Bad Behaviour

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Darcey McGonigle didn't do birthdays. These days, she didn't see the point.

It had been different, of course, when she was a little girl and birthdays were all about noisy parties with forbidden food like sucky sweets and brightly coloured fizzy drinks. Those birthdays had come with satisfyingly exciting boxes wrapped in special paper tied with coloured ribbon, and possibly even a trip to the cinema where more junk food was allowed 'just for today'. Those birthdays had been fun and magical.

But now all a birthday did was remind her that she was another year older and that somehow her life hadn't turned out like she'd expected back when she'd strutted around the place feeling like a fairy princess for the day. (Her princess phase had lasted for less than a year, during which she'd worn pink dresses and allowed her mother to use pretty clips, ribbons and slides in her wavy blonde hair. After that, she'd decided that fairy princesses were passé, had cut her hair herself with nail scissors – much to her mother's horror – and had refused to wear dresses ever again. She'd eventually

given in on the dresses, of course, but she didn't do pink any more.)

Obviously, she thought, as she stepped under the shower, gasped, and rapidly turned the dial to hot from the sub-zero temperature she'd somehow left it at the day before, nobody's life turned out exactly the way they expected. She wasn't stupid enough to imagine that the things she'd wished for on various other birthdays – being a famous singer (tenth); growing bigger boobs (fourteenth); finding Mr Right (various ever since her fifteenth, but not one she'd had in the last couple of years) – she wasn't stupid enough to imagine that any of these things would all just happen. She was also realistic enough to know that what she'd wanted when she was ten or twenty or even thirty wouldn't necessarily be the same as she wanted now. But on the morning of her thirty-fourth birthday (which somehow she couldn't help thinking sounded scarily older than thirty-three) she had the nagging feeling that time had somehow speeded up on her and that she still hadn't changed into a grown-up who knew what she really wanted from life. Nothing, absolutely nothing, had panned out the way she'd originally planned. Which didn't have to be a bad thing, she supposed, as she drizzled honey and almond shower wash over her shoulders, but it would be so much better if, just once, she could make a plan and see it all work out. It was all very well to accept that she couldn't sing and that her boobs had remained a neat but uninspiring 34B and even that she probably hadn't found Mr Right, but it would be nice to achieve something from her childhood wish list.

Bloody birthdays, she muttered, after she'd got out of the shower, dressed and spent ages taming the kinks that still

plagued her hair (wrestling with her dryer, her GHD and copious quantities of anti-frizz serum to achieve her objective) they were just an excuse for multinational companies to rip people off by selling overpriced cards with crap rhymes.

And so she didn't bother to check the mailbox in the hall of her apartment building for birthday cards on her way to work but breezed past it without even glancing in its direction. She already knew that she'd receive four cards to mark the occasion: one from her mother; usually a 'For my Daughter' special with flowers, ribbons and a badly scanning sentimental verse – unlike Darcey, Minette loved celebrating birthdays; one from the twins (an old-fashioned sepia-type card if Tish had bought it; a cartoon feature if it had been Amelie's turn to choose – the twins, older than her by a year, always sent their cards as a pair); a generic 'Happy Birthday' card from her father with the date inscribed on the inside – as if she didn't know what the date was; and finally a 'To My Goddaughter' card from Nerys, her mother's best friend, who would include a lottery scratch card with it and a message that if it came up trumps Darcey was to spend the money entirely on something frivolous for herself. Darcey always felt touched by the card and the gift implying that she needed the money. No matter how often she told Nerys that she was financially independent (although that independence came with her very own breath-taking mortgage and much-utilised credit card), Nerys would adopt her most sympathetic tone and tell her that every woman could do with money of her own, especially when she didn't have anyone to look after her any more. Darcey always gritted her teeth at that but said nothing. So far the total haul from all of Nerys's scratch cards had only amounted to a fiver –

which Darcey had naturally enough spent on more scratch cards, although not one of them had delivered anything in return. That didn't really surprise her. She wasn't a person who won draws or raffles or matched lottery numbers and so she didn't really expect her numbers to come up. That was why she didn't bother with wish lists of things she'd do if she won the lottery. She'd grown out of lottery-win wish lists in the same way as she'd grown out of birthdays.

She walked briskly out of her glass and steel apartment building close to Dublin's Grand Canal Dock and crossed the road in order to bask in the morning sunshine. She'd bought the apartment in one of the city's currently fashionable locations two years earlier, and she loved it despite the scary mortgage, and even though her mother thought it was far too cold and impersonal; while the twins chided her that she was shutting herself away by living on the fifth floor of the tall, thin block. (And all three of them suggested that she'd be better off back home in Galway these days than living in the stress-inducing cauldron that Dublin city had become.) It had been the purchase of the apartment that had led to the astronomical credit-card bills too. She hadn't realised just how much money she'd end up spending on (mainly unused) gadgets for the tiny kitchen or the perfect light for the living room or the scatter cushions and plumped-up pillows for her king-sized bed. But she knew that one day she'd come out from under the blanket of debt (she did, after all, and much to her own surprise, have a well-paid job!) and she loved living in Dublin, a mere five-minute walk from the Dart station and a short hop by train from her office in the Financial Services Centre.

Normally Darcey arrived at the undistinguished office building before seven thirty each day but on the morning of her birthday she was late. This was because almost as soon as the commuters at Grand Canal Dock got on to the train the driver announced – rather too cheerfully, Darcey thought – that due to a mechanical fault they wouldn't be going anywhere for a while. Darcey didn't hang around for the trains to start running again and the inevitable scrum that would ensue as everyone tried to pile on, but instead walked to Grand Canal Street and looked for a cab even though she knew that, theoretically at least, it would have been nearly as quick to walk. But she was wearing her pencil-thin black skirt and her killer-heel L.K. Bennett suede boots, and walking more than a few hundred metres at a time was simply not an option.

There weren't any cabs. She paced along the road as gingerly as the killer heels would allow, wondering why it was that there were always cabs when you didn't want them and never ones when you did. If I get a blister, she thought grumpily, I will sue Iarnrod Eireann and their damn mechanical faults! As she allowed herself the mental image of her day in court against the train company she suddenly spotted a yellow cab sign and waved frantically, managing to nab the taxi ahead of a disgruntled fellow passenger, who glared at her as she smiled sweetly at him and closed the door, glad that now she wouldn't be *too* late for work.

Late, of course, was relative. She didn't actually have to be in at seven thirty. But everyone who did well at Global Finance was in the office early and, even though she wasn't a morning person, she felt it was important to be there too. Darcey was the business development manager of the financial services

company which managed its international business out of the centre. Tish and Amelie teasingly called her their high-flyer sister. That was complete nonsense, of course. She wasn't really a high-flyer. Her job was interesting, but, she told them, it sounded far more important than it was. Really it was all about being nice to people. And anyone could do that.

Despite getting the cab, the snarling morning traffic – made worse by a burst water pipe on Pearse Street – meant that it was nearly forty minutes after leaving her apartment instead of the usual twenty before she jabbed at the lift call button in the marble lobby of the Global Finance building. She sipped on her takeaway coffee, waiting for the kick from the caffeine coursing through her veins to lift her non-morning persona into someone who could be nice to people despite the hour. Even though she really wasn't ready for niceness and actually found it hard to talk sensibly until she'd downed her first coffee of the morning, she smiled in greeting at more of Global's employees as they joined her in front of the lifts, all of them with waxed coffee cups in their hands. (Global had coffee vending machines on every floor but the general consensus, which Darcey agreed with utterly, was that the coffee was sludge and it was much better to get a takeaway from the Italian barrista on the corner.)

They smiled back at her. Darcey was well liked by her colleagues, even though many of them were in awe of her ridiculously high IQ and everyone knew that Peter Henson, the managing director, was a bit scared of her himself. But she never made an issue of her IQ (she'd once commented ruefully that intelligence was entirely different to common sense), she was easy to work for, and she never bawled anyone

out for a mistake even if they deserved it. (Although many people thought that her patient acceptance of the fact that they were less than perfect was bad enough.)

Darcey worked on the sixth floor. As the lift moved gently upwards, she listened to Margaret Rooney and Mylene Scott chatting in disbelief about the latest celebrity break-up and agreed with them that it was all his fault – even though she hadn't really followed the romance of the hot singer and the hotter Hollywood actress, being generally cynical about celebrity marriages. Margaret and Mylene were still talking about it as they and the other employees got out at the third floor, where most of the administration took place, leaving Darcey alone for a few moments. She glanced at herself in the mirrored walls of the lift before stepping out; her usual quick check to see that she looked OK and didn't have a coffee-froth moustache or previously unnoticed spots breaking out on her forehead. High-flyers were supposed to look efficient and well groomed, and Darcey, even though she laughed at the twins when they used the expression, secretly liked to picture herself as a tall ballbreaker of a woman as she strode through the office in a power suit. Unfortunately, though, her mental picture was often ruined by the image of her Donna Karan skirt accidentally caught in her knickers or a ferocious ladder snaking up the back of her Wolford stockings as she walked. Or her worst nightmare, tripping over her own feet and ending up flat on the floor. She'd always been clumsy as a child, even during her princess period. She worked hard not to be now.

Her reflection appeared OK, despite an errant lock of caramel and honey hair (missed by the GHD and the blow-dry styling

lotion) curling over her left ear. She smoothed it down, although she knew she was probably wasting her time. Her hair had a mind of its own. Her make-up was fine, though – a tinted moisturiser applied to her evenly toned creamy skin (thankfully no spotty eruptions in the last hour), neutral eye shadow on her eyelids and a slick of dark mascara on her already long, sweeping lashes. On her lips she wore a rose-tinted lip salve. Darcey's lips were her least favourite feature; she wished they were full and bee-stung like so many actresses and models these days, but they were just normal, which obviously meant that they looked too thin. (One of the girls in corporate finance had hers regularly pumped with collagen and had offered to fix her up with an appointment but Darcey usually fainted whenever she saw a needle, and besides, she'd never seen anyone who didn't look worse when they'd had it done, no matter what people said.) So she stuck with her too-thin lips and consoled herself with the fact that she'd once been told that she was a good kisser. Besides, bee-stung lips weren't really power-woman. They implied a certain vulnerability that Darcey was determined never to show.

Darcey knew, as she contemplated her image in the smoked-glass mirror, that she had strong features, which meant that she was very definitely not beautiful. Even when she'd been younger, and before she'd hacked off her golden curls, she hadn't really been beautiful, just an average little girl with bright blue eyes and a nose that was slightly too big for the rest of her face. She hadn't changed that much really. Average was about right for her. She hadn't had anything done to her nose and her hair was still difficult to

deal with. These days she wore it in a straight cut which reached just above her shoulders in a slightly severe way. She knew that trying to wear her hair straight when it really wanted to be curly was why she had to buy every new hair product that came on to the market and why her GHD was the most important piece of equipment in her life, but she liked the severe appearance. It meant that people didn't mess with her. Her black suit, with its figure-hugging skirt and tailored jacket over a charcoal-grey top, made her look almost frighteningly efficient. She liked looking efficient. It was better than looking beautiful.

She'd once talked to her mother about the advantages of being beautiful, resigned to the fact that beautiful girls got the nicest blokes and the best job opportunities and that they were simply noticed more, whereas average girls had to work so much harder on all fronts. It wasn't fair, she'd said, and Minette McGonigle hadn't tried to placate her by saying that she was talking nonsense, and instead had agreed that no, it wasn't. Minette didn't try to sugar-coat things for her children.

That particular memory always came back on birthdays. But it wasn't important any more. Darcey pushed the memories to the very back of her mind as she walked across the floor to her desk and sat down, logging on to her computer even as she slid her jacket on to the back of her chair, and noticing that, thanks to arriving later than usual, she already had a number of messages on her voicemail.

And even more messages in her email folder, she realised. Most were newsletters she subscribed to, some were from customers and one was from the director of human resources at Global Finance. She opened it and clicked on the web-page

link inside. Immediately the sound of 'Congratulations' blared across the sixth floor, while a trio of cartoon bears danced across the screen holding up a banner which said 'Happy Birthday'. The nearby office staff grinned at her and waved. She made a face at them, then stabbed at the keyboard to shut down the message before picking up her phone and dialling an extension number.

'Very appropriate,' she told Anna Sweeney, the director of human resources. 'It's always good to start the day by assaulting your colleagues with dreadful music.'

'It's cheerful,' protested Anna blithely. 'And fun.'

'Yeah, yeah,' said Darcey.

'And I can do these things because in my exalted position I know everyone's birthday,' continued Anna.

'Indeed you do,' agreed Darcey. 'But I thought we agreed last year *and* the year before that that I don't do the cute message from Human Resources reminding me that I'm another year older and deeper in debt.'

Anna laughed. 'I know. I know. But it's my job.'

'You're supposed to be supportive of the staff.' Darcey's voice held a hint of amusement. 'Not bash them over the head with the notion that they're getting even closer to grey hair.'

'You're lucky, Blondie. Nobody'll notice yours.'

Darcey laughed. 'If only.'

'Anyway, happy birthday,' said Anna.

'Thank you.' Darcey grimaced as more and more messages appeared in her email folder. 'I'd better go. The whole world is sending me emails. Talk to you later.'

'What d'you think about the meeting today?' asked Anna.

'Huh?' Darcey stopped scrolling through her inbox. 'What meeting?'

'There's an email from Peter,' said Anna. 'I thought you would've read it by now. Slacking, are you? Looks like the takeover is going to happen. And looks like InvestorCorp have beaten Assam Financial to the deal.'

Darcey stopped scrolling and opened the email Anna was referring to.

To: All Staff
From: Peter Henson, MD
Re: InvestorCorp
There will be a meeting in the staff dining area at 12 noon to discuss InvestorCorp and its intentions towards this company. All staff are requested to attend.

'Um,' said Darcey.
'Um indeed,' said the director of human resources.

Everyone in Global Finance had known for some time that their company was probably going to be taken over by a bigger one. It was almost inevitable that it would happen sooner or later, since Global Finance was a profitable minnow in the sea of finance companies and therefore a prime takeover target. The rumours had been swirling around the office for months now and had popped up on the financial pages of the newspapers a couple of weeks earlier, causing Minette to ring Darcey and ask her what was happening and to remind her that there were plenty of jobs in Galway if the worst came to the worst.

'You know as much as me,' Darcey had replied. 'And I'm sure I'll be fine no matter what.'

But she couldn't really be sure. And despite what she'd said to Minette, she was worried that everything wouldn't actually be fine. It might not matter that it was InvestorCorp, of course. Things changed, people moved on. But she would have preferred the takeover to be by any other company in the world.

She twirled at her errant lock of hair as she stared at the email. Maybe she shouldn't stay around for the whole InvestorCorp deal. Maybe she should just look for something else now before anything happened. It wasn't like it had been when she'd first joined the company, still wet behind the ears really and inexperienced no matter what she thought. People in the industry knew her now, and respected her. But still . . . She wiped her suddenly perspiring palms on the sides of her skirt. InvestorCorp was different. And not just because even the receptionists in their US offices had Harvard degrees.

I shouldn't have given in, thought Darcey. I shouldn't have let myself get sucked into this whole high-flying career thing. I was never cut out to be a ballbreaking career chick, no matter what other people think. And I should have had more sense than to think that being a business development manager was something I really wanted to be.

Global Finance's one hundred employees gathered in the cafeteria at the appointed time. Darcey sat on the edge of one of the wooden tables and didn't talk to anyone while they waited. Peter Henson was five minutes late, which caused one of the admin staff to mutter that he'd been the

first to go and provoked a ripple of amused laughter among the rest of them. But then he strode in to the dining area, tall and confident, followed by the other members of the board, all looking pleased with themselves.

When the meeting got under way, Peter announced that the takeover was going ahead and that eventually and inevitably there would have to be some changes, but that they were nothing that anyone needed to worry about, and that no jobs would go.

'And if you believe that, you'll believe anything,' muttered Mylene Scott, who was sitting beside Darcey.

'Of course jobs will go,' Darcey agreed. 'You know what'll happen. The new set of suits will come in and they'll talk about rationalisation and downsizing. Only they won't rationalise and downsize themselves.'

Mylene looked at her, startled at such a cynical comment from the woman from the sixth floor who, despite her relatively easy-going nature, she actually regarded as a suit too.

'Well, you don't have to worry,' she said eventually. 'You're set up with that great job of yours.'

Darcey shivered. They all thought she had a great job and was brilliant, but in the end it had been a sheer fluke that had started her off on this career path. She honestly expected that one day someone would ask her a question she simply couldn't answer, and then they'd realise that she was nothing more than a jumped-up accounts temp and not a hotshot high-flyer at all.

The truth was that she'd been happy as a temp. Temping gave her a freedom that she'd never found in a permanent job. Temping meant that she didn't get involved with people

and they didn't get involved with her. As well as which, Darcey knew that her boredom threshold was very low and she normally got fed up anywhere she worked after a few months, which meant that temping suited her down to the ground. When she'd come to Dublin a few years earlier, after the life she thought she was going to have had disintegrated into nothing and she'd made such a fool of herself, she'd eventually landed a job filling in as maternity cover for someone in an international bank, operating out of the financial services centre. Her job had been to check the daily trading reports for errors and exceptions – times when, perhaps, a trader had broken a dealing limit with one of the bank's trading partners or had incorrectly booked dollars as euros or something equally silly.

The woman at the temping agency had told her that it was a pressurised environment but that Amabank paid extremely well and it would be a worthwhile three-month stint. Darcey didn't care. It didn't matter to her whether she was looking for million-dollar mistakes or filing invoices. All she wanted was to be too busy to think and to get paid every week. So three days later she was sitting in the audit department of the bank where Jayne and Sinead, her two new colleagues, wanted to know all about her.

Darcey had never been the kind of person who confided in complete strangers. Besides, she was only going to be in the bank for a few months and she didn't expect to become best friends with either of them. She told Jayne and Sinead that she was from Galway and that she'd been abroad for a while and was now looking to work in Dublin.

'Are you married or single?' asked Jayne.

Darcey was startled by the question.

'Jayne's getting married next month,' Sinead told her. 'So it's the uppermost thing in her mind right now.'

'I'm not into marriage,' Darcey said, which effectively ended the conversation. Jayne looked at her huffily for not being interested and called up the website of the hotel where she was holding her reception to check once more how the room looked.

The department was busy but was hardly the pressurised environment Darcey had been hoping for. She found that she was easily able to cope with the work and never objected when she was given anything extra. She made herself extremely unpopular by actually doing work she hadn't even been asked to do, but she preferred to keep busy than to spend time staring into space while thinking about things she didn't want to think about any more; or even worse, being quizzed by Jayne and Sinead about the men in her life. Now, when she looked back on herself at that time, she knew she must have been unbearably standoffish. But she hadn't been able to help it, and she certainly didn't blame Jayne and Sinead for apparently being pleased when she was lent to other departments to help out.

Bernard Hickey, who was head of financial administration, had asked her whether she'd ever considered a job in accounting, after she'd managed in fifteen minutes to find an error in a spreadsheet that had eluded him for more than a day.

'Not at all,' she'd said firmly.

'But you found that mistake. And I checked over and over.'

'Because you were checking the computer,' she told him.

'And the mistake was in the original numbers, not the figures that were input into the computer.'

'I should have seen that,' he said in disgust. 'Did you do maths at college?'

She laughed. 'That wasn't maths,' she told him. 'It was mental arithmetic! Pure and simple.'

He grinned at her. 'Yeah, well, between computers and calculators, there aren't too many people who are good at mental arithmetic any more.'

'My father was a maths teacher,' Darcey told him. 'He made us practise.'

'Ah.' Bernard nodded. 'Well, any time you're thinking of a permanent job, let me know.'

'I don't think so,' said Darcey. 'But thanks anyway.'

It was two weeks later, the day she'd been lent out to Trader Support, that everything changed completely. And it had nothing to do with maths.

She was sitting at her desk at lunchtime trying vainly to complete the fiendish-level Sudoku puzzle in the paper when Mike Pierce, who traded in euro corporate bonds and who'd been having a telephone conversation which was getting louder and more exasperated by the minute, suddenly stood up and shouted, 'Does anyone in this damn building speak any goddam German?'

Darcey's eyes flickered upwards. Mike had torn his headset from his head and was looking around in frustration. She cleared her throat.

'I do,' she admitted hesitantly.

'Great.' Mike thrust the headset at her. 'Well in that case can you figure out what the hell this guy is saying? English

is meant to be the language of business, and you'd think he'd have some clue . . .'

Darcey got up from her desk and took the call.

'*Guten Tag, mein Herr*,' she said, then continued in rapid German. 'First of all, I apologise for my colleague's rudeness. Can I help you?'

The German, who introduced himself as Dieter Schmidt, told her that there was a problem regarding the interest payment for a bond in Mike's portfolio and that he was ringing with instructions about procedures that Amabank should take. His own English-speaking colleague was off sick that day, but according to their records the Amabank staff spoke German.

'Not all of us, it seems,' said Darcey as she checked his instructions again and wrote them down on her notepad. 'Anyway, it's fine now. *Danke und auf Wiedersehen*.'

She handed her notes to Mike, who was looking at her in amazement.

'You're fluent,' he exclaimed.

She shook her head. 'Not really. It might sound good to you but my accent is like nothing on earth to a native German.'

'What a treasure you are all the same.' He grinned. 'Good at maths *and* German.'

She looked at him in surprise.

'Come on!' he said. 'Bernard's been talking about you and that damn missing 50 k for the last two weeks. He thinks you're a genius.'

'He's being silly in that case,' said Darcey. 'Anyone could've spotted it. They were all just thinking the wrong way.'

'Perhaps.' Mike looked at her thoughtfully. 'Any other talents we don't know about?'

Darcey shrugged. 'I doubt it.'

'Can you speak any other languages?' he asked.

'Some,' she replied uncomfortably.

'Like?'

'French, I'm good at that,' she told him eventually. 'Italian, not bad. Spanish, OK-ish.'

'Bloody hell. You've sure been hiding your light under a bushel,' he said. 'Did you study languages?'

'My mother is Swiss,' she replied. 'She speaks German, Italian and French, although the accent – well, it's different. She moved to Ireland when she married my dad and I guess she thought it would be good for us to learn them too. I au-paired in Spain for a few months and that's where I picked that up.' She stopped, uncomfortably aware that she'd given more personal details about herself in the space of a few seconds than she'd done since she'd first joined the company.

'Ever do any other work abroad?' asked Mike.

'Like what?' she asked.

'Office work? Admin? Dealing with clients?'

She shook her head again. 'Not interested.'

'Hmm.' Mike continued to look at her thoughtfully until she found herself blushing.

'For heaven's sake,' she said sharply, 'maybe you should just get on with doing whatever it was that Dieter suggested so that you'll eventually get your interest payment.'

'Maths, languages and spirit,' he said. 'I like that in a girl.'

* * *

It was the day after that episode when Darcey was called into the MD's office.

'I won't beat around the bush,' Cormac Ryan told her. 'I like the idea of you doing more work for us, Darcey. Specifically using your particular talents. I don't understand why we didn't know about your language skills before now.' He sounded vaguely irritated, as though she'd held some vitally important information from him.

'Hardly necessary,' she said. 'After all, I'm a temporary audit clerk.'

'But you know that our business is worldwide.'

'Of course. All the same, it doesn't much matter to me. I'm only here for another four weeks.'

'We want to offer you a six-month trial period as a permanent employee,' said Cormac. 'Everyone is impressed with your knowledge of our financial products. And your maths skills. We're also equally impressed by the language factor. We think it could be very useful in our European market.'

'Really?' She regarded him thoughtfully.

'We think you could work well with our European customers. It means a lot to someone to be able to talk in his own language.'

'Or hers,' said Darcey.

Cormac's gaze, until now firm and unrelenting, flickered. 'Or hers. The point is that sometimes we send people overseas and they make a good presentation, but the potential clients then sit around and chatter away in German or French or whatever. And it would be good to know what they're saying.'

'You want me to spy!' Darcey was shocked.

'God, no,' said Cormac. 'I don't mean for you to pretend that you can't speak to them. I want you to go in forcefully and greet them in their own language and let them know that we understand them completely. And that we've gone to the trouble of understanding them.'

'But we don't go to the trouble,' Darcey pointed out. 'Otherwise lots of people in Amabank would speak lots of languages.'

This time Cormac's look was one of irritation. 'Do you want this job or not?' he demanded.

'Not especially,' said Darcey. 'I'm happy the way I am.'

He looked at her incredulously. 'Happy using a third of your brain? Happy earning a third of what you're capable of?'

It had been like a blast from the past. Only then she'd been told that she only used an eighth of her brain. She was fed up with people thinking that she didn't use her potential and that she had no ambition. Ambition didn't make you a good person, after all.

'You're smart and you're talented and you're totally wasted where you are,' said Cormac flatly. 'But if that's the way you want it, it's fine by me. I just think it's a shame, that's all.'

'A third of what I should be earning?' She said it slowly.

'Well, depending on how things went . . .' Cormac told her hastily. 'After training, after some time. But you would be paid more as a permanent member of staff doing a specific job.'

Darcey closed her eyes for a moment. Maybe it was time for her to turn her life around. To stop drifting from job to job. To take control of things for herself. She'd changed in the last few months. Maybe it was time to prove it to herself.

'Tell me more about it,' she said eventually. 'Like – what *would* you pay me?'

She accepted the job. The way she looked at it was that she deserved the extra money. And if her personal life was a shambles, then it was up to her to make her professional life the best it could possibly be instead. The only problem was that she never really felt like a professional person. She had no real idea of how a professional person should feel.

She'd stayed with Amabank for two years, and then she was headhunted by Global Finance. Being headhunted was a strange experience. She'd never expected anyone to ring her up out of the blue and offer her another job, and despite the fact that she'd become more confident about what she was doing (even if she still wasn't very comfortable with it), she didn't consider herself to be a real expert. After all, she hadn't studied finance at college, although the concepts were easy for her to understand. It was just that she didn't really see the point to a lot of it.

But Peter Henson, the Global Finance MD, whom she'd met at a financial conference, was very persuasive.

'Come and talk to me at the very least,' he'd told her. 'I feel confident that we have the right job for your skills.'

Her task would be to find new clients in Europe and sell them the Global Finance products and services. The salary was excellent. The business development job was high-profile. It freaked her out how everyone else wanted her to be a successful high-flyer. Despite nowadays thinking that she should make her professional life as good as it could be, Darcey wasn't commercially minded at all. She liked reading

for pleasure, not because she could understand financial reports in four languages. She liked doing maths puzzles for the fun of it, not to come up with some new way of making money for the company. Making money had never been important to her.

Yet, she'd thought, as she listened to Peter Henson talk about yet another increase in her salary, maybe making money was what she'd be best at in the end. Not making friends. Not making love. Just making money. Perhaps she wasn't so different from everyone else as she'd always thought. And, she admitted, she didn't know what her mother told the neighbours about her these days, but it would be ultimately satisfying if the news got around that Darcey McGonigle had turned into a kick-ass hotshot after all.

So she took the job, and because of the extra money she'd finally felt confident about dipping her toe into the property market. Minette and the twins had been getting at her to buy a place of her own for ages. Dead money, they called the rental she paid every month, and she knew they were right. A place of her own was making a statement too. That she was in control of her life again. That she could make it by herself. That she didn't need anyone else to . . . well, that she didn't need anyone else at all, actually.

'You won't regret it,' Peter Henson had said when she finally accepted the job.

Now she was beginning to think that actually she might.