

# HOUR OF THE BEEES



LINDSAY EAGAR



Something flies too close to my ear. For a moment, its buzz is the only noise in my world.

“Hey,” I say, out of reflex, and swish my ponytail like it’s a weapon.

“What?” Dad turns off the radio. The quiet brings attention to how bumpy the highway is.

The bug zooms out the truck window, its jeweled body glittering black and gold in the sunlight. A bee. “Nothing,” I say, contemplating the grim view. It’s been mile after mile of “nothing” for more than an hour. Up ahead, a line of mesas comes into view, flat as tabletops and crumbling along the edges, rock-cakes going stale,

eternally baking. I snap a picture with my phone, but on the screen the mesas blur into red smears beneath an empty sky.

“Are you sure we didn’t miss a turn? Maybe we’re in Mexico.”

Dad snorts. “Trust me. I’d rather go to Mexico.” He switches his twangy rock music back on and checks his rearview mirror. My mom and one-year-old brother, Lu, follow in the minivan, the only other vehicle on the road.

My legs ache from being cramped in the truck for almost three hours. “How much longer?” I groan.

“Excited, are we?” Dad says.

No. Definitely not excited. Instead of a summer filled with pool parties and barbecues, I’ll be spending my days on a dusty sheep ranch with a grandfather whom I’ve never met. At least Mom and Dad are dreading it, too. I’ll have some company in my misery.

We turn off the highway and rattle down a long dirt road for about ten minutes. As we curve around the base of a mesa, Dad lets out a sigh. “There it is. Home sweet home.”

Across the rose-colored land, a run-down Rambler

sits in a browned pasture, its roof sagging, the porch beams warped with age. The entire property is tucked between the buttes—out of sight, out of mind. Forgotten by civilization. Grandpa Serge’s two-hundred-acre sheep ranch, the place where Dad grew up.

My dad may have grown up here, but he also left the first chance he got. I can see why.

Dad pulls into the gravel driveway, right next to the house, and kills the engine. “Now, Carol, don’t be nervous.”

“I’m not,” I lie, and take a wobbly breath.

I squint until my eyes focus through the bright white desert sun. The ranch is literally in the middle of nowhere. No hint of the highway or of the rest of New Mexico; the ranch is its own little city, the sheep its woolly citizens.

Dad told me this was still a working sheep ranch, but other ranches just outside of Albuquerque have hundreds of sheep. Here I count only a dozen sheep, moping in the massive pasture—if you can even call it a pasture. The grass was once green, I’m pretty sure, but is now the color of swamp water, and crunchy. Hasn’t Grandpa ever heard of a sprinkler?

I swallow my disappointment. I've been trying to think of the ranch as a summer getaway, almost a vacation, only a few hours from my room, my school, my friends. But it might as well be on Mars.

Home sweet home, indeed.

Dad holds out a wrinkled and worn pamphlet titled "The Seville's Guide to Dementia for Caregivers." How many times has he made me read this? How many times have we already had this conversation?

"Let's go over it one last time," he says. "Our number-one goal this summer is . . ."

". . . not to upset Grandpa," I recite.

"No confusing sentences, no complicated questions, no loud noises, no word puzzles," Dad lists.

*No talking about Grandma Rosa*, I add silently. But that's always been Dad's rule.

"If he gives you any problems, come find me." Dad shifts in his seat.

The Seville—the assisted-living facility we're moving my grandpa into—filled our heads with horror stories about how dementia can transform even the sweetest grandparents into kickers and biters. "What happens to grandparents who aren't so sweet?" Dad had wondered.

Mom comes to my window, Lu slung on her hip.  
“Are we ready to go in?”

“Well, we didn’t drive all this way for the scenery,”  
Dad says.

I laugh for Dad, for his tiny joke. He fumbles slamming his truck door shut, then drops his keys in the dirt. I’ve never seen him like this—like a nervous kid.

I step onto the scorching desert dust, so hot my sandals are useless. The air feels like it’ll drown me. I grab my Gatorade from the truck and take a swig.

Mom grasps Dad’s hand until their knuckles turn white, and they walk up the driveway together, looking like they’re about to knock on a rabid stranger’s door, when it’s only Grandpa Serge.

But he is a stranger, I remember. To me.

“Last time I saw you, you were climbing out of the backseat of the sheriff’s car.”

The gruff greeting sends butterflies into my stomach. In the shadows of the porch, the outline of my grandfather hunches in a wicker chair. The legendary Serge.

“That was years ago. You’ve seen me plenty of times since then.” Dad’s turning red.

“Well. Here you are.” Grandpa Serge doesn’t sound especially happy about this. He stands, and when he comes into the light, I hold back a gasp. I’ve only seen pictures of Serge, and Dad warned me he might seem different in person, especially now that the dementia has gotten hold. But I’m not prepared for just how different.

A skinny green oxygen hose links behind his ears and feeds into his nostrils. His skin, in the photos, was always ripe brown, earned from hours sizzling in the desert, working the ranch—but now it’s pale, and hangs from his bones like it’s melting. And his eyes . . . His eyes in the photos are true blue, clear as the mid-day sky.

But the eyes of the Serge before me are watery blue, like faded jeans. They move beyond me and focus on some invisible person on the ridge. Those eyes are what I think old looks like. The Serge I know from those few photographs Dad showed me at home—that Serge is nothing like this version, a rusty old man parked on the porch like a leaky, broken-down car.

*This is why we’re here, I remind myself. Because Grandpa is sick.*

“Rosa.” Serge points right at me, and the butterflies in my stomach flap so hard, I worry they’ll leave bruises.

“No, I’m Carol,” I say quickly. “Not R—” But I can’t say it, the forbidden name.

“This is Carol,” Dad cuts in. “Your granddaughter. And here’s Lu, your new grandson.”

“Yes, I know,” Serge snaps. “Carolina. And Luis.”

Mom taps the back of my shoulder. “Say hello,” she prompts.

“Hi, Grandpa, it’s nice to meet you.” The words come out exactly like I rehearsed them, thankfully, because my mind is focused on Serge’s skin, how it folds and wrinkles, mottled with splotchy sunspots. Lumps pop out on his face and neck, like tiny marbles under the skin. Those were there in the photos, I remember, but subtler because his face was fuller, his skin tighter. What are they, anyway? Measles that never healed?

“*Hola, chiquita,*” he says. “*El gusto es mío.*” The pleasure is mine, he says in Spanish, his eyes glowing. And then, in English, “You look just like her.”

“*P-Papá . . .*” Dad stutters, as if there’s more to say. He’s been gone for twelve years—there is everything to say. Before he can fill in the blanks, something

hobbles down the porch steps, a creature with frizzled black fur and a wet nose.

“Inés?” Dad whispers. “No way!” He kneels to scratch behind the ears of this mangy dog, grinning at Mom and me. “Inés was my dog growing up.”

I pat the old dog’s rump as she walks past me on stiff, arthritic legs. I’ve always wanted a puppy—Mom’s never let me have one—but this is not exactly the dog I pictured. Her bloodshot eyes droop at half-mast, and her fur is peppered white and gray around her snout.

Mom balks. “How is she still alive?”

“Some dogs live longer than you think,” Dad says.

“Not for thirty years, Raúl.” The dog brushes against Mom, and she backs away, suspicious, like it’s a zombie. The dog flops into the dry grass and lets Dad rub her belly.

“You’re right,” Dad whispers to Mom. “This can’t be Inés. Must be one of her puppies.”

“More like her puppies’ puppies,” Mom mutters.

“What’s the dog’s name, *Papá*?” Dad asks.

“Don’t tell me you don’t remember Inés,” Serge says.

“Of course. But this isn’t Inés,” Dad says.

“Who else would it be? Inés is the best sheepdog in the state.” My grandpa shakes his head. “What else have you forgotten about your home?”

“You’re right. Sorry.” Dad looks at each of us, silently communicating that we should let the old man believe this is the thirty-year-old Inés.

A great silence follows, tossed over all of us like a quilt. I want to talk, but this is a historic moment, and a scary one. Dad hasn’t been home in years—since before I was born. That’s why I’ve never met my grandfather. The moment is a pulsing, living quiet, about to smother us, but I keep my mouth shut.

“Serge.” Mom saves the day. “Remember me? Raúl’s wife, Patricia? It’s so good to see you.”

A grunt from the porch.

“We’re going to bring our things inside, okay?” she adds gently.

Serge says nothing, just walks to the other end of the porch and starts scrubbing a wool blanket in an old-fashioned metal tub. Weird.

“Is it the dementia,” Mom whispers to Dad, “or is he always so . . .” She searches for the word.

“Prickly?” Dad finishes. “No, that’s just my dad.”

*Grandpa Cactus*, I think.

“Carol.” Mom pulls me aside. “Could you stay out here with Lu? Dad and I want to go in first; we don’t know what state the house is in.”

“Sure,” I say, fanning myself with the Seville pamphlet.

“And keep an eye on Grandpa, too, please.” Mom sets Lu in the dried brown yard and disappears through the front door, gripping hands with Dad again, like the dark house is haunted.

“And Grandpa, too,” I whisper.

The name “Grandpa” tastes weird. It doesn’t fit. “Grandpa” is for someone who always keeps his cookie jar full, someone who gives bear hugs, someone who keeps a straight face while spinning a yarn at the dinner table.

I climb up the creaky porch stairs and bend over the railing to get a visual of Lu. He’s scooted his way over to the gravel driveway and is tossing pebbles at the dog. She’s being so patient with him, considering he’s disrupting her afternoon siesta.

I tighten my swinging black ponytail. I can already wring sweat from my hair, and we only just got here. I’m

no stranger to the desert, but at home, in Albuquerque, I could hide from the heat in the pockets of shade, in frozen yogurt shops, on the cool, fresh-cut grass between houses.

Here, there's nowhere to hide.

I peer around me. The ranch house is the tallest thing for miles, until the land rumples up into a ridge, a kind of mesa that never was—a wall of rock that makes the ranch seem like it's in a bowl. No trees, though there's a scabby black tree stump on the edge of the pasture, so there *was* a tree at some point. Whose bright idea was it to chop it down and get rid of the only shade for miles and miles? No sounds, except the *swish-swish* of Serge washing that blanket. Quiet and flat.

The desert seems alive and breathing, a huge, sandy monster that sucks moisture from bones and blows the dry, dry air up, where it rolls and churns and boils.

Another bee buzzes around my shoulder and lands on my earlobe.

“Go away!” I wiggle my body and swat at the bee. The dog lifts her head and sniffs in my direction. Finally the bee carries itself away, until its lace-thin wings are camouflaged against the beginnings of sunset.

“Are you dancing for rain, *chiquita*?” Serge is behind me, still washing that blanket.

“No, I don’t know any rain dances.” The dog rests her head back in the grass, and she dog-sighs. Lu throws another pebble at her and laughs.

“We need a rain dance,” Serge says. “My bones are so dry, they itch.”

“It’s almost the rainy season, isn’t it?” I say. We relearn about New Mexico’s desert water cycles every year in science. It’s mercilessly dry until July, then it rains in buckets through autumn—sometimes so much that the rivers flood. Monsoon season, we call it.

“No rainy season in this desert,” Serge says. “No rain for a hundred years.” He folds himself in half, spine curled, trying to pull the blanket out of the tub. But the striped maroon wool, heavy with water, is too much for him to lift with his shaking hands, which are frozen into claws. Useless hands. Old hands.

The Seville pamphlet warned that this can happen. Body parts shut down without notice.

“Here, let me help.” I unhook the blanket from his fingers and re-rinse it. To my relief, he lets me.

“Where are your boots, *chiquita*?” Serge says.

“It’s too hot for boots.” A bead of sweat rolls off my forehead, proving my point.

“Fiddle-faddle.” Serge clacks his own boots on the porch floorboards. They’re as antique and leathery as he is, real cowboy boots, embroidered with vines and fleurs-de-lis. They look like they were once black, under layers of dirt and sheep grime. “Everyone needs a pair of snake-stomping boots here.”

I dip the blanket in and out of the tub, relishing the chilly water. “Why?”

“Snakes are braver in the drought,” Serge says. “They didn’t use to be so bold.” He pantomimes crushing a snake beneath his heel. From the grass below, the dog softly growls.

“No rain for a hundred years,” Serge continues. “No rain makes the ground crackle, makes it harden. Makes it sharp. Like walking on a shattered stained-glass window.”

I glance down. Through my sandal straps, my feet are already coated in cinnamon-red dust.

“And no rain for a hundred years means no bees.”

“Bees?” I echo.

“Sí. No rain means no flowers. No flowers means no bees.”

“I saw a bee earlier,” I say. “Two of them, actually.”

“Here?” He frowns. “No, no bees in a drought.”

The heat and my grandpa’s circling words and sentences are making me dizzy. I dig my fingernails into the links of the wool, but the last flakes of soap refuse to wash away. “This wool is impossible!” I toss the blanket back into the water.

Below the porch, Lu laughs and babbles, “Impah! Impah!”

“Impossible, yes.” Serge plucks that word from the air like a fish from a river. “Bees, impossible. But it’s only impossible if you stop to think about it.”

He tries to stand, and his legs tremble like cold noodles. I rush to be his crutch but he barks, “I can do it.”

*Your loved one with dementia may seem cross with you or snap at you when you’ve done nothing wrong*, the words from the Seville pamphlet recite in my mind. He yanks himself away and plops back down in his wicker chair. “If you see any more bees, *chiquita*, tell me. The bees will bring back the rain.”

“Don’t you mean the rain will bring back the bees?” I ask, hoping my correction won’t upset him.

But he shakes his head emphatically. “No. The bees will bring back the rain. But first we need the bees.”

This is one of the things that happens when you have dementia, the pamphlet warned—it’s called “word salad.” Serge will arrange words in a way that doesn’t make sense, like saying the *bees* will bring back the rain. I should stop pressing him, but I’m trying to understand.

“So it never rains here?” I say.

“No rain for a hundred years,” he responds.

“Then where does your water come from?” Please, please, tell me there’s still running water at the ranch. If this becomes a camping situation—brushing teeth with bottled water, sponge baths, no ice for drinks in this thick heat . . .

“The ranch has wells,” Serge says, “but we don’t waste water. Every drop counts. No rain for a hundred years.”

No wasting water. That explains the pasture. From the porch, I can see the creosote bush and yarrow that have crept through the grass, belly high to a horse at this point. Soon this will be all the sheep have to eat: scrubby, thorny, wild desert plants.

Well, since we're not supposed to waste water . . . "The blanket needs to soak a little longer," I say, and it sinks to the bottom of the tub. "Maybe overnight."

"Yes, drought dries everything to bones," Serge says, seeming not to hear me.

Dad says our brains are like a strand of Christmas lights, and Serge's lights are shutting off, one by one. Dementia means Serge confuses names and faces. He forgets what day it is, what year it is, his memories a deck of cards that keeps shuffling and reshuffling. He loses things, he'll put the milk back in the cupboard instead of the fridge, or he'll forget to eat altogether.

When Serge fell last winter and almost broke a leg, a paramedic called Dad and said it was time. Time to move Serge off the ranch and into an assisted-living facility, before he really hurts himself.

I guzzle my Gatorade. One drop falls from the bottle and sizzles, evaporating as it hits the dirt. A few sheep wander into the yard from the pasture, bleating at me with bulging black eyes.

No rain for a hundred years . . . It sounds like something from a book, an evil curse from a grudge-holding

fairy who wasn't invited to a party. Except curses in fairy tales always come to an end, and here the sky is cloudless for miles. Forever. If this is drought, it's miserable. Every inhale scratches my lungs.

*Get used to it, I tell myself. There's two long months of summer ahead.*

"Carolina," Serge says.

"Carol," I say.

"Carolina," he says again, stretching out the *i* into a long *eee* sound. It's exactly the kind of drama I remove from my name on purpose.

"I go by Carol," I tell him.

"Raúl doesn't call you Caro-leen-a?"

"Not unless I'm in trouble."

"Raúl." He tut-tuts, like of all the stunts Dad's pulled, this is unforgivable.

"Caro-leen-a," he says, "is a beautiful, strong, Spanish name. You should use it. Every day. For everything."

As if Serge has any idea what it's like to be a twelve-year-old girl. I roll my eyes. "I'll go by Carolina the minute all my friends go by *their* Spanish names."

My friends Gabby and Sofie are really Gabriela and Sofía, but we don't call them that, not since Manuela

Rodriguez, *the* Manuela Rodriguez, started going by Manny. And when Manny started straightening her hair with a flat iron, plucking her eyebrows, and sharpening her cheekbones with blush, the rest of us had to keep up.

This is how it is in sixth grade. Sink or swim, eat or be eaten. Keep up or be forgotten.

My gut lurches when I think of junior high, starting in just two months. It's only going to get worse.

"Rosa's sister was Carolina, you know." Serge is so worked up, his oxygen tube squeaks with extra air. "Carolina was not ashamed of her heritage."

"I never met Grandma's sister," I point out. *I never even met Grandma Rosa*, I want to add. I take a breath, but the air is so hot, it doesn't even cool itself down inside my body. I feel like I've swallowed the sun.

"Carolina is your namesake." Any smile in Serge's eyes is gone. "Why do you spit on your roots, *chiquita*?"

His question rattles through me, but I don't have a good answer.



I peek over the porch railing to check on Lu. The rocks he was playing with are abandoned, half buried in dirt. The dog is asleep.

Where'd he go?

“Lu?” I jump down the porch steps. “Lu, where are you?”

“Luis,” Serge corrects. *Why do you spit on your roots?* I think.

“Lu,” I say pointedly. “We call him Lu.”

“Luis,” Serge begins, “is a strong Spanish name . . .”

Conversational déjà vu. I run to the chicken coop, void of any chickens. Lu would think it's funny to kick

these old poo-smearred feathers into the air. But he's not here.

My heart skips. If Lu wanders off the ranch, he's buzzard food.

I run back to the house, sandals slapping the gravel driveway.

"Did you see where Lu went?" I call to Serge.

"Luis," he corrects again, and so I ignore him.

"Lu!" *Don't freak out*, I tell myself. I force my breaths to be metered and easy, and concentrate on filling my lungs to the brim. I scan the ranch for a sign, any sign, of my brother. There's nothing.

"This would never happen back home," I mumble. There are no cliffs at home, no dangerous ranch equipment, no troughs of water for him to drown in. No jack-rabbits to give him rabies, no fire ants, no coyotes. No buzzards.

Tears sting my eyes. I didn't even want to come here!

"No bees in the drought," Serge says. He's just background noise now. "The bees, the bees . . ." This chant drips out of his mouth like water from a leaky faucet.

I dart past Serge, nearly tripping over his oxygen

tank, and cry “Mom!” through the front door until she and Dad come out.

“What is it? What happened?” Mom’s gaze lands on Serge, still safely parked in his wicker chair, and she sighs with relief. The dementia keeps my parents on edge: Serge will be like another toddler to babysit this summer.

“I can’t find Lu.” My spit tastes bitter in my mouth. “I promise, I was watching him. I just took my eyes off him for one second—”

Dad leaps from the porch steps like a mountain lion. “Lu!” His voice echoes off the ridge.

“Quiet,” Serge calls. “You’ll scare the bees.”

“We’ll find him.” Mom pats my back.

“He’s not in the coop, or the driveway, or the pasture,” I say. Mom checks those places anyway and searches each room in the house. When she walks through the pasture a third time, her panic level has risen from shaky to emergency.

“Did you check the barn?” she asks.

“What barn?”

Mom points to a weathered structure, leaning on the edge of the pasture—patchwork roof, crooked windows.

Maybe it was a barn—about a million years ago. I jog to it and push the squeaky door open with my foot.

Goose bumps rise along my arms. It isn't cold in the barn, of course, not when it's a million blazing degrees outside, but my skin must know something I don't.

“Lu?” I whisper. This barn makes me want to be quiet, like it's a church. The boards are gray and splitting down the middle, and it smells as if a puddle of hundred-year-old rain has pooled in a corner, growing stale for a century. There are pyramids of dusty ranch equipment—garden tools, wheelbarrows, barrels for storing feed.

But no Lu.

When I turn to go, I spot something. Highlighted for a millisecond, in the stream of a sunray, is another bee. I blink, and the bee is gone.

Serge said there were no bees in a drought. Was that the dementia talking, or is he right? Are these miracle bees?

“Carol!” Mom's shout pulls me out of my daze.

I back out of the barn slowly, almost reverently, then run to the house. “Did you find him?”

“The little stink's under the porch.” Mom shrugs:

crisis over. My heart stops twittering, and my hands calm their quaking.

I want to be mad at my baby brother for scaring me, but when I bend over and peek at him, he squeals and laughs. I shake my head and smile at Mom. An angle of sunset caresses her face. Her hair escapes from its braid in soft wisps, and her eyes glitter like black diamonds as she smiles back at me.

Mom was married once before, when she was younger. They got divorced, then she met Dad, and it's no wonder he snatched her up. Even with the beginnings of wrinkles on her forehead, she could be in a magazine.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. It's a message from Gabby.

I made my friends promise to text me every five minutes, since they get to stay in Albuquerque and hang out while I'm stuck here for the summer. It's been five hours since I last heard from them—I was starting to think they'd forgotten about me.

*We're going to Manny's end-of-the-year volleyball party!* Gabby's message says. *How's the ranch? Awful?*

Before I can text her back, a hair-raising sound comes from under the porch.

A sound like maracas.

My eyes meet Mom's. I've never heard this sound before, but growing up in New Mexico, I've listened to enough stories from hikers and farmers to place it.

"Rattler?" I whisper. Mom crouches, peering into the darkness. The dog growls from the grass.

Dad comes up behind us. "What, Patricia?" he asks quietly, catching our tension like a fever.

"R-rattlesnake," I tell him. I can barely get the word out, I'm shaking so much. It was only half an hour ago, wasn't it, that we were safely driving on the highway? Half an hour ago that summer hadn't started yet?

Dad cheeks fade, seashell pale. "Get out of the way."

He tries to shove in next to Mom, but she hushes him. "I've almost . . . got him." She stretches her arms beneath the steps. "Come on, Lu, nice and easy."

"I told you, *chiquita*," Serge says. "Drought makes the snakes braver. *Locas*."

The rattler hisses again, and I hold my breath. *No, no, no, please don't jab Lu*, I think, in case the snake reads human minds. *He's only a baby, please don't bite him*.

In a smooth, gliding movement, Mom yanks Lu out, like pulling a turkey from a piping-hot oven. A spiral of

dust twirls around my brother, who's giggling and clapping, unaware of the trouble he's causing.

Mom passes Lu to me while she shakily stands, and I plant a hurried kiss on his dark hair.

Dad runs into the house and reappears with a shovel and a dingy pillowcase. "Move," he commands. Mom and I shuffle backward.

Serge leans over the porch railing, drool dangling from his mouth like fishing line. "Where's your snake-stomping boots, Raúl?"

"Not now, *Papá*," Dad growls. He kneels in the dirt and pokes the shovel under the porch. The snake rattles its tail, an eerie percussion solo.

"Dad knows what he's doing, right?" I ask, but Mom doesn't answer. Words keep falling out of my nervous mouth. "He grew up here, so he knows what he's doing, right?"

No answer.

When Dad pulls the snake out by its tail, the ugly thing doesn't bite, but kindly lets Dad coil it into the pillowcase. He dusts off his pants and puts the bagged snake in the back of the truck.

"Are you going to kill it?" I say.

Dad gets into his pickup. “It’s illegal to kill rattlers,” he says. “I’ll take it up to the ridge.”

“What if it slithers back?” I say, but he’s already driving off.

“No bees in a drought,” Serge says. He reaches into the tub and grabs the wet blanket, successfully this time. Mom joins him on the porch and helps him wring the wool out and drape it over the railing. “If you see a bee,” he says to her, “tell me. The bees will bring the rain.”

Word salad again. I watch for Mom’s reaction. Maybe Serge is sicker than we thought. Maybe the Christmas lights in his brain have all popped.

But Mom flashes him one of her warm, sparkling smiles—a smile that could put the sun out—and Serge melts. Even I feel the last of my snaky jitters go away; Mom’s smiles are legendary. “If we see any bees, we’ll let you know. Right, Carol?” She winks, then whispers to me, “How long has he been talking about bees?”

One of Mom’s jobs this summer is to keep a mental catalog of Serge’s dementia symptoms, especially what she calls “slips,” when he slips out of the present moment and out of reality. Bee talk, filed away.

“The whole time,” I say. “He’s got a real thing about them. Mom?”

I stare at Serge, who’s pouring fresh suds in the tub so he can rewash the blanket he just hung up to dry.

“Mom, has he always been this . . .” A thousand words flit through my mind. *Weird? Crazy?*

*Strangely magnetic?*

Mom puts her arm around me. “His brain’s deteriorating, honey. I know it’s hard to watch. But remember, this is still your grandpa under all the sickness.”

*But I don’t even know my grandpa, I want to say. How am I supposed to know where the dementia ends and Serge begins?*

Mom takes Lu from me, leaving a toddler-shaped stamp of red dirt on the left side of my tank top. She’s about to head into the house when a pair of headlights spring above the curve of the main road. Someone’s turned off the highway, heading for the ranch.

I watch the car’s every twist around the mesa until it pulls into the driveway. It’s a powder-blue, bullet-shaped two-door convertible.

“Who’s that?” Mom asks, and I shrug. No one I know drives a fancy car like this. But when the driver

opens the door, I know exactly who it is. The first thing I see is her leg, golden tan with a high platform wedge on her foot. Not exactly ideal shoes for a summer at a sheep ranch, but if anyone can make it work, my big sister, Alta, can.

“Hey,” she says, stepping out of the car with movie-star grace.

Dad’s returned from dumping the snake on the ridge. When he sees Alta, he makes the tiniest groan and shifts his feet, bracing himself for the onset of enemy fire. Alta has that effect.

Her wedges stomp down the crunchy, dry grass, flattening the blades. Her cobalt-blue purse is the color of the shadows beneath the ridge and looks as expensive as the new car. The dog leaps up, tail wagging, and greets Alta with more enthusiasm than I thought the old canine could muster.

I didn’t get a tail wag.

“Nice wheels,” Dad offers. Alta grins at him. She has the same heart-melting smile as Mom—only Alta’s has fangs.

I didn’t inherit the smile. I got Dad’s stitched-on, serious mouth instead, and my eyes are nothing like

Mom's shimmering black jewels; mine are more like dull black olives.

Mom crosses her arms. "You're late."

"Well, sorry. We were birthday shopping." My sister turned seventeen last Sunday, but she's dragged out the celebration for another five days, as only Alta can do.

Mom gestures to the car. "You and Gael? Shopping for this?"

Alta beams.

Gael is Alta's dad, Mom's ex-husband. Alta stays with him every other weekend, except this summer; Gael is going to Europe on business, and Alta wasn't invited to tag along.

"How's Grandpa?" Alta asks Dad, and I snicker at how blatantly she changes the subject. It's a typical Alta move, acting like she volunteered to come here to help, out of the kindness of her heart. Really, Alta doesn't care about Serge. Every time we bring him up, she's quick to remind us that Serge isn't even technically her grandfather.

I hate when she measures our family's relationships like that, reducing it to who shares whose blood. But she loves keeping those details in her back pocket, so

she can whip them out in the heat of an argument: “But my dad lets me have my laptop in my room at night! I don’t even belong here!”

She wants to be the black sheep of the family so badly, we all let her.

Mom’s not finished. “Gael bought you this?”

Alta tosses her hair, like the gorgeous specimen of a car behind her is No Big Deal. “I paid for part of it.”

I’m trying to decipher which version of Alta is here to visit. Some days she’s in a butterflies-and-rainbows mood. She paints my toenails, and lets me sit next to her at dinner, and talks to me in full sentences. She goes shopping with Mom and lets Dad help her with calculus.

But if it’s Moody Alta who’s arrived at the ranch, then she won’t stop brushing her hair, and she’ll look at me with cold eyes, like I’m a cockroach to her. She’ll swear at Dad and make Mom cry in five syllables or less, growled through her teeth.

It’s like having two older sisters instead of one.

“That’s just how teenagers act,” Mom explains when Alta lashes out. “You’ll do the same thing someday.” But

I hate it when she excuses Alta's behavior with something as silly as her age. Twelve isn't easy, either.

I decide to test the waters: "How's Marco?" I ask. Marco is Alta's on-again, off-again boyfriend, so this is a risky question to ask.

But Alta smiles. "Good. I need to call him, actually. Do we even get reception here?"

I release a shaky breath. It's Happy Alta, for now. "It's pretty spotty. And there's no Wi-Fi."

"That's okay. I've got a hotspot. Hey, baby brother." Alta grabs Lu and tosses him into the air, sprinkling dust in my hair.

"Come help get dinner started," Mom directs. "And we're not done talking about that car."

Alta rolls her eyes and carries Lu up the porch steps. I catch a whiff of her department-store body spritz. Three hours driving in that teensy car, and her shirt isn't even rumpled.

"You mean *my* car," she can't help saying to Mom.

"We'll see," Mom says, her voice raspy with fatigue. She goes in the house, followed by Alta and Lu and the creaky dog.

“Dinnertime, *Papá*.” Dad tries to help Serge up, but Serge slaps Dad’s hands away.

“Don’t touch me! You’ve got snake stink on your fingers.”

“Aren’t you hungry?” Dad says. He’s being so patient with Serge, even though I can tell he’s exhausted. Less than an hour at the ranch, and he and Mom are already tapped out.

“Stinks like death.” Serge folds his arms, his ancient eyes glassy, staring at the horizon. “I’m staying here. Waiting for the bees.”

“Okay, okay. Fine. Whatever.” Dad stomps into the house a tad harder than necessary.

*Mmmm, dinner.* Lunch was hours ago. I go up the porch steps but stop at the screen door.

There’s a sound, a droning. Another rattler? My stomach clenches.

But it’s a bee.

“No bees in a drought,” I whisper. It circles my head twice, then buzzes toward the pasture.

When I unfreeze and turn back to the door, Serge is next to me, steady on his feet. He puts his hand on my elbow.

“A bee, Rosa!” he says.

“Not Rosa,” I say quickly. “I’m Carol. Remember?”

“I never thought the bees would be back.” His eyes burn a hole in me.

Our number-one goal this summer: don’t do anything to upset Grandpa Serge. But would it be more upsetting for him to know that I saw it, too, or to think he’d just imagined it?

“No,” I whisper. “No, it must have been a trick of the light.” Up close, Serge’s eyes are less yellowed, more like rings of light blue and gold. Rings, like the inside of a tree trunk.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. Gabby’s message from earlier, still unanswered, demands attention: *How’s the ranch? Awful?*

*Yes, awful, I write back. Too hot.*

I look at Serge. He’s staring at the barn, its roof silhouetted in the last gulp of sunset light.

*This is going to be a weird summer,* I finish, and send the text.

Then I go inside, and leave Serge alone on the porch.

# Hour of the Bees

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