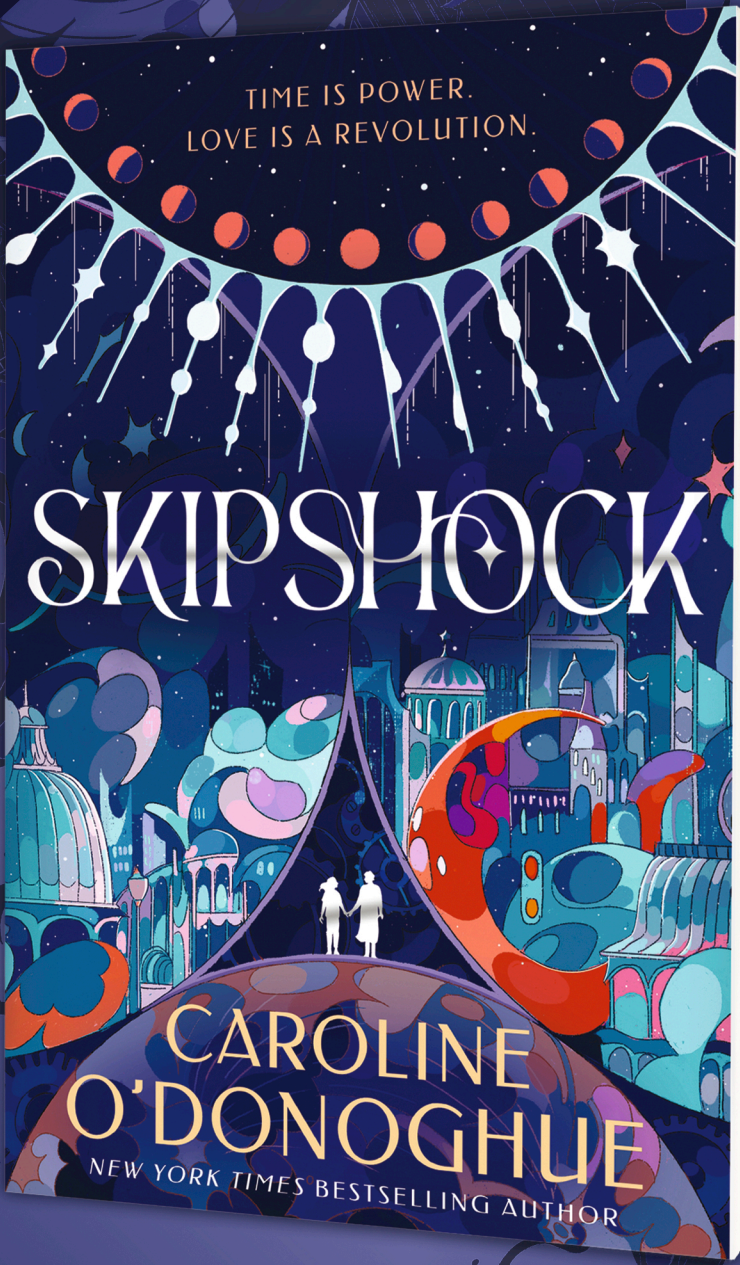
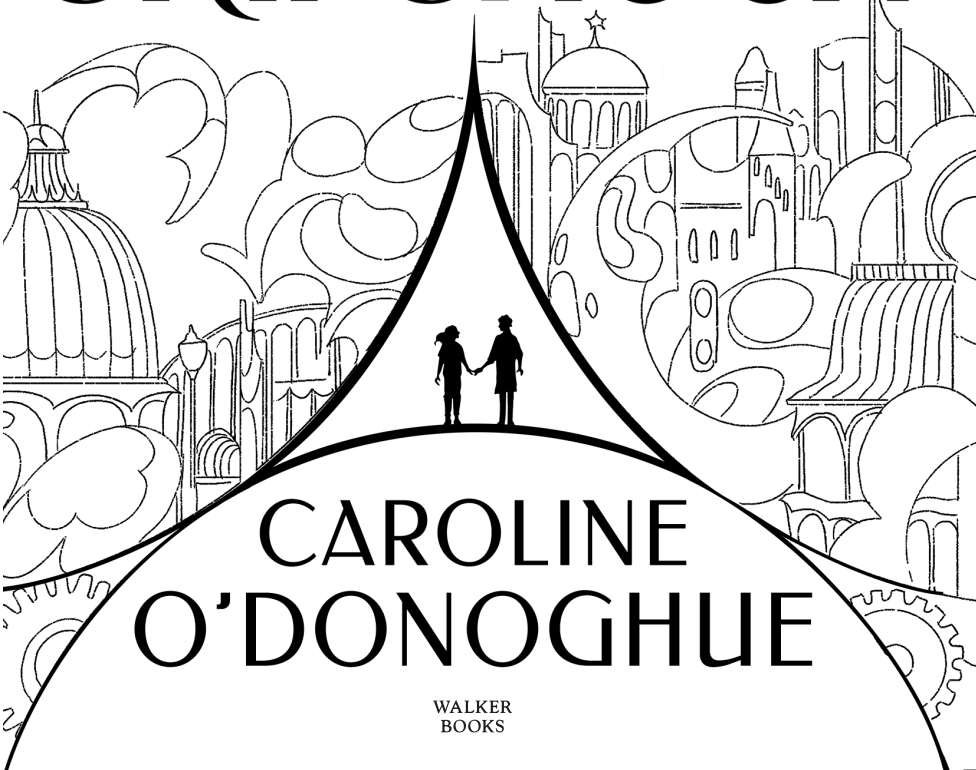
CHAPTER SAMPLER



A WALKER BOOK PROOF

SKIPSHOCK



CAROLINE O'DONOGHUE

WALKER BOOKS

First published in the UK 2025 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

EU Authorized Representative: HackettFlynn Ltd, 36 Cloch Choirneal, Balrothery, Co. Dublin, K32 C942, Ireland. EU@walkerpublishinggroup.com

This book has been typeset in Bembo Infant MT Std

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5295-0796-6

www.walker.co.uk

To my two favourite salesmen.
Natasha Hodgson, who I crossed worlds to meet –
And my mother, for telling me to go.

PROLOGUE

MOON

The most common response I get when I tell people what I do for a living is: I couldn't do a job like that. What they mean is they *wouldn't* do a job like this. Every so often a new gruesome story circulates about salesmen, and what travelling between time speeds does to one's physical health.

We are twice as likely to be alcoholics, three times as likely to die by suicide, and infinitely more likely to disappear without anyone caring at all.

But all I ever say is – you're right. You *couldn't* do a job like this. You couldn't haggle in a language that you don't speak. You couldn't fall asleep anywhere, training your body to relish fifteen-minute-long seated naps in the middle of a busy market square. And you couldn't wake up the way we do.

Salesmen wake up like dogs. Snoring one second, barking at a stranger the next.

I wake up on the train. Somewhere between Crader and New Davia I feel the carriage screech against a tunnel, and have the slightly spectral sensation of knowing – even with my eyes closed – that I am being watched. The tangled gari beads are pressed between the seat and the nape of my neck, leaving light indents in my skin.

"Hello," I say, eyes shuttering open. Everything about the stranger tells me she's in the wrong place. First of all, she's a *she*. You rarely get women travellers these days, unless they've got a visa to work a special trade, and she looks too young and too out of sorts for that to be the case. Every detail uncovers a new question. Questions like: why is she wearing summer clothes on a train heading this far west? Why is she wearing a man's watch that doesn't fit her wrist? I squint at the glint of light catching the clock's face. It's heavy. Expensive. Silver.

"Hello," she responds anxiously. The longer I look at her, the more her strangeness unfurls like new petals. Frantic green eyes glancing worriedly down at an orange slip, a paper rectangle no bigger than her palm. "You're in my seat."

I gesture around the empty train carriage, arms wide with emphasis. Evidencing that there are quite a few seats free, and it's rather churlish of her to be protective of this one.

"There is no *my* seat," I reply. "This is the North-west quad – no assigned seating. Who are you?"

She says nothing. Just shows me her orange rectangle, creased in her nervous hand. I take it from her, and read it aloud like I've been handed a story written by a small and imaginative child.

"13.05 single," I read. "Cork Kent to Dublin Heuston."

She looks at me expectantly. "Am I near?" she asks, the hope draining from her speech. "Am I near Dublin?"

I hand the bright stub back to her. I've never heard of where she's from or where she's going to. I choose not to share this information. Salesmen are supposed to know about everywhere. The licensing tests are rigorous. They give you a big empty train map to mark with every world station, and it's ninety per cent pass-fail. They want to make sure you know every world, so there's less plausible deniability if they catch you in the wrong

one with the wrong visa. Perhaps she's a plant. A test. A mole. Some new plan of Semper's, designed to trial our memories, our sympathies, and our resistance to a pretty face.

Pretty face comes to me unbidden, instinctive, the way "sleep tight" might follow a softly uttered "goodnight". It presents itself to me in a childish way, because even though she's about the same age as me, she reminds me of childhood. The wild hair – red, but nowhere near a natural colour. The big eyes. The willingness to show fear to a stranger.

Fear. It's something I've tried to grow beyond. I'm not an idiot, and I don't think of myself as superhuman. I'm victim to the same thoughts and emotions as anyone else. But I do think that in almost all cases you can subdivide large emotions into smaller ones – fear into anxiety, love into affection, empathy into sympathy – therefore protecting yourself from those who will reliably take advantage. In the way insects will cloak themselves to look like their surroundings, I will respond blandly in the hope that blandness will cover me and that peace will follow.

It is only very traumatized people, Ves once told me, who confuse stasis for peace.

This person, meanwhile. This person is making no secret of her feelings. She's completely animated by fear, and, for a few seconds, I simply stare at her. Her uneasy eyes flitting all around the carriage. Her breath running short. Fingers fidgeting at her hair, then her scalp, then at the cuticles on her other hand.

"Why don't you sit down?" I suggest.

We sit, uneasily, in a moment of mutual study. Now that she's across from me, her eyes level with mine, I can feel her digesting my appearance. To be fair to her, it's a lot to take in. The crescent moon that starts above my left eyebrow and hugs around my cheekbone is far bigger than most salesmen's tattoos,

its largeness in direct proportion to how much they didn't want to give a licence to a Lunati boy. They dug deeply, sharply, and despite their insistence on professionalism and neutrality, with some spite. The scar was violent red in the beginning. Now, six years on, it has smoothed to a papery beige. I watch her, watching me. She forgets her panic for a second because she is wondering how a person could end up with a scar that is so aggressive, yet so precise.

"The answer is yes," I say. Eager, for some reason, to get these private thoughts of hers into the open. "It did hurt, and yes, I was awake. And yes, I gave my permission."

She laughs then, embarrassment briefly overriding terror. "Sorry," she says. "I was staring, wasn't I?"

"Oh, not so much that anyone would notice."

There is a brief trading of apologetic smiles, and then a silence.

Before we continue, I want to say something about that trade and that silence, because it happened so quickly, and no one was there to see it. Among salesmen, there is a practice known as scooping. This means that a salesman "scoops" a bunch of his old inventory into a handkerchief for you at a low price, and while most of it will be useless or cheap or out of date, there will always be something strangely valuable in there. A little gem, or a rare coin, or a kind of glass that you didn't think they made any more. Maybe the salesman didn't realize he was giving it to you. Maybe he holds you in higher esteem than you originally thought.

That's what it was like with her, during that first train journey. A gemstone was briefly uncovered in silence.

She scooped me up, is what I'm saying. Or maybe it was the

other way around. The face and the eyes and all the silly red hair. Not red like fire. Red like rust. Red like metal. Red like a chemical spill.

The moment passes. She remembers that she has no idea where she is, and her breath starts coming short. She lays the palm of her hand across her chest, as though trying to block her own heart from escaping.

"My name is Moon," I say at last. "And I think you're in the wrong place."

PART ONE

NEW DAVIA

1

MARGO

The school pushed for a therapist.

Donna-Anne agreed to it, not because she believed in therapy, but because she wanted to impress upon Margo how serious the matter had become. She had, after all, sold the watch. And not just any watch. *Richard's* watch.

Donna-Anne said it as though Margo had stolen from her mother directly. As if she had purposefully severed her mother's last remaining tie, and only out of spite. But Donna-Anne had many things, including their house, to remember Richard by. Margo only had the watch. It was, technically speaking, hers to sell.

The therapist suggested that Margo had depression. The therapist implied that it was something that was always cooking inside of Margo, even before the crash. That death had stirred up a nature that was naturally morose. Old school reports were summoned and then reviewed. Much was made of comments over her primary school years.

Margo is content in her own company, read one.

Margo often seems a little lost during group projects, came another.

And – this one felt slightly cruel, on review – *Margo has not left much of an impression on the other girls.*

He suggested that there was a link between this early Margo and the Margo who, aged sixteen, sold her dead father's watch, dyed her hair metallic red, and attempted to run away from home. He thought it was deeper than simply having a dead dad. He said that somewhere down the line, and after more meetings, drugs might be helpful. For the moment, he said, he could recommend breathing exercises.

Donna-Anne took her daughter and left the therapist's office.

There was nothing, Donna said, actually *wrong* with Margo. If anyone was to blame, it was Donna herself for allowing the leash to get too long. She had left her daughter to her own devices and it had led to the blossoming of a criminal. The whole thing had gone beyond her mother's capabilities. It was time for a change. It was time for boarding school.

(They got the watch back, of course. The pawn shop owner, a Cash4Gold that took silver too, had called Donna-Anne after he realized that the third hand only worked when you pushed the timer. The inscription – *Richard Madden III* – made its owner easy to track down. Small towns don't forget plane crashes in a hurry, much less their victims.)

And this is how we find Margo, in the moments before she fell through worlds. A sixteen-year-old failed runaway with a watch and unsuitable clothing. Six days off her next birthday, and on a train from Cork to Dublin.

Thirsty.

So, so thirsty. The summer had arrived late in Ireland, as it almost always does, with hot weather such a rarity that no one knew how to protect against it. She did not bring sunglasses for the immense glare of light through the window. She had not brought her water bottle. Her only snack was a sweating ham sandwich, gluey with heat. She picked at the

sandwich and got thirstier by the minute.

The train screeched to a halt inside a blackened tunnel. She waited a moment. A voice came over the tannoy, a fuzz of static obscuring the driver's words. Something was broken. He repeated himself, and Margo listened closely. She understood nothing. Then, silence.

When she had boarded in Cork there had been a smattering of other travellers in the carriage with her. But they had all got off in Mallow, and now she was en route to Dublin alone. She became uneasy. It felt like being strapped into a broken roller coaster, wondering whether her terror was normal or simply part of the ticketed experience.

The open windows, which had been the carriage's only air conditioning, let in nothing but dead heat and a dank earthy smell. There was a faint whiff of piss, and she wondered whether people sheltered in these tunnels at night.

As the darkness pushed in on the train and the tannoy continued to express garbled, apologetic sentiments, Margo felt her throat grind with anxiety. There was nothing really scary at all happening, she told herself. She was just dehydrated. This was why she had a headache. This was why she was panicking. There was a shop somewhere on board. There had to be. She needed water. She got out of her chair, keeping her hands on the seat headrests in case the train suddenly started moving again.

As Margo moved through one empty carriage after another, there was a mounting sense that she was in a problem that Coke Zero could not solve.

Eventually, she came to a shuttered counter that usually sold snacks and drinks. Through the shutters she could see cans winking at her. Margo threaded her fingers mournfully through the gaps, like a mother visiting her son in prison. She looked

down at her silver watch, slung low over her palm, and reasoned that she would sell it all over again for a single can.

She was alone on a broken train. A wild sadness rushed through her, not for the situation itself, but because of how much this moment felt like all the ones that had led to it. She had been a clean and well-running thing for so much of her life. She was an only child, and not the kind who had lots of cousins and neighbours to compensate. Their family was a strange and quiet one. Love was gained through achievement and maintained through behaving pleasantly. She had been a good student and she had some friends, despite what those early school reports had implied.

Then her father died. Her habitual insomnia and moody periods became her permanent companions. She was sleep-starved and in shock. She stopped talking to everyone, stopped going to school, and eventually her friends stopped calling. Life was too hard to put up with for a moment longer, so she decided to run away. She didn't get far. Boarding school was meant to be the compromise. The fresh start.

Yet here she was: stuck, clouded with menace, and alone. No fresh start, and no bad dye job, could change that. She was silly for thinking it could.

The train started moving again. There was a sharp, screeching noise that sounded like metal on metal, and she knew the train was fighting hard against the darkness. Before she even had time to apply this metaphor to herself, the compartment shook and Margo was thrown by the momentum. She steadied herself, one arm clutching furiously to the wall. As the train moved faster and faster, she inched her way to the rubbery airlock between carriage doors.

In the airlock, she started to feel sick. It suddenly felt as though all her internal organs were crowding together and

looking to escape through her neck. Would she vomit? *Here?* On Iarnród Éireann property? Margo closed her eyes and remembered Cork, where everyone got the bus everywhere. She could no longer keep her balance by holding on to the wall, and instead curled into a ball on the floor, her eye sockets resting on both knees.

As the airlock rocked and screeched, Margo wondered if this was what it felt like to die. She pushed the timer on her father's watch, the thin hand that only ticked for sixty seconds and stopped again. She practised the breathing lessons the therapist had taught her. Timing her breaths on ten-second intervals, watching the third hand strike two, then four, then six. Breathing in. Breathing out.

And when she opened her eyes again, the train had changed completely.

Everything was wooden. The industrial plastics had been replaced by dull mahogany. The sticky, piss-soaked air had thinned. It was suddenly cool, like a window was open and letting in a chilly winter. Margo rubbed at her arms in her thin denim jacket, her cheap summer dress soaked with sweat.

She stumbled back to her seat, the carriage still empty. Although not, she suspected, because passengers had changed for Mallow. The itchy seat coverings that her legs had prickled against just moments before were now a deep red velvet, battered and showing stuffing. Her legs wobbled as she walked.

But one other thing, she realized, had changed.

She wasn't alone any more.

A figure, a man, was asleep with his head against the window. His suit jacket was draped over him like a blanket, and his shoes – a pair of dark, battered brogues – were on the seat in front of him.

Her seat.

She could sit somewhere else. There was, after all, no one else on board. But to sacrifice 57B at this point was to let go of reality. She needed to talk to someone. Anyone. A grown-up. She watched him, her gaze packed with need, wondering if that alone was enough to wake him up.

His grey eyes opened quickly and fell from her hair to her feet, taking detailed mental notes on each part of her. Margo could do nothing but stare back.

He was not, as it turned out, a grown-up.

What age he was exactly, she couldn't tell. Every element of his appearance both proved and contradicted the idea of maturity. His mess of thick brown hair said *boy*; the grey streaks in it said *man*. His quick, mischievous smile was definitely *boy*; his dark suit was absolutely *man*.

The one thing about him that didn't figure into the algebra of how old he was, was the tattoo that started at his temple and arched around his left eye. The tattoo was the thinnest sliver of a crescent moon.

"Hello," he said at last.

Caroline O'Donoghue is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling YA fantasy series *All Our Hidden Gifts* as well as several highly-acclaimed novel for adults, including her most recent *The Rachel Incident*. She has written for *The Times* and *The Guardian*, and is the host of an award-winning podcast, Sentimental Garbage. She was born in Ireland and lives in London.