

All Buttoned Up

Judith Nolan



"True love is rare, and it's the only thing that gives life real meaning."

Nicholas Sparks



April the 12th was fast approaching and Catherine had no true idea of what she was going to give Vincent this year. It was their fifth anniversary and she wanted it to be something truly special to reflect the hard work and commitment of the last five years.

But, try as she might, nothing she looked at had managed to catch her attention, or give her that much-needed light bulb moment of clarity. Then it seemed as if fate had stepped in and given her the nudge she needed.

But could she make it happen as she envisaged? Was there still time?

She sat, cross-legged, on one of her chintzy couches and stared at her find. She pondered if she had the temerity to even attempt what she had in mind. But, if she

didn't go ahead, then she would never truly know her limits. If it all ended up as an abject failure, she would simply bury it, as she had done with all her other failures, and no one would be any the wiser.

It had all started with her mother. Well, some of Caroline's long-forgotten effects.

Catherine's father had spent the past weekend clearing out the attic of his townhouse, and had found some things his late wife had left there. Supposedly intending to return to them one day. Which, of course, she never did.

Charles has asked Catherine to dinner and afterwards, together, they'd gone through the cases and boxes of mysterious treasures he'd found in the attic. There were childhood things. A bag of shells Catherine had forgotten she'd collected. A ragged toy rabbit she had once cherished and taken to bed each night. To keep away the monsters in the dark, she had told her mother.

She'd kept the toy, until her mother had given her the rose Vincent now wore in the leather pouch around his neck. That had been her gift to him on their first anniversary together...

Among such old treasures there were bags of cards from both birthdays and Christmas that had been for some purpose, now long forgotten. There were pictures and snaps of long ago memories.

Catherine frowned at the assorted things. *Perhaps she could make a scrapbook for Vincent? That would be easy enough.* She had sighed, not truly knowing what she wanted to do.

There were books of pressed flowers, all neatly labelled and identified. Caroline had been a keen gardener, and loved roses the best. There were pages of them, their faded pressed fragrance still evident.

In the bottom of the last box were some lengths of folded materials, and a number of patterns for men's waistcoats in several styles. Charles had dipped in both hands and had come up with handfuls of impressive brocades and fine paisleys.

"I remember these." He shook his head. "I think your mother was trying to modernise me. Drag my stuffy, corporate lawyer's image into the 60s, and make some kind of a statement. These were all the rage, once. She went out and bought the brightest and the boldest fabrics she could find." He laughed ruefully. "I didn't have the heart to tell her they just weren't me. I guess she put them away when she finally realised just how stubborn I could be, when I was pushed."

“It’s such a pity she didn’t make them up. They’re gorgeous.” Catherine smoothed the finely detailed brocade and another bundle of soft plum velvet with a loving hand.

The velvet felt warm and comforting. The fabric whispered beneath her palm, as if trying to communicate with her. Make some obscure message known.

Catherine had smiled at her own wandering fancy. She knew who would love all these bolts of cloth. Mary would find excellent uses for them all.

Beneath the folds of cloth there were bags of assorted buttons, in many sizes and shapes. Catherine had poked through them, intrigued. There was one bag that had seemed to contain only oddments of old buttons. There was even a velvet antique sewing box full of needles and threads. It was almost as if they were waiting to be used once more. Waiting for her...

“If you like them, then please, take them with you,” Charles had said, his voice rough with tears. “Please take them all. I have no need of such things.” His blue eyes had filled with memories, but he’d shaken his head at Catherine’s questioning look.

“If you’re sure, Dad...” Catherine had replaced the materials into their box and closed the lid.

It was only on the taxi ride home that a vague plan began to form in her mind. A plan that would not be banished, even as it took her breath away.



“Of course, I have Vincent’s measurements. I know them all, by heart,” Mary huffed, frowning at Catherine’s question. “What’s this all about?”

“I have an idea for our anniversary, but I will need your help.”

“Of course, my dear.” Mary brightened. “Tell me what you need.”

Catherine quickly laid out her plans, and offered some of the bolts of cloth from her mother’s collection as payment. She had already sworn Mary to absolute secrecy.

“Oh, these are just lovely. Thank you.” Mary sorted through them eagerly, shifting them into different piles. She murmured her plans for each, as she worked. She looked up. “When do you wish to start?”

“Is now too soon?” Catherine looked at her wristwatch. “I have a continuance that will last until next week, so I managed to get away from work early. I know Vincent isn’t here, right now.”

“He’s away with Winslow and Cullen, shoring up some of the lower tunnels. They’ll be hours yet,” Mary replied briskly. “So we have lots of time. The sooner we get started, the sooner you’ll be done.”

The two women chatted as they worked. Catherine found she was more use if she just stood and watched Mary’s agile fingers working the old sewing machine. She did everything she was directed to do. In no time at all what she had seen in her mind’s eye had been created.

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin.” She saluted the older woman’s skills. “I am all fingers and thumbs.”

“It took me years of practice.” Mary beamed happily, holding up the end result of her task. “Now you stow this in your bag, before Vincent sees it. And you’re good to go. You’re sure you’ll be all right to finish the rest?”

“I’ll manage.” Catherine nodded. “I can, at least, thread a needle. I made Vincent’s leather pouch.” She smiled, quickly folding the garment Mary handed to her, and stowing it out of sight in her large hold-all.

Mary stood and covered her machine with a large cloth. “Let’s have another cup of tea. We can chat until Vincent returns. The pipes say he is not far away, now.”



The bag of oddment buttons was as Catherine had thought. An intriguing mix of many colours and sizes. Some of them looked to be very old. Perhaps even several lifetimes of collecting by the many women from her past.

She sorted them into their sizes and, after much consideration, picked eight that appeared to have tales to tell. She took a moment to appreciate their beauty and appearance of durability. Her plan for Vincent's anniversary gift was going better than she had hoped.

"Nothing ventured..." she murmured, opening her mother's old sewing box.

She selected the needle she thought would be right for the task ahead and set to work to make her vision a reality. She knew she would not be finished before midnight...



Catherine moved slowly around her balcony, lighting candles as she went with a long wax taper. She'd decided to wear the same long ivory and lace evening dress she'd worn on the night of their first anniversary.

As she blew out the match, she sensed a presence behind her. She turned to find Vincent standing in the shadows at the far side of the balcony. Beneath his cloak, he too had decided to dress in his formal white ruffled shirt from their first anniversary. Somehow it seemed fitting.

Catherine smiled at him. "It was five years ago, tonight. Sometimes I wonder how it is even possible that we have come so far."

"It is because we have each other." Vincent indicated the candles all around them with a sweep of his hand. "Once again we remember a dark moment of madness with dancing light."

Catherine walked slowly toward her love. "It's always been a time for celebration. I found such hope again that night. And I found you. Nothing can change that. We are bound together, you and I."

Vincent drew her into his embrace. "And every moment, since that time, I am truly reminded of what a gift life is." He dropped a kiss into her fragrant hair, holding her closer still.

They stood that way for some time, before they both said in the same moment, "I have something for you."

"You go first." Catherine laughed, shaking her head.

“Very well.” Vincent reached into a pocket of his cloak, drawing out a small parcel wrapped in a piece of paisley cloth with a long fringe that danced in the night breeze. “Happy anniversary, Catherine.”

“What is it?” She asked, as she opened the gift to find a beautifully detailed, antique silver frame.

“Vincent, it’s beautiful. Thank you. Wherever did you find it?”

“Mouse found it in a dumpster. Cullen cleaned and polished it for you. It never ceases to amaze me what beauties your world carelessly throws away,” Vincent replied softly, his eyes on her face, even as he acknowledged her pleasure in his gift.

Catherine reached to kiss his cheek. “Now it’s my turn. Close your eyes.”

Vincent did as she bid, though his brow creased in puzzlement.

Catherine drew her wrapped gift from where she had it hidden. “Hold out your hands, Vincent.”

She placed the parcel across his open palms. Vincent opened his eyes to stare at it. He didn’t speak for several moments.

“You can open it,” Catherine prompted when he didn’t speak.

“Of course. Forgive me.” Vincent made short work of the ribbon and wrappings.

He put the paper aside to hold up her gift to the light of the candles. Soft, rich brocade met his wide-eyed gaze, subtle colours of blue and green interlaced with silver thread glowed in the light. A row of eight unmatched buttons glimmered down the front fastening, each one uniquely different, and each one seeming to have a story to tell.

He looked back to Catherine smiling face and knew she was very proud of her gift. He drew a long breath, and exhaled it slowly. He looked forward to hearing her tale of the waistcoat, as much as he wanted her to help him put it on.

He could see it was a gift that had been made with love. A gift of eclectic things, and memories, he was eager to share with her...



“To feel the love of people whom we love is a fire that feeds our life.”

Pablo Neruda

