Anyone but Him

Sheila O'Flanagan

Published by Headline Review

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Copyright © 2004 Sheila O'Flanagan

The right of Sheila O'Flanagan to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in 2004
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

First published in paperback in 2005
by HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

This edition published in paperback in 2006
by HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING

A HEADLINE REVIEW paperback

1

Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this publication may only be reproduced, stored, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, with prior permission in writing of the publishers or, in the case of reprographic production, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

ISBN 0 7553 0758 5

Typeset in Galliard by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Polmont, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE BOOK PUBLISHING
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
LONDON NW1 3BH

www.reviewbooks.co.uk
www.hodderheadline.com

Chapter 1

The Four Seasons: No 3 in F Major (Autumn) – Vivaldi

Andie Corcoran walked out of the bedroom, shook her burnished copper hair back from her face and cleared her throat.

'OK,' she said. 'Not that I want to sound like a walking cliché or anything, but – does my bum look big in this?' She turned slowly so that Tom could see the back view of the figure-hugging electric-blue dress she was wearing.

He whistled slowly as she turned. 'Yes,' he said.

'Yes!' She whirled around and her eyes, soft grey with little flecks of the brightest green, stared at him in horror. 'Yes!?'

He laughed. 'Oh, come on, Andie. Of course your bum doesn't look big in it. You have a lovely bum. Neat but kind of voluptuous. And you look amazing. Stunning, even. It's so – so unlike you. And it's enough to make me want to rip that dress off you straight away.'

She tried to glare at him but couldn't quite keep the twinkle out of her eyes. 'Well you can't. Not yet. Just wait here a minute.' She disappeared back into the bedroom and reappeared a moment later, this time wearing a

button-fronted dress in maroon silk. 'Is this better?' She turned around again.

Tom exhaled slowly. 'It's more what you usually wear.'

'More boring?'

He hesitated. 'More ordinary,' he said eventually. 'But honestly, love, you'll look great no matter what you wear. The clothes aren't important.'

'The clothes are vitally important,' she corrected him. 'And I don't want to look great – even though great is exaggerating just a fraction anyway, given that I weigh at least half a stone more than this time last year. Great isn't good enough, Tom. I have to look sensational.'

'I suppose it's pointless saying that you always look sensational to me?' He walked over to her and began to undo the tiny buttons at the front of the dress.

'Utterly pointless,' she agreed as she wriggled away from him. 'I know it doesn't usually matter very much to me what I wear, but this is the one day of the year that it does.'

'Another year, another wrinkle.' He grinned at her. 'And you're only thirty-two. Hardly pension territory yet.'

'Old enough to think I'd have more sense.' She pressed her fingers to her temples. 'I guess if I was really mature I'd just grab something out of the back of the wardrobe and fling it on, but I'm not quite ready for that yet. Besides, I don't want to be the one who looks as though she couldn't afford to be there.'

Tom grinned. 'I'll never quite get to grips with the whole designer oneupmanship that goes on among women,' he told her. 'Although I'm glad that you don't normally fret so much about what you're going to wear.'

'Most of the time it doesn't really matter,' commented Andie. 'But this is different.' She leaned against the wall and looked at him pleadingly. 'So what do you think?'

'If you want to look demurely sensational and more like your usual self then I'd wear the maroon,' said Tom. 'But if you want to make a statement about being an elegant sex-bomb, the blue's the one.'

Suddenly Andie started to giggle. 'Sex-bomb. If only.'

'You are to me.' Tom put his hands on her shoulders. 'You know you are.'

His lips found hers and this time she didn't stop him as he fumbled at the buttons.

'Hell's teeth,' he muttered. 'There's enough of them.'

'Designed to slow men like you down,' she murmured breathlessly.

'Men like me!' He slid the dress off her shoulders so that it suddenly rippled to the floor. 'What d'you mean, men like me?'

'Sexy men.' She pushed her hands beneath his black T-shirt. 'Stamina men.'

'I'm glad you think I'm sexy. But stamina?'

'Oh, you've got that in spades.' She led him through the open door and into the bedroom. His eyebrows lifted as he couldn't help but notice the scene of devastation. Dresses, blouses, skirts, shirts plus shoes in a variety of heel heights were scattered in disarray so that it resembled a communal changing room during the January sales.

'How come you have so many clothes when you don't give a stuff about what you wear?' asked Tom.

'This is my entire wardrobe.' She pushed a rose-coloured top out of the way and lay on the bed. 'Some

of these things are absolutely ancient.' Her teeth found the lobe of his ear and she bit gently on it. 'Like me.'

He laughed. 'You didn't obsess as much about it last year.'

'Last year was Jin's turn. She was the one who'd turned thirty. When it was me, I was devastated. Remember? I cried.'

'Well I think you improve every year.' He gathered her fiercely to him and rolled so that she was over him. 'You're on top,' he told her, and grinned delightedly as she slid on to him.

'This was supposed to happen after my bath.' She lay beside him on the crumpled duvet and picked up her discarded bra with her toes.

'What's wrong with now?' he asked.

'Because once I have a bath your closeness disappears,' she told him. 'I wanted you to be with me this evening.'

'I wish I could be,' he said. 'I really do.' He slid off the bed. 'How about I run the bath for you?'

'If you like.' She closed her eyes and listened to him walking barefoot to the bathroom.

'What would you like me to put in it?' he called. 'There's a nice-looking bottle of something purple on the shelf.'

'Not that!' she called back. 'In the cabinet. An Elizabeth Arden bath crème. It's the only expensive one I have and I want to be expensive the whole way through.'

'Whatever you say.'

She heard the sound of the water flooding into the

bath and sighed. It would be nice, she thought, not to have to go anywhere tonight. To stay in the flat with Tom and make love to him again, and then to send out for some Chinese food and eat it, half naked, on the bed while they watched something romantic on the TV. And then to sleep for a while, wrapped in each other's arms. So much more appealing than going out. Especially going out to Jin's triple birthday celebration, an event which Andie knew would be as stage-managed and over-the-top as everything her younger sister did.

'Come on then!' She felt him lift her into his arms and opened her eyes. 'Let's get you clean and scrubbed and ready to go.'

'Put me down!' But she laughed as he carried her into the bathroom and held her over the foaming tub.

'Gently or with a splash?' he asked.

'Oh, gently, please.' She kissed him on the nose. 'Otherwise the tidal wave – a result of the Archimedes principle of displacement and due to the fact that my bum is definitely big no matter what you say – will engulf the entire bathroom and possibly leak down on to poor old Tina below.'

'You're no fun.' But he lowered her slowly into the bath.

'I know,' she said. 'That's why you love me.' She closed her eyes and disappeared beneath the foamy water.

'Wrong,' he said as she emerged.

'Wrong?' She blew foam from her nose.

'I love you because you're the most fun I've ever had.'

'With my clothes off or on?' she asked.

'Either.'

'Fair enough.' She flicked some foam at him.

'Don't,' he said dangerously. 'Or I'll jump in there with you and Tina will definitely have to worry.'

'Promises, promises,' said Andie and disappeared beneath the water for a second time.

He was sitting in the pink tub chair beside the window when she emerged into the living room again.

'Oh.' His eyes widened and he looked at her in stunned appreciation. 'How come you don't bother getting done up like this for me?'

'Would you want me to?' She walked across the room, and the electric blue of her dress shimmered in the late afternoon sunlight. Her hair, partly pinned up and partly falling in studied carelessness, was a perfect counterfoil to the elegance of the dress. The narrow gold necklace which he'd given her for her birthday glittered at her throat.

'Well, maybe not all the time,' he said. 'But – Jeez, Andie, you look totally stunning.'

'I'll still be a fish out of water,' she told him.

'Stop putting yourself down.' He shook his head. 'An hour ago you were an ordinary, though admittedly desirable, female. Now, I'm telling you, you look good enough to eat.'

'Too late,' she told him. 'We did that earlier.'

'Actually, I'm afraid to touch you,' confessed Tom. 'In case I smudge some part of the perfection.'

'Then don't,' she said. 'It took me ages to create this look and I couldn't bear to do the make-up again.'

'Aren't you meant to tell me it's all to do with your

bone structure or something?' he asked. 'I mean, you've got cheekbones this evening that I never even noticed before.'

'And the squashed nose bequeathed to me by some malevolent ancestor.' She shrugged helplessly. 'I might look good to you, Tom, but I've too many flaws to be beautiful. And I'm nothing, absolutely nothing compared to Jin. Or her crowd.'

'You're worth a million of her,' he said fiercely. 'More than a million. And there's nothing wrong with your nose.'

'You know it's awful, but thanks anyway.' She moistened her lips and then grimaced. 'Better try and remember not to lick off all my lipstick before getting there. I know there are women who can do the whole long-lasting lipstick thing but I'm not one of them. Two seconds of normal living and no matter what it is, it's gone.'

'When you get into the car you needn't say a word,' Tom told her. 'I won't ask you questions and you won't have to speak. If that doesn't keep your lips red and glossy nothing will.' He smiled at her. 'But, oh boy – they're very kissable like that.'

'Well don't even think about it,' she said warningly. 'I am now officially a creation, Tom Hall, and I can't possibly have your slobbery kisses destroying my look.'

'Wouldn't dream of it,' he assured her as he picked up the car keys from the table. 'Wouldn't dream of it.'

They didn't speak as he turned on to the Malahide Road and drove through the Dublin suburbs until the road abruptly narrowed and detached homes surrounded by

cultivated land replaced the serried rows of houses. The sky was milk white, an evening haze dampening the effect of the earlier summer sun. Andie removed the sunglasses she'd previously perched on her despised nose. She turned them over and over in her hands, tracing her index finger around the frame, and then, finally, dropped them into her lap. She picked at the cuticle of her little finger, pushing it back down the nail. Then she fiddled with her gold necklace as she looked out of the window at the high walls and electronic gates which guarded the privacy of the ever more impressive houses along the road.

Tom glanced at her, noticing the worry lines creasing the corners of her eyes, feeling the tension rising within her with every mile they travelled. He took his hand from the steering wheel and placed it on her thigh. The squeeze he gave her was comforting and companionable.

'You'll be fine,' he said.

'I know.' She stared straight ahead as the road turned and the trees on either side formed a green archway above them. They saw the double gates and she made him drive past as she turned to look at the driveway. About a dozen cars were lined up in the huge cobbled circle in front of the house itself, while more had been parked at one side of the driveway.

'Stop now,' she told Tom.

Immediately he pulled in to the left. She reached down and picked up her tiny blue bag from the footwell. Tom got out of the driver's seat, opened the rear passenger door and took out the bouquet of flowers and two gift-wrapped boxes.

'Sure you can manage?' he asked as he handed her the flowers and the boxes.

'Yes. It's not far.'

'But can you walk in those shoes?'

She glanced down at her spindly-heeled blue and gold Marks & Spencer sandals, which she'd managed to find the day before in their end-of-season sale and which looked much more expensive than the half-price she'd paid for them. 'Of course I can.'

'OK then.' He looked anxiously at her.

'I'm fine,' she said. 'I've been exaggerating the nervousness of it. When I'm there it never seems so bad. *She* never seems so bad either!'

He chuckled. 'Will you have a good time?' he asked.

'Not as good as earlier.'

'Will you think about me?'

'Not at all.' She smiled at him.

'I'll call you,' he said. He leaned towards her and, avoiding the flowers, kissed her on the cheek. 'Have fun.'

'I'll do my best.'

'And – happy birthday, Andie.'

'Thanks.' She touched the gold necklace before she turned to walk towards the house.

The driveway was long and gravelled. Despite her confidence of earlier, Andie was finding it difficult to keep her balance on the chipped stones. She stepped off the driveway and on to the lush green lawn which bordered it instead, but this time the spindly heels of her nearly-there sandals disappeared into the grass. With each step a clump

of earth stuck to the heels. By the time she arrived at the house she was wearing a large portion of the garden.

Briarlawns was the house of a self-made man, thought Andie, as she approached the steps up to the front door. Built ten years earlier, it was a collection of design features from homes that the owner had seen in other places. Red-brick, because it was in a semi-rural setting. A Dutch-style roof. Wrought-iron balconies outside the upstairs windows. A Georgian-inspired front door. It wasn't ugly but it wasn't beautiful. It was the house of someone who wanted to say that he could afford to build it. Having built it, though, the owner had never actually lived in it and according to Jin had been glad to make a profit on the sale.

'Hello.' The tuxedo-wearing Adonis at the open front door had a list in his hand. 'Do you have an invitation?'

'I'm Andie Corcoran.' Andie moved the bouquet of flowers so that she could see him more clearly. 'I'm Jin's sister.'

'Mrs Dixon's sister.' He scanned his list and then looked at her again. 'Andrea?'

'Yes,' said Andie.

'They're at the back,' said the man. 'Through the hallway and down—'

'I know,' said Andie. She walked past him and into the white and black tiled hallway with its wide staircase. 'Oh,' she added, turning back. 'Has my mother arrived yet?'

He nodded. 'Mrs Corcoran arrived an hour ago,' he said.

Andie smiled to herself. She could just imagine the panic on Jin's face when her mother arrived at the house

half an hour before she was supposed to. No doubt Cora would've said that the time on the invitation was for guests, not family. That she'd arrived before then in case they needed a hand with anything, knowing deep down that of course they didn't need a hand with anything, that they'd paid a fortune to the caterers not to need a hand with anything. Which would have left Cora with plenty of time to wander through the house on her own. Andie knew that her mother was fascinated by its three reception rooms, dining room, billiards room (honestly, thought Andie, billiards!), Kevin's study, the huge country-style kitchen and seven bedrooms (she sometimes wondered whether they slept in a different one each night of the week). When Andie had first come to visit, she'd been given the whole tour, the one that also included the eye-popping master bedroom with its walk-in wardrobes and en-suite bathroom with separate bath (including water jets), shower and sauna. It had overwhelmed her at first and then she'd felt dismissive of it all, telling herself that money wasn't everything and that happiness was more important.

Afterwards she'd gone back to her one-bedroom first-floor flat (which didn't have a balcony because it had been built in the sixties when things like that were far too fancy for what was considered a place for people who couldn't afford an actual house) and told herself that everything she had, she'd worked for herself. And that she should feel satisfied and proud as well as being happy.

Which she did, of course. After all, she wasn't the kind of girl who got a kick out of having a walk-in wardrobe because she wasn't the kind of girl who bothered buying

the amount of clothes she'd need to fill it! But whenever she came to one of Jin's parties she couldn't help feeling a little inadequate, as though somehow by not wanting the wardrobes and the clothes and all of the things that Jin thought were important, she'd managed to fail at being a twenty-first-century woman.

She shook her head to dismiss the negative thoughts as she crossed the hallway and walked down the short flight of stairs which led to the open door at the back of the house. She was fine. Jin was fine. Different didn't matter.

The garden had been dotted with enormous green sunshades. Andie wondered at what point the organisers had decided that the Irish summer evening was exactly that – summer, without the threat of a potential cloudburst – which meant that they could actually use the sunshades for their true purpose. The milk-white haze still hung in the sky but hadn't built up into grey banks of cloud as it so often did, the air was warm and still and heavy with the scent of the multicoloured flowers which spilled out of the carefully cultivated flowerbeds and the cobalt-blue Italian glazed pots.

Groups of people strolled round the vast lawn and sipped champagne, the occasional burst of laughter breaking through the hum of conversation. The women were all dressed for an occasion, the men wore suits. Andie remembered this time the previous year when she'd been the one hosting the triple birthday celebration – the three of them, herself, Jin and Cora, had ended up having an indoor barbecue in her flat while the rain bucketed down ferociously outside.

'Andie! Over here.'

She turned at the sound of Jin's voice and smiled at her sister. I will *not* be intimidated, she told herself, as Jin approached and kissed her on both cheeks. And I won't let her occasional comments about how I could do better annoy me.

'Hi there,' she said. 'You're looking well.'

'And you.' Jin smiled at her sister and Andie felt guilty at her thoughts of earlier. Yes, Jin was stunningly beautiful; yes, she was rolling in money; yes, it had all come so easily to her. But she was still her sister and they shared a lot of childhood memories. They'd seen each other naked in the bath and crying after a dressing-down from Cora. They'd gone on wet-weather summer holidays in the west of Ireland together and they'd shared the trauma of falling out of the apple tree in the tiny back garden of the house in Marino, Andie spraining her wrist and Jin (dramatic as always) breaking her arm. They had a lot of things in common. She shouldn't always focus on the things that were different.

'Happy birthday,' said Andie and handed Jin the bouquet of flowers. 'This is for you too.' She also gave her sister one of the gift-wrapped boxes.

'Thanks.' Jin kissed Andie again and waved at a nearby waiter to take the bouquet. She looked at the box. 'Will I open it now?'

'If you like,' said Andie.

Jin unwrapped the matt-black paper and lifted the lid from the velvet box. The narrow-handled silver spoon nestled on purple silk. She ran her finger lightly over the inscription – her name and the date.

'It's lovely,' she said.

'I didn't know which one to give you and which to give Ma,' said Andie. 'Hers is a sugar spoon this year.'

'This is great,' said Jin. 'And yours is in the house. I'll give it to you later.'

'Whatever you do, don't forget.' Andie grinned. 'I only have about a million spoons in the flat.'

'Kevin thinks that giving each other spoons is a great idea,' said Jin.

'So do I,' said Andie. 'And I love them all.'

Jin raised an eyebrow.

'I do,' Andie told her. 'They're cute. They all have a story to tell.'

'More importantly, as Kevin says, they're a good investment.'

'That was the original idea. Investments for us all.' Andie looked round wryly. 'Not that you needed it in the end.'

'You never know.' But Jin laughed. 'Anyway, I think it's nice that the three of us buy each other the same thing. And it's always interesting to see who picked what.'

Andie nodded, then looked round the garden. 'Where *is* Ma?'

A frown creased Jin's brow. 'Somewhere,' she said vaguely. 'Probably telling Genevieve Boyd all about my wonderful sauna or something while Genevieve is thinking that she could buy and sell me and my saunas.'

'Could she?' asked Andie.

'Look, honey, you might think that there's a bit of wealth on display here. But what me and Kevin have is

buttons, just buttons, compared to some of them. Lily and Conor O'Shea have just bought a damn island.'

'An island? Off Ireland?'

'Are you mad? Who'd want an Irish island where it'd piss rain on them three hundred and sixty-four days a year. No, in the Caribbean.'

'Like Richard Branson. Anywhere near him?'

'I don't know,' said Jin. 'They haven't invited us out yet.'

'Well, you do already have the house in Antigua, don't you?'

'Yes, but it's not the same as an island!'

Andie giggled.

'What?' demanded Jin.

'It's just so ridiculous,' said Andie. 'You grew up in a house that originally had an outside toilet!'

'Andie, that toilet was never outside. You say things like that to make yourself seem more earthy and grounded than me.'

'It was so outside!' Andie made a face at her sister. 'OK, not when we were kids. But before that.'

'Yes, well it doesn't give you permission to think that you come from an impoverished background and that wealth is a disgusting ploy of the middle classes.'

'I don't think that at all,' said Andie mildly. 'I just can't quite see the point of island oneupmanship.'

'It's exactly the same as musical oneupmanship,' returned Jin. 'You know, where you tell someone that the latest top-selling single is all very well but it's not actually music. And you refer them instead to something obscure by Prokofiev.'