



The Sting of Death

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Chapter One

‘What on *earth* does she think she’s doing?’

Penn was staring in bewilderment at a figure at the top of the field. ‘Is it some sort of ritual?’

‘She’s zapping wasps, I think,’ Laurie explained mildly. ‘There’s a nest of them close to her precious bees and they’re robbing the hive. It led to all-out warfare, and she goes up when she can to lend her support to the bees.’

‘Um – how?’

‘Well, if I’ve got it right, she spreads a trickle of honey on the roof of the hive, and then when a wasp starts drinking it, she hits it with a piece of wood. She says she killed sixty yesterday.’

‘Is that enough to make a difference?’

‘I wouldn’t think so.’

Penn's gaze was riveted on the veiled apparition, over a hundred yards away. Her aunt was a constant mystery to her – sometimes so sensible it hurt, other times completely mad. A young golden cocker spaniel sat at a judicious distance watching its mistress warily.

‘Doesn't she get stung?’

‘Scarcely ever. She's very good at it, you know. Her honey won all the prizes in the show last week.’ He smiled, a parody of the proud husband.

‘You've really taken to this rural life, haven't you? It's working out a lot better than I expected it to.’

‘Roma wouldn't have allowed it to fail. You know what she's like.’

Penn chuckled. ‘Yes, I know what she's like,’ she agreed. ‘After all, I've known her all my life.’

‘And I'm just a newcomer on the scene,’ he supplied lightly, putting out a hand to prevent any protestation.

Roma Millan was enjoying herself enormously. Everything people told you about wasps was completely wrong. It didn't make any sense, for example, to talk about ‘making them cross’. It was hard to see how a wasp could be any more provoked than to have a hunk of wood brought down on its fellows in a relentless offensive, just when some irresistible honey had been provided by a kind deity. And yet there was no sign of anger. They flew past her shoulder, over and around her, to get to the bait, and sat meekly lapping at it while death came out of the sky.

‘Serves you right,’ Roma muttered, as a particularly large insect was flattened under her sure aim. ‘You should

leave my bees alone.’ She had refined the force of her blows, so as to reduce the risk of damage to the roof of the hive. The bees seemed unconcerned at the thumps – she almost permitted herself to believe they knew she was there to help them.

The truth was that she was worried about the bees. They couldn’t get on with their normal work while having to man all defences against the wasps. It was war, pure and simple. Struggling pairs of combatants rolled on the ground beneath the hive – wasp and bee locked together, trying to sting each other, like soldiers in a pre-mechanised war. The only sure solution would be to track down the wasps’ nest and get a professional to destroy them. In a six-acre field, with several hundred yards of hedge, this was a tall order. Meanwhile, she couldn’t bear to let the poor bees fight it out unaided.

Penn’s energetically waving arm eventually attracted Roma’s attention, as she brushed a trickle of sweat out of her eye. ‘Oh!’ she muttered happily to the spaniel. ‘Better go and say hello. Come on, Lolly.’

She didn’t hurry – it was too hot for that. Penn would come to meet her in a minute, when she’d judged that Laurie wouldn’t feel abandoned. Her niece’s features came slowly into focus as the gap between them diminished, the curves of her face reliably distinctive. Penn had one of those faces, Roma had long ago discovered, that always took you by surprise. You only remembered a shadowy form of it, so the reality seemed to possess an extra dimension and vivid colours. Penn’s brow was high and convex, her cheeks as plump as a baby doll’s. Her skin

was a deep honey-brown after a sunny summer. When she smiled, her mouth was a wide expanse of teeth and full lips. Roma thought she was lovely, a fortunate blend of her mother's rich colouring and her father's Polish bone structure. *Pity Justine never looked so nice*, Roma caught herself thinking with a stab of irritation. Trust her sister to produce the perfect daughter, leaving Roma with a much inferior model. All this talk about genes and designer babies made Roma laugh. Nature would always be several jumps ahead. Justine, the child of an aching handsome Spaniard and the not unattractive Roma, had turned out sallow, under-sized and un-coordinated.

Aunt and niece embraced lightly, the affection restrained. Roma looked over Penn's shoulder at Laurie. 'I told you she'd be early,' she said. 'She's always early – keen to see her old auntie, like a good girl.'

'What were you doing with the bees?' Penn asked quickly. A shade *too* quickly, Roma noticed, aware of the way Penn worried about the threat of comparison with her cousin Justine. 'It looked awfully violent.'

'I was helping them fight off the wasps. Futile, I know, but it makes me feel better.'

'Are the bees in serious trouble?'

Roma shook her head. 'Not really, in the long term, but it's a dreadful nuisance for them, and it's sure to interrupt their work. By this time next month, the wasps will have mostly died off. I should probably feel sorry for them – they haven't got anything like the organisation of the bees. But I don't – I hate them. I like killing them just for the sake of it.'

Penn tutted, her shock only half-simulated. ‘I never took you for a killer,’ she smiled. The spaniel was jumping up at her, demanding attention. Penn took little notice.

‘We’re all killers in one way or another – aren’t we, Laurie?’ Roma said.

Her husband raised an eyebrow, and took a half-step backwards. ‘Steady on,’ he protested. ‘Speak for yourself.’

‘Tush!’ Roma derided him, and began to say something more, before stopping herself. ‘Well – let’s go and have a cup of tea, then. Or lemonade. I think there’s some left in the fridge.’

The threesome sat in the tight little courtyard between the back of the cottage and the wall surrounding the vegetable garden, Roma defiantly positioning herself in full sunshine, the others, including the dog, edging sideways into a patch of shade. Penn made routinely approving remarks about the garden and the glorious location they’d found for themselves, and waited for the questions to begin.

‘What did you say this woman was called – your long lost cousin on your father’s side?’ Roma finally enquired. ‘It all sounds a bit peculiar to me.’

‘She’s called Karen, and she’s the daughter of Daddy’s sister, Aunt Miriam. You must have met her now and then?’

Roma blinked slowly. ‘I suppose I did,’ she agreed. ‘Wasn’t there a funeral? Somebody’s father? I got roped in to mind all you infants, while everyone went off to the church.’

Penn considered. ‘Probably that was Karen’s granddad. Aunt Miriam’s father-in-law. My dad would have gone, because – well, because he does things like that. He’d have

wanted to be with his sister. So if my mum was busy, you'd have had me to look after as well. I hardly remember it – nobody seemed unduly sad.'

'Miriam looked like you do now,' Roma said slowly. 'Same round cheeks and bouncy hair. I remember Helen talking about her sometimes, saying what a good friend a sister-in-law could be. I'm sure I only met her once or twice. Funny how long ago all that seems; another lifetime. So this long lost cousin is Miriam's daughter?'

'She isn't really long lost; I've known where she is. We used to have holidays together when we were really little. I stayed with them once for a whole week. Karen and I played with dolls a lot, and our mothers cooked. You're right, they were good friends for a few years, Helen and Miriam. I remember my dad joking about it, saying they liked each other more than him.'

'But it didn't last long?'

'They moved away, that's all. There wasn't any falling-out or anything.'

'Well, it's a nice coincidence that she lives only a few miles from here. You can visit us both on the same trip. Very convenient.' Roma leant her head back, getting the sun full on her face, eyes closed. But the questions continued. 'Is she the same age as you?'

'Older. I seem to remember she was six when I was four. She's got two kids now.'

'Married, dare I ask?'

'Oh, yes. All very traditional in that respect, from what I can gather. Except—' Penn spluttered into laughter. 'Well, I suppose they *are* rather unusual, after all.'

Roma waited, eyes open again, but unfocused. In the shade of the tangled wisteria, Laurie seemed to have dozed off.

‘Her husband’s a sort of undertaker. He runs his own business, doing something New Agey – natural burials in a field behind the house.’

‘Good God! You mean Drew Slocombe? I know Drew, you idiot. He’s the sweetest boy. Not the least bit New Agey, either.’

Penn closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, she shook her head slowly, in resignation. ‘I might have guessed,’ she sighed. ‘You’ve been here five minutes and already you know the entire population in intimate detail.’

‘We’ve been here for almost a year, and Drew is one of the few people I’ve actually befriended locally,’ Roma corrected. ‘He’s one of those easy people you feel you can talk to about anything after five minutes’ acquaintance. He obviously has a soft spot for older women – in the nicest possible way, of course. We took to each other right away.’ She hoped Penn couldn’t see the brief wince at the memory of her last conversation with Drew. It still brought a surge of hot embarrassment, two weeks later.

‘Laurie? Did you know she was carrying on with a young undertaker?’ Penn asked. ‘Who just happens to be married to my cousin, into the bargain?’

‘Nothing to do with me,’ Laurie disclaimed, without opening his eyes. ‘She does exactly as she likes, you know that.’

‘So – tell me how you happened to meet him,’ Penn invited.

‘He was a guest speaker at my Probus Club. Did it very well, too. No mealy-mouthed euphemisms . . . called a corpse—’

‘And a spade a spade,’ Penn supplied, erupting into another musical laugh. ‘I assume he has plenty of use for a spade. God, Auntie, this is all very bizarre.’

‘It’s not bizarre at all. You’ll see when you meet him. He’s a perfectly normal young man.’

Karen Slocombe was taking the sudden reappearance of her cousin with complete equanimity. ‘She’ll stay an hour, talk about the kids, and her job and how we last saw each other in 1979, and that’ll be it. That’s how it always is with cousins – you know you’ve got something in common, but you’re damned if you can work out exactly what it is.’

Drew chuckled. ‘I wouldn’t know. I’ve only got one cousin.’

‘Yes, I remember. A simpering child called Nanette. Interesting name.’

‘Boring person. So, are we giving this Penn some lunch? And is Penn short for Penelope?’

‘Yes to lunch; no to the name. The story, as I remember it, is that our grandfather was helped by Quakers when he first came here from Poland, and quite quickly became one himself. When his son – Uncle Sebastian – had a daughter, Grandfather was ill, and they thought he was going to die. So they named her after William Penn, the Quaker, to please him.’

‘Did he die?’

‘No, you know he didn’t. He lived another twenty years. He’d only just died when I met you. Don’t you remember?’

‘Now you mention it,’ Drew said vaguely. ‘I get confused when I’ve never actually met any of the people concerned.’

‘We should make more effort to keep in touch with them,’ Karen said seriously. ‘We owe it to the children. My mother’s only seen Timothy twice.’

Drew sighed.

‘I know,’ she sympathised. ‘It’s all such a performance.’

‘Let’s get the cousin over with first,’ he said. ‘One relation is quite enough to be going on with.’

They’d finished Karen’s home-made leek soup before Penn mentioned to Drew that Roma Millan was her aunt. ‘She says she knows you,’ she added.

‘Oh, yes,’ he nodded with enthusiasm. ‘I know Roma. She and I get on very well. The first time I met her, she asked me exactly how long it takes for the flesh to come away from the bones, assuming the body isn’t in an airtight coffin.’

‘And did you know?’ Penn’s face paled slightly, but she seemed determined not to be disgusted.

He laughed and shook his head. ‘Not really. And I don’t think she was genuinely interested. She was just showing off to the other Probus ladies.’

‘That sounds like my auntie,’ Penn agreed.

‘We had a long talk a couple of weeks ago – did she tell you?’

Penn shook her head. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Oh, well . . .’ he let the sentence tail away.

Karen’s failure to join in the conversation was due to

a preoccupation with helping her two-year-old daughter Stephanie finish her soup without getting most of it on the table. In a high chair on her other side, Stephanie's little brother Timothy banged a spoon.

'Family life,' Drew sighed, half-apologetically. 'You probably didn't bargain for all this.'

'They're sweet,' Penn mumbled. 'It's very nice to meet them.'

'Well, we quite like them,' Drew said. 'Though we do have our moments.'

Karen wiped Stephanie's face, and handed her a thick slice of bread spread with Marmite. 'That should keep her quiet for a bit,' she said.

'It's always quiet,' Stephanie announced reproachfully. Everybody laughed, including Timothy.

'You are,' Karen confirmed. 'You're amazing.'

'It's a coincidence, though, you being Karen's cousin, as well as Roma's niece,' Drew pressed on. 'One of those small world things.'

Penn shrugged. 'England's fairly small, when you think about it. Roma was looking for a rural retreat, and because she was based in Bristol all her working life, it's not surprising she looked in this area. Laurie's lived mostly in Devon, so it's familiar territory for him, too.'

'They seem to like it, anyway.'

'It's absolutely fabulous, apart from traffic noise, and aeroplanes going over. It's a lovely view of the hills, whatever they're called.'

'Brendon,' Drew supplied, before Karen chipped in determinedly.

‘How’s your dad, Uncle Sebastian? I used to like him. He always seemed to have a special way with children.’

‘Because he’s never properly grown up,’ said Penn. ‘He’s a perpetual little brother. Your mum has a lot to answer for. He still tries to get her approval.’

Karen looked at her own children thoughtfully. ‘These are only a year and a half apart. It probably won’t be the same at all. My mum’s four or five years older than your dad, isn’t she?’

Drew let their talk wash over him, thinking about Roma Millan, and continuing to marvel at the fact that her niece was Karen’s cousin. There seemed to be something fatalistic about it, something that would maintain his link with Roma. If so, he was grateful for it. Roma intrigued him in several ways. She seemed so robust and clear-sighted at their first encounter, but during their talk of two weeks ago, she’d revealed deeper layers, where she was much less sure of herself. The revelation had been deliberate. She was asking him for something, appealing to him in some unspecified way. He wondered whether Penn held any clues as to what this might be.

Conversation became uncomfortably arduous again as Timothy demanded everyone’s attention while he ran through his repertoire of animal noises. ‘We’ll go and sit in the garden,’ Karen ordained, as soon as the salad and cold meat had all gone. ‘These two won’t be such pests there.’

Another reproachful look from Stephanie made Karen take back the remark. But they adjourned to the garden anyway.

Drew commented on the influence of the Polish genes in the appearance of the cousins. ‘You really are very alike,’ he observed. ‘Like sisters.’

‘We were saying how odd cousinship is,’ Karen said. ‘Or is it cousinhood? Anyway, here we are with all these genes in common, and we know almost nothing about each other. And I for one have almost no idea what Poland’s like, even though my grandparents were born there. I’ve never been, have you?’

Penn nodded. ‘I took a year out after school and spent three months there. I stayed with Great-Aunt Hannah – Grandma’s sister. I suppose she must be your great-aunt as well. An amazing character. I still write to her.’

‘How old is she?’

‘Oh, not very old. Early seventies. She makes me feel very connected to that part of the family. Tells me all the births and deaths and marriages.’

‘Why wasn’t she a refugee as well?’

Penn shrugged. ‘More people stayed than left, you know. The family aren’t Jewish – they weren’t in much actual danger.’

Karen shook her head. ‘It all seems a million years ago, the war and everything. Mustn’t it be awful to live in a country that everyone instantly associates with events of sixty years ago? You say *Poland*, and all anyone knows about it is that it was invaded by Hitler. I suppose everyone there regards it as ancient history, as well.’

‘More or less,’ Penn said vaguely. Her attention had been caught by the contents of the field behind the house. ‘Is that your cemetery?’ she asked Drew.

‘Peaceful Repose Burial Ground,’ he corrected her. ‘Fifty-two burials already.’ The pride in his tone was unmistakable. ‘Just about enough to live on, if we’re careful.’

‘Only if I grow nearly all our food,’ Karen pointed out, waving towards the further end of the garden. ‘I’m getting very good at it. Everything we’ve just eaten, apart from the butter and meat, was home-grown.’

‘Fantastic,’ Penn applauded, half-heartedly. Her main attention was still on the graves in the field. ‘They don’t show,’ she said, and then laughed at her own words. ‘I mean . . .’

‘I know. Even though we haven’t banned formal headstones, like some places do, most people opt for a piece of natural granite or sandstone, and we’re not arranging them in straight rows. The trees are a good camouflage, too. Amazing how quickly they’re growing.’ He surveyed his acres as if seeing them afresh. ‘We haven’t even been here two years yet, you know,’ he boasted.

‘It’s lovely,’ Penn told him. ‘No wonder Aunt Roma’s so impressed. It’s absolutely her kind of thing.’

‘She wanted to book a plot—’ Penn’s expression of horror stopped him. ‘Why, what’s the matter?’

The visitor put a hand flat against her sternum, and didn’t speak for a few moments. ‘She’s only fifty-nine. And she never talks about dying. It seems like tempting fate,’ she gasped breathlessly. ‘It gave me an awful feeling, you saying that. Just superstition, I know.’

‘It is, yes,’ he said firmly. ‘Just thinking about dying doesn’t make it happen, you know.’

‘Right,’ Penn said shortly. ‘I’m sorry. I hate to think of her dying before she’s patched things up with Justine, you see.’

‘Justine?’ Karen repeated. ‘I remember a little girl called Justine. Auntie Helen brought her to some family gathering.’ She frowned, trying to remember.

‘Roma’s daughter,’ Penn confirmed. ‘They fell out five years ago – it was all rather horrible. Roma can hardly bear to say her name now.’ With a visible effort, she changed the subject and told Karen and Drew about her aunt’s vendetta against the wasps, making them laugh more than the story warranted, all three eager to lighten the atmosphere.

‘This is a bad area for wasps,’ Karen remarked. ‘Stephanie’s been stung twice in the past week, poor little thing.’

Again Penn’s violent reaction was startling. ‘No!’ she gasped. ‘That’s absolutely terrible.’

Karen raised her eyebrows. ‘No, it isn’t,’ she said. ‘It only hurt for a minute, and she forgot all about it in no time. She’s not allergic or anything.’

‘But people can *die* from a sting. And you don’t always know if you’re going to react badly; from one sting to the next, you can become sensitised.’

‘Phooey,’ said Karen, unmoved. ‘One person in a million, maybe. There’s no sense in worrying about it, anyway. If it happens, it happens.’

‘You can get special medical kits, with an antidote, if you go into anaphylactic shock. You should get one,’ Penn pressed, her expression still full of concern.

Karen's face hardened, and she looked away over the field, forcing down the annoyance. 'Well, it's only a short season. I don't expect I'll bother,' she said lightly.

Never happy in an atmosphere of conflict, Drew sought to moderate things. 'Karen doesn't approve of the over-medicalisation that goes on these days,' he explained. 'I think she's right, on the whole. Never before have human beings been so healthy, and yet they seem to worry constantly about their physical wellbeing. It's irrational, when you stop to think about it.'

Penn blinked. 'Well, er – I suppose that's so,' she stammered. Drew had the impression he'd struck a nerve. When Penn had first arrived, he'd characterised her as an intelligent young woman, confident and relaxed in a new situation. When he'd learnt of her relationship with Roma Millan, he had recognised a similarity immediately. Not in looks, as with Karen, but in general outlook and approach to the world. Now he began to revise this judgment. She was much less grounded than he'd first assumed; the initial behaviour seemed more of a façade than the real woman, and a very thin façade at that. She was nervous, flustered and irritated. Casual remarks could upset her. He watched her closely for a moment, observing a struggle to relax. He also had an impression that she wanted to say something to him.

An urgent wail from Timothy effectively removed Karen from the scene, leaving Drew attempting to mollify their visitor. He returned to the subject of their mutual acquaintance.

'Your aunt's retired then, is she? She's never mentioned anything about her work to me.'

It was a dismal failure. Penn's face tightened even further, and her hands curled into fists. 'She was a teacher,' she muttered. 'The same as me – only I'm in FE. All my students are over sixteen, thank God. But Roma was in primary.'

It was difficult to see why that should cause such agitation. Drew grinned his most disarming grin. 'Of course – I should have known. She's just like my old French teacher, Miss Harrison.'

'And was Miss Harrison dismissed for abusing the kids?' Penn flared, her eyes wide and hot. 'Because that's what happened to Aunt Roma. That's why she's hidden herself away down here, trying to forget about it and start a new life. She had a lot of good years left in her, and they took it all away from her – for *nothing*.'

Karen looked over from where she was sorting out the children. Penn stood up, brushing non-existent fluff from the legs of her trousers. Drew teetered on the plastic garden chair, not sure whether to stand as well or stay in place.

'I'd better go,' Penn said. 'I'm sorry to have been so touchy. I'm not usually like this. It's just . . .' She clamped her lips together, and pressed a finger and thumb into the corner of each eye, in a gesture Drew recognised as designed to stem the flow of tears.

'It's just—' she looked at Drew urgently. 'Can I trust you about this? Trust you not to think I'm mad?'

He looked up at her, mildly. 'I shouldn't think you're mad,' he smiled. 'And even if you are, there's probably a reason for it.'

‘It seems mad, to be coming to you, a complete stranger, and pouring out my troubles.’

‘Happens all the time,’ said Karen, overhearing this last remark and giving an encouraging laugh. ‘Must be something in his face.’

‘Well,’ Penn tried again. ‘It might be nothing at all. I’m probably drawing all the wrong conclusions. It’s Justine, you see.’

‘Ah,’ Drew breathed.

‘She’s gone missing.’

Karen and Drew exchanged a long deep look, containing concern, confusion, and, from Karen a resigned, *Oh God, here-we-go-again.*

‘You’d better try telling us about it then,’ said Drew, pointing at Penn’s chair in a silent instruction to sit down again.