

Sweetened with Honey

A Farm Fresh Romance

Book 3

Chapter One

Valerie Comer



Chapter 1 -----

Sierra Riehl had done a lot of strange things while studying natural medicine, but this seemed right up there with applying leeches to let blood. Straight out of medieval times.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” She set the jar containing two honeybees on the table in her naturopathy office.

“I think so.” Her friend eyed the bees crawling up the side of the glass. “I’ve read a lot of reports that say stings really help. My rheumatoid arthritis seems worse every day.”

“I know. That’s the only reason I’m agreeing.” Probably not what she should say out loud — and not what she would, if Doreen Klimpton’s symptoms hadn’t taken over so quickly. Her once-vibrant friend had shrunk in on herself in recent months.

“Where are you going to apply it?” Doreen kept her eyes on the jar as she settled her bony frame in the reclining chair. “Are you going to sting me twice?” Her thin fingers gripped the armrests.

“Maybe.” Sierra slipped a lab coat over her lilac dress. “I plan to start with one as a test. If things go well, we can do a second one. Or not, as you wish.”

Doreen nodded. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.” She took a deep breath. “Getting stung on purpose.”

Sierra couldn’t, either. Yet, since she’d taken up apiculture, she kept hearing old beekeepers say they never had arthritis. The venom from the many stings they inevitably incurred in the line of duty kept their joints at ease. Unprovable at the moment, but she’d be glad of the side benefit as she aged, no doubt. She’d never expected her boss to test the theory.

Doreen closed her eyes. “Do it already. The anticipation must be worse than the sting.”

“You’re sure you don’t have allergies?” Sierra had asked before, but man, all she needed was to see Doreen go into anaphylactic shock.

“I was tested. It should be fine.”

Sierra took a deep breath. Should she swab Doreen’s hand as though she were giving a needle of some other kind? Probably. She reached for a cotton pad and a bottle of alcohol and wiped the area at the base of Doreen’s thumb.

Needles normally went into tissue-laden areas like biceps, not bony parts. But it wasn’t a needle. A bee’s stinger wasn’t nearly as long as most of those.

Just do it.

She unscrewed the lid, grabbed a bee with a pair of tweezers, and put the lid back on. Did she have the bee in a decent grip? It looked like it. “Last chance to refuse treatment.”

Doreen turned her face toward the window, where a late September breeze fluttered the mini-blinds. “I’m ready.”

Sierra held the bee’s rear against Doreen’s hand. A sharp intake of breath revealed the insect had reacted as predicted, releasing its venom.

A man’s voice came from the doorway. “What is going on in here?”

Sierra whirled, dropping the tweezers and the bee.

“Oh, Gabe!” Doreen struggled out of the deep chair. “It’s so good to see you. I wasn’t sure you were ever coming home.” She tottered across the room and flung herself into Gabe’s arms.

Whoa, working in that Romanian orphanage had treated Gabriel Rubachuk right. He looked leaner — better — than Sierra remembered.

Gabe’s piercing blue eyes met hers over Doreen’s head. “You didn’t answer my question.”

Sierra thrust her chin up. “Applying bee venom therapy for her rheumatoid arthritis.” Speaking of bees, what had happened to the one she’d used? Not that it mattered much, since they could only dispense venom once before dying.

His laugh echoed harshly in the small room. “Are you some kind of quack?” He looked down at his former mother-in-law still in his arms. “Didn’t the doctor prescribe medicine for you, Doreen? Isn’t it working anymore?”

“I don’t like how it makes me feel.” Doreen sniffled against his chest, clutching him close. “And it doesn’t work as well as it did at first. Don’t be angry at Sierra. I asked her to do this. I researched it online.”

Gabe shook his head. “You can’t believe everything you find on the Internet. Anyone can pretend they’re an expert.” He eyed Sierra. “I thought better of you. Anything for a buck?”

That stung. She pulled herself to her full height. Not that she was tall enough to intimidate a guy like him. “I’ll have you know there’s plenty of evidence to support the articles Doreen found. Even when I was in school, venom was noted as relief for several types of arthritis and multiple sclerosis. Besides, people get stung all the time. It’s less invasive than the pinprick of a needle.”

What Sierra didn’t know was how the toxin affected Doreen. She touched the older woman’s shoulder. “Can I ask you to sit back down, please? I’d like to have a look at the site.”

Doreen released Gabe, who patted her back awkwardly, then resumed her seat. She laid her hand on the armrest.

Sierra scrutinized the area. A fiery mound the size of a nickel surrounded the white prick mark. That didn’t look good. “I’m afraid you’ll need to stay with me a while longer, until the swelling stops spreading.”

“If she’s allergic to the sting, get her to a real doctor.” Gabe loomed closer. “They can give her an antihistamine shot. What’s it called, an Epipen?”

The scent of his aftershave filled the air. Who knew those commercials for Old Spice would make it trendy again for guys under fifty?

Sierra's nose twitched as she put a bit of space between them. "An Epipen isn't an antihistamine. It's—" She parked her hands on her hips and sighed. "Oh, never mind. Just get out of my office and let me do my job. I'm perfectly capable of monitoring Doreen and dispensing a countermeasure if needed. For now, it bears watching, but impeding the venom will also nullify the good it's doing against her arthritis."

"I'm not going anywhere until Doreen comes with me." Gabe leaned against the beige wall, muscular arms crossed over his striped button-up. "Then it looks like I'm taking her to urgent care."

Lifting orphans must've provided a great workout. Sierra pulled her gaze back to his face. "Now who's overreacting? I've been keeping bees for two seasons. A lot of people have a quick reaction that subsides just as fast." Though most of Doreen's hand now looked puffy.

If only Gabe weren't in the room, blocking Sierra's ability to think. Of all the ways she'd dreamed they'd meet again, this wasn't one of them. He would come into Nature's Pantry and commend her for the way she'd helped Doreen pull his health-food store into the black while he'd been off in Europe. Or he'd stroll in at Green Acres Farm to see his buddy, who was married to her best friend.

In either case, his eyes would light up at the sight of her.

Yeah, she'd been dreaming. It would never happen. He'd never see her as anything but the woman whose father's semi-truck had rolled right over his wife's car, killing her and their unborn child instantly. Such a shame Bethany had swerved from the deer that jumped in front of her car and hit the semi instead. She probably would've survived the deer.

Sierra had hoped three years away would be long enough for Gabe to heal up and move on. Just her luck he'd now see her as a quack... or worse, a con.

oOo

Dread of returning to Galena Landing, Idaho, had dogged Gabriel Rubachuk for three years.

Staring down Sierra Riehl while she fussed over Doreen came as a welcome distraction. Something to focus on besides the apartment that had once been his home. Besides the shock of seeing Bethany's mom half-crippled and in obvious pain.

"It's so good to see you, Gabe." Doreen's sad eyes found his. "When did you land in Spokane? I thought you'd let me know when you were coming home."

How could he explain? Bethany had been close to her mom, but what linked him to her now? Just the health-food store. He and Bethany had bought it from her as newlyweds, but Doreen had taken over running it when he bolted for Romania to help in his parents' mission work after Bethany's death.

“I wasn’t sure.” It sounded lame. He’d had a pretty good idea when he bought the tickets, after all.

“Looks like the swelling has stopped spreading,” Sierra said. “How are you feeling?”

Doreen looked down at her hand.

Looked inflamed to Gabe. A twinge of regret crossed his mind. He’d known her RA had flared, but it hadn’t brought him back to the US. He’d just ditched her along with all his other responsibilities.

“It’s kind of hot and itchy,” she ventured.

Sierra nodded. “That’s to be expected. I know we’d talked about doing both hands today, but I’d rather wait and see how this one fares.”

Sting her again? No way. Gabe pushed off from the wall, mouth open in protest.

Sierra pinned him with a glare as she tucked a strand of long blond hair behind her ear. A curl sprang loose immediately. “This is none of your business, Gabe. You are interfering with my ability to provide quality care to a patient who came to me voluntarily.”

“But she—” She what? Wasn’t capable of making decisions about her own health care? Ouch.

“Furthermore, you’re trespassing.”

Gabe shook his head. He knew the answer to this one. “You are. This is my building. My store downstairs. My apar—” He choked on the word. “My apartment up here.” He allowed his gaze to rove the area. This would have been the baby’s room. He tugged at his shirt collar as breath nearly failed him.

“You left Doreen in charge, and she leased this space to me.” Sierra’s gaze softened. “I’m happy to let you have it back, Gabe. We just didn’t know when you were coming. Last we heard, you were thinking of staying overseas until the New Year.”

He’d returned to sell the business. What he’d do then, he didn’t know. Sticking around in the town that held all his memories of a happy marriage seemed a bad idea. Maybe he’d go back to school. Get a degree in something useful. Who knew what?

“It’s okay. I-I’m not sure I can handle living up here anyway.” He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Thanks for helping Doreen.”

“Gabe’s right,” Doreen said. “He doesn’t need to stay here for now. He can live with me.”

His head was shaking before she’d even finished. “No, that’s okay. No need to rearrange your life.” The only thing worse than this apartment was Bethany’s former bedroom in her mom’s house and the kitchen where he’d taught her to bake chocolate chip cookies when they were thirteen.

“But—”

“Steve and Rosemary are expecting me. I’ll bunk out at the farm with them for a few days until I figure out what I’m doing.” Besides running again. “No need to put anyone out.”

Doreen pushed out of the chair. “You’re staying with Nemeseks? They knew you were coming, and I didn’t?”

He liked Doreen fine. Respected her. Hated to see her in pain. How could he gently remind her that she didn't have a claim on him anymore? "We've stayed in touch since they came home from Romania. Being out at the farm will do me good."

Their son Zach had been the other integral part of his growing up years. He and Zach and Beth hung out lots as a threesome, but Gabe had plenty of memories of his buddy that weren't dependent on Bethany. Yes, staying with Zach's parents was the best idea.

"I needed to see the store before I drove out there. Looks good. Well stocked." He backed toward the door. "Thanks, Doreen."

Tears glistened in her eyes.

He'd bet they had nothing to do with her arthritis or the bee sting.

"That was Sierra." Doreen's voice trembled. "I haven't been up to much lately."

Gabe managed to get the words out. "Thanks, Sierra." Just his luck he was beholden to her, of all people. Yeah, he knew he'd left Doreen in a bind with the business. He'd lost a wife, but she'd lost her only daughter. Why had it seemed okay for him to run and push her to take on his responsibilities on top of her own grief? He'd been blind.

Blinders still helped him cope.

"You're welcome." Sierra's jaw tightened, and she looked ready to say more. She shook her head and turned away.

He couldn't stand it. "What?"

"Nothing."

With women it was never "nothing." He hadn't been married for five years without learning a thing or two. But did he really want to push it? No. Not with her, of all people.

He stared hard into her blue eyes. She needed to keep her distance. Not to be sweet to Doreen when he wasn't. Not to take care of the business he'd abandoned. Not to be happy and carefree in this place filled with his painful memories.

Sierra took a step backward, her eyes widening as her lips pulled into a straight line.

Good, maybe she was getting the message.

"I don't feel so well."

Gabe took a step closer as Doreen's head lolled against the back of the deep chair, but Sierra got there first. "Doreen? Are you okay?"

"She's passed out. That's it. I'm taking her to urgent care."

Sierra glared up at him but stepped aside. "There's no need. Give her a moment."

Gabe gathered Doreen into his arms. She hardly weighed a thing. "You've done enough."

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