

Bees in June

HARPER
MUSE

a novel

ELIZABETH
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HARPER MUSE



Bees in June

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Bees in June

A swarm of bees in May
Is worth a load of hay;
A swarm of bees in June
Is worth a silver spoon;
A swarm of bees in July
Is not worth a fly.

—Seventeenth-century beekeepers' poem



HARPER
MUSE

PROLOGUE

HIS HEART IS STILL BROKEN.

Could we have prevented this?

Who among us was strong enough to fly that vast distance? Even if we could have managed such a feat, a human in love is not likely to listen to reason, no matter how sage the advice.

It's been years in human time, and he is no stronger. He has ignored every sky-swept sunset and even the most intoxicating rose. We fear his wounds will never heal.

He seems so earthbound now, keeping his eyes downcast instead of among the stars that used to leave him wonderstruck.

It all seems so cruel. There must have been a gentler way to redirect him to his true path.

Life for humans is rarely gentle. Experiencing the sting of betrayal will allow him to understand how sacred the balm of true love is when he finds it at last.

The lessons are so hard.

True, but the rewards are so great.

May we tell him?

Yes, it is time. We must construct a premise more compelling than even our most magnificent honeycomb so that he can reach only one conclusion. The sooner he gets to Spark, the sooner his shattered heart will begin to knit back together.

What about her heart?

It grows colder every day. If he does not hurry, though, more than her heart is at risk. Her very life depends upon our success.

Is he going to save her?

No, something even better is afoot. She's about to realize she must save herself





CHAPTER

1

Spark, Tennessee
June 1, 1969

SUNLIGHT FLASHED AGAINST A BIT OF SILVER CLASPED in the enormous crow's beak. The bird, black as a moonless night, soared in a lazy semicircle over the newly sprouted tobacco. A soft breeze stirred the oak leaves and ruffled the white blossoms on the climbing roses that had grown against the small farmhouse for the last fifty years. The bird landed on the porch with his offering of a can's pull tab encircling his chipped beak like a ring. As he dropped the metal onto the enamelware plate, he cocked his head to eye Rennie Hendricks. She reached over her sleeping dog, picked up the ring, and deposited the scrap of metal into a mug filled with paper clips, bent nails, and foil gum wrappers.

"Thank you, Poe." She set aside the worn copy of *Jane Eyre* she was reading and pointed to the enamel plate. "Some pumpkin and sunflower seeds and near the last of the peanuts today. I should have had all three planted at least a month ago. The sunflowers and pumpkins will catch

up, but peanuts need time. Maybe—”

Shrieking in protest, the crow flew off in a rush of wings and feathers as Rennie’s husband, Luther, stepped onto the back porch. “Takin’ this to the barn,” he said.

Rennie’s eyes fell to the wooden cradle in his hands. “I’m not ready yet, Tiny. Please put it back in the nursery.”

“We don’t have a nursery, same as we don’t have a baby.” He set the cradle on the worn, wooden boards of the porch. “It’s been almost three weeks. Time to get back to life.”

Rennie’s voice trembled. “Tiny, please. Try to be understanding.”

“Staring at an empty cradle all day isn’t gonna bring him back. Our son is gone—dead and buried. I’ve *tried* to be understanding, like when I drove you out to the cemetery yesterday. I thought you’d cry a little and say one of your prayers, but what do you do instead? Pull out a blanket and tuck it into the dirt around his grave. He’s not cold, the same way he doesn’t need *this*.” Tiny grabbed the cradle. “What if someone saw you singing that crazy lullaby about the moon and stroking the blanket you put over a mound of dirt? They’d be callin’ Doc Grisham and tellin’ him you’ve gone loony.”

Rennie’s voice shook. “Please put it back.” Losing Gabriel had devastated her, but after the funeral, Tiny had returned to his routine like nothing had happened, while she lingered in a gray pit that made even the smallest of tasks daunting. “I need more time.”

His jaw tightened, and without a word, he went back inside with the cradle. When he returned, he said, “It’s tough on both of us, but moping on the back porch all day isn’t doing any good.” Running his enormous hands through his

sandy hair, he added, "How about cooking us a nice supper or mending that shirt I tore on the fence last month?" He stepped off the porch but turned around to add, "Maybe think about focusing on me for a change now that you're not gonna be a mama."

She swallowed her protest. She *was* a mother, and always would be, even if her child was already in heaven, and he was wrong to say otherwise.

Tiny glared. "You hardly even look my way these days, but if you did, you'd see I'm struggling too, losing my son and trying to farm this godforsaken land. Almost everyone we graduated with makes their living off tobacco, but I swear I don't know how any farmer survives. Beb White says it takes a thirteen-month year to turn a profit in tobacco, and he's right." He looked at his wife. "I could use some encouragement and maybe a little appreciation while I'm out here working like a dog, trying to keep us fed and coming up with the damn rent my own parents are chargin' us.

Rennie had been expecting the topic of money to come up. It worked its way into every one of their numerous fights, and with what had happened a few days ago, the topic was overdue.

Tiny's father had crossed the field that connected the two houses earlier in the week, letting himself into the kitchen without so much as a knock, demanding to see Tiny. "Where is the bastard?" Wayne Hendricks had snarled. "He owes me a hunnert dollars rent. Said he'd bring it by this morning, but of course he didn't."

"He's in Nashville getting supplies for the farm."

"Is that what he calls his liquor store runs? Tell him to

pay up or you and him both will be out on your sorry asses.” On his way out, he added, “How does it feel to be married to a loser?”

When Tiny had returned, she dreaded delivering the message, knowing it would result in a fight that would end with Tiny driving to Putney to drink away whatever was left of the day or night at the Moonshine Lounge in nearby Caldwell County. She was right, even with leaving out the part about being married to a loser, and Tiny didn’t return until almost noon the next day. He was feeling the pressure, and so was Rennie. The farm wasn’t much, but it was the only home she had. She surveyed the small house she had lived in for the last four years, with its faded white paint and shingles curled enough from decades of sun and rain to flap like bird wings whenever the wind blew.

She had barely survived the last three weeks. Her body insisted she had an infant to feed, producing milk for a child who would never nurse. Her mind heard Gabriel wailing for her, and she spent the first few nights home roaming the house, searching for him. Her brain eventually comprehended Gabriel was gone, but her heart only wanted to crawl in a grave of her own beside him. “I feel so left behind,” she had sobbed to Tiny, who had no way to cope with his wife’s cavernous emotions beyond awkwardly stroking her hair.

As she rocked on the back porch, an idea came to her. What if she found a job? She could help ease some of their financial stress, and having something to do, somewhere to be, might distract her, get her back onto a path that could lead her to a semblance of normalcy.

The crunch of gravel on their rutted driveway made them

both look up. Tiny grunted. "Here comes May Dean. Why am I not surprised? I told everyone to stay the hell away from us and let us mourn in peace, but your idiot cousin never thinks the rules apply to her." He grimaced. "Need to check something in the barn."

May Dean Bradford parked a shiny red convertible in the side yard and pulled a Castner Knott shopping bag from the back seat. A gust of wind blew her blonde hair in her face and swirled her flowy green dress. "I know Tiny said no calls or visits," she said from the driveway, "but I couldn't stay away a minute longer." After climbing the three steps onto the porch, she gestured to the bag. "I've brought you some food." She smiled at the sleeping dog. "I'm glad to see you, Spot." May Dean nodded to the bag. "Some of my pot roast, mashed potatoes, and coleslaw, plus some Jell-O salad. Of course, I'm not as good a cook as you, but who is?" May Dean pecked Rennie on the cheek and frowned at her pale face. "I'll put all this in the fridge and fix us some lemonade." She lifted a jug from the bag. "I just made it this morning."

"Thanks. That'd be nice."

After a couple of minutes, May Dean popped the screen door open with her hip and handed Rennie a glass that glistened with beads of condensation. "I've missed you these last three weeks. How've you been feeling?"

"Tiny's ready for me to get back to normal."

"I asked about you, not Tiny."

Rennie sighed. "Not too good. I don't have the strength to do much past sit on this porch and watch the world go by." She glanced toward the barn where her husband was hiding from May Dean. "But I'm thinking of looking for a

job, something to occupy my mind.”

“Don’t rush into anything too soon. Your body needs time to heal.” She handed Rennie a small box. “I was doing some shopping yesterday and saw this. I thought of you right away. It’s a scarf.” As Rennie opened the gift, May Dean nodded toward the convertible. “Come for a ride with me. You can tie back your beautiful auburn hair, and we’ll see how fast my birthday present will go.”

“Some other time.” A flash drew her eye to the porch railing. *Why would a lightning bug be out in the middle of the day?* She looked closer. The sparkle came from a bee, not a lightning bug, and it was stalking up and down the porch railing. Was it glowing? She shook her head. *It must be the sun reflecting off its wings*, she thought, but the vibrance told her she was wrong. *Bees don’t shine.*

She turned back to her cousin. “And my hair’s mouse brown.” A slight smile crossed her lips. “Remember when you took me to that fancy beauty shop in Nashville and that snooty stylist said he’d never seen actual mouse brown hair before? I’ve never forgotten it.” Odd that the bee was ignoring the fragrant roses blooming just a foot away, and the sun was *still* reflecting from its wings, even though it was in shade. A memory stirred in her brain—she’d seen that light before.

“He was just jealous because his own hair looked like dishwater after an all-you-can-eat buffet.” May Dean followed Rennie’s gaze and immediately slipped off a shoe. “I’ll kill it, what with Tiny being so allergic and all.”

Rennie lifted her hand in protest. “Never kill a bee, especially in June. Uncle Dixon taught us, remember? A bee in June is like a silver spoon.”

Putting her shoe back on, May Dean frowned at her cousin. "I thought that poem was about how bees stop swarming by July 'cause they're all dead as a fly."

Rennie shook her head. "It's about how bees help the earth. And June bees are the best of all. They pollinate the plants and ensure the farmers will have a good crop."

"I'm glad one of us was payin' attention. Sometimes Uncle Dixon's stories seem too much like school." She brushed her hair off her shoulders. "It's forty-nine days till the moon landing. Ev and I have a countdown calendar on the fridge, and I took one over to Uncle Dixon too. Ev says it's science and American know-how that'll get those brave men to the moon, but *I* think it's magic and prayer." She tugged at the hem of her dress. "My parents' first date was to hear this new thing called a radio, and here we are, talking about a man walking on the moon. Do you and Tiny want to come over and watch the landing at our house?"

"Tiny thinks the government's faking the whole thing, that they're going to film it all out in Hollywood to fool the Russians." Rennie paused. "But I'd like to see it."

"Great. We'll plan something."

Rennie rocked gently while May Dean shifted in her chair, her face flushing as she spoke. "I met the man who bought the old Sawyer place next door to Uncle Dixon. He moved in about two weeks ago. His name is Ambrose Beckett, and he is *so* handsome. I'm guessing he's about thirty. Black hair and the biggest green eyes. And no sign of a wedding ring. You should take him one of your famous pies so you can meet—"

"You're babbling, May Dean. When you talk this fast, you've got something you're afraid to say."

After a tense moment of silence between the two women, May Dean whispered, "I'm scared to tell you."

"Maybe I can do it for you." Rennie took May Dean's hand. "You and Everett are expecting."

Words gushed from May Dean's lips. "How did you know? I didn't want to say anything because your pregnancy was so hard, and then, well, I mean . . ."

"Gabriel died. You can say it." Her voice was barely a whisper, and the words sliced like knives as they crossed her throat. "My baby came too early to survive on his own."

May Dean hung her head. "I'm so sorry, Rennie."

Rennie pasted a smile on her face. "Listen to me. You can be sorry my son died, but don't you *ever* be sorry about your baby." Her voice quavered as she softly added, "I'm happy for you."

May Dean's face flooded with relief. "I hated keeping it from you."

That shiny bee was *still* marching up and down the railing, mesmerizing Rennie. Chill bumps covered her arms despite the warm day.

Fishing her keys from her straw bag, May Dean said, "I'd best be getting back. Ev has been fussing over me like a mother hen ever since I told him, and he's liable to call the sheriff for a search party if I'm a minute late." Her voice softened. "I'm due in October." She paused on the step. "We've told each other everything since we were kids. I should have known not to be scared. Love you, and I'll check on you tomorrow."

Rennie blinked back the tears pricking her eyes. "It's wonderful news." She watched May Dean drive away, her blonde hair flying in the breeze.

The bee, still gleaming, flew from the railing and landed on the rocker's arm. She crawled about six inches and turned toward Rennie, vibrating at a frequency Rennie could feel in her soul. The words *Come right away* popped into her head, and with a certainty she didn't understand, she knew she had to go to her uncle Dixon. Still weak from the difficult birth, she struggled to stand, then walked toward her husband with the bee flying alongside her, urging her forward.

Tiny was in the tobacco field, yanking a weed from freshly turned earth.

"I've got to take the truck to check on Uncle Dixon."

Sweat dripped down Tiny's face. "Nope. I gotta go to town."

Rennie's voice was soft but urgent. "It's important. I won't be long."

He squinted down at his wife, a full foot shorter than him. "I didn't hear the phone ring, and I didn't see you get outta that damn rocking chair to call *him*." The bee orbited Tiny's head, buzzing angrily. "Did May Dean tell you to go over there?" His nostrils flared. "She can drive that ridiculous birthday present of hers over to check on him her own self and quit being so pushy for once."

The bee left Rennie's side and landed on Tiny's cheek, glowing like a porch light on a foggy night.

Tiny grabbed his face. "Bastard stung me." He slapped at the bee. "Gotta take an antihistamine and get some ice on this thing before my whole eye swells shut." The bee's motionless body fell to the ground. "Take the damn truck."

The drive to her uncle's house took less than ten minutes, but with each mile, fear ratcheted up in Rennie's stomach. It had only been a month since her last visit with her uncle,

but it seemed like a lifetime ago as she sped to his farm. She had been so happy, almost giddy, during their visit as they laughed and talked the afternoon away, neither realizing that tragedy was about to strike.

As a child, Rennie had two working parents, which meant she had spent most of her summers with her aunt and uncle, and she had developed a deep love for them both. Her aunt and uncle recognized Rennie's interest in nature early on and had delighted in teaching her about the world around them. While her classmates were driving with their parents into Nashville to the roller rink or the movie theater, Rennie was crouched by her uncle, learning about the bioluminescence of foxfire or collecting fiddle-leaf fern heads with her aunt for a salad. Rennie's favorite pastime, though, was listening, entranced, to their stories, which could be about bumblebees that held hands as they napped in the curve of a tulip poplar blossom, or how a person could tell if the coming winter would be mild or harsh if they knew how to interpret nature's coded signs.

May Dean would sometimes join in the adventures, providing the perfect companion for those long, lazy days. They would play in the bee yard for hours, pretending the scarlet elf cup mushrooms by the spring were goblets, or the delicate Dutchman's breeches blooms were their dolls' laundry hanging on a gossamer green clothesline. Their hickory stick dolls would watch from their pawpaw leaf rafts as the two girls waded in the bend of Flat Rock Creek, peeping under stones for a bashful crawdad or sunfish.

At the thought of the creek, an image came to Rennie of a glowing bee, luminous through the dark water—the same light that had emanated from the bee that had stung Tiny.

She grasped at the memory, but it eluded her. She shook the fragmented recollection from her head. What she needed to focus on now was getting to her uncle.

As Rennie bumped along Dixon's gravel driveway, she spied his ancient pickup in its usual spot under an enormous elm. She parked beside it and jumped from the truck, tripping on the root that had caught her foot so many times. After steadying herself, she brushed by the rowan tree her aunt Eugenia had planted to ward off evil from entering their home and ran inside the handsome farmhouse built with her uncle's own hands decades ago. The Kit-Cat clock in the empty kitchen swung its black tail and rolled its eyes in a rhythmic cadence that contrasted against her own racing pulse. She hurried into his bedroom, where a double bed was neatly made with a colorful quilt. "Uncle Dixon!" she called. Nothing. She jerked open the bathroom door and then dashed into the second bedroom. No sign of him. The back porch, where she had listened to dozens of her uncle's stories about the old days, was her next stop. His green wicker rocker sat empty, as did the porch swing. She stopped in her tracks and willed her heart to slow down. *Think, Rennie!*

A breeze carrying the sweet smell of bee balm blew through her hair. Of course. The hives. She bolted off the porch and down the well-worn path, running by trees and then the climbing rose arch. Masses of flowers her aunt had brought as seeds and bulbs from her home in Appalachia as a bride bloomed on either side of the path, while a stone statue of a rabbit peeped out from under an astilbe leaf. She charged through a clearing with a small area of grass and a little ledge reaching out over a bend in Flat Rock Creek,

not hearing the spring splashing against the rocks.

She turned a corner, and there it was, the bee yard, so ethereal and magical, that as a child Rennie had pretended she was a princess in an enchanted land anytime she visited. Delicate anemones, more of Eugenia's handiwork, bordered the edge of the woods, along with bluebells, coneflowers, woodland phlox, and marsh marigolds. Bees bobbed around the puffball flowers of a witch alder bush. Some distance from the water, shaded by a massive linden tree's heart-shaped leaves, were three little hives, painted white, with shingled, pitched roofs, resting in a thick bed of moss. Each hive looked like several boxes set on top of one another, with bees moving in and out of the small hole at the base of each box. Between the water and the hives, a delicate iron settee was nestled under a maple. About three feet from the first hive, her uncle lay crumpled on the ground.



CHAPTER

2

"UNCLE DIXON!" RENNIE CRIED AS SHE RUSHED TO HIS still frame. Kneeling beside him, she gently touched his face. "What happened?"

The man slowly opened his eyes. "I knew they'd tell you," he whispered.

"Who?" Rennie asked.

"The bees. They know I love you."

He's hit his head and isn't making sense. "I love you too, Uncle Dixon. Are you able to move?"

Pressing his arm against the soft grass, he struggled to sit up. "Do you think you can get me over there?" He nodded to the small iron bench about four feet away, crafted with intertwined vines and flowers. A central medallion that resembled a rose bloomed across the back. "I just need a minute to collect myself."

Rennie slid her arms beneath his body and tried to raise him to a standing position. "I can't," she panted. "I'm too weak."

“Let’s both rest here a minute, then I bet we can do it. A few deep breaths will help.”

Soft wind brushed their cheeks as they sat in silence. A bed of yellow trout lilies basked in the sun, while in the distance Rennie spied pink coral bells bobbing in a wooded thicket. *So peaceful*, she thought, watching bees buzzing by hives that seemed to pulse with encouragement. *I could stay here forever.*

“I think I’m ready. Are you?” Rennie asked. After he nodded, she was able to lift her uncle to his feet. She had a good grip on his arm, which felt as skinny as a twig in her hand.

He had worked his fifty-acre farm for decades, doing backbreaking work every day. Although he seemed so frail, it was easy for Rennie to remember her uncle being strong and healthy enough to hoe the rows, strip the stalks, lift the bundles of leaves into the barn rafters, and manage the thousand other physical tasks a tobacco farmer had to perform. She could sense a vibrant man was still in there somewhere, just not where you could see with your eyes. If you looked with your heart, though, you could see the dashing man her aunt Eugenia had fallen in love with all those years ago in the foothills of Kentucky.

Gingerly, he lowered his body onto the seat and gently patted the rose medallion, as if greeting an old friend. “Eugenia loved this bench, and so do I.” Gesturing for Rennie to sit beside him, he said, “I came down here to tell the bees something and lost my balance when I raised my hand to knock on their roof.” He looked at his niece. “I should pro-ly tell you too.” He paused to observe bees resting on the landing board at the base of one of the hives. “A while back, I had a stroke.”

Rennie gasped. “What? I had no idea. When?”

His voice was soft. “You were in the hospital with Gabriel.”

Rennie flinched at the memory of the day that she both birthed and lost her only child.

“I was sitting on the porch with my new neighbor, Ambrose Beckett, and he noticed I was slurring my words and looked kinda funny.” He chuckled. “More funny than usual, I mean. He got me to the hospital in Nashville, and the doctors did a buncha tests, kept me there too long for my liking, then sent me home. Said the stroke was mild, that I should be mostly okay.”

“I wish you had told me. I could have helped you.”

“You had your own life to deal with.” He patted her hand. “And Ambrose’s been coming by to see about me. Yesterday afternoon I asked him to take care of the bees, and he said he would.”

Hearing Ambrose Beckett’s name for the second time in a few hours gave her pause. Both May Dean and her uncle thought a lot of the newcomer, but she made a mental note to learn more about this man. Her uncle had managed on his own for years, but now the independence she had always admired had shifted to vulnerability, and she needed to make sure this Ambrose Beckett could be trusted to be a part of her uncle’s life, caring for what he held most dear, his bees.

Her uncle added, “I can still look after myself. Just need to get a little stronger.” He studied her face. “Something we can work on together as you go on without your Gabriel.” After a moment, he said, “I hope you know how much he loved you and cherished being your son.”

Her uncle had a well-deserved reputation for telling the truth no matter the topic. She had cried for so many things since her son's passing, and hearing from him that Gabriel was aware she was his mother and felt their bond, however brief, was a balm to her soul.

Rennie lifted her face toward the sky, relishing the warmth caressing her skin before a cloud crossed the sun, instantly chilling her. "I'll never understand why I was given what I desired most in the world only to have him taken from me so quickly." She bowed her head and added, "Tiny says it was my fault, that I must have done something wrong to go into labor so early."

"There's a lot in this world we aren't meant to understand, at least not yet." His voice took on a flinty edge. "But let me tell you one thing I *do* know. You were not responsible for your baby coming too early. Tiny is wrong to blame you, and cruel to tell you so." He patted her hand. "You know what I'm grateful for? All Gabriel ever knew was love. Think about how you both lived in those few hours. That perfection was something you needed to see. The bees and I agreed on that." He wrung his hands. "It's so important that I tell them my news."

She turned her focus on her uncle. A head injury was serious. Tiny had once recounted a story to her about how he had hit a fastball that had struck the pitcher in the head with enough force that the man was out for the rest of the season. "He didn't know up from down for a solid month," Tiny had gleefully reported.

She frowned. Did her uncle have a concussion? "Can you tell me again why you needed to come to the hives today?"

"I must tell them something. Our survival depends on

it.”

Growing up, she made a game of talking to the bees, and they had answered her in her head, like when she spoke for her dolls. “*A vivid imagination*” is what her mother said about her, using a tone that indicated this attribute was not a blessing. She had listened to her uncle speaking to his bees hundreds of times, but now he was saying the conversations were life and death. This had to be a concussion, or maybe even another stroke. She needed to call Doc Grisham.

“Let’s head up to the house. You’ll be more comfortable there.”

“No.” He pointed with a shaky finger toward the beehives. “They’ve got to know. I’m already late in telling them.” He looked at Rennie and then back toward the three hives bustling with activity. “When someone dies or there’s a big change in the family, you need to tell your bees right away. If you don’t keep them up to date with all the goings-on, they get sickly and die. Then your crops are poor, you got no honey, and everything goes sour. Listen to the buzz. That might as well be our heartbeat. The bees and us, we’re connected.” He shifted on the bench. “I’ve told them three times about you—the day you was born, when you married Luther and then left that same night for him to be a baseball player up north, and then losing your boy.”

Her uncle had regaled her with tales her whole life—stories about the doings of the kestrels and vireos that flew over Cooke County, how trees communicated with each other through their roots and leaves, or why the star-nosed moles and swamp rabbits around the farm were such good friends. And of course, there were lots of bee stories, like the way they would push any bee from the hive who had

gotten drunk on fermented fruit, or how they could warn each other of danger from a predator. One of her favorites was a story about how a brave little bee had saved her whole hive from one of its worst enemies, yellow jackets. But this wasn't one of his lighthearted yarns that had anywhere from a dash to a full helping of truth. What he was telling her made no sense. "Wouldn't you feel better lying down in your bedroom? I could let Doc Grisham know about your fall."

"No, this needs to get done." His voice shook a bit as he spoke. "It about killed me to come down here and tell them about Eugenia, but I had to do it." Squaring his shoulders, he continued. "She taught me the rules. Tell them everything, whether joy or sorrow. Say the truth the best way you know how."

Uncle Dixon's eyes filled with tears. "The day Eugenia died, I brought down three little pieces of black fabric and tacked one to each roof to let them mourn like any other member of the family." His hand wobbled as he pointed. "Step over there and feel of that first roof on the left."

Rennie rose and stood before the hive, running her hand along the roof until she brushed a little nail surrounded by a tattered scrap of cloth, bleached out from fifteen years in the sun. Her heart twisted at the thought of her uncle coming down here with his black fabric, hammer, and nails.

"Would you knock three times on each roof for me?"

After doing as he asked, she nodded to her uncle. He cleared his throat, and in a thready voice, said, "Okay, bees. Here's some news. I've had a stroke, which means I'm not strong enough to care for you. A good man named Ambrose Beckett'll be taking over for me. He was raised up around bees and knows the old ways. He's got hives of his own,

brought to Spark when he moved here from Kentucky.” His voice shook. “You’ll be well tended to.”

Dixon rubbed his hands along his thighs. “It’s best to tell them before the sun has set and risen, but as long as they’ve been told as soon as I could get to them, it should be okay.” He looked over the bee yard. “This way everything will go along as it should. You know a lot about bees, and I would have asked you to tend to them, but you’re still healing from Gabriel. I hope you understand about me askin’ Ambrose and not you to care for ’em.”

Rennie nodded. “I can still check on them, right?”

“Absolutely.” A look Rennie could not recognize crossed his face. “They know you love them, and they know you love me. I think they’d be hurt if you didn’t look in on ’em.” He nodded to the closest hive. “See how they’re on the landing board?” Rennie glanced at the slanted piece of wood at the hive’s entrance, what Rennie always thought of as a kind of welcome mat. “They’re taking in the information so they can dance for any of ’em that was away from the hive for the announcement.” He peered into her face. “Have I told you why bees dance?”

She’d heard several versions of how bees dance to communicate everything from a warning about a new wasp nest in the area to how a load of nectar had come in and everybody needed to get to work, but she never missed a chance to hear her uncle’s latest spin on one of her favorite tales. “Tell me about them.”

“Bees know what helps one bee also benefits the whole hive. When they find good flowers, like a big patch of asters or yarrow, they dance out a map. The other bees watch and learn how far they need to fly, which direction to go, and

about any dangers, like hornets, from the information that bee is dancing out to them.”

“That’s a lot to get out in a dance.”

“And no bee ever wants to sting you. If she does, she’ll die. A bee has to believe it’s worth giving up her life to harm you.”

Rennie’s mind flashed back to the bee that was so insistent about getting her attention, the one that stung Tiny when he said she couldn’t take the truck to check on her uncle. The bee had fallen to the ground, dead.

“Bees are some of God’s best work, and a bee in June is best of all. A swarm of bees in June is worth a silver spoon, like the poem says.” His eyes studied the hives nestled under the trees. “Watch a bee and she’ll show you what’s right and how we should go. Treasure every bee you see, Rennie.”

“I will.”

He looked up and pointed to the maple. “It’s fixin’ to rain. We’d best get on back.”

Rennie scanned the clear sky. “How do you know that?”

Uncle Dixon nodded to the branches of a tree. “The maple’s showing her petticoats. When the wind blows so you can see the underside of the leaves, you know rain’s coming.”

As she rose from the bench, Rennie asked, “Have you eaten lunch yet?” When Dixon shook his head, she added, “I’ll call the doctor, then fix you something.” She helped him to his feet, and together they slowly made their way from the ring of trees surrounding the hives, through the arch brimming with New Dawn roses, and up to the simple farmhouse that held some of Rennie’s happiest memories.

A gray cat rubbed against Rennie’s legs as she began dialing her uncle’s phone. “Looks like Lewis Carroll is glad to

see me.” After talking briefly with the receptionist at Doc Grisham’s office, Rennie hung up the receiver. “The doctor’s coming by to check on you in about an hour. His nurse said you can carry on like normal if you feel up to it.”

“I’m fine. You don’t need to fuss over me, Rennie.”

“I know, but I’ll feel better knowing the doctor’s seen you.”

She glanced at Lewis Carroll’s bowls and topped off his water dish. Opening the fridge, she looked over the possibilities. *Hmmm, not much here.* “How about a grilled cheese and tomato sandwich?” she asked. “And some iced tea?”

He nodded gratefully and sat at the small oak table. Rennie fixed his lunch and took a mental inventory of his fridge and pantry, planning a stop by the BuyMore grocery store before her next visit. A closer look around the always pin-straight home revealed a thin layer of dust. Maybe that next visit needed to come sooner than she thought.

After finishing his sandwich, which he proclaimed delicious, he pulled a cigarette out of his shirt pocket. “Will you help me with this?”

She took the cigarette from him with a disapproving frown. “You shouldn’t smoke anymore. It could bring on another stroke, or you could fall asleep and start a fire.” Even as she fussed, she struck a match.

“No man is perfect. There are so few things left in this world for me to enjoy, and my Lucky Strikes is one of them.” A little of the old sparkle came back to his eyes. “I’ll take it out on the porch.”

“I’ll clear up these dishes and then sit with you while we wait for the doctor.”

A light breeze greeted her as she stepped onto the oak

planks of the porch. Uncle Dixon was in his favorite chair, a willow rocker with a faded green cushion. Rennie settled beside him in her spot, a wooden swing hanging from two chains. She pushed her toe against the floor, causing the swing to move and the chains to squeak softly. Lewis Carroll appeared and hopped onto Uncle Dixon's lap. Looking over his backyard, her uncle stroked the cat's soft fur.

"I feel more peaceful now that I've told the bees about Ambrose."

"You sure love your bees."

"I do, and they love me back." He rocked gently in his chair. "They love you too, you know. The bees even saved your life when you was little."

Rennie sat up. "What?"

"That time you fell into the creek and sank clear to the bottom. The bees saved you from drowning."

No family story had ever been told about her nearly drowning, and although her mother never talked about anything that could be perceived as complaining, surely *someone* would have mentioned it to her if it had really happened. She bit her lip. Hadn't it been an hour already? Rennie glanced anxiously at her watch and then at her uncle. He was still confused, a sure sign of a concussion. She rose from the swing. "I'll call the doctor ag—"

A black sedan was rumbling up the driveway. "Thank goodness. I'll go fill him in." She hurried off the porch and toward the car. After a moment, Rennie brought Dr. Grisham to her uncle's side. He shone a light in Uncle Dixon's eyes and examined his head, then asked several questions about any blacking out, confusion, or dizziness. The doctor turned to Rennie as he helped her uncle inside. "I

want to do a more thorough exam. I'll come get you when I'm through."

About twenty minutes later, the doctor stepped back onto the porch. "He's had a nasty fall, but no concussion and no sign of another stroke. He's in his bed and needs to rest, but he'll be fine."

Rennie frowned. "But what about it being life and death he tell the bees something and how they saved me from drowning?"

The doctor tucked his stethoscope back into his bag. "Older people sometimes get mixed up. It's nothing out of the ordinary." He picked up his bag. "I'll check back on him in a few days if that'll make you feel better." He paused. "And call my office if you see anything that worries you."

Rennie tiptoed into the bedroom. Seeing her uncle still awake, she pulled a quilt over his thin body. Touching one of the double wedding rings fashioned from bright bits of cloth, she said, "This is my favorite of your quilts."

"Eugenia's mother made it for us. It was our favorite too. I love being able to use it every day." He patted the soft cloth. "When I'm gone, I want you to use it, not hide it away in some trunk because it has memories." A slight smile crossed his lips. "I hope you'll be as happy living here as I was. It does my heart good to know the farm will be in your hands."

"Please don't talk about dying. You just need to get stronger and you'll be fine." She stepped to the window. "I'll draw the curtains and you get some sleep, okay?"

The man nodded, eyes already heavy.

As she tiptoed from the room, she paused in the doorframe. "Uncle Dixon, you're my bee in June."

His face sagged a little, but maybe that was because of the stroke. “And you’re mine, Rennie. Your visits are a tonic for an old man who thought his happiest days were long since gone.”

Just as Rennie opened the screen door to head back to the farm, a loud clap of thunder startled her. Uncle Dixon had been right, and so had those petticoats.





CHAPTER

3

HOW COULD SHE THINK OUR CONVERSATIONS WERE pretend, like playing with dolls?

Completely understandable, considering the foolish way humans raise their young. Children learn the most important parts of life through fables and stories the adults tell them and then are told by those same adults that none of it is true.

What's the point in explaining to them how the world works if the adults will claim the fairy tales are only stories to amuse little ones?

It has something to do with what they call growing up, giving up what they embraced in childhood and shouldering the attitudes and responsibilities of adulthood. Dixon and Eugenia understood, but her parents, her teachers, and her friends taught her not to believe what her heart knew. And she listened, which is why we lost her.

Humans are supposed to be smart.

Some are, and others are not, like that slubberdegullion she's married to.

*She's always been one of the smart ones. She'll remember us.
And that is precisely what will get her through what is ahead.*

