

Beautiful Angel

Judith Nolan



*"I do not know what it is about you
that closes and opens;
only something in me understands
the voice of your eyes
is deeper than all roses
nobody, not even the rain,
has such small hands..."*

~ e.e. cummings

Thursday, April 12th was a very special night of the year. But Catherine was growing colder by the minute! A chill wind whipped her coat against her legs, making her shiver. Rubbing her gloved hands together, she silently bemoaned the fact that instead of spending the evening with Vincent celebrating their third anniversary, she was here in one of the worst areas of the city, stomping her feet to get the circulation going and looking down a dark, garbage filled alleyway, waiting for permission to proceed.

She had been only five minutes from leaving the office tonight when she received the call to identify the body of a young woman who had died from an apparent overdose. That sad fact meant Catherine's already bad day had just gotten a whole lot worse. Thankfully Joe hadn't yet returned to his office from the courthouse. Catherine knew he was going to be both deeply devastated at the news, and furious that their star witness was unable to testify. As a result, their already shaky case was crumbling towards non-existent. Catherine dreaded what she was going to find in the alley, a young woman's life snuffed out, and she had been helpless to prevent it.

"D.A. Catherine Chandler, eh?" The police officer guarding the head of the alley scanned Catherine's card closely in the beam of his flashlight. "Yeah, this looks like the same card that dead hooker had in her purse. Fat lot of good it did her in the end. I suppose you're legit, though you sure don't look like any D.A."

The strong beam shone into Catherine's eyes. She put up a hand to shield them, turning her face from the glare. "Can we get on with this, please? Where is my witness?"

"Down there." The flashlight's strong beam swung around to indicate a spot about halfway down the alley where a blanket covered body lay beside an overflowing dumpster. "Good luck with getting any kind of statement out of her now." The officer chuckled at his sick joke. "Guess you got better things to do too." The beam of light flicked over Catherine's clothing again. "Sure would be a shame to get them pretty shoes all dirty. You could just take my word for it that it's her. I've arrested her enough times to know. It would save us both a lot of paperwork."

"Thank you, Officer..." Catherine peered at the policeman's name tag, "...Ramos. I will be sure to report your excellent conduct to your superiors."

"Suit yourself. I'm just a working stiff, doing my job," the policeman remarked sourly, shrugging as he stood aside, allowing Catherine to pass. "I'd watch out for the rats, if I was you, there's some real big ones down there. Saw something moving down by the body just a few minutes ago. Have fun in the dark." He chuckled again before sauntering back to his position at the narrow opening to the fetid darkness, taking the welcome beam of his flashlight with him.

"Give me a break!" Left seething in the sudden gloom, Catherine fumbled in her purse for the small flashlight she carried before picking

her way carefully down the alley through the scattered piles of trash. Reaching the blanketed body, she crouched down beside it, lifting the corner to peer beneath.

It was as she suspected when she received the phone call. Lying curled up facing the dumpster with a drug needle still imbedded just below the elbow of her out stretched arm, Angela Evans, Catherine's best witness in the Cordell murder trial, looked like a lost child. Despite being a well-known heroin addict, Catherine knew her witness had been trying to stay clean. She guessed the lure of the drug had become too much when coupled with the terror of having to testify in court.

Catherine had done her best to shield the young woman from the glare of publicity and intimidation by the defence team in the trial, but she guessed the pressure had become too great. Angela had looked for a way to escape and found it.

Joe was not going to like that his most high-profile case had gone south. He was relying on this witness and what she saw that night. It had been Catherine's job to keep the young woman safe, but she didn't have eyes in the back of her head, and the streets were Angela's home. She had walked out of the safe house a week ago and disappeared into the night.

"I'm so sorry." Catherine sighed, dropping the blanket back over the young woman's pallid face. She rose slowly to her feet, intending to return to the head of the alley and report her findings to Ramos. No

doubt he would be pleased to see the back of her so he could write up his report and finish his shift before midnight.

She glanced at her wristwatch. Perhaps there was still time to get home and send a message down to Vincent. Something might yet be salvaged from this night's sad events. She inhaled deeply, needing to feel his strong arms around her right now, holding her close, telling her it would be all right. That her world was not spinning out of control.

She could almost feel him hovering near, offering her his great strength and boundless compassion. Needing to see him right now, she glanced into the far end of the alley where nothing but sinister shadows hung. Any one of them could contain her love.

"Oh, Vincent..." She sighed wistfully. There was nothing more she could do here. If she hurried she could still make it. Catherine had barely gone two steps when someone hissed at her from across the alley. "Who's there?" She swung her flashlight beam into the shadows.

"*Hey!*" There was a sudden movement, an arm flung across a face followed by a groan of complaint. "Shine that somewhere else, will ya? It's only me."

"*Kristopher?*" Catherine lowered the light as she peered deeper into the shadows. It was Kristopher Gentian all right, looking very much alive as usual, despite his outrageous claims to the contrary. She would have recognized that Mets cap and rumpled clothing anywhere. "What are you doing here?"

“I wasn’t in time to save her...” Kristopher looked beyond Catherine, his expression filled with anguish. “I should’ve been here, but I was down by the river, making sure Gerry got enough to eat. I try to look out for them all, the lost and lonely ones. Don’t want them to end up like me.” He shrugged sadly. “Can’t be in two places at once though, can’t save them all, I guess.”

“Save who?” Catherine could feel the familiar sensation of confusion setting in. It always happened whenever the artist showed up, *or* should that be *materialized*? The jury was still out on that one. She set her teeth, closed her eyes and counted to ten. It didn’t help. When she opened them again he was still there, watching her anxiously.

“You okay?” His face crinkled with concern. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.” He grimaced. “Sorry, grave humour, couldn’t help it.”

“What do you know about Angela?” *Stick to the facts, Chandler.* That was far safer than trying to follow any insane Gentic logic. “How could you have saved her?”

“Could’ve called the cops...” Kristopher tossed a worried look up the alley towards Officer Ramos, who was talking to a young female passer-by. His sad eyes tracked back to Catherine. “Or you...maybe I should’ve called you. Would’ve been able to help, right?”

“Were you here when she overdosed?” Catherine strove to keep her tone clinical.

Kristopher's ghost sighed impatiently. "I already told you, I was down by the river with Gerry, otherwise Angela would be safe now."

"So you don't know the facts about what happened here tonight?" Catherine wiped a weary hand over her eyes. The beginnings of a headache started to thump in her temples. "You have no new evidence?" She inhaled deeply. "This was just what it looks like then, another unfortunate case of heroin overdose by a desperate young woman."

"Can't say, but I don't think so. I know she wouldn't have done this to herself." Kristopher shrugged. "Not now, not when she was trying to stay clean for Jessica. She was all that mattered, you know. I think someone did this to her, to shut her up. Maybe your murder case guy got to her. I know she was real scared of him."

"And just who is Jessica?" Catherine sighed, clinging desperately to the facts. "Is she a potential witness too? Can you take me to see her?"

"Jessica's her baby." Kristopher said slowly, as if he suspected she wasn't really listening to him. "Can't be a witness, she's only five weeks old. I know Angela wouldn't do anything that might harm her. She loved that kid. That's what I've been trying to tell you. She had a very good reason to stay clean."

"All right, the facts." Catherine threw up her hands in frustration.

"Angela doesn't have a baby. She would have told me." This whole

situation was getting crazier by the minute. “Just go, Kristopher, before I have to explain how you came to be down here in the first place.”

“He can’t see me if I don’t want him to.” Kristopher glanced back up the alley towards the policeman’s back view. “Angela never went anywhere without her baby. She didn’t tell anyone because she didn’t want them to hurt Jessica. Something is very wrong here, Catherine. I can feel it.”

“*You* think there’s something wrong with this whole scenario!” she whispered furiously. “Thanks for the great observation Kristopher. Now go home! I can handle this.”

“Look, all I’m saying is Angela had Jessica with her about three hours ago. I saw them up by the park. I thought she’d be all right because she said she was heading somewhere safe and she had money to pay for a room. I thought Gerry needed me more.” Kristopher pushed back the cap on his head. “Guess I was wrong about that. Now I gotta fix it, make it right. Gotta find Jessica and take her somewhere safe, some place where they can’t hurt her.”

“Are you sure there even is a baby?” Catherine frowned. “Heaven help me, I don’t know why I’m even talking to you. According to you, you don’t exist. You’re supposed to be a ghost, remember?”

“I know there is a baby because I saw her tonight. I do have eyes, you know.” Kristopher looked beyond Catherine again towards the blanket wrapped body. “*Hey!* Did you see that?” He pointed urgently.

“See what?” Catherine turned, despite her better judgement to the contrary. “What is it now?”

“Look, something just moved, under the blanket. See for yourself if you don’t believe me. Go and look.”

“It was probably just a rat...” Catherine muttered as she returned to the body, looking down at the pathetic shape huddled there. She was about to tell Kristopher he was mistaken when there was a sudden movement beneath the blanket and something, or someone, cried out, in a low, pitifully small sound.

“See, told you.” Kristopher came up behind Catherine’s shoulder, pointing down at the blanket. “That’s not a rat. I know rats, and they don’t sound like a baby. Have a look and see.”

“This is madness...” Despite her reservations about what Kristopher Gentian might know about the furrier denizens of the city and their unsavoury habits, Catherine sank slowly to her knees beside the body. Lifting the blanket higher than before and leaning in to shine her flashlight into the dark space on the previously-concealed, far side of the body, she could just make out small movements under the heavy coat Angela had been wearing. Again there was a tiny mewling sound that barely carried in the cold air.

“Vincent’s here.” Kristopher said quietly, crouching down beside Catherine. “He’ll know what to do to make it right. I sent him a message asking him to come.”

“*Vincent?*” Catherine’s head shot up. “Are you *crazy?*” Jumping to her feet, her outstretched elbow passed right through Kristopher’s abdomen. Instantly Catherine’s joints went numb with cold and a tingling feeling shot up her arm, making her gasp in pain.

“Hey, watch it!” The artist jumped back. He rubbed an aggrieved hand over his midsection. “That hurts!”

“What happened just then?” Catherine frowned, rubbing her painful elbow. “What’s wrong with you?” She felt her grip on reality slipping away. There just *had* to be a rational explanation, but she was yet to discover it.

“You hit me,” Kristopher complained, “Not my fault. You should look where you’re going. Not fair just to go right through people like that without warning.”

“This is an insane conversation,” Catherine complained in disgust. “I can’t believe I’m having it!”

“*Hey?* What’s going on down there? Who you talking to?” From the head of the alley the police officer’s flashlight suddenly swept over them. “You about done, Chandler?” He advanced a couple of steps. “Coroner will be here soon to tag and bag the stiff. You better not be in the way.”

“Just give me a couple more minutes.” Catherine called back. “I’m about done.” She peered into the shadows, looking for Vincent, wondering if he was here after all. She couldn’t trust Kristopher’s word for anything.

“Suit yourself.” Officer Ramos retreated back to the lights of the sidewalk. “Don’t forget about the rats. They don’t care how expensive your shoes are.” He chuckled again.

“I’m here, Catherine.” Vincent glided silently out of the deeper shadows further down the alleyway, sinking to his haunches beside her.

“Kristopher sent word you needed me.”

“Some day you must tell me just how he does that.” Catherine sighed brusquely. “But for now we need to hurry.” Reaching beneath the blanket, she unbuttoned Angela’s heavy coat and pulled it open.

Nestled against the dead woman’s shoulder a tiny white bundle moved and then became still. The mewling sound came again, shallow and thin in the chill of the night.

“It *is* a baby!” Catherine couldn’t believe her eyes. “But that’s impossible! Why did no one see her?”

“Told you,” Kristopher said smugly. “I knew she had to be here. Angela wouldn’t leave her behind. The guys that murdered her must have missed seeing the baby. Angela did real good hiding her like that.”

“I’m afraid your reliability is not well known,” Catherine bit back. “We’ll need to call child services to come and pick her up. It’s freezing out here.” As she spoke she gathered the tiny, pathetic bundle against her chest, trying to share some of her own body warmth with the baby.

“*No way!*” Kristopher’s horrified gasp of negativity was swiftly followed by Vincent’s softly spoken, “No, Catherine. I will take her to Father. There is no time to lose. It may already be too late.”

Catherine frowned as she rose to her feet. “I’ll admit Social Services is overworked, but I...”

“I’ve been in those places, where they put the lost kids no one wants,” Kristopher muttered tersely. “And look how I ended up, dead and buried with no place to call my own. I promised Angela I’d look after them. Now there’s only Jessica. I’m not going to let you put her into the system.” He balled his fists, his face losing all of its boyish charm. “I get a say here, you know. I’m almost family and she hasn’t got anyone else.”

“Give her to me, Catherine.” Vincent stretched out his hands, palms uppermost, his tone pleading for her to see they were right and that there was no time to waste on fruitless argument.

“Well, if you think we’re doing the right thing...” Undecided, Catherine looked down at the tiny baby huddled against her chest. Then something came back to her. Something Mr. Smythe, the owner of the

bookshop Kristopher supposedly haunted, said to her when she'd first gone there looking for the elusive artist.

Smythe had sighed deeply and complained, *"My dear young lady, you are so young and so cynical. You should not be so certain. The world devours all of our certainties and all of our beauties as well."*

"All of our beauties..." She sighed, shaking her head. She stared down at the tiny face cuddled against her shoulder. The baby heaved a shuddering sigh.

"You know the tunnels are the right place for her, Catherine," Kristopher urged, indicating Vincent. "He knows it too. She has nowhere else to go. There she will know love. She will get to see all the beautiful things life can hold. You've gotta let her have a chance at a fresh start."

For a few vital seconds Catherine was torn between her duty and what she knew to be true. "Very well." She held out the baby towards Vincent, sliding her into his waiting hands. From the mouth of the alleyway she heard heavy boot falls as Officer Ramos came towards her, sighing impatiently at her tardiness.

"Thank you, Catherine." In a whirl of black cloak and swift movement Vincent faded soundlessly into the night.

“You’ve done all right.” Kristopher’s cheeky grin faded into the darkness as he too vanished into the shadows. “Be seeing ya around...”

“Can’t see what’s been keeping you down here all this time.” Ramos complained brusquely as he came up behind Catherine. “She was only a crack whore, after all. No big loss there. The coroner’s here. You done now?”

“Yeah, I think I’m done.” Catherine flashed him a dismissive glance as she passed him, heading out of the alleyway and into the welcome glow of the street lights beyond.

“This was found tucked inside Jessica’s blanket when Mary uncovered her.” Vincent held out a folded sheath of papers. “Your name is on it.”

Catherine took them from him. “Will she be all right?”

“We are hopeful.” Vincent nodded. “Father is confident you have given her a fighting chance. We will know in a few days. She is very tiny and weak.”

“I’m glad.” Catherine smiled mistily. Somewhere in the distance a clock struck the hour of midnight. “Happy third anniversary, my love.” She took Vincent’s hands, drawing him into her embrace and kissing his cheek. This was what she had been dreaming of all day, this was

where she truly belonged. “I’m just sorry it didn’t go according to my plans.” She rubbed her cheek against Vincent’s vest. “I was going to have candles and everything prepared for us. I was even going to cook us a meal.” She laughed softly. “Or give it my best shot.”

“You saved a life tonight, Catherine. That more than makes up for any time we may have lost,” Vincent replied, tightening his arms around her before turning her so her back was against his chest and they were both gazing out over the city, and the darkened spaces of Central Park. “No one could have done any better.”

“You and the impossible Kristopher Gentian helped.” Catherine shook her head. “I couldn’t have done it without you. I still can’t make him out. Is he really a ghost or just a very good fraud?”

“Understand that Kristopher is simply Kristopher and you will be fine,” Vincent laughed quietly, kissing the top of her head. “The painting he did of us is real enough. You only have to believe, Catherine, for it to be so.”

“Cryptic answers at midnight, just what I need.” Catherine tipped her head back to smile up at him lovingly.

Vincent laughed and kissed the tip of her nose. “What does the note say?”

“I don’t know...” Catherine had forgotten about the folded papers he’d handed her. “Let’s see...” She opened it to find several pages torn from

a large notebook and written across in neat printing that took up all the free space on each page. She read slowly, turning each over to read the other side.

“Well?” Vincent prompted after several minutes of pensive silence.

“What is it?”

“Angela’s deposition.” Catherine went back to the beginning. “It’s all here, everything she saw that night.” She held them out to him.

“Names, times and who shot Brannigan and why. Incredible!”

“Will it hold up in court?” Vincent took the pages from her and began to read.

“Only if we can prove she was murdered to keep her from testifying. I’m afraid it won’t be easy.” Catherine shook her head as she turned to face him. “But it’s a beginning, and far more than we had before. Joe will put his best people on it.”

She went up on tiptoe, sliding her arms around Vincent’s neck. “If it hadn’t been for you, that night in the park three years ago when you found me...”

“We truly have endured much, Catherine, and yet we still stand.”

“And we will continue to stand, as long as we have each other. Together we can do anything.”

“Always...” Vincent inhaled deeply, smiling down at the only woman in the world he could ever love. His great heart had been created only for her. Her beauty, both inside and out, humbled him and made him believe in miracles.

“Always, Vincent...” Catherine rose higher on her toes to press a soft kiss to his unique mouth, and slowly it deepened into a true communion of souls as Vincent drew her down into the cushions piled together against the shelter of the wall. And for a long time there was silence on the small balcony under the stars...

~ **FIN** ~
