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A Season to Remember

Written by Sheila O'Flanagan

Published by Headline Review

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Sheila
O'Flanagan
A Season
to
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First published in 2010
by HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

First published in paperback in 2011
by HEADLINE REVIEW
An imprint of HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

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ISBN 978 0 7553 7517 2

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

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recyclable products and made from wood grown in
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HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

Prologue: The Sugar Loaf Lodge I

The Sugar Loaf Lodge wasn't really a lodge at all.

It was actually a large country house, which had been built in the late seventeenth century by a minor English earl whose family had been gifted lands in County Wicklow, Ireland. The family – the Earl, his wife and their four children – spent a single summer in the house, which nestled close to the iconic Sugar Loaf mountain, before returning abruptly to England. The reason for their departure wasn't clear, but it was generally believed that one of his children had taken ill and died in Ireland, leaving both the Earl and Countess broken hearted and quite unable to return to their summer home.

When the Earl himself died a few years later, the property passed to his eldest son, who, having had a childless marriage and therefore nobody to leave it to, didn't much

care what happened to it. He rarely visited the house, and after his death it quickly fell into disrepair. Its ivy-clad walls crumbled and the large rooms were invaded by the damp Irish air, while the once carefully tended pasture-green gardens grew wildly out of control. The local people avoided it, because rumours and legends had grown up around the derelict building, including ghost stories in which the spirit of the dead child was seen wandering sadly around the ruin. According to these stories, seeing the spirit (nobody was quite sure whether it was a boy or a girl) was meant to bring bad luck, and so generally people stayed away.

The property eventually passed to the state, which had no real interest in it either. There was a brief effort to restore it in the 1970s, but it wasn't until more than thirty years later that Neil and Claire Archer borrowed far more money than they'd originally intended, renovated it and eventually opened it as an exclusive country hotel.

Their family and friends told them they were crazy. There was no real money in the leisure business, they said. Big companies got into it for tax breaks, but for the little people it was nothing but hard slog and no rewards.

'We're not trying to become multi-millionaires,' Claire told them calmly. 'We're doing this because we want to.'

‘You’re amateurs,’ said Neil’s father, a barrister who’d wanted his son to follow him into the legal profession and who felt that running a hotel was somehow beneath Neil’s abilities.

‘Gifted amateurs,’ Claire reminded him. ‘I do have a hospitality industry qualification, you know. And I managed a hotel in England for three years.’

‘Totally different,’ said Alan Archer. ‘Your entire livelihood didn’t depend on it.’

‘We’ve got the backing,’ said Claire.

‘I don’t know how,’ Alan said.

‘A good business plan,’ she told him, although the level of debt they’d taken on terrified her. But they’d come out from under it in the end, she knew. And their hotel would be the best in Ireland.

Five years after they’d embarked upon the project, the Sugar Loaf Lodge had become everything they’d intended. Large enough for guests not to feel suffocated by each other’s company, but small enough to retain a country-house warmth. With an award-winning restaurant and breathtaking spa, the Sugar Loaf Lodge was considered an oasis of peace and serenity within striking distance of the capital city. Each room was named after one of the Dublin and Wicklow mountains and was carefully decorated to reflect the ambience of an area known as the Garden of Ireland. Despite its hefty

rack rates, the hotel was almost always full, and its website was regularly updated with fulsome reviews from its guests. (Well, most of the reviews were positive; Claire had been miffed to see that some people complained about the quality of the bikes that the hotel provided for cycle trips around the countryside. She thought they were fine, but apparently the guests weren't too keen on having to work hard to negotiate the hills.)

However, what people liked most about the hotel was Neil and Claire themselves, who seemed to have an almost uncanny ability to know exactly what each guest wanted or needed before they asked for it. Extra towels or blankets or pillows were provided almost as soon as the visitor thought about it; the room temperature was regulated to each guest's individual preference; and Claire always remembered everyone's name, so that they felt personally welcome. All of this meant a steady stream of repeat bookings from visitors who claimed that the Sugar Loaf Lodge was one of the best small hotels in the world.

Claire, especially, was very pleased about this. The idea of opening the hotel had been hers and she'd been the one to persuade Neil that the location of the Lodge, nestled within the Wicklow Mountains and with uninterrupted views of the rolling hills, was absolutely perfect. She'd been the one to negotiate with the council about its restoration and about the provision of a road

to the building itself. She'd decided to engage an interior designer to re-create a look of stately grandeur, but with a homely touch. She'd spoken so passionately and persuasively to the bank manager that he was immediately convinced they would make a success of the hotel – although it was Neil's understanding of balance sheets and accounts that had ultimately swung the deal.

Sometimes Claire read stories of other hotel owners who'd tried and failed to achieve what they'd achieved, and she wondered if their own luck, which had helped them to avoid the pitfalls that had plagued those others, would hold. Neil said that the reason they'd succeeded wasn't due to luck but because as far as both of them were concerned, running the Sugar Loaf Lodge was more than a business. It was the fulfilment of a dream. And having a dream was far more important than business plans designed to squeeze every last cent out of the hotel. You made your own luck, Neil told her, and that was what they did every day.

Neil and Claire regularly turned down offers by international chains to buy the Sugar Loaf Lodge. They wanted to keep its unique identity and not lose it to corporate branding, no matter how financially attractive that option seemed. Every year they congratulated themselves on doing the right thing – even though the last bid had

given them real pause for thought. It had been a substantial amount of money and they couldn't help wondering if perhaps they would be insane to pass it up.

'Let's give it another year or two.' It was Claire who decided in the end. 'Maybe by then we'll be fed up with running a hotel anyway and we'll want to hand it over to the faceless suits.'

'You think you'll ever be tired of it?' Neil smiled at her.

'I suppose one day,' she said thoughtfully. 'But right now – I love it.'

Almost immediately after they turned the offer down a sudden surge of economic gloom led to a plunge in bookings. Claire, looking at a raft of cancellations and empty rooms, felt sick inside and wondered if their amazing run of luck had turned.

People were leaving it till the last minute to book their holidays, particularly their Christmas break. Because of its wonderful location, the Sugar Loaf Lodge was usually a popular destination for Christmas, and quite often booked up by September, but this year, even as late as the beginning of December, there were still rooms available. Neil and Claire took additional ads in the newspapers and crossed their fingers while resolving that all their guests would find their expectations surpassed. Which would hopefully mean that

when people were choosing their hotels for the future months, the Sugar Loaf would be high on their list of possible destinations. Always providing, they said anxiously to each other, that people would be booking any hotel in the future at all. They didn't even want to think further than Christmas!

It was a nerve-racking time. The banks were being unhelpful and the hotel staff, terrified at the possibility of losing their jobs, were gloomy. Claire called them all together to tell them that they would get through this crisis, and that with everyone's help the Christmas season at the Sugar Loaf Lodge would be the most successful ever. She said this in a strong, confident voice, which reassured the staff. But afterwards she locked herself in her office until her hands had stopped shaking.

Then she looked at the bank statements (normally Neil's job) and swallowed hard. It was because of her pig-headedness that they were in this situation. She'd been the one to insist that they could go it alone, that they didn't need branding or interference from a chain. She'd been the one to say that the success of the Sugar Loaf Lodge was built on the fact that it was a family-run business and that it wasn't logo-ed to within an inch of its life. Neil had agreed, but she knew he thought that they might regret turning down the latest offer.

The thing was, she didn't regret it. Not for the hotel

itself. And not for the money that they would have made out of it. Claire wasn't someone for whom money was all that important. But she regretted it bitterly for the staff. Because unless they filled all the rooms at Christmas, and unless people spent a lot more money than they had done in the last six months, all her brave words about getting through the bad patch together would be nothing more than that – brave words with nothing to back them up. And the people who'd worked so hard for her because they trusted her and Neil to do what was best would find themselves out of work.

She looked at the bookings and felt the sick feeling again. Normally by now they were turning people away, rather than wishing that they would call. It was all going terribly wrong. And it was all her fault.

Neil was anxious too. He knew, even better than Claire, how precarious the business was. People didn't realise how quickly things could turn. There had been a time when it seemed that they could do no wrong, when people would book weekends away without even thinking about it. These days they would ring up and ask what was included and try to negotiate the price of the room or the visits to the spa or even the cost of the meals in the restaurant. Neil knew that he and Claire had pared everything to the bone, but they couldn't do anything more without compromising the hotel. It was a luxury

hotel, after all. Which meant that you had to pay more. The thing was that right now, nobody wanted to pay for luxury. They either couldn't afford to or they wanted it on the cheap. And it was trying to find the balance between the two that was proving so difficult for them.

'What will we do?' Claire looked anxiously at Neil as they went through the bookings together. 'We're going to lose money if we don't get more people into the restaurant every night and if we're not booked up in the next week or so.'

'I know,' said Neil.

'I'm so sorry.' She started to cry. 'I thought that we had it sussed. I thought that we were the best hoteliers in the country and that we knew what people wanted. I thought we knew better than the chains and that's why I wanted to keep the hotel for ourselves. But I was wrong.'

'No you weren't,' said Neil as he put his arms around her. 'You were absolutely right. The Sugar Loaf Lodge is one of the best hotels in the country and we're good at knowing what people want and we'll give everyone who comes here the very best Christmas they've ever had.'

'And even if we do all that . . .' Claire looked at him anxiously. 'We could still end up up shit creek without a paddle.'

‘All we have to do is to get through this,’ said Neil. ‘Anyone can run a business in the good times. Anyone can seem like a genius when the going is easy. Tough times sort out the men from the boys. And we’re tough, Claire. You know we are.’

‘I thought I was,’ she said. ‘Now I’m not so sure.’

‘Of course you are.’ He grinned at her and pulled her closer. ‘Who was it who marched into the council offices and demanded they re-route the water pipes? Who was it who dealt with the Amazon forest of paper-work they sent us? Who was it who managed to get this hotel open for business on the scheduled day even though nobody said it could be done?’

‘They were things I could deal with,’ she said disconsolately. ‘People wanted to come to the hotel then. But now . . . everyone’s hoarding their money and I can’t blame them. If we had any of our own, I’d hoard it myself.’

From the first day they’d started work on the hotel, Claire had felt attached to it in a way that she couldn’t quite understand. She felt as though it was more than just a pile of bricks and mortar; as though it had a living, breathing soul. She never said this to anyone else because she knew they’d think she was a bit deranged. Or fanciful. She couldn’t help feeling as though the Lodge itself watched over them, like a

guardian angel. And she felt as though they watched over it in return. But now she laughed bitterly at herself for being so foolish.

‘You’re not foolish.’ The voice seemed to come from right behind her.

‘What?’ She spun around in the chair, startled. There was nobody there. God almighty, she thought, I’m cracking up under the strain. I’m starting to hear things. I suppose I should be grateful I’m not seeing things too.

‘Everything will be fine,’ said the voice.

Claire wondered if her subconscious was talking to her, trying to reassure her.

‘This is only one year,’ the voice said. ‘The house has been here for hundreds. You’ll get over it.’

She supposed her subconscious was right. But one bad year could break them. That was the problem.

‘You’re strong,’ said the voice. ‘You’ll get through it. You won’t let one bad season get you down.’

It was funny, thought Claire, how it was that all of the good times were so overwhelmed by the bad times. When the hotel was doing well and making money, they simply accepted that as a fair return. But when things were going badly, they felt utterly despondent. And even though they knew that it wasn’t entirely their fault, they still wished they could have done things differently.

‘We all wish that,’ said the voice inside her head, and Claire could hear her own regret in it. ‘Every day we wish we’d done things better. Or not done something at all! But we have to live with how things are, not how we want them to be.’

Claire smiled. Her subconscious was right. Things were the way they were. She and Neil would live with it. And regardless of how many people stayed at the hotel for Christmas, she’d make sure that they had a superb time. So that if – when – things got better, they’d remember the Sugar Loaf Lodge and they’d want to return.

‘All the same,’ she said out loud to herself, ‘it would be just great if we could fill those empty rooms.’

She was looking at stock lists when the phone rang.

‘Sugar Loaf Lodge,’ she said in her most welcoming voice. ‘How can I help you?’

‘Hello,’ said the female caller. ‘I’m enquiring about rooms. I’m wondering do you have any availability for Christmas this year?’

‘Yes.’ Claire’s heart leapt hopefully. ‘We have a two-night package if you’d like that.’

‘Oh good,’ said the woman. ‘I want to book some for our family. There’s quite a few of us. I’m hoping you can fit us all in.’

Claire felt a warmth envelop her as she made the booking, and afterwards she replaced the receiver on

the phone and sighed with relief. One phone call had made a difference. Four rooms. Just like that. She was still smiling when the phone rang again.

‘Sugar Loaf Lodge,’ she repeated. ‘How can I help you?’

‘I know it’s probably a bit late,’ said the male voice, ‘but do you have any rooms left over Christmas?’

Early on Christmas Eve morning, while the staff were getting ready for breakfast, Neil walked into the traditionally decorated lounge with its panoramic views of the frosty countryside and allowed himself a small sigh of relief. It hadn’t been until the last possible moment that the final available room had been booked. But it had. And so he and Claire could relax a bit. Not that there could be any proper relaxing until Christmas and New Year was over. But at least they had their full house.

At least it hadn’t all come crashing down on them.

All they had to do now was make it work for the guests. And they absolutely knew how to do that. It was what they were good at.

‘Everything OK?’ Claire joined him at the window.

‘Perfect,’ he said.

They stood side by side in silence. He slid his arm around her waist.

‘Ready?’ he asked softly.

She took a deep breath. ‘Ready,’ she said.

He kissed her quickly on the cheek. And they walked hand in hand through the lobby of their hotel, both determined that this would be the most memorable Christmas ever at the Sugar Loaf Lodge.