

# The Phone Call

*Judith Nolan*



*“He hadn't suffered the eternity of the ring about to be picked up, didn't know the heart rush of hearing that incomparable voice suddenly linked with his own, the sense it gave of being too close to even see her, of being actually inside her ear.”*

*~ Jeffrey Eugenides*



Catherine worked her way through the chaos of the D.A.'s office bullpen with the hardened determination of long practice. Always moving forward, she made a neat side-step here, a brisk '*excuse me*' of apology there, managing to clear her path with the minimum of fuss. After all, she was on a mission to get the job done. And time was now seriously against her.

Her arms were stacked with a pile of precariously perched files, simply waiting for the right opportunity to cascade to the floor. She needed to weave the quickest path towards her distant desk, before she finally lost her grip. She didn't have time to pick up the pieces.

Joe was waiting impatiently for her help with the breaking down of the Berkley testimony before the night was over, and she wasn't about to disappoint him. The case was complex and difficult, and they were losing ground fast to a shark tank of very well paid lawyers who fought them at every turn. Monday was a deadline they simply couldn't miss.

Over the stack of relevant files, she could see Joe through the glass windows of his office, watching her progress. Intense irritation was written large on his tired features. He lifted his arm to tap the face of his wristwatch significantly with an accusing forefinger, signalling his discontent.

"Okay, okay, I hear you..." Catherine muttered, nodding her understanding.

She moved quickly beyond the Friday afternoon crowd of workers

huddled around the coffee machine. They were talking about their plans before they all left for the weekend.

Catherine listened to their excited chatter and heartily wished she could join them in their exodus. But she had to stay behind. Even if it meant she would be breaking her promise to Vincent that she would be at her apartment for him tonight, it was an inescapable fact Joe needed her more, right now.

She had not seen her love in over a week. She had been too busy. She missed his uncomplicated company and the warmth of his close embrace.

She prayed she could make it up to him in some way tomorrow. She might never get home at all, tonight. Even with Joe breaking down his share of the files, midnight loomed far too close for comfort.

She was aware that Vincent would already be waiting for her, pacing her balcony, looking in at her darkened windows. She sent all her love along their bond, knowing he would sense her regret and sadness. She hated staying late, but it was the only way to help Joe.

She shook her head. She doubted her boss would allow her the time to escape the bullpen, and go in search of the old sax player who could send a message Below.

And to make matters worse, it was her 30th birthday next week, and she had made such plans for this weekend. Spending quality time

alone with Vincent was an intoxicating temptation. Since her father's death, sharing the milestones of her life with those she loved seemed incredibly important. Time always seemed to be her enemy these days.

Jenny Aronson was intent on making the usual fuss and getting up a party on the actual day, something Catherine accepted with good grace, since her best friend meant well. No doubt Jenny would have a fresh stable of keen young men willing to wine and dine the birthday girl. *But it would not be the same since Vincent could not be there...*

Again, the old, familiar frustration rose, the one where she had no easy way of contacting him to let him know she couldn't be home.

If he was more like Elliot Burch, or any other man within her social circle, she could have picked up the telephone receiver and dialled his number, made her heart-felt apologies and rescheduled for another evening.

*If only Vincent had access to a telephone...*

Once seated behind her desk, Catherine could have snatched a quick conversation while she worked. On the down-low, of course, beneath the sharp look of Joe's simmering impatience. She was a woman, after all, she knew how to multi-task. Her shoulders rose and fell as she accepted the inevitable.

She was aware that Joe had not yet forgiven her over the Kristopher Gentian affair. Joe still maintained the mysterious artist had been a fraud, and Catherine had been completely taken in by an original pick-up line and a hard-luck story. He'd also discovered that Radcliffe had gone co-ed in 1971. His shocked look of disbelief had spoken volumes.

But dig as he might, Joe could not turn up any concrete evidence about Kristopher or his current whereabouts. He'd even spent his precious lunch time staking out Smythe and his 777 book store, but to no avail. His failure to produce anything concrete about the young artist, combined with his deepening frustration over the Berkley case, both further thinned Joe's already scant stock of patience. He disliked mysteries even more than he hated time-consuming continuances.

The guy *was* real, he was not a ghost, as Smythe the book seller had tried to claim. And Berkley's lawyers were going to regret the day they tangled with Joe Maxwell. Joe swore as much.

*Of course, none of this matters now*, Catherine grimaced tiredly. It was already very late outside, if she dared to glance towards the windows.

Her back ached, her feet hurt in their high-heeled shoes, and her arms had lost all feeling some time ago. The oasis of her crowded desk loomed before her, and she slid the files onto it with a deep sigh of relief.

Joe appeared beside her, tugging at his tie as he muttered grimly, "I need this done tonight, Radcliffe. So help me, I'm not going to tolerate

another continuance on this one! I'll be 20 years in my grave before we finally get Berkley to face trial!"

"It's okay, Joe." Catherine attempted to placate him with both hands raised. "I'm on it. He won't get away this time."

"Yeah...I know." Joe heaved a sigh, as he ran an open palm up and around the back of his neck inside the collar of his shirt. "Sorry, Cathy."

He grimaced, before retreating to his office to hurl darts at his battered dart board, before settling behind his desk to break down his share of the Berkley files.

Catherine understood all too well what he was feeling. She sank into her chair, kicking off her offending shoes before scooting the seat forward with her stockinged toes as she reached to open the first file in the stack.

She glanced quickly at her watch. If she pushed hard, she could get it all broken down this side of midnight. Then it was Joe's problem, not hers. There could still be time, *if she hurried*...She opened the file and began to read.

Time ticked inexorably by and she made some significant progress. The bullpen was now empty and silence had settled. Only movement within Joe's office showed any sign of life. He was on the phone, talking with someone. She could hear him raising his voice more than once. She dared not offer him any kind of distraction from his renewed

frustration.

Catherine ignored her boss's conversation as she worked doggedly on. Impatient fingers pushed the fall of her hair back behind her ear, as she reached for and opened the next to last file. *Maybe, just maybe...*

*"Catherine..."*

She jumped at the whispered sound of her name. Startled into immobility, she sat with her pen poised above her yellow legal pad. If she didn't know better, she would have sworn that it was Kristopher's voice. She looked around, but there wasn't any sign of a tall, rumped figure in a Mets cap.

"Ghosts..." she breathed roughly, returning her distracted attention to the work. "I must be more tired than I thought."

Moments later, the voice came again, toying with her name, lengthening it, while adding a sing-song candescence. *"Catherine..."*

"Okay, this isn't funny." She threw down her pen. "Show yourself!"



“Who’re you talking to?” Joe’s impatient question answered her. “There’s no one here but you and me.” He hitched a hip onto the edge of her desk, frowning down at her. “Don’t lose it on me now, Radcliffe. I need your mind on this case. I don’t have any time for games.”

“Nor do I!” Catherine complained hotly. “I...thought I heard someone, that’s all. It sounded like Kristopher, but how could it be?”

“Ghosts...” Joe’s lips tightened. “Or maybe just one fake ghost, in particular. Face it, Cathy, that Gentian guy really did a number on you. He’s got you jumping out of your skin. Smythe only claimed he was dead to push up the asking price of the guy’s paintings. I had thought you were smarter than that. I need your mind on this case, not off on some flight of fancy!”

“Maybe it was just the wind.” Catherine frowned. She wasn’t going to get into the same old argument with her boss. “Forget it.”

She must be imagining things because she hadn’t heard Joe leave his office either. She picked up her pen and ducked her head back over



her legal pad. "I'm more than half way through. One more hour and it's all yours." She glanced significantly at Joe's open office door. "If you leave me alone to finish it."

"Okay, okay, I can take a hint. I'm making some headway too, at last." Joe made an opened hand gesture of appeasement as he rose to his feet. "Make me proud, Radcliffe. I need this win. Like yesterday. I just got off the phone with Moreno. He's counting on us to deliver. Let him down again and we'll both be looking for new jobs come Monday," he shot back over his shoulder as he walked away, finally shutting his office door behind him.

"No pressure, then." Catherine settled back into her work, trying to ignore the rash of goose-bumps stalking her skin. She was sure someone was watching her, but there was no one in sight.

Then the voice came again. "*Catherine...*" The lilt was now higher, and gently mocking. "*You're gonna want to answer the phone, Catherine...*" the unseen presence commented with certainty.

"Oh, now this is ridiculous!" Catherine complained under her breath, throwing down her pen once more. "Come out and show yourself!" She lowered her tone further and hissed, "*I know it's you, Kristopher. You can't fool me again. You're being ridiculous! I've got work to do!*"

But no one, and nothing, moved within the harsh glare of the overhead strip lighting. There were few places to hide. Catherine half-rose from her chair to glare behind the nearby row of cabinets, but again, she

saw nothing. Then she sensed Joe's eyes on her and she returned to her seat.

The ethereal voice came again, saying, *"Don't be mad, Catherine...But he missed you tonight. And all the other nights. I decided to help you both. I told him what to do. This is the only way I know how to make amends..."*



"You're not making any sense..." Catherine muttered, keeping her head down over her work. "Who are you talking about?"

It seemed completely asinine that she was having this conversation with thin air. But from her unwanted knowledge of Mr Gentian, he had the uncanny knack of turning up uninvited at the most inconvenient moments, and she couldn't afford the distraction. She decided to humour him, for now. "What do you want?"

Frustration was making her imagine things that were not there. Catherine decided to let her awareness go, and allow it to lead her where it would. It would save her some precious time in the end.

*“When your phone rings, answer it. You will want to answer it, Catherine...”* Smug assurance underscored the words. *“Trust me...”*

“Trust you?” Catherine glanced at her telephone. “No way, you have to be joking. And besides, if Joe catches me on the phone...” She left the rest of the statement hanging significantly.

*“Then answer it as soon as it rings,”* Kristopher replied quickly. *“Are you ready, Catherine?”*

“This is madness...” Curiosity and anticipation swept through Catherine in equal measures. She wasn’t sure what to expect, but she somehow sensed it was important. And she wasn’t going to get any more work done, suspended as she was in this stew of confusion.

A split second before the telephone rang, she felt the vibration of it running through her heightened senses. The barest tremble of the first ring and she was already snatching the receiver from its cradle. She hunched down behind the stack of files blocking her view of Joe’s office and cupped the receiver mouthpiece in her palm, praying he had not heard.

“Hello...” she whispered quickly. “Who is this?”

The soft hiss of connection greeted her, and the sound of someone breathing. But no one answered immediately.

Catherine frowned, adjusting the receiver closer against her ear.

“Speak to me. Who are you?”

“Catherine...? I am here. It is lovely to hear your voice again. I have missed you tonight.”

“*Vincent...?*” Catherine breathed, nearly dropping the receiver, so great was her shock at the unexpected voice on the other end. Then her protective instincts kicked in. “Where are you? Whose phone are you using?” Her frowning gaze hunted the office for any sign of an approaching Joe. “It’s not safe for us to talk like this.”

“I am at Lady May’s home, Catherine,” Vincent was quick to reassure her. “I am in no danger.” He hesitated, before saying, “This was Kristopher’s idea. He wanted to give you something for your upcoming birthday. He is trying to make amends for all the trouble he caused you.”

“So he said. But we really cannot talk now...” Catherine’s resolve was severely shaken. Having Vincent this close, inside her ear and mind, was doing strange things to her equilibrium. “I have work to do...” It sounded so lame, even if it was true. After all he had made a great effort to contact her.

But at any moment Joe would come back to see what she was doing and check on her progress. If he found her on the phone...”Give me your number there...” She snatched up her pen and ripped a page from her notebook. “I’ll phone you when I get home...” She wrote down the number Vincent gave her. “I know it will be late, but can you wait

for me there?”

“I will await your call, Catherine.” Vincent’s voice whispered through the very depths of her soul. “Please take care, until we meet again.”

“You too...” Catherine’s toes curled at the caressing tone of his voice. If only she was tucked up in bed, listening to him talk to her, so close and yet so far away. The visions that danced in her head were a revelation. She felt wrapped in a cocoon of blissful happiness.

Seeing Vincent in person was always a magical experience, but this was on another level, where they could say things to each other that perhaps he was too reticent to say to her face. There was a certain anonymity to speaking with him over the phone. Now that ice had been broken, Catherine could hardly wait to get home and phone him back.

Who knew what secrets he may reveal once his guard was down? Catherine decided to try one... “I do love you, Vincent.”

“Catherine...” There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line and a long silence. “I am keeping you from your work,” Vincent finally said gently. “We will talk again later...know that I am with you, always...”

“I know...” Catherine smiled wistfully. It wasn’t much, but she would take it. For Vincent, who had not used to this method of contact before, this would take some getting used to. He needed to loosen up and say what he was thinking. She would be happy to teach him the finer points

of telephone conversation. Where he got to say some more toe curling things...

Vincent was correct, she was aware. She needed to go, finish her work and escape this place. But having been caught by the sound of his incomparable voice in her ear, she was now reluctant the end the conversation and return to the mundane files.

“Catherine...” Vincent whispered down the line. “I will wait for you.”

“Thank you.” Catherine sighed happily. “Goodbye...for now...” She replaced the receiver carefully in its cradle.

She sat still, staring into the middle distance. Her heart was racing and she could not stop smiling. The files, her desk, the whole bullpen faded into insignificance. She was alone with the memory of their very first telephone conversation. And it had been made possible by a ghost.  
*Impossible...*

“Thank you, Kristopher.” Her eyes strayed to the quiet of the office around her. “Wherever you are...”

*“I am never very far away, Catherine,”* Kristopher reassured her.

*“Happy Birthday.”*

“Why does that statement not comfort me?” Catherine laughed shortly.

“You had better go before Joe catches you.”

*"The tit willow?"* Kristopher mocked with amusement. *"He will never catch me. I'm a ghost, remember?"*

"Go, before I lose all my new-found, good feelings about you," Catherine commanded, picking up her pen and beginning to write. "Ghost indeed. You're nothing but a fraud. Believe me, I have met a few good ones."

*"So, I'm forgiven...?"* the question wafted back to her, the voice that uttered it, fading slowly into the distance.

"Perhaps," Catherine sighed. "I haven't made up my mind yet." She laughed softly. "Maybe next time..."

*"Always with the 'next time'..."* Kristopher complained. *"Fare thee well, maiden fair...say hello to Vincent for me. When you talk to him again..."* The artist's voice faded and was gone on the echo of a gentle laugh.

It was almost an hour later, when Catherine finally reached for the last file in the stack, that she found the envelope. Someone had inserted it among the last pages of dry legal testimony. It was tied up in a simple red ribbon and with an attached note that said simply *For Catherine* in Kristopher's untidy scrawl.

"Kristopher...?" Catherine looked quickly around, but as usual no one was in sight. Curiosity drove her to open the envelope, and smooth out the folded piece of heavy paper inside.

It was a detailed sketch. A beautiful drawing of Vincent seated at the table in his chamber, holding an old-fashioned telephone receiver to his ear. His smile was heartbreakingly tender, and he was looking straight ahead, his eyes fixed on the viewer. His face held such a look of love it caused Catherine's heartbeat to race and her breath to catch.

His beloved eyes looked directly into hers, deep into her soul, and in the back of her mind Catherine heard his familiar voice whispering longingly, *"I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where. I love you simply, without problems or pride: I love you in this way because I do not know any other way of loving but this, in which there is no I or you, so intimate that your hand upon my chest is my hand, so intimate that when I fall asleep your eyes close..."*

"Oh, Vincent, I love you so much..." Catherine leaned down to kiss the drawing gently, before returning it to the envelope and pushing it into her purse slung on the back of her chair. She could not wait to get home and dial the number he had given her, to renew the conversation they had barely begun...

*~ FIN ~*





*“There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle...”*

**~ Albert Einstein**

