

# *Love, Friendship, Loyalty*

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*"Kindred spirits are not so scarce as I used to think."*

- Lucy Maud Montgomery: *Anne of the Green Gables* -



The telephone rang for what seemed like the hundredth time on that miserable, rainy day, as thick, dark clouds in the sky forced everyone to keep the lights on all day. Mildly annoyed, she put down the book in her hands and groped through the not-so-tidy piles of still unread manuscripts ahead of her to find the receiver. Once she did, she picked it up to her ear.

"Jenny Aronson," she half-shouted, irritated that someone up there simply didn't want her to finish reading that bloody romantic novel manuscript she was supposed to assess for publishing.

"I apologise, Miss Aronson, but I've got Mrs O'Donnell on the line for you," a hesitant female voice said on the other end of the line. Jenny was generally very popular among her employees for her bubbly and positive nature, but even the best bosses are allowed to have their off days.

"Who?" the book editor raked her overloaded brain, running on her third coffee within the past two hours.

"Mrs O'Donnell," the voice repeated, "*the writer...*"

As if lightning struck her, Jenny's eyes widened, and she was immediately alert.

"For crying out loud, why didn't you say that right away?!" she exclaimed, her voice suddenly cheerful. If her assistant on the other end of the line had seen her at that moment, she wouldn't have missed a beaming smile on her face.

"*I'm sorry, well... She's waiting.*"

"Put her through!" Jenny demanded, excitement born out of her natural love of books and good writers building up in her again. Something clicked on the line, before another female voice, one with a heavy Irish accent, resounded in her ear.

"Miss Aronson? *It's Brigit O'Donnell.*"

"Brigit, I'm happy to hear from you again! And I told you last time we spoke that you can call me Jenny."

There was a chuckle on the other end of the line.

"*All right, Jenny. I know it's been a while already, but I simply wanted to thank you for organising that lovely party for me when I was in New York on Halloween. In many ways, it was... unforgettable for me... It's a shame you couldn't come, but it was wonderful, and I met some very interesting people there.*"

Miss Aronson's face fell with annoyance, remembering the reason why she couldn't have shaken the famous novelist's hand in person back then.

"You're most welcome, and I know, I'm really sorry about that. That stupid flu knocked me out for almost two weeks!" she rolled her eyes before chuckling, a smile reappearing on her lively, pretty face. "It's handy, though, having great assistants who can do just as well in running these things. I'm glad you were happy with their work."

"*You should definitely consider a raise for them,*" Brigit remarked, sounding amused.

"*Believe me, trustworthy and reliable people are worth gold these days.*"

"That's very true; I shall consider it," Jenny replied, smiling widely. "I hope you have already thought about another book. You wouldn't believe how many people have already asked me about it! Cathy literally ordered me to let her know as soon as you put a new novel in print." She laughed.

"Cathy?" the writer back in Ireland inquired curiously.

Jenny shook her head, laughing again.

"Oh, I'm sorry! My friend, Catherine Chandler. She's a big admirer of yours. Apparently, you two met at the party."

There was a brief silence on the other end of the line.

“Brigit?” Jenny asked, wondering if the connection got interrupted.

*“Aye, I’m here,” the writer replied, sounding thrilled. “And of course, I remember Catherine! A truly wonderful woman... Do you think you could give me her address? I... well, I know calling is easier if you want to catch up, but you see... I have a weakness for writing letters. Maybe a bit daft and old-fashioned by now, but I find it more personal...”*

Another brief pause followed, and Jenny was about to reply, but Brigit continued.

*“Anyway... Would it be possible to get her address? I would be very grateful to you.”*

Jenny didn’t take long to respond. “Of course, you can have it! I’m sure she will be delighted to hear from you in person. I’ll have my assistant send it to you.”

*“Thank you very much! You cannot imagine what it means to me...”*

Miss Aronson knitted her brows but only for a moment before a beaming smile warmed her face again. “Don’t mention it. An editor does what she can do for a great writer,” she said.

*“Well, thank you again for everything, and hopefully speak soon,”* Brigit brought their conversation to an end, her voice filled with gratitude and joy.

“You bet on it! Bye!” Jenny replied.

*“Bye!”*

Jenny ended the call and pressed the button to speak to her assistant.

*“Yes, Miss Aronson?”* the soft-spoken female voice asked.

“Be so kind, Janet, and send Brigit O’Donnell’s agent the address details of my friend Catherine Chandler. It’s in the phone book. Her phone number is...” Having the phone receiver wedged between her cheek and her shoulder, Jenny reached for her little book of contacts. “It’s 555-8291. I’m sure there’s at least a hundred Catherine Chandlers in this city.”

*“Of course, Miss Aronson. I’ll do it right away.”*

“And Janet?”

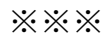
*“Yes, Miss Aronson?”*

“Drop that Miss Aronson thing. I’m Jenny.”

The editor could feel the shock on the other end of the line and suppressed a chuckle.

*“All right, Miss... I mean... Jenny,”* the assistant replied, her voice betraying a smile.

“Thanks,” Jenny said and put down the receiver, smirking. She leaned back in her comfy, leather office chair, shook her head, and thought, *Well, well, Cathy... Seems you enchanted someone yet again...*



It was another late home coming for Catherine Chandler when she finally closed the front door of her Manhattan apartment behind her. With relief, it has to be said, for the strenuous hours at the D.A.'s office had started to wear her out. However, after chucking her briefcase and coat on one of the pastel-coloured couches, she shook herself up, thinking, *It was my choice and I'm finally doing something meaningful.*

She walked into the not-very-spacious kitchen, ready to make herself a light dinner and a cup of tea. After filling the kettle and putting it on the stove, she sat down at the small breakfast table and reached for the pile of letters she had received that day. Most of them contained invitations to fancy dinner parties of her countless acquaintances from high society circles. She put them straight into the bin, without much regret.

"Sorry, no time, and... no interest, I'm afraid," she said out loud, with a shrug. There were times she would have already been thinking about where to get a nice new dress for the occasion, but those times were long gone and almost forgotten. The Catherine Chandler of today was no way near the one she used to be before her almost fatal accident.

The last piece of mail wasn't as flat as the others; it was properly sealed with cellotape, covered with stamps of various sizes, and it seemed that there was some small object inside it. Curious, Catherine looked at the place stamp mark on the envelope: Belfast, UK... Her interest was piqued immediately, her eyes coming alight, the endless reports she had to finish and deliver by the end of the day, and that she just barely managed to do completely forgotten. Could it be? No... why would *she* want to contact me anyway? But what if...?

With an excited smile, her hands carefully opened the mysterious envelope. The date told her it travelled to its destination for almost a week. Her hands suddenly held two pages of a letter and a small, metal object. Catherine observed it for a moment, her fingers testing the details of the pattern on the polished surface; she admired it with an expression of amazement. Then she took the letter and started reading the few neatly written lines.

*Dear Catherine,*

*I know this will probably come as a surprise to you, but when I found out that Jenny Aronson, who works as editor for my American publisher, is your friend, I could not let the opportunity pass to ask her for your address. It has been over three months since we met, but I often think of the night that brought us together and those extraordinary events that happened then. I have met interesting people on my rocky road through life, but you have been one of the most inspirational ones. You and... your very special friend, who saved my life twice that night...*

*I think I'm not wrong assuming that you two share a very unique bond, one that cannot be tainted by prejudices or social conventions. It would be fascinating to know how this bond was formed, but I guess, as all life's greatest stories, even this one deserves (and also needs) its own space, safe from the intrusions of this world that could disturb or destroy it. Therefore, I will satisfy my curiosity by retiring into the chambers of my memory and*

*remember the noble warrior with the golden hair, sailing with Theseus into faraway lands, who made me feel safe and understood, and the beautiful lady who entered his life and captured his heart like no other woman ever could...*

*As you may guess from my books, I am a romantic, although firmly and sometimes painfully aware of the often cruel reality. However, I do believe that true love doesn't always vanish with the first danger, obstacle, or heartache that it brings, but that it can blossom and grow stronger and deeper with every day, hour, and minute. It is worth fighting for, were it even just for one night...*

*Since I know you would surely ask me if I'm doing well and if I'm safe, yes, I am both, thanks to God and the team of trusty and relentlessly protective people who surround me. So don't worry about me, I shall be as fine as I can be, providing that my dear Ian doesn't stop watching over me from above, and that people don't stop longing for stories that bring love, truth and light into their lives... At least that is what I modestly hope my books do, and as that is the reason why I keep writing.*

*I dived into my memory box over Christmas, which contains a few family heirlooms and keepsakes reminding me of special and deeply treasured moments in my life. Among them, I found the little thing you have hopefully found in this letter. My mother, who gave it to me, got it from my grandmother, a strong Irish woman of great values, yet also one of the kindest, wisest and gentlest people I have ever known. I think you will understand why it reminded me of your friend. Please, give it to him with my greatest gratitude and friendship, not only for having saved my life but also for listening, understanding, and sharing his fears and dreams with me. I hope that one day, we can continue our conversation, and that you will be a part of it too. I would dearly love that...*

*Thank you again, be safe, both of you.*

*With love,*

*Brigit O'Donnell*

Catherine wiped a stray tear from her cheek, but couldn't wipe the smile off her face. Her look fell on the object in her hand again, and of course, it made perfect sense why Vincent should be the recipient of this beautiful little treasure. She put it back into the envelope, together with the letter, stood up and turned off the stove. The tea and dinner would have to wait, the letter would not...

She walked through the living room, reaching for her coat and keys, and while putting the envelope carefully into her coat pocket, she left her home yet again.

Her destination was underground.

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“Catherine...” Vincent breathed, regarding with awe the vintage piece of white gold jewellery in his hand as they stood at the threshold.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” she replied, smiling. She noticed the deep emotion radiating from the maned man. “Some very skilled craftsman made it a long time ago, it seems.”

“Yes,” he agreed, and the corners of his mouth turned upwards. “This pattern has its meaning.”

Catherine leaned closer to him to get a better look, intrigued. “I was wondering what it was,” she admitted truthfully.

“It’s a Claddagh Ring,” Vincent said, appreciating the delicate details of the ring: a heart held by two hands, topped with a crown set above the heart. “It comes from Celtic art. The heart symbolises love, the hands friendship, and the crown loyalty.”

Catherine’s smile widened. “She surely is a wise woman.”

Vincent tilted his head, his face still bewildered. “These rings have been passed from generation to generation, from mothers to daughters for centuries... Each one of them is very special. If Brigit didn’t wish to keep it...”

“It means she doesn’t intend to have children? Maybe her love for Ian was too deep and unique for her to find someone else to share her life with. Some people can never recover when the love of their life passes away.”

Their eyes met, and there was a mutual understanding of the words that were never spoken between them, yet strongly felt on both sides.

“Some love leaves too great a mark on one’s heart and soul and makes itself irreplaceable in any way,” Vincent remarked quietly. His deep blue eyes reflected the knowing feeling that were he in Brigit’s place, he would have felt the same. No other woman could ever fill the gap if Catherine ever left his life...

Catherine smiled knowingly, suddenly feeling herself drifting into the sphere of light-headedness and joy again, as always when Vincent spoke of love and looked at her the way he did just now.

“Maybe you can meet again one day,” she pondered. “She saw you when you saved her from Jamie and didn’t tell the police about it. I think that proves she is more than trustworthy to keep your secret.”

“Perhaps,” Vincent replied, smiling and genuinely hoping she was right.

Catherine’s emerald eyes suddenly narrowed.

“What did you actually talk about that night?” she asked, only now realising she had never inquired before.

Vincent chuckled, then lifted his eyes from under his thick brows; a playful smile settled on his face.

“Love,” he answered, and his gaze was warm and all-telling.

Catherine felt the blush rising on her cheeks. She was unable to tear her eyes from his, a dreamy smile appearing on her lips without her thinking about it. Her mind flooded with memories of that extraordinary Halloween night, especially of their walk through the City, long into the morning... When he didn't say anything more, she forced herself to look away, then glanced back again.

“Well, I... better get going,” she stuttered, her eyes travelling from his eyes to his chest and back. “I have an early morning start tomorrow. And I want to write back to Brigit.”

“Of course,” Vincent acknowledged, still smiling; he found himself enjoying seeing Catherine bashful like a teenage girl before the boy she liked.

“Good night, Vincent,” Catherine managed to whisper and touched his forearm.

“Good night, Catherine,” he replied with an equally quiet voice, the heat of her touch seeping through the thick layer of his sleeve.

They held eye contact for a long time before Catherine finally turned around and walked into the milky white light to reach the ladder leading back to her apartment.

Vincent's eyes regarded the spot for another moment, holding on to another precious memory of her presence. His look dropped to the ring in his hand and he smiled again.

*Love, friendship, loyalty... Love and friendship... Love...*

