

# Invasion of the Bee Girls

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Sardoodledom Storyhouse LLC

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# Chapter One

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## Hidden Pods & Killer Bods

**D**eep beneath the expansive grounds of the Brandt Institute, hidden below layers of alternating earth and concrete, exists a small chamber room.

This room is not found on any blueprints nor in any governmental backlog. For all intents and purposes, this small chamber room does not exist. Inside of this chamber that should not exist, a series of empty mechanical pods light up and whir to life.

Lights flicker. Machines hum. Numbers and letters flash across screens in sequences of green and black. Fifty yards south of these pods, a set of heavy double doors beeped and whooshed open with the scanning of an ID card.

With the type of detachment usually attributed to someone who had been drugged, Rita Calder felt her limp legs being dragged along the smooth polished tiles of a short hallway. The tiles were cool to the touch and the space between them grabbed at her sensible Dansko work clogs and threatened to tear them from her flaccid feet.

Minutes went by in a daze. Rita felt her weight shift as she was dragged around a corner, then another, then another. Eventually, she lost track not only of her sense of direction, but she also lost track of her shoes, noticing only when her bare toes began to click across the tiles and send shivers up her calves.

She tried to blink the fog away and remember just when she had lost her shoes, shed and discarded like an old skin somewhere back in the twisting corridors of the Brandt Institute. However, she could remember nothing.

The air thickened as she was guided deeper into the chamber room. The chamber felt hot, humid, stifling. The air buzzed with a low-frequency thrumming sound that wasn't quite mechanical in nature. The buzzing was constant and pulsing and, much like a heartbeat, she felt it in her chest as she was dragged further into the room.

With a sense much like falling, Rita found herself being lowered to the cold floor by a set of small hands. She blinked rapidly, trying to regain her bearings. Above her head she sensed more than she saw a looming dark shape, smooth and solid. A tingling sensation brought her arms back to life and she wiped at

her eyes until she was able to read clearly the sign affixed to the front of the dark shape:

**Transmogrification Pod #3B.**

Rita's drugged mind could barely make sense of the words but somewhere off in the back of her mind, faint alarm bells went off. The tingling sensation worked its way down her torso and through her legs. Her whole body felt like it were resting on a bed of pins and needles. She tried to speak but her mouth didn't cooperate. Her lips felt heavy and alien to her. She tried to use her tongue to speak but it just rolled around lazily, feeling like it were filled with sweet honey.

"I see the sedative is wearing off," came a soft voice beside her. Rita turned her heavy head and saw Dr. Susan Harris standing near her, a familiar yet cold smile on her face. Dr. Harris spread her hands and gestured about the room. As she did so, her white lab coat spread open

like an insects wings. "This is a room that very few people have ever been granted access to. You should feel special. You were chosen. Not all of us are." As Rita continued to open and close her mouth silently, Dr. Harris pressed a few buttons on a Didactic Three Push Button Electrical Automatic Trainer.

The room about them suddenly seemed to brighten. The buzzing sensation grew louder and a cool breeze wafted over Rita as the hidden doors to the transmogrification pod opened. The inside of the pod was peppered with honeycomb-shaped alcoves, which glistened with a fine layer of goldenrod mucus. In the center of the glistening pod, a woven cocoon seemed to be eagerly waiting. The gold and silver strands of the cocoon shimmered like oil on water. It seemed almost *alive*.

Rita was all pins and needles and fear and confusion. "N-no," she protested, her tongue

and gums vibrating as the effects of the sedative left her. "This isn't right. I..I didn't sign up for this. You can't do this to me." Dr. Susan Harris nodded and smiled, acknowledging Rita's words but doing nothing about them aside from pressing another couple of buttons.

"I'm sorry if this isn't what you wanted," Dr. Susan Harris said, although there was no shred of sorrow in her tone. "You might not have wanted this, but it isn't up to you. It never was. That's the case with our bodies, isn't it?" Dr. Harris flipped a switch and the buzzing in the air intensified. "Haven't you always noticed how men look at you? You pretended not to notice it but you did, didn't you?" More buttons pushed. More code entered. The buzzing continued to intensify. "You see, it's simple biology. We can't help being what we are. And you, well, you're a very beautiful woman. You may not choose to use that to your advantage,

but you have an effect nonetheless. So now, with the help of these pods," Dr. Susan Harris paused a moment to wave her arm towards the pod like she was a model showing off the latest sports car or speedboat, "your power will become *our* power. In time, you will understand and be grateful."

Rita tried to crawl away but her limbs failed her. As she flopped on the floor like a fish out of water, Dr. Harris finished her sequencing and turned her full attention on Rita. Dr. Harris prepared an injection that looked like thickened honey mustard. As Rita's eyes widened at the sight of the needle, she then noticed the other women already in the room. They stood at attention in a tight semicircle around the room. They were all completely naked, save for a pair of hexagonal sunglasses sitting atop their noses. Their skin was smooth, flawless, luminescent. Although their mouths didn't smile,

they still seemed somehow to be emanating triumph, buzzing with jubilation.

Dr. Harris pointed the tip of the syringe towards the bright light overhead and flicked the barrel with a long nail and an audible click. She pressed on the plunger and a couple drops of a thick liquid crawled from the tip. It was an unnatural color, gold in nature. The shade fell somewhere in the space between Golden Poppy and Urobilin, or Mikado Yellow and Lemon Glacier depending on how the light hit it. It didn't drip like a true liquid, it crawled like a semisolid. Like frozen molasses. Or an ambered drop of honey. Rita hadn't noticed the other women move, yet she was suddenly aware of dozens of hands lifting her from the floor. The overhead light glinted off a myriad of hexagonal lenses.

Rita screamed as she was entombed in the sticky cocoon. Pairs of naked hands poured

palmfuls of a warming resin over her. It was thick like honey. It was hot like wax. As her eyes disappeared below the hardening honey, darkness enveloped her. She tried to scream. The cocoon enveloped that too.

Then there was only silence. Silence and darkness.

Then, a light.

Not from an external source, but from her. She felt the light *inside* of her.

And it began to buzz.

It started behind her eyes: a stabbing pressure that spread about her head, curling through her skull like smoke. Her heartbeat slowed, stopped, then restarted. It sped up to an inhuman degree. Rita could feel her heartbeat increasing tenfold, from one hundred beats per minute to a thousand. She wanted to scream, but the golden syrup filled her throat and choked her lungs. Rita felt like she was

suffocating, yet she found she didn't quite need to breathe.

Panic ripped through her mind anew when her skin began to burn and itch over every inch. Her skin began to crack and reform, break and reshape like clay on a wheel. A legion of little golden filaments formed beneath her flesh. As her joints popped out of place and her bones twisted and stretched, her pores wept with honey.

Rita felt a tingling in her ovaries. They began to swell and mutate. Rita's pheromone glands elongated and pulsed. She felt her entire being reprogram itself. Rebirth itself. Behind her fluttering eyelids, she saw a kaleidoscope of shapes. She saw gridlines of green fade into orange stacks of squares. She watched as these fizzed and dissolved into bursts of purple and green spots. She felt her world streamline itself. No more would she be concerned with social

media, with Hollywood and daydreaming and career paths and friendships. Everything reduced to instinct and purpose. Seduction and multiplication. Her head swum and buzzed with a trio of natural orders:

*Obey.*

*Seduce.*

*Kill.*

Time passed, although she had no clue how much. Minutes, hours, days, it could have been any of the above. Time passed until it was time. When it was time, the cocoon cracked. Rita found herself hatched into the same world as before, only now she saw things differently. Now she saw things in shades of green, blue, ultraviolet and grey. Rita stood tall, naked. Proud. She felt her internal buzz.

Rita opened her mouth to speak but rather than words spilling forth, she emitted a low droning hum. Something about her mouth

felt different, yet she found she could still use her tongue if she focused.

"You're ready," Dr. Susan Harris whispered sweetly in Rita's ear. Her breath smelled like honey and milk. The doctor placed one hand on Rita's shoulder and pointed towards an open doorway with the other. "Go," the doctor hissed. "Find a man. Show him what true devotion looks like."

Rita smiled and inhaled. She could sense one nearby, She could practically see neon runways leading the way. It was time to hunt. It was time to pollinate. She put on a pair of hexagonal sunglasses to hide her eyes from view. Her eyes were now afflicted with a sectoral heterochromia. Her eyes glowed black and gold.

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Martin Gruber's boots slapped against the linoleum tiles, his footfalls echoing down the deserted corridor like the drumbeat of a re-

treating army. His flashlight flickered in his hand. He cursed and smacked it back to life as he ran. Sweat stung his eyes and poured over his upper lip. He rounded a corner and paused to catch his breath.

Nervously he looked to his left and his right. His frightened eyes stayed peeled for any sense of movement off in the darkness. Something had shorted out this section of the buildings power earlier in the night. The cameras ran on a backup power source but they were still down for over three minutes during the transition time. Before the monitors cut out, Martin had sworn he'd seen something. Women. *Naked* women. At least two or three of them, judging from how much ground they covered in such a short time. He caught a glimpse but he didn't believe his eyes. That is, until he found the footprints. There were footprints sprinkled across the tiles of the restricted ge-

netics wing of Building 2A. They were sticky, faint outlines of a female foot that was dipped in honey.

With his breathing slowed down, Martin was ready to continue on.

He wasn't even supposed to be here. Not tonight, and not this deep into the research halls. Patterson had called off, said he had to go to his daughters ballet recital. *Lying asshole*, Martin thought when he saw Patterson on the Jumbotron at the Sacramento River Cats game. Now, here he was. In over his head and out past his security clearance. He clicked his walkie again, checking for a signal. There was still some kind of interference, some type of static. He couldn't get any backup or management on the line. He would have stayed in his office if it wasn't for the buzzing sound.

It was faint at first, but grew stronger, more insistent the longer he tried to ignore it. It

didn't sound mechanical, it sounded alive. He had to find it. He had to follow it. Now, it was so loud that he could feel it rattling in his teeth. And it made him want to run. Even more so when he saw the footprints again.

The sticky footprints ran all along the floor in a zig-zag pattern. Then the trail took a sharp left turn and ran directly up the wall. The flashlight flickered again as Martin waved the blinking beam all along the walls and ceiling of the hallway. They were all covered in those honey-dipped prints.

"Oh my god," Martin said in a wavering voice. "She's...she's not human." The flashlight flickered again and went out. He smacked it a few more times but it did little more than flash once and stay dead. He tucked it back into his belt loop and then continued to run. He rounded the far corner and then came skidding to a halt.

There she was. She was beautiful, pale, luminescent. She was completely nude, save for a pair of hexagonal sunglasses on her button nose. She took a step forward and smiled. The buzzing grew louder in Martin's ears and he dropped to his knees. She leaned over him and tilted down her sunglasses. He saw her eyes. Familiar, yet different.

"Rita? Ms. Calder, is that you?"

Rita smiled. In one smooth motion she brought her sunglasses back up to their proper spot, and then she leapt.

She slammed into Martin with unimaginable speed. His vision blurred. His body began to tingle. The very air between them seemed to shimmer and wave with pheromones. Martin knew he had only seconds to act. He threw his body sideways, tumbling through an emergency exit, which set off an alarm and a flashing red light. She was on him in a second,

her hands already closing around his sweaty neck. Her palms pulsed and secreted a sticky substance that felt both like fire and ice. Her mouth hovered an inch from his own. Her breath smelled like honey and wildflowers.

“No, please!” he gasped, trying to squirm his way free. Her tongue brushed the length of his cheek. She ground her pelvis into his with malevolent intent. Then came the sting.

He didn't see it. He *felt* it, something sharp and wet sliding into the soft base of his skull. Her body vibrated at a high frequency until he felt his muscles seize and contract. His neural pathways all fired at once, every nerve, every sensation, every pleasure center in his body, they all ignited at once in an ecstasy so powerful that it felt like agony.

Martin Gruber screamed. He screamed until he stopped. Then he never screamed again.

Rita slowly rose to her feet. She adjusted her sunglasses and stepped over the twitching corpse of her now former co-worker. Her work finished, she vanished back down the corridor like a ripple on a dark sea.

# Chapter Two

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## Stiff on the Table

**T**he desert didn't care about secrets.

It swallowed them. Sucked them down like quicksand, tumbled them until they became directionless, and then fossilized them into deeply ingrained whispers. Yet sometimes, if you listened closely enough, you could still hear them buzzing. On a night like this one, the buzzing was louder and more insistent than usual.

The Brandt Research Institute sat four miles outside the town of Peckham, California. The

building was a massive mix of grey government concrete, chain-link fencing topped with razor wire, and deeply entrenched tunnels. It looked like a cold war bunker that had been converted into a high school and then back again. Its secrets were closely guarded, even the janitors and wildlife wranglers needed to possess clearance badges. People in town knew to stay away and to not ask questions, especially when somebody was rumored to turn up dead. This is why nobody called the police when Martin Gruber went missing.

He'd been rumored to be missing for three days before he was discovered in a dark section of the Brandt Institute. He had never clocked out from his shift as security. Had he been alive when he was found, the overtime would have been been killer. Instead, he was dead as a doornail and stiff as one too.

His body was discovered at half past noon. He was on the floor, face-up and wide eyed. His work trousers were ruined and his skin was still flushed a bright red color even though he had been dead for some days. His lips were parted in such a way that they almost resembled a smile. The custodian who had discovered him had vomited for over thirty minutes before he was able to call it in. Now, near to three o'clock, Dr. Susan Harris walked into the cold storage lab, took one look at the body, and didn't so much as flinch.

"Looks like cardiac arrest," said the doctor on duty as he dabbed at beads of sweat pooling on his greasy forehead. "Probably stress related. He hadn't had a day off for a bit, was covering someone else's shift. Probably just ran his body a little too hard and collapsed before he could call for help."

Dr. Susan Harris gave him only the tiniest of nods to acknowledge she had heard him and then she stepped past him to observe the body for herself. Her hands traced every curve and contour of his body, although she was careful to never actually touch him. She pricked her ear near his temple and seemed to be listening for something. After a moment she straightened up and asked the doctor on duty, "Was he alone when they found him?"

The sweating doctor nodded vigorously and dabbed at more beads on his forehead. "Indeed. The security tapes also cut out about an hour before his estimated time of death. The backup system didn't seem to record anything during that interim. There are no signs of forced entry anywhere, although it still remains a mystery how he ended up in that wing without the proper security clearance. Maintenance assumes it was a system failure related

to a power outage." Susan Harris only nodded and stared. The sweaty doctor cleared his throat and went on:

"He..umm..the state and position of the body. The..he..umm, it looks as if he..," the doctor trailed off, his own skin now flushed a deep crimson color. Dr. Susan Harris arched an eyebrow in his direction, beckoning him to finish his observation. "Well, i-i-it almost seemed like he died in ecstasy. The look on his face, the flushed skin. The..erm..the engorged nether region. It almost looks like he had orgasmed to death and his heart gave out."

The sweaty doctor sweat some more. His face was a burgundy mask of embarrassment. Dr. Susan Harris looked down at the aforementioned nether region with cold, clinical detachment. "Yes," she agreed simply. "It does." She straightened up and brushed some invisible dirt from her pristine white lab coat. As she

straightened, the harsh fluorescent lights above glinted off of her hexagonal sunglasses. When she spoke, her tone was as flat and cool as the linoleum tiles beneath her feet.

"Have the body kept in Cold Storage 15B. I'll sign off on the autopsy myself. I want samples of his soft tissue. I also want a full hormone panel ran, with special attention to the pituitary and adrenal glands, as well as the hypothalamus."

The sweaty doctor blinked in surprise. "You . . . you think that this was a *chemical* reaction?"

"I think that you have your orders," she told him coldly. She was already walking away before he could think to ask any other followup questions. The doctor shivered, despite his sweating. "That's one cold bitch," he muttered to himself beneath his breath. The sweat on his forehead had already begun to cool. It was almost as if the heat were turned up when Susan

Harris was around. The air felt warmer, more humid. Like a greenhouse. Or a beehive.

As the doctor began to dutifully fulfill her orders, he covered the body back up with a sheet. He still hadn't noticed the faint, sticky residue that clung to the hair on the back of the dead man's head. It was gold and thin, like silk made of honey.

# Chapter Three

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## A Fair Assessment

**D**etective Neil Agar intensely hated three things: the heat, crime scenes, and friggin' bugs. Unfortunately for him, California had all three in spades.

The final wisps of smoke from his third cigarette dissipated as they hit the rickety blades of the ancient ceiling fan overhead. He was sitting alone at a booth in a diner that was just off of Route 14. He was tense, jaw clenching and

unclenching as he sat hunched over a cup of black coffee that tasted like it was poured into his mug from an overheated radiator. Each sip made him grimace like a punch to the gut.

As he sipped his brackish beverage, the radio played something twangy and terrible through its crackling speakers. It was a song about horses, or women, or some kind of country-fried mashup of the two, it was hard to tell. Either way, it was hell on the ears. He tried to ignore the horrid music as the fan continued to whirl and spin and rattle, doing little for the heat and a lot to his nerves.

Neil Agar hadn't slept in over forty eight hours. His shirtsleeves were caked with dirt and sweat, and they were rolled up past his elbows in two uneven piles. This revealed a long jagged scar that marred the forearm of Neil's left side, a ghoulish souvenir from the night a noise complaint had escalated into at-

tempted murder and a house fire. Still, Neil would rather have been back there than in hot, humid, bug-filled California.

He finished his cup of poison. The waitress walked briskly over and refilled his porcelain mug. He didn't thank her, he only nodded his head ever-so-slightly and pulled another cigarette from his latest 'last pack ever'. That was when his phone rang.

Neil sighed. The phone rang. Neil sighed again. He lit the cigarette and took the first glorious puff, closing his eyes and enjoying the brief moment of peace that never lasted past a call being answered. This wasn't the phone for the diner, nor was it his personal cellphone, which would have ironically been playing the opening notes of Hotel California on repeat. No, this was his other phone, the one that hardly ever rang; yet it still rang entirely too often. It was his black phone, the one with no

display, no frills, no number, save for the one that the government assigned to it whenever they needed his services. He opened his eyes and glared at the sleek dark phone. He hated it. It always reminded him that no matter who you were, the government would always own you.

He flipped the phone open. “Agar,” he growled. When the response came, the voice was clear, crisp, bureaucratic. It was entirely devoid of empathy or charm. “Neil Agar,” it said, “you’re being called back to active status.”

Neil sighed. He took another long pull from his cigarette and coughed. He grabbed his mug and drowned the taste of smoke from his mouth, replacing it with the shockingly putrid taste of the world’s worst cup of Joe. “Let me guess,” he grumbled into the phone. “There’s another dead body. No signs of a struggle. People in a panic, weird fluids everywhere like

an orgy at Burning Man. Tell me, am I close here?”

A short pause. Then the voice responded, “That’s a fair assessment.” Neil closed his eyes and suppressed the urge to quit his job and start over somewhere else. Maybe he could open up a little coffee shop, as apparently any old sludge you could pour into a cup can be sold to a sucker like him.

“Where?” Neil asked, fearing longer sentences would reveal too much of his current state of mind.

“A research facility out in the sticks. It’s in a corporate owned swatch of land called Peckham, couple hours outside of Fresno. One of their security guards was found dead early this morning, presumed killed last night. The tentative cause of death seems to be cardiac arrest but, according to the inside chatter, something doesn’t seem quite right. Something about

glandular failure, something related to sexual overdrive. The top brass wants to make sure we don't have any possible bio-agents at play.”

If Neil hadn't had a mouthful of liquid tar, he would have snorted. Instead, he swallowed and asked, “So, you think that some Poindexter cooked up a sex virus in the lab and then this guy got himself fatally horny?”

A pause came over the line.

“I think that you should check it out and report any and all pertinent facts to the number that is now programmed as speed dial three on your phone.” Neil sighed and pulled out a small pad and pen from his pocket.

“Fine. What are the details?” Neil was annoyed to discover that the ink of his pen had dried up, leaving only scratch marks in his pad when he tried to scribble anything down.

“We need you to handle this one quietly. In and out as quickly as you can. We aren't en-

tirely sure how many corporations have their grubby fingers in this place and we'd like to get through it without getting ourselves implicated in any frivolous lawsuits. No backup, no local law enforcement on this one. You're going to be attached to Department Nine for this."

"*Nine?*" The irritation was abundantly clear in Neil's voice. "I thought I was out of Nine. I'm supposed to be in Six now."

"You *were* in Six," the annoyed but still professionally bureaucratic voice shot back. "Until last night, when somebody died sporting a raging hard-on and bug bites all over their neck. So now you're back in Nine. Is that clear enough for you?"

Neil froze, the stained mug hovering an inch from his lips. "Bug bites? Did you say bug bites just now?"

The response was matter-of-fact. "That's what the coroner is calling them."

Neil set the mug down and stared into the shallow pool of filth in his cup as if it would offer him an alternative. "You know that I hate bugs," Neil spat.

"That's why you were chosen," the voice informed him. Although Neil couldn't see the face on the other end of the line, he just knew that it was looking mighty smug at the moment. "We know that you'll take this case personally. Good luck detective."

The line went dead.

After a few more sighs, a few more painful sips, and one last 'last cigarette', Neil pushed himself to his feet. He rummaged around in his pockets until he found a crumpled fifty dollar bill. He dropped it onto the table and walked out into the smothering heat of a hot California day.

The sun was angry overhead. There was so much shimmering heat on the asphalt that Neil could see it rising up in wobbly waves. A fly buzzed past his ear, nearly clipping him like Maverick in a F-14 Tomcat. He angrily swatted at it, teeth clenched tightly. *Bugs. Friggin' bugs.*

Neil slid behind the wheel of his dusty government-issued sedan and turned the key. After a moment, the engine stopped fighting him and roared to life. He sighed. "A dead guy with bug bites, a bad heart and a boner. Jesus Christ, does it get much worse than this?"

The sedan pulled out of the diner's lot, sputtering and kicking rocks on its way back to the highway. Somewhere, a far way down the road, something was stirring. Something was breeding and killing and, unbeknownst to Neil Agar, something was indeed getting much *much* worse.

# Chapter Four

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## The Peckham Blues

Neil drove for hours that seemed endless. By mid evening, he had finally reached Peckham, California.

At first glance, Peckham looked to be identical to every other isolated weirdo town that Neil Agar had ever known and hated. There was only one street running through town, which started with a no frills gas station that priced their fuel like it was liquid gold. Along the rest of the street, there was a general store,

a tire shop that was shuttered and closed, and a diner that looked as if it hadn't so much as painted a wall since Eisenhower was in office. From inside the diner, old people wearing out-of-style clothing watched him pass from their perches upon weathered stools. From the curious looks in their eyes, Neil knew that this was the sort of town where you knew everybody's birthdays, transgressions and blood type. Neil absentmindedly wondered if the coffee there was any better than that filth he had swallowed earlier.

Neil drove a few minutes past the diner until he came upon a large dusty sign reading **The Golden Ratio Motel**. The neon beneath it reading **NO VACANCY** looked like it had burnt out over a decade ago. He pulled the car into one of the many open parking spots and shut it off. His boots kicked up dust as he crossed the lot to the lobby door, leaving

miniature dust devils to whirl in his wake like an old timey Western film.

A loud bell rang as the door swung open. The breeze accompanying Neil inside sent a few loose papers flying from the front desk. He watched silently as they fluttered to the floor unfettered. Nobody was standing behind the counter. Neil sighed.

He crossed the lobby to approach the desk, not caring to alter his step as he put a dusty boot-print on the back of a fallen piece of paperwork. He slammed his hand down on a service bell which dinged much louder than he anticipated, sending a jarring jolt of sound through his clenched teeth.

“Just a minute,” a voice called from somewhere beyond the desk. Neil sighed again and looked around. He noted the outdated magazines. He noted the full collection of room keys hanging on a pegboard behind the front

desk. He saw a bathroom key that was affixed to a large wooden block, presumably to avoid the key going missing. Attached to the wooden block was a small air freshener shaped like an evergreen tree, which did little to cover the smell of mildew and age and piss that clung to every surface in the lobby. “Sorry about that,” the voice came again. “What can I do for you?”

The front desk clerk was a wizened old woman who looked just as likely to give you a magic potion and a side quest than she would a room for the night. Neil gave her the name the reservation was made under. He bristled when she handed him a key and said that he was going to be staying in room nine. *Nine. Must be their idea of a joke*, Neil thought. He swore that he would remember that when he was writing up his report. He requested room six instead and she handed him a different key.

He took it and nodded. He turned without saying thank you and he headed for his room.

Room six was so appalling that he almost went back and demanded room nine again. However, with a few quick peeks through neighboring windows, Neil quickly ascertained that every room in this craphole was in a similar state of affairs. Room six smelled like mold, insecticide and sex between the homeless. He glanced at the sheets and decided that he may not end up sleeping tonight either.

He quickly unpacked, as he always traveled on the light side. He brought only the essentials: a tape recorder, a pad of paper, a 9mm Staccato P, and a windproof electric coil lighter tucked into a pack of cigarettes. After he was done laying out his items, he sank heavily into a chair and leaned his head back. He was fighting off a killer headache. He was now also attempting to not think about what kind of terrible

event would leave that disgusting brown smear he observed on the ceiling above his chair.

Neil sighed, stood and lit another cigarette. He decided that he would quit smoking on a different day and he opened his emergency pack that he kept in his inside jacket pocket. He smoked until his head buzzed. Only then did he feel ready to begin working. He holstered his weapon and tucked it beneath his jacket. He clicked the tape recorder and, after confirming that it was in working order, he dropped it into his right pocket. His body was still craving coffee, nasty or otherwise, so he decided that he may as well begin his investigation at the diner he had passed.

Before leaving the motel, Neil went back to the lobby to use their fax machine. Once again seeing that nobody was standing behind the counter, Neil didn't bother with the bell. He simply walked behind the desk and powered

on the machine himself. Once the top brass had faxed over all the relevant files for his investigation, Neil was on his way back down the road, traversing the same road that led everywhere and nowhere.

# Chapter Five

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## The Buzz about Town

Talking to the old people at the diner confirmed Neil's earlier suspicions: everyone in this town seemed to know what everyone else was up to. Everyone, that is, except for the staff at the Brandt Research Institute. Brandt seemed to be perched on every tongue, tucked in the back of every mind, yet nobody could seem to tell Neil a single damn detail about what it was exactly that they did there.

The Brandt Research Institute was stationed a few miles outside of town. It was a gargantuan concrete building, securely tucked behind a looming chain-link fence that was topped with glistening razor wire. The entire place stank of sterile secrecy and sinister silence. Many of the locals seemed to enjoy referring to it as ‘the bug burg’, which made Neil’s skin positively crawl.

Although the old bags were more than willing to voice their opinions, unfortunately none of them were worth very much. For no matter how nosy, or self-proclaimed ‘observant’ they were, not a single one of them knew what Brandt did aside from ‘messing with bugs’ or something along those lines. It wasn’t until he started interviewing the diner staff that Neil started to get some real answers.

“Yeah, they used to come in here all the time. Always at odd hours though, and rarely ever together.”

Finally, it sounded like Neil might get somewhere. These words came from Ruthie Wilson, one of the overnight shifters at the diner. She was in her late thirties or early forties, sporting a head full of fading blonde curls and a bright red apron. Her laughter seemed nervous as Neil asked her his questions.

“So they usually came in during the twilight hours?”

“Yes, that’s right,” she told him, absently tucking a curl back behind her ear. “They’d come in, usually alone but sometimes in groups of two to three of them. They were always polite but they kept to themselves. Anything you overheard from them was all technical mumbo-jumbo and weird Latin names.”

Neil wrote furiously in his notepad as she spoke. The pen he used was one that he had purloined from the abandoned motel front desk. He checked the dossier he had faxed over

to him, checking for the names of the important players. “Did Dr. Henry Murger ever eat here?”

Ruthie scrunched up her nose while she thought for a moment, then she nodded. “Yes, Dr. Murger comes in sometimes. He was by himself once or twice but, usually, he was with someone.”

Neil’s ears perked up. “With someone? Who would that be?”

Ruthie shrugged. “He was always in here with some tall woman, another doctor. A blonde with a severe face. She was always super serious, never smiled. Her eyes though..her eyes were really something.”

Neil rummaged through his papers until he found what he was looking for. He slid a paper across the countertop. “This her?”

Ruthie picked up the paper and nodded quickly. “Yes, that’s her. Dr. Harris, that was

her name. Dr. Susan Harris.” She studied the picture for another moment. “Boy, she’s pretty, but in a mean sort of way, you know what I mean? She has those piercing eyes..it’s like they can look right through you. Like she can almost see your thoughts, you know?”

“Did you ever notice anything strange about her?”

Ruthie scratched her chin while she thought. “About Dr. Harris? Well, sort of. I mean, I’m sure that this isn’t strange for her, or anyone in that field, but..well, I know that she keeps bees.”

“Keeps bees? What, you mean that she runs a hive or a colony or something?”

“Well...no, not exactly. It’s not like she was raising them for honey or anything. She just kept them. In jars, big ones, all over the place. She’d been spotted with some in her car, some she carried in and out of work with her. One

time I heard a buzzing at their table. I thought it was somebody's cellphone set on silent but, when they paid the check, I saw a massive bee fluttering in a jar tucked deep in her purse."

"I see," Neil said, hoping he wouldn't have to really see one. "Does anyone else keep bees around here?"

The question brought a chuckle to Ruthie, which surprised Neil. "Oh sweetie, *everyone* in this town has bees. It's been that way for the past year. They just sort of started appearing everywhere and, well, there isn't much else to do in this town. So people started keeping them. Some as pets, some for honey." Ruthie shrugged. "No idea why they started migrating here but, well, we've made due. They've showed up in homes, sheds, stores, you name it and there's been bees in it." She wiped her hands on her apron and smoothed some wrin-

kles from her top. “Can I get you any honey for your coffee? The locals all seem to love it.”

While Ruthie disappeared to the back to fetch him some of her patented honey coffee, Neil reached into his pocket and clicked off the recorder. Soon he found himself pouring over his notes again. Something was gnawing at the back of his mind, something she said had registered faintly in his head, but he was still unsure of what it was. Overhead, the ceiling fan continued to whir and click in a steady rhythm.

The file on top of his stack had a picture of Dr. Murger paper-clipped to it. His full name was Henry William Murger, fifty three years old. He had the top security clearance at the lab, level G14. He worked in something that the lab was calling **Xenobiotic Applications**, whatever the hell that was. Neil’s tired eyes scanned the papers in his file. The coroner

said he had most likely died from heart failure brought on by a ‘sustained orgasmic event.’ Neil wasn’t sure what that was, but it sure sounded like a much better way to go than the ways he usually found himself investigating. He sighed and pushed the papers back into a neat stack. Near his ear, a buzzing sound caused him to flinch. He ducked and swatted his hand angrily at the sound, slapping it down onto the counter with enough force to shake his steaming mug of honey infused coffee that was just placed in front of him by a smiling Ruthie.

He didn’t smile back. He lifted his hand. Smashed flat on his palm, he saw that it wasn’t a fly that buzzed him like he had originally suspected. It was a bee. A big one. A small smear of guts and gold dust marked the spot where his hand had ended its life.

The sight made him shudder. *Bugs*. He hated friggin' bugs.

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Back at the motel, Neil was pouring over the notes from his interviews like a Peckham waitress pours honey into brackish coffee. As he reviewed the voice recordings from his interviews, he began to notice a low-level buzz.

It wasn't a literal buzzing, not like the bee that had whizzed by his ear in the diner. It was a metaphorical buzz, low and constant. It was in the voices of the people he spoke to, it was in their eyes when he began to ask them questions. It was the background buzzing hum of fear.

A knock at the door interrupted Neil's train of thought. He sighed and got to his feet, shuffling quickly across the carpeted room. He opened the door without bothering to check

the peephole first. "Yeah, what do you want?" Neil asked the man standing in the doorway.

The man at the door was large and imposing. He was as muscular and hairy as a honey badger, and the look on his face showed that he was just as ornery as one too. A brass badge hung crookedly over an ample gut. The badge identified him as Sheriff Jim Peters.

"Funny, I was just about to ask you the very same thing." Sheriff Jim Peters walked into the room without an invitation. He crossed over to Neil's desk and turned a curious eye to the small organized pile of Neil's belongings. He reached a hairy hand down and leafed through the top sheets laid out on top of a manila envelope. "What is all this stuff?" Sheriff Peters asked, in a tone that conveyed that he already knew the answer.

"My investigation," Neil stated simply. The sheriff pulled a face.

“We didn’t call for any investigation,” he said coolly. “Old Gruber dropped dead. People do that every day. It’s not against the law to go home to your maker. It’s only natural.”

“His balls were swollen to the size of cantalopes,” Neil said flatly. “What do you find so natural about that?”

Sheriff Peters eyed Neil with a professional coldness. “Is that information in your file here?”

“You tell me,” Neil said nonchalantly. “You’ve been looking right at it.”

The sheriff let out a long sigh, as if he were the one annoyed at someone entering his room and rifling through all of his belongings. “Look mister...,” he trailed off, awaiting a name. Neil didn’t offer him one. The sheriff sighed again. “Okay, now look here. What’s this really about? We don’t have any serial killers out here, no commies or Russian sleeper

cells, no terrorist organizations. We've got one old dead dweeb that used to study bees and beetles, so what are you investigating exactly? Plan on arresting a couple of bugs? A bee or a dragonfly, something like that? I gotta tell ya, I don't think we have any handcuffs small enough for that task. You gonna put 'em in jail or a jar?"

Neil let a short silence pass. He kept his unflappable, cool blue eyes locked solely on the sheriff. He waited until the silence stretched itself into the beginnings of discomfort. Then, he waited another thirty seconds before speaking.

"Tell me, sheriff, since you seem to have everything under control around here. Why is it that three other men have died here in the past year? All of them dead of cardiac arrest, no signs of a struggle. Yet half of them were found all alone with their pants down around their

ankles. That ringing any bells for you? Or are you only sheriff this week because your name got pulled out of a hat?”

Sheriff Peters stood stone still. If looks could kill, Neil would have been bludgeoned beyond recognition. The sheriff's fingers twitched. He chewed his lip, a movement that looked habitual. “People die. Four in a year is not unusual. And in this heat, in this climate, the old and the socially introverted don't take care of their bodies. They treat their hearts like they're batteries that could never run out. People drop all the time. The coroner said cardiac arrest and I'm not going to call that woman a liar.” The sheriff paused and leaned forward. “There's no connection between those men and old Gruber. There's no connection between any of them, save for they lived in the same town. You're looking for something that doesn't exist.”

Neil kept his face as blank as a refrigerator door. He looked the sheriff in his eyes until the bigger man stepped back and readied himself to leave. Then, Neil smirked, which was also habitual. “Thanks for stopping by, sheriff. I’ll keep in mind everything you said about looking for something that doesn’t exist. You’re right, that sounds like a foolish gesture.” As the sheriff walked out the door, Neil added, “By the way, sheriff, the Jesus fish on your cruiser is crooked. Give the J-man my best the next time you pray. Have a nice day.” As his smirk spread into a satisfied smile, the door closed just an inch from the sheriff’s reddening face.

# Chapter Six

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## Queen Bee

**A**fter a dinner that consisted of cigarettes and a frozen beef n' bean burrito that only partially heated up in the lousy motel microwave, Neil was off to Brandt to see what he could learn.

The Brandt Research Institute stood out against its surroundings like an appendectomy scar on an exotic dancer. The building stood tall and menacing, an island of ugly grey clashing with the tan sandy colors of the desert. The building was enormous and it had so many power lines running in and out of it that the

sky looked like an octopus playing a game of electrified Cat's Cradle. Neil drove his sedan through two gates and a tunnel before he even encountered the first security guard, who moments later waved him forward on foot. Neil flashed his temporary credentials and gave the big guard a small nod as he passed. Neil had to turn sideways to avoid bumping into the mammoth of a man. Eventually, the long entryway he traversed ended in a thick set of automated glass doors.

As the doors whooshed open at his presence, a cold breeze wafted out to greet him. Neil shivered involuntarily. The inside of the Brandt building was at least twenty degrees cooler than the muggy desert air. The lobby was clean, sterile and cold. A powerful air conditioner hummed through dozens of metal grates. The breeze carried with it the smell of formaldehyde, antiseptic and methane, all

of which reminded him of the coffee he had choked down at the diner. Apparently all the coffee in California tasted like hot swamp water, which Neil surmised was the reason behind the popularity of adding a teaspoon of honey to it around here. Behind a large metallic desk was a stoic-looking woman who had the posture and warmth of a tombstone. After checking in, she directed Neil down another seemingly endless hallway that would eventually lead him to the genetics wing.

Neil walked down the expansive hallway, his footfalls echoing back at him like amplifier distortion. At intervals of thirty feet, he passed windows made of chickenwire and tempered glass. In these windows he saw machines that whirred and hummed, stainless steel counters littered with levers and test tubes, and walls hung with protective gear. Inside of these rooms, scientists in white coats moved every

which way, gliding white and silent like ghosts. Some of them looked up as Neil passed before quickly looking away. Others froze when they saw the visitor, stuck mid-step like a deer in headlights.

Something was wrong here. Neil could *feel* it.

Dr. Susan Harris's office was at the far end of the corridor, tucked away protectively like a queen bee in a distant chamber of a hive. The first thing that Neil noticed about her office was the light. It was too bright, too warm compared to every other room he'd passed before. The previous labs all had sterile lighting, fluorescent and pale. Her light, it was like a large sunlamp, the kind you'd buy to keep your pet lizard all warm and toasty. As she pressed some buttons and swiped a card to allow Neil access, he noticed that the light was indeed coming from many small sunlamps set up on every

available surface. There were dozens of terrariums stacked on metal shelving. Inside of these, bees buzzed and flickered in and out of waxen nests. Some of the bees were normal, the type that you see everywhere. Others weren't. Some bees seemed to be big, *too* big, larger than any Neil had seen before, and that included on the Discovery Channel. The rotund ones shimmered gold and black, their eyes large pools of obsidian. Their movements seemed predetermined, almost machine-like. Neil didn't know why, but they seemed unnatural to him. Dr. Harris turned her back to Neil as soon as he entered and she resumed her position over at a back shelf, messing around with a dial attached to a power source.

“Mr. Agar,” she said without looking at him. Her voice was slow and deliberate, like honey sliding from a spoon. “I was told you might be dropping by. What a pleasant surprise.”

"That's *Detective* Agar," Neil corrected her, striding one step closer to the back of her lab coat. "And I would have made an official appointment but your number wasn't listed. And besides, I don't like giving people the time to prepare a lie for me." That comment got her to turn around and face him.

Dr. Susan Harris wore a sleek black dress beneath her lab coat, cinched at her slender waist with a Fendi FF Belt that was gold in color. Despite being both inside and at work, her sunglasses remained perched above her grecian nose. Her hair was perfect. Her lips were neutral colored but they still maintained their seductive air. Her face remained expressionless, but it was the type of stillness that took effort, like a mask that you had to hold in place. Neil had seen that kind of face before. It was usually plastered on people who had seen too much,

been through too much, or perhaps had done something unforgivable.

"What do you think I would lie about, *Detective Agar*?" She didn't smile, but somehow her lips implied one. "You've read the reports. They're pretty straight forward. I'm afraid you're looking for a mystery where there isn't one."

"Yeah, I've read the reports," Neil said. "And they all read like a bad dream. Dead men with balls so enlarged that they'd be passed around at a Nickelback concert like beach balls. And every single one of those men had contact with this very lab in the days leading to their death."

Dr. Susan Harris continued to stare at him with a cold, expressionless face. "And?" She cocked her head slightly to one side like a dog trying to make sense of a curious sight. "Enlarged privates can be caused by numerous things. There's fluid buildup, testicular

torsion, hernias, spermatoceles, trauma. What does any of this have to do with our lab?"

Neil gave her a stare that could freeze water. It seemed to elicit no response on her face. "You tell me, Ms. Harris. What exactly are you working on here?" Even through her sunglasses, Neil could feel her icy glare.

"That's *Doctor* Harris, detective." She sighed and lifted a delicate hand, indicating all of the terrariums scattered about her workspace. "I run the entomology and pheromone division of Brandt Research Institute. We deal with the biochemical communications within insects and the like."

"Pheromones? Those are the things that make creatures crazy with desire, isn't it *doctor*?"

She gave him a tight smile, her practiced patience running thin. "Amongst many other things, detective. Perhaps you should investi-

gate further into the subject some time. Ants use pheromones to mark food trails. Moths use them to attract mates. Minnows use them to communicate pain and warn others against dangers. There's releaser pheromones, primer pheromones, signalers, and modulators. It's a rich area of study. I assure you, everything that we do here is above board." Dr. Susan Harris walked over to a small, buzzing box, measuring about 2.5 cubic feet. She opened it up and Neil flinched involuntarily, expecting a swarm of angry bees to burst forth and sting his beautiful face. Instead, he was relieved to see that it was simply a miniature refrigerator. She removed a cold bottle of water and cracked the seal on it. She sipped it and smiled, not bothering to offer one to her guest.

"I see," Neil said, licking his dry lips and cursing inwardly that he was starting to get thirsty. "And do all above board departments

have key-card protected sublevels and no government oversight?"

She didn't flinch. She only sipped her drink.

Neil reached into his jacket and pulled out a photograph. He slammed it on a countertop and slid it towards her. She picked it up and showed no outward reaction to its contents. It was a photograph of Martin Gruber. He was on his back, lips frozen in a grin of ecstasy. He was dead.

"Tell me," Neil said. "Wasn't he one of yours?"

Dr. Susan Harris looked at the photograph for a long time before responding.

"He worked security here. He worked with many departments, not just mine."

"But you did know him." Neil phrased that as a statement, not a question.

"I knew *of* him," she corrected.

"He worked here for years."

She gave him a small smile, which was far more unnerving than her implied one. "That doesn't mean that I knew him."

Neil stared at her for a long moment. He let the silence hang heavy in the air between them. She didn't appear to mind. She didn't appear to sweat. His instinct itched. There was something very wrong with this broad, he could feel it.

"Something about this place stinks, doctor. And I intend to find out just what it is."

Her smile didn't grow, but her lips seemed to imply that it had. She tilted her head once more. "Bees can smell emotion, detective. Did you know that? They can especially smell fear. To them, it smells like vinegar." Her nostrils flared just in the slightest. Neil noticed, and he didn't like it.

"You enjoy making people uncomfortable, don't you doctor?"

She shrugged. "I enjoy the honesty of knowledge," she told him. "Even when it stings."

Despite his personality and his work experience, Neil couldn't help it. He did feel very uncomfortable in her presence. That small smile, the hidden eyes. It all unnerved him. "I expect that if I call on you again, you'll answer. Am I right?"

She shrugged again. "My work is here. I'm not going anywhere." Her words were matter-of-fact but Neil detected a threat hidden beneath them.

"Alright then doctor, I'll be seeing you. Have fun playing with your bugs."

"Bees are insects," she corrected him.

"Insects bug me, too."

As Neil stepped out of her laboratory, the door clicked shut behind him like a vault. Through the window he could see her silhouette. Her back was to him once more, her pos-

ture perfect. Neil watched her work for a few minutes. She never removed her sunglasses. As she worked, the bees in her immediate vicinity seemed to react to her presence. The large bees, the unnatural looking ones, they began to smash themselves against the glass, over and over again, as if they wanted to get out. As if she was calling out to them by name.

Neil felt the beginnings of a headache creep into the back of his skull. It was not painful, not yet, but it was far from pleasurable. It was somewhere neatly in the middle.

# Chapter Seven

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## Jars

**R**ather than retracing his footsteps and returning to the lobby, Neil went through an unmarked exit and approached the stairs.

He took the stairs two at a time, descending a couple flights. As he wound his way down, the air got warmer. There was a sweet scent on the air that grew stronger the more he descended. Various doors he passed indicated which floor

he was on. He walked by the chemical storage wing, he passed by doors that led to agricultural labs, pest control departments, and forensic entomology. As he got lower and lower, the air became heavy, like it wasn't being circulated properly. Beneath the humming of the HVAC vents, he could detect the subtle stink of mold, metal and disinfectant spray. Picking a door at random, Neil exited the stairwell.

As the door clicked shut behind him, Neil saw a lab technician leaning against a doorway, his eyes downcast, studying the scribbles on a clipboard. Neil gave him a small nod and flashed his badge as he passed. The man didn't speak, nor acknowledge Neil in any way. Inwardly, Neil smirked. Another cog in the machine. Another ghost in a lab coat.

Neil turned a corner and saw a room that appeared to be abandoned. He tried the handle but it was locked. A keycard reader sat next to

the door. With a small smirk of satisfaction, Neil reached into his back pocket. He took out the credentials that he wasn't supposed to have, the ones that he had swiped from Dr. Susan Harris when she turned her back to him. The keycard reader blinked green and the lock clicked open. Quietly, Neil slipped inside.

The room was dark, save for the soft glow of small heat lamps, which crackled with life. He pocketed the borrowed credentials and instinctively moved his hand to the grip of his service pistol. At first he detected no movement, no sound in the lab aside from the lamps. Then he began to hear it, just at the edges of his hearing. It was an eerie hum, a low level buzz. The volume was low but the sound was constant. It was the buzzing of insect life somewhere nearby.

That's when he noticed the jars.

Dozens of them. Close to maybe eighty of them as far as he could estimate. Multitudinous glass containers, all of them filled with bees. Some were dead, while others were dying. They twitched and beat their wings weakly against the walls of their transparent prisons. Some of them, however, were still alive.

Neil's hand tightened on his pistol as he surveyed the various jars. Some of them had labels affixed to them, which were all marked with some type of scientific code. He picked one of those up at random and he took a closer look:

**Genetic Permeation Series F – Trial 4E –  
Subject Viability: Unstable**

He shook the jar, which rattled when a long dead bee inside clinked stiffly against the glass. Neil squinted, looking at the dead bee more intently. Something was wrong with it, and not just because it was deceased. On its back, instead of a pair of forewings and hind wings,

there were three sets. Neil quickly set the jar down and grabbed another one. He held it up to a lamp to read the label:

**Genetic Leading Edge Vortice Series B –  
Trial 16F – Subject Viability: Unstable**

The bee inside of this jar was dead as well. Where there should have been a stinger, there was another metatarsus, deep crimson in color. Neil allowed himself a small shudder. He set that jar down and scanned the shelves. Some of the jars had no labels at all, just sloppy script written directly onto the glass with a grease pencil. Neil searched for a jar with a living specimen. Once he found one, he immediately wished that he hadn't. He watched a bee spinning in small circles, its six small legs clicking against the glass. The gait of the bee was clumsy, off-balance. When he squinted to see it better, he realized that this was because two of the six legs ended in a human-looking fingernail.

He leaned in, heart thudding, trying his best to read the chicken scratch scrawled on the side of the jar:

**Genetic Drift Series – Trial 6L – Subject Viability: Stable**

In a near panic, Neil searched as many of the non-labeled jars as he could. Inside of them all was a veritable freak show of bees. None of them were ordinary. Some of them were bloated, like a corpse pulled from a river. Others were scrawny, stick thin and crooked. Some of them had wings that were too long. Neil watched one of these dragging its heavy useless wings behind it like a backpack full of bricks. This bee, as well as his neighbor, also seemed to be striped incorrectly. A few of them had small thoraxes that boasted the appearance of human vertebrae, like a mammalian spine carved from chitin. Neil was horrified.

Then, from behind him, a sound.

Neil spun around, his training taking over as he fluidly drew his weapon and leveled it towards the sound.

Nobody was there. It was just a ventilation fan kicking on late, lazily, as if it had fallen asleep on the job. Neil returned to the task at hand. One by one, he checked the jars. There were mutations, transfigurations, transmogrifications — every type of terrible *ation* in the book. Even as he viewed the genetic changes, even as he balked at the failures and affronts to god, something in the back of his mind was pecking at him. It was a low buzz, a feeling; a feeling that something, aside from the very obvious, wasn't right. Neil took three slow breaths to calm his nerves, wishing he had a cigarette to ease his nerves instead. That's when he realized what was wrong:

There was no queen.

Neil remembered every Discovery show, remembered every detail of the school tour he chaperoned for his nephew to the local honey farm. He knew that every hive, every cluster of bees, they all had a central figure that they revolved around. They all had a queen. The queen was the engine of the hive; the queen was the reason that the hive functioned. He quickly re-examined the contents of the jars:

Only workers.

Only drones.

Only soldiers.

Only death.

No queen.

Neil left the lab quickly, hearing the door click shut and automatically lock up behind him. His skin itched. The back of his neck prickled like someone was injecting his spinal column with static electricity. He returned to the stairwell and briskly climbed back to the

floor he was supposed to be on. As he hurried toward the lobby, Neil turned a corner and saw a group of female researchers all huddled together in the hallway, murmuring low amongst themselves. All of them wore sunglasses. As he passed them, one of them turned her head and watched him go. Her rapt attention wasn't flirtatious, nor was it professional. Even behind her shaded lenses, Neil knew that there was hunger in those eyes.

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Back at the motel, Neil poured shitty coffee into a chipped mug and sat staring out the window. As he looked off into the growing darkness, Dr. Susan Harris's words replayed in a loop in his mind:

*"Bees can smell emotion, detective. They can especially smell fear. To them, it smells like vinegar."*

He thought of Gruber's corpse in the pictures. His face twisted in rapture, his sexual organs swollen like the ankles of a Republican president. He thought of the other victims — junior researchers passing through, local farmers, drifters, all of them dead. All of them with that same expression of rapt pleasure on their dead faces. All of them with cantaloupes for gonads.

There was a pattern here, a shape forming in the darkness. Something was killing the men in this town. And what's more, the way that they did it, these men didn't seem to mind it at all.

Neil fought with his thoughts, not wanting to voice aloud the idea that was beginning to form. He didn't want to give such a ludicrous thought oxygen, at least not yet. Still, it buzzed around in his brain anyway, beating away at the edges of his thoughts like insect wings flapping relentlessly against the walls of a glass jar:

**What if the killer wasn't a person? What if it was a species instead?**

# Chapter Eight

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## Love Stings

It started with a cigarette.

Neil stood across the street from **The Nightcap Motel** and puffed away at his fourth 'last cigarette' of the day, his collar popped up against the cold wind of the desert night. He was staring intently at a woman, watching her. Studying her like a scientist observing a freaky insect in a jar.

The woman, a Dr. Elle Hunnicutt according to Neil's dossier, stepped from her car and giggled. Her long legs peeled from the car like

an elongating shadow. She was tall, slender, elegant in her movements. Her elegance seemed out of place in a podunk craphole like Peckham. As she crossed the lot and began to ascend the stairs to the second level, her tight black dress hugged her hips like heat-treated shrink wrap. Even as the sun began to set in a bright array of oranges and yellows, her sunglasses stayed on.

Neil squinted against the setting sun, watching her movements through the smokescreen curling up from between his lips. He had followed Dr. Hunnicutt from the Brandt Institute that evening. He trailed her for a while, ultimately ending up at this lousy motel where he overheard her register under a fake name. Soon after, Neil saw her make a phone call in her car. After that, she waited. Eventually, when she had exited the car and climbed the

stairs, the woman now known as 'Holly Wehi' disappeared into Room 220.

Neil lit another cigarette. When he was halfway through it, an unknown man pulled up in a rundown blue Honda. When he exited his car, he looked both ways, a sheepish expression on his face. Guilty with a mix of horny, Neil knew this face well. It was the face of someone sharing a secret rendezvous.

The man was young, maybe twenty-six or twenty-seven. He looked excited but nervous. He checked his phone and then made his way to the second floor. When he arrived at the door of Room 220, he knocked twice softly. She opened the door immediately, as if she had been standing just on the other side of it, waiting for him. They disappeared inside. Neil sighed and crushed his cigarette underfoot, wishing he had the time to smoke it all the way down to the filter.

Neil crossed the parking lot and ascended the stairs quietly as a snake through grass. He crept his way to Room 220 and pressed his ear up against the door. At first, he heard nothing. Then, faintly, he heard laughter. It was male laughter, nervous. It sounded giddy; ready. Then, Neil heard a moan.

Feeling just the slightest bit sheepish himself, Neil reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his small recording device. He clicked it on, just in case. He pushed it flush against the crack in the door jamb, insuring that it would capture all of the noises that would soon be emitting from the motel room.

More sounds filtered through the doorway: shuffling, unzipping, breathless gasps. A thump, a second one, then a hard impact against a wall. Then, silence. Neil held his breath, pricking his ears for the slightest noise. There was a wet sound, a sloppy slurping

sound. It was the sound of moist sausages spinning on a gas station rotisserie.

He waited. Five minutes passed. Then ten.

Suddenly, something slammed against the door hard enough to rattle the plaster along its frame. Neil fell back, dropping the recorder as his heart hammered in his ears. Recovering his balance, Neil reached down and drew his weapon. Cautiously, he picked up his dropped recorder and he tilted his head, listening. There was another sound in the room now. It was rhythmic, pulsing. It was a buzzing noise that grew louder by the second, like a swarm of bees fast approaching.

Neil had heard enough. He retreated to the stairs as quietly as he could. After that, he flat out ran back to his perch across the street. Shortly after vacating the premises, the door to Room 220 opened.

As Neil huffed and puffed, inwardly cursing himself for not quitting smoking yet, Elle stepped out of the room. She wore the same tight black dress. Only now, it was unbuttoned down to her navel. She straightened her sunglasses, which reflected the pale yellow light of the motel hall sconces. Her skin seemed to be glowing with something like sweat, only thicker.

Elle walked slowly, purposefully back to the parking lot. Her movements were satisfied, fluid. She didn't spot Neil. She didn't even look both ways before entering her car. She just got back behind the wheel and left, disappearing from the scene like a whisper lost to the night.

Neil waited until her taillights completely vanished before he approached Room 220 again. He pressed his ear against the doorway, listening for movement inside, listening for signs of life. There were none.

After flashing his badge at the front desk, Neil returned to the room with a keycard in hand. The door opened with a soft click. The interior of Room 220 smelled like cheap air freshener, stale peanuts and sex. Yet beneath all of those regular motel smells, Neil detected the hint of something else. Something sickly sweet, like honey left to rot in the sun. Crumpled up in the corner, discarded like a pile of soiled sheets, Neil saw the body.

The man from the Honda, mid-twenties, strong build, he was on the floor in a heap. His eyes were open and glassed over. His mouth was agape, twisted up into a sappy grin that didn't quite reach his eyes. His hands were clenched, his fingers white and purple from the force of it. His veins stood out against his pale skin, like blue wires floating in cloudy milk. He didn't have to check the man's nether

region to know that it was swollen, most likely already the size of a pair of pomelos.

Neil held his breath and leaned closer.

With a tentative finger, Neil turned the man's head. Although he had no pulse, his skin was still warm to the touch. There were two small puncture wounds on the side of his neck. The incision marks were ringed with an infectious red color and crusted over with a golden powder. Neil backed away, trying to push down the bile rising in his throat. The buzzing in the room grew louder. He couldn't tell if it was in the room or in his head.

Outside, the desert wind picked up. The last of the orange and yellow was sucked out of the dying sky and darkness ruled completely.

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Neil sat in his desolate room, feeling about as bleak as the furnishings around him. Smoke

from his ninth cigarette was still lingering above him when he lit his tenth.

He pressed rewind again. The recorder ran all the way back and clicked off. He hit play, again. The sounds were starting to become familiar to him, yet no more logical.

There was a gasp. There was moaning. There was thumping, a low trembling cry. On this listen, however, Neil heard something else. Something that the recorder must have picked up as he smashed it all the way against the door jamb, something that his ears alone hadn't picked up on.

Beneath the trembling cry, there was something else. A soft voice, barely audible. It was the whisper of a predator. The voice hissed: *For the queen*. The voice said: *You'll die beautifully*.

Neil hit stop. He lit another cigarette with trembling hands.

As he exhaled and watched the smoke waft up towards the brown stain on the ceiling, he knew that there was no denying it any longer. This was no lab accident, this was no mutation gone wild. This was murder. It was deliberate, organized. It was scientific in its violent precision. It was the women...*they* were the weapon. And Neil was damned if he knew what any of that meant.

# Chapter Nine

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## Ms. Bee Hive is Misbehaving

**M**orning in Peckham came to Neil Agar like a bloodshot eye: dry, scratchy, and filled with regret.

The desert landscape was too bright, too hot. Neil's rented room was sweltering as the old weak air conditioner fought a losing battle with the rising California sun. He was thirsty and his mouth tasted like rust flakes. He wanted to smoke a cigarette to cover up the taste but angrily remembered running out of them

last night. He chastised himself. *Last cigarette? Pssh! You picked a lousy time to start believing in yourself.* He sighed and dressed, trying his best to shrug off how bad he was jonesing for a smoke at the moment.

Based on the state of his room, Neil wasn't going to bother checking what the complimentary breakfast was. It would probably crawl right off of his plate. Instead, Neil headed back to the diner. He had gotten a tip from Ruthie the waitress that someone he had been wanting to talk to had sat down for breakfast a few minutes ago.

After a quick pitstop to the gas station to pick up another carton of smokes, Neil ended up right back where he had begun his investigation: over a horrid cup of coffee.

For a while, Neil sat at a corner booth and just observed his target. Dr. Henry Murger had all the signs of a guilty man. He had pale skin

and twitchy eyes. His right leg was continuously bouncing with nervous energy while he poured over a stack of printouts and brightly colored folders. The folder on top read **Insect Behavior Modification** and it was as thick as the sludge that Ruthie poured from her coffee pot. After choking down enough of the poison to make his headache go away, Neil walked over and plopped himself into the seat opposite Dr. Murger without waiting for an invitation. The doctor looked up at him with startled eyes.

"C-Can I help you?" Dr. Murger asked nervously. He smelled faintly of decaying plants and fertilized soil.

"Do you know who I am?" Neil asked him flat and directly.

"Yes, y-you're..you're that detective that has been s-ss-sneaking around town lately."

"Sneaking? Heh, that's a funny way of putting it when someone is investigating multiple murders." Neil opened a fresh pack of cigarettes and shook one into his hand.

"You aren't s-s-supposed to s-smoke in here. It's against the law to smoke indoors."

Neil eyed him coldly. "You aren't supposed to murder anyone either, yet your town seems a little lax on that rule." Neil lit a match and took a huge drag off of his cigarette before blowing the smoke into Murger's twitching eyes. Murger coughed and leaned back. As he did, Neil stole a glance at the contents of the papers he was pouring over. The words *drones* and *queen* and *mate* and *pheromone* littered the pages. Neil reached out and snatched up the topmost page.

"So what are you working on here, Murger? More research for your partner in crime?" Neil only got a moment to look it over before the

doctor attempted to snatch it back from his hands.

"Hey! Y-you can't d-do that! That's highly unethical! This is classified research material and —"

Neil leaned forward, so close that their noses were practically touching. Neil watched as the doctor's eyes grew wide, he watched as sweat started to bead on the man's greasy forehead. Dr. Murger wiped at his brow. When his nervous hand fell away, Neil noticed a smudge of a yellowish substance left behind.

"Tell me about the bees, doctor."

"The b-b-bees?"

"Yes, the bees. The ones you're probably reading about in your little stack of crap there." Neil crumpled the paper he had stolen into a tight ball and then lobbed it right at Murger's face. It silently bounced off of his slick forehead and fell amongst its peers on the table.

Murger blanched but said nothing about the assault with a deadly paper. "I'm n-not s-sure what you're talking about, detective." More sweat beaded on the man's forehead and some of it began to slowly drip down his hooked nose. His eyes twitched in double time.

"I'd believe you if I were asking about the birds and the bees, as clearly a greasy Poindexter like you wouldn't know about that type of thing. But I asked you about bees, doctor. Only bees. And in fact, if you'd like me to be more specific, I suppose I'm really asking about the ones on the lower levels. The freak show bees. The mutants, the ones with long wings and human finger nails. Is this ringing any bells for you, doc?"

The rickety fan overhead continued to turn at its usual pace but Neil could feel the air change. It was heavier now. The entire room felt like it had tensed up.

"I've got deadlines. I have to catalogue pheromone cross-adaptation charts. I have peer reviews to administer. I need to study these charts so I can p-p-properly calibrate my tool —"

Neil slammed his fist on the table so hard that Murger's untouched plate of biscuits and gravy jumped like it had sat on a tack. Neil stamped out his cigarette on the biggest biscuit and lowered his voice to a knife-edged whisper. "Don't insult me. Tell me about the bees or you'll be sorry." Neil let the threat hang in the air a moment, incomplete. Neil knew the man's worried mind would come up with suitable implied punishments, he had no need to voice any of his own. "You were working closely with Dr. Susan Harris up until sometime last month. You think you're the only one with papers and information? Don't play with me, pal. You were helping her build some type of

climate chamber, one that she wanted to keep on the hush. She built it off the books and had it installed somewhere in that massive eyesore of an institution. Now tell me, where is it?"

Dr. Henry Murger sweat and shook under the scrutiny. Neil had no idea how the man was sitting erect, as clearly he lacked a spine of any kind.

"I-it's...it's in the c-closed wing; the one on the eastern side. O-only a f-f-few people h-have access to it." The man blinked sweat out of his beady eyes. Neil pressed his advantage.

"And? Tell me everything."

"Everyth-thing?" Murger dabbed at the sweat on his forehead with a limp paper napkin.

"Yes, everyth-th-th-thing," Neil said, mocking his nervous stutter. "And if you don't, I'll have you put away for impeding my investigation. And believe me, a sweet little nerd like

you would get passed around like currency in that place."

Dr. Henry Murger swallowed hard, blinking rapidly again, not only from sweat but now also because he wanted to hold back the tears that were beginning to threaten the edges of his eyes. "She was b-b-brilliant," Murger said in a near whisper. "She h-had ideas, b-big ideas. About desire, h-how to control it."

Neil arched an eyebrow and leaned in across the table. "Control desire? You mean like with pheromones and the like?"

The nervous doctor nodded dumbly, his head bobbing like a pigeon. "Y-yes, s-something like that. It was all about de-decoding encoded behaviors. F-finding patterns in the genetic code." The doctor paused but this time Neil held his tongue in the ensuing silence. He could tell that he had worn the doctor down and that his explanations would be forthcom-

ing, even if were going to come out in annoying little spurts. "She st-st-studied d-different lifeforms but b-b-bees...it was the b-bees that she said ha-had the m-most potential." Murger swallowed hard. "Then sh-she...she went too f-far." Murger slumped down in his seat like a deflating balloon. His eyes took on a faraway look, glassed over and filled with remembered horrors.

"What did she do?" Neil asked. The doctor only sat silently, staring blankly ahead while his head played his horror on repeat. "Yo, Dr. Space Case, I asked you a question." The doctor blinked but only partially came out of his stupor. "What did she do?" Neil asked again. He made it clear in his tone of voice that he would not ask again; not without getting really *really* mad.

"She changed herself," Murger said, so low that Neil almost thought he had imagined it.

"Changed herself *how*?"

Murger sunk even further into his seat. He was starting to resemble a puddle more than he did a man. "She infused the bee genetics with her own DNA." His voice was still low and barely audible, but gone was the stammer. He sounded hollow, faraway. Neil knew the man was suffering and that he should feel bad for him but, the truth was, he didn't. Neil was just happy that the stammering was gone.

"She knew that human testing would never be approved, not for this sort of fringe eugenics research. She said it was a passion project, but it was more than that. I don't know her reasons..I didn't know them then and I still don't know them now. But she said it was important. Not just for her, but for all of mankind." He laughed a hollow laugh, cracked and sour like chapped lips sipping grapefruit juice. "She wanted to create a new type of human. I came

to see eventually that she only meant a new type of female. One that was the dominant species, the apex predator. One that could survive anything, one that could reproduce at will. She took genetics from frogs, from fungi, from all types of things that were resistant to extreme weather, to pressure, to environmental factors. She grafted and adapted all of this onto the very genetic coding of queen bees. She'd been able to map out their entire genomes, and then tweak them, add or subtract from them. She toyed with that code until it was perfect, until she thought that it would work." Murg-er's eyes went distant again. A moment later, he eyed Neil's dangling cigarette and asked if he could have one. Neil had a newly opened carton, he most assuredly could have spared one. Still, he refused.

"Sorry egghead, it's my last one." To punctuate his refusal, Neil blew a smoke ring into

Murger's face. The doctor sighed and hung his head before finishing.

"She changed immediately, although the changes weren't all apparent at first. She was faster, stronger too. But at the beginning it was mostly her personality that had changed. Gone was her collaborative spirit, at least with me. She began to recruit only females into her inner circle of experimentation, regardless of their rank or education. Soon she was shunning any male presences, including myself. She would still smile when she saw me, but it became different. It was cold, calculating..yet still..it was magnetic. I still yearned for her. It wasn't just our working relationship that I missed...it began to feel like something more." Murger let his story fizzle out and he sat there silently, sweating. Neil eyed the depleted man and scoffed. The detective stamped out his cigarette on the tabletop and then flicked the butt

into Dr. Murger's beverage mug. After pulling out another cigarette from the pack that Neil claimed he didn't have, he lit it and blew another puff of smoke at the doctor. The smoke clung to the beads of sweat on his face, changing the droplets from transparent to translucent.

"I'm guessing that would be the work of the pheromones. That's what you're studying here, isn't it brainiac? They've weaponized their pheromones. They can get men to do their bidding, their bedding, whatever they want. Am I right, pal?" Neil leaned in close, the secondhand smoke burning Murger's eyes. "They kill men with sex, don't they?"

Dr. Murger's skin flushed and he closed his eyes. "It's not that simple. She isn't killing them, she's *out-evolving* them. When they mate, the men are exposed not only to the pheromones, but also to the genetic cock-

tail that she's cooked up and inserted in their code. But because the code was tailor-made for women, it has different effects on men. Terrible effects. After they mate, they succumb to biological overload. Heart failure, glandular rupture. It's too powerful, it's like they become programmed to want her *too* much. It's not murder per se, it's unintended side effects."

Neil grabbed the weasely doctor by his sweat-drenched collar and pulled him nose-to-nose with himself. If the cigarette wasn't so obviously perched between Neil's lips, the angry look in his eyes would have made it easy to believe that the smoke was coming from his ears. "*Unintended side effects?* Tell that to the morgue, pal. That's where a lot of innocent men are beginning to stack up like Lincoln Logs with erections." Neil tightened his grip on the man's collar; Murger let out a pained wheeze.

"I watched one of those bee girls kill a man last night. She lured him in, took what she needed from him and then left him in a pile on the floor like dirty laundry. After that she walked away casually, like she were on her way to meet her girlfriends for brunch. Unintended side effects? That's *murder*, Dr. Dingus, no matter how you may try to spin it. And since you've just admitted to being an accessory to such, I could call my superiors right now and have them come down on you like a Georgia thunderstorm." Neil's fist tightened around the collar of Murger's shirt like a noose.

Murger shook like he was set on vibrate. Neil felt the collar absorb sweat like a wet sponge. The doctor's face drained of color. "You shouldn't be talking to me. If they knew that I said anything..."

"What? What would happen? Would you finally lose your virginity right before they killed you?"

Murger twitched and shook but didn't answer. Neil shook him even harder and then looked the doctor square in his eyes when they stopped rolling around.

"Help me stop them."

The doctor tried to back away but found that he couldn't, not with his wet collar tightly held in Neil's death grip. "I can't."

"Yes you can numb-nuts, and I'll tell you why. You helped to build the hive. So you can help me destroy it."

Neil released the man's collar. He fell back into his seat like he was lacking bones. He panted and sweat. Neil let the man catch his breath and he allowed his own eyes to wander, following the ascending smoke from his cigarette. When Neil's gaze fell past the glass pane

overlooking the parking lot, something caught his eye. It was a trio of women. Silent. Tall. Incredibly sexy. And every one of them was wearing a pair of hexagonal sunglasses. Neil looked to the sweaty weasel sitting across from him, wanting to see if he'd noticed the women. It didn't seem like he did; Murger was leaning toward the table and muttering mumbled nonsense to nobody in particular. When Neil looked at the window again, two of the women were gone.

The one that was left smiled at him. It wasn't a friendly smile. It was a warning set in lipstick.

# Chapter Ten

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## Honey, I'm Home

The lock on the external sub-basement door was industrial: magnetic, reinforced and fitted with a keycard security system. Luckily for Neil, he had a key. He swiped the keycard he had borrowed from Murger through the card reader and heard a satisfying beep and a soft click. As Neil pulled open the heavy door it let out a tortured squeal bore from long periods of disuse.

Neil stepped through and into the dark hallway beyond, gun raised, penlight sweeping. He paused and listened for the echo of footsteps,

indicating security was on the way. He heard only silence and the faintest buzz. Ordinarily, Neil would write that off as the hum of machinery or the soft whir of a ventilation shaft doing its job. However, in light of recent events, Neil knew it wasn't any of that usual bullshit. No, it was bees. Thousands of bees in jars. Dozens of bees in white lab coats. The buzz belonged to a bustling hive and he was the exterminator.

The inside of the long corridor was damp. The air was heavy and carried on it the scent of moss-covered rocks and hand sanitizer. Beneath that, there was the sickly sweet smell of overripe fruit and honey. As Neil silently traversed deeper into the passageway, the temperature seemed to drop with every step he took. He crept along as quietly as he could, counting fifteen slow paces between each set of flickering emergency lights that hummed behind

bright orange casings. When he rounded the next corner, he saw where the hallway ended. It ended in a blast door, which was wrapped in warning stripes like a red and white bumblebee. Above the metallic handle there was a keypad with smears of a waxy golden resin on six of the buttons.

Checking over his shoulder to insure he wasn't being followed, Neil quickened his pace to the door. He wasn't supposed to be here. Then again, neither were a swarm of genetically enhanced femme fatales with venom in their veins and legs for days. He shook his head to free it of images of sexy monsters in sunglasses and his fingers felt their way along the wall. On his third pass he found what he was looking for. A small crack in the wall revealed a buried control panel. He ripped the panel from the wall and twisted the manual override.

A faint breeze accompanied the hiss of hydraulics. The door swung ajar with the groan of a bear just waking up from its winter nap. Neil gave the door a tentative tap with his foot, coaxing it open another few inches. The sickly sweet smell increased tenfold; from the stink of rotten cotton candy to a fire at the Wonka factory. He nudged the door open the rest of the way, covered his nose with his shirt collar, and stepped into whatever was next.

The massive room was once a sterile lab but it had been converted into something else. There was golden resin dripping from the ceiling like melting sugary stalactites. The walls were all covered in sticky golden secretions laid out in a mass of hexagonal prismatic cells. In the center of the floor was a pulsing light which omitted from an ominous looking orb. Every three seconds the orb would open slightly and release into the air a small puff of golden vapor.

Stepping further into the room, Neil noticed the cocoons. There were a lot of them, he counted at least fifteen from his preliminary sweep. Each of these cocoons were about the size of a casket, suspended in the air by a material that looked like it was woven with human hair and silk protein. Inside of these cocoons, shadows of movement danced. It was as if the entire room had been converted into a greenhouse of chrome, shadows and wax.

Neil crept along, penlight sweeping. The light passed over surgical trays littered with sterilized tools, jars of fluttering bumblebees, whole shelves filled to capacity with antennae, honey and molted human skins. The sight of that discarded flesh made Neil's crawl. There was no denying it. He was in their nest.

Over his shoulder came the click of heels against the metal grating of the floor. Neil whirled around, his gun leveled and ready. A

woman stepped from the shadows. She was tall, perfectly contoured. Her sinister smile revealed pearly white teeth spaced perfectly apart inside a pair of plumbago colored lips. The smile was familiar to Neil, it was the one he had seen through the glass of the diner. She took another step forward and lowered her hexagonal sunglasses, letting them slip to the tip of her slightly upturned nose. The movement revealed her eyes, which were dark and black. She had slitted pupils that glowed a faint amber color.

"You shouldn't be here, detective," she purred. Her voice echoed around the humid chamber like sonar from a bat. Neil agreed. So instead of arguing the point, he fired. Before the bullet even left the chamber, she was on the move. With inhuman speed she rolled to the right, springing back to her feet effortlessly. She crossed the divide in two long strides

and lashed out with a long leg, catching the detective in the wrist and sending his gun clattering to the floor. Before Neil could blink he found himself pressed up against a sticky wall, a powerful hand squeezing his jaw and forcing his lips into a pucker. Her face floated an inch from his, her hot breath warming his skin. Her breath smelled like honey and rot.

“You’re resilient,” she whispered. “I like that.”

Her lips parted and a pink tongue flicked out flirtatiously. Then, a long black glossa fell from her mouth, making sucking sounds like a straw in an emptied glass. As she leaned in for a wet kiss, Neil head-butted her. With a strangled hiss her head snapped back and she stumbled a few paces away. The sunglasses fell from her face and were crushed beneath her heel as she staggered. Neil took advantage of the opening. With a blur of motion he rushed to the near-

est countertop, grabbed a surgical tool from a tray and heaved it in her direction. The scalpel thunked into her with a sickening sound. She doubled over, hands grasping at the sterile tool plunged into her hardened abdomen.

She didn't bleed. She leaked.

A yellowish goo oozed from the new opening in her midsection. She let out a wail, high-pitched and inhuman, more like a buzz than a bellow. She lunged for Neil again, hands reaching toward his throat with lethal intent. This time, Neil was ready for her. He grabbed another tool from the tray and plunged it deep into her temple. She gurgled as golden nectar poured forth from the wound, dribbling and dripping around the handle of the repurposed laparoscopic instrument.

Howls erupted from somewhere beyond the chamber. Neil took that as his cue to leave. He quickly located his pistol and then hauled ass

back out of the chamber, his footsteps falling heavily as he ran towards the exit. The entire hive sounded as if it were coming alive now, buzzing and shrieking and the beating of insectile wings sounded behind him, echoing and giving chase.

A few steps from the sub-basement door, a fluttering passed overhead and Neil ducked his head instinctively and dropped to a crouch. An angry bee girl flapped to a stop in front of him; her dripping mandibles opened in a scream of fury. He didn't hesitate. He pulled the trigger. A deafening boom filled the corridor. Pieces of her skull and exoskeleton cascaded to the floor like sticky snow. Neil grabbed at the heavy door, which let out another groan of resistance. Once he muscled it open wide enough, he ran.

He ran until his legs burned and threatened to leave him. He ran until the very act

of breathing felt like a herculean task. He ran until he was safe inside of his car; bloody, bleak, and bereft of breath. His eyes were wild, filled with adrenaline and fear.

He had seen it. The hive was undoubtedly real. And what's worse, it seemed to be growing.

# Chapter Eleven

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## Honeysuckled

**N**eil stood before the gathered crowd crammed into the small rectangular building that served as Peckham City Hall. He was still wearing the same shirt he had broken into the hive with; it was covered in sticky golden resin and spattered with blood, none of it his own. Although his left eye was practically swollen shut from the impact of his head-butt, he still maintained eye contact the

best he could with the grim faced council seated before him.

"Your town is under siege," he repeated. His jaw was set and there was fire in his unswollen eye. "Not from any normal threat; not from disease, poor gun control, or human traffickers. No, this threat is primal, it's downright biological. Science has run amok in this town, allowed to fester and grow uninhibited out there in the desert sand and now it has spawned a monster." A murmur ran through the crowd until one of the councilmen raised a hand for silence. "Your town is under attack," Neil pressed on, his voice gaining strength as he went. "Not from the kind of monster you may be picturing; it's no planned pandemic or Frankenstein reanimation. No, this monster lives amongst you. This monster is taking many forms, and all of them are of beautiful women." Another murmur cut through the

crowd, louder this time, as well as a fair amount of snickering. Men shifted in their seats, elbowing their wives playfully. Women scoffed, a couple gasped. Neil heard all of this and tried to clarify his statement.

"It's not just any women, that's not what I mean. These women have been changed, they've been biologically altered. These women have been chemically induced to evolve, to hunt, to seduce, to destroy." The crowd noise rose in pitch, the laughter became more obvious. "They have been programmed by renegade doctors at the Brandt Institute to control and kill men using pheromones extracted from queen bees. These pheromones make them inherently irresistible to men. In turn, these men give in and get stung, triggering heart failure, strokes, enlarged genitals." More laughter. It downright pissed Neil off. He turned to face the crowd, anger turning his

skin the faintest shade of red. "It's not funny, not at all. You've heard the rumors, some of you have even read the reports, I'm sure. There are men in this town that are dying. You understand that, don't you? That isn't funny to you, is it? All of these men dying, it doesn't matter that they've done so with a smile plastered on their face. They all ended up six feet deep anyway, all of them with balls swollen and misshapen like a prizewinning pattypan squash."

The snickering died down. The crowd watched Neil with equal parts disbelief, horror, pity and the type of morbid curiosity that residents of a Freak Show must have seen on the regular. Neil turned back to face the council, imploring them as earnestly as he could manage. "These women have been genetically altered to mimic the powers of queen bees. Why do you think there have been so many bees migrating to the area? Why do you

think that your men have been dropping dead? There's a hive beneath the Brandt Institute, large and growing larger still. I've seen it. I've been inside of it."

Silence.

Then, the snickering began anew. It was nervous, derisive, dismissive.

Councilman Berg leaned forward, a patronizing smile plastered to his cherubic face. "Detective Agar, you must understand how..erm ..*irregular* this all sounds. Surely you can appreciate that."

Neil gripped his side of the podium harder. If the wood had been any softer, his fingerprints would have been permanently embedded in it. "I don't give a flying fuck how it sounds," Neil growled, angry and desperately trying not to lose control of the situation. He chose his words poorly. Councilman Ramsey leaned over and whispered something to

Councilman Berg. It wasn't meant to be heard, but the microphone picked it up anyway.

"A flying fuck is what you'd get from a bee girl, isn't it?"

Councilman Berg tried to suppress a smile but it failed. Neil was livid.

"With all due respect to the council here, I need you to start doing your jobs. You can sit in your comfy chairs on your plump asses and crack jokes all you want but the simple fact remains that your town is dropping dead. There are new victims all the time, the latest was that pervert at the Nightcap Motel. These women, these bee girls, they're starting to pick you off one by one. You need to authorize a strike force and you need to do it now. We need to fight these things before they multiply and spread."

Councilman Ramsey put on his best straight face and asked, "So you need us to authorize a raid? Do you mean a raid on the Brandt Insti-

tute, or just a giant can of the stuff?" Councilmen Berg and Ramsey snorted and chuckled, a few blissful tears fell down Ramsey's face. Neil wished he could bash that ugly mug in on the spot. Through gritted teeth Neil said in short clipped words, "This is no joke. This is real. I fought them. I killed two of them. They didn't bleed human blood, they leaked honey."

Getting control of himself once more, Councilman Berg asked, "Are you drunk, Agar?"

Councilman Ramsey added, "We can smell it on you."

Neil lifted a sleeve and sniffed. His shirt smelled like honeysuckles. "It's from the lab. It's from *them*."

The crowd and the council both muttered amongst themselves. He was able to pick out a few words. He heard *drunk* and *mead* and

*crazy*. Before the council spoke again, Neil already knew that he had lost them.

"You need some rest, detective, maybe a change of clothing as well. We suggest you consult with our town doctor, and maybe after that you can file a report with the —"

Neil spun on his heels and walked out of the City Hall, making sure to slam the bejeezus out of the heavy double doors on his way out. Once he was outside of the building, adrenaline and nerves caused his hands to shake as he tried to light a cigarette, one that he wasn't even going to pretend would be his last one.

As he smoked, he saw Sheriff Peters drive past in his cruiser. The cruiser made a slow, lazy pass, all along the sheriff's eyes were tracking him like a rabid dog. Neil sighed, an exhalation that was accompanied by acrid smoke. He was all alone in this. It was just like his superiors had said. There was no backup coming. There

was nothing the local law enforcement could or would do. He was alone in this.

Later that night, Neil sat perched on the edge of his crunchy motel mattress. Before him, spread all across the bedspread, was every piece of information he had on the Brandt Institute. On his papers and maps, he marked off every air vent, every access panel, every emergency intake line. The hive was rooted in the sub-basement and he didn't think he would be able to sneak in the same way twice. The answer was here, it was here somewhere. He only had to find it.

A soft knock at the door shook him from his concentration. He got to his feet angrily, ready to curse out a cleaning lady who clearly didn't do her job around here anyway. When he opened the door, he saw that it wasn't a member of the motel staff.

"Detective Agar? Sorry to bother you. I..I was told that I could find you here. I was at City Hall..."

The woman allowed her words to trail off. She was short and stout, like a teapot. Her hair was a mix of auburn and grey. Her eyes were weary and in her hands she clutched a stack of newspapers like it were a sick cat. She held the papers aloft, gingerly offering them up to Neil. "I don't know if this helps anything, but I believe you."

Neil brought the woman inside and checked the lot, insuring that she was alone. After that he shut the door and motioned for her to take a seat in the unoccupied desk chair. She sat down but didn't look comfortable. Her eyes constantly darted around, a sure sign of paranoia. Neil mentally crossed his fingers and hoped he didn't just let a lunatic into his motel room.

"What can I do for you Miss.," he trailed off, giving her the space to provide her name.

"Mrs. Wreston. Well, *Ms.* Wreston now," she said in a voice that was barely above a whisper.

"Alright Ms. Wreston, what brings you here? If you were truly there at City Hall, then surely you must know that I'm in the middle of some very important work." She nodded absently, like the motion was set on autopilot. She set the stack of papers in her lap and nervously wrung her hands for a moment.

"I was there...I heard every word you said. I...I know that you were telling the truth."

Neil let silence hang in the air, waiting for her to continue. She didn't. Neil sighed and rubbed at his eyes before pulling out the last cigarette from his most recent pack. "Okay, you believe me. Great. What does that have to do with you coming here tonight? I don't have very long."

She continued to wring her hands for a moment before making a show of stopping herself and straightening up in her seat. She smoothed the stack of newspapers in her lap and tried her best to smile. A small smile appeared on her face but it was a thin mask, it was all loss and darkness beneath it.

"My husband...my *late* husband...before he died..he changed. He became..well, there's no other way to put it. He became *obsessed* with another woman." She went back to wringing her hands, anxiety and embarrassment playing for control of her face. "She was an intern, one who had just moved to town. She was interning at Brandt, something about studying the relationship of pollinators to agricultural ecosystems. My husband, he was a dishwasher at the local bar. They met one night shortly after she moved to town." Ms. Wreston paused again, her face flushed. "He mentioned

her right away. The way he perked up whenever he talked about her, it gave me reason to worry straight away. He said it wasn't that he was interested in her, but that he was interested in her work, what she did. He said he had always had a penchant for biology, it was favorite class at community college. I was worried, but I tried to ignore it. We had been married for over ten years, I didn't really think that anything would happen." She paused again as a single tear fought its way down her reddened cheek.

"By their second meeting, he was already changing. He was moodier, more distant. It was almost as if he were experiencing withdrawals when he was away from her. He claimed he was only tired, that the late night shifts were catching up to him, but I knew better. It was her, he was constantly obsessing over her. If I brought her up, his reactions would become severe. The first time I addressed my

worry, he just put a reassuring hand on my leg and told me not to worry. He even told one of his lame jokes..he said 'Pollinate her? I barely know her!'" Ms. Wreston smiled in a faraway way. "Then after that, he became snappier, much crueller in his replies. He told me that he didn't feel the same way about me.. about us..not anymore. He said it wasn't her, but I knew that it was. After that, there was a night or two that he didn't come home after his shift. I'd heard rumors around town that he was spotted hanging out near the Brandt Institute, that he was sometimes seen in the company of a beautiful young woman." She paused again, this time for a long time.

Neil cleared his throat and tried to get the emotional woman back on track. "And those newspapers? What does that have to do with this?"

The woman lifted the pile of papers from her lap and presented them to Neil, who took them with a small frown on his face.

"After...after my husband was gone, I wanted to know why. So I began to do some research into Brandt, trying to figure out just what exactly it was that they did out there in the desert. I didn't know why, but somehow I just *knew* that they were responsible."

Neil began thumbing through the papers, initially seeing nothing of note within them. "And what did you find?" Neil asked.

Ms. Wreston sighed and gave a small shrug. "Nothing. At least, nothing that I was expecting to find." She went back to wringing her hands but this time she powered through and kept on recalling her tale. "There were no headlines about Brandt, no notes in the science rags about breakthroughs or grants or anything like that, but there was something else. There was a

pattern that I had begun to notice. I didn't notice at first because I was looking in the wrong place." She looked up at Neil with a wan smile. "Try looking at the personal ads, detective."

Neil did. He saw them in every issue. By the time he thumbed through the third paper in the stack, he was beginning to see the pattern as well.

"It wasn't just my husband. Those ads, they used to be for lots of things. People selling cars or home appliances. People looking for love, or for a pen pal. Job openings, things like that. But then the tone shifted. They became different, more pleas than actual ads. Different women, just like me, all asking their husbands to come home. Wondering where they went at night, wanting advice or to be convinced that something else was going on. All of those lonely women, all of them suddenly jilted by a partner who had become obsessed with some-

one else. I don't know everyone in town...some of these women I knew, some I do not. But when I started studying and cross-referencing their names, I saw a pattern. A lot of them, like myself, have now become widows. Some of them are still waiting, unsure what became of their men, stuck in this terrible holding pattern of waiting and worrying. Not all of our men returned, not all of our men have turned up. The police couldn't do anything about it, there is no direct law against adultery or changing how you feel about someone. But the ones who did turn back up..it was just like you said. They were dead, dead with smiles on their faces. Dead with...well...dead with bloated features." She began to cry.

Neil felt uncomfortable so he kept his eyes on his lap and continued to leaf through the stack. Sure enough, personal ads by the dozens asking for the whereabouts of their husbands.

Boyfriend advice for those finding themselves suddenly abandoned. Missing persons reports, autopsies of men with testicles like medicine balls.

"I don't know what it all means," she said when her crying was back under control, "and I don't know if any of this information helps to stop it. But I wanted you to know, detective, that I believe you." She paused and dabbed at the corners of her eyes with a damp sleeve. "My husband was a good man, I know this. So after hearing what you said in there..about the pheromones..it..it gave me at least a small sort of peace. I really don't think he meant to act that way. I like to think that he had no choice..it was pure impulse..only pure biology, pure chemical reaction." She smiled with eyes full of tears. "He loved me, and you allowed me to feel that again and to believe it, too. I felt like I was finally believed by somebody. So..I don't

know. I guess I just wanted to return the favor. I believe you, detective."

Without another word, she got up and left the room. The door shut quietly behind her. Only after he heard the sound of an engine turning over and gravel crunching under rubber did Neil get up and glance out the motel window. The woman was gone.

He sighed and looked at the stack of newspapers, now added to the smorgasbord of papers spread across his bed. He needed a cigarette. After opening up a fresh pack from his already half emptied carton, Neil sucked the smoke down to the filter in three long pulls. Using the first cigarette to light a second one, he puffed until he felt a buzzing in his head.

Tomorrow, he would take on the hive. Tonight, he needed a god damned drink. Thinking back on the woman's tale, Neil decided to visit the local watering hole. Maybe

he'd learn something new. Maybe not. Either way, there was a stiff drink waiting there with his name on it.

# Chapter Twelve

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## Bar Mead

Neil had been at the bar for the better part of two hours. He started by drinking whiskey neat. However, after drinking enough to dull his senses, he switched to a local drink that the bartender had suggested called The Queen's Gambit. It was made with metheglin mead, brewed with cinnamon, nutmeg and vanilla beans. Neil didn't usually go for sweet drinks but this one was delicious

and it hit like a Mike Tyson left hook. He had downed four of them before he even realized it. They were addictive, as was the buzzing in his head which gave him a break from the constant stress, the planning and the images of a bee girl's head exploding from a bullet set on repeat.

Neil drank until he forgot where he was. Then he remembered where he was, and why he was there, and then he drank a couple more. Soon enough his per diem was spent and he was ready to stagger his way back to his motel room. When he stepped out into the fresh air, a soft voice called to him from his righthand side.

Neil knew better than to trust pretty women after midnight. So when a tall blonde appeared, leaning against his car, arms folded and lips painted the color of begonias, he knew to keep his distance. "Detective," she said in

a voice that was smooth as silk, "we need to talk." The bright halo of light from the parking lot lamppost made her look like an angel. Yet even through the fog of fermented honey and nutmeg, he remembered clearly that the devil was once an angel, too.

"Who sent you?" Neil asked, his words only the slightest bit slurred. She wasn't one of the ones he had seen before, she must be new, freshly transformed. She had the same shape as the rest of them, the same soft glow and allure. Even as his heartbeat increased, his hand dropped to rest by the grip of his service weapon.

"Nobody sent me," she said with words that sounded and smelled sweet. "I came here to help you."

Neil scoffed. "Bullshit," he said, his own words far from sounding or smelling sweet.

The woman left her spot next to his car and took a tentative step forward. "It's true, detective. Not all of us are on her side. She..she's gone quite mad."

Neil's fingers flexed and strayed ever closer to his weapon. "Why should I trust you? You're one of them, I can smell it on you."

She tilted her head, looking like a kitten with a thought. "I am. I was..until I saw what she became. Her true form, it terrifies me." She stepped the rest of the way into the light, her body now on full display. She was wearing a sheer black dress that clung to her like a bad reputation. Her every hypnotic curve was on display, making Neil swoon despite his best efforts to remain steadfast and stoic. Her skin had a sheen to it, it was too perfect, too golden, almost closer to wax than skin. She was halfway between a woman and something else. "Please detective," she purred, "you've seen the

hive. You've seen what she's creating. I do not want to be a part of that."

"Yeah? And just what exactly is she creating?" His fingers twitched, readying to free his weapon at a moment's notice.

"The next stage, detective. She's evolving. And she wants the rest of us to evolve with her." As she waited for him to respond, her lips puckered. She shifted her weight and pushed her glorious breasts together. The overall effect it was having on him was stronger than all of the fermented honey in the place. His head started to swim.

"And you want me to stop her? Why?" Neil was doing everything he could to stop the parking lot from spinning. Too late he was beginning to suspect that this was an effect of pheromones.

"Because I'm scared, detective. I don't want to become like her, I want to remain myself.

Please, I know what you are planning to do. Let me help you." She smiled. Her begonia colored lips were plump and they were calling to him. Deep in his gut he knew that every word spoken from those perfect lips was a lie, yet his brain and his genitalia sent him chasing after her every syllable like moths after a flame. He felt a buzzing in his pants and he faintly wondered whether it was his phone set to vibrate or something else entirely.

"Why?" Neil asked weakly. He was getting caught up in a haze, he wasn't thinking clearly. "Why would you want to help me?"

She took another step closer. Her skin shimmered when she moved. He saw his own dilated pupils reflected back at him in her hexagonal sunglasses. "Because I like the way that you smell. You smell like vinegar."

Neil didn't realize the trap had already been sprung until his insides burned and his vision

blurred into white nothingness at the edges. All about him the air was thick and heavy with a choking smell, it was venom disguised as perfume. The pheromones permeated the air between them until he could see them riding the breeze in waves. He stumbled back a few steps, putting his sweaty hands to his head.

“N-No...you...” His tongue felt heavy. His knees weakened and threatened to send him spilling to the gravel lot.

“You’ve resisted longer than most,” she said, circling him now like a vulture with a perfect ass. “It’s kind of beautiful, really. Your struggle, your will. You would make a great drone.”

Neil dropped to one knee. Everything around him was vibrating. The air was thick as syrup, the powerful pheromones reducing his limbs to wet sand. She crouched down beside him and brushed his cheek with an expertly manicured nail.

"Men," she said with a wistful sigh. "You always think that you're the apex predator."

He groaned as his head swum and drowned in sensations he hardly understood. "I've... I've killed two of you," he muttered weakly.

The smile on her face didn't fade. "I know. And it is time to atone for that sin. It is time to meet the Queen."

She kissed his forehead. Then everything went black.

# Chapter Thirteen

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## All Good Things Must Come To An End

**N**eil awoke suspended in wax.

His arms were cocooned in golden resin and stuck to his side with the force of a neodymium magnet. The air all about him smelled of sweet rot and nectar. Everything was sticky and warm, like the insides of a dy-

ing body. Above him, encased in the metal Transmogrification Pod, the honeycombed walls pulsed like a hypnotic heartbeat. He tried to move his head but it was held fast in place by a gelatinous golden mixture. There was a soft humming, a constant buzzing, yet he couldn't tell if that was in the machine or in his bones. Outside of the pod, sultry shapes moved in the shadows. As his eyes adjusted, they came into focus.

Female forms, perfectly shaped. Curvaceous, deadly, nude. They surrounded his pod, silently watching him struggle, pressing their perfect chests against the glass and smiling cold smiles. To them, he must have smelled like vinegar. He struggled against the waxy resin that held him in place but it refused to loosen its grip on him. Once he gave up that struggle, he noticed the change that had come over the room. No longer were the naked mutant women looking

at him. No, their heads were tilted upwards, staring at something that towered over them. That's when he saw it too.

It was her. Dr. Susan Harris. The queen bee.

Only now she was different. She was taller, at least three feet taller since he had last laid eyes on her. She was pale, practically translucent in the bright lights of the laboratory. Beneath her silky skin, her veins stood out like lighted strings of Christmas lights. All of her veins shown black and gold. As she peered down at him with her five eyes, her hair fell as smooth as oil and honey. It was the color of nectar. She flapped her massive wings and gently set down on the ground in front of his pod. When she leaned closer, he saw his own terrified face reflected back in the compound mirrors of her ocelli eyes. When she spoke, her voice slithered from her throat, gliding out and dropping her words like droplets of sweet honey.

"Welcome, Detective Agar. Welcome to the hive." Her words buzzed around his head like flies.

"Quite the welcome wagon you've put out for me," Neil spat sarcastically. He tried to turn his head side-to-side to take in the full scope of his predicament but his head was stuck fast in the wax.

Dr. Susan Harris walked slowly up to the pod. Her path was direct, right down the middle of Neil's field of vision. As she got closer, Neil noticed something else different about her, aside from the obvious. Her middle section, more of a thorax now than a human midsection, was bigger, rounder. It was almost bulbous, like she were smuggling a children's Hop-Along ball beneath a sundress of gold and black stripes. She pushed her insectile face against the glass of the pod, her hot breath causing it to fog up when she spoke.

"You killed two of my daughters," she said. She squinted five obsidian eyes. Her mandibles flexed angrily around a tightlipped smile that was once fully human. She sniffed at the air between them. When she opened her mouth again, it wasn't a tongue that lolled out but a long, wet proboscis. It flicked about as if she could taste him on the stifling air of the laboratory. The proboscis continued to spill forth from her mouth like a long spaghetti noodle slurped in reverse. At the end, a dripping wet glossa licked hungrily at the glass in front of Neil's face. She smiled at him with an inhuman face. "But luckily for us, soon I will no longer need scientific help with procreation."

"So you'll just need the mental help, then?"

Neil's comment had a reaction but he couldn't tell what it was. Her mouth spread, but whether it was a smile or a snarl, he was unable to tell on her mutated face. "Despite all of

your flaws, detective, I am still willing to offer you a place in our hive. You have proven yourself to be resilient, resourceful, sturdy. You would make a good soldier. Of course," she paused and glanced at Neil below the belt with five unblinking black eyes, "Soldiers don't get to have...*stingers*."

Her black eyes studied his face. There was malice in the dark pools of her pollinated pupils.

"Or maybe you could be a forager. Forever enslaved to the hive, bringing back to us anything we ask for, as much as your pathetic human spine could handle. Or perhaps you could be a drone. Mindless, only useful for one thing. And since in the hive we believe that fair is fair, drones are also the shortest lived." She paused and buzzed. To Neil's human ears, he could almost detect laughter in it. "No, no. Maybe a queen's attendant, would you like that, my

pet? You could spend all day grooming me, worshipping, begging to please me until I am finished with you. What do you say, detective? Do any of these job openings sound better to you than simply 'food' or 'corpse'?"

She leaned in closer and fogged up the window again. Even through the thick glass, he could smell her cloying breath. It smelled of dead flowers and burnt sugar. As she breathed and taunted him, Neil continued to subtly waggle his fingers, just as he'd been doing ever since he woke up. His fingers squirmed and continued to worm their way closer to his jacket pocket. Even as his body was glued to its spot, he was able to just barely free his right hand. It wasn't much, but it was enough. In another minute or so, he'd be able to reach his pocket.

Neil looked into the two biggest eyes that Dr. Susan Harris had. For the first time since

they had met, she was without her hexagonal sunglasses and he could look her in the eyes. In those dark orbs, he saw nothing left of her humanity. It emboldened his resolve; he was going to see this mission through to the end.

"I appreciate the job offer," he said slowly, wriggling his fingers in double time as soon as they cleared away any of the wax holding them in place. "And even though you've clearly seen better days, I must admit, there's still something awfully tempting about you. Hell, you still look better than my ex-wife. She was a bit insane, just like you, but she decided to become a whale instead of a bee once we ended things." Dr. Susan Harris, Queen Bee, buzzed again. Was it amused laughter? He couldn't tell. But as he spoke, she kept her five eyes solely focused on his face. She didn't notice that his hand had made its way to the outer edges of his jacket. He could still feel it there, tucked away inside

of his resin-coated pocket. He could almost reach it.

"My ex only thought I was good for one thing too, although I'm afraid it had everything to do with my pocketbook and nothing to do with my..*stinger*." He paused and winked. "Which I can assure you is functioning just fine, thank you." Suddenly, *there!* He felt it. His fingers managed to partially dig into his pocket and rest on the button secreted inside, the one attached to a detonation trigger. While the black eyes of the transmogrified doctor studied him, he smiled. For the first time, he saw those eyes blink, surprised, perhaps even a bit apprehensive.

"I'm afraid, however, that I'm going to have to turn you down. When I signed my divorce papers I made myself a promise. I swore that I'd never find myself working tirelessly for another Queen B again, even a mu-

tated one. Sorry." The Queen Bee threw her head back and bellowed out such a loud and prolonged buzzing that he could feel it vibrate up his bones and through his skull. His eyeballs shook like they were attached to a vibration plate in a lazy man's gym. Even as his teeth chattered from the buzz, he smiled and said, "Y-y-y-you sh-should h-have k-k-killed-d...m-me wh-when y-you..had the-the ch-chance..Queen b-b-Bitch!"

Neil closed his eyes and pushed the button, praying that the weasel Dr. Henry Murger had done his part. Luckily for him, the town at large, and whoever was the beneficiary of Brandt's fire damage insurance policy, the doctor did. Thermite charges, all remotely set to explode; placed in the ventilation shafts by Dr. Henry Murger, the coward who desperately wanted to stop feeling like one. It seemed that Neil's numerous threats in the parking

lot of the diner, almost none of them that he could actually back up, had worked. That little weasel did what was asked of him and, in return, Neil promised not to take him down too. Neil still wasn't sure if he was going to uphold his end of the deal or not.

Unlike conventional explosives that relied on a widespread blast effect, thermite charges generated an intense heat. How intense, you may ask? It's capable of melting steel, turning metal into rivers of molten lava that spread and demolish anything in it's path. That's what made it the perfect choice for disabling expensive scientific equipment.

Pouring forth as piping hot rivers of deadly grey, the ventilation shafts melted and spilled into the laboratory. They drizzled and dripped, covering beeping machines, flashing lights and humming computers like the world's hottest fudge atop a crunchy mechanical sundae.

Flames began to sputter and spew forth from the melting machines. In turn, these flames ignited the copious amounts of flammable chemicals residing in all the beakers, cans and Erlenmeyer flasks populating the laboratory countertops. Chemicals burned blue and green and purple. Autoclaves burst in bright geysers of whistling steam. Glassware erupted and burning filter papers fell smoking to the floor, lending to the hive the look of Satan's Christmas snow-globe after a hard shake.

As the hive began to collapse and succumb to the roaring flames, attractive nude women in hexagonal sunglasses screamed. Their hardened skin bubbled and cracked. As they shrieked and buzzed in high-pitched frequencies, covered in chemicals that burned without remorse or reason, the wax holding Neil in place, as well as the pod he was cocooned in, began to heat up and melt away.

The Queen Bee, formerly Dr. Susan Harris, fell to her knees and screeched. Four more massive wings burst forth from her back and began to flap in frantic rhythmic bursts. She tried to take off and hover above the flames but the ceiling was too low for her new massive height, refusing to allow her enough space from the flames licking at her legs. A beaker burst and soon her thorax was covered in hissing green flames that seemed to have a mind of their own. She screamed and buzzed as she burned. Her underbelly split and poured out her yellow and brown insides like a cracked egg. Whatever had been growing inside of her, it too burned and bubbled and died.

The heat soon became oppressive and unbearable. Neil's sweat commingled with melted wax and honey as he dropped from his suspended state and spilled out of the rapidly dissolving transmogrification pod. All about

him women buzzed and burned and burst and died, leaving charred limbs and antenna twitching along the floor in their final spasms of life. Neil tore himself away as the walls collapsed around him. He saw a gap form and, as best he could, he ran through it between dripping drops of molten steel. He cried out in pain as a few drops splattered on the back of his neck and rolled painfully down his back as he ran through the ever-widening gap. Choking, burning and gasping for air, Neil stumbled down the corridor, past melting walls and dying drones, through an inferno of dying mutants and the machines that spawned them.

Behind him, the hive screamed as one, its accursed buzzing filling the space between his ears.

He didn't look back.

Outside, dawn was beginning to break over the Peckham desert. As Neil staggered into the

growing sunshine, behind him a large portion of the Brandt Research Institute collapsed into a smoldering crater. He eventually steadied his gait and began the long walk back to his motel room, covered in ash, wax and blood; some of it his, some of it not. He knew there would be no headlines, no medals for his valor. He knew that the papers would claim it was an isolated laboratory incident. That is, if they reported anything at all. Still, he wore a grim smile of satisfaction for a job well done; as well done as the charred remains of a one Dr. Susan Harris.

# Chapter Fourteen

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## A Bee-line to the B-Line

Two weeks later

His favorite hunting grounds were the stretch of highway between Peckham and Barstow. The black asphalt was piping hot to the touch beneath the relentless heat of the blistering California sun. He loved the heat. The heat made people slow, made them stupid. The heat could make people crazy.

A rundown and rusted station wagon pulled into a vacant spot and parked. The engine rattled before going silent. For as lousy as the vehicle looked on the outside, the woman inside of it was beautiful beyond description. He noticed her the moment she stepped from the car. She rose from her seat, graceful like the rising tide. In a slim, form fitting black dress, she could take your breath away. Pale skin, flawless and unmarred. Her lips were full and provocative, juicy. They called to him. They begged for him. Although she had dark aviators on to protect her eyes from the sun, he could tell she had beautiful eyes. How could she not? He thought about how great they might look on his mantel, floating in a jar with the rest of them. They'd be suspended in time with their perfection perfectly preserved in formalin, distilled water and isopropyl alcohol.

She looked in all directions as she exited the vehicle. She tried to look casual but he could tell that she was anxious. She didn't want to be seen, she was running from something. Little did she know, soon she'd also be running from *someone*.

He stalked his prey as she walked away from her vehicle and took a seat on an old stone bench. She checked her surroundings one more time and then seemingly relaxed. He smiled to himself. Now was when he made his move.

The next train wouldn't arrive at the station for over forty minutes. The B-Line would come eventually, but it was famous around here for running behind more than half of the time. They would have plenty of time to play.

Slowly he crept forward, slinking low, not brandishing his blade until he was only a few steps away from the waiting woman's

back. When she was almost within grabbing distance, she turned and looked directly at him. She smiled, unsurprised and unafraid. He froze in mid-step, the California sun reflecting off of his hungry knife.

"You smell strong," she said causally, lightly. "I think you'll do nicely."

He shuddered, unsure how to react to such words. For the first time in his murderous career, he hesitated, unsure of himself. She smiled again, broader this time.

"Vinegar," she said. "Now you smell like vinegar."

She was on him in a flash. He screamed in terror, but only for a moment. Soon his scream turned to one of unbridled pleasure. Then, he blacked out.

He awoke later back in his shoddy motel room. There was still dirty laundry littering every surface and takeout containers by the

dozen laying about in various stages of rot. There was no light except that which was emanating from the blue lightbulb showcasing the blobs of surfactant and distilled water that danced in his lava lamp. Something was different, however. There was a tempting woman's silhouette encased in the shadows.

He became suddenly aware of a sweet scent on the air. It smelled like honey and wilted rosehips. It was heavy and even in the dark he could tell the scent was thick as a fog. He knew that something was wrong. He also knew that he didn't seem to care.

The supple silhouette was standing just inside the scope of his vision. He sensed her as much as he saw her. She was tall, curvaceous, perfect. She achieved the type of impossible standard that every woman was held to. Every measurement correct, every inch of her skin flawless enough to lick. She was wearing noth-

ing but a pair of oversized sunglasses, which seemed to be hexagonal in shape. Her hair was swept back in a stylish swoop, the ends of her hair gleaming like they were dipped in wax and lit by fireflies. Her skin shimmered with golden freckles.

"I love you," he said in a voice that he didn't recognize as his own. She smiled. Her perfectly plump lips were the color of bright Hibiscus.

"Shhh," she whispered, stepping forward until she placed a finger to his quivering lips. He felt his resolve, his identity, his own wants and needs all fall to the floor with her whisper.

With the grace of a ballerina and the intentions of a stripper, she casually sat in his lap and straddled him like she'd done it a thousand times before. Her touch was electric, he could hear and feel a buzzing at every point of impact. As her sweet hot breath fell on his face, somewhere in the back of his mind his ratio-

nal self was screaming for him to get away, to push her off of him. Yet although she weighed no more than one hundred twenty pounds, he hadn't the strength to get her off of him. His body protested the very thought, he craved her being on top of him. No matter what his brain could think, no matter how strange the situation he found himself in, her touch, her scent, her very vibe overruled them all like a ring forged in Mordor.

When she kissed his forehead, his body surged to life. Every nerve was electric, every neuron was on fire. When she licked his neck, he gasped with ecstasy. When she licked him again, this time with something other than a human tongue, he began to smile and panic all at once. Her hands were exploring him. No, not exploring, *probing*. Looking for soft spots. He felt a sudden jab, the impact rocked his whole body like a cannonball to the gut. He

felt heat, intense burning pain, and began to scream as it coursed through his body like liquid fire burned in his veins.

She began to bite his neck, sickening slurping sounds following each bite. As she slurped, he felt it in his chest, in his lungs, in his ears. His heart began hammering, fast, *too* fast. It no longer felt like a heartbeat, but rather a jackhammer aimed at his insides. His lips parted and a groan of pain and a moan of pleasure escaped his lips at the same time, as if the sounds and sensations were shackled to each other like inmates on work detail.

"Wait....no...I don't..," he trailed off, no longer feeling capable of speech. She straddled him more firmly now, her weight felt crushing. She began to grind her perfect body against his with robotic rhythm and lethal force. As she rode him fiercely, her hexagonal sunglasses flew from her face and clattered noisily to the floor.

He saw then that her eyes were pure black and higher in number than he would have expected. They blinked away a sticky golden substance that her sweating body seemed to secrete with exertion.

His head fell as he rasped and coughed. A glob of something gold and brown fell from his gasping lips. His vision began to dissolve and flicker at the edges like a film reel running out of frames. Still, she didn't stop. She held his wrists down against the floor; they bent at severe angles until they broke. Her hands were impossibly strong. He wanted to scream from the pain of his bones shattering and jutting from his skin, but he could not. He felt his skin buzz every time that it impacted hers, vibrating together like two cellphones set on silent. Her scent overwhelmed him. It smelled of flowers, of honey, of rot, of poison, of death. His heart pulsed until it threatened to explode.

Pain ripped a course through his chest and down his left arm; a pain which was sharp, excruciating, and all-consuming.

He died a moment later with a pained moan still stuck in his throat, his face was a mask frozen somewhere between pain and pleasure.

Two days later, the cleaning crew found him.

His corpse was twisted in a grotesque state of torture and ecstasy like a horny balloon animal. When the law enforcement investigated, they saw no obvious signs of a struggle, despite the state that the body was in. There was only a sticky residue left on his neck, and twin puncture wounds located right on his jugular. The last detail they saw was the one that they'd never forget. They saw that his testicles were engorged, swollen to the size of unevenly inflated purple balloons. They were coated in some sort of a golden resin, one that glistened when the sun shone through the motel window.

# Chapter Fifteen

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## SardyHouse Presents: Invasion of the Bee Girls

**D**id you enjoy this adventure?  
Are you ready for more?

Follow the QR code to head on over to **SardyHouse Presents**, where you can grab a digital version of this book, watch the original film that inspired the novel, and enjoy some

free music from talented artists who were all inspired by this tale.

