

Chapter Four: Sunflower Café and Bakery

The drive from the hospital to downtown Gaia took us through one roundabout and the town's two stoplights. With a few thousand full-time residents, its population exploded during tourist season. Main Street's restaurants, brewpubs, and specialty shops catered to bikers, campers, and hikers. Around here, everyone knew everyone else. Diddy squat happened without the rumor mill clocking in at the Sunflower Café and Bakery.

The Sunflower inhabited a pre-Civil War waystation from the Underground Railroad. Some locals believed ghosts haunted the café. That set the stage for Haunted Happenings, the Main Street event occurring the three weeks prior to Halloween. It included whatever spooky entertainment the town invented.

The Sunflower was both a local hang-out and a tourist favorite. It served breakfast and lunch on Sundays through Wednesdays. Supper on Thursdays through Sundays allowed more variety. It featured area musicians, an open mic for local poets and writers, and occasional psychic readings. Keeping its historic external facade, the interior fused Zen with Northwood's rustic. Reclaimed wood bordered artfully shabby brick walls. Partitioned niches at the windows provided cozy enclaves. Natural greenery hung from the ceiling. Work from local artists decorated the walls. Background music featured Midwest performers. And an elevated platform served as an occasional stage.

Tourist publications referred to it as idiosyncratic, haunted, and a must-see attraction.

The delicious scent of coffee, fresh fruit pastries, and sizzling bacon hit us as soon as we walked in the door. The lunch crowd had thinned out, giving us plenty of seating choices. We opted to eat on the outside patio, leaning chairs against a table to mark our spots before ordering. Luna Dominic, the owner, waved at us. She was a striking thirty-something with a flawless alabaster complexion and long ruby hair that sheened across the room. Despite her faded jeans and loose-fitting top, she had an aura of sensuousness. Mystery shrouded her background. All she told us is that she descended from Celtic Gypsies. During the ten years she owned the café, she'd earned respect for her business acumen, her food, and her psychic awareness.

She brushed her hands against her apron as she approached us at the counter. "I heard about Zach Taylor. How ironic is it he had the same allergic reaction as the character he played? I feel guilty casting the two of you as those actors."

"Woah, Luna. It's not your fault. It was a freak accident. I hope." I explained the uncertainty about the bee trap.

"What's Nika's take?"

"She's calling the circumstances *suspicious*."

There was a momentary lull before Sasha asked Luna, "What does your *spidey sense* tell you?" She put air quotes around *spidey sense*. "Didn't you say the beekeeper's secret was the ability to command bees to attack your enemies?"

I jerked my head toward her. "Sasha! That's a horrible thing to say. It sounds like I planned on having the bees attack Taylor."

Luna's reaction was equally swift. "That was *not* the moral of the Beekeeper's Secret. Since you missed the play, I'll overlook your faux pas. Here is the Cliff Note version. During the witch trials, some people believed witches harnessed the power of bees in some supernatural way. It became convenient to blame them when people fell ill. You get partial credit for that. There are three bigger points. First,

superstition and fear drove the accusations. Second, the justice system used trials to escalate petty grievances into capital offenses. And third, colonists were aware of the importance of bees and pollinators. Maybe they didn't have the scientific knowledge we have today, but they knew. Some even kept bees both for that purpose and for honey production. These beekeepers realized how something so small could exert such power in the ecosystem. They showed empathy for bees, and by extension, for others. It's unfortunate that empathy didn't carry over to those accused."

I looked at Luna with a smirk. "Hey, I played the main witch in that production, and I didn't pick up on all of that myself."

Luna sighed. "Believe me, you *are* an intuitive and empathetic beekeeper. You just don't trust your instincts enough. I thought casting you in Mary Smith's role would give you a nudge in that direction."

"Why did you pick *The Beekeeper's Secret* for this month's community performance? You looked at other plays that didn't involve horses, and beehives, and witches. Given the timing of the production, did you know that only Zach and I were available for your climactic ending?"

After a slight pause, Luna responded. "Tiffany mentioned your ancestral connection to Salem. I thought that, plus the beekeeping connection, was intriguing. I didn't expect the pageant to foreshadow Zach's allergic coma."

"If my intuition was as strong as you say, why wasn't I aware of Zach's risk? At first, I even resisted moving the production farther away from the beehives. I thought he was being overly dramatic. What didn't I know that everyone else knew?"

"You apparently weren't aware of Taylor's allergy," Sasha said. "Pretty much everyone else knew about it."

"What?" I looked at Sasha. "It's true; I didn't know. But as I recall, you told Nika you didn't know he had an allergy, either."

Luna interrupted us before Sasha responded. "Sasha's right about Taylor's allergy being common knowledge. When I heard what happened at the winery, I remembered Felicity's article last year about bee stings. Anybody who read it would have known Taylor was allergic. See?" She turned her phone screen toward us. It was open to an archived article from the Gaia Gazette, written by Felicity Anderson. The article described mild to severe allergic reactions, including coma. It described Zach Taylor's history of allergies and a picture of his alert bracelet. It explained how to handle an emergency.

"You know Felicity and Zach were a thing for a nanosecond, don't you?" Luna asked.

"Really?" How was I so clueless about Gaia residents? I assumed from Sasha's expression (yes, it was the Sasha squint that gave her away) that she was as clueless about it as I was.

"Ah, so you don't know. I thought everyone knew everyone's business in Gaia." Luna looked behind her before leaning toward us. She spoke in a near whisper. "Felicity was doing a piece about outdoor weddings, or so she claimed. That's how she found out about Taylor's bee allergy. That's also how Taylor found out Felicity thought they were getting married."

"For real? She was researching for her own wedding?" I asked, catching a repeat of the Sasha-squint out of the corner of my eye. She again registered surprise. "Before he even proposed to her?"

"Uh-huh. Took Taylor by surprise. He wasn't simpatico with her on that point. They broke up and I fancy Felicity still carries a grudge. It was nasty for a while. She acted like she wanted to kill him.

Not that Felicity would ever hurt anyone. But it steamed her when it happened.” Luna straightened up and moved toward the register. “What can I get for you?”

Sasha and I studied the whiteboard for the daily lunch specials and made our orders. I handed Luna my credit card. She refused it, saying, “I owe you at least one free meal, remember?”

I checked behind us to be sure we weren’t obstructing customers. Then I refocused on Luna. “Back to Taylor. What’s your opinion? Could it have been an accident?”

She closed her eyes and tugged on her earlobe. We waited. Sasha bounced her index fingers on her lips and I suspected I looked similarly eager. It may have been a minute, but it seemed an eternity.

Luna opened her eyes and laughed. “What? Did you expect some wisdom from the supernatural?” She shook her head. “I was just pondering the facts. Bees didn’t just magically appear in Zach’s car.” A crash from the kitchen drew her attention. “Sorry. I better check that out. We’ll talk later. You didn’t brief me about how Wolf is doing.”

Sasha preceded me to the patio. “Zach Taylor seems to have a lot of enemies. I’m surprised about him and Felicity. She’s got to be ten years younger. Or maybe more. She’s about Luna’s age, isn’t she?”

“Even though she doesn’t look it, she’s older than Luna. My guess is she’s pushing 40. She had a high-profile career at some big national news organizations before the internet changed the industry. To my knowledge, she never married.”

“Sometimes that’s better than being hitched to someone like my ex.”

“Relationships are never easy.”

Sasha righted her chair and sat down. “Ain’t that the truth? My last romantic relationship was when I bought myself a heart-shaped box of chocolates on Valentine’s Day.” She crossed her arms and leaned on the table. “Tel me more about what’s up with you and Ryan.”

The midday sun bounced off the concrete, causing visible heat waves that pummeled the remnants of my headache. I raised the umbrella over the table. “It’s warmer than I expected for this time of year. Even the humidity is climbing.” My brain sizzled as I sidestepped her query.

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“You avoided my question.”

I sat down and adjusted the angle of the umbrella. Stalling. Then I picked up the salt shaker and rolled it between my palms. My phone pinged, signaling our orders were complete, and I sprang to my feet. “Lunch is ready. I’ll go get it for both of us.”

Before I set foot inside, Luna emerged and set our meals on the table. “Service with a smile.” She angled another chair into the shade and plopped down. “We just closed, so you’re my last customers today and I have some time to finish our conversation. Sam and Roxie can clean up.” Her two employees were part-time students and served as both kitchen and wait staff.

Sasha rapped her knuckles on the tabletop. “Alex is avoiding my question about how things are going with Ryan.”

Luna looked at me. Sasha looked at me. Trapped.

“Okay, okay. I’m conflicted and confused. All right?” I clenched my fists and jaw. “When Wolf nearly gave me a heart attack this morning, I was relieved that Sasha, rather than Ryan, helped me. And I still haven’t called him about Taylor.” I positioned my plate in front of me. “Can we eat now?”

Sasha took a bite and began chewing.

Luna tilted her head in my direction. “Keep talking.” Her piercing blue eyes were so intense they bore into my soul as if she could read my mind. Is it because she’s psychic, or am I just a wimp?

I pushed my chair away from the table, bouncing my leg. “If Ryan and I might soon live together, shouldn’t I want to share everything with him? That’s how I felt with Matt.” I slid my phone toward them. “See this? Ryan sent me a text at 7 a.m. to say he was in the office, that he was thinking about me. I didn’t even respond.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Luna put her hand on mine. “You can’t compare everyone to Matt. Remember when you joined that dating site and didn’t like anyone who wasn’t a Matt-twin? When you started out, you deleted every invitation. Then you got braver and tried a few dates. There was that CPA from LaCrosse who took you on the Mississippi River cruise. Then the cabinet maker from Prairie du Chien who took you to that community play. One and done. Each time. Ryan was your first encore dating partner.”

“You’re saying I shouldn’t worry about him moving in?”

“I didn’t say that.” Luna’s response was immediate, almost cutting off my sentence. “If you’re not comfortable, don’t do it. And don’t let Ryan talk you into it. The point I’m making is that Matt is gone. It may be time for you to give someone else a chance.”

I swirled my coffee in my mouth as I contemplated asking Luna another question. I took the plunge. “Is it possible that Matt doesn’t want me to date Ryan?”

“What makes you say that?” Luna asked.

“When I arrived home last night, Wolf resisted going inside. I had to coax him in. The house was cold, like a winter day with a broken furnace. Then suddenly, Wolf was ecstatic, as if he saw his best friend. Matt was his best friend.”

“It’s still May, so the house could get cold after sundown,” Luna said. “And even old dogs succumb to zoomies.”

I pulled my chair back to the table and chewed a few more bites. Then I set the fork down. “There’s more. I smelled Matt’s aftershave and heard his footsteps on the stairway. The steps creaked the way they did when Matt walked upstairs after a shift. And when I found Wolf this morning, I felt icy hands nudging my shoulders.”

Sasha stopped eating and rolled her lips over her teeth. “My grandmother claimed that when she felt the icy fingers of the wind, it meant a soul was passing into the hereafter. Maybe it’s also a sign when they come back.”

“All I know is that I sensed Matt’s presence. Or wanted to.” I gazed at Luna. “What do you think?”

“I’m confident there is an afterlife. But if you’re grasping for a guarantee, I can’t deliver one. Maybe your brain is sending caution signals about Ryan.”

“What are your reservations about Ryan?” Sasha asked. “You seem happy when you’re with him. And your kids get along with him. Do you trust him?”

“That’s the point. He’s never given me a reason not to, as far as I know. Perhaps I’m unconvinced, even invincible.” I scratched my head. “It’s the whole dating game. Put on an approachable persona. Be on our best behavior. But the last few weeks changed. Ryan’s more secretive, evasive. Or at least that’s the way it seems to me. There’s nothing concrete I can put my finger on. It’s just a feeling.” A tingle crawled down my spine as if an invisible arm hugged my shoulders. “I wonder if I’m ready to date yet. Or to commit. And Ryan’s grogginess this morning annoyed me. Bigly.”

“Makes sense. Bigly.” Luna winked at me with a smile. “The only person you have to satisfy is yourself.”

“Luna?” A voice drew our attention to the door where Luna’s employee leaned out. “Sam and I have finished up. We’re leaving and wanted to remind you to ask about the honey.”

“Thanks.” Luna waved at her employees as they left. Then she loosened her hair from its ponytail and let it cascade down her back. “Alex, I’m looking for a local honey source for my café. Do you have any extra honey you’d be willing to sell? Are your hives producing enough?”

“I don’t know yet. There was winter kill or another condition that caused hive damage. It doesn’t seem to be critical yet, but I don’t want a colony of unhealthy bees.” I raised my fork for another bite, but plopped it on the table. “Speaking of bees, last night I dreamed about a swarm of bees attacking.”

Luna swished a sip of water in her mouth before swallowing. “Who were the bees attacking?”

“It’s a mystery. The dream jumped from image to image. Disjointed. I don’t think I was the victim. They seemed to target someone else. There was an attack, but everything else was fuzzy.”

Luna took another sip. “I researched some Celtic mythology for the play. According to their mythos, the bee was a messenger between our world and the spirit realm, and could communicate through dreams. That was part of the folklore of The Beekeeper’s Secret. Dreams about bee swarm attacks insinuated increasingly uncomfortable situations.”

“Maybe it was a premonition of Zach’s attacks,” Sasha said. “Maybe the beekeeper’s secret is real.”

I raised my eyebrows.

Luna shook her head. “Or it was simply a dream. Period. Alex had the dream because she was worried about the hives. Then Zach gets stung. The connection is irresistible, but that doesn’t make it factual.”

“I guess,” I acknowledged.

“But then,” Luna continued, “I think everyone has some level of a sixth sense. Especially you, Alex. You just must learn to trust it.” She stood up and put her hand on my shoulder. “Sweetie, look at me. You made the right decision by adding mead to the product line. And you made the right decision by adding local honey to strengthen your brand. Don’t underestimate yourself. Trust your intuition and allow the signs to reveal themselves. You’ll make the right call when the time is right. And you’ll handle future events in ways that will surprise you.”

If I wasn’t worried enough about my bees, the winery, and the risk of being accused of murder, I now worried about handling *‘future events in ways that will surprise me.’*