

# Our First Valentine...

Judith Nolan



*"To a man, sex is the ultimate expression of love. It is pure pleasure.*

*But to a woman there exists something greater than pleasure—gestures of adoration. A gentle caress on the cheek, an attentive smile, a soft kiss while swept away in a slow dance, the whispered words, 'You're beautiful'—these are the tokens of love that women cherish..."*

*~ Richelle E. Goodrich*





“I don’t believe it...” Catherine traced her finger reverently down the spine of the book. “Exactly where did you come from?” She shook her head as she grasped the book gently, drawing it slowly from its hiding place. “Perfect...just perfect.”

Secreted in a shadowed, forgotten corner of her father’s extensive library, the heavy volume of poetry had remained hidden from the casual glance, almost as if it did not wish to be easily found. As if it had been waiting just for her.

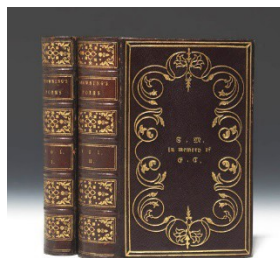
Catherine had been searching in earnest for some hours, willingly giving up a Friday evening of attending a musical on Broadway, with her father and Kay, to spend it here searching among the thousands of books that lined the room. But then she was on a quest for the perfect gift, for a very special someone. Tomorrow night she and Vincent would be spending their very first Valentine’s evening together, and she wanted it to be memorable.

The book was heavy, a beautiful copy in lovely, contemporary, full burgundy morocco-gilt. Who knew her father's collection contained such a treasure? As far as she was aware, her father avoided poetry.

She studied the book's spine, silently reciting the legend she read there. *Browning's Poems, volume I.* it declared in worn gilt lettering. Catherine opened to the fly leaf, finding it had been signed to someone, saying:

***'For C.W. with love...'***

Catherine puzzled over the initials for a moment, but found no answers. Published in 1850, the book was a second edition of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetry. The poet had written some of Catherine's favourite poems. The book was simply perfect, and she could not believe her luck. It would be even more perfect with its companion volume.



She glanced back over the packed shelves, running her free hand over the spines, but no amount of searching could locate the second book. Perhaps time had irretrievably separated them.

“No matter...” she decided, returning to her chair, and sitting down with the book in her lap.

Her father would be home soon, and while he had given her permission to take anything she found of interest, she could not tell him for whom the book was intended. But the frowning look of wary hope he had given her, meant he was wondering if his daughter was dating again, and the gift was intended for someone special. *Perhaps, Elliot Burch?* But wisely, he didn't ask.

The moment Catherine released her hold, the book fell open naturally, almost as if impelled by an invisible hand. The lines of poetry revealed spoke to her immediately.

***How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.***

***I love thee to the depth and breadth and height***

***My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight***

***For the ends of being and ideal grace.***

***I love thee to the level of every day's***

***Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light...***

“Oh, Vincent...” Unshed tears burned the backs of her eyes as she read the lines again. She swallowed tightly, before releasing a long breath of wonder. It was almost as if the book had always been intended for Vincent, so perfectly did it fit within the depth and breadth

of their budding relationship. She couldn't wait to give it to him. She smiled, kissing her fingertips before touching them to the poem.

Closing the book reverently, she half-rose, but in doing so, she sighted a folded piece of yellowed note paper that must have fluttered from the book into her lap. Frowning over its significance, she sat again, picking it up, laying the book of poetry aside on a nearby table, momentarily forgotten.

Unfolding the paper, she discovered it was a letter. The date was the first thing that caught her eye.

**February 13<sup>th</sup> 1956**...Catherine studied this for some minutes, trying to pierce the date's significance. The letter had been written two years before the date of her own birth.

Below the date someone with a neat, feminine hand had written an opening salutation. ***My dearest, beloved, Charles...***

Catherine's heart jumped and contracted. It was a love letter. *To her father? But from whom?* She read quickly on...

***I am so sorry all our hopes and dreams have come to this. I have tried to be brave and stand up to him, but Father says I must not see, or speak with you, ever again.***

*However you and I both know this is not possible. I would surely die without you to love and guide me. For you truly are the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach. Without you I would go on living for a while, but everything loving and generous within me would be withered and dead. Perished under the duty and responsibility my father urges me to remember, for the sake of our family name and circumstances. You are said to have few prospects, or hope of advancement, within your current law firm. Father says you will amount to nothing, and come to a bad end, given how your father ended his own life, crushed beneath a burden of gambling debts and dishonor. Father remarked unkindly that the acorn never falls far from the tree, and no man in the Chandler family would ever be good enough for his daughter. I must now accept that unpalatable fact and move on. I have tried so hard to tell him this is not so. I said you have promised to work very hard to make a comfortable life for us, and that you have plans of*

*founding your own firm soon. I know it would do well.*

*Father laughed at the very idea.*

*He wants to send me far away to Europe, to the strict care of my mother's maiden great-aunt. She is charged with finding me a suitable husband with all possible speed.*

*I have steadfastly refused to go. I would be so far from you, my darling, and I could not bear it. To be forced to remain apart from you now is a burden I do not think my poor heart will long endure.*

*Against my stated objections, Father has already booked the passage and expects me to adhere to his wishes by the end of the week. He will come for me then, my dearest.*

*I have hidden this note inside the book of Browning poetry you gave me for my birthday. I have asked my maid to deliver it, in the hope she will reach you in time, and you will be able to release me from this intolerable burden of our impending separation.*

*Come for me, my love, and I will happily run away with you, as you have often asked me to do. Now I see it is the only way for us to be together.*

*I am aware my father may never forgive me for this transgression, and for that I am truly sorry. But, my dearest Charles, I know I will die without you to hold me and love me, as I know only you can...*

*I will eagerly await your note by return, hoping you can spirit me away from all of this and we can be together once more. Tomorrow is Valentine's Day, my darling. Your enduring love would be the perfect gift. I dream often about the children we will have, once we are married...*

*In love and hope*

*And with eternal affection*

*I remain always, your Cathleen.*

Catherine read her late mother's letter again before lowering it slowly. She glanced at the book of poetry. So it had been a gift from her father.

**C.W.** had been her mother's maiden name of Cathleen Wainwright.



She wiped an unsteady hand across the tears now running freely down her cheeks. She had no idea her parents had been through so much heartache and opposition. All she knew of her maternal grandfather was he had been a gruff man, who had provided a generous dowry for his only daughter upon her wedding day. More than enough money to set up his new son-in-law in his legal practice, and secure its long-term future. And the old man had died a few weeks before his granddaughter's birth.

Catherine refolded the note carefully and placed it once more within the book of poetry. Fresh heartache over the loss of her mother's love troubled her anew. Heaving a long sigh of uncertainty, she settled back in her chair and hugged the book close to her heart. She decided to wait for her father to come home, to share the revelation with him. There was so much she still didn't know...



Vincent unwrapped Mouse's discovery with cautious relief. He was fast running out of time to find just the right gift for Catherine. But his endless searching for just such a gift had drawn a frustrating blank. He wanted it to be perfect. After all, tomorrow would be the first Valentine's Day they would be spending together.

The ragged piece of heavy brocade curtain fell away to reveal a book. But not just any book. Vincent gave a low whistle of approval.

“Mouse, I don’t believe it. You, my friend, are a true miracle worker,” he said to his hovering companion, grasping the boy’s shoulder. The tinker beamed his pleasure with a wide grin.

“How is it possible?” Vincent smoothed a gentle hand across the old book’s burgundy, morocco-gilt cover. Admittedly it had seen better days. Once it would have been a handsome addition to anyone’s library. Now it was battered and worn, its gilt lettering sadly faded and chipped. But it mattered not.

He turned the book up to study its spine, frowning at the legend written there. *Browning’s Poems, volume II.* it declared in worn gilt lettering. Vincent opened the book to study the fly leaf, finding it to be a second edition of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s poetry, published in 1850.

He knew it would contain some of the greatest love poems ever written, and it would make a perfect Valentine’s Day gift for Catherine. He could not think of anything more perfect, except perhaps the discovery of the first volume. He shrugged off the faint hope, assuming the passage of time had irretrievably separated them.

Mouse placed a hand on Vincent’s forearm, peering over at the book. “Vincent said, Mouse, see what you can find, but make it good.” His blue eyes lifted to scan his friend’s face. “Mouse found this. Thrown away in a dumpster with lots of other good stuff Mouse can use. Mouse knew Vincent wanted a book.” He shrugged. “Poems not for Mouse, but you like it. Okay good, okay fine. For Catherine, yes?”

“Yes, Mouse, for Catherine.” Vincent nodded. “And it is to be a surprise.”

“Mouse can keep a secret.” The tinker’s tone was injured. “Valentine’s Day tomorrow. Just in time, I think.” He nodded and winked, tapping the side of his nose.

“Yes, Mouse...” Vincent ran his finger down the poem he was reading. “*Love me Sweet, with all thou art, Feeling, thinking, seeing; Love me in the lightest part, Love me in full being...*” he quoted softly.

“Okay, poetry...” Mouse shook his head in disgust. “Can’t eat them. Can’t use them. Don’t make anything worth having,” he complained. He shrugged. “But if it makes Vincent and Catherine happy, Mouse is happy.”



Vincent dropped soundlessly onto Catherine's balcony. The evening had barely arrived, but he could not remain hidden Below, until it was truly safe. This night of their first Valentine he intended to enjoy to the full. He smiled, sensing Catherine's rising excitement through the bond they shared.

Overhead a hint of rain lingered among the scudding clouds, but the balcony tiles were dry. He pushed back the concealing hood of his cloak from his hair, turning to inhale the evening air, and all its sounds and scents. Glancing over the balcony wall, he frowned down into the leafy expanse of the park. His imagination painted a furtive, shaggy-haired figure slipping through the shadows. Mouse on his nightly patrol for anything useful. Vincent wished him well in his quest.

Instantly his body stiffened as it always did when he sensed Catherine's approach. Awareness feathered through him, even before she spoke. He turned eagerly.

"Vincent..." She pushed the balcony doors wide, moving through the billowing curtains and straight into his arms.

He caught her, holding her close as she rubbed her cheek against his vest, nestling closer still. "I could not wait to see you." Vincent sighed, gathering her slender body hard against him. This was all he needed to feel complete once more.

Lifting one hand, he gently caressed the warm curve of her cheek with the back of his fingers. He smiled at the soft sound of appreciation she

made. He pressed a kiss into her hair. “Do you know how beautiful you look tonight...?” he whispered against her ear. A long shuddering sigh moved through both of them.

“Happy Valentine, Vincent.” Catherine drew back slowly. “I thought maybe we could go inside...by the fire. It’s warm in there, and cold out here.” She looked up at him, the wistful gleam of hope in her eyes nudging at his natural caution.

It was such a small request, surely for this one night he could meet it. He acquiesced on a slow nod, his boots silently marking the few steps towards the threshold to her apartment. Before him, Catherine walked backwards, her hands linked encouragingly within his, her eyes fixed on his expression, wary of any sigh of chagrin, or indecision. Quick to agree if he backed away. Knowing this mattered to his love, Vincent kept his face deliberately neutral, even though his heartbeat sounded uncomfortably loud in his ears.

The filmy curtains parted around the width of his shoulders, and then fell behind him. He was inside her home, her chamber. The room seemed to accept him with welcoming arms. A sensation of being watched by someone just beyond the edge of his vision rippled along the fine hairs of his spine. But the unseen presence bid him not to be afraid. Approval soaked into him, relaxing and soothing the tension from his great muscles. *All will be well...always...* the sensation of a ghostly kiss brushed over his cheek...

“Vincent, what is it?” Catherine’s voice was filled with concern. She had seen his momentary hesitation upon fully entering her world.

“It is nothing...” Vincent hurried to reassure her, stepping down into the room. “A passing fancy, nothing more. It is good to be inside, Catherine. Truly.”

“Good, I’m glad.” She breathed with relief. “What would you like to do?”

“I don’t know...” Vincent turned his attention back to the living room.

Soft music was playing somewhere, a hauntingly sweet song about love and loss. It tugged at his consciousness, making him even more aware of Catherine’s soft fragrance. Perhaps sensing his discomfort, she took care to leave the balcony doors half-open and the curtains softly billowing in the night breeze. But she was right, it was warmer inside.

The electric fire was the only illumination beyond a few scattered candles in glass holders. Bunches of red roses in crystal vases lent a subtle perfume to the air, and on the coffee table she had laid out a selection of food. A bottle of wine chilled in an ice bucket beside another of water. She had thought of everything. Her thoughtfulness touched him deeply.

“Can I get you anything?” Catherine asked gently, indicating the array, while watching her love surveying the living room.

“No, thank you.” Vincent kept his tone light. “Perhaps, later...”

Consciously he slowed his breathing, allowing a fragile sense of peace to flow through their bond. This was not a night for denying he wanted to be here, with his love...he had chosen this, and it mattered to Catherine that he be here. He sensed the smiling approval of the unseen presence.

“I have something for you,” Catherine said softly, moving closer. She placed a hand on his arm. “It is all right, Vincent. There is nothing here that can hurt you.”

*Only you...the traitorous beast within him muttered roughly, glaring back at her. Only you can take him away from me...make him into something he was never meant to be...*

“And I have a gift for you,” Vincent responded, pushing down the dark stirring inside him. *Not tonight and never here...I could never break the things Catherine cherishes...*

The beast growled warningly, but acquiesced reluctantly. *This was not over, Vincent...it will never be over...*

Determinedly ignoring his inner self, Vincent pushed a hand into the depths of his cloak, but Catherine forestalled him. “Please, me first,” she begged, putting out a hand.

She smiled when Vincent nodded. She hurried to one of her chintz couches and pushed a hand down behind a cushion. She produced a foil wrapped package and held it out. "For you. I could not believe my luck when I found it. I just knew it was meant for you."

"What is it?" Vincent took the package, turning it over in his hands. He sensed it was a book, and he was intrigued.

"You won't find out unless you open it," Catherine encouraged. "But first I need to tell you there is a story attached to it. An incredible story that I never knew until now."

She pointed to one of her couches. "Perhaps you had better sit down and I will tell you."

"Very well." Carrying her gift, Vincent eased himself down onto the small couch. In the background the music changed to a song with a beautiful Irish lilt. Catherine sat down beside him, curling her legs beneath her long skirt. "You don't mind if I tell you a story first, Vincent, do you?"

"Of course not." Vincent shook his head. "Why should I mind? If you wish to tell me something, Catherine, then I would never prevent you."

She smiled, her quickened breathing suddenly fracturing, as if shattered by a sad memory. Vincent reached to take her hand, encouraging her silently to begin.



“I had searched and searched for just the right gift for you,” she confessed. “I wanted it to be very special, for our first Valentine together. But I was fast running out of time and ideas, until I thought to look through my father’s library. And it was there that I found exactly the right gift for you.”

Vincent sat silently watching her animation as Catherine proceeded to tell him the story of the book and its mysterious letter. Retrieving it from a side table, she gave him the note to read, and he absorbed it without comment.

Catherine sat down again to watch him, knowing he understood all she had said and that which she had left unsaid. He did not question or ask her to repeat anything she had said. He had simply accepted the incredible coincidence that had led to Catherine finding exactly the right book. Almost as if it had been arranged by an outside force of which they knew nothing. An unseen, but loving presence that had seen their budding relationship, and approved...

“I think your mother would like us to open our gifts together.” Vincent dipped into the pocket of his cloak, and held out a small package wrapped in a fringed silk shawl towards Catherine. “I have an instinct we may be surprised by them.”

“Do you think so?” Catherine accepted his gift with eager hands. She placed it on her lap, her nimble fingers making short work of the string binding, even as Vincent used his claws to neatly slit the tape securing her gift.

Shawl and foil paper fell apart in concert, revealing their contents. Both lovers sat for several minutes, soft music underscoring the disbelieving silence.

Then they both said in unison, “Where...? I mean, how did you...?”

Vincent frowned his disbelief, even as Catherine turned over the second volume of Elizabeth Browning poetry. The exact companion copy to her gift for Vincent. The one she had searched for and failed to find. Even if this copy was tired and worn, and had seen better days, it was a treasure indeed. *How could it be possible?*

“How is it possible...?” Vincent voiced her thoughts exactly, in a hushed and awed tone. “Mouse found your volume discarded in a dumpster. I had thought its companion was lost forever.”

“And yours was my father’s gift to my mother. But I never found the second volume.” Catherine raised her eyes. “Do you think...can it be possible...I don’t know what to think now.”

“We must believe in the evidence of our own eyes,” Vincent replied softly, smoothing a loving hand over the volume he held. “I have felt a presence here, ever since I walked in. Someone who loves you dearly and wishes the best for you. On this night meant for lovers, perhaps it holds more than a little magic.”

“Where...?” Catherine turned her head, looking around at the shadows in the room, as if trying to pierce their secrets and make sense of it all. Vincent could see her lawyer’s mind struggling with the concept.

“Love comes in many forms, Catherine...” he said quietly, rising to his feet and reaching for her hands. “And it never dies. It merely passes into another plane, another place. But the essence of that love makes us who we are, who we were meant to be. Always...”

He took the book from her unresisting fingers, placing it on the couch beside his own. Gently he drew her into his embrace, even as the music on the stereo changed to a ballad about enduring love, and knowing you will never be alone again, once you open your heart to another.

Vincent slid his hands down to Catherine’s waist, linking his fingers in the small of her back. He leaned down to place a soft kiss on her open mouth, his tongue tantalisingly sweet against hers, before he whispered for her alone, *“Love me Sweet, with all thou art. Feeling, thinking, seeing. Love me in the lightest part. Love me in full being. Love me with thine open youth. In its frank surrender. With the vowing of thy mouth. With its silence tender. Love me with thine azure eyes. Made for earnest grantings. Taking colour from the skies, can Heaven’s truth be wanting?”*

“I love you so much, Vincent...” Catherine sighed, long and low.

Together they began to circle the floor, wrapped in the music and their love, each for the other. Catherine nestled her face into the curve of Vincent's shoulder, close enough to hear his soft whisper of, "You are so very beautiful..."

"It is you who has made me beautiful. You see the very best in me," she replied. "Happy Valentine's, Vincent."

"Happy Valentine, Catherine." He laid his cheeks against her hair, and there was nothing more needing to be said, as they slowly kept pace with the music...

**~FIN~**



*"Yes: I am a dreamer. For a dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world."*

**~ Oscar Wilde**



*"A room without books is like a body without a soul."*

*~Marcus Tullius Cicero*