

The Hat Shop on the Corner

Marita Conlon-McKenna

Published by Bantam

Extract

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Chapter One

Ellie Matthews's heart was heavy as she joined the rush of early morning workers making their way across St Stephen's Green. She ignored the clouds racing above in the blue sky and the rows of bright red and yellow tulips that lined a pathway through Dublin's city-centre park, and she barely glanced at Jimmy Byrne, the park keeper, already busy with shovel and hoe planting out wallflowers. Crossing the old stone bridge, she paid no heed to the ducks dabbling on the lake below as she approached the main gate.

Crowds of commuters stepped off the Luas city tram line and, joining them, she headed down Dawson Street. Cars hooted and the traffic roared as Ellie turned into South Anne Street – the street she had known all her life. She stopped and, rummaging in her handbag, pulled out the key of the shop, turned it firmly and slipped inside the door of

number 61. Her heart was racing and she leaned against the wood to steady herself.

It was almost six weeks since she had last crossed the threshold of the small milliner's shop her mother owned, and in those six weeks her world had utterly changed. She tried to compose herself as she touched the counter, the display shelves and the hatstands.

Forty days ago, Madeleine, her mother, had finally given in and agreed to be admitted to hospital. Once there, she had slipped away from the pain and fear of her terminal illness in a cloud of morphine and gentle acceptance that Ellie still struggled to understand.

'I am not afraid,' she had insisted, 'so you must not be either.'

The days had run together far too quickly as she watched her beautiful mother pass away to that other world she believed in so strongly.

Her aunts, Yvette and Monique, and Monique's husband, Uncle Jean-Luc, and her cousins had come over from France. They had gathered together, along with close friends and colleagues, for a funeral mass in Clarendon Street Church, her mother's favourite city-centre place of prayer. Afterwards, with the simple grace and style she had exuded throughout her life, Madeleine Matthews had been laid to rest in a pretty plot in a graveyard in Wicklow. Ellie sighed, assaulted still by the pain of it.

Two of them! There had always been the two of them against the world, mother and daughter, best friends, companions, much more than that. She had never imagined a life

without her mother – and now, for the first time, she was alone. There had been no brothers and sisters, no huge extended family to call on, for Madeleine Matthews had raised her child on her own. Ellie knew her mother would have loved to have more children, a family of dark-haired, wide-eyed boys and girls, but it was not meant to be: a little less than three years after her whirlwind wedding to Philip Matthews, he had walked out of the tempestuous marriage and left her with a small daughter to raise.

Ellie glanced round the shop, which was dusty and in need of a good Hoover. The doorway was filthy, the windows needed a wash, and the back of the shop was filled with hat-boxes and bags of sinamay, felt, satin and gauze. Unfinished pieces of work cluttered the surfaces, along with offcuts of petersham ribbon. She studied her mother's huge cork noticeboard arrayed with photos, coloured drawings, samples of fabric and unusual patterns and designs, and wondered where to begin.

The shop was shut but no matter, it should still be neat and clean, the way her mother liked it. Ellie slipped off her red beret and black coat and, with a piece of ribbon from the counter, she briskly tied back her shoulder-length black hair. It was high time she began to tidy up. Wrinkling her nose in disgust at the sour-smelling contents of the half-open milk carton on the shelf and a stale packet of biscuits, she began to bag some rubbish. Next she got the brush and mop and bucket and washed out the tiled front entrance to the shop, keeping her head down and ignoring passers-by. A small black cat appeared and tiptoed across the wet

tiles, trying to slip between her legs and into the shop.

‘No, little cat!’

Ellie shooed it away with her brush, before going back inside and turning her attention to the Hoover. She had just started it when she heard a knocking on the shop door. Surely they could read the ‘Closed’ sign?

There was a man standing at the door. Switching off the noisy Hoover and smoothing her hair, she ran to see what he wanted.

‘I’m sorry to disturb you,’ he began.

‘We’re shut,’ said Ellie firmly. ‘I’m only here to clean the place.’

‘Oh, then forgive me. I was looking for Madeleine.’

‘Madeleine’s not here,’ she explained slowly, trying to compose herself. ‘She passed away a few weeks ago.’

‘Oh . . . I’m very sorry. My condolences on her death,’ he apologized. ‘I knew she was ill but I didn’t realize the seriousness of it. I’ve been trying to get in touch with her.’

Ellie could feel pinpricks of tears behind her eyes as this tall man in his expensive suit stared at her.

‘Madeleine was your . . .?’

‘My mother.’

‘There is a resemblance,’ he said gently. ‘And of course Madeleine told me about you. We’ve been in discussions regarding the sale contract for these premises. You probably know about it.’

Ellie shook her head. Her mother had barely discussed the business over the past few months. She had been too ill, too weak to waste her energy on such material things.

'Please, come inside. I'll just put the catch on the door,' Ellie said.

'I should have introduced myself properly,' he offered, his eyes serious. 'My name is Neil Harrington – from Harrington Smith, the law firm.'

'And I'm Ellie,' she replied firmly, wondering if he knew that the business was now hers.

'We represent Casey Coleman Holdings. They are one of Ireland's largest property companies and have invested heavily in property on this street, which they intend re-developing to provide shops and offices and accommodation. I had drafted a contract of sale on their behalf with your mother with regard to number 61.'

'My mother was going to sell the shop!' She couldn't disguise her surprise. Ellie would never have imagined her mother willingly agreeing to the sale of the business she loved so much and had worked so hard to build up.

'Yes, we had discussed the sale. She felt circumstances were changing. The street – well, it will be radically altered with this new plan, as I said, and I had already drawn up the contracts.'

Contracts. Ellie couldn't believe it. Why had her mother made no mention of any dealings with the serious dark-haired lawyer? Her mother had bought the shop thirty-one years ago and had worked here almost every day since. It had been far more than a business to Madeleine Matthews: it had been her life! She would never have considered selling it if she hadn't fallen ill. But perhaps the man standing in front of her was right? Perhaps her mother had been more of a

realist than she had imagined, planning for the future. A wave of emotion almost overwhelmed Ellie. She was adrift, like a cork bobbing on the ocean, not knowing where she was going to end up.

‘Miss Matthews?’

‘I’m sorry, Mr Harrington. I knew there were plans for the redevelopment of the street, but I wasn’t aware that my mother had already considered selling the business.’

‘I suppose, under the circumstances,’ he said, looking at her with what appeared genuine concern, ‘she wanted to do what was best.’

‘The best!’

Ellie swallowed hard. She felt hurt, threatened. Who could say what was best when her mother was dead and buried and she was the only beneficiary of her will? A simple document, the will included the shop, their second-floor apartment in a Georgian building in Hatch Street, and a small savings account that had already been depleted by the costs of the funeral.

‘I have no wish to intrude at a time of grief but I will leave you a copy of the contract to read.’ He withdrew a large brown envelope from the leather briefcase he had opened on the wooden counter. ‘If you want to discuss it with me or my partners over the next few days or weeks, whenever, we are at your disposal.’

Ellie tried to control the tears welling in her eyes. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘Bound to be an awful time,’ he murmured. ‘I should go. Here’s my card if you need me and once again my

sympathy on your mother's passing. She was a lovely woman.'

Despite his stern expression he seemed kind. Glancing at his card, she could see he was a senior partner in the law firm. He was young – thirty-five or thirty-six – for such a position. She wondered if her mother had liked him, trusted him.

Ellie walked him to the door, saying polite goodbyes, before watching his tall figure in the dark grey suit turn back up towards Dawson Street. She fingered the envelope. No, she'd read it later when she went home. For now she'd concentrate on getting the shop spick and span, even if it included tackling the massive spider web up in the corner near the top shelf. She'd better get used to doing such things, for now there was no one else.

Hot and tired, she had an immense feeling of satisfaction after a few hours' cleaning and tidying and washing down dusty paintwork. For once she had not dissolved with grief and she had actually lost track of time. Except for a break at lunch when she had slipped across the road to buy a sandwich and some milk, she had been permanently ensconced in the shop.

Suddenly she realized that someone was knocking loudly on the shop door. Was it that Neil Harrington again? Perhaps he had forgotten something. She tried to tidy herself, then stepped forward and opened the door. It was a customer.

'I'm sorry,' she apologized, 'but we're closed.'

The determined middle-aged woman on the doorstep

paid absolutely no heed and brushed past her to stand inside the shop.

'Where's Madeleine?' she demanded. 'I have been trying to contact her for the past three weeks. Twice I've been to Dublin but the shutters were down. I tried phoning, I—'

'I'm very sorry,' explained Ellie. 'My mother passed away two weeks ago. She had been sick for a while.'

The woman looked pale and for a second seemed to reel with the news.

'Oh my God! I can't believe it, poor Madeleine!' she gushed, fiddling with her handbag. 'I just can't believe it. I was here with Madeleine only a couple of months ago ordering a hat.'

'A hat?'

'Yes, it's for my daughter's wedding.'

'When is the wedding?' asked Ellie.

'It's on Saturday,' wailed the woman. 'That's why I came in today to collect it.'

Ellie felt an instant of panic. She hadn't noticed any completed hat ready for collection either in the shop or in the small workroom out the back.

'Sorry, I only came in today to sort a few things out and tidy up. Perhaps you could give me some details of the hat you ordered?'

'It's a sort of dusky pink, with one of those big wide brims with a slight upturn. Your mother had found some fabric in just the right colour to go with my outfit and she was trimming it with silk flowers and a swirl of ribbon.'

Uneasy, Ellie was almost certain there wasn't a hat of that

description anywhere in the small shop. She'd check every box and bag to be sure.

'Listen, Mrs . . . ?'

'The name is Maureen Cassidy.'

'Well, Mrs Cassidy, would you like to sit down while I just check my mother's workroom and storeroom?'

'Oh, that would be lovely, dear. My feet are killing me from walking all round town.'

Ellie settled her mother's customer with a copy of *Vogue* before trawling through all the boxes stacked on the floor in the back room and making one more round of the hatstands. There was one hat crown in a rich, deep rose colour on a block. She had to find her mother's hard-backed notebook to see the order, the rough design she had been contemplating. At last under a pile of tulle and organza she found it. There, in her mother's fine writing, were the order and the rough sketch for Mrs Cassidy, with a completion date of two weeks ago. What was she going to tell the customer? She went back out front.

'I always love reading these stylish magazines,' said the woman, smiling up at her expectantly.

'Mrs Cassidy, I did find your hat on one of the blocks in the back but I'm afraid it's not finished.'

'Not finished!'

'I'm sorry but it must have been one of the last things my mother was working on before she went into the hospital.'

'Not finished . . . but what am I to do? Lucy's wedding is on Saturday. It's all organized. I have my dress and a little jacket and the most darling shoes and a handbag, but I have

to have a hat. I'm the mother of the bride . . . What am I going to do?'

Ellie stood there feeling awful, unsure of what to say, for not finished was an understatement: the hat was barely begun.

'Not finished, you say?'

'Not even near being finished,' she admitted candidly.

'But couldn't someone else finish it, do the rest? There must be someone?'

Ellie shook her head. 'This was my mother's business. She employed no one else.'

Mrs Cassidy looked as if she would burst into tears.

'There must be something someone can do? Where else am I going to find a hat that will match my outfit at this late hour!'

Ellie felt guilty. Her mother had prided herself on never letting a customer down, on always having the work done, the hats and ornamental headpieces ready on time to be collected by her clients.

'I can finish the piece,' she volunteered, tilting the notebook in her hands as she considered it. Was she talented enough to step into her mother's shoes, to continue her mother's work, to finish off the piece to the customer's satisfaction, to create something with the style and panache that Madeleine Matthews always did?

'You?'

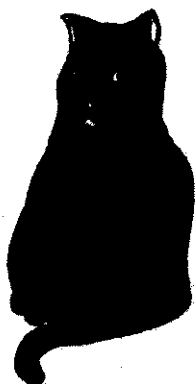
'Yes, I am also a milliner, trained by my mother. I've spent most of my childhood and growing years in this place and have often helped her with her work. I studied art and textiles in college and have a very sound knowledge of

design. Besides, my mother has left a copy of the design here in this notebook.'

Maureen Cassidy studied the coloured drawing. 'Are you sure you'd be able to do it?'

'Of course,' Ellie assured her. 'I have worked on many hats.'

She simply couldn't let down her mother or this nice woman. Whether it was out of loyalty or love or the big soft heart her mother and friends were always teasing her about, or some moment of utter madness in her bereavement, Ellie found herself promising to complete the hat and have it ready for the customer in less than twenty-four hours. It was a promise she had every intention of keeping.



Chapter Two

Ellie couldn't believe that she had made such a rash promise to one of her mother's customers. What had possessed her? However, holding the stiffened rose-coloured crown in her hand she knew that it was the right thing to do. She wanted to protect not only her mother's reputation but that of the hat shop. Maureen Cassidy deserved the very best and Ellie was determined to work all night if she had to, to achieve exactly the design her mother had sketched out so precisely in her notepad. She would simply finish the job. She had grown up with the world of millinery, shaping the materials on the hat blocks, sewing and stitching and steaming, bending brim wires and covering them, hand-rolling silk petals and flowers, trimming feathers, fixing ribbons; from her mother she had learned all the skills needed to create the perfect piece of art that was a hat. A hat that would make

Mrs Cassidy shine at her daughter's wedding in three days' time!

The street outside was quiet, a few passers-by gazing at the window before hurrying on their way to the bus or the Luas tram as the town began to unwind and the shops shut. She watched as the newsagent's and Scottie O'Loughlin in the old toy and joke shop pulled down their shutters for the night. Mr Farrell from the antiques shop five doors down checked his keys as he locked up, the newspaper under his arm as he headed up the street. Over the past two years South Anne Street had changed. Property prices had skyrocketed and some of the shops had been forced to close down. A few landlords had refused to renew the leases of their existing tenants, knowing they could sell to the developers for a huge price. The woman from Killiney had closed up her beautiful gift shop further down six months ago, and it still lay idle along with a few others, their shopfronts empty and neglected. Ellie remembered South Anne Street as a bustling thoroughfare with a range of shops run by a myriad of characters, everyone knowing everyone else. It was a shame the way things were changing.

The street-lights flickered on as one by one the rest of the shops and businesses in the street closed for the night.

I'd better run out and get something to eat, thought Ellie, pulling on her coat. She raced to the deli near Duke Lane to buy a roll and some soup and a wrap, for she intended to work for the rest of the evening. She was trying to balance her purchases and open the shop door when she noticed the little black cat again, miaowing for attention.

'Scat! Go on, scat!' she called, trying to shoo it away. But the cat pushed its way in between her feet. Terrified that she would hurt it, with her key stuck in the door and her soup carton wobbling ominously and about to spill all over the two of them, Ellie found herself lurching forward and landing in a heap on her own tiled doorstep as the shop door opened. The soup was saved but the bag with her supper in it lay beside her on the ground. The little cat tilted its head curiously at her and a second later pulled out a piece of chicken from the fallen wrap and gobbled it up.

'You, you!' she threatened.

The cat stood for a few seconds as if trying to make up its mind. Its small black body tense, it stared at her then stepped past her into the shop and jumped up into the chair with the blue cushion near the window.

As she stood up, Ellie burst out laughing, something she hadn't done in weeks. She was tempted to scoop up the small creature and bury her face in the comfort of its warm fur, but she was afraid to scare it. Inside she sat down in the tiny kitchenette and took out what was left of her supper, holding her breath as the cat appeared again. Minouche, the street cat her mother had adopted, knew the shop well and settled itself patiently to watch her eat.

'I suppose you're hungry too.' She tossed it a bit more of the chicken wrap, which it delicately chewed. The cat eyed her intently as Ellie poured it some milk in the lid of her empty soup carton. Whether she wanted it or not, she guessed she had company for the night.

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