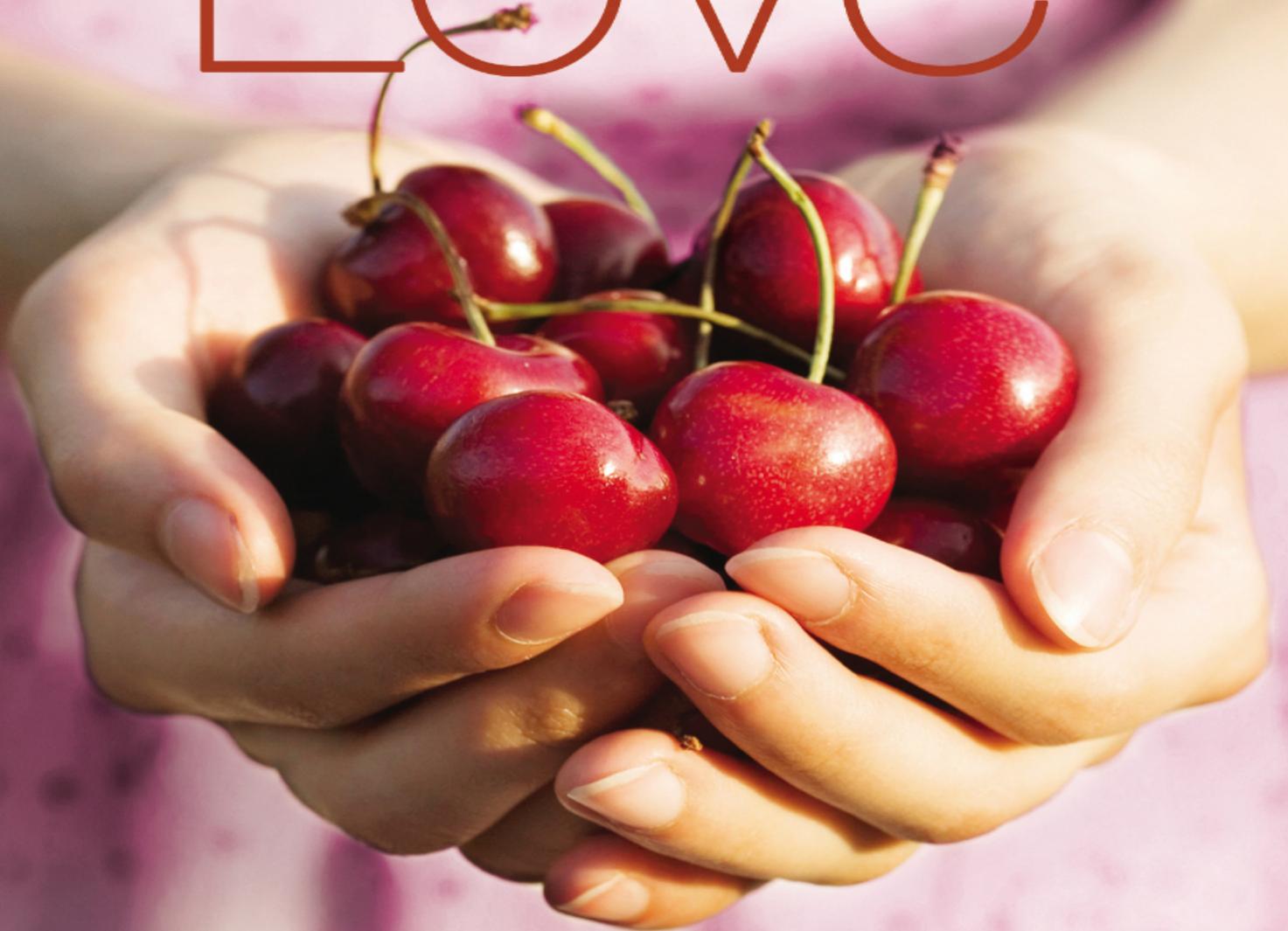


MARITA CONLON-McKENNA

a
Taste
for
Love



HER DELICIOUS NEW BESTSELLER

About the Book

Alice loves to cook. She believes the secret of good food is to cook with passion.

Her love affair with cookery has taken her from her parents' seaside hotel, to Paris and then one of Dublin's finest restaurants. Then she marries Liam, and is happy to hang up her chef's hat and cook for her family and friends instead.

But now she's cooking for one!

Her marriage to Liam over, it's high time she learned to stand on her own two feet and begin again... Urged on by her friends Alice decides to open a cookery school.

The Martello School of Cookery opens its doors and Alice begins to teach a group of total strangers to create food that is delicious. And in the comfort of the kitchen these strangers find that there is much to learn, not just about baking and sautéing - but about recipes for life...

By the number one bestselling author of *Mother of the Bride*.

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About the Author
Also by Marita Conlon-McKenna
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A Taste for Love

Marita Conlon-McKenna



TRANSWORLD IRELAND

For my best
friend, Ann
Frances Doorly,
who loved life
and lived it to
the full!

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Chapter One

Alice Kinsella checked the oven. The rich aroma of spices and apricots from the slowly cooking lamb tagine was filling the kitchen. The table was set, the white wine was chilling in the fridge and the red wine was on the counter. Everything looked perfect, and she hurried upstairs as she had only half an hour to get ready and change into something a bit more stylish before her guests arrived.

It was a Saturday night in November, and it seemed strange hosting a dinner party on her own, but she just had to get used to it. She was fed up of Saturday after Saturday sitting in watching DVDs and game shows on TV, and just longed for a bit of decent adult company, everyone sitting around her table with nice food and a few decent bottles of wine. She had always enjoyed having friends around at the weekend or eating out at one of Dublin's many restaurants, and it was one of the things she missed most now that Liam was gone.

It was almost a year and a half since their marriage break-up, and she was still trying to get used to the loneliness of it, and adjust to life without Liam. At first friends and family had been great - remembering to include her, and asking her to lots of things and nights out - but she had noticed over the past few months that the number of dinner and party invitations had dwindled. It was bad enough losing her husband, her marriage, and her

financial security, but losing people she had considered friends was probably the thing that hurt the most.

As she pulled her pale-grey shift dress on over her black tights, and slipped into black suede shoes, she tried to push all negative thoughts of her ex-husband from her mind and concentrate on the night ahead. She was going to enjoy herself and have a bit of fun, with or without Liam!

'Hey, Mum, is there anything you want me to do?' offered her twenty-two-year-old daughter, Jenny, who was home for a few days from Galway, where she was at university.

'Will you check I put fresh towels in the downstairs bathroom, please?'

Alice glanced at her make-up, understated yet enough to make an impact. Her eyes looked different with a hint of eyeliner, the smoky grey and beige shadow that Jenny had suggested she try, and the new mascara she had treated herself to. Her light brown hair, longer and recently lightly highlighted, feathered around her face. She added a warm peach-coloured lipstick and topped it off with a little gloss before dabbing on some of her favourite perfume.

She was looking a lot better than she had done this time last year, when it had felt like her world had fallen apart, and she had been literally on the floor with anger and rage at the injustice and unfairness of it all. Liam moving out of their Monkstown home and in with Elaine Power, the thirty-eight-year-old marriage-wrecker he now called his new partner. He and Elaine had scarcely known each other, and yet her husband of nearly thirty years had walked away from his marriage to Alice with barely a backward glance. Their eldest son, Conor, still wasn't speaking to him, and Sean, their twenty-year-old, tried to avoid his father. Poor Jenny, their only daughter, did her best to remain neutral.

'I've put one of those fancy American towels downstairs.' Jenny smiled as she came back into the room

and sat down on the bed. 'Wow! Mum, you look great! That dress is so good on you! You've lost weight.'

'Do you think so?' Alice ran her hands over her firmer hips and flatter tummy. 'Would you notice?'

Alice had to admit that the only good thing to come out of the most stressful time in her life was that she had, for the first time in years, without going on the Atkins or Weight Watchers diets, dropped ten kilos in weight. She felt the better for it. She was taking far more exercise, and was eating less as she was no longer cooking the kind of meals that Liam enjoyed. A fridge full of red meat and pork and sausages had been replaced by one containing healthy chicken and fish and vegetables!

'Everyone will notice,' teased her daughter.

It was so good to have Jenny in the house, even if it was only for a few days. She would be heading off on the train back to college on Wednesday evening, and Alice would really miss her.

Sean was a good kid, but he was rarely around, and seemed always to be busy in college doing something or other. Alice suspected he was still in denial about their situation, and was trying to avoid it and home as much as possible.

Alice jumped as the doorbell went.

'Will I let them in?' offered Jenny.

'Thanks, love. I'll be down in a minute. I think it's probably Joy.'

Alice looked at her neck, deciding to remove the classic pearls that Liam had given her ten years ago and put them away in their box. Instead she took out the silver John Rocha piece that Conor and his girlfriend Lisa had given her last Christmas, and put it on.

'Better,' she said. 'Much better.'

Joy greeted her with a huge hug. Her old school friend was always the first at everything and had already made herself

at home in the kitchen. She was clutching a glass of red wine while interrogating her god-daughter Jenny about her love life in Galway.

‘Mum, make her stop,’ begged Jenny, mortified.

‘You’re living away from home with no mamma or dadda around,’ teased Joy. ‘I can only imagine what Alice and I would have got up to in our day. There’s bound to be some lovely Galway man around.’

‘Well, if there is ... and I’m not saying there is ... you and Mum are the last two I’d tell!’

Alice noticed Joy was wearing her regulation black – this time a skirt with a bolero-type wrap-over top – and had made huge efforts with her unruly blonde hair. She was wearing it pinned up neatly.

Ten minutes later Sally and Hugh Ryan had appeared, Hugh carrying three bottles of expensive French wine into the kitchen and putting them on the kitchen island. ‘Some very good wine to go with some very good food, judging by the aroma tempting my taste buds.’

‘Thanks, Hugh!’

They were her dearest friends, and he and Sally had rallied around when Liam had gone off with ‘the witch’ Elaine, leaving Alice virtually penniless. Sally had been a rock over the past year, even listening to her midnight tirades about Liam and ‘his hussy’. While Hugh, practical as ever, had managed to get her a temporary job in the accountancy firm where he was one of the partners.

In the twenty-five years that Hugh had been coming to their house he had never arrived without bringing a highly recommended wine that added to the occasion. He was a real wine buff, and Liam and he used to spend ages talking about various vintages. She was glad that tonight, despite Liam’s absence, he had kept up the tradition.

‘And I’ve got some photos of little Ava, our ten-day-old granddaughter, to show you,’ added Sally proudly.

Alice was so pleased for them, having their first grandchild. It was such a milestone.

‘Champagne to celebrate?’ She laughed as she took the Bollinger from the fridge, Hugh gallantly doing the honours and opening the bottle for her.

‘To little Ava,’ they toasted, as Nina Brennan and her husband David joined them, too.

‘I’ll stick with the red wine,’ insisted Joy. ‘Champagne just goes straight to my head.’

Alice could certainly vouch for that.

They moved to the sitting room, the fire blazing in the grate, as Alice’s neighbours, the Cassidys, appeared. Molly Cassidy had been a great friend to Alice over the years, and even though she and her husband Jack were a good bit older than Alice they were wonderful company. Jack, retired from his career in the Garda, still seemed to know everything that was going on in the country.

The last to arrive were Alice’s brother Tim, his wife Patsy, and their daughter Erin – who was six months younger than Jenny. An only child, Erin had spent a vast amount of her childhood in the Kinsellas’ house, and she and Jenny were great friends as well as being cousins.

Jenny went to get more champagne glasses as everyone relaxed and chatted easily.

‘This is such a treat,’ declared Molly. ‘Jack is always delighted when Alice invites us over, as she’s the best cook we know.’

‘Good to have a decent meal compared to that awful stuff we ate on holiday,’ Jack said.

‘Where were you?’ asked Joy.

‘We got back from Egypt on Tuesday,’ explained Molly. ‘We went on a cruise on the Nile, visited Cairo and the museum, and of course the Pyramids. We stayed in some wonderful places.’

‘Cost us an arm and a leg, but it still didn’t stop us getting tummy trouble.’ Jack groaned. ‘Followed all the

precautions, but it made no difference ...'

'Well, at least you're back on your home turf now,' consoled Joy.

Alice slipped back into the kitchen. Everything was going perfectly. She checked the lamb: it tasted rich and warm, perfect for a chilly night. She would serve it with couscous and a creamy mash that she knew Jack and her brother Tim were very partial to. The green beans were perfect, and there was the obligatory salad as she knew Erin and Jenny were big into greens. She popped her starter of goats' cheese into the top oven to warm. Once everyone was seated she would cover it with some crumbs and herbs and give it a quick toasting before serving it on a bed of rocket, accompanied by the cooked beetroot that went so perfectly with it. Lighting a few candles, she called everyone to the table.

Sitting around chatting as everyone ate and laughed and told stories, Alice relaxed.

David and Tim were on second helpings of the lamb, and Jack had gotten through a mound of creamy mash. The wine was flowing, and Hugh was great at making sure that new bottles were opened as needed. They were all such good friends, and she didn't know how she would have survived the past eighteen months without them. They had bent over backwards to support her and encourage her to stand on her own two feet again; each person at the table in their own way had listened and advised and encouraged her.

'Alice, how do you do it: cook such delicious food and still manage to lose weight?' Sally sighed. With her curvy figure she was constantly trying diets and gyms and weight-loss clubs.

'Heartbreak, Sally, but you well know I wouldn't recommend it.'

'I put on almost two stone after Malcolm and I split,' admitted Joy. 'I was so sad, and I guess I was comfort eating. It was only when I realized that poor Beth was worried about me that I managed to pull myself together, and decided that there had to be a life after Malcolm. It was what both Beth and I deserved. I realized that the only person who could make me happy with my life was me!'

'And you've been enjoying yourself ever since,' teased Jenny.

'Of course!' said Joy, raising her glass. 'That's what it's all about!'

Alice smiled. Joy had refused to let her sit home and mope after the break-up, and had dragged her to dinners and lunches, walks, theatre and gallery openings, weekends in Barcelona and Prague - as well as a few trips to Joy's holiday cottage down in Wexford. Alice would be lost without her best friend, and they always seemed to have fun together.

The talk at the table turned to politics, and Jack and Tim nearly came to blows about the state of the economy and what should be done to solve it, while Hugh the accountant tried to calm things.

At her end of the table Molly told them she and Jack were planning to visit China the next year, to see Beijing and Hong Kong and walk the Great Wall.

'You two are such intrepid travellers, you put us all to shame!' remarked Nina Brennan enviously.

'Well, as Jack says, it beats sitting around waiting for the two of us to get old!'

Jenny helped Alice serve the warm apple and almond tart with vanilla ice cream and whipped cream, and made coffee for everyone. Alice was relieved that everything had gone so well.

'Alice, that lamb had such a flavour! How do you do it?' asked Sally.

'The secret is in marinating it in lots of spices overnight, and then slow cooking it,' Alice explained.

'And you must give me the recipe for this,' begged her sister-in-law Patsy as she finished the last crumb of the light almond tart.

'I'll email it to you,' Alice offered.

'I'm always trying out Alice's recipes, but somehow when I make them at home they never seem quite as good,' Patsy joked.

'That's because she's a natural cook.' Jack beamed. 'Molly has got green fingers; she can get anything to grow. And Alice is the equivalent with food.'

'Cooking makes me happy,' admitted Alice. 'I guess that's why I like having you lovely people over and doing it for you.'

'And we love coming here and enjoying your fine food,' replied Hugh, toasting her.

By midnight Jack and Molly had said their goodbyes and Jenny and Erin had disappeared to the comfort of the leather couches in the family room.

Alice produced Liam's vintage port and a bottle of Baileys, and they all relaxed.

'Sorry, Alice, but we have to head off, too,' apologized Hugh, sipping his glass of creamy liquor. 'We're driving down to Waterford in the morning to see Sally's parents. Her dad is celebrating his eightieth birthday and there is a big family lunch. We'll have to be on the road by ten o'clock tomorrow.'

'Next time it's our turn,' promised Sally as their taxi arrived and they said their goodbyes in the hall.

'The Ryans are a lovely couple,' said Tim.

'I'd be lost without them,' admitted Alice. 'Hugh has been so kind, giving me all types of advice on tax and finance, and even getting me some work in his office.'

'How's it going there?' enquired Joy. 'What's it like working for Hugh?'

'Great. Hugh's lovely, and everyone has been very kind. But to be honest, it's not exactly my type of work. It's all big spreadsheets and debits and credits. Half the time I'm not sure what I'm doing! But at least it's a job for the time being.'

'A job is a job!' declared Nina. 'They are like gold dust at the moment. Poor Lucy has been trying to find work for ages with no success.'

'It's tough out there,' Tim added.

'Will you stay at Hugh's firm?' pressed Joy.

'I'm not sure.' Alice hesitated. She had joined the accountancy firm on a six-month temporary contract, filling in for someone on maternity leave, and she really wasn't sure if her contract was going to be renewed, or even if she wanted to stay. 'I'll have to see.'

As she got up to make a fresh pot of coffee she realized that there was no point worrying needlessly about what the future would bring. If there was one thing she had noticed lately, it was that one had very little control over fate.

An hour later everyone except Joy had gone home, Joy accepting Alice's offer to stay overnight in the spare room rather than spend a fortune on a taxi.

'Where's that bottle of wine Hugh opened before he left?' asked Joy, topping up their glasses as she told Alice about the man she had been out to dinner with three times.

'Three dates! Why didn't you bring him along tonight?' Alice said, cuddling her terrier, Lexy.

'Are you gone mad? I barely know Fergus, and I'm not going to inflict him on anyone until I'm sure that he's not another of those lunatics I tend to attract.'

Alice tried not to laugh as she thought of some of Joy's previous male friends, who had certainly been a bit different.

'The next dinner, bring him along!' she urged.

'That's if he survives till then,' said Joy.

Alice had to give it to her best friend: when Joy's husband, Malcolm, had cheated on her and left her, and moved to London with his new lady love - who was expecting his baby - Joy had managed to raise their twelve-year-old daughter with very little support from Malcolm and eventually pick herself up and get on. She had made a new life for herself centred round her daughter Beth, her friends and family, and her work as a teacher.

Alice knew that it was a lesson that she needed to learn, too.

Chapter Two

Lucy Brennan stared at the standard polite rejection letter. She had sent twenty-two copies of her CV out to a number of shops and businesses over the past ten days, and only two had bothered to reply. This was the third, saying there were no current vacancies, but that they would keep her details on file. It was so depressing! Lucy rammed the letter into a bundle in the drawer of her desk. She had been unemployed officially now for twelve months, and judging by this letter it certainly didn't look like anything was going to change.

She was broke, single and back living with her parents! Her life was a Tragedy with a capital T! This time last year she'd had a great job, a great boyfriend, and been sharing a house in Ranelagh with Anna and Megan, two old school friends. They'd called it 'the party house' as it was always full of friends. So many great nights had started and ended back in the small red-bricked terraced house on Warwick Road. Then, fast as you could say global recession, economic downturn, banks, builders and bloody NAMA, everything had collapsed around them. Everyone was suddenly broke and looking for work, or trying to hang on to their jobs. Each time she turned on the news or read a newspaper things were getting worse. It was so depressing. She was twenty-five, and this was meant to be her heyday - not the nightmare it had become.

First, she had lost her job. Phoenix Records, the small record store off Clarendon Street where she worked, had closed down. She had pitied Jeremy and Charlie, the owners, as they'd watched sales dwindle week after week, everyone downloading their music to their iPods and iPhones, so that trying to sell CDs had become almost impossible.

She'd felt bad for the guys in the young bands that Jeremy had promoted, putting their posters up in the window and giving their tracks a push by playing their music in the shop and advertising their gigs. Jeremy had had to give them back stacks of unsold CDs and tell them not to give up hope ... things had to change ... great music would always have a place in a civilized society. First Jeremy had cut her wages, then her hours, until eventually, heartbroken, he had explained that he could no longer afford the rent and he and Charlie were just going to close up and hand back the key to their landlord. Phoenix Records, for the moment, would have to shut.

'But I promise you, Lucy, if, like our name, we rise from the ashes of this economic mess, you will be the first person we hire back.'

'Thanks,' she had said, hugging him, knowing how much money he and Charlie had lost over the past two years in the failing business. Music was their life, and she knew the two of them were almost broke. She couldn't imagine her life without the small store with the big heart that could sell out a concert or a gig, and had even broken two or three of the big Irish bands and singers over the years. What would she do without the shop and the music and their customers? It had hardly seemed like work, coming in to a place she loved so much. She had immediately tried to get another job, Jeremy giving her an amazing reference, but no one had wanted a girl with no proper qualifications who only knew about bands and the music scene and how it all worked.

At least, as she had told herself at the time, she had still had Josh Casey, her boyfriend of fourteen months. They were mad about each other and joked about having more time to spend together now that she was footloose and fancy-free. At first it had seemed great, but month after month it had eaten away at them. Josh, fully qualified, had become focused on his own job in the big firm of solicitors on the Quays. He had had to work later in the evenings, and had seemed to have less and less time to see her and be with her. He had become bored by the new bands and their gigs in Whelans and Tripod and Slatterys. Bored by her friends, bored with staying in watching DVDs, bored by her lack of funds to go anywhere different, do anything different!

‘Josh, I can’t afford to go to Paris to watch Ireland play a stupid rugby match! And I’ve no intention of going to a restaurant that is going to charge me half my week’s dole for a meal and a few glasses of wine!’

‘I’ll pay for you,’ he had offered. ‘I’m earning.’

‘Josh, I don’t want your money! I can pay my own way,’ she had insisted stubbornly.

Being broke and trying to live on a tiny budget was no fun, and it hadn’t really been a surprise when he’d told her a few months later, ‘Lucy, maybe we need to take a break from each other ... not be so intense, and just cool it for a while?’

‘Sure ... maybe you’re right, Josh!’ she had said, trying not to cry or let him see how much he was hurting her. They’d gone from having fun and being crazy about each other to making each other unhappy. This way she hoped that they could still at least be friends.

‘You and Josh will get back together, just wait and see,’ Megan had reassured her. ‘Anyone can see you two are made for each other.’

‘Yeah, Josh will be back in your life again,’ Anna had insisted. ‘He’s far too great a guy to be an ex.’

The girls had consoled her with fun girly nights and lots of wine, pasta and talk, until, after about three weeks, she had realized that Josh had stopped texting and phoning her and was no longer part of her life. Two months later she'd heard he was going out with a girl from his office.

Then Megan had lost her job in one of the big banks. Two unemployed girls unable to pay the rent in their Ranelagh home was not going to work out, and they had all talked about downsizing to a small two-bedroom apartment. Then, out of the blue one day, Megan had announced she was taking off for Canada. She had cousins in Vancouver, and they were hoping to help her get a job there as a credit analyst.

'There's nothing to lose, Lucy. Why don't you come with me?' she had said.

Lucy did consider it, but knew that finding a job might be very hard in Canada. Megan had qualifications and a hefty redundancy package from the bank to tide her over, whereas she would have to borrow the money from her parents.

'I promise to let you know the minute I find a job for you. Then you just book a flight and come over,' Megan had urged. 'You've nothing to keep you here.'

*

In August the three girls sadly said goodbye to 'the party house', Anna deciding to move in with her boyfriend Ted.

'He's been asking me for ages, so I guess now is a good time to try out living together ... hopefully we won't kill each other!'

Lucy liked Ted. She was happy for him and Anna, even if it meant that she was temporarily homeless and had to move back home with her mum and dad.

'Your room is still there for you,' welcomed her mum. 'It's good to have you home, Lucy.'

It was good to be home, but she felt embarrassed at twenty-five years of age to be dependent again on her parents. She knew they were puzzled and didn't understand what was happening to her. Her brothers Niall and Kevin both had good jobs: one working in a big insurance company and the other in an upcoming green energy company which he had joined after qualifying as an engineer. Emma, her older sister, was not only married and had a little boy called Harry, but had a great job in Google's Dublin head office. She knew her folks wondered where they had gone wrong with her. Why was she such a disaster compared to her brothers and sister?

She had taken the studs from her ears and nose, lightened her hair colour and even purged her wardrobe of denims and Doc Martens, but it had been to no avail ... there were just no jobs. Her dad would sit down with a pad and pen with her, and draft and redraft her CV when he came home from his work at the bank.

'Lucy, you must have some idea of what you would really like to do! The sort of career that would satisfy you, the kind of work you want.'

'I loved Phoenix Records,' she said. 'It was a great buzz working there.'

'Given the current climate, no one is going to be opening another record store in Dublin - or anywhere else for that matter,' said her dad, irritated.

'I know.'

'So you need to focus on something else, Lucy, and try to get experience working in a different environment.'

It was easier said than done. Her reams of unanswered CVs were a testament to that fact.

She had done a bit of babysitting and childminding for her brother Kevin and his wife Cassie and their baby Sophie, and also for her sister Emma. She loved minding her little niece and nephew. Sometimes, through one of Jeremy's contacts, she got a bit of work on the promotion

side for big gigs coming into the city's large music venues. It was hand to mouth stuff, and she didn't know how much longer she could keep it up as week after week friends headed for London, New Zealand, Australia and Canada.

'Something will turn up,' her mother said soothingly, again and again.

Lucy knew she was a useless case. She'd loved school, and been happy there, but her exam results had been pretty awful. She wasn't academic, and had struggled to get through the Leaving Cert, unlike her brothers and sister. She had scraped into one of Dublin's smaller colleges, realizing after her first term studying marketing and business and French that she had absolutely no idea what she was doing, but enjoyed the social life. She had flunked her first-year exams, and halfway through repeats in her second year came to the conclusion that there was absolutely no point in it, and just dropped out.

She had tried lots of other things: computers, interior design, tourism, massage, web design ... and hated every single one of them. She had racked up a fortune in fees over the years, and still had no idea of what her calling in life was.

Sure, she'd like to get married and have kids, but that didn't really count as a career aim. Her sister Emma had Harry, the most huggable three-and-a-half-year-old on the planet, but she still had to work. She and her husband had a massive mortgage on their small house up in Sandyford.

'Lucy, think yourself lucky you are not caught up paying a mortgage like us.' Emma grimaced. She had given up her Volkswagon Beetle, her fancy clothes, her fake-tan sessions, nail bar and spa treats with her girlfriends, and romantic breaks with Gary in order to keep paying the bills. At least Harry was able to attend the crèche attached to her office, and would start school next year.

'Any news?' asked Lucy's mum hopefully, coming into her room with a pile of washing she had brought in from the line.

'Just another letter with a great big no!' Lucy sighed, feeling sorry for herself. 'Mum, I can't see how I am ever going to get a job unless I emigrate.'

'I'm sorry, pet. It's not your fault. It's the stupid politicians and bankers that run this country that have brought us to this. Who would believe married men and women with families and mortgages are losing their jobs, and talented people like yourself not even getting called to an interview? Honestly, Lucy, it makes my blood boil. In my day jobs were ten a penny. If you didn't like a job or your boss you just quit! Upped and left, and usually found something better. There were jobs and opportunities galore. How did we come to this, I ask you?'

Lucy was so fed up of it. She didn't want to talk about her problems and set her mum off on another of her regular diatribes against politicians and political parties. Ever since her mum had gone back part-time to study arts in college she had loved talking about politics - which was one of her subjects!

'I might sign on for another course,' Lucy said hesitantly. Nina Brennan looked sceptical.

'What kind of course?'

'I saw one on learning the techniques for making stained glass windows. It's starting next month. Or I could learn how to do mosaic tiling!'

'Lucy, why would you want to go making stained glass windows?' asked her mother gently. 'Or do mosaic tiling?'

'It's something to do!' Lucy sighed. 'Something a bit different!'

Nina Brennan harrumphed in disbelief.

Lucy stared stubbornly at the 1980s pink floral print wallpaper in her bedroom.

Something had to change. Something really had to change!

Chapter Three

Staring at the figures on the screen, Alice tried to control her mounting panic as numbers began to slide and disappear before her eyes. What had she done? Had she touched something on the computer keypad by accident? Had she hit delete? This job was going disastrously! She looked over at the desk where Kelly Riordan was inputting numbers as quickly as humanly possible, her attention riveted on her own screen.

'Kelly!' she whispered. 'Kelly!'

She couldn't hide the urgency in her voice, and the twenty-four-year-old, looking up, sensed her quandary and immediately came over.

'What have you done, Alice?' she whispered fiercely, surveying the damage on the Excel account before her and leaning forward and hitting an icon. UNDO.

Alice watched incredulously as the figures magically seemed to reappear and the column of numbers began to look some way right.

'Thanks.' Alice was so grateful to the skinny blonde for all her help over the past few weeks. Kelly seemed to be constantly bailing her out of trouble, dealing with her mistakes, and covering up her utter ineptitude at doing accounts. How had she landed herself in this situation, working in Ronan, Ryan & Lewis's at something she hadn't a clue about? Hugh had been more than kind offering her this job, but in her heart she knew that she was in way over

her head! At her age she couldn't compete with Kelly and John and Aoife, and all the other young people here who had college degrees, and were studying accountancy, and seemed to be able to just work away at the computers easily. Her simple ECDL computer course, taken last year, had barely prepared her for the kind of work she was expected to do. She was a dinosaur out of step with the modern office world of laptops and digital downloads and iPods. She must have been mad to accept Hugh's charitable offer of work in the accountancy firm.

'Everything OK, Alice?' Hugh looked concerned as he stopped near her desk.

'Mmmm.' She smiled. 'Fine, thanks, Hugh. I'm just trying to sort a few things out here.'

'Good.' He looked relieved, and she watched him walk back towards the door to his bright office overlooking Fitzwilliam Square. He really was a good man, and he and Sally had been so supportive since Liam had left her.

It had been hard, so hard to get back up on her feet after Liam's affair with Elaine and his demand that Alice and himself separate. It had felt like someone had taken a saw and severed her arm and left her raw and bleeding and shocked. She had driven by Elaine's apartment twice and contemplated murder - or something more mundane like throwing a brick through the second-floor wrap-around glass windows of her modern city-centre apartment overlooking the river. Only the thought of the disgrace she would bring on her family had prevented her from doing such an idiotic thing!

So, while Liam and Elaine lived happily in their glass tower, she struggled to keep her head above water financially, pay her bills, run their home of nearly twenty years and make the best of working in Ronan, Ryan & Lewis.

She glanced at the clock. Only two hours and she would be free to take the DART back home to Monkstown. She'd bring the dog for a walk, heat up the remainder of the lovely shepherd's pie she had made last night, put her feet up and watch the TV.

'Alice! Alice, have you got the copy of the Dunderry report?'

Alice jolted out of her reverie to see the large stocky figure of Alex Ronan standing in front of her.

'It's somewhere here,' she said evasively, trying to work out which pile she had put it in and remember if she had done the changes he had requested.

'Where? I'm in a hurry, their finance guy is phoning me in a few minutes about something, and I want to check the figures.'

'I'll find it, Alex, don't worry.'

Alice frantically scanned the in-tray on her desk and the slide-out drawers, looking for the report Alex had given her to update, trying to ignore his exasperation and impatience as he watched her get more flustered and panicked. Having the senior partner standing over her was making her feel useless, like some school kid on work experience.

Coming closer, Alex impatiently began to go through her work.

'I can find it myself,' she said indignantly, as he pulled open the drawer and banged it back before rifling through the polished black leather tray on her desk.

'There it is,' he said, grabbing it.

'That's the Graham—' she began.

'And Dunderry report I want. The companies merged eighteen months ago, and we acted for Dunderry.'

Her face blazed red. She felt stupid.

He peered at the printout figures.

'You've inverted two of the columns,' he said grimly. 'Transport and rent ... there is a difference, you know.'

She apologized profusely, knowing that Kelly and Aoife and the rest of the office were watching what was going on.

'I'm sorry, Alex.'

'So am I,' he said, marching towards his office door.

Kelly gave her a little reassuring smile, and Alice, trying not to cave in to her overwhelming feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment, buried herself in another deadly dull report.

Since Liam had left she had tried out a few ways of earning money, but this was without doubt the worst. She had worked as a sales assistant in Elegance, the small gift shop in Foxrock, during the busy Christmas period, done bits of babysitting for friends of friends, had even set up a little business selling homemade cupcakes to local cafés and at the weekly farmers' market in Dun Laoghaire until the cupcake market had got totally oversaturated and she had begun making less and less profit. She had done the catering for two funerals and a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary party, but couldn't hope to compete with the more established caterers who were struggling for business.

Alice wasn't proud. She was willing to try most things, but it was becoming more and more obvious that she just wasn't cut out for office work! She'd have to talk to Hugh. Explain how she felt. Money or no money she didn't know how much more of working in Ronan, Ryan & Lewis she could stick. She glanced up at the clock. Only one hour and forty minutes to go ...