

*The queen must produce some substance that attracts the workers and that can be obtained from her only by direct contact. This substance evidently stimulates the normal working behavior in the hive. This chemical messenger has been called "queen substance." Experiments have shown that the bees obtain it directly from the body of the queen.*

—Man and Insects



## Chapter Six

The next morning, inside the honey house, I woke to banging in the yard. When I pulled myself off the cot and wandered outside, I found the tallest Negro man I'd ever seen working on the truck, bent over the motor, tools scattered around his feet. June handed him wrenches and what-have-you, cocking her head and beaming at him.

In the kitchen May and Rosaleen were working on pancake batter. I didn't like pancakes that much, but I didn't say so. I was just thankful it wasn't grits. After kneeling on them half your life, you don't care to eat them.

The trash can was full of banana peels, and the electric percolator bubbled into the tiny glass nozzle on top of it. *Bloop, bloop.* I loved the way it sounded, the way it smelled.

"Who's the man out there?" I asked.

"That's Neil," said May. "He's sweet on June."

"It looks to me like June is sweet on him, too."

"Yeah, but she won't say so," said May. "She's kept that poor man strung along for years. Won't marry him and won't let him go."

May drizzled batter on the griddle in the shape of a big L. "This one's yours," she said. L for Lily.

Rosaleen set the table and warmed the honey in a bowl of hot water. I poured orange juice into the jelly glasses.

"How come June won't get married to him?" I asked.

"She was supposed to get married to somebody else a long time ago," said May. "But he didn't show up for the wedding."

I looked at Rosaleen, afraid this situation of jilted love might be unfortunate enough to send May into one of her episodes, but she was intent on my pancake. It struck me for the first time how odd it was that none of them were married. Three unmarried sisters living together like this.

I heard Rosaleen make a sound like *Hmmph*, and I knew she was thinking about her own sorry husband, wishing he hadn't shown up for *their* ceremony.

"June swore off men and said she would never get married, and then she met Neil when he came to be the new principal at her school. I don't know what happened to his wife, but he didn't have one anymore after he moved here. He has tried every which way to get June to marry him, but she won't do it. Me and August can't convince her either."

A wheeze welled up from May's chest, and then out came "Ohi Susanna." *Here we go.*

"Lord, not again," said Rosaleen.

"I'm sorry," May said. "I just can't help it."

"Why don't you go out to the wall?" I said, prying the spatula out of her hand. "It's okay."



On Sunday I thought they would go to church, but no, they held a special service in the pink house, and people came to them. It was a group called the Daughters of Mary, which August had organized.

The Daughters of Mary started showing up in the parlor before 10:00 A.M. First was an old woman named Queenie and her grown daughter, Violet. They were dressed alike in bright yellow skirts and white blouses, though they wore different hats, at least. Next came Lunelle, Mabelee, and Cressie, who wore the fanciest hats I'd ever laid eyes on.

It turned out Lunelle was a hatmaker without the least bit of shyness. I'm talking about purple felt the size of a sombrero with fake fruit on the back. That was Lunelle's.

Mabelee wore a creation of tiger fur wrapped with gold fringe, but it was Cressie who carried the day in a crimson smokestack with black netting and ostrich feathers.

If this was not enough, they wore clip-on earbobs of various colored rhinestones and circles of rouge on their brown cheeks. I thought they were beautiful.

In addition to all these Daughters, it turned out Mary had one son besides Jesus, a man named Otis Hill, with stubby teeth, in an oversize navy suit, so technically the group was the Daughters and Son of Mary. He'd come with his wife, who was known to everyone as Sugar-Girl. She wore a white dress, turquoise cotton gloves, and an emerald green turban on her head.

August and June, hatless, gloveless, earbobless, looked practically poverty-stricken next to them, but May, good old May, had tied on a bright blue hat with the brim up on one side and down on the other.

August had brought in chairs and arranged them in a semicir-

cle facing the wooden statue of Mary. When we were all seated, she lit the candle and June played the cello. We said the Hail Marys together, Queenie and Violet moving strings of wooden beads through their fingers.

August stood up and said she was glad me and Rosaleen were with them; then she opened a Bible and read, "And Mary said . . . Behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things. . . . He hath scattered the proud. . . . He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away."

Laying the Bible in her chair, she said, "It's been a while since we've told the story of Our Lady of Chains, and since we have visitors who've never heard the story of our statue, I thought we'd tell it again."

One thing I was starting to understand was that August loved to tell a good story.

"Really, it's good for all of us to hear it again," she said. "Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here."

Cressie nodded, making the ostrich feathers wave through the air so you had the impression of a real bird in the room. "That's right. Tell the story," she said.

August pulled her chair close to the statue of black Mary and sat facing us. When she began, it didn't sound like August talking at all but like somebody talking through her, someone from another time and place. All the while her eyes looked off toward the window, like she was seeing the drama play out in the sky.

"Well," she said, "back in the time of slaves, when the people were beaten down and kept like property, they prayed every day and every night for deliverance.

"On the islands near Charleston, they would go to the praise house and sing and pray, and every single time someone would ask the Lord to send them rescue. To send them consolation. To send them freedom."

I could tell she had repeated those opening lines a thousand times, that she was saying them the exact way she'd heard them coming from the lips of some old woman, who'd heard them from the lips of an even older one, the way they came out like a song, with rhythms that rocked us to and fro till we had left the premises and were, ourselves, on the islands of Charleston looking for rescue.

"One day," August said, "a slave named Obadiah was loading bricks onto a boat that would sail down the Ashley River, when he saw something washed up on the bank. Coming closer, he saw it was the wooden figure of a woman. Her body was growing out of a block of wood, a black woman with her arm lifted out and her fist balled up."

At this point August stood up and struck the pose herself. She looked just like the statue standing there, her right arm raised and her hand clutched into a fist. She stayed like that for a few seconds while we sat, spellbound.

"Obadiah pulled the figure out of the water," she went on, "and struggled to set her upright. Then he remembered how they'd asked the Lord to send them rescue. To send them consolation. To send them freedom. Obadiah knew the Lord had sent this figure, but he didn't know who she was."

"He knelt down in the marsh mud before her and heard her voice speak plain as day in his heart. She said, 'It's all right. I'm here. I'll be taking care of you now.'"

This story was ten times better than Beatrix the nun. August glided back and forth across the room as she spoke. "Obadiah tried to pick up the waterlogged woman who God had sent to

take care of them, but she was too heavy, so he went and got two more slaves, and between them they carried her to the praise house and set her on the hearth.

"By the time the next Sunday came, everyone had heard about the statue washing up from the river, how it had spoken to Obadiah. The praise house was filled with people spilling out the door and sitting on the window ledges. Obadiah told them he knew the Lord God had sent her, but he didn't know who she was."

"He didn't know who she was!" cried Sugar-Girl, breaking in to the story. Then all the Daughters of Mary broke loose, saying over and over, "*Not one of them knew.*"

I looked over at Rosaleen, who I hardly recognized for the way she leaned forward in her chair, chanting along with them.

When everything had quieted down, August said, "Now, the oldest of the slaves was a woman named Pearl. She walked with a stick, and when she spoke, everyone listened. She got to her feet and said, 'This here is the mother of Jesus.'"

"Everyone knew the mother of Jesus was named Mary, and that she'd seen suffering of every kind. That she was strong and constant and had a mother's heart. And here she was, sent to them on the same waters that had brought them here in chains. It seemed to them she knew everything they suffered."

I stared at the statue, feeling the fractured place in my heart.

"And so," August said, "the people cried and danced and clapped their hands. They went one at a time and touched their hands to her chest, wanting to grab on to the solace in her heart."

"They did this every Sunday in the praise house, dancing and touching her chest, and eventually they painted a red heart on her breast so the people would have a heart to touch."

"Our Lady filled their hearts with fearlessness and whispered to them plans of escape. The bold ones fled, finding their way north, and those who didn't lived with a raised fist in their hearts."

And if ever it grew weak, they would only have to touch her heart again.

"She grew so powerful she became known even to the master. One day he hauled her off on a wagon and chained her in the carriage house. But then, without any human help, she escaped during the night and made her way back to the praise house. The master chained her in the barn fifty times, and fifty times she loosed the chains and went home. Finally he gave up and let her stay there."

The room grew quiet as August stood there a minute, letting everything sink in. When she spoke again, she raised her arms out beside her. "The people called her Our Lady of Chains. They called her that not because she *wore* chains . . ."

"*Not because she wore chains,*" the Daughters chanted.

"*They called her Our Lady of Chains because she broke them.*"

June wedged the cello between her legs and played "Amazing Grace," and the Daughters of Mary got to their feet and swayed together like colorful seaweed on the ocean floor.

I thought this was the grand finale, but no, June switched over to the piano and banged out a jazzed-up version of "Go Tell It on the Mountain." That's when August started a conga line. She danced over to Lunelle, who latched on to August's waist. Cressie hooked on to Lunelle, followed by Mabee, and off they went around the room, causing Cressie to grab hold of her crimson hat. When they swung back by, Queenie and Violet joined them, then Sugar-Girl. I wanted to be part of it, too, but I only watched, and so did Rosaleen and Otis.

June seemed to play faster and faster. I fanned my face, trying to get a little air, feeling light-headed.

When the dance ended, the Daughters stood panting in a half circle before Our Lady of Chains, and what they did next took my

breath away. One at a time they went and touched the statue's fading red heart.

Queenie and her daughter went together and rubbed their palms against the wood. Lunelle pressed her fingers to Mary's heart, then kissed each one of them in a slow, deliberate way, a way that brought tears to my eyes.

Otis pressed his forehead to the heart, standing there the longest time of them all, head to heart, like he was filling up his empty tank.

June kept playing while each of them came, until there was only Rosaleen and me left. May nodded to June to keep on with the music and took Rosaleen's hand, pulling her to Our Lady of Chains, so even Rosaleen got to touch Mary's heart.

I wanted to touch her vanishing red heart, too, as much as anything I'd ever wanted. As I rose from my chair, my head was still swimming some. I walked toward black Mary with my hand lifted. But just as I was about to reach her, June stopped playing. She stopped right in the middle of the song, and I was left in the silence with my hand stretched out.

Drawing it back, I looked around me, and it was like seeing everything through a train's thick window. A blur passed before me. A moving wave of color. *I am not one of you*, I thought.

My body felt numb. I thought how nice it would be to grow smaller and smaller—until I was a dot of nothing.

I heard August scolding, "June, what got into you?" but her voice was so distant.

I called to the Lady of Chains, but maybe I wasn't really saying her name out loud, only hearing myself call on the inside. That's the last I remember. Her name echoing through the empty spaces.

When I woke, I was lying on August's bed across the hall with an ice-cold washcloth folded over my forehead and August and

Rosaleen staring down at me. Rosaleen had pulled up the skirt of her dress and was fanning me with it, showing most of her thighs.

"Since when have you started fainting?" she said, and sat down on the edge of the bed, causing me to roll into her side. She scooped me into her arms. For some reason this caused my chest to fill with more sadness than I could bear, and I wrestled myself free, claiming I needed a drink of water.

"Maybe it was the heat," August said. "I should've turned on the fans. It must've been ninety degrees in there."

"I'm all right," I told them, but to tell the truth, I was bewildered at myself.

I felt I'd stumbled upon an amazing secret—it was possible to close your eyes and exit life without actually dying. You just had to faint. Only I didn't know how to make it happen, how to pull the plug so I could drain away when I needed to.

My fainting spell had broken up the Daughters of Mary and sent May to the wailing wall. June had gone upstairs to her room and locked the door, while the Daughters huddled in the kitchen.

We chalked it up to heat. Heat, we said. Heat would make a person do strange things.



You should have seen how August and Rosaleen fussed over me the rest of the evening. You want some root beer, Lily? How about a feather pillow? Here, swallow this spoon of honey.

We sat in the den, where I ate supper off a tray, which was a privilege in itself. June was still in her room, not answering August's calls at the door, and May, who wasn't allowed near the TV because she'd already spent way too much time today at the wall, was in the kitchen clipping recipes from *McCall's* magazine.

On the television Mr. Cronkite said they were going to send a rocket ship to the moon. "On July twenty-eighth, the United

States of America will launch *Ranger Seven* from Cape Kennedy, Florida," he said. It was going to take a 253,665-mile flight before it crash-landed onto the moon. The whole point was to take pictures of the surface and send them back.

"Well, baby Jesus," said Rosaleen. "A rocket to the moon."

August shook her head. "Next they'll be walking around up there."

We had all thought President Kennedy was off his rocker when he declared we'd land a man on the moon. The *Sylvan* newspaper had called it a "Luna-tic Vision." I took the article to class for the current-events bulletin board. We all said, A man on the moon. *Right.*

But you can never underestimate the power of cutthroat competition. We wanted to beat the Russians—that was what made the world go around for us. Now it looked like we would.

August cut off the TV set. "I need some air."

We all went, Rosaleen and August holding on to my elbows in case I started to keel over again.

It was the in-between time, before day leaves and night comes, a time I've never been partial to because of the sadness that lingers in the space between going and coming. August gazed at the sky where the moon was rising, large and ghostly silver.

"Look at her good, Lily," she said, "'cause you're seeing the end of something."

"I am?"

"Yes, you are, because as long as people have been on this earth, the moon has been a mystery to us. Think about it. She is strong enough to pull the oceans, and when she dies away, she always comes back again. My mama used to tell me Our Lady lived on the moon and that I should dance when her face was bright and hibernate when it was dark."

August stared at the sky a long moment and then, turning

toward the house, said, "Now it won't ever be the same, not after they've landed up there and walked around on her. She'll be just one more big science project."

I thought about the dream I'd had that night Rosaleen and I slept by the pond, how the moon had cracked to pieces.

August disappeared into the house, and Rosaleen headed for her cot in the honey house, but I stayed on and stared at the sky, imagining *Ranger 7* blasting away for it.

I knew one day I would go back into the parlor when no one was around and touch the Lady's heart. Then I would show August the picture of my mother and see if the moon broke loose and fell out of the sky.



*How did bees ever become equated with sex? They do not live a riotous sex life themselves. A hive suggests cloister more than bordello.*

—The Queen Must Die: And Other Affairs of Bees and Men



## Chapter Seven

I jumped every time I heard a siren. It might have been an ambulance off in the distance or a police chase on television—it didn't matter. Part of me was always braced for T. Ray or Mr. Shoe Gaston to drive up and end my charmed life. We had been at August's house eight whole days. I didn't know how long black Mary could keep the curtain drawn.

On Monday morning, July 13, I was walking back to the honey house after breakfast when I noticed a strange black Ford parked in the driveway. I lost my breath for a moment, till I remembered Zach was coming back to work today.

It would be me and August *and* Zach. I'm not proud of it, but I resented the intrusion.

He was not what I expected. I found him inside holding a honey drizzle like a microphone, singing, "I found my thrill on