



LAREN MALLEY

SOMETIMES ALL
YOU NEED
IS RIGHT
IN FRONT
OF YOU.

RECIPES AND
REDEMPTION

A CHESTER COUNTY COUPLES NOVEL

Recipes and Redemption

Karen Malley

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Recipes and Redemption
COPYRIGHT 2023 by Karen Malley

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. Contact Information:
titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version^(R). NIV^(R). Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.TM Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations, marked KJV are taken from the King James translation, public domain. Scripture quotations marked DR, are taken from the Douay Rheims translation, public domain.

Scripture texts marked NAB are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* Copyright 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, 2024
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-9918-6
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Grandma, who always asked how my book was coming along. A lifetime of memories were made around her table.

Books by Karen Malley

The Pine Springs Series

Finding Sunshine (Free Prequel)

Following the Sparrows

A Second Chance for Grace

Sunflowers and Suspicions

The Chester County Couples Series

Lilacs and Love Letters (Free Prequel)

Moonlight and Mystery

Recipes and Redemption

Christmas Novellas

Saved by a Christmas Angel

The Christmas Mission

Cactus for Christmas

1

Black smoke filled the kitchen and the fire alarm blared. Oliver's cries rivaled the sound of the alarm. Erin strapped him in his highchair, still wailing, and opened the oven door. She thrust oven mitts on her hands, grabbed the pan, and ran outside with it, thick smoke trailing in her wake. She set the ruined dessert on the ground and rushed back inside to her son. A moment later, her housemate Beth hurried in.

"What's going on?"

Erin bit her lip, not trusting herself to answer without bursting into tears. She pulled Oliver from the highchair and held him tight with one arm while pulling out a chair to reach the smoke alarm.

"Let me help." Beth took the chair from Erin, climbed up, and disconnected the alarm. Oliver's sobs turned into whimpers once the noise ended. Beth turned on the blower over the stove and opened the kitchen window. The chill February wind blew into the room, but it was a welcome alternative to the smoke. Beth turned back to Erin, who still stood clutching Oliver.

"Are you OK?"

Erin closed her eyes for a moment and then found her voice. "I can't do this." Hot tears filled her eyes.

Oliver squirmed, and she put him down. He toddled over to the cabinets and began pulling out pots and pans.

Beth motioned for Erin to sit at the table. "I'm going to make a pot of tea, and we're going to sit and talk."

"I can't. I'm too busy."

"Then I'll help you. You won't get anything done in this state."

Erin complied, taking a seat at the large oak table where she could keep an eye on her son.

Beth put the kettle on, grabbed two mugs and teabags, and was back at the table with the tea within minutes. Erin wrapped her hands around her mug and took a calming breath.

"I had chocolate lava cakes in the oven, and Oliver woke up early from his nap. He started screaming, so I ran upstairs to check on him. His diaper was a mess, and it took me forever to clean him up. I lost track of time until the smoke alarm went off."

"That's understandable."

"Yes, but now I need to make more cakes."

"Do you have a delivery tonight?"

"No. I'm trying to see if it's possible to make them ahead of time and warm them in the oven before delivery." Erin took a sip of tea and a shaky breath. "I appreciate all you've done for me. Helping me start this catering business has been amazing. I don't think I would've gotten through my first Christmas without David without the distraction of cooking for all those Christmas parties."

“But?”

“But you’re a little too good at marketing. You wouldn’t believe how many people signed up for a Valentine’s Day dinner. I guess there are a lot of guys out there who want to impress their dates with a home-cooked meal.”

“It makes sense. The restaurants will all be busy, and this way they can do something special at home.”

“Yes, it does, but I have no idea how I’m going to get all these dinners made and delivered on time. That’s why I was trying to make the chocolate lava cakes ahead.”

“What else are you making?”

“White chicken and spinach lasagna roll ups. It’s much easier to make individual portions than traditional lasagna. Also, a garden salad, homemade rolls with garlic butter, and the individual chocolate lava cakes.”

“What you need is a delivery service. How many dinners will you deliver tomorrow?”

“Twenty.”

Beth’s mouth dropped open. “You’re making dinner for twenty different couples?”

Erin nodded.

“You didn’t have to say yes to everyone who asked.”

“But that’s the point of the business.”

Beth reached out and squeezed Erin’s hand. “Yes, it is, but you also need limits. I’ll take a step back with the marketing. I don’t want you to be overwhelmed by this. It’s supposed to be fun. Only a meal or two a

week.”

Erin’s heart warmed in appreciation for her friend. “I can’t believe you only moved in here four months ago. What would I do without you?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not going anywhere.”

“My brother might have something to say about that.”

“Why would Jason want me to leave? Everything is going great between us.”

“Yes, that’s the point. One of these days, he’s going to marry you and steal you away from me.”

Beth’s face glowed red. “We’re taking it slow. I don’t want to rush into an engagement like I did last year. You saw how that turned out.”

“This is different. Jason will be a wonderful husband. He took such good care of us after David died. Speaking of which...” Erin set down her tea and climbed up to reconnect the smoke alarm. “I can imagine David looking down from heaven, scolding me for leaving the smoke alarm disconnected. The first thing he did when we moved in here was put a smoke detector in every room.” She returned to the table.

“And you lost him in a fire anyway,” Beth said.

“Yes, but he knew the risks.”

“Do you ever think about what life would be like if he hadn’t gone back into the fire to rescue that third person?”

“Of course. I still think about him every day. It’s not as hard anymore, but I’ll always miss him.” Erin stared down at her mug. “Sometimes I get mad he gave his life for that stranger, but that’s what made

him the man I loved. He always put others first. That's the life of a firefighter. He was good at what he did. I lost track of how many people are alive today because of him. I wish he was one of them."

"He'd be so proud of you with your business."

Erin swallowed against the lump in her throat. "Do you think so? I'm not feeling especially proud today."

"It's going to be fine. Give me a list of the delivery addresses and times. We're going to work this out together."

Erin pulled her handwritten list from a kitchen drawer and handed it to Beth. Beth took the list and disappeared from the room.

Oliver tired of the pots and pans and climbed into Erin's lap. "Snack, Mama?"

Erin smiled. She may not have her husband anymore, but Oliver was the joy of her life. "Yes. You're right. It's time for a snack. She balanced the sturdy seventeen-month-old on her hip and set him back in his highchair. She cut up some fruit and placed it on his tray and then closed the kitchen window, shivering as she did so. Her eyes fell on the ingredients still lining the counter. She took a deep breath. She could do this. Somehow God would get her through this, and she wouldn't disappoint all those couples. She started whipping up another small batch of cakes while Oliver was content with his snack.

A few minutes later, Beth entered the room, four spreadsheets in her hand. "I've got it all planned out."

"What do you mean?"

"I mapped out the addresses. We can get all the meals delivered between 5:30 and 6:00.

"How is that even possible? They're all over Chester County."

"By dividing it into four trips." Beth placed the spreadsheets on the table. "You and Oliver will take this one, and Jason, Rusty, and I will deliver these."

"I can't ask you guys to do my work for me. And how did Rusty get mixed up in all this?"

"I called Jason to help. He'd do anything for his baby sister." Beth grinned at Erin. "He and Rusty were playing racquetball at the university, so Jason asked him if he wanted to join the mission to provide Valentine's dinners to those without culinary skills."

"But one of those meals was going to Jason. This is your first Valentine's Day together. You shouldn't spend it delivering meals with me."

"Nonsense. It's just another day. Besides, that's one less meal to deliver. We'll come back here and eat the dinner he ordered. Make a little extra for Rusty. He'll work for food."

"He would've gotten leftovers the next day anyway."

"Oh?"

"When I started this business, Rusty told me he wanted to eat my food as much as possible, but he didn't want me to do any extra work. So every time I make meals, I make an extra portion for him. He pays more than he should, since he's only getting leftovers, but he says it tastes good to him, even if it's a day later."

"I had no idea. I haven't seen much of Rusty since our play together in the fall."

Erin shrugged. "He loves my food. It's fun to cook for him."

"Are you sure he's only interested in the food?"

Erin face grew warm. Time to change the subject. "Isn't the spring show starting soon? I loved watching you and Jason act together in the fall play."

Beth's eyes grew dreamy. "That's when I fell in love with him."

"Yes, that was clear to everyone in the audience."

Beth's face reddened. "I couldn't help it. Jason is quite the charmer. Anyway, auditions for the spring show start at the end of the month. I can't wait to start up again." Beth lifted Oliver from his highchair. "How about if I take this guy off your hands so you can make those cakes in peace?"

"You are too good to be true."

"Let me eat one, and we'll consider it even."

"Deal." Erin turned back to her ingredients. How did Beth do it? Minutes ago, Erin was completely overwhelmed, but Beth found a solution to her problem, and now the great Valentine's meal delivery was back on track. She sent up a silent prayer. "God, I miss David, but thank You for the people You've brought into my life. Thank You for Oliver and for giving me this business. Thank You for Beth, who has been such a blessing to me."

~*~

Rusty washed off the sweat in the locker room shower and then joined back up with Jason.

"Thanks for the game."

"No problem," Jason said. "Maybe next time I won't get my butt kicked so badly. I can't believe how fast you are with a racquet."

Rusty grinned. "I need to be better than you in something."

Jason raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"You're good at everything you do. You're always the lead in the plays; women fall in love with you after spending five minutes with you..."

Jason laughed. "Not true. You're a good actor, too. And everyone loves you."

"Yeah, in a friendly way. I'm excellent at being friends with girls, but no one ever seems to want more."

"You just didn't meet the right girl yet."

Rusty pressed his lips closed. He had met the right girl, but she wasn't interested in him. Maybe someday. He'd wait as long as it took for Erin to come around, but he wasn't about to tell her brother that. He shrugged. "So you think there's hope for me yet?"

"Absolutely." Jason said. "Are you sure you're OK with helping us deliver meals on Valentine's Day? You don't have anything planned?"

"No, I don't, and thanks for reminding me. I'm surprised you aren't going out with Beth."

"I was planning on a dinner in, courtesy of my sister."

"Won't Beth be upset if you miss your date?"

“It was her idea. If Erin needs help, how can I say no? She and Oliver are the only family I’ve got. I want to support her in this. Besides, Beth and I will still see each other. We’ll eat together at their place. You’ll come back to the house after making your deliveries, right?”

“Sure. I won’t pass up your sister’s cooking. I love her white lasagna. The cheese sauce is so thick and rich. My mouth is watering thinking about it.”

Jason studied Rusty’s face. “How many times have you eaten Erin’s cooking?”

“I’ve taken advantage of her catering service a time or two.” Rusty hoped the grin he gave would distract Jason. “What? You wouldn’t want a guy to starve, would you? You certainly can’t expect me to survive on my own cooking.”

Jason laughed. “No, I suppose not. Sounds like a win for both of you.”

Rusty and Jason parted ways as they headed back to their respective apartments in West Chester. Rusty took advantage of the quiet moments to reflect on Jason’s words. Was Erin the right girl for him? Whether she was or not, he couldn’t get her out of his head. Yes, he adored her cooking, but there was more to it. She was full of light. It was the only way he could explain it. His mind traveled back to the first time they’d met. Last spring the show had a role for a dog. Jason convinced Erin and David to bring their dog Sadie to the show. The whole family visited rehearsal one night. Rusty smiled at the memory. Oliver had been so small back then. Rusty took one look at that

perfect family, and all he could think of was how blessed David was. A beautiful wife and son. Even a well-behaved dog. Throughout the course of the show, they'd all become friends. Then, a week or two after the show ended, David had been killed.

Rusty's heart still hurt for Erin. He hadn't seen her again until the fall show. Jason spent most of the summer helping her out, and Rusty stayed out of the way. Still, the small family came to mind often over the summer between writing his textbook and taking repair jobs on the side. When the semester started again, his free time dwindled, but he returned to the show in the fall. When Erin showed up to rehearsal with cupcakes for Jason's birthday, Rusty's heart leapt in his chest. Even after losing her husband, she still shined a light. How that was possible, he had no idea. Now he managed to see her at least once a week, and as a bonus got to eat her cooking. Whether she was the right girl for him or not, there was no way he'd ever get her out of his head.

Back at his apartment, he popped a frozen dinner in the microwave while daydreaming about Erin's lasagna. He sorted through the mail and stopped short at the sight of a thick envelope with his name and address spelled out in calligraphy. A wedding invitation?

He flipped over the envelope and read the return address. His gut clenched. Oh, he knew that address well. He'd spent the first eighteen years of his life there, but hadn't been back in two years. Not since...

He rubbed his temples and grabbed his food from

the microwave. Plopping the tray on the table, he stared at it, his appetite gone. He pushed the tray aside and opened the envelope.

*Mr. and Mrs. George J. Stuart, Jr.
request the honor of your presence
at the marriage of their daughter*

Sarah Ann Stuart

to

Trevor John Hart

Saturday the 5th of April

At 11:00 in the morning

The Harrison House

Scranton, PA

Rusty scrubbed a hand down his face. His baby sister was getting married. In spite of himself, his lips curved into a grin. Trevor finally got up the nerve. He was a good man. Sarah would be well taken care of. The question was: who sent the invitation? Was he welcome to celebrate with the family? The last thing he wanted was to tarnish Sarah's special day. Still, the invitation opened something in his heart that he thought dead and buried. A longing for family. To be accepted, to be loved. Was it possible to go home again?

2

The aroma of fresh baked bread filled the farmhouse as Erin pulled another tray of dinner rolls from the oven.

“That’s the last of them.” She placed the rolls on the cooling rack beside the stove and slid two giant trays of lasagna roll ups into the oven.

Beth and Oliver sat in the den racing cars down Oliver’s car ramp. Erin moved into the room and flopped on the sofa. “Once the lasagna is cooked, all I need to do is package it in the individual foil pans and reheat the lava cakes.”

Oliver giggled as he dropped another car down the ramp. He toddled after it as it slid across the floor.

“Sounds like everything is under control,” Beth said.

“We might pull this off after all.” Erin stretched her arms over her head and rolled her neck. “It’s been a long day, but I’m almost finished.” She checked her watch. “Yep, we’ll be right on time for the deliveries. What time did you say the guys were getting here?”

“Jason was going to run home after school to let Sadie out before coming here, so probably around four thirty. I’m not sure how late Rusty’s last class is, but he promised to be here by five.”

Erin sucked in a deep breath. "Today has been exhausting, but I love this. My food will help so many couples celebrate their love this evening."

"It's great having a job where you touch people's lives directly. That's why I love my new job," Beth said.

"I'm sorry. I've been so busy with the cooking and baking I haven't asked you about any of your other clients. How are things going with the rest of your business?"

"Great. I've been doing a lot of website design. I hadn't spent a lot of time in it before, but after working out the kinks with yours, I'm getting the hang of it. This past week I designed a website for a woman at church who is starting a photography business and also for a man who's launching his own Christian counseling practice."

"If you can do for the other people what you've done for me, they'll be busier than they can handle."

Beth grinned. "I'm happy to help. And being able to set my own hours is amazing."

The doorbell rang, and Beth rushed to answer it. Erin moved to the floor to play with her son, giving Jason and Beth some space. It was Valentine's Day, after all. There would be no special Valentine for her this year. Her mind flew back to her last Valentine's Day with David. She'd made a fancy dinner and sent Oliver to David's parents for a couple of hours. David got called away to respond to a kitchen fire in West Chester. A college student was using his oven for the first time trying to impress his girlfriend, and the faulty