FALLING FOR BEEKEEPING

VOLUME 1

Chapter 1

 William E. Mattatall

It was late afternoon, thinking I needed to get the honey out of two of my hives, both being honey bound, I thought giving them more room would prevent a swarm. Enlisting the help of Kevin Schible, a protégé of mine, we began the task of pulling frames from the two hives. Due to the time of the day, everyone was home and they were not happy. Darkness began to gather as we spun out the 20 or so frames we had taken from the two hives.

“Well, one more task completed” I groaned wiping the sweat from my brow as we filled the final two-pound jar.

“Not bad, not bad” chirped Kevin grinning from ear to ear. “67 pounds, not bad at all” he continued.

It was now well after eight and darkness covered the bee yard with a heavy cloak. I had always been taught that the frames needed to be replaced in the hive immediately after extraction, a practice now long abandoned.

I was now in my eleventh year of bee keeping. Since day one, I had worn a mesh veil pith helmet combination that covered my head and shoulders. A nylon jacket and long cuffed cowhide bee keeping gloves completed the attire. Kevin donned a pollinators’ jacket with hooded veil attached and, of all things, short pants.

As we approached, supers in hand, the girls were waiting for us. Out they came with a vengeance. A thick cloud of buzzing anger surrounded me. Hastily I pulled the inner cover off. Just as I was replacing the super, I heard a buzzing, louder than the rest, in my right ear.

“Yeow!” Kevin yelped as he slammed the super on the second hive. “Gotta go! They’re stinging me all over my legs. Ow! Ow! Ow!!” he yelled as he leaped over the fence and disappeared in the darkness beyond.

Not wanting to get stung on the ear, I quickly exited the bee yard and crossed the garden. As I passed through the gate, I jerked off my veil. In the ten years of bee keeping, past the garden gate had always been a safe haven. This would be the exception. The moment the veil cleared my head, the sisters sweet began to kiss me on the ears, and one placed a hot one on my cheek. I took off like the Flash. I ran as hard as I could toward the north. The bees were now stinging me on the neck, under the collar of my jacket. Next, they worked their way under the cuffs of my gloves and were attacking my wrists. After clearing the yard, I turned to the west. I was now in the farmer’s field, about a block from the gate. Off came my jacket and gloves as I clawed at the stingers in my neck and wrists. I then turned to the south, as I approached the road in front of our home. The girls were relentless, they were now singing me on the hands, arms, and back making me run all the faster. Four more blocks passed, almost a quarter of a mile, before the infamous buzzing stopped. I dropped to the ground, exhausted, writhing in pain. After catching my breath, I crawled to my feet and limped back home. As I approached the back door, there stood Kevin.

“You’ve got bees all over your pants” he screamed breathlessly as I entered the warm glow of the dusk-to-dawn overhead light.

Feebly we knocked 40 or so bees from my pant legs, sending them instantly to the promised land as they hit the pavement. Barbara, my wife, came to our aid with vanilla wipes and Benadryl antihistamine tablets as Kevin and I removed stingers from our tortured bodies.

I had stings on my ears, cheeks, arms, hands, neck, and shoulders. Sixty-two in all. Kevin’s hands and legs were the focus of the sisters’ sweet attention. Kevin’s stings totaled sixty-five. Luckily, although annoying and extremely painful, neither of us had to seek medical help.

As in most things we do, after participating in the same task for a length of time, one becomes complacent and fails to focus. The rules become blurred and we at times do things without thinking. In this case, our complacency resulted in the endurance of a great deal of pain which was only trumped by unforgiving itching that followed.

RULE: Never work bees, especially taking honey, in early morning before the foragers have left or evening (4 p.m.) when everyone is at home.

P.S. It was almost a week before we could safely approach the hives and replace the telescoping cover on one hive. We also found Kevin, in his haste, had replaced the super on hive two in an upside-down position.

REMEMBER, bees, no matter how gentle they can be, they are still wild animals.