

Sugar  AND SPICE

HEATHER GREER

*To those who have let mistakes of the past steal the sweetness of
the present.*

*"For I will be merciful to their iniquities, And I will remember
their sins no more." ~ Hebrews 8:12*

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Chapter One



“Have you seen the announcement?”
Emeline Becker started at the unexpected interruption of silence, accidentally banging her head on the underside of her desk in the process. She groaned, glaring first at the pen she’d been trying to retrieve, still on the floor, and then at her best friend.

How had Kelly managed to sneak up on her? The tinkling bells on the front door of Sugar and Spice Bakery usually got her attention, even in her office.

“That depends on what you’re talking about.”

“Oh.” Kelly baited Emmie, unfazed by her mood. “So you haven’t heard about the Gingerbread Festival.”

Emmie winced as her fingers found a tender spot on her head. “Did they finally decide to scrap the gingerbread and host a sugar cookie festival instead? Did my best friend, the festival coordinator, finally take my suggestion to the rest of the committee?”

Hands braced against her hips, Kelly smirked. “Yes, Emmie. New Kuchenbrünn, Missouri, the American namesake

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of the gingerbread capital of the world, has decided to eighty-six the gingerbread in favor of sugar cookies on the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the festival.”

“I don’t see a problem.” Emmie shrugged. “Ginger is perfect for redheads, but it does not belong in my kitchen.”

Kelly plopped down into the chair across from Emmie. “Your great-grandma would roll over in her grave hearing you talk like that. The Sugar and Spice Bakery has been a prominent feature in the festival since she opened the place. And the only reason you don’t like gingerbread is because of the Unfortunate Incident of Festival 133.”

“Do we have to call it that?”

One brow rose impossibly high. “Would you rather I call it, ‘the day my best friend puked gingerbread all over the boy she was crushing on’?”

Emmie huffed. “First of all, it was not all over him. It was on his shoes. Second, I’m still surprised no one else has gotten sick in that stupid gingerbread eating contest. And third, he wasn’t my crush. He was my sister’s boyfriend.”

“Who you were trying to impress by winning the trophy.”

Emmie toyed with a pen on her desk. “I was thirteen. Fine. I had a teenage crush on him, but he was sixteen and dating Karen. It didn’t matter anyway. He was nothing but a jerk in the end, breaking her heart when he left after high school.”

Kelly’s sigh put Emmie further on edge.

“Give it up, Emmie. You say it’s all about your sister, but we both know your heart took a little damage in that move too. Still, I think fifteen years has exceeded the statute of limitations on heartbreaking crimes.”

Kelly placed a hand on top of hers, stilling the furious beat she tapped without realizing it against her desktop. A feeling close to betrayal snuck in. Kelly knew how much teenage Emmie had admired Ryker Lehmann. When Emmie

found out he left without even a good-bye to her, Kelly was there.

It didn't matter that he'd been Karen's boyfriend. In the year before he left, it seemed she and Ryker hung out almost as much as he did with Karen, since he often waited at the house for Karen to get out of after-school clubs or off work. She'd thought they were friends. At the very least, she deserved a good-bye. She'd gotten nothing.

The subject needed to change.

"It doesn't matter. You came here with big news, and all we've done is talk about the horrors of my past and the one person I'd rather not talk about again. What happened with the festival?"

Kelly bit her lip. The expression made Emmie's insides tense. Guilty? Nervous? Sheepish? Yes, definitely sheepish. What was going on with her today?

"Out with it. Whatever it is, you know it will be worse if you try to hide it now."

Kelly fidgeted. Emmie pinned her with a look.

"Fine. The Gingerbread Festival Committee wants to do more to boost tourism year-round, and they think the festival is the place to start. They want to professionally photograph and video the events, and they also want to develop a coffee table book to promote all our town has to offer throughout the year."

"So?" Emmie frowned. "I think the additional advertising sounds great, as long as I don't have to commit to gingerbread, forsaking all others for the additional eleven months of the year. I don't see the problem."

"Neither did I." Kelly's smile seemed tense. "Until a few minutes ago. The committee already chose the photographer. He'll be here at Sugar and Spice tomorrow to begin. Everyone thinks it's perfect they've managed to get a local guy to return to his hometown for the festival."

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The blood drained from Emmie's face. "No. You're kidding me, right?"

Kelly shook her head. Emmie stared at her friend, as if a glare could change the outcome.

"The festival hired Ryker as the photographer?"

Kelly gave a slight nod. "Ryker Lehmann, successful professional photographer and hometown darling, returns home to promote the festival he loved as a child."

"And you couldn't stop them?"

"What was I supposed to do? I don't have that kind of power."

"Come on, Kelly. You're the mayor's personal assistant by day, and the festival committee coordinator by night. Personally appointed to the task by your illustrious boss. If anyone could derail their plans, it would be you."

"Not this time." Kelly shook her head. "The idea reached him before I did. He thinks it's a wonderful plan, and there was nothing I could do to stop it."

"Did you even try?"

Kelly's tight-jawed stare convicted Emmie. Of course, she'd tried. It was only her spiraling emotions that prompted the question.

"Sorry. That was uncalled for." Emmie rubbed her temples. "This is not happening. First, my bakery is taken over by the only cookie I truly hate. And now, you're telling me the one man I'd hoped never to see again will be in my bakery tomorrow morning?"

"Eight o'clock sharp." Kelly reached across the desk and laid a hand on Emmie's arm. "But it's not going to be so bad, is it? That was a lifetime ago. You've grown up, matured. You can handle this."

"How mature is it for me to hope he's gotten fat and wrinkly and gone bald in the last fifteen years?"

“Emmie. You’ve got to forgive and get past this.”

“I know. I know. I have to put on my big girl panties and deal. With the gingerbread and with Ryker Lehmann.”

Kelly laughed. “That’s the spirit.”



RYKER WIPED STEAM from the bathroom mirror and stared at his reflection. The man who looked back at him wasn’t the same boy who left New Kuchenbrünn after high school. His face wasn’t as thin as it’d been at eighteen, but it wasn’t near heavy.

The five o’clock shadow covering his cheeks was rough against his palm. Should he plan extra time to shave in the morning? No. The stubble stayed. Without it, he’d been told he looked like a kid again. And while he didn’t thrill at the idea of getting older, he didn’t want to look like the boy who went away to college and never returned.

That wasn’t really fair either. He’d come home the first couple of Christmases to see his parents. But when they’d retired, they found a renter for their home and moved to Sevierville, Tennessee like they’d always dreamed. Two hours from his place in Asheville, North Carolina. The perfect distance for autonomy and regular visits, though it took away all reasons to return to his hometown.

When he got an itch for the feel of New Kuchenbrünn, he’d make a trip to nearby Helen. Their Oktoberfest and Christmas Markets always did the trick. Well, almost. Even after all these years, he still hadn’t found gingerbread quite like what Sugar and Spice Bakery offered.

Tomorrow, he’d taste it again for the first time in years. Not to mention the opportunity it would give him to reconnect with the people who’d been like a second family to him.

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“That’s what this is really about.” He hoped no one was in the adjoining room to hear him mutter to himself.

Frustrated, Ryker flipped the light switch off and stepped into the bedroom portion of his hotel room. Was it still called a hotel room when it was at an inn? He didn’t know and wasn’t sure he cared. But he needed a distraction to get his mind off seeing the Becker family tomorrow. A warm welcome wasn’t guaranteed after the way he left, but that hadn’t been his fault. They couldn’t hold the silence against him.

He grabbed his laptop and stretched out on the bed. A little research would benefit him in dealing with local businesses. He could accomplish more in less time and wrap up his work when the festival ended.

Starting with the festival pages outlining all the events taking place in the next two weeks, Ryker made notes about possible photo opportunities and which ones would be better captured using video. Before long, he made his way to the individual shop websites.

His finger paused over the touchpad, the cursor hovering over the link to Sugar and Spice Bakery. It felt a little like spying, but the shop was his first stop the next morning. And he did like to be prepared. He clicked the link. A history of the nearly sixty-year-old business filled his screen along, with photos of the bakery’s interior and some of its specialty items. Not bad images, but he could provide them with better.

The menu page could stand a good overhaul. It was easy to see someone cared, but they didn’t have the know-how he possessed. He clicked the next page and froze. When had the Becker family sold the bakery?

The caption under the photo of the woman listed her as baker and owner. He looked at the woman again.

Photogenic for sure. Pretty in a cute way, without even trying. Long, straight dishwasher-blond hair pulled back into a

no-nonsense ponytail. High cheekbones and the stronger line of her jaw gave angles to her otherwise round face without sacrificing the softness. Her smile was perfect, showing off one dimple on the left side. A light in her sky-blue eyes proved her smile wasn't for the camera alone. They were beautiful and also vaguely familiar.

Ryker scrolled past the picture. Emeline Becker. His eyes flew to the photo again. This was Emmie? Karen's little sister? Fifteen years had changed her more than it had him. While he'd filled out some as he went from his late teens to his thirties, his features had already matured by the time he graduated.

When he left New Kuchenbrünn, Emmie was fifteen, if that. She'd gone from a little kid to a cute teen who had the attention of all the boys in her class. Still, she'd kept a little preteen awkwardness around the edges and was completely oblivious to the attention she received. He'd noticed the change then, but now? The little kid and awkward preteen were evicted, leaving a confident, beautiful woman in their place.

He skimmed the rest of the page. No mention of Karen or Emmie's parents except in paragraphs talking about the history of the restaurant. It seemed Emmie had taken the reins roughly six years after he left. What happened to the rest of the family?

One last look at Emmie with her bright blue eyes and single-dimpled smile, and Ryker shut down his laptop. A yawn and a glance at his watch confirmed the need to get some sleep. Before he knew it, the time would come for his trip to Sugar and Spice. And his chance to find out why Emmie seemed to be on her own.