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If You Were Me

Written by Sheila O'Flanagan

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By Sheila O'Flanagan

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Destinations
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Stand By Me
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Better Together
Things We Never Say
If You Were Me

Sheila O'Flanagan

If You Were Me

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In 2013, Typhoon Haiyan devastated the Philippines. In order to raise funds to help the survivors of this disaster, Authors for the Philippines held an auction in which authors, agents and publishers offered items for auction. My offering was an acknowledgement/dedication in my next book.

This is that book and the winning bid was one which helped to push the total raised to over £55,000. The bidder wants to remain anonymous but I am delighted to dedicate this book, as requested:

To Jean, from her three much-loved sons.

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And thank you beyond measure to my readers who are the loveliest of people, you always bring a smile to my face with your messages. You can contact me though my website, Twitter and Facebook pages. I hope you enjoy Carlotta's story.

Chapter 1

Hora Zero (Zero Hour) – Rodrigo y Gabriela

When I open my eyes and focus on the clock beside the bed, I realise with absolute horror that I should have been awake an hour ago. I blink a few times in sheer disbelief and then check the time on my mobile phone. The clock and the phone are in complete agreement. So now I'm late. Not just a little bit late either, but properly, horribly, maybe-miss-the-damn-train late. And missing the train means missing the plane. Missing the plane means missing Dorothea's party. And missing Dorothea's party . . . I leap off the bed with the agility of an Olympic athlete. Missing the party isn't an option. I need to get out of the hotel room and into a cab as fast as I possibly can if today isn't going to morph from triumph to disaster in the space of a couple of hours.

In a corner of my mind (the tiniest sliver of a corner of my mind, to be exact) I tell myself that I might be overdramatising a little, although I'm not really a dramatic sort of person. In my business life – the life I was living a few hours ago – I'm famed for my ability to be cool and calm under pressure.

In fact, I'm pretty much unflappable in the face of near disaster. But we're talking about professional pressures and corporate disasters. This is entirely different. I may be overreacting to missing a party, but it's my soon-to-be mother-in-law's seventieth birthday party. I'm supposed to be handing over flowers and making a speech about what a wonderful person she is. It's important to me and to my fiancé, Chris, because although we're pretty rock solid as a couple, the dark cloud on our horizon is his mother. She doesn't like me and I . . . well, I don't like her very much either, to be honest. I'm constantly doing my best to change her view that I'm a poor choice of future wife for her only son, but I never quite seem to manage it. If I fail to show at her party it will be a major black mark against me, and all my months of trying to be nice to her will have been in vain.

Nevertheless, as I slide my arms into my silk blouse, I can't help wondering if I've deliberately overslept, if some unknown place in my psyche stopped me from waking up so that I wouldn't make the train in time. I'm a big believer in listening to your subconscious, but I'm not going to listen to it today. I know I didn't oversleep on purpose. Dorothea's party is just as important to me as this morning's breakfast meeting was. Deliberately missing her party would mean I want her to lower her opinion of me, and it's already low enough. Which is annoying because, without trying to blow my own trumpet or anything, most people would think I'm a reasonably good bet as a daughter-in-law. I'm single, solvent and free from emotional baggage. Though God knows, as far as Dorothea Bennett is concerned, even the Virgin Mary wouldn't have met her exacting standards for her only son's future wife.

Why on earth didn't I set my phone alarm? I certainly

didn't expect to fall asleep when I came back to the hotel to relax after the meeting, but I'm the sort of person who plans ahead. I'm practically pathological as far as advance planning is concerned. So surely I should've anticipated the possibility of nodding off when I stretched out on the hotel's king-sized bed with its luxurious duck-feather mattress topper and cool, comfortable pillows. But the thing is, I don't normally sleep during the day. I find it hard enough to sleep at night. Four hours out for the count was totally unforeseeable.

I sweep my cosmetics into my bag, not bothering to check that the caps on the various tubes and pots are properly tightened. Nor do I bother putting my make-up brushes into the funky leopard-skin pouch that my god-daughter, Natasha, bought me last Christmas. I can sort all this out afterwards. Right now, getting out of the hotel is my main priority.

I pick up my hairbrush and run it through my hair, which is short, dark and sticking up in spikes on one side of my head while stuck flat to the other, as though I've been hit by a brick or something equally solid. Spiky is how I usually wear it, but in a slightly less frantic style. I take my sparkly clip from the bedside locker and shove it into the centre of the spikes, where it glitters beneath the single halogen light over the mirror. My green eyes, surrounded by sleep-smudged mascara, glitter too; I think it's with stunned disbelief that I overslept. I feel my chest tighten with stress and I think that at least a heart attack would be a reasonable excuse for missing the party. I take some deep, calming breaths. A heart attack isn't the solution. Really it isn't.

I turn away from the dresser and stuff the balled-up tights

on the floor beside my bed into my case, before slipping into my high-heeled shoes. Putting on the tights will slow me down, and I don't need them – I only wore them for the breakfast meeting earlier because I always wear tights in a business environment. It feels more professional than going bare-legged. Besides, when I can afford the luxury of putting tights on at my leisure, these are a particularly nice pair which do good things to my slightly too thin pins. They're black, with a criss-cross pattern running up the side and a tiny diamanté star at each ankle. Not that it's important what they look like. Not that anything is important right now other than getting to the station in the next half-hour.

I leave the room, throwing one last hurried glance behind me to make sure I haven't left anything behind. But given that I didn't unpack when I arrived yesterday evening, there's nothing for me to leave. I stand in the corridor at the lifts and jab the call button about half a dozen times. I know it doesn't make the lift come any faster but it helps me to rid myself of some of the pent-up anxiety I'm feeling. And some of the anger too. I'm so angry at myself I can feel my teeth grind as I debate whether it might be quicker to lug my case down ten flights of stairs, or exercise a little patience and wait for the lift.

I stifle a sudden yawn. I can't be tired now, I simply can't. I don't remember the last time I slept for four hours on the trot. I know that today is a bit of an exception, what with the jet lag from yesterday plus this morning's early meeting, but all the same . . . I wonder if I'm suddenly turning into someone who needs her full eight hours. The thought horrifies me. What about future breakfast meetings? Will I be the

one to arrive at the last minute looking puffy-eyed and bedraggled because I can't haul my ass out of bed? Will I be the one to nod off at an important point in the presentation? I shudder.

Usually when I have a breakfast meeting I'm one of the first to arrive and I ensure I look smart and groomed and totally in control. It doesn't matter that I don't like meeting clients before dawn, or that I'd much prefer to have had my fruit and full-fat yoghurt, possibly followed by a Danish, before dealing with spreadsheets and PowerPoint presentations. I don't eat at business breakfasts because it's impossible to look efficient and impressive when you've got puff pastry flaking down your jacket or a smear of bitter-orange marmalade on your cheek. That's why I passed on the food that was provided by Ecologistics this morning, even though I was ravenously hungry. But I drank a gallon of coffee to make up for it, which is why it's bizarre that I fell asleep at all. Usually, after more than one cup, I have to clamp down on a caffeine rush and its associated jitters. But I guess jet lag trumps caffeine as far as I'm concerned. Even though it's never bothered me before.

Finally the lift arrives. The doors slide open and a sextet of fit, healthy-looking young people dressed in blue tracksuits and with name tags hanging around their necks move to one side to make room for me. There is a sports conference being held at the hotel today and tomorrow. Clearly athletes schedule meetings at far more reasonable hours.

I'm thinking that if I hadn't asked for a late checkout this morning I probably would have been woken by a chambermaid wanting to make up the room. I hadn't been going to bother keeping it at all, but then decided it might be a good

idea in case I felt like relaxing for a while after the meeting. My habit of micro-planning has backfired spectacularly.

I suppose Mateo, my colleague, will be amused when he finds out.

'We have turned you into a Spaniard,' he'll say. 'Needing your siesta.'

He hasn't turned me into a Spaniard. Or an Argentinian. Or anyone else who needs a siesta. I haven't changed a bit over the last weeks while I worked on the project that took in both sides of the Atlantic. Not that I've ever seen anyone in the offices of Cadogan Consulting, the international company we work for, taking siestas. Everyone works the same core hours, which are laughably supposed to be nine-to-five. Most of us work a lot more than that. The only people who take siestas in Spain or Argentina are proprietors of small local businesses, like family-owned shops or garages. And, unfortunately, the employees of Ecologistics, the struggling firm who'd hired us to tell them how they could return to profitability and strength.

Ecologistics is based in Seville. Mateo and I had visited the corporate headquarters (a dull, square concrete building on the outskirts of the city) at the start of the contract over six months ago. Then we'd gone to the other Ecologistics offices in Europe, before heading to their base in Argentina for a few days. We'd taken notes, shared our thoughts about their operations and come up with a survival plan. This morning, at the breakfast meeting, I was the one to give them the bad news. That survival would be tough. And messy. And hard. Something they probably knew already. They just needed to hear it from someone else. And that someone was me.

When it comes to standing up in front of our clients and delivering bad news, I'm one of the company's first choices. Dirk Cadogan, the grandson of the founder of Cadogan Consulting and our current CEO, once told me it was because I am a velvet assassin. I looked at him in confusion and he explained that when I walk into a room everyone assumes that because I'm a small, slim woman with snazzy tights and a sparkly clip in my hair, nothing I say is going to be too terrible. And then I wield the axe in my Orla Kiely bag, and they're left shell-shocked.

I told Dirk that he was being appallingly sexist, which made him flinch. Using words like sexist in the workplace is like lighting touchpaper these days. As soon as it's out of your mouth someone immediately starts thinking Labour Court and some kind of discrimination case, but I laughed after I spoke. Because the truth is, it doesn't matter how we'd like things to be; the workplace is full of -isms of some kind or another and the trick is negotiating them without losing your dignity. I work with what I've got. If clients are softened up by the fact that short with sparkly clips is unthreatening, well, that's a good thing. I'm happy to cultivate that image. It doesn't bother me in the slightest. Same as I don't mind when Mateo walks into a room and everyone's eyes are drawn to his one-metre-ninety body, his broad shoulders and the six-pack abs rippling beneath his cotton shirt. Chris hasn't met Mateo, which is possibly a good thing. I don't need my fiancé worrying about my work colleagues, and Mateo, though undeniably attractive, isn't my type. Anyhow, working with him is a temporary arrangement. Normally I'm based in Dublin with occasional stints in London and an annual trip to New York. Cavorting around Spain and

Argentina was an exception. A nice exception, as far as working in completely different environments goes, but more time-consuming and stressful than usual. As well as more exhausting. I'll be glad to get home.

Anyway, I did the velvet assassin thing with Ecologistics earlier and told them where they were going wrong and what they'd need to do to get the company up to speed again. Not surprisingly, the plan called for a certain amount of rationalisation, which is really another way of saying job losses. Even though it was almost inevitable, I hated having to point this out. I don't like being the person who's the cause of someone else losing a job. Every time I have to do it I feel sick. But I also have to accept it. I lay it out as calmly and as professionally as I can because that's what I'm paid to do. And I justify it by saying that in the long run, more jobs will be saved if the company concerned takes our advice. In any plan that means people are let go I always include substantial salary cuts for the senior management who got them into this mess in the first place. It's the least I can do and it makes commercial sense. But you'd be surprised at how many so-called leaders don't want to share the pain. In my velvet-axe-wielding way, however, I attempt to make it an essential component. And to be fair to Antonio Reyes, the CEO of Ecologistics, he was completely accepting of it, and indeed of the plan in total. Antonio's support is good news for me, because it means a further contract for Cadogan and more fees for the firm. I texted the news to Dirk immediately after the meeting, and his reply reminded me that I have a ninety-five per cent record in getting companies on side, which continues to make me one of his top consultants. Getting Antonio on board will mean a

decent bonus for me this year, which was why I was feeling very happy when I said goodbye to Mateo as we left the Ecologistics building. He didn't come back to the hotel for an extra hit of celebratory coffee because he was heading directly to Cadiz. He has family there. Dammit, I think, if we'd had coffee together maybe I'd have stayed talking to him and I wouldn't have fallen asleep at all and I wouldn't be panicking now.

The lift stops at every floor between mine and the ground, which isn't doing my stress levels any good at all. When we eventually arrive, I push my way past the sports conference people, pause briefly at reception to tell them I've left the room, clatter out of the hotel and stand on the pavement, looking for a cab. The sky, which was a glorious blue earlier in the morning, is now a lowering grey and it feels like it's going to rain. So much for my junket in the sun, as Chris keeps calling it. These clouds are every bit as dark as they can be in Dublin.

I push random weather thoughts out of my head and clamber into the taxi that has just pulled up outside the door.

'Train station, please,' I say in English. 'As quickly as possible.'

He seems to understand both the destination and my request for speed, and I get the feeling that he's taking it as a personal challenge. He puts his foot to the floor and we squeal away from the kerb as though we're in an action movie. And as we do, the heavens open and the rain starts to fall. I've never seen rain like it. It's as though someone has opened a celestial sluice gate. A torrent of water seems to have simply cascaded from the sky, flooding everything

beneath. The cab driver swears softly under his breath. I understand the tone if not the words as he switches his windscreen wipers to fast, although he might as well not bother for all the difference they're making, because this is like driving through a river.

Nevertheless, I'm hoping that the rain will delay the train and allow me an extra few minutes to board. Flooding on the tracks maybe. Sodden points. Though obviously not enough flooding or sodden points to force a complete cancellation of the service. That possibility throws me into a flap again. I can't have the train cancelled. I just need my taxi driver to get me there in the next twenty minutes. And he will. He's giving it everything he's got. He's the Jenson Button of cab drivers. (Actually, glancing at his face in the rear-view mirror, I reckon he's more the Jeremy Clarkson of cab drivers. But never mind. As long as he gets me to the station in time, I don't care who he reminds me of!) I remember Mateo's words yesterday as we glided out of Madrid's Atocha station on our way to Seville.

'Renfe prides itself on punctuality,' he said of the national rail company. 'If the train is more than five minutes late, you get your money back.'

I heartily approved of that when he told me. I still approve of the concept. But I'm hoping that they're going to have to do a big payout for a six-minute delay today. Although if Jeremy Clarkson keeps on at this rate, I'll be there in time to sashay coolly along the platform, laughing at myself for worrying at all.

We swerve around a corner into a narrow road. Although the Hotel Andalucia is on the outskirts of the city and it seems totally unnecessary to go through twisting streets that

feel as though they should be only for pedestrians, I'm reckoning that Jeremy is taking a short cut. He negotiates a few hairpin bends with great aplomb, turns on to a main street again, swears once more – loudly this time – and then crashes into the back of a stationary van.

OK, I tell myself as I'm flung forward and my seat belt restrains me, this hasn't happened. I haven't just been involved in a car crash in Seville. But Jeremy is now swearing very loudly and opening the driver's door. Like magic, a crowd has gathered around us, all talking loudly and gesticulating wildly. The crash wasn't actually that bad. It was more of a shunt really, because we'd just come round a bend and Jeremy wasn't going that fast. But the owner of the van is yelling at him and I'm suddenly worried that there's going to be a fight. I don't want to be involved in their fight. I don't want to be involved at all. I don't need to be. Nobody is hurt. I look around anxiously.

Neither driver is taking any notice of me. I open the passenger door and slide out of the rear seat. Random onlookers glance at me curiously, and then someone asks me a question but I've absolutely no idea what they've said and shrug unconcernedly. Which is no mean feat because I am the complete opposite of unconcerned. I'm as concerned as it's possible to be. I'm losing precious seconds standing around in torrential rain while the two drivers compete to see who can shout loudest. And then I hear the sound of sirens and know that the police are coming.

The police means witness statements and all sorts of time-consuming things. I'm a law-abiding citizen and I want to do my best to help, but there's nothing I can add to this. Certainly not in Spanish. And I can't hang around for something that might take forever. So I sidle around to the back

of the taxi and pop the boot. I raise the lid slowly and ease my suitcase out. Even though I've been travelling for nearly three weeks, it's not a very big suitcase. It's bigger than the ones budget airlines allow you to bring into the cabin, but otherwise it's pretty neat. I put it on the ground beside me and glance around. The only person looking at me now is a baby with a tiny pink bow in her mop of dark hair, snuggled up in a pushchair. I give her a complicit smile and a wink and then edge myself away from the fracas. By this time I'm utterly drenched and so is my case. But my departure hasn't been spotted. I start to walk more quickly and then, at a set of traffic lights, I cross the road and turn a corner. I have no idea where I am. But I'm still determined to make the train on time.

I don't know which direction I should be walking in. The Santa Justa station is quite big, and I reckon it must be visible from a reasonable distance, but all I can see are rain-darkened buildings and orange trees. Despite the rain, there's a heady scent of orange blossom in the air. In other circumstances I'd quite like to be here, soaked to the skin and inhaling orange blossom. It's not something many of my colleagues would imagine me doing, but it's sort of earthy and lovely and . . . I don't have time for this. I slick back my now soaking hair and look around me. I don't know which way to turn and my ankles are chafing from the high-heeled shoes. Maybe I should've waited to put on the tights after all. I feel like crying. I even gulp. But then I stop myself. I never, ever cry.

A white car with a green taxi light appears through the rain. I almost run out in front of it in my eagerness to stop it. The car glides to a halt and I open the passenger door.

'Train station,' I tell the driver, heaving my case on to the seat beside me. I think he's grateful for that. I'm pretty sure he didn't want to get out and put it in the boot.

I drip all over the back seat as he puts the car into gear. I've lost precious minutes thanks to Jeremy's shunt. I'm still feeling a bit guilty about abandoning him, but I have to make this train. So I push him to the back of my mind and peer out of the window as we make a couple of turns and then finally, thankfully, approach the railway station.

There are loads of cars either parked or waiting outside. My driver pulls up as close as he can to the entrance, and I pay him way more than I should. I've suddenly remembered that I didn't pay Jeremy at all and I feel guilty again, but only for a moment. He didn't get me to my destination, did he? But I'm here now. I heave a sigh of relief and run into the station. Well, I don't run exactly, because my ankles are in agony now from my shoes, but I do a sort of fast hobble, dragging my case behind me.

The train for Madrid is scheduled to depart in three minutes, from a platform at the other end of the station. I take a deep breath and half run, half limp the length of the concourse before flinging myself towards the platform where the sleek white train is standing. I breathe a sigh of relief and offer up a silent prayer to St Jude. I'm not at all a religious person, but it's good to have spiritual help at times of trouble and I'm well known to the patron saint of lost causes, who has got me out of a jam on more than one occasion. I'm thinking that he's come up trumps again when a railway employee, in her neat uniform, stops me. She says something in Spanish and I look blankly at her.

'The train is closed,' she tells me in perfect English.

'No it's not,' I protest. 'It's there.'

'But closed. There is no more access.'

'I must have access.' I realise my voice is shrill and I try to take it down a notch. 'I have to catch that train.'

'I'm sorry.' To be fair, she does sound regretful. 'But the gates close two minutes before the departure of the train. So that it is on time,' she adds helpfully.

It didn't take me a whole minute to run the length of the platform, did it? I'll have to start taking my gym membership more seriously if it did.

'I won't delay it,' I assure her. 'It'll only take me a couple of seconds to board.' I slip off my shoes so that I can run faster and she looks at me in astonishment.

'It's not possible,' she says.

'I'll be really quick,' I tell her. 'I'll just jump into the first carriage and – oh!'

I watch, horrified, as the train begins to glide slowly and majestically out of the station. Without me.

I've missed it.

Dorothea will never forgive me.

Neither will Chris.

This can't be happening.

'I am sorry, Miss . . . Carlotta.' The railway employee reads my name from the e-ticket, deciding to ignore the O'Keeffe part, which seems to cause pronunciation problems outside of English-speaking countries, and looks at me sympathetically. 'Perhaps you can buy a ticket for the next one. It leaves in two hours and twenty minutes.'

I don't know what to say to her. It's as though my brain has disconnected itself from my body. A train leaving in two

hours and twenty minutes is of no use to me whatsoever. A train in two hours and twenty minutes won't get me to Madrid in time for my flight. I want to ask about other possibilities and alternatives but I can't speak. Because I still can't believe that my train really has left without me. I'm furious and gutted at the same time. I should never have agreed to come to Seville at all. It hadn't even been part of the original plan. Antonio and the rest of the board were supposed to come to Madrid to meet us. But Antonio's mother had been taken ill earlier in the week and he didn't want to leave the city, so he asked if Mateo and I would make the trip to Seville instead. And I agreed because I thought it was kind of sweet that the chairman of a multi-national company, even one in the sort of trouble that Ecologistics was in, would want to stay near his mother instead of putting business first. It occurs to me that men and their mothers have become an irritating complication in my life.

'Would you like to buy a ticket for the next train?' The employee is still trying to be helpful.

'I don't know,' I say eventually, as I look at the now deserted track. 'I need to think.'

'Of course,' she agrees. 'There is a customer lounge in the station for passengers with your class of ticket. You can freshen up there. And my colleague will help you.'

'Thank you.' It's not freshening up I need, it's drying off. And a train. I need a train to Madrid right now! But I follow the direction in which she's pointing and push open the door to the lounge. The receptionist makes a comment about the weather in Spanish and then English, and on hearing of my dilemma is equally sympathetic about the missed train,

although she also emphasises the punctuality of the high-speed system. I'm beginning to hate it by now and I'm wishing that I could be in Dublin's Connolly station, where I'd be a hundred per cent certain they wouldn't mind being a minute or two late once they knew how critical the whole situation was. Efficiency has its drawbacks, I think unhappily as I sit down in the lounge and take out my iPad. I click on the train timetable and try to figure out my next move. Which isn't going to be phoning Chris and telling him that I'm stuck in Seville. There has to be some way of making it home in time. And I'm going to find it.