

Once You Are Real...

Judith Nolan



“Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.”

Margery William Bianco



“Another Christmas...” Catherine reflected softly, rubbing her cheek against the shoulder of Vincent’s cloak. “And Lena’s baby is now two years old.” She sighed.

“Where has the time gone?” Vincent gave voice to her unspoken question.

“Yes... So many things pull us apart. Often, they take us far away from those we love.” Catherine drew back to frown up at his pensive face. “When all we wish for, is to be together at this time of celebration.”

Vincent's watchful expression filled with understanding. "I gather your father is still enjoying himself, in Paris, with Kay?"

"He seems to be. He sent me another postcard. The usual one that said, 'Having a great time. Wish you were here.'" Catherine shook her head. "I wish I was..."

She heaved another shuddering sigh. "I wish to see it all again, with you. I want to show you everything you have only seen in books, or heard about in stories. Second-hand tales are not seeing things for real."

"But I have seen it all," Vincent reasoned, drawing her close again, tucking her head deeper into his shoulder. "I see it every time you talk about those places you have been. You make them real, for me. And once they are real, they cannot be changed, or taken away. I need nothing more. Nothing that would endanger all we have."

Catherine nodded against him. "I know. And yet..."

There was a deepening silence for some time, before Vincent remarked gently, "For once then, I am not the orphan at the feast."

"What do you mean?" Catherine pulled away from him to wrap her arms across her body against the chill night air. She took several steps towards her balcony wall to stare out over the light-spangled cityscape.

Vincent moved to lean his back against the wall beside her, watching her expression. "With your father away, where will you spend the holidays?"

"I..." Catherine frowned at his question. She blinked. "Well, here, I guess. I have so much work I need to catch up on. Files to compile, and cases that will not wait. I told Dad that when he insisted on staying in New York. I said I would be fine." She shrugged. "I told him not to worry. I said I'm a big girl, now."

"I gather from that rather sweeping statement, you don't wish to celebrate Christmas."

"That lack of time factor comes into play again." Catherine turned to look into the emptiness of her darkened apartment. This year she'd neglected to put up her tree, and even her usual strings of fairy lights for her balcony doors still lay, untouched, in their box at the bottom of her closet. "My work has had me running non-stop from early morning until after dark. I barely have time to catch my breath."

Vincent's large hand covered hers, where it rested on top of the wall. "There is fault on my side, as well. I have been guilty of being selfish with your time, Catherine. It is after midnight. You should be in bed asleep by now. I have kept you up."

“Never!” Catherine caught his hand between hers. “Never even think that, Vincent! I would be truly lost without you to lean on, and comfort me, when it all gets to be too much. I have no-one else. As you once said, no-one stands on my side of the river.”

Her vehement words seemed to mollify him a little. They eased the look of strain she saw in his darkened eyes.

“In two more days, it will be Christmas Day. By your own admission, you have nowhere to be, and no-one to be with,” he stated, gently.

“No-one, but you.” Catherine lifted his hand to her lips, and she pressed a lingering kiss to the backs of his fingers. “Vincent, do you think...?”

“Christmas, Below, is a time when we show those we love how grateful we are for having them in our lives. Small gifts are exchanged, and the party often lasts until well after dawn. Those who do not need to hurry home, often stay for some days, afterwards.”

“Are you asking me to spend Christmas with you, in the tunnels, Vincent? Could we do that?”

“As with Winterfest, everyone agrees, it would not be Christmas, without you, Catherine. You are a part of us.” Vincent nodded vigorously “I did not think it could be possible. I am seizing the moment with both hands. And you are not allowed to say no.”

Catherine glanced once more at her empty apartment, and the shadowy piles of paperwork on her dining table. Their radiance of silent disapproval sealed their fate. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“And all that work you said cannot wait...?” Vincent played devil’s advocate, indicating the piles of work.

“There’s always another time to deal with reality. We all need to play hooky, now and then.” Catherine slid both her hands around his lower arm. “What do I need to bring to the party?” She gave a short laugh. “You know I don’t cook. But I know how to shop for the essentials. William could send me a list.”

“All the gifts that are given out, must be either hand-made or something that is not bought. It is a rule Father decided on long ago, and it’s a good one. If a gift is wrapped with love, and given with love, then it will be received with love.”

“I see...” Catherine echoed softly. “Making something from scratch was never on my resume,” she admitted, honestly.

“You made this pouch for the rose you gave me.”

“Yes, I did.” Catherine reached to stroke the pouch hanging by its thong around Vincent’s neck. “My one claim to fame. You will never know what it cost me in time, and patience.”

“Very well, then look for something that has had some meaning to you, something you know someone Below will cherish, because it comes from you. Wrap it and specify a general age on the gift.”

“I like that idea better.” Catherine nodded, as she stood away from him. “When and where shall I meet you?”

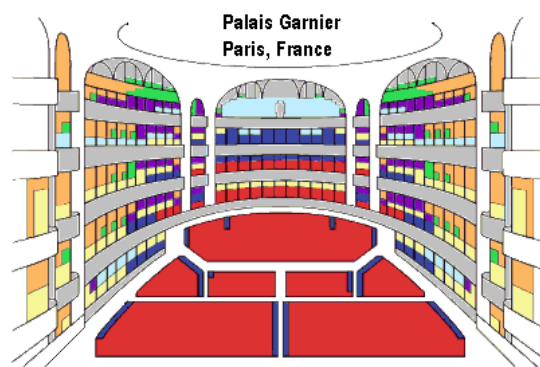
“I will come for you at your basement entrance at midnight on Christmas Eve.”

“Until then. Be well, Vincent.” Catherine hugged him close, genuinely sorry to see him finally leave.

She stood on her balcony long after Vincent had left her. In her mind she viewed those of her possessions that were not costly in either money or materials. She drifted into her living room, turning to close and lock the balcony doors behind her before switching on some lamps.

Walking around the room, she stopped to frown at everything, before finally drifting towards her bookcase. Some of the volumes she had bought over the years, but most had been gifts from her childhood.

Lying on its side at the bottom of the bookcase was a large volume that she knew Vincent liked to look through whenever he had the chance. It was a book about Charles Garnier’s herculean construction of the glorious Paris Opera House.



It was a book Catherine had once been given by a friend, after her first trip to Paris. But its plans and drawings, its details of the drawn-out construction process, had

been completely lost on her. This was something she could give to Vincent with a clear conscience, because it was within Father's rules on gift giving.

Continuing her search, she ran one hand over the spines, studying the titles. None of them attracted her attention, until her questing fingers finally halted on a rather battered book that had seen better days.

She drew it out slowly, turning it over to see the cover. "*The Velveteen Rabbit...*" she breathed, remembering the book as having been a gift from her father for her thirteenth birthday.

Charles had told her the book had once belonged to his father before him. It was a well-travelled, well-loved volume. Some of its pages were loose and the dust cover was now worn at the corners and rubbed in places.

Catherine doubted her father would mind her passing the book on. Smiling, she murmured her favourite line from the book. "*Once you are real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always.*"

She smiled, knowing this was the perfect Christmas gift for a tunnel child. "For always..." she breathed, turning to start her search for some suitable wrapping paper for both books.

Father had been right in his assessment of gift giving. That which is wrapped with love, and given with love, will always be loved... no matter what.



"When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

Margery William Bianco

