

Summer, five years into Lela's youth, the fields adjacent to the bee farm were ruptured with flowers. They settled in neat lines that divided the earth into columns. Bright colors were stitched across the ground, complex designs that would drive a child to exasperation when trying to sketch into her journal.

There was a balance she could not imitate, one she could yet understand. They all knew it: the bees, the flowers, the tulip farmer's nephew. He pulled stray buds from the ground and laced their stems into the chain linked fence. She pulled them free and pressed them into her books.

"You see these flowers?" She pulled a heavy beekeeper guide over her chest and let the pages flutter back across her skin to a pair of dried tulips. The small boy leaned closer and pushed straw yellow hair from his eyes to concentrate on the lanky girl. Her dark grey eyes mapped the apples of his cheeks as she pulled the book close and set her hands over the brown spine.

"They grow thanks to my bees." Her smile came off as pompous. He called her stupid on that first encounter and ran back into his flowers until the shades of blue and yellow swallowed him.

The sun pulled itself from the earth and left behind orange scars as she worked on her chores. The morning was solitary, and the sky seemed to sag in deep red pockets.

"Lela, Lela." Rosa called for her an hour after she had trudged into the fields. She stopped far away from the hives, and like many of the indoor workers, her hands were alert at her sides.

"The meeting is about to start." Rosa spoke in short breaths that melted under the southern humidity. She fidgeted nervously, although meters away from the colonies. Rosa waited to be dismissed, prayed for it actually. Under her breath, her lips trembled.

If it was up to Lela, the short plump housekeeper would had never been hired to work at the bee farm, but it was her Father's decision to hire a woman whose skin was not tough enough to handle a simple sting. This type of woman, Lela knew, was no good.

A single honey bee flew between them, and Rosa jumped a few meters back into the sharp green of the field.

“The ones that roam alone can do little harm.” Lela said, moving her mouth with burden as she tried to explain the fact for the millionth time. “It’s when they are in swarms that you should start shaking.”

“Yes.” Rosa gave a false smile and nodded away the words. “swarms...”

Together they walked back up the thin dirt trail that the farm employees had carved into the grass with their footsteps.

“Bees.” It was the first word Lela had heard the tulip farmer’s nephew say in a year. He sat on a folding chair on the other side of the fence. Before Lela had come, he had been reading a book, similar to the ones she usually lugged around.

“You were completely wrong, you know?” He opened the book to some passage. The ink was blurred by the harsh sun, and she couldn’t make out the words.

“What?” Lela stood tight lipped, gripping her sketchbook and a basket full of hand mixed paints. She had come outside today determined to sketch the fields for what they truly were, to capture them and chain them to paper. She had expected to be alone.

Lela observed the tan boy on the other side of the fence. In between the two summers, she had forgotten what she had even said to him. She was six now. Anything she had done when she was five was obsolete. She had spoken so many words in between the lapse, that their previous conversation had become lost in her mind. His face, however, she remembered. The image of his curving chin cut at her mind. He wore the same worn expression as he leaned onto the fence.

“Bees grow thanks to flowers, too.”

Lela’s father was already at the table when she changed out of her bee suit and slipped into his office. Daffodils that she had picked yesterday afternoon sat in a vase as a simple and cheap centerpiece. Usually these meetings were in a more formal setting, involving conference tables and ties, not a small dinner table crammed into Harris’s office. This however, was the only time his colleagues could manage to fit into their schedules. No one had the time to commute to a different location.

“Get on with it,” Lela cried after sitting down and pushing away the pale yellow table cloth that pooled itself onto her lap. In a short time she would have to get ready for school and push talk of bees out her head. Although she had promised her father to stay silent when sitting

in through these sorts of meetings, she felt a need to intervene. The curiosity was burning a hole in her head. She was sure that if she pushed her short locks aside, she would find a gap in her skull.

“Sorry.” She withdrew some of her energy when she saw her father’s glare. His colleagues however, looked sheepishly grateful and glanced at the wall clock.

“You’ve always been impatient, Lela.” He folded his hands and turned to his associates. He held a thick letter, the pages looking stiffed as if they were faxed just a mere hour ago.

That’s probably why this meeting was rushed. Lela sat straight in her seat at the far end of the table. Although eighteen, she was not allowed to fully participate in the business gatherings.

“There is a group of scientists who want to visit our farms.” Harris breathed into the fat of his palms.”

“They’re studying something called Colony Collapse Disorder and believe that our farms are suffering from it. To put it simply, CCD is the abrupt disappearance of worker bees.”

When was it that they first started disappearing? Lela could remember the slow decline of money start when she was ten. But that could have been caused by many things. It was the year that her mom left, when the foundation to her own colony collapsed into itself. Yes, some hives were found empty that year, but Harris had also refused to hire any extra field workers to take the place of Lela’s mother.

There were many factors in play in that summer but she was sure of her decision. It was that year that she marked as the start of the bees’ disappearance, the year her life had started to crumble.

The third time she saw the tulip farmer’s nephew, Lela gasped. He was amongst the faces of the scientists. His tall broad form was different from when she saw him at five or six, yet she recognized the shape of his face immediately, the straw colored hair limp against his ears. She didn’t approach him. Two conversations in childhood didn’t make him any less of a stranger.

“That man,” Rosa and Lela stood apart from the rest, so the housekeeper had to point to specify who she was referring to. “He used to play on the tulip farm next door. He was a relative

of the farmer. To think he would become a scientist—”

“Put your finger down. I know who he is,” Lela spoke softly, yet her voice startled Rosa. The housekeeper had looked after Lela long enough to know that the teenager’s anger could come in low volumes as well as loud ones.

When the group of scientists came to the back of the room, the pair withdrew a little more against the wall. One of the scientists outstretched his hand, and Rosa gave a thin smile.

“No, we’re not with the associates. I’m just the housekeeper, and this is the daughter of this region’s head of the Beekeeper Association.” Rosa put her hands on Lela’s shoulders. She was glaring at the floor.

“It’s always good to be polite.” The light haired man shook Rosa’s hand. “I myself am only an intern with those people.” He motioned at the other scientists who had moved on to converse with Harris.

He hesitated to take Lela’s hand while she searched for some recognition, found none, and outstretched her own instead.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Lela.” She stared at the man, unable to truly see him as the shy tulip farmer’s nephew who had she always assumed was her own age, the one who had meekly corrected her on the interdependence of bees and flowers.

Varroa mites. Varroa destructor. Varroaosis. The scientists carried this diagnosis around in heavy crates of samples, in clipboards, and in folders. They worked in short hours throughout the day when the bee farm employees were restricted to certain sections of bee hives, leaving a free area to observe. It only took a few days for them to verify that this disease was rampant in the hives. Notes and reports seemed to stick out from everywhere in the form of dark ink and paper. Lela was certain that the men would drown in them soon enough.

There was the consistent voice of the head scientist speaking into the collar of his coat as he recorded lengthy notes and the turning of more paper passing through hands like pale flower shells.

These scientists didn’t address her but went straight to her father. They didn’t seem to mind though, that the girl followed them around like a lose shadow as they conducted their observations.

In the afternoons after school, she would watch them smoke the bees' into docile states and retract the frames of honeycomb. She noted how the frames were only half full with bees. Years ago, if she had done the same, she wouldn't be able to count the number.

"The bees are declining, and our reports show that the hives are a little less than half empty." The lead scientist gave Harris a copy of his notes after the first week of his arrival. Lela sat in the back of the room, filing order forms for her father into a large cabinet. From there she could listen to snippets of conversation over the rustling of paper.

"Mites are the cause of this. Every single hive is infected and the chemicals you are currently using have little effect."

Lela's father gave a stony glare and stretched his fingers across this desk. "Now... tell me how to solve the problem." The slight blue tinged skin of his upper lip was exposed as his mustache twitched.

The lead scientist simply smiled.

Effects of the decline of the bee population:

- Not as many tulips bloomed as in Lela's childhood. The mass of colors dried up and retreated far back from the chain link fence.
- Lela gave up trying to draw the fields by the time she was eleven. There was no longer a point.
- The tulip farmer's nephew didn't visit. With the decline of product, there was no need for an extra hand during the summer.
- Rosa was hired as a housekeeper, a woman who could not replace Lela's mother, who did not have a love for bees.
- Her father was more irritable.

By the second week, the scientists were working on a newly developed procedure to try and diminish the impact of the varroa mites. Lela suspected that if was there their purpose of coming to the bee farm all along, to find a test subject on a large scale.

Like most of the other times, she was there when the idea was proposed, moving silently amongst her father's office with paperwork spilling over her palms. Since the fall was approaching, her help wasn't need much in the fields. Not as much honey and royal jelly could

be extracted as in the earlier seasons.

“There is some risk of contamination, but the success can reap so many benefits. This farm can be twice as large.” The lead scientist pushed the rims of his glasses up his nose and leaned against her father’s desk. Harris expression was undecipherable. He wore a poker face as much business men did. It was a look that couldn’t possibly rear a child. It was little wonder that his daughter often seemed so cold.

“What’s Lela’s opinion? Maybe it can help in your decision?” It was the intern that spoke and directed the attention towards the bony girl in the background. Lela turned her head abruptly from the paper work below her nose. Her father jumped a little in his seat as if he did not know that she had been there all along, so used to her silent movements that he could no longer detect her presence.

“Anything, if it helps the bees return.” Lela pulled a strand of dark brown hair around her pinky. *And the tulips. And mom.* She didn’t speak the last two things out loud.

The scientists spent the next few months processing their data and put it into play in March. A group of three hives was moved apart from the rest and set next to the chain linked fence where there were a few dozen almond trees growing. The leaves bore bright white flowers that bobbed against each other like decorated heads. She remembered that her mother had planted these when she was four to add some eccentricity to the otherwise plain farm. Twigs poked out the leaves like fingers and seemed to beckon Lela as they shook in the wind.

These hives set under the trees would be the test subjects, the sacrifices in a way. A net was cast over it all to ensure that the bees fed only off the almond blossoms. She knew this much, yet the actual experiment was still a mystery.

Because conditions had to be controlled, no workers were allowed to touch the hives. Not even Lela could get away with following the scientists. For the sake of their experiment, she had materialized in front of their eyes and had been forced to be acknowledged.

She was told to keep away, so she chose a day that the scientists were out buying supplies to get an up close view of the bees. She walked up the thin footpath up to the secluded area and leaned against the almond trees. Occasionally small dots of black and yellow floated around her

head like occupied daydreamers. She picked a burr off her bee suit as she listened to the soft humming. It was a sound that had become almost non-existent in some parts of the bee farm.

“Maybe the experiments are working.” She quickly made her way to the nearest of the hives with anxiety balancing on the tip of her tongue. She calmed the bees with a cloud of smoke and withdrew a frame of honeycomb, then another, and another. It was clear to her that there was a difference in volume. Whatever was being done had made some effect.

There was a movement within the entrance of the net enclosure. She saw the tulip farmer’s nephew looking her way with a bewildered expression.

“You,” Lela was flustered as she inserted the frame in her fingers back into the hive with shaking hands. “What exactly did you do? The populations in these hives are growing.”

She knew that if he had been one of the others, he would not have answered her. He may have even pulled her from the crook of her elbow and led her out the enclosure. Instead of that, he set her down and explained.

“It’s a two part procedure. There’s a set of chemicals for the bees and one for the flowers they feed on. You see, if traces of the mite are left on the pollen, then the hive’s health won’t ever improve. The bees would just continue to pick up the parasite they deposited while pollinating the blossoms.”

“I see.” Lela sat down in the shade of the Almond trees. It was interdependence in play. The tulip farmer’s nephew rustled his hair, and the blonde wisps spread themselves out from under his palm. He said something about how the almond blossoms smelled sweet, but Lela was no longer paying attention. There was hope. The bees were returning, no matter how slowly the process was occurring.

It only took a few more weeks of results to convince Harris to apply the experiment to the whole of the farm. The scientist used their trump card, the intern, to get the tulip farmer next door to apply the chemical treatment to his farm as well.

By the end of the second year, the results were visible. Honey production was up with the increased number of bees. The tulips next door were stretching their boundaries. It was shocking to Lela that this many had ever bloomed. In her room she dug up old paint. She would attempt to draw the tulip fields.

The situation was very similar to that of when she was six. She was sitting under the almond trees trying to imitate the width of the tulip fields in a sketchbook, the tulip farmer's nephew on the other side of the fence. Although the other scientists had far since left, he was remaining temporarily to help his uncle.

With the paint spread out against her, shades of blue and yellow on her exposed knees, he finally recognized her as the girl who had provoked him in an interest in bees.

"Why do you like the bees so much?" He tucked a fluttering red tulip and braided it into a loop in the fence. Any other teenage girl would go insane here."

"I never thought of that." Lela stretched her legs out under the canopy of mild sunlight. The paper in her hands reflected something complete. Her understanding was finally there.

"My mother loved these honey hives, even if that love was short lived. I just want the opportunity to discover some of it."

She thought back to a memory of her mother dabbing honey on the tip of her nose, Harris laughing in the background. Maybe her mother had left these fields in the end, but Lela decided that she would give the bee farm a chance. Although eighteen, she was convinced that she could find some sense of happiness downing in the beehives.