



*This novel tells the story of four dedicated beekeepers with very diverse upbringings and backgrounds who join forces to stop the construction of a planned pesticide factory to be built on the Anacostia River in Washington, D.C.*

## **The Bee Catchers**

By Justine A. Cowan

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# The Bee Catchers

A Love Story  
to Bees with a Happy Ending

Justine A. Cowan

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down on the uneven gravel pavement. She was a tiny little lady carrying a big belly, and it had been months since she could see her feet and didn't want to trip and hurt herself or unborn me. She cradled her tortured lower back with her hands and moaned.

Successfully out of the truck, she waddled down the road a bit to a nearby hotel, holding Daddy's arm in a death grip.

The hotel was the famous Green Moss Cottage and Spa, named for the distinct vegetation in the nearby old growth forest. Many of our early presidents often visited the hot springs there for relief from their aches and pains. Momma made her way through the fancy hotel lobby and found the darkened cocktail lounge. She plopped herself into the nearest comfy, overstuffed chair and put her swollen feet up on another chair. The waiter didn't say anything though, seeing poor Momma's uncomfortable, pregnant state. Close to delivering me, she ordered an alcoholic drink: a strong Brandy *Alexander*.

When my father's cousins arrived, they filled the tank to the brim with gas from a huge metal container, ensuring that my folks were able to get home safely. Momma slept really well that night and I made my entrance into the world early the next evening, the treasured first-born child.



## **Billie**

After school the next day, I made Mom take me to the Coronado Library. It was close enough to our house that we could walk

there and then walk back home. I loved their great selection of books for kids, but this time I couldn't find what I was looking for.

I walked over to the desk of my favorite red-haired librarian, Miss Molly, and stood right in front of her until she looked up.

"How are you, today? It's good to see you."

"Do you have some good books about honeybees?" I asked.

"Well, let me look here on the computer. Just give me one sec." Miss Molly got busy typing fast on her keyboard. "We have quite a few books about bees, but they're in the adult section," the carrot-topped librarian informed me. "Your mother will have to check them out on her card."

"Hey, Mom! I need you to come over here. Right now!" I screamed to the other side of the library.

My poor mother. Her face and neck turned bright red from embarrassment, but she was laughing at the same time. She dashed over to where I stood, almost tripping over some disheveled toddler dragging a blanket who had recently escaped from their mother. Mom had been a sprinter in high school and was still in good shape.

Mom arrived and planted herself right in front of me. "Must you scream, young lady? It's so undignified! You know better! I don't think they heard you over in Point Loma!"

"Sor-ry!" I grinned.

We left the library that afternoon with so many large, heavy books, my brother Paul had to help us carry them. They were books about everything anybody wanted to know about bees,

agriculture, honey production, and constructing beehives. When we got home, I took the books up to my room and sat on my bed reading until Mom called me downstairs for dinner. I was hooked.

When Daddy came home late that night, he came upstairs to tuck me in and kiss me goodnight. He still had on his grasshopper-green flight suit and smelled like nasty old jet fuel and bitter Navy coffee. He had big, dark circles under his eyes and his hair and face were all sweaty and greasy because he had to wear a heavy helmet when flying. In fact, there still was a red mark on his forehead from the tight skullcap he wore under his helmet.

“I was a little worried when you didn’t run down the stairs and jump into my arms when I got home like you always do,” he said, as he hugged me and then sat down next to me on the bed.

“I still love you more than anything, Daddy, really I do. You are still my best buddy.”

“Well, I’m glad to know that, Billie Goat,” he chuckled.

“But I love the bees now, too, a whole lot! They’re so beautiful—all black and gold with see-through wings and fuzzy little legs. They work in a team and collect pollen to make honey and feed their babies. Do you think we can have some bees live in one of those box things in our backyard?”

“Slow down, kid! I know you’re excited but let me tell you something neat first.” Daddy got serious. “My great-grandfather was actually the inventor of that box beehive.”

“Really? That is so cool!”

Daddy nodded his head.

“He was a Presbyterian minister, and his name was Lorenzo Lorraine Langstroth. The beehives in his time were rounded, kind of cone shaped and funny-looking. I think they were usually made from woven basket materials. But he wanted to harvest cleaner honey and have fewer dead bees in his hives, so he invented a very simple hive with frames that you could pull out. Those box beehives still bear his name: the Langstroth hive.”

“Can we talk some more about this tomorrow, Daddy?” I rubbed my eyes. “I had a big day.”

“Sure, kiddo. G’night. I love you.”

I reached up and hugged him one more time. Daddy covered me up with my pink and white afghan, turned out the light, and closed the door. I leaned back on my pillow and stared at the glowing stick-on stars and planets on my ceiling that brother gave me for my birthday.

That night I dreamed I was in a garden of honeysuckle, roses, and sweet Confederate jasmine like the kind that grew along the fence in our back garden. The perfume from all of these together was so strong, it floated through our yard and then came through our house, right up to my room! Hundreds and hundreds of beautiful honeybees surrounded me, circling my body like a tornado that came out of nowhere and then disappeared as fast as they came. They zoomed past me in a rush of energy and purpose. They flew back and forth from huge sunflowers to their hives and then off again to do their work in an orchard of fruit trees. When they zipped by, I heard them whispering to each other and then speaking to me in a secret language. I



understood what they were saying but couldn't respond in any human words that I knew. Their language was so special—just for bees and other beautiful flying insects, not little girls.

Here is a picture with some of the story from one of the library books Mom checked out for me that day. I couldn't believe that the name under the writing was from someone in my family!

## The American Honeybee



(from website [http://beneficialbugs.org/bugs/Honeybee/Honey\\_Bee4.jpg](http://beneficialbugs.org/bugs/Honeybee/Honey_Bee4.jpg))

*"... the chief peculiarity in my hive was the facility with which they could be removed without enraging the bees .... I could dispense with natural swarming, and yet multiply colonies with greater rapidity and certainty than by the common methods .... feeble colonies could be strengthened, and those which had lost their queen furnished with the means of obtaining another. .... If I suspected that anything was wrong with a hive, I could quickly ascertain its true condition and apply the proper remedies."*

*~ Lorenzo Lorraine Langstroth*



## **Alexander**

When I was eleven years old, my little brother was stung to death by bees. I don't know exactly what type of bees they were, and I really don't care. It all happened so damn fast.

We kids were playing out back, catching fireflies and playing tag after dinner. We were dirt poor, so nature was our entertainment. Johnny and I were hiding behind a rotten tree trunk, trying not to get tagged by my sister. We crouched down low so that Gracie couldn't see us.

"Gracie lost the game, Alex!" my brother squealed as he continued to hunker close to the earth, making himself as small as he could.

Well, I guess Johnny's little legs got tired of that position, because the next thing I saw was him falling backward onto something that looked like a mound of dirt. It was no dirt pile. It was something alive and angry.

My little brother had fallen onto a wild hive in a rotten tree trunk. In an instant, a tornado of angry yellow and black creatures swarmed around his tiny body, defending their hive; clinging to him, stinging him in every conceivable place, stuck like glue.

"Get up, Johnny! Run into the woods!" I screamed at him. "Jump into the crick!"

But he couldn't move from the spot where he had fallen. It happened so fast, he had no idea what was happening to him. He couldn't even scream. He just stared at me, mouth open, body writhing on the ground on top of the stump, arms reaching out towards me. I swatted at the bees with my tennis shoes,

impervious to any damage they could inflict on me, trying to pick Johnny up and move him back to the house. I dove under my brother, trying to push him far away from what was happening, trying to shield him from further harm with my body, but it was too late. He was covered in a noisy, living blanket of shiny black and gold.

“Gracie, go get Momma!” My heart was racing, and I didn’t know what to do first. I stayed with my brother.

My sister ran to our mother, who was busy hanging laundry on the outside line. Daddy was out of town that day.

“Run to the neighbors as fast as you can, girl. Tell them to call the doctor and bring him here,” Momma ordered, then sprinted back to where Johnny lay. When she arrived at our location behind the house, my little brother was stung so bad that he bloated up like roadkill left out for a couple of days. His lips and eyes were so swollen that he was unrecognizable as Johnny. By the time Momma got to us, the bees had flown off of him or died.

I cried. “We were playing hide and seek, having fun, and he fell back onto a wild hive. It was an accident!”

My mother couldn’t talk but let out a wail. She stared at me blankly, then scooped Johnny up, sitting on the ground, holding him gently like the Madonna with the body of Christ, rocking him back and forth while cradling his head in her pale arms.

“Hold on, little buddy. Help is coming. Stay with us, please!” I begged my little brother.

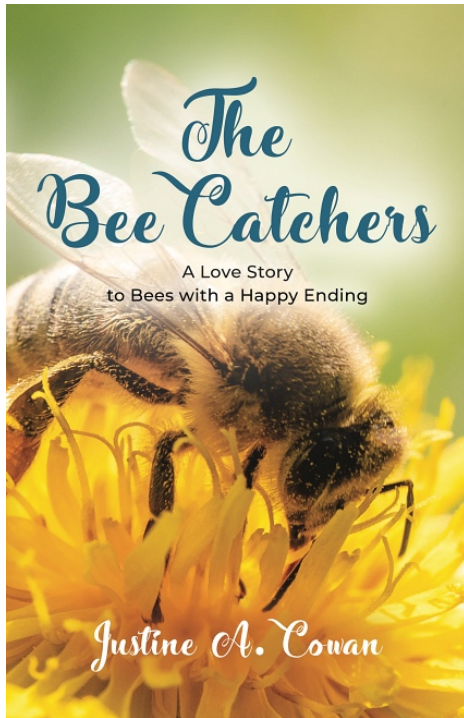
But soon my brother was gurgling and gasping for breath, a high-pitched whistling sound coming out of his mouth, his little hands springing up to grab at his throat, fingers scratching at the indentation in his neck. His lips twisted around soundlessly and turned blue, and his eyes rolled back. Momma stopped rocking him long enough to whisper something in Johnny's ear, something private between them that she would take to her grave only two years later. His spindly arms and legs stiffened, and his head jerked back at an unnatural angle. Then his body relaxed. My little brother was dead.

After Johnny died, Momma cradled his little body in her arms, rocking him back and forth and singing to him under her breath. After a time, the neighbor lady walked up noiselessly and stood behind her, bending down and placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Mavis, it's time. You have to let the men take your boy away now. Here's a nice warm blanket we can use to wrap him up. He'll be just fine." Mrs. Wilson handed the blanket down to my mother, still huddled on the ground with her dead little boy. The two women carefully swaddled my brother. Momma sobbed and whined the whole time like an injured animal.

Mrs. Wilson's husband and a few men walked over to where Momma held Johnny. They lifted him, then reverently carried him down to the road, heads bowed, to the makeshift hearse: an old white Ford truck that belonged to Tom, our closest neighbor. Momma, Mrs. Wilson and I followed a few steps behind the procession.

We stopped when we got to the road. The men loaded Johnny's bundled body carefully onto the flatbed, rearranging square



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