

“Blessed”

Judith Nolan



Catherine came to my chamber tonight, dressed in midnight blue, and looking as lovely as I have ever seen her. My heart almost stopped at the sight of her standing before me, so enormous was my love for this slender, indomitable woman.

I drank her in, even as I puzzled at something new. There was a glow about her that I could not divine, but it shimmered in her eyes and her smile. In that vital moment, I missed the bond we had once shared until my terrifying illness had stripped it from me. But I sensed there was some momentous discovery hovering just beyond my reach, and my understanding.

“You look well,” she said, happy to see the good progress I had made in my recovery, after all that had happened to us.

“Father refuses to let me out of his sight,” I countered, shaking my head. “He and Peter have been relentless in their determined ministrations.”

“Which is why I have already asked for his blessing, tonight.” She extended her hand toward me. “They’re playing Mozart, in the park. I thought we might attend the concert. If you’re feeling well enough.”

“I think that would be just what the doctor ordered.” I linked her hand in mine, lifting it to my lips and kissing the backs of her fingers.

The tenuous connection between us intensified, and I heard her inhale sharply. I knew such an intimate contact was an uncommon gesture on my part, but suddenly seemed so natural to perform.

I straightened, wishing I could tell her everything. I could see her eyes were sparkling with unshed tears. Her tremulous smile curved her generous mouth.

I was almost overwhelmed with an intense desire to lean closer and kiss away her look of sorrow.

'Whatever happens, whatever comes... know that I love you...' The words trembled on my tongue, but I did not voice them.

Why had they been so easy to say then, standing with her - before her apartment windows, watching the sun set - and not now? Had my illness emboldened me in ways I have not managed to reclaim? Had there been things that had passed between us that I do not now remember? I frowned, wishing I could recall.

"Mozart is waiting for us," Catherine prompted softly, watching me with loving eyes. Almost as if she sensed the intense struggle within me.

Turning with me, she walked by my side, her arm linked through mine as she watched me from the corner of her eye, assessing my needs, thoughtfully. I almost smiled at her doting care. Father must have instructed her well.

We arrived in the drainage tunnel, beneath the sound shell in the park. I could hear people talking and moving around, and the orchestra tuning up. As we gathered and arranged against the wall the stock of pillows and comforters, we kept hidden, the concert-goers hushed, and the first notes began to float into the evening air.

I settled into my customary place with my back to the concrete wall, offering my heavy cloak and body as a warm shield against the chill blocks. Catherine smiled as she moved into my arms as naturally as breathing, and I knew we were content. We were cocooned in our secret place beneath the park. I would willingly have given everything I had, if we could stay that way, forever...

Through the grated storm drain high above us, the music flowed down like rain. It swept in concert with our heartbeats. The orchestra began to play Mozart's *Clarinet Concerto*, but it mattered not what they played.

I was at peace. *We* were at peace. My thoughts turned inward. *'And this, more than anything, I am filled with a gratitude for my life... for all that I have...'*

Catherine appeared to sense my thoughts. She looked up at me. "How do you feel?"

I nuzzled the scented freshness of her hair. "There are no words," I tried to explain, but I failed once more. My thoughts refused to leave my tongue.

"Try one..." she persisted, with a gentle smile.

She knew now how much I loved her. But she still needed to hear the words spoken, as they had been in her apartment. I could feel her longing to return to that intimacy.

I puzzled for a moment. Just what had passed between us in the wide softness of her bed? I felt it hovering there, just beyond the reach of my fractured memory.

I frowned, searching for the right word, just the right sentiment to tell her everything I was thinking and feeling.

“Blessed...” I kissed her hair in deep gratitude.

Blessed... Such a simple, single word that encompassed so much. I felt blessed to be whole once more. Blessed to have Catherine back in my arms.

I caressed her shoulder, moving my fingers against the soft beauty of her skin. She sighed as she leaned her head back against my shoulder, watching me with fathomless eyes. As the music swirled around us, she lifted her face to mine, in blind invitation. Without further hesitation or thought, I leaned down to kiss her, softly and with deep reverence...

