hailed her from across the street—“Hey, gorgeous!”—she'd turned to him with joy, heartbeat accelerating as always at the thought of a message from Vincent—and he hadn't disappointed her.

The heavy, cream-colored envelope, the flowing script, the welcome invitation.
The children are giving a concert tonight.

That was all.

No start time. No “please join us.” No protestations of eternal devotion.

Just his initial, that single letter that seemed both regal and lonely in its solitariness. The signature that caused her heart to flutter at the thought of the assurance implicit in it—she would know it was from him because there could be no other—and to sink at the thought

of the secrecy that required it. Never—well, rarely—a full signature. Nothing that could prompt questions or give anyone a hint, a lead, should it fall into the wrong hands.

Today, however, she focused on the assurance. It made her smile to think that he knew she would be there, that she now knew his world well enough to know what time to arrive without prompting, and that the loving words were superfluous. What need of words when she could feel him with her, feel his love, and knew that he could feel hers?

It didn't mean she didn't want to hear the words sometime. But she knew it was coming, and she could wait. Perhaps tonight, she'd thought, as she'd thanked Bennie and continued swiftly, easily, on her way to the office.

It was that kind of day.

A passing cab, no traffic, an early arrival and good news at the start of the work day. Judge Roth had refused bail and Fratelli was off the street. Joe was happy—and when Joe was happy, everything just went better all around.

Rita located the witness she needed in the Svenborg case, and the woman wanted to cooperate. The city lifted its budget freeze, and Moreno sent offer letters to two new attorneys before the ink was dry on the announcement. One of the paralegals had suddenly surfaced and taken half the paperwork off her desk. She'd gotten out of the office on time.

Well, maybe not on *time*.

She'd left by six, however, and that passed for “on time” these days.

There had even been time for a quick bite to eat before she'd descended into the basement, down the ladder and practically fell into Vincent's waiting arms.

“Catherine.”

She'd shivered, as always, at the sound of her name in that voice, the bow that swept across her heartstrings and sent the sweetest music vibrating through her, body and soul, in a way that she could no longer hide from him.

She often tried to hide it, however, knowing he struggled so with his own responses and not wanting to make it difficult for him. Tonight, though—tonight, she clasped him tighter and rejoiced in the feel of his body against hers and the involuntary tightening of his arms. The small sigh—no more than a breath, really—was almost her undoing. She felt, rather than heard, the tiny rumble in his chest, and felt, too, the barest beginning of his usual panic response. Before it could grip him completely, she removed herself from his arms.

“Vincent. Are you well?”

He’d shaken his head a bit dazedly, but she knew enough to know that it wasn’t in answer to her question.

“Come,” she said, holding out her hand. “The children are waiting.”

It had seemed so promising.

Beautiful music. The safety of numbers.

Alone in a crowd, as they so often were, the bond allowing them a privacy that transcended any company.

She had leaned against his solid warmth and allowed herself to dream.

A beautiful dream.

Nothing like this sodden, slashing reality.

Vincent’s tension had communicated itself to her instantly. She’d turned instinctively toward where his own gaze was directed. In the next moment, they’d risen in unison and made their unobtrusive way toward the corridor where Jamie waited in some agitation.

“Jamie?”

“It’s Mouse,” Jamie announced. “He’s gone Above.”

“Mouse often goes Above,” Vincent said. “I’m sure he will return soon.”

“No, you don’t understand! It’s a thunderstorm. He took a key.”

Catherine had looked from one to the other in puzzlement. There was no need of keys Below. Had Mouse found a key to some place full of treasures? Treasures he might “take, not steal?”

“And a kite,” Jamie finished, in a voice of doom.

“A kite?” Catherine asked—but she was talking to an empty tunnel.

Both Vincent and Jamie had rounded the corridor and were well on their way to the Park entrance.

She hurried after them and repeated her question, a little more insistently.

“Vincent? A kite?”

Without breaking stride, he explained. “We have been discussing electricity in one of my classes for the past few days. Mouse came to answer some of the more practical questions.”

Jamie gave an unladylike snort. “Practical!? ‘Twist red thingie onto silver gizmo.’”

“In all fairness, Jamie, he did offer some safety tips.”

“Yes. ‘Don’t touch wires. Bad idea. Worse than worst. ZZzzzzzzzt!’”

Catherine had grinned at Jamie’s impression of an electric shock as conveyed by Mouse. She could almost see him doing it.

In the next moment, however, she lost all inclination to grin.

“We were discussing the history of the discovery of electricity. . .” Vincent began explaining.

“. . .and you, naturally, related the story of Benjamin Franklin,” Catherine supplied.

“And the kite. And the key,” Jamie finished, gloomily.

Suddenly, their alarm made some sense. Catherine couldn’t remember all the details of the Franklin legend, but it didn’t seem like a good idea for Mouse to be out in a thunderstorm, serving as a human lightning rod.

She quickened her pace.

Which is how she came to be trudging through the Park in this driving rainstorm, soaked to the skin, ruining her new boots, hoarse from shouting. Worried about Mouse. Worried about Vincent.

There had been that brief, fierce argument in the drainage tunnel as he’d tried to persuade her to stay Below, and she’d tried to convince him that she would be perfectly all right. No sane human enemy would be out on a night like this. She’d wanted him to stay safe and dry, and he’d wanted her to remain behind, and, while they were arguing, Jamie had plunged into the rain and the howling darkness.

They’d followed after, argument forgotten, although the little spurt of annoyance with each other had contributed, perhaps, to the ease with which they’d decided to split up and cover more ground.

In fact, Catherine realized that her own internal monologue was full of a mounting anger toward Vincent.

Why in the hell would he tell that story?! To Mouse?! she thought. Of all people. Doesn't he have sense enough to know better?!

She had sense enough to know, however, that she wasn't being reasonable. She was cold and wet, and she felt her idyllic evening slipping away from her. She wanted to lash out at someone, and Vincent was just the handiest target.

So far.

It would be lucky for Mouse if she *wasn't* the one to find him first.

It would be lucky for all of them, she thought, if they got back safely. The wind was fierce. It was turning the raindrops into icy needles and tree limbs into dangerous projectiles.

When she did find Mouse, standing on top of one of the granite outcrops, artfully left behind all those years ago when designers Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux supervised the blasting and removal of most of the Park's huge boulders, she could barely keep her footing on the rain-slick rock. In fact, she would have fallen had Vincent not materialized behind her, blocking the wind and the rain with his sturdy frame and helping her and Mouse both down into the lee of the boulder and back across the Great Lawn.

Somewhere along the way, Jamie rejoined them, and all four of them staggered back to the drainage tunnel.

For a moment, they simply rested, enjoying the sudden respite from the storm and the shelter provided by the tunnel.

Then Mouse sighed over the sodden string still clutched, with the key, in his hand. The kite had escaped.

"Too much rain," he said, forlornly. "Wind stole kite. Can't catch electricity."

Vincent spoke softly, his voice a gentle reprimand.

*"A kite is a contract of glory
that must be made with the sun. . ."*

"Wait for the sunlight, Mouse," he said. "You need a spring afternoon. Gentle breezes."

"*Not* a hurricane," Catherine added.

“Hurricane?!”

They could see Mouse’s face brightening, and Jamie grabbed his arm.

“It’s just a figure of speech! This isn’t a hurricane. You better get Below and get out of those wet clothes! And stop chasing storm clouds. Father won’t like it.” She opened the gate and hurried Mouse through it.

Vincent and Catherine could hear her scolding him as the two figures vanished into the tunnels.

She turned toward Vincent, then, and a humorous comment died unspoken on her lips. There was a most un-Vincent-like look on his face. If she didn’t know him so well, she’d have sworn she’d just caught him ogling the way her wet clothing was clinging to her frame. The thought quickened her pulse and, she was sure, gave him more to ogle as her body responded involuntarily to his avid perusal. Instinctively, she crossed her arms.

In the next breath, she caught herself and deliberately uncrossed them, meeting his bemused glance with a questioning look of her own.

Was this it?

Had their moment come?

It hung in the balance for a span of several heartbeats, and then he seemed to gather his control around him with his cloak. He exhaled on a great shuddering breath and spoke in a carefully regulated, almost expressionless tone.

“We should go Below.”

“And get out of these wet clothes?” she challenged him.

“Please, Catherine.”

“Yes,” she sighed, letting him off the hook, but she knew he heard her repeat Jamie’s words under her breath as she followed him into the Tunnels.

“Father won’t like it.”

The day had started out so well.

Back in Vincent’s chamber, he supplied them both with towels, and they concentrated on mopping up the surface dampness. As he removed the wet towel from her hand and handed her another, drier one, he carefully brushed one lock of hair out of her eyes. She

could feel the hard nail just barely touching her forehead. It sent a tingle all the way down her spine. Suddenly, she felt like she couldn't breathe and, at the same time, that she was doing nothing but breathing him in. The rain had washed away the aroma of candles and smoke that usually clung to him and left only his own, unique, intoxicating scent behind. She inhaled greedily, aware that she was making him uncomfortable but unable to stop herself.

He took a step backward.

Quickly, to prevent him from leaving, she said the first thing that came into her mind.

“That quote. About the kite. And the ‘contract of glory.’ What’s it from?”

Her voice rang a little hollowly in her own ears, but he answered naturally enough.

“A poem by Leonard Cohen.”

He turned quickly to the bookcase and pulled a slim volume off the shelf. Leafing through the pages, he found the one he wanted and handed it to her.

“A Kite is a Victim?” she asked, and when he nodded, she continued to read the first few lines in a voice still husky with unexpressed emotion.

*“A kite is a victim you are sure of.
You love it because it pulls
gentle enough to call you master,”*

She'd gazed up at him then, knowing he could see all her love and desire in her eyes, the half-formed wish that he would have the courage to take the mastery she offered freely.

But he had taken up the verse, from memory, and spoke it now in a tone of gentle rebuke, “*strong enough to call you fool; . . .*”

“Never that, Vincent,” she'd assured him, and he'd gone on, somewhat desperately.

*“because it lives
like a desperate trained falcon
in the high sweet air,”*

Once again, they'd entered into dangerous territory. The poem itself had become the articulation of the struggle. He was equating her with the falcon, flying free above him. As real, as physical, as their need for each other was, it would always find eternal expression in words, in metaphor, in poetry. There was no sense fighting against that, she knew—but maybe she could turn it to her advantage.

As he moved away from her toward the big chest of drawers, using the need to get dry clothes for her as an excuse to break the tension, her eyes scanned the rest of the poem.

A wave of quiet certainty washed over her.

When he put his hand on the soft Tunnel gown he'd kept for her since her father's death, she was at his shoulder, her own hand covering his and her voice offering the last few lines of the verse as a promise.

“ . . . *you can always haul it down
to tame it in your drawer.*”

There was an eternity of the loudest silence she had ever known.

Catherine tried to let all the love she felt, all the trust, all the need mingle in a single all-encompassing wave of feeling, of longing.

I am yours, Vincent. Whatever I am. Kite, falcon, victim, master. Anything and everything. I am yours. I am 'the victim you are sure of,' 'the fish you have already caught.' You are already 'worthy and lyric and pure.' All you have to do is take me. Take what is offered. What belongs to you.

She thought she might have spoken it aloud, it was thundering so strongly through her veins.

'Can't catch electricity,' Mouse had said.

That wasn't true. You could catch it. You *must* be able to catch it.

If you tried.

The 'contract of glory.' It's here, Vincent. I'm here. Just open your heart. Open your arms.

Blue eyes met green—and smiled.

The day had started out so well.

Now—maybe—finally—against all odds—

It was going to end well, too.

All quotes from Leonard Cohen's "*A Kite is a Victim.*"