

“Blessings”

by Jodie Boyle

Winter had arrived early in New York City. No snow just yet, but icy winds had wrecked havoc the last few weeks, causing blackouts and traffic accidents. Many residents had stayed indoors as much as possible, trying to stay warm and not to think of January and the long, cold winter months.

Catherine wasn't thinking of the New Year, but she was warm. This afternoon had seen her bake up a storm. Gingerbread cookies, pumpkin pie, and pecan and chocolate chip brownies. Catherine wasn't well known for her culinary skills; most dinners were either eaten out or brought home from her local deli. But while de-cluttering her apartment, she had come across her Mother's favourite recipes book.

She was surprised to find it, and after making a cup of tea, she had pulled up a chair in her kitchen and looked through it. Her eyes misted as she saw her mother's handwriting. Not a day went by that she wasn't in her thoughts. Memories flooded through as she remembered the times she and her mother would be in the kitchen, when she was a little girl. Catherine would help by mixing, pouring and most importantly licking the bowl. Her mom would always let her eat the first cookie out of the oven and give her the biggest slice of cake.

I love and miss you so much, Mom.

Reading the recipe book had inspired her to bake. Now she smiled as she surveyed the finished results. She was starting to feel tired after so much cooking so she sank into the sofa, curled on her side, and closed her eyes.

Her favourite sound awoke her, the tap-tap-tap on her balcony doors. It took her a few moments to rouse herself, and then she went to her dining room, opened the doors, and was rewarded with an icy gust of wind. Vincent looked magnificent, standing on the balcony, his hair blowing around him, blue eyes resting softly and intently upon her. She knew that she would never tire of looking at her love. There were times, like now, when she wanted to freeze time.

She reached him first and wrapped her arms around his waist.

“It's so cold. Come inside,” she told him as she took his hand and led him inside.

Vincent's mouth started watering as he inhaled the delicious scents of cinnamon, nutmeg, brown sugar, and chocolate.

“William makes delicious food, but it doesn’t smell as heavenly as what you are cooking now.”

She smiled and showed him her creations.

“As soon as they cool down, I’ll give you some to try.”

“I came tonight to see that you were well...and to invite you to Thanksgiving dinner. Are you free, tomorrow evening?”

“Oh, that would be wonderful. I’d love to come. It’s a great idea, having Thanksgiving a day earlier.”

“Yes, we like to have celebrations tomorrow night with our friends and family. The following day we visit our Helpers and take food to those that have no families to celebrate the holiday.”

“That’s so thoughtful, Vincent.” She took his hand and kissed his palm. What an amazing man he was.

It was busy at work the next day, but she managed to get to the market during her lunch hour. She picked up the remaining items on her shopping list after work. Vincent greeted her and picked up her packages. Slightly disappointed that she couldn’t hold his hand, she linked her arm through his and they began their walk to the home tunnels. After leaving everything in Vincent’s chamber, they went to the library. Every time Catherine visited, she was in awe of this beautiful space. Stained glass lamps, candles, and the wonderful collection of books. Catherine had visited many libraries, but Father’s was her favourite.

“Happy Thanksgiving, Father” Catherine exclaimed as she hugged and kissed him on the cheek.

“Thank you, my dear. Happy Thanksgiving to you, too. I’m glad you could join us.”

“I’m honoured.”

After having tea with Father, the next stop was the kitchen. Controlled chaos ruled. William stirred, tasted, directed the assistants, and alternated between yelling and laughing. Catherine received a crushing bear hug from the cook and she returned his embrace, happily. She had a soft spot for William. As much as he came across as a grumpy old man, he was a sweet soul, caring and fiercely protective.

“Is there anything I can do to help, William?”

“No, thank you. You’re a guest. You’ll make me happy if you enjoy dinner.”

“Oh, I will, I’m sure. I did bring a few desserts to share, if that’s alright?”

“Vincent! You didn’t tell me your lady could cook. I’m going to have to taste some right now.”

Catherine longed to see the children, so they went to the children’s bedrooms. All was quiet there; not a tunnel child in sight. Returning to the kitchen, they came across Kanin, who was carrying a box of fruit.

“Hello, Kanin. Happy Thanksgiving. We were looking for the children. Have you seen them?”

“Happy Thanksgiving to you, too, Catherine. You’ll find the kids in the Great Hall. They’re on table decoration duty and having a wonderful time, no doubt. See you soon.”

Catherine hugged Vincent around the waist as they descended the staircase to the Great Hall. The wind was slightly warmer than Above, but she still shivered. Vincent kept her warm. He always did.

From the whistling wind, they entered the hall to laughter and warmth. A flash of brown hair was all Catherine saw; as Samantha threw herself into Catherine’s embrace.

“Everything looks beautiful, Samantha. You’ve been busy.”

“I’m in charge. I’m making the boys do all the hard work. The girls and I are decorating,” Samantha advised solemnly.

“May I help you?”

“Would you like to put the pumpkins on the table?”

“Sounds great!”

Samantha took Catherine’s hand and led her to the longest table. After cuddles with the other children, they helped with the decorating. The table, the hall, everywhere she looked was beautiful.

The children left the Great Hall and returned to their rooms to get ready for dinner. Catherine and Vincent went to his chamber and waited for the call that would summon them to the feast.

“I’m so happy I’m here. Each time I visit, I feel calm and relaxed. It’s like the world above doesn’t exist. To think for years I never knew of this place. I wish I had met you years ago, Vincent.” She smiled and took his hand in hers.

“Yes. It is a special place. I’m happy to call it home. I have often craved, and still do, your world Above. Do you know I’ve only seen the sunlight a few times? I know the city’s shadows. I, too, would like to have met you long ago.” Vincent brushed his fingers against the back of her hand. Such a simple gesture, but one that meant so much. They sat in silence for a while, words were not needed; just sitting next to each other was special.

The message came over the pipes and they walked to the Great Hall once more. Vincent carried the Thanksgiving presents Catherine had brought.

If the Great Hall looked beautiful before, now it was breathtaking. Hundreds of candles flickered. Nuts, fruit and vegetables were scattered in groups across the tables. Autumn foliage was in abundance, in vases on the tables and trailing the staircase.

After greeting each other, the tunnel family were asked to take a seat by Father. Vincent and Catherine sat on either side of him. Adults and children alike became silent, even the babies, as though they knew Father was going to give them a blessing.

“Welcome everyone, to this Thanksgiving dinner. We come here tonight to celebrate and give thanks for another year together. We have much to be thankful for. We are in this home below the city, safe and warm and surrounded by friends and family. Our Helpers give so much to us; I can not thank them enough.” Father smiled at Catherine as he said this.

“I would like to give thanks to God for his many gifts and I would like to say thank you to each and every one of you here tonight. You give this old man great joy. So, my family and friends, happy Thanksgiving and I love you all. Now, let us enjoy the feast that William has created.”

Applause and excited chatter broke the silence. Trestle tables had been set up at the far end of the hall and groaned with a large selection of food. The elderly members of the community selected their dinner first. The children went next and finally, the adults. Roast turkey, chicken and beef, potato casserole, squash, honeyed carrots, mixed salads, bread rolls, and home-made gravy and cranberry sauce were enjoyed by all. After main course, the children performed some harvest songs and read from the Sonnets.

It was then time for dessert. As well as Catherine's offerings, they had apple, pecan and blueberry pies, trifle, sponge cake with fresh cream and strawberries, fruit and nut slice, custard, and fruit salad.

"I will never eat again," Catherine informed Vincent when they were done with their meal. Thank goodness she had worn a dress. If she had chosen pants, they would have burst at the seams. Vincent wasn't full, but felt for Catherine.

Father raised his glass and tapped a fork against it.

"What a magnificent feast this has been, William. You have done a wonderful job again this year. Please give a round of applause to our chef." Enthusiastic applause and cheers resounded.

"I was sitting here tonight, thinking of how blessed I am to be here with you all. I would like each of you to speak aloud all that you are giving thanks for this year."

One by one, the tunnel dwellers shared their gratefulness. All were heartfelt and most were moving. Then, it was time for Vincent and Catherine to speak.

"I would first of all like to say thank you to you all, for inviting me to share this celebration. There are many things I am thankful for. My life, my health, my family and friends. I could not have asked for better parents. I have a place to live and as much as my job drives me crazy at times, I am glad to have one. Most of all, I'm thankful to the man sitting opposite me. Vincent not only saved my life, but he helped me to become stronger, more loving and compassionate and to help those less fortunate. He brings me endless joy. There are not enough words to tell you how much I adore him." Catherine reached out her hand and brushed the side of his face, held his hand, and smiled into his ocean blue eyes.

Vincent was so overwhelmed with emotion; it took him a few moments to find his voice.

"You are all a part of who I am. I care about each and every one of you. I am so grateful for each precious day of life. Father, I love you. You are a wonderful role model, parent and friend. We would be lost without you."

Vincent held one of Catherine's hands in both of his. He took a deep breath before continuing.

"My Lady and my Love. Catherine. The night that I met you, my life changed forever. At the time you were a stranger, yet it was like I had always known you. Those eight months apart from you were so very hard. Seeing you again was a dream come true. Your company, kindness, your beauty within and without. All these things and more, I am grateful for."

The world faded around them both.

So many times Catherine had thought and dreamt about kissing Vincent. She adored his embraces; she could happily curl up in his arms and hold him for hours, days, years. Yet, right now, she knew she had to kiss him. It was a pull, a powerful force, calling her to him.

Vincent shared that feeling. He was at once nervous and calm. This was Catherine, the woman whom he loved without end. How was he so fortunate that she would love him in return?

Catherine stood and leaned across the table. She kissed him first on the corner of his mouth, the second on the other side, and then finally placed her lips upon his. It wasn't sexual in nature, in this – their first kiss. It was simply a kiss that said, I love you. I'm part of you. Now. Forever. I'm yours.

Vincent's heart rejoiced, knowing Catherine's love and receiving the gift of her kiss.

They slowly returned to their surroundings. Neither of them heard the sighs or saw the smiles on everyone's faces. Samantha, especially, was happy to bear witness. She loved Vincent and thought Catherine was the most wonderful lady she had ever met.

Father cleared his throat. "I believe it's time for the children to retire for the night. Would everyone like to wish them goodnight?"

The children were only a little disappointed. They were lucky to be up this late. The adults said goodnight and the parents that were present, hugged them. With a final wave, they were gone.

Soon after, Catherine remembered her gifts for the children.

"Vincent, I'd love to read them a story and I have a few small gifts. Would you like to come with me?"

The children were surprised to see Catherine again so soon. She gave them a packet of mixed candy, which were her favourites. Mello-crème pumpkins, candy corn and Hershey's kisses. She read them "The Hare and the Tortoise" and "The Little Match Girl", which had many of them in tears. After more hugs and kisses, Vincent and Catherine left the bedrooms and returned to the library. Port and chocolates were being served.

They talked to the others, but would steal glances at each other from time to time. Vincent didn't know if it was the port or the kiss, but he couldn't take his eyes off Catherine; felt butterflies each time she smiled at him.

Catherine watched Vincent and smiled. She loved him. It was as simple and wonderful as that. She wanted to go to Times Square and shout to the world - "*I love Vincent!*" For now, though, she was content to be here with him, in this beautiful room, surrounded by dear friends. Their Bond hummed between them, feeling such warmth, such peace, and such love.

Olivia, Kanin, Mary and Father were the last to leave.

"Thank you so much, Father. I had a wonderful time." Catherine hugged him close.

"It was so good to see you, my dear. Take care."

"I shall take Catherine home now," Vincent told them.

Father saw the look of love between his son and this lovely lady, whom he had come to think of as a daughter. Their love was a miracle and something special. He was blessed to have known Margaret, so many years ago and he was doubly blessed now, having Mary's love.

I love you both. Be well...

Vincent and Catherine took the longest way back to her apartment. They walked slowly, hand in hand. A few times they had to stop and hold each other, both of them needing to touch, craving the connection.

The blue light of the basement illuminated them. Vincent's eyes reminded Catherine of Lake Louise, in Canada. Fathomless, deep, and crystal blue.

Her eyes. Those eyes. Vincent could write a thousand words and not come close to describing Catherine's emerald eyes. Eyes that were looking at him with such love, it left him breathless.

"Vincent"

"Catherine"

"It's been a perfect night. I don't want it to end. Thank you."

"What do you thank me for?"

"For everything" she told him.

Everything. Such a small word, yet so wonderful.

It was Vincent who took Catherine in his arms and kissed her, who held her face in his hands and didn't speak of his love for her; he showed it instead.

Catherine thrilled to his kisses. When they finally parted, she held Vincent so tightly, so closely. She never wanted to leave his side. Vincent held her hand a moment longer, then reluctantly let it go.

Catherine walked backwards, not wanting to lose sight of him.

Then, the blue light claimed her and she was gone.

As Catherine started to climb the ladder, she thought

I have a man I love, wonderful friends, and family, a home. I have so many blessings.

Catherine walked straight to Vincent's side, and threw her arms around him.

"I love you"

Vincent smiled and kissed her hair, holding her close.

"I love you"

They loved each other. They had a troubled beginning; a present and a glorious future lay ahead. There was much to plan, much to dream about, but for now, it was enough. They had each other.

With a happy heart, Catherine felt Vincent's eyes upon her retreating form.

Both of them thought it. Vincent said it.

I'm blessed.

The End