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The Honey Queen

Written by Cathy Kelly

Published by HarperCollins

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CATHY KELLY

The Honey Queen



HarperCollins *Publishers*

HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollinsPublishers 2013

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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-737365-9

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Typeset in Sabon by Palimpsest Book Production Ltd, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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For my family, John, Murray and Dylan.
For Mum, Lucy, Francis and all my beloved family, and
for the dear friends who are always there for me.
Thank you.

Part One

The atmosphere of the bees and the hive is determined entirely by the mood and personality of the queen bee. A calm queen will result in a calm, peaceful and productive hive.

The Gentle Beekeeper, Iseult Cloud

Prologue

Lillie Maguire kept the letter tucked into the inside zipped compartment of her handbag, a battered beige one Sam had bought her in David Jones one Christmas. The handbag was as soft as butter from years of use, and coins would slip down in the places where the lining had split, but she didn't care: it was a part of him.

She had so little left of Sam that she treasured what she did have: his pillow, which still had the faintest scent of his hair, the shirt he'd worn that last day going into hospital, the engagement ring with its tiny opal bought forty years before. And the David Jones bag with the ripped lining. These were her treasures.

The letter was almost a part of the bag now: the edges curled up, the folds worn. She'd read it many times since it arrived a fortnight ago and could probably recite it in her sleep. It was from Seth, the half-brother she hadn't known existed, and the one link to a mother she'd never known.

Please come, I'd love to meet you. We'd love to meet you, Frankie and I. You see, I've been an only child for fifty and then some years, and it's wonderful to hear that I have a sister after all. I never knew you existed, Lillie, and I'm sorry.

I'm sorry too to hear about your husband's death. You must be heartbroken. Tell me if I'm being forward for proffering such advice, but perhaps this is exactly the right time for you to come? Being somewhere new might help?

The one thing I can say for sure after all these years on the planet is that you never know what's around the corner. I lost my job three months ago, and that was completely unexpected!

We'd love to have you with us, really love it. Do come. As I said before: I may be speaking out of turn because I've never suffered the sort of bereavement you have, Lillie, but it might help?

It was such a warm letter. Lillie wondered if Seth's wife, Frankie, had a hand in the writing of it because there was such a welcome contained in it, and yet the wise woman in Lillie thought that Seth was probably still reeling at discovering her very existence.

The sudden appearance of a sixty-four-year-old Australian sister could mean many things to an Irishman called Seth Green on the other side of the world, but most shocking might be the knowledge that his mother, now dead, had kept this huge secret from him all his life.

Women were often better at secrets than men, Lillie had always felt. Better at keeping them and better at understanding *why* people kept them.

They knew how to say 'don't mind me, my dear, I'm fine, just a bit distracted' to an anxious child or a confused husband when they weren't fine *at all*, when their minds were in a frenzy of worry. *What would the doctor say about the breast lump they'd found? Could they afford the mortgage?*

Would their shy son ever make a friend in school?

No, a wise woman could easily make the decision that certain information would only bring pain to her loved ones,

so why not keep all the pain to herself? She could handle it on her own, which meant they didn't need to.

Men were different. In Lillie's experience, men liked things out in the open.

So given a bit of time, Seth might feel entirely differently about the whole notion that his mother had borne another child before him when she was very young, and had handed that child to a convent that had in turn handed her to a sister convent in Melbourne. It might just help him, if he were to meet that child.

An open-ended ticket, Lillie decided. That would be the right way to travel to see Seth and Frankie.

Martin, one of Lillie's two grown-up sons, had set the whole thing in motion.

Soon after Sam's death, Martin, who was tall, kind and clever, just like his father, had taken up genealogy and started spending many hours on his computer looking for details of his past. As a university history lecturer, he said he couldn't believe he'd never thought to do this before.

'It's the history of our family, I should have taken this on years ago. What was wrong with me?' he asked, running hands through shaggy dark hair that made Lillie's fingers itch to get the scissors to it, the way she used to when he was a kid.

The thought of him as a child, of *her* life when he and his brother were children, made her breath catch.

When Martin and Evan were children, she'd had her darling Sam. Now he was gone. He'd died six months ago, gone to who-knew-where, and she was just as heartbroken as if it had happened yesterday.

No matter that Lillie told everyone that she was coping – her sons; her daughters-in-law, Daphne and Bethany; the girls in the book club; her best friends Doris and Viletta; her pals in the Vinnies shop where she put in a few volunteer hours a week – she wasn't coping. Not at all.

On the outside, she could smile and say she was fine, really. But inside was different: the entire world had a Sam-shaped hole in it and she wasn't sure she could bear to live with it any more.

In this new world the sky was a different blue: harsher somehow. The sun's heat, once glorious, had a cruel quality to it. And the garden they'd both loved felt empty without the two hives Sam had kept for forty years: there was no gentle hum of bees lazily roaming through the flowers. In the early stages of his illness, Sam had given his hives to his best friend in the local beekeeping association.

'I think they're too much for you to handle, sweetheart,' he'd told her as he watched, with sad eyes, while Shep carefully got the two traditional-style hives with their little pagoda roofs ready for transportation.

'Shep could come in and open them every eight or nine days,' Lillie had protested. 'He does it when we're on holiday, he could do it now.'

'I think I'm worn out looking after them,' Sam said. Lillie knew he was lying, but she said nothing. Deep down, Sam knew he wasn't coming out of hospital, but he'd never tell her that. He'd always protected her and he was still doing it.

Now, *afterwards*, there were plenty of jars of honey in the pantry, but Lillie, who used to love a glossy smear of golden honey on wholegrain toast, couldn't bring herself to open a new one.

Nothing tasted the same. The flat whites she loved from the little shop near the library tasted so strange that she'd asked the girl behind the counter if they were using a different coffee.

'No, it's the same. Fairtrade Java. Do you want me to make another one? No sweat.'

Lillie shook her head. Of course the coffee wasn't different. *She* was different.

It must have been his father's death that prompted Martin's interest in the family tree.

Martin's wife, Daphne, groaned good-humouredly to her mother-in-law about Martin's passionate new interest. 'Between Martin being permanently attached to the PC on genealogy sites,' she said, 'and Dyanne glued to hers on chat rooms, *saying* she's only talking to school friends, when she's supposed to be doing schoolwork, I should add, I could walk out and neither of them would notice.' A cheerful and kind midwife, Daphne now appeared to have a second full-time job – keeping an eye on Dyanne, their fourteen-year-old daughter, who had recently discovered her power over the opposite sex and was keen to test it out.

'There's not much of my side of the family to research,' Lillie said ruefully. At her age, she'd decided she was long past the pain of the concept that her birth mother had given her away as a baby. She'd always known that she was adopted, and at fifteen it had been achingly painful. At sixty-four it was merely a part of her past. 'Adoption was different in those days, Daphne. I don't think they put half of it down on paper. From the little bits I know, he won't find anything from my side.'

Daphne smiled.

'That won't stop Martin. You know what he's like: when he gets into something, he's obsessed. The number one topic of conversation at dinner every night is either Martin's latest haul of illegible records or how every kid in Dyanne's class is going to a concert apart from her and it's not fair that we don't trust her, after all she's *nearly* fifteen. We are a pair of fossils, she says. By the way, any chance you'd come to dinner on Friday?'

Lillie always said she was lucky to have such wonderful daughters-in-law.

'It's not luck,' Daphne and Bethany would insist.

'It's because you're the way you are. You never interfere,' Bethany once told her.

‘But you know how to help when it’s needed,’ added Daphne.

Both of them knew girlfriends with mothers-in-law who needed to be locked up in high-security premises, if only there was a loophole in the legal system allowing for this. A special hard labour camp might be set up for those who continually brought meals over to their married sons’ homes ‘*so they could eat proper food instead of takeout*’.

Within weeks, Daphne had been proved right about her husband’s tenacity. Martin must have had termite blood somewhere in his genealogy because he’d burrowed into every crevice until he found out that Lillie had been given up for adoption in a Dublin convent by one Jennifer McCabe; father unknown.

Evan and Martin Maguire had conferred about this information, and then Martin had burrowed even deeper in the records to discover that Jennifer McCabe had subsequently married a Daniel Green, and from this union there was a son, Seth, now in his fifties.

Teaming up, just like they used to when they were kids, two years apart in age, Martin and Evan arrived at their mother’s home waving pieces of paper and airplane schedules.

They had her brother’s address and every detail they’d been able to glean about him from the Internet. Seth Green was an architect; he’d designed a school which had won an award, they told her delightedly.

‘What?’ Lillie stared at her sons, united in their happiness over this information.

‘We’ve found your brother!’ said Evan. ‘We haven’t contacted him yet, but we will if you say we can. He’s your family – *our* family. We’ll talk to him and then you can fly to see him. We’ll pay. Doris could go with you . . .’ Evan, cheerleader in the expedition, took after her with his strawberry blond hair and freckled Celtic skin. He had his father’s wonderful kindness too – it shone from his eyes. ‘Mum, the

last six months or so have been so terrible for you. Maybe doing something new would help you recover from Dad's death – not that you would ever recover,' he added hastily. 'But, you know . . .'

Both he and Martin looked at her expectantly, hoping and praying this plan would help. She could see it in their faces and she loved them for it, but it was all too much, too fast.

She might be able to smile at people from the safety of her Melbourne home, but away? In a foreign country with people she didn't know and a brother who might hate the sight of her? As for Doris, she was so scared of flying there wasn't a snowball's hope in hell of getting her on a plane.

'Let me get the iced tea out of the freezer and then we'll talk,' Lillie told her sons and left the room as fast as she could.

In her and Sam's clapboard Victorian house with its pretty curlicued verandah and lush garden, the kitchen had been very much Lillie's room. It wasn't that Sam hadn't cooked – his barbecue equipment had been treated as lovingly as a set of a carpenter's tools, washed and put away carefully on the grill shelf after each use. But barbecuing was outdoor work.

The kitchen, with its verdant fern wallpaper, pots of Lillie's beloved orchids on all surfaces, and the big old cream stove they'd had for thirty years, was her domain. She stood in it now and briefly wondered where the small tray was, where the tea glasses were. Shaken by the news that she had a brother, Lillie was suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of loneliness. She and Sam had often talked of travelling to Ireland.

'We could kiss the Blarney Stone and see if the Wicklow and Kerry Mountains are as beautiful as they say,' Sam said.

'As if you need to kiss any Blarney Stone,' she'd teased back.

He'd known that she didn't want to search for her birth family. That had been the dream of a younger woman.

I know it's out of love, but why do people keep coming up with things to make me feel better, Sam? she asked now, looking up.

She didn't know where he was or if he heard her, but talking to him helped. She just wished he'd answer in some way.

Grief was a journey; she'd read that somewhere. A person didn't get over it, they moved through it. One of the worst parts was not knowing where she was on the journey or if she was on it at all yet. The pain was still so bad. Perhaps she was still only at the entrance to the grief journey, buying her ticket, looking out at an endless plain in front of her where people were to be seen shuffling along in parallel lines, time slowed to a snail's pace.

'Mum—' called Martin.

'Hold your horses,' she called back, finding the cheerful mother voice she'd always been able to summon. Her sons had their own lives and families. Mothers cared for their sons, they didn't expect the sons to have to care for them.

She carried the tray of iced teas into the living room.

'Show all the documents to me,' she said, sitting between them on the big old couch with the plaid pattern. 'A brother!'

Seth Green had immediately responded to Martin's email. Martin printed out the reply and read it to her, but Lillie didn't like this email business. She was a letter or a phone call person. How could you tell what sort of person was writing to you on a computer when you had no voice to listen to or no signature to consider? Seth was apparently happy to hear about her and that was just fine, but nonetheless she felt stubborn. Seth and Frankie could visit her if they wanted to. She was busy, she told her sons.

Then, a fortnight ago, Seth had sent a letter via Martin, the letter that nestled in her handbag and called to her so that she read and reread it many times a day.

Her adopted mother, Charlotte, the only mother she'd ever

known, had often talked about Lillie's background and all she knew of it. She'd told her how in 1940s Ireland illegitimate children and their mothers were so badly treated that most women were forced to give their babies away in tragic circumstances. A nun called Sister Bernard had been travelling to Melbourne to join the Blessed Mary Convent in Beaumaris and she'd taken baby Lillie with her for adoption. Mother Joseph, who was in charge of the convent, knew how much Charlotte and Bill wanted a baby after all the miscarriages, and so baby Lillie had come into their lives.

As Martin proudly handed over the letter to his mother, Lillie knew that he hadn't considered the possibility that she might not want to see her birth family. She'd thought it wouldn't bother her, but at that exact moment, she discovered that there was still a tiny place inside her that ached with the pain of rejection.

For two weeks she'd been carrying the letter in her handbag. This morning, just as she was about to drive to the park for a walk with Doris and Viletta, something had made Lillie open her handbag and take out the now worn letter one more time.

Her mother had often told her the Irish had a way with words and it was true. The letter was proof of that. Such warmth and such pure honesty all wrapped up together. And all from someone she had never met. Crazy though it seemed, it was as if this person thousands of miles away could see into her heart and understand the hopelessness inside. Lillie wondered again if it was partly written by Seth's wife. Because whoever had written the letter had gotten through to her in a way that nobody else had since Sam's death.

Please come . . . I may be speaking out of turn because I've never suffered the sort of bereavement you have, Lillie, but it might help?

She stood in the hall, lost in thought. Outside, the sun was blazing down. It hadn't been the best summer but now that autumn had arrived, the heat was blistering. Nearly forty-two degrees on the beach the day before, according to the radio. Even as a child, Lillie had never been a beach bunny. Not for her the shorts, skimpy vests and thongs that her friends ran about in.

'It's your creamy Celtic skin,' Charlotte would say lovingly, covering the young Lillie with white zinc sun cream.

Years later, as a married woman, Lillie had pretended irritation with Sam that he, despite also being of Celtic descent, was blessed with jet-black hair and skin that tanned mahogany.

'You're only pretending you've got Irish blood,' she'd tease. 'You came from Sicily, no question.'

Not a freckle had ever dusted his strong, handsome face and the only time his tan faded was as he lay wasting away in the hospital bed. His skin turned a dull sepia colour, as if dying leached everything from a person.

'I'm sorry, love. I don't want to leave you and the kids, the grandkids . . .'

Those had been almost the last words he'd spoken to her and she treasured the memory.

Lillie had struggled to find words to comfort him. Then it had come to her, a gift to the dying, the only thing she could give him: 'We all love you so much, Sam, but it's the right time to go, it's safe for you to go. We don't want you to suffer any more.'

Saying it and meaning it were two entirely different things. In her breaking heart, Lillie didn't want Sam to die. She could now understand people who kept loved ones alive for years even when they were in a vegetative state from which there was no return. The parting was so final.

But people sometimes needed to be told to go. One of the hospice nurses had explained that to her. Strong people like

Sam, who had fiercely protected their families all their lives, found it hard to leave.

‘They worry there’s nobody there to take care of you all,’ the nurse had said. ‘You need to tell him it’s OK to go.’

And Lillie had.

When Sam had been dying, the hours seemed to fly past because she knew they were his last.

Since then, time had slowed to a snail’s pace . . .

Now, standing in the hall, she rubbed her eyes furiously as more tears arrived. She was so tired of crying.

Her cell phone pinged on the hall table with a text message.

Are you coming walking today? I did my stretches and will seize up if we don’t start soon. I am leaning over our park bench and will be stuck like this. Doris xx

Lillie smiled as she put her hat on and grabbed a pair of sunnies from the table at the door. Doris could always cheer her up.

As soon as she rounded the corner at the community centre at the Moysey Walk, she saw Viletta and Doris gossiping happily as they half-heartedly did stretches ahead of their walk – five miles today.

It was a beautiful trail to walk. The girls had been walking along the beach, local parks and now, along the Moysey Walk for nigh on twenty years, long before everyone and their granny began extolling the virtues of walking. Today, autumn leaves were beginning to fall from the trees, and to their left, lay the glittering sea below. ‘Hi, girls,’ Lillie said, glad that her sunnies were hiding her eyes.

Hearing the faint catch in Lillie’s voice, Doris looked at her shrewdly. ‘You’ve just missed a gang of young rugby guys jogging,’ she announced, keeping her tone upbeat. ‘Viletta told them they had great muscle definition and they all went red.’

Viletta laughed. ‘I could be a cougar,’ she said with a put-on sniff. ‘They’re the hot thing in Hollywood – young blokes wanting older women.’

‘Older *rich* women, honey,’ said Doris, and Lillie joined in the laughter this time.

They walked two or three times a week, fitting it in between their chores and pursuits. Viletta, the oldest of the trio at sixty-nine, was a yoga buff and nobody seeing her in her walking sweats and simple T-shirt would imagine she was a grandmother of five. Her hair, she liked to joke, was the giveaway – pure white and falling poker straight down her back; she kept it tied in a knot for the walk. Doris, tall with salt-and-pepper hair and a tendency to roundness, regularly complained she wasn’t as fit as Viletta, who set the pace.

‘You get toned blokes in yoga classes and I get knee injections in the surgery,’ Doris would say in mock outrage. And Viletta would smile at the notion. She hadn’t looked at a man since her husband had died more than fifteen years before, for all her talk of cougars.

Lillie liked to amuse herself considering how the three of them must appear to strangers on their rambles: Viletta would appear to be the trainer, a lean, tanned woman urging her two more curvy friends on.

Though she didn’t have Viletta’s toned muscles, she didn’t look like a woman in her mid-sixties. That was most likely down to the hair, she reckoned: even a few greys in her thick strawberry blonde curls couldn’t diminish its warmth. Her Irish inheritance coming through. In the mirror she saw her face had become thinner since Sam’s death and underneath her iris-blue eyes were faint violet shadows. She hadn’t used make-up to hide them: vanity seemed so futile in the wake of her loss.

They were halfway into the walk and had settled into their regular rhythm when Doris managed to get herself beside

Lillie, a few paces behind Viletta, who was storming ahead as usual.

‘You look a bit down, Lillie,’ she said conversationally. ‘Everything OK?’

Doris had known Lillie long enough to realize the effort required to maintain a smile on her face, a smile that would disintegrate the moment somebody put on their *Poor dear, lost her husband* voice or showed pity. Which was why Doris talked to her friend the way she’d always talked to her, in the same warm, vibrant tones.

‘I’ve been thinking about my brother in Ireland . . .’ began Lillie.

Beside her, she could sense Doris relax.

‘I’m going to Ireland to visit him and to find out about my birth mother,’ she said. There, it was done: she’d decided.

When Doris grabbed her and hugged her tightly, Lillie was so surprised she almost lost her balance.

‘I’m so glad!’ shrieked Doris, never one for volume control. ‘It’s exactly what you need. Oh, honey, I’m so glad!’

Lillie relaxed into her friend’s embrace. It felt lovely to be held. There were fewer people to do that these days. Her sons weren’t huggers, not the way Sam had been. Her hugs now came from her grandchildren. From Martin’s daughter, Dyanne, and from Shane, Evan’s seven-year-old, who held her tight and told her she was the best nanny in the world.

‘If I’d known you wanted to be rid of me that much, I’d have gone ages ago,’ she teased Doris when they separated.

‘Witch!’ said Doris, wiping her eyes. ‘I’m happy for you, Lillie. There’s no secret recipe for getting through what you’re getting through, but doing something different might add another ingredient to the pot, so to speak.’

Lillie nodded. ‘I’ve been thinking it over and over. Sam and I had talked about visiting Ireland, but I don’t think I’d ever have done it by myself at my age. But now Martin’s so excited about finding Seth and Dyanne’s desperately hoping the Irish

relatives are rich so she can stay with them when she goes off on her big trip.'

Both women smiled. Dyanne was the same age as Doris's grandson, Lloyd. Many amused conversations were had about their grandchildren, who were both going through an 'I want to be famous' phase, when they weren't too preoccupied with 'Can I have an advance on my pocket money?'

'Are you stopping for a rest?' Viletta called back to them.

'No,' yelled Doris, and they started walking again. 'It's going to be tough, Lillie, you realize that? You'll be alone on a very emotional trip.'

Lillie nodded. She could rely on Doris for utter honesty.

'I'm going to be fine,' she said, and gave her friend a smile.

For the first time since Sam died, Doris caught a glimpse of peace in her friend's iris-blue eyes.

'Sam will be with me,' Lillie added, touching one hand to her chest above her heart. Then her lips quirked in a smile like the Lillie of old. 'I'm ordering him to come!'