

A stylized graphic of a matchstick with a flame. The matchstick is white with a teal outline, and the flame is represented by several teal lines of varying lengths. The background is a teal gradient.

# THE MATCHMAKER

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## About the Book

Maggie Ryan can't help it! She constantly finds herself trying to match things and people together and with three bright, beautiful, *single* daughters she decides that a little romantic matching is needed.

However, Maggie's quest to find the perfect partner for each of her reluctant daughters is proving difficult. Grace has had enough of heartbreak and given up on men, deciding instead to concentrate on her career, and Anna believes that no man can ever live up to her romantic ideals. While single-parent Sarah devotes so much time to her little girl Evie that romance constantly passes her by.

Determined to get '*rings on those fingers*' Maggie Ryan believes that the arrival of new neighbour, bachelor Mark McGuinness, is an opportunity far too good to be missed!

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Author's Note

About the Author  
Also by Marita Conlon-McKenna  
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# THE MATCHMAKER

MARITA CONLON-McKENNA

For mothers and daughters everywhere

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The most beautiful thing in the world is a match well  
made.

Jane Austen, *Emma*

## The Matchmaker's Tips for a perfect Match . . .

1. Opposites do definitely attract.
2. Best friends can make the 'best' husbands.
3. Interfering in the lives of daughters, sisters and friends usually helps . . .
4. Distance can make the heart grow fonder; but usually of someone else!
5. Remember bad boyfriends make equally bad husbands.
6. Men who are still living at home with their 'Mammies' at thirty will (no matter what a girl does) always be Mammies' boys!
7. Good Men are not like the 46A bus . . . they do not come along that often!
8. Seeing a man when he is sick, in his pyjamas and is at his absolute worst, and still managing to find him somewhat attractive, is very encouraging.
9. Always accept lunch, dinner and party and concert invitations as given time they may lead to a diamond ring.
10. Remember falling in love can happen at any age.

# Chapter One

It seemed to Maggie Ryan that she had been matching things all her life, from simple socks and underwear in drawers and linen baskets to table mats and table settings and menus, furniture, curtains and clothes, to the more complex choice of the perfect gift for the people she cared about, or the talents of her children with school subjects and hobbies. Matching people was another matter as it always tended to get a bit more complicated. Bringing people together, however, was what she was good at, and something that she actively enjoyed. She smiled thinking about today's big Sunday lunch with family and friends gathered around her rather ancient dining table.

As she looked out over the square of elegant red-brick Georgian houses that formed a neat rim around the lush hedges and greenery of Pleasant Square, she smiled again. 'Pleasant' was the perfect word for it, she thought, this historic square with its old family houses tucked between Leeson Street and Ranelagh where she had lived for thirty-two years. She and Leo had raised their family here, opposite the east gate of the park with its tantalizing view of the herbaceous borders and flower beds.

The square itself, though not very big or imposing, was still considered one of Dublin's most desirable places to live, and the houses that surrounded it architectural gems. Verdant oak, ash, beech and chestnut formed leafy pathways through the small park, enjoyed by generations of the square's inhabitants. Pleasant Square's appearance had

barely changed over a century and a half and Maggie couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

She glanced at the 'Sold' sign outside number 29, on the corner opposite. She had to admit she was curious to know who had bought the O'Connors' house. It had gone to auction about two weeks ago. Over the past month streams of visitors, would-be purchasers and inquisitive locals had viewed the three-storey home. Property prices in the city had literally gone through the roof and an old house with character so near town coming on the market was bound to attract interest. Despite being rather ramshackle and a bit run-down the house had sold for a fortune and rumour had it that the purchaser was a man of property, a wealthy investor. Whoever the mysterious buyer was, he had made a wise decision!

She remembered moving into this house, number 23, when she was a bride, Leo Ryan sweeping her up into his broad arms and insisting on carrying her up the steps and across the threshold, the two of them racing up the stairs and along the landing to the huge bedroom and the big bed, where they had stayed for hours, scarcely believing that they were man and wife and were now legally able to sleep together.

The house had been let as flats for years and was much the worse for wear when they first saw it, but Leo, with his eye for investment, had seen the potential. Over time they had both worked to restore the old house to its original condition, junking flimsy partition walls, sinks and two-ringed gas hobs, replacing multicoloured carpet and lino with polished floors, restoring original plasterwork and revealing the magnificent boarded-up fireplaces in the drawing room and dining room. Year by year they had turned a house full of tatty bed-sits into a comfortable family home as they worked and raised their three daughters.

The girls were grown up now. Grace, Anna and Sarah were independent young women, bright, beautiful, kind and good-hearted, just as daughters should be. She was proud of them, all so different. Grace, an architect, wrapped up in her career; Anna lost in the world of literature and academic life; and Sarah, who was still struggling to find a niche of her own but was devoted to her small five-year-old daughter Evie, who was the apple of her grandmother's eye. She loved them dearly but she had to admit their single state perplexed her.

Sometimes she wished that she could stop the clock, turn back time, have Leo alive again, back beside her, the children still young. But it seemed nothing could stay the same: Detta and Tom O'Connor deciding to move to England to be near their son Cormac and his family and selling up was just another example of it. Soon a new neighbour would be moving into the old Georgian house on the square. It was stupid for her to get sad and emotional about it. Pull yourself together, she told herself. You've a busy day ahead. She'd invited everyone for lunch to say a fond farewell to Detta and Tom before their big move to Bath next week. Lord knows they deserved a nice meal and a proper celebratory send-off from the square.

Grabbing the Sunday newspapers off her doorstep she retreated to the warmth of the kitchen and the promise of a quick read, a mug of fresh roast coffee and two slices of wholemeal toast with honey before ten o'clock mass. Then she would come home and pop that enormous leg of lamb she'd got from John Flanagan the butcher into the oven with a few sprigs of rosemary from the garden and begin the preparations for lunch.

## Chapter Two

Pulling the duvet up over her face and ears, Anna Ryan tried to keep herself warm and block out the nasty world that was waiting for her to emerge from her cocoon of sleep, drink and daydreaming. Her mouth, tongue and throat felt as if they were growing some kind of obscure turgid bacteria; how she wished she had had the foresight to bring a glass of water to bed with her last night. She contemplated the clock and the skinny strip of daylight that teased through her heavy chocolate-brown curtains. It was midday already.

Why did she do it? Waste her time going to one of those awful student-type parties in an overcrowded apartment in Temple Bar where you had to shout over the Killers to be heard and where everyone was dressed in black and drinking cheap red wine, talking about scripts and trying to be sophisticated? Why did her drama students always have to be so predictable! She should have had more sense and left early like she had planned - made a polite appearance and then got a taxi home instead of staying there till four a.m. arguing about the state of the Abbey Theatre and whether plays should aim for Broadway or broke. She must be mad talking to a load of twenty-year-olds about the complicated influences on the structure of Irish drama on a Saturday night. She was pathetic. She had hoped Philip would turn up, only discovering at midnight when she texted him that he had gone to Kilkenny to run a workshop with a theatre group over the weekend, a fact that he had forgotten to mention to her. Philip Flynn worked with her in

the college's English department and as neither of them was involved with anyone, a somewhat unusual relationship had developed between them. With a mutual passion for theatre and literature, they often attended events together, sharing a bottle of wine or supper afterwards. There had been one or two late-night boozy romantic skirmishes between them but somehow good sense had prevailed and they had managed to avoid spoiling it. He was an interesting man and although others considered him self-centred - self-absorbed - and somewhat aloof, she understood the passion for drama and poetry that drove his personality. Still, a phone call from him would have been nice and saved her making an absolute eejit of herself!

She groaned, staring at the wall, wishing the day was over before it had even begun. She would have dearly loved to give in to her hangover and loll in bed for the rest of the day but she remembered that she had promised to go for Sunday lunch at her mother's. If she didn't show up Maggie Ryan would have a search party out hunting for her, which meant that one of her sisters would turn up, give her a lecture and see the calamitous mess and state of her house - a fate she intended to avoid at all costs.

Stretching gradually, she braved getting out of bed. She looked and felt absolutely mind-blowingly awful. Clutching at walls like an invalid, she gingerly made it to the bathroom. Her brown wavy hair was in a frizz that even the bravest hairdresser wouldn't touch and her freckles stood out like paint splatters on her pale face; her eyes were smudged and smeared with that stupid natural plant dye mascara that she had been trying out. Throwing cold water on her face and neck to revive herself she realized carbs and coffee were urgently needed and, wrapping herself in the duvet, struggled to the kitchen for a mug of coffee and a slice of toasted brown bread. She had only instant and a half a carton of milk, but the brown bread she found was in no fit state to be handled, let alone toasted. Desperate, she

searched her kitchen presses and the fridge for something to eat, torn between a half-packet of water crackers and a pecan-nut cluster bar. She opted for the water crackers, which she smeared with butter and a slice of Edam cheese topped with a smidgen of peanut butter that was rather ancient-looking but still in date.

A good hot shower and she might even begin to feel human in about an hour, she thought. Scrambling among the clutter of newspapers and books strewn on the kitchen table she searched for the copy of the new volume of poems by an incredible woman Russian poet who had moved to Ireland. It was here somewhere . . . Ah! Finding it, she gave a sigh of contentment as the caffeine began to work its magic. Curling up in the chair, she began to read.

## Chapter Three

The Sunday streets were quiet as Grace stared out the window of her apartment overlooking Spencer Docks. Barefoot in her oyster-coloured silk wrap, she listened to a church bell ringing, calling the faithful of the city to mass and watched as below a rowing boat skimmed its way across the water, the crew perfectly in time, the oars lifting and dipping in unison. A perfect Sunday morning, dry and clear with only a hint of cloud in the sky.

The coffee-maker was on and the smell of toast filled the apartment. She opened the fridge: eggs, yes, bacon, none; she'd cook scrambled eggs for breakfast. She grabbed three eggs from the shelf, whisking them quickly with butter in the small saucepan. The creamy yellow eggs were almost cooked when Shane walked in.

She blinked, surprised to see that he was dressed already for she had intended they should share breakfast in bed. He had obviously showered for his fair hair was still clinging damply to his forehead and neck as he reached and kissed her.

'Mmm, that smells good,' he said, lowering himself on to the kitchen chair.

She piled some eggs and toast on to his plate, passing him the coffee and some butter.

'I'm starving,' he admitted, tucking in as she sat down beside him.

The eggs were just perfect. Nothing worse than over- or underdone scrambled eggs. There was definitely a knack to it, she thought as she began to eat.

'Why did you get dressed so soon?' she asked.

'Things to do,' he said, buttering more toast. 'Johnny phoned me last night. There's a sale on golf clubs over in Howth. We thought we might run over and have a look and then maybe play a few holes. The weather looks as if it might hold so we may as well.'

'There's lunch at my mother's at two thirty,' she reminded him.

'Sorry, Grace, but I just can't make it.'

He didn't sound the least bit apologetic and as she studied his handsome face she realized that spending the day together had never been part of his plan.

'She'll be disappointed,' she said, trying to conceal her anger, 'but she's invited quite a crowd.'

'There you go.' He laughed, reaching for the coffee. 'No harm done.'

She wanted to say to him: Forget Johnny, forget golf. Forget lunch at my mother's. Why can't we just stay here for the day looking out at the water, being with each other. But she didn't.

'It was a great night,' he said dipping his toast in the egg. He had butter on his lip; his beige cords were brushing against the tanned and toned skin of her bare leg.

Grace said nothing, thinking about the expensive meal they'd shared in Peploe's on St Stephen's Green the night before. The busy restaurant had been packed and they had been so lucky to get a table. They'd talked for hours, telling silly stories, taking it in turns to impress each other by being outlandish.

'I'm not sure if those Irish coffees were such a good idea, though.'

'They were,' he insisted.

She laughed, remembering how they'd fallen into a taxi and gone straight home, Shane holding her close all the way, racing upstairs and dancing to Sade on the stereo as he made her take off her shoes and stockings and sit out on

the balcony with him watching the moon. It had been such a perfect romantic night and Shane had been tender and funny and held her until she had fallen asleep in his arms.

'Will I see you later?' she asked, turning away from him as she got up to make more coffee.

'I'll text you. Depends on Johnny and what time we finish. We might just get a quick steak in the clubhouse. So don't worry about me, OK?'

It wasn't OK but she wasn't prepared to admit it and nag and fight like some needy woman.

'Listen, Gracey, I'll let you know if I can call by later. If not I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Fine.' She smiled brightly, layering some marmalade on a slice of golden toast.

He smoothed her tumble of shoulder-length blond hair and then bent and kissed her lips. He tasted of coffee and sugar and his skin and hair smelled of her expensive Jo Malone orange and lime shower gel.

'Thanks for breakfast and everything,' he said, kissing her one last time as he grabbed his jacket and wallet and keys.

Resisting the urge to argue with him, she walked him to the door and watched him get the lift.

Afterwards she stayed sitting for ages, her coffee going cold as she contemplated her relationship with him. Seagulls screeched along the river; a bold cormorant dived up and down as if it was looking for treasure, watching the waves below as it moved across the water. Shane was probably off swinging a golf club somewhere, totally oblivious to the fact that he had upset her. It was stupid, she knew. He hadn't done or said anything deliberately hurtful. It was more what he hadn't done, had left unsaid.

They had been going out for nine months. She knew that didn't mean she owned him but she hoped that he enjoyed being with her as much she did with him. They saw a lot of each other at work, and that was the way their relationship

had started. But outside of work it was different: they needed to make time for each other, no matter how busy their schedules were or how many projects they were working on. She was prepared to make the effort, to give their relationship the time, but she wasn't sure that Shane O'Sullivan was.

She glanced at her watch, suddenly realizing it was past midday as the sunshine streamed in the window. She could sit here for the rest of the day moping around or get dressed and go for a brisk walk along Sandymount Strand before heading home for a meal at her mother's. The comfort of Sunday lunch beckoned.

## Chapter Four

Standing at the bedroom door, Sarah studied her sleeping child: Evie's long dark eyelashes fanning across her cheek, her black hair in a tangle across the pillow, a smile on her lips. Sometimes it took her breath away just to look at her. Her daughter was utterly, totally beautiful.

'Mummy, are you watching me?' a sleepy voice asked.

'Of course,' she replied, clambering into bed with her and pulling the pink gingham quilt up around them.

'Why?'

'Because I love you, and when you're asleep and dreaming you make all kinds of funny faces.'

'What are they like?'

Curled up beside her daughter, she demonstrated and Evie giggled aloud.

'I was dreaming up a dog,' Evie said slowly, her blue eyes shining. 'A big white dog, with soft hair and a black nose . . .'

'That was a nice dream then,' Sarah agreed. Evie was going through a doggy phase. Sarah had searched the mothering manuals, but there was no mention of what to do about a child who was so obsessed about getting a dog that she even dreamed about them.

'His name is Snowy.'

Sarah just could not afford to take on a dog at the moment with all the costs involved: food and injections and vet's bills. Evie didn't understand how tight their finances were and how a hungry dog could be the last straw that would upset the delicate balance of their budget.

‘Some day, pet, we’ll get a dog,’ she promised, ‘but not just yet.’

‘When?’

Sometimes she wished that Evie wasn’t so clever. ‘Well, we can’t get a dog while Granny still has Podge. He’s a very old and slow cat and it wouldn’t be fair to him to have a new young dog running around the place and in the garden. It would scare him, wouldn’t it? The dog would probably bark at him and chase him and I think poor old Podge might not even be quick enough at running to make it up a tree. It would be cruel. Do you see?’

‘I see, Mummy.’ Evie nodded, giving a big disappointed shrug of her shoulders.

‘What’s that for?’ Sarah joked. ‘Your granny’s cooking us a lovely dinner today and Grace and Anna and Oscar from next door are coming over too.’

‘Can I wear my pink dress and my new pink tights then?’ pleaded Evie, bouncing up and down with excitement in the bed.

‘Of course, but you have to have a bath after breakfast and wash your hair,’ Sarah bargained as her daughter covered her in kisses before jumping out of bed.

Sarah watched her bounce out of the room and smiled to herself. It was funny how the worst thing that could have happened to her had ended up being the best. Finding out at nineteen, in the middle of college, that she was pregnant had seemed a disaster. A baby had been the last thing she wanted, but now – well, she couldn’t imagine life without Evie.

She had been madly in love with Maurizio, an Italian exchange student in the year above her. He was over from Milan for six months studying media technology. Small and dark and very handsome, he had asked her to show him how the contrary college photocopying machine worked and she’d ended up helping him copy his project. He had repaid her with coffee and a sandwich in the student café

afterwards. Maurizio told her that Irish girls were the most wonderful creatures in the world. Sarah had, of course, believed him. She was so crazy about him that she could barely breathe. When she told him that they were going to have a child he had asked her to move back to Italy with him - live in a student house in Milan, transfer from her Art and Design course in Dun Laoghaire to college there.

'Wait till the baby is born,' her mother and father had advised. Sarah, overwhelmed by their support and love and insistence that they would help cover all the costs of having a baby, had agreed.

Maurizio had returned to Milan and his studies, coming to Dublin for three days when baby Evie was born. Evie had his dark, almost black hair and long eyelashes and, Sarah suspected, a little of his Italian temperament, but her blue eyes, heart-shaped face and fair Irish skin were a carbon copy of her own looks. At first Maurizio had sent some money and she had made the effort to visit his parents in Italy for a week. It had been a disaster. His father wasn't well, the Carlucci family's apartment in central Milan was on the tenth floor and smaller than she expected; Evie's waking for night feeds woke the whole family and probably half of their neighbours too.

She had returned home exhausted. Maurizio only made it to Dublin for five days that summer to see his daughter. He was doing a masters degree, transferring to Rome; he was excitedly looking forward to the future. Sarah realized that Evie and herself were not part of it. There had been no big fight or angry words, they had simply drifted apart. Over the years his contact with his child had lessened, his financial support dwindled, leaving Sarah disappointed but not really surprised.

Motherhood had totally changed her. When Evie was born she had insisted on being with her all the time, refusing to hand her baby over to a crèche or someone else to mind. The maelstrom of emotions she felt for this small

being who was so dependent on her made her decide to quit her course, stay home and be a full-time mother.

'Are you sure that's what you want?' her father had asked.

'I'm sure.'

She was still sure, and didn't regret an hour or a day that she had spent devoted to her small daughter. Her parents had been more than generous, turning the basement of their house into an apartment for herself and Evie, refusing to accept any rent for it.

'Sure, all we were doing was storing stuff there, and who in God's name needed a table-tennis room,' Leo Ryan had pointed out as two bedrooms, a small sitting room and a bright kitchen had been created and painted up with new heating and new fittings installed. When Evie was two and a half Sarah had gone back and finished her course at night, her mother encouraging her to get her qualification and babysitting on Tuesdays and Thursdays for her as she wrote her thesis and took on her final year project.

She lived on the small income she got for working part-time in the local national school, which meant she was broke most of the time. She helped out with their library and gave art classes to the older children. The odd design job came her way through old college contacts and if she needed extra money her friend Cora, who ran a successful catering company, was always glad of an extra pair of hands either in the kitchen or serving at some of the fancy Dublin parties she catered for in people's homes. Still Sarah had no regrets. She watched as her friends' careers began to take off, and knew she wouldn't change places with them for the world, for she had Evie.

## Chapter Five

Sunday lunch. Maggie Ryan was a great believer in the tradition of Sunday lunch. Some considered it old-fashioned, but she clung firmly to the tenet that gathering around the table for a good meal at the end of a busy week was the best way to keep a family together. It ensured time with her children, kept her in touch with relations and was a relaxed way to entertain friends. Leo had always enjoyed it, carving up beef or lamb or turkey or pork loin into slices as he sipped a glass of red wine and put the cares of the week behind him. When he'd died she had abandoned the whole idea of entertaining, hating Sundays with a vengeance because they highlighted his absence, making it an awful day. Gradually, however, over the past few years, as her anger and grief had subsided, she realized that she hated being on her own Sunday after Sunday and had reinstigated the tradition.

Today the smell of roasting lamb and potatoes pervaded the kitchen and she had just added a tray full of peeled onions to the dish at the bottom of the oven. She had a large rhubarb crumble ready to pop in the oven later for dessert and some sticky toffee ice-cream in the freezer that she knew her little granddaughter adored.

The big mahogany dining table was set and she had lit the fire in the drawing room as there was still a nip in the air. Satisfied with progress in the kitchen, she decided to have a read of the papers, putting her feet up for a few minutes before the onslaught of visitors. Podge, her aged marmalade tabby cat, snoozed beside her in the chair.

Sarah and Evie were naturally the first to arrive, having only to make the short trip from the basement apartment up the stairs to the main part of the house. Sarah was wearing her usual jeans and T-shirt, topped by a pretty pink tapestry waistcoat.

'Imagine! I found it in the Oxfam shop,' she beamed as Maggie hugged them both, Sarah's long straight fair hair such a total contrast to her granddaughter's cascade of dark locks. Evie made a beeline for Podge who was lost in some cat reverie.

'How old is he, Granny?' she asked.

'About twelve, I think.'

'Will he die soon?'

Maggie cast a look of alarm over at Sarah, not wanting to upset her granddaughter. Maybe they'd been talking about death in school?

'Don't worry, Evie,' she reassured her. 'I hope that Podge will live for another few years.'

Sarah shot her a grateful glance, offering to help with the food as Evie's attention strayed from the family cat. She certainly was a live wire and full of chat as she bounced around studying the table.

'Granny, why are you using the special plates?' she quizzed, scrutinizing them.

'That's because I've extra visitors coming,' she replied, 'and I thought they might like these plates with their pretty pattern.'

'She's full of questions about everything at the moment.' Sarah laughed. 'It's non-stop.'

'There's nothing worse than a quiet child,' teased Maggie. 'Parents are always worrying about them. At least you don't have that problem!'

The doorbell went and Maggie watched as Sarah ran to open it. Her neighbours Gerry and Helen Byrne and their son Barry, who was home on a visit from London, had just arrived, Gerry carrying a bottle of expensive-looking red

wine and Helen a bunch of purple and yellow freesias, to give her hostess.

Barry almost lifted Sarah off the floor in a bear hug. The two of them laughed and chatted as Sarah took their coats and offered to put the flowers in water; Barry followed her down to the kitchen in search of a vase. Sarah had known the Byrnes all her life: they had been good friends to Maggie over the years and a tower of strength when Leo had died.

'This is just like old times,' Gerry exclaimed, warming himself in front of the fire.

'Can I get you a drink?' Maggie offered.

'A glass of wine for me, and Helen will have her usual gin and tonic.'

Maggie hoped that there was lemon in the fruit bowl in the kitchen as Helen was fussy about adding a slice of lemon to her drink.

Grace arrived next. She looked amazing in a pair of slim-fitting cream cords and a beige cord jacket, smelling of that expensive American perfume she always wore.

'I've just had a lovely walk along Sandymount Strand.' She smiled and hugged her mother.

'Where's that boyfriend of yours?' Maggie asked. 'I thought you said he was coming too.'

'I'm sorry, Mum,' she apologized, 'but Shane couldn't make it. It was a last-minute thing.'

Maggie said nothing. She could read the disappointment in her eldest daughter's eyes.

Why Grace had got herself tangled up with someone so self-centred was beyond her. Shane O'Sullivan worked in the same architectural firm as Grace. She wasn't sure it was at all wise for her daughter to get romantically involved with a colleague, especially one who seemed so unreliable. They'd been going out for almost a year but she had to admit she just couldn't take to him. Grace on the outside might seem composed and direct but underneath

she was sensitive and caring. She deserved a boyfriend who was a lot better than a handsome heartbreaker like Shane. Maggie had to bite her tongue on her opinion of him but to her mind he seemed to be constantly letting Grace down; today was only another example of it.

'Who else is coming?' Grace asked.

'I've asked Detta and Tom. You know, I'm going to really miss them. They've been such good neighbours over the years, and when I think how kind they were when your father died and I couldn't even think straight . . .'

'I heard their house was sold,' Grace said, all interested. 'Who bought it?'

'I'm sure they'll tell us. Oscar of course is coming. He loves a good Sunday roast. Anna should be here soon.'

Grace smiled; her mother loved having people around, cooking and entertaining and chatting. Her parents had always been a social couple but now her mother had to work hard to fill the void left by her father's death.

'Can I do anything?' she offered.

'No, you relax,' urged Maggie. Her eldest daughter worked far too hard. At the top of her profession, her job in one of the city's busy architects' firms consumed her. She went from one project to another, constantly putting in long hours and overtime, with scarcely any time for a personal life. Maggie's motherly worries were interrupted by the arrival of Detta and Tom O'Connor bearing two rather ancient bottles of champagne.

'We found them in that old wine cellar under the stairs. We felt we must celebrate, Maggie. Can you believe it, the house sold and us upping sticks and starting over at our age,' declared Tom, beaming like an overweight schoolboy in his usual navy blazer, his round face flushed with excitement.

'When are you moving?' asked Gerry, congratulating him.

'The removal people are coming on Thursday,' answered Detta, full of emotion, her double chin wobbling. 'All the

boxes are already there and we've so much to pack and label correctly but they'll help us, and then on Thursday evening we're getting the car ferry over to Holyhead. We'll stay the night there and the next morning drive down to Bath.'

'Next Sunday, God willing, we'll be with Cormac and Lynn and their three boys. We've bought a small cottage only about a half-mile from their house.'

The bottles of Moët were well chilled and Gerry helped Maggie to open one. Maggie was just passing a glass to Detta when Oscar from next door appeared. He moved slowly, his arthritis obviously troubling him again, his long thin frame cushioned by a heavy tweed jacket. Anna arrived just a minute after him.

Maggie welcomed them both but asked no questions, taking in the black T-shirt and unironed olive-green skirt and boots, and the dark circles under her middle daughter's eyes and her pale skin as she hugged her.

'You OK, Anna? Do you want some champagne?' offered Sarah, not surprised when her sister demurred.

The enormous leg of lamb was done to perfection, the potatoes nicely roasted when Maggie called everyone to sit down. Sarah and Grace helped her to carve and serve the food.

'A toast to Detta and Tom,' she called. 'It's sad saying goodbye to the best of neighbours but we all wish them good fortune in their new home in England.'

Gerry and Helen nodded in agreement and seventy-five-year-old Oscar made a small speech of his own.

'May the road rise to meet you,' he said softly. 'The square won't be the same without such dear friends. How I'll manage in O'Brien's on a Wednesday night without Tom along for our regular pint of Guinness beats me.'

'Gerry will have to buy you one instead,' said Helen, squeezing his arm.