THE BOOKSHOP LADIES

ALSO BY FAITH HOGAN

My Husband's Wives
Secrets We Keep
The Girl I Used to Know
What Happened to Us?
The Place We Call Home
The Ladies' Midnight Swimming Club
The Gin Sisters' Promise
On the First Day of Christmas
The Guest House by the Sea

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FAITH HOGAN



An Aria Book

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To the booksellers in shops, in marketing, in publicity and those who cheerfully champion my books in reviews, blogs and by word of mouth – I am so much more grateful than I can say – thank you!

All shall be well,
And all shall be well,
And all manner of thing shall be well.

Julian of Norwich

Prologue

Joy was so distracted by the fog and thoughts of the evening past that she forgot to remind the taxi driver to take a right for Rue de Penthièvre. They had missed the turn-off for their flat. If it wasn't for Yves, they might have gone on for miles before she noticed. Thankfully, the driver turned down a side street. Soon they were back on route again. Thickening fog forced her to squint and her eyes fought hard to pick out familiar city shapes. Usually, along here, she would gaze up towards Montmarte. Even after all these years, it took her breath away, illuminated and brooding above the city. In spite of her French tailoring it seemed, at heart, she would always be an American enthralled with this city. Tonight silver mist cloaked the zinc roofs masking their familiar scaffolding to the dramatic backdrop of the cathedral. Overhead, the old street lamps loomed as if strung directly from the clouds. From their apartment, she knew that even the closest terracotta tiles would be invisible to her tonight. On nights like this, Paris had a particularly strange mystery and promise about it. Or perhaps it was just tonight. This evening's party had felt as if they were standing on the threshold of a fresh chapter. She and Yves were about to begin a new journey together now that he had retired from the career that had been his great passion in life – except for her, of course.

Tonight was too dark for views of anything beyond a few feet before the headlights on the narrow street.

'It was a wonderful night,' Yves murmured next to her.

'It was,' she agreed, but silently, just wished she was at home in their apartment, sinking into the deep tapestry sofa that she had picked up in a flea market when she was young enough to care more for other people's history than her own. Thank goodness she'd thought to leave the heating on. 'Congratulations, it was the perfect retirement party.' She reached across and squeezed his hand. He felt strangely cold and she moved closer to him. They would be home soon, safe and content in their comfortable apartment.

'Hard to believe that's it, really,' he said softly and she knew that, unlike with her little job as a marketing and publicity consultant, he was retiring from a career that was not only very lucrative but a lifelong obsession. His retirement party had been held in the smart gallery he'd opened many years earlier, just as he was starting out to make a name for himself in the Parisian art world. But the gallery was only a fraction of his career. Yves Bachand, her darling husband, had spent most of his life importing and exporting exquisite pieces of art and discovering new talent. He had helped many artists who might not otherwise have an opportunity to have their work exhibited to a wide appreciative audience. Yves had plucked too many struggling artists to count from obscurity and made their careers both lauded and financially viable. Tonight's retirement party had been a who's who of not just the French art world but the international art world in which he was a respected figure.

Joy was so proud of him and she couldn't help smiling because it was all so different to her own retirement party. A lacklustre speech by the CEO accompanied by pâté on crackers (she objected to foie gras and, since most of her colleagues were on a crusade of some sort, she was far from alone in her opposition). The white wine was warm but she had been surrounded by colleagues who she counted as friends. By comparison, Yves's 'do' had Bollinger flowing like spring rain in Seattle. The hors d'oeuvres were divine; they defied her to pick apart exactly what

was in them, their complexity on the palate a fine and delicate mix of the best ingredients. The speeches were witty with lots of in-jokes that she wasn't part of, but Yves had squeezed her hand and thanked her profusely when it was his turn to say a few words. God, how she adored him. The years they had spent together had whizzed by too fast. Like any couple, sure, they'd had ups and downs but from the moment she met him, she couldn't imagine life without him. Even at their lowest ebb, after four miscarriages and a baby boy who only just made it into the world before fading away again, she had Yves, by her side, carrying her through. She was looking forward to this next phase of their lives together. She glanced across at him and he smiled at her.

'What do you say, when we get home, I pour us two large brandies and we sit for a while watching the fog make the city disappear?' Their apartment had views across the terracotta rooftops of Paris. In the distance you could see the top of the Eiffel Tower, just the tip, but it confirmed for Joy that she was here, in France. It was a world away from the Midwest where she'd grown up. She'd left the States after her mother passed away – it had only ever been the two of them. There was nothing to take her back there now. It sure was a long way from Ely, Minnesota, to Paris, but Joy felt as French these days as she felt American. Home was a two-bedroom flat with a cluttered office and a large dining room for entertaining. The bedroom space might be modest, but it had been theirs for as long as they had been married and she loved its old-fashioned charm, with doorways that were too tall, intricate grand covings and an original parquet floor that shone like honey glaze in the morning sunlight. They knew most of the neighbours, mainly couples, like themselves, nearing retirement having finally emptied nests; they regarded newcomers with wariness. 'We can pretend we are the only people in the city!' He smiled because when she looked out of the car window, she could hardly see beyond where the headlights shone on the road.

'That sounds perfect.' They had both been looking forward to the day when they were retired. Strictly speaking, she was not due to retire for a few more years, but Yves had easily convinced her. They could afford it, so why not enjoy a few years while they were still healthy and strong enough to see a bit of life. Driving on for a little longer in silence, Joy thought it one of those evenings that she would always remember, whizzing through the deserted Paris streets, towards a new phase of their lives together. She had just glanced at him, sharing something unspoken, as if they were both wrapped up in a shawl of absolute contentment, when she heard the driver gasp. She turned, but not fast enough to see the dim blurred lights of an oncoming car speed towards them. Too late. The driver had run a red. And they were careering around the junction, as if they were skaters on ice; the moment was so slow, playing out like a demented lullaby.

Joy didn't know what happened next, but she felt her whole body lifted in the seat, hurled forward and then brutally pinned back. She reached out, grabbed the headrest in front, managing to straighten up, for just one vital second. It all happened so quickly, later she would wonder did they say anything to each other, did they try to warn each other to look out. It was so fast and yet the impact was grotesquely measured. Horrified, she watched as the Renault jammed into the side of the car. Yves's side. The crash was deafening, she remembered that, or maybe, later she would just believe it.

'No.' She screamed, because somewhere in the back of her brain, she knew it was the thing to do, but no amount of screaming would help them to escape the impact. She saw Yves, his eyes widened and then he was thrust sideways, behind her. She was somehow sitting on the edge of the seat, clutching the front passenger seat for balance. The car spun. Again. Again. Again. The shop fronts in near darkness seemed to pass her by repeatedly, as if she was on a monstrous carousel.

'Are you both okay?' the driver was shouting. She heard the click as he unfastened his safety belt, the metal sound echoing in

the chilling stillness. He was kneeling now, peering into the back, trying to make out the tangle of his passengers.

'My husband, Yves, he was on the…' Joy couldn't think of the word. She knew it was the side of impact, but it felt as if all useful language, anything coherent, had slipped from her mind. 'Call for help,' she couldn't even be sure if the taxi driver had heard her, because suddenly her ears began to ring so piercingly, she might as well have been sitting in the bell tower in Notre Dame and it would be quieter on the hour.

'Humph.' Yves made a strange sound, but Joy was so intent on trying to extricate herself from the tangle of the seatbelt that the noise didn't fully register until she heard what sounded like a series of frothy gurgles next to her.

'Yves,' she screamed. He was choking. *Was he choking?* Joy scrabbled at his neck. She managed to dig behind his back to click open both seatbelts. She fell forward with a painful thud when the tension was broken, then twisted in the tiny space between the seats to face him. Yves was staring straight ahead; his eyes wide in their sockets, his hand pulled up uncomfortably to his chest.

'Oh my God.' She knew, immediately, he wasn't choking. It was worse than that, much worse. He was having a heart attack. Sweat rolled down his face; even in the darkness of the car she could see filmy beads glistening on his forehead and running down his cheeks. Milliseconds ticked by like centuries. She was acutely aware of her own breath, of her heart hammering in her chest, of her blood thrashing so hard through her veins it felt as if it might erupt. Mount Vesuvius, right here in this deathly quiet street in Paris.

Somewhere in the distance she heard a siren, was it coming here? Please, let help be coming. 'Call an ambulance, my husband is not well.' This time she screamed at the driver. Even though they were only a few hundred metres from the apartment, it felt as if they might as well be a million miles away from anywhere. She reached across, tried to undo the bow tie Yves had knotted

so expertly before they left for the party, but everything in the back of the car was restricting. She couldn't prise it open, her fingers were sweaty and shaking and she fumbled with it, until he raised a hand to push her away. In desperation, she pulled open the buttons on his shirt.

'It's okay darling. Everything is going to be just fine. Don't worry.' But he was fading away from her, his eyes were panicked, darting left and right. His breathing, chaotic only moments ago, had quietened so much that she held her own breath as if by doing so she could help him stay with her.

'Oh my darling.' She wanted to cry it out. Then she spotted his mobile phone down in the footwell. She grabbed it, dialled the emergency services. It felt as if it was taking forever to explain. She wanted to shout, *listen, we don't have much time*. But she didn't, she'd never been *that* sort of American, now for once, she wished she was. Instead, she heard her voice answer one question after another, as if she had all the time in the world.

'It won't be long,' the voice finally said and, through the fog, Joy thought she heard another siren in the distance, but of course, it couldn't be. She tried to make Yves more comfortable, moving as if she were a marionette, controlled by some unfeeling puppeteer.

He was dying. She knew it, with some part of her brain that had not quite engaged with what was happening, knew on some cold logical level, that Yves was leaving her now.

'Darling. Darling. I'm just going to…' She could give him mouth to mouth. ABC. Wasn't that what they'd learned on the first aid course they had attended all those years ago? Airways. Breathing. Circulation. But it was impossible in this cramped space.

She'd managed to open his tie by the time the ambulance arrived. Too little; too late. She was sure of it. He had not said a word for almost fifteen minutes; it was an age since she had seen his chest rise or heard his shaky breath.

'Joy,' he whispered when they placed him on the stretcher.

'Shh, don't talk. Not now, wait until you're stronger.' She started to cry. She thought he was gone already, too shocked to register fully what it all meant.

'I have to tell you…' he gasped.

'It's okay. Don't say anything now, whatever it is; tell me when we get to the hospital.'

'It's… I'm so sorry. I…' tears trickled down his cheeks. The ambulance attendant shook her head, as if to say, don't worry, this is normal. Or at least, Joy hoped that was what she meant.

'Stop, there's nothing to be sorry for, it was a wonderful night and we have good times ahead of us, this is just…' A blip? Wasn't that what young people said now? A blip – except she knew this was no small interruption to their plans. *Please, don't let it be the end.*

'No. You don't understand.' He gasped for breath and she willed him to stop. To just stop talking and concentrate on getting better, nothing was more important than that. She wanted to fling herself across him, right there, in the back of the ambulance, but there were so many lines running from his open shirt, measuring his very life force. And then, she wiped the tears from her eyes.

'It's fine. Everything is going to be fine, it really is,' she said, as much for herself as for Yves.

'No, Monsieur Bachand, please, you must put this oxygen mask on, it will help you breathe and…' The EMT was placing the mask between them, pulling the elastic out so it would not catch in his hair.

'This is important, I've wanted to tell you for so long, but I never did.' He placed his hand up in front of the mask. '*I have a daughter…*'

1

Robyn Tessier rubbed her dry eyes. If only there was a market for dust and cobwebs, she'd be a millionaire already. They'd been organising the bookshop for days now when she caught sight of her reflection in the old-fashioned mirror that had once hung in her uncle's bakery. Even in the antique glass, she looked faded, her green eyes dulled by the shadows around them, her complexion pale – who ever said pale was interesting was having a joke, she reckoned. She needed a long hot shower. Her white T-shirt was covered in book dust, even her fine blonde hair seemed to have dulled to a waxy yellow thanks to teeming layers of cobwebs in every corner of the old shop.

'Hey, stop slacking,' Kian pushed through the door that led from the flat upstairs.

And this was why, Robyn knew, she loved Kian Lawson. He was standing, balancing a box of books in one hand and two large mugs of tea in the other. His dark hair was falling into his eyes and he had a silly grin on his face. It was hard to believe he had a PhD in early German philosophy! They were both tired. It had been a long day, trying to make sense of a system that had maybe meant something to dear old Douglas Howard once. Now, what with the thorough cleaning she'd had to give the place and the addition of new shelves in what had once been Douglas's kitchenette, well, chaos was a kind word.

'It won't take us that long, come on, Robyn,' he wheedled,

although he needn't have bothered, she'd do anything to get the place off the ground. The bookshop. Her own business, right here in Ballycove. Since she'd taken it on, a nervous panic seemed to seep into her consciousness too often to be ignored. She was scared and maybe Kian was the only one who knew it. He was definitely the only person to whom she could admit it.

'But what if…'

'Come on, there's no point in what ifs now! You've said you're opening this place in a week. It's what you've always wanted to do and, if it kills me, you're opening it in a week's time. Now, your choice, are we putting these books on the shelves or shall we just leave them stacked up in the boxes?' He was making fun of her now, but at least it made her smile. He made her feel safe; he'd always made her feel safe.

The boxes were everywhere, stacked one on top of the other, endless cubes of cardboard filled with second-hand books bought from Douglas Howard's niece. Robyn's great-uncle Albie had been cross, thought she'd paid far too much, but what was a shop without stock? If she went out to buy new stock, she'd have had to spend ten times more.

'*A stóirín*, Robyn,' her great-uncle had said to her gently, 'if people didn't buy them in all the years that Douglas had them stored up in that little shop, what on earth makes you think they'll buy them now?'

'I won't be selling them just to passers-by in Ballycove, Albie, that's the difference.' And it was true. 'Books aren't like pastries. They don't have a sell-by date and I can post a book off to the other side of the world so long as the customer pays for packaging.'

Of course, she had Kian with his love of quirky hard-to-track-down books, to thank for that too. It was Kian who had introduced her to the world of online sales for special interest books. Really, you could say it was down to Kian that she might have some chance of making a living at the one thing she'd pinned her hopes on.

'True, it'd be hard to do that with my brown soda loaf,' and he scratched his head, as if the world was passing him by too quickly, although there was nothing slow about her uncle Albie.

'Where do you want me to put this?' Kian broke into her thoughts and somehow managed to quell the panic rising up in her at the thoughts of opening day looming so close now.

'Um, let's see, trains, planes and automobiles? I thought maybe we'd put everything to do with transport into the little sitting room at the back. What do you think?' She had the idea that maybe, if she created separate areas of interest, maybe she could make something of the place on social media. The shop floor was big, but it was broken into a series of nooks and crannies which really leant themselves to doing something very special. Instagram and TikTok loved a gimmick, something cute, something eye-catching. The place, she had decided, would be her shop window. She was much better at dealing with people online than in real life anyway; why not make the most of it?

'Good idea, so if I pick up every book with a transport theme and drop it in there, that's going to be quite a bit sorted.' He was being optimistic.

'I thought a children's section just inside the door.' There were so many children's books, some of them so old probably no one would want them, but still, the bookworm in her couldn't bear not to put them on a shelf. 'I can make a bit of a thing of new books then in the window, when I…'

That was a bit off; she knew she'd have to start turning over a profit before she could even begin to think of ordering in the latest bestsellers. They set to work quietly, each lost in the sorting and carrying of books. She was lucky to have Kian here, and she wondered, as she so often did over the years, why he kept coming back. After all, he worked in a university where there would be no shortage of people to spend time with – surely, there must be other friends he could be catching up with? He would have colleagues, too, and doubtless the college bars would be filled with people – well, girls, not that much younger than her,

with whom he could have spent every other weekend instead of coming down to help her.

'I love coming here,' he said when she mentioned it to him later. 'I'm hoping you'll make me a partner, actually. I could definitely do with a share of the profits.' He was joking. He had managed to get his dream job a few months earlier, lecturing in one of the most prestigious philosophy programmes in the country. The department thought he was the second coming when it came to the early German thinkers.

'So, I'd do all the work and you'll end up with the Porsche?' No one was less likely to want a sports car than Kian. 'Hmph, I don't think so – for now, we'll call it an internship, or maybe your goodwill hours!' She laughed as he held up a book with a photograph of an old Model T on the cover.

'Come on, it's time to feed me,' he said and he pulled her up from the floor. She sprang up like a gymnast, the physical work of the last few weeks had been good for her. Although she ached, perversely she'd never felt fitter or happier. 'Actually, maybe on second thoughts, let's get a takeaway, yes?' he was pulling her to the door of the shop.

Outside, night had drawn in and the streets glistened with damp from rain that she hadn't heard falling. Two doors down, someone was working on the little shop that had once been a fishmonger. It had closed years ago, when Robyn was still a kid, left to gather cobwebs and cracks.

'It looks like a coffee shop, that'll be handy,' Kian said, peering through the glass. A young man was painting the old counter. It had been so dark brown that Robyn almost remembered it as being black. Now it was being transformed into a rich maroon.

'It could be gorgeous,' she said. The old-fashioned counter ran from one wall to the other facing the street. Somehow, it inspired Robyn with a little more optimism. She was not the only person in the world willing to take a chance on a sleepy little village overlooking the Atlantic Ocean.

'You know…' Kian spun around and grabbed her as she

almost fell into his arms. They stopped for a moment, the moon a golden crescent that seemed to look away from them, so it was just the two of them on the empty street and the sound of rain dripping from the drainpipe. Robyn held her breath, was this it? Was he about to kiss her? She closed her eyes, no one would know, out here, just the two of them, it felt as if they were the only people in the world. She wanted it so badly. And then, he righted her, his strong, thin arms steadying her so her feet were on the path again. It was just a clumsy moment. As it passed, she remembered that she was his friend, nothing more. 'Sorry,' he said, 'anyway, I was going to say, it's a good sign, don't you think?'

'I do,' Robyn replied quietly, too busy trying to keep her voice steady. She was in love with Kian, had been for years probably, but it was a one way street. She'd always known that, whatever had gotten into her tonight, she needed to remember it. The last thing she wanted was to spoil their friendship, just because she lost the run of herself thanks to the excitement of her bookshop finally taking shape and the magic of a big old golden moon in the sky.