THE WOMEN AT OCEAN'S END

Also by Faith Hogan

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FAITH HOGAN



An Aria Book

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For Judith Murdoch, literary agent,
co-conspirator and friend.

'…and the truth will set you free.'

John 8:32.

Prologue

Galway, May 1957

Constance Macken wiped her nose with the back of her hand; her hanky was nowhere to be found and she wasn't going back onto the street to look for it. She'd had enough of Mickey Kane calling her names and making fun of her in front of the others. *The girl with no da*. Her mother called him the original invisible man. 'One minute he'd been promising me the earth, moon and stars and then quicker than you could say a baby Guinness and a chaser in the local pub, he'd hightailed it off to Dublin with the barmaid.' That wasn't much use to Constance, she could hardly go telling the other children that her father had run away and left them. She could scarcely admit it to Dotty, never mind anyone else.

The girl with no da. That's what they called her, but since news of her mother's good fortune was in the paper, it had become much worse. 'They're only jealous, you know that yourself,' her best friend Dotty said, but even if she

was right, and Constance doubted it, that still didn't make things any easier.

Constance was small for her age, tiny, in fact; an easy target. At twelve years, she was still waiting to sprout up, but it felt less likely with every passing day as everyone in her class at school shot up around her. Her mother said she was like a little sparrow, not like her best friend. They were the same age and already Dotty Wren had developed curves and stood taller than any of the boys their age. Constance sighed now. Her mother talked about going away, leaving Galway altogether, and maybe that would be for the best. She'd miss Dotty though – for all she'd be glad to leave behind in this grotty little street, she'd miss Dotty Wren.

'There she is, boys.' Mickey Kane's thin voice cut through the hedges opposite. They must have slipped over the low wall at the side of Mr Wren's garage. They wouldn't dare come into Constance's garden, would they? 'Want it back? You'll have to come and get it, Constance.' Mickey's hand protruded through the thick privet, waving her handkerchief over and back like a sail swaying on the high seas.

'Give that here.' Constance shot to her feet. She was within grasping distance of the hedge when she remembered herself. The last time they caught her, they'd held her down and forced a worm into her mouth. She still remembered the taste, the feeling of it slithering about on her tongue; she'd almost choked through tears and trying to keep it from the back of her throat. In the end, to catch her breath, she'd had to swallow it. The humiliation of it was unbearable; even now, it was like a sharp whack against her gut, doubling her up in its unexpected intensity. If she allowed it to play out in her mind, she could almost be back there lying on

the pavement, holding her breath until it felt as if she was going to drown under the weight of them. Their laughter had jeered in her ears as she'd tried to stand and straighten down her vomit-covered dress.

Later, she thought of what they could have done to her. It might have been much worse. The way Glen Howard looked at her sometimes made her shudder with a revulsion she didn't fully understand. She wasn't sure which was worse, that numbness of being reduced to something so vulnerable or the raging fear of where it could lead to if they picked on her again. They had pinned her down, sneered at her: that was the undoing of her; she'd been completely helpless.

She shot away quickly from the hedge.

'I don't want it back, you're welcome to it.' It was her best one, her mother would surely do a dance about it, but she didn't care. She had to sound as if it didn't matter, like Dotty. They'd never dare hold Dotty down or call her the awful names they called Constance. Of course, Dotty had two parents. Her parents were married. She carried no shame with her everywhere she went.

'And now, did you hear, boys, the Mackens are going up in the world. Lah-di-dah!' Mickey tried to sound posh. 'Probably be moving out of this dump too…' He stepped through the hedge, inching just a little too close to Constance for her liking. 'Will your da be coming back from England now he doesn't have to make all that money for you?' There was tittering laughter to that. Constance felt her cheeks flush. It was the lie she'd told once when they'd first begun to jeer her about her father. *Oh, he's gone to England to make money for us*. Simple as that and Constance had trotted the lie off because she had wanted to believe it.

'Probably, but…' she stammered, felt her lower lip quiver, a small muscle tighten in her jaw as if she was being wound up for fight or flight. She took a deliberate step back from the boys, who were jostling so much in the hedge that the whole border was moving in waves like the ocean.

'My ma says your mother probably made enough money on that book to buy up this whole street if she wanted to…' That was Glen Howard, an overgrown bruiser of a boy. Glen had sat on her legs when they'd forced the worm in her mouth. His big face looming behind the others, eagerly lapping up every moment of her agony, as if she was just another creepy-crawly he'd picked up off the ground to pull apart, limb by tortured limb.

'So?' Constance asked, placing one foot behind the other to move away from them. She could feel the path give way to grass beneath her sandal. She was reversing gradually towards the empty garden on the other side. It was her only hope. She'd never make it to her own back door. This was what it must be like to be set upon by a tiger or a bear and know that you were within seconds of mortal ruin. All those books she'd read, they never talked about how you could feel sick with fear. Sour bile rose up in her throat now, lodging just where she remembered the worm slithering down. *Holy God*. Her hands were sweating, thin clammy films building up between her fingers, her palms sticky. She thought her heart might explode in her chest. *Just breathe; outwit them*, because they would be on her in a flash if they thought she might try to escape. One more step. She felt the border behind her that separated the Macken garden from the one next door. Mr Morrison had died months earlier. His house stood empty, waiting for someone new to take

it on. So far, no-one seemed to be very keen on becoming their new neighbour. The Kelly brothers, moving as one, stepped from the hedge. They looked around, appraising the Macken back garden as if they'd landed in a tantalising oasis. Constance did a quick calculation. There wasn't a hope she'd make it to the back door now. She was nowhere near as fast as the boys when it came to running. Hadn't she learned that to her cost last time?

The empty house next door loomed over her like a great big silent presence. All the windows were caked in dust and cobwebs hatched by a year's worth of neglect; it felt as if she was being watched by dangerous eyes.

There was no choice. She might just escape if she slipped through and hid in the undergrowth. From there, she could crawl along the side of Mr Morrison's old shed and press herself through the narrow gap in the fence further along so she emerged back into her own garden just opposite the scullery door. The only thing stopping her was the niggling sense of fear she had about Mr Morrison's ghost stalking about and keeping an eye on the place. Stupid. She knew it. But ever since the funeral – Dotty had insisted they look through the windows in the mortuary to see the old man laid out in his best suit –Constance had had nightmares about him. It was her first time seeing a corpse and she still hadn't gotten over it. Added to that terror, Mr Morrison never liked children. Certainly, he'd never been keen on Constance going in to fetch her ball if it strayed across the fence.

'All the money in the world doesn't change what your ma is…' One of the boys guffawed.

'Trollop.' They began the familiar murmuring chant that

they always teased her with. They hummed it, just enough to be heard, but not so loud that anyone who wasn't in the know would have had any idea what the taunt was. Constance gasped, tried to push down the ball of fear in her chest. Oh, how she despised them.

'Doesn't that make Constance Macken a little bastard?' Lickey Gillespie said and he pushed his glasses further up his nose, as if he'd just made a brilliant discovery.

'Little bastard. Little bastard. Little bastard.' The chant was menacing and now they were moving towards her in intimidating steps. They would fire into a sprint any second.

Be damned with the ghosts, she'd rather take her chances with dead old Mr Morrison than have to endure another worm slithering down her throat. Or worse.

She fell rather than turned back through the small gap in the fence. It was hardly visible and, from the other side, it looked as if she had just disappeared into thin air. Once beyond the fence, she realised there was a thin run, flattened along the centre of the hedges. Foxes. They raced about at night, calling out their strange coughing sound and wakening Constance so she tossed and turned and had to beat down nightmares about Mr Morrison's garden and what else might be living there.

Now, Constance dropped to her knees. The ground was wet and uneven here, ruptured with roots and bits of debris the old man must have raked to the side over years of clearing back for vegetables and fruits that were too bitter to entice any child to steal them.

In Constance's throbbing ears, the filthy chorus had grown louder, threatening. Her blood ran cold and icy. There

was no going back now. The garden was more overgrown than last time she was here. She'd better not miss the gap to break away from the thick foliage, otherwise she would hit a dead end and be trapped for sure. She took a deep breath, pushed further through the hedges, scratching her knees as she crawled, avoiding animal droppings and hoping that none of it clung to her clothes or her shoes.

Once through the undergrowth, Constance crawled quickly along a narrow trail made by all sorts of nocturnal creatures she preferred not to think about. Evening was drawing in, the smell of woodbine sweet and cloying in the air. Probably her mother had forgotten about the time. Ideas did that to her mother. It was not a bad thing when other children were put to bed while the sun still shone brightly and Constance could laze in the garden or flop into a chair with a book and a glass of milk from the cool cupboard beneath the kitchen sink.

Behind her, she heard the boys move closer. She hesitated, her heart thumping in her chest, suddenly disorientated, she wasn't sure which way she should go, not without raising her head above the undergrowth. She started to move quickly. Maybe it didn't matter so much which way she went, if she could find somewhere to hide until they gave up.

Then she heard it. A noise, a mewling, it was a lonesome whine above the voices of the boys who scrabbled somewhere behind her.

It had to be a cat, hadn't it? Not some ghostly apparition of old Mr Morrison, giving his onions one last check from the spirit world? Constance shivered. *There are no such things as ghosts*. The nuns at school were adamant about that. *No such thing*. That's what Sister Consietta said. Although,

the nuns were great believers in purgatory even if Sister Consietta wouldn't be drawn on where that was exactly. *Stop it*. Wherever it was, it certainly wasn't at the end of Mr Morrison's garden.

Two gardens across, she thought she heard Mr Wren's car being reversed into the little garage he had built at the back of their house. She was tempted to call to him for help, but she feared the boys would be upon her in an instant. Mr Wren was the nicest of all the grown-ups she knew, and Constance couldn't help wishing that he was her dad.

There it was again: a mewling sound coming from the end of the garden.

Was it coming from the old well? She was so close to it.

The well had been locked up years ago. You'd hardly even know it was there, thanks to the way the garden had outgrown itself over the last year. It was little more than a hole in the ground with a wooden trapdoor across it. No-one went near it usually, except if a winter storm flooded the gardens and it had to be pushed across to take the overflow. The timber cover was crude but effective in keeping out animals and children, until now, it seemed. The well wasn't used any more. All the houses along here had been built with indoor lavatories and kitchen sinks linked up to the city's main water systems. Her mother gave out often enough about the colour of the water some days and the fact that it turned her tea a dreadful shade of grey in summer.

Constance listened carefully, hardly daring to breathe; she tried to tune her ears unswervingly to the cries, above the drumming of her racing heart. It was definitely a kitten. He sounded pathetic. She heard him again; lower this time, a sort of keening sound.

Constance sat there for a moment, part of her afraid to break cover, but the howling felt like a knife twisting up in her guts and smothering out the fear of what she was risking. She couldn't leave the poor thing to suffer any longer. She seemed to be alone in the garden: the boys had not yet broken through the fence. A deep breath and she pushed through the undergrowth, looking up and down the garden all the while to check that it was safe. She ploughed on all fours through a sea of overgrown vegetables and weeds that were probably waist-high in places, thistles and briars scratching against her bare arms and legs as she went.

'It's okay, I'm coming,' she whispered under her breath. The well was little more than a hole in the ground. At some point, a rough frame had been placed around it, to define it by a matter of inches from the garden Mr Morrison had prized above all else. Constance wasn't sure she'd have been so brave had it been anywhere near the house. The old cover lay loose across the low frame. Constance crawled to it, slowly and carefully to avoid fox droppings and who knew what else was buried here in the neglected long grass. In the distance there was a sharp scream. Lickey Gillespie had been stung by a wasp; she watched him through the thick foliage. Only a few yards away, but it seemed they had forgotten about her, for now at least. The boys were moving away, towards Mr Morrison's empty house. They had spotted a slightly opened sash window which proved more interesting than torturing Constance, a mercy she was grateful for even if she didn't count on it lasting very long.

The mewling sound again made her push on.

Pushing the cover across was easy. Lying on her belly, gingerly she leaned over the edge. *Urgh*. Immediately the

overpowering smell of putrid water caught her breath, making her retch. Now she wished she had her hanky.

The mewling was loud and echoey here, not the gentle sound that had whispered through the grass moments earlier. *Definitely a kitten.* Constance told herself sternly to forget her mother's warning that this place was filled with rats' nests. That had only been to put her off, why would rats choose here when there were far more comfortable places to set up home? Dotty maintained *it went down all the way to hell and if you got too close, there was a chance Satan himself could reach up and pull you in.* Well of course, Constance didn't believe all that nonsense either. After all, she had made her confirmation a year ago. She knew better than anyone that the road to hell wasn't down some smelly old hole in the ground. Reverend Mother Mary Ignatius said it was to be found most easily in the big cities, especially in the communist and atheist countries. You knew it because its road was paved with good intentions, not that Constance had any idea what that sort of road would look like.

She shivered in spite of herself. Perhaps she should wait for Dotty?

A pathetic whimper came from the darkness. There was only one thing for it. She would have to reach down as far as she could and try to grab it. The stench was getting worse the longer she was here, far better to move as fast as she could. Naturally, this was what her mother had complained about for years: *the foul-smelling constancy of it just when the days are good enough to open a window.* In winter time, it was like pulling a plug on an overfilling bath. Summer was a different story. If the days were fine as they had been

for weeks on end now, the reek of dirty water would hang on the air and cling to clothes drying on the lines in the gardens all along the road.

That didn't matter now. All that mattered was— Silence. The sound of the cat's mewling had ceased. Oh God, had she killed it, made some part of the wooden cover splinter down and cut the creature in half? Constance scrunched her eyes up, afraid to peer over the edge, but she had to, she just had to get her courage up, move closer and peer down into its darkest depths.

She gripped the side of the well tightly, felt the dry slab burn against her skin. The outer rim was little more than a few rough bricks dug into the earth to save the whole garden from falling in. She had to force herself to look over the side, fully expecting to see nothing but black and the reflective circles of two pathetic dead eyes staring back at her from the bottom of the well.

'Meow.' It was faint, but by some miracle, the kitten was clinging onto a narrow ledge at the side. It was a little way down, but not so far Constance felt she couldn't reach it if she stretched.

'Shh, here puss, puss,' she soothed as she pulled the sleeve of her dress up further, leaned over the side and reached down as far as she could to grab the kitten. She hoped he wouldn't scratch her, but she braced herself in case, because regardless of how feral the creature was, she had to grab him and pull the poor sod to safety, it would only take a second, not enough time for him to do any real damage. Except, she couldn't reach him, not like this. His soft ears were just beyond her fingertips.

'Right,' she murmured, looking around her. She inched

closer, so close her belly was now balancing on the side of the well, her body almost at a right angle, so the blood rushed to her head, making her dizzy and sick all at once. *Bloody hell*. It still wasn't enough. She rattled off a quick Hail Mary – an insurance of sorts – then she steadied up, before stretching as far as she could. She reached her hands down, down, ignoring the pull on her shoulders; still she couldn't feel the animal near her grasp. She leaned further over, her head spinning as if she'd just stepped off a carousel; she was bent way across the edge of the rough wooden frame so its jagged splinters grazed beneath her belly button. Taking a deep breath, as if about to dive into the water, she reached as far as she could, feeling her muscles tighten all along her spine and down the sides of her body. One more stretch. Fur. She could feel it, soft, wet, downy beneath her hands. She grabbed the cat by his neck, yanked him up in a flash and swung him across behind her back, so he could land on the safe ground. Maybe not the gentlest rescue, but he was alive.

It was as she was swinging her arm back again to place her hand on the rim of the well that a crow screeched over her. It was so low, she felt the breeze of its flight almost lift her dress from her skin. The jolt caused Constance's whole body to jerk and before she knew what was happening she had lost her footing. For what felt like an eternity, she swayed back and forth, her head tipping further into the well, her hands before her face, she couldn't right herself around to grab the sides of the well to keep her balance. She tried to bellyflop her body backwards on the grass. On the second attempt, she thought she felt the earth beneath her as if she might have shifted her weight so she was safe,

but then something silky and writhing brushed up against her – the cat, startling her – and she lost her purchase on the ground.

Falling into the well seemed to happen in slow motion.

Constance reached out, trying to catch onto something, perhaps another ledge just as the cat had. There was none. Something rubbed against her back: a rope against one wall. She grabbed it, wrapping her body around it. Her hands, covered with sweat, betrayed her by slipping too easily against the braids and losing purchase so holding in one place was impossible. The tighter she held on, the more the rope cut sharply into her skin, peeling it coarsely, which might have made her let go, but for the drop beneath. She slid down it, desperately fighting against fate and gravity; gripping hungrily to descend as slowly as she could, clinging to the narrowing shaft of daylight as if it could save her from what was clearly unavoidable. She wanted to scream – tried hard to call out for help – but her voice caught somewhere in her throat, her breath halted in her lungs, she was beyond making a sound, too petrified to do much more than hang on.

Inch by inch she slid down into the blackness, too engrossed in the task of holding on to think about what waited at the end. She must have fallen from the rope, but even years afterwards she wouldn't remember what had happened next.

Forty foot or was it yards? That was the first thought she had when she woke. She'd heard the grown-ups discuss the well a year earlier, but she couldn't for the life of her guess at just how far down she was. It was dark, but still, she could see the sky, just a glimpse far above her in the

narrow well mouth. It was as much as she could make out and she lay for a long time staring at the clouds and sobbing miserably. She tried to think of a way out, but her head hurt, her body felt as if it had been broken into a thousand pieces and she was too scared to move much in case of what might be lurking in the shadowy walls above her.

Later, she remembered Dotty's father – Mr Wren. He must have been near his garage, but he wouldn't have heard her scream, not from two gardens up.

She tried calling for help, when she woke up later. By then, she had no idea if it was morning or afternoon or even how long she'd been there. It was no use. She stood up, reached round, searching the air above her head for the rope she'd clung to earlier, maybe she could climb back up again? It was no good. It was not there, it must have ended somewhere above her reach. There was only one thing for it. They would have to find her, maybe just like she'd found that kitten, maybe someone near the fence at the right time would hear her call. And so she began to call out, her voice quickly ascending to a frightened scream which only fed her terror. In the end, her voice grew hoarse and her sobs overtook her calls for help. She was lost down here in the darkness and soon even the slim shaft of light that penetrated from so far over her head began to fade.

Later, much later, she thought she heard them calling her. *Constance. Constance. Constance.* Her mother's voice had a strange musicality to it, as if keening her daughter's name. But Constance was too tired for any of it to register beyond a mere whisper. *I'm here. I'm here. I'm here.*

By the time night came in, she had fallen asleep as much from giving up as exhaustion or fear.