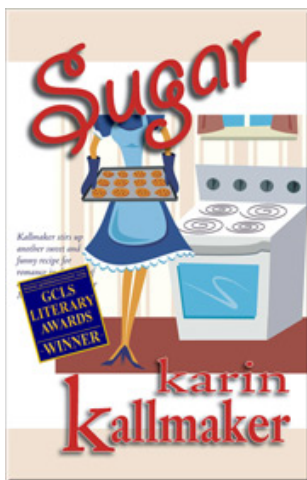


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## Excerpt from SUGAR



SUGAR IS A  
CONTEMPORARY LESBIAN  
ROMANCE BY KARIN  
KALLMAKER.

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## CHAPTER ONE

Honestly, Sugar Sorenson thought to herself, she'd had no idea oven insulation was flammable.

She did know, from repeat experience, that charred sucrose, glucose and fructose smelled for days. The acrid aroma could ruin clothing, other baked food and linens. It snuck into flour and tainted spices.

More than sugar had burned today. Looking at the sodden remains of her one-room living quarters, Sugar

was pretty sure nothing in the so-called “garden cottage” would ever smell clean again—the stench of burnt converted garage was worse than anything she’d ever managed. Even though water dripped from every surface in the kitchen area, some things – like the pile of cookbooks she hadn’t been able to rescue – were still smoking.

Outside, on her landlord’s lawn, were the few cookbooks she’d saved. The haphazard pile was surrounded by several lingering firefighters, talking quietly amongst themselves. Their poses were curiously relaxed, making it hard to believe that thirty minutes ago they’d been smashing her car windows so it could be pushed farther from the blaze. When she’d bolted outdoors getting her car keys had been the last thing on her mind.

That was it. All there was. Poof, flash, crackle ... ashes.

It was all over so quickly. She’d called 911 less than an hour ago. That had been a scant minute from the moment she’d realized her little fire extinguisher wasn’t going to stop the rising flames. The fire station was only a block away and reassuring sirens had begun even before she’d hung up her cell phone.

She’d hated the sleeper-sofa and it didn’t belong to her, so, all in all, its fate was a blessing. But her little red Honda hatchback she had loved. She hoped missing glass was the worst of its woes once it dried out.

She moved slowly toward the smoldering pile of cookbooks. Perhaps the ones in the middle could be saved. She pulled open the drawer where she kept the oven mitts, but a large puff of smoke bellowed into her face and she couldn't help a startled cry.

"Hot spot!" Heavy footsteps pounded behind her and someone with a very strong arm muscled her out the front door and into the fresh air. "Please stay out of here, ma'am!"

"I was just hoping there'd be something left, that's all." Sugar's protests seemed to fall on deaf ears.

She had to admit the firefighters were doing their firefighter thing with efficiency. The "cottage," as her landlord had advertised it, was an illegal rental, and Robert was going to be very unhappy about the ruin. She supposed she should call him. She wondered if firefighters were required to tell county inspectors that there had been living quarters here. Maybe she should quietly disappear – but where could she go? Noor would put her up for a night or two before familiarity bred contempt. She wouldn't last that long with any of her other exes. Her sisters would make space for her, but only after she'd agreed to live her life according to their relentless perception of her as the baby of the family. So what if she was youngest? At thirty-four she had a right to self-determination.

With a sinking heart, she realized the only person who'd welcome her with open arms was Grannie

Fulton.

No way, Sugar thought. Grannie Fulton's arms might be open but her mind was not. She'd have a killer brownie in one hand and the Good Book in the other. "Come in, my prodigal," she'd boom. "Come in and find your salvation!"

Gran's brownies were a religious experience, but all that talk of hellfire and brimstone ruined the epiphany.

Sugar belatedly realized one of the firefighters was gesturing at her from the cottage doorway. She walked in that direction but the firefighter bolted toward her in response. She hesitated and let the imposing figure reach her.

"You need to get at least as far away as that fence, ma'am!"

The voice and visage were muted behind the safety gear, but Sugar could tell the speaker was female. Looking up and doing the math, she figured the woman for six-two, a good eight inches taller than she was. "Why?"

The because-I-said-so exasperation was plain. "It's for your safety."

"What about yours?"

"I'm the professional."

Having no tart response to that, Sugar retreated to the fence that separated her imputed lawn space from

her landlord's. The off-kilter pickets divided his tended lawn and garden from the lumpy broken part she was supposed to care for. It was what she had signed on for, she reminded herself. Living in a converted garage with nothing but her own resources to carry her forward in life, that was the goal. She'd given up slaving in restaurants for other people. What a waste of ten years that had been. She needed nothing and no one.

Well, except a place to live.

Not that anyone had asked to take care of her forever. Not that she wanted to be taken care of, either. Not that she'd had more than a passing coffee with an eligible woman since Noor had said, "This isn't working for me." Not precisely heartbroken, Sugar hadn't gone right back to dating simply because she hadn't had much spare time. It wasn't as if anyone had sought her out once word got around that she was single.

Did she care? Of course not. She could live on her own. Of course she could.

The warm spring breeze shifted and the smell from the house did *not* make her think of the status (burned up) of her life. The skyscraper of a firefighter turned around as if to warn her to move further back, but Sugar was saved from another admonishment by the arrival of an ordinary sedan in the tiny side driveway that led to her "garden cottage." It was the kind of car you'd forget seconds after seeing it. The King County

seal on the driver's door caught her attention then. That was quick, she thought. Was it a building inspector or arson investigator? Someone from the tax board coming to demand payments of some kind from the landlord for the illegal rental?

Even worse, could it be a health inspector finally realizing that Cake Dreams by Sugar was operating at a new address, and had been for longer than allowed without updating her business license and inspections? She'd known all along the cheap rental was temporary. Now, fate had decided it was time to get legal again, it seemed. She wasn't missing *that* message in all this chaos. How would she afford a new place with the right zoning to get her inspections back up to date?

The woman who climbed out from behind the wheel did not have a clipboard. In Sugar's experience, all inspectors carried clipboards. Nor did she look the least bit like an accountant. Of course Sugar didn't know exactly what an accountant might look like, but the black lace-up Doc Martens, calf-length leggings and flowing overshirt of blue, green and purple patchwork didn't fit the stereotype in her head. Neither did the brilliant emerald crocheted bag tucked under one arm. If tax assessors looked that good then no one would be anxious to talk to one, she realized.

Two realizations hit her at once: the newcomer was stepping over fire hoses with the aplomb of someone accustomed to doing so, and, after an

exchange of curt nods, it was clear that the tall firefighter knew her.

“I’m Gantry Racine from Victim Services.” She held out an elegantly pale hand tipped with short but gleaming nails. “Do you need anything? I have fresh bottled water in the car, and an armful of resources we can call to get you shelter for a while if you need it.”

“Oh. I’m a victim?”

“Of a fire, yes, but we don’t have to worry about if the label fits.” Gantry had black eyes that snapped and sparkled.

I must be in shock, Sugar speculated, not to have taken in right away that she’s likely the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen in the flesh. She’d heard of porcelain skin but never actually looked at it except in paintings.

“Drink this,” Gantry said firmly. She produced a foam cup from her bag, along with a Thermos bottle. “Tea. Would you like sugar?”

“Yes.” Tea sounded really good, now that she thought about it. “That’s my name.”

“How rude of me.” Gantry handed over the cup, then tipped the contents of a sugar packet into it. “I didn’t ask your name. I sincerely apologize.”

“It’s okay.” Sugar rushed to reassure her. “Sugar Sorensen is the whole name.”

“I wish we were meeting under better

circumstances.” She nodded at the cup in Sugar’s hand and Sugar dutifully sipped. Hot, a bit strong, but the act of sipping was calming.

The firefighter, who had watched their exchange behind the passivity of the safety mask, spoke so suddenly that Sugar nearly jumped. “Hey, Gantry.”

“How’s life been treating you, Charlie?” Gantry pushed her thick, blonde hair over her shoulder, but there was no flirtation in the gesture.

“Same old, same old. Are you going to be at Dee’s shindig?”

“I’m on call, so who knows?”

“Me, too.”

There was a loud shout of “all clear” from inside the house. The firefighter, Charlie apparently, pulled off her safety mask. Sugar took note of the two light brown eyes set in a face too evenly café au lait in shade to be the result of a mere temporary tan. Close black curls were glossy with perspiration.

I must be in shock, Sugar thought again. All the women were looking like models. She stifled a giggle. If she looked in a mirror maybe her freckles, chipmunk cheeks and unruly, mousy brown hair would be gone. Instead, she’d see Meg Ryan at thirty-four. That wouldn’t suck.

The other two women were talking in fits and starts about Dee’s shindig, which appeared to be a wedding of some sort. Sugar was staring morosely at

her poor windshieldless Honda when yet another car arrived.

Whoever it was didn't work for any government agency. The Jaguar's door opened and the first thing Sugar could see clearly was a tapered black pump, exactly the kind that made her feet hurt just looking at them.

Deep down there was a thought that she ought to know who this person was, but nothing came to her as the quiet click of the heels on cement proceeded toward them. The woman's brow was furrowed with concern, but she still stepped forward with confidence. Her red hair was caught in a French braid that shimmered in the sunlight. "Sugar? Sugar Sorenson?"

"That's me," Sugar replied brightly.

"The fire truck is blocking the street." The newcomer glanced open-mouthed at the ruin of Sugar's car and then at the smoldering cottage. "My goodness, what's happened?"

Producer—she had to be the producer for *Best of Seattle*. The producer who might want to do a spot on *Cake Dreams* by Sugar. The producer who was supposed to melt off the chair with a casually offered slice of fruit and chocolate mousse torte. That torte, had it survived the drenching from the fire hoses, would have tasted like burnt house, Sugar realized, so the deluge was just as well. Under the circumstances she was fairly certain her hospitality wasn't under scrutiny.

Charlie answered seriously, “A single-unit domestic fire. Seems to have started in the kitchen wall from an electrical source.”

“Oh, my lord.” For the third time in minutes, Sugar found herself appraised by a lovely pair of eyes. These were the blue of four drops of food coloring into a quarter-cup of sugar. I’ve cracked up, Sugar thought. “What a shock that must be.”

“You look very familiar to me, but I don’t think we’ve met.” Gantry regarded the producer for a moment. “Was your picture in the *Advocate*?”

The perfectly lipsticked mouth opened in slight surprise. “Yes, it was. They did a piece on women in television. I’m here to set up a segment on Sugar’s culinary business and discuss the desserts category of the Seattle Eats cookoff coverage.”

Sugar considered that she hadn’t been this close to this many lesbians all at once in quite some time. The last time was at the Grrlz Dance Party, and she wasn’t really a “grrl.” On the other hand, she hadn’t been the only over-thirty lesbian there, either. Why was she thinking about a party from months ago when her house had just burned down? She looked closely at the producer, now thinking those incredible blue eyes were familiar. Surely she was losing her mind. But how did she ask? Did she say, “Did I meet you at that dance-mostly-naked, step-out-back-if-you-want-to-do-more party? Didn’t we bump hips and other body parts for a

while on the floor?” It had been in March, in honor of Noor’s thirty-fifth birthday. Pathetic that the only party she’d been to in ages had been for an ex. She couldn’t bring it up. It would sound like a come-on, as if she’d burnt her brains along with her house.

Even if they had met—maybe even briefly danced—she didn’t want the producer thinking she was a compulsive party girl. She was hardly the good-time girl her family thought she was. Rose took those honors.

She’d never had the luxury of the time or money to drink bitter coffee and plan her next body piercing. Her small circle of friends was comprised of sous chefs and wannabes, which meant they were free for two hours a month. There were a few women in the greater Seattle metropolitan area with whom she had shared a misguided night that had turned into an awkward breakfast, but only Noor counted as an ex. They’d dated for almost three years, ruined that by moving in together and broken up a few months later.

Now that the house had burned down, however, there were three awesomely attractive lesbians all looking her over. And all she was to them was a victim.

“Yes, well, it certainly is.” Emily Dorsett, Sugar thought. The producer was Emily Dorsett. She turned that bright blue gaze in Sugar’s direction again. “We’ll reschedule this, Sugar. I’m just devastated for you. You’ve got my card, right?”

“Actually...” Sugar swallowed as her voice cracked. “I’m not sure I do anymore.”

Gantry was the one who moved first, but it was Charlie who caught Sugar before she hit the ground.

“What was I thinking?” Gantry’s face swam in Sugar’s vision for a moment. “Standing her out here in the sun after a shock.”

Just before Sugar blacked out she thought that they all had angels’ faces, looking down at her in concern, like a trinity of lesbian beauty, compassion and strength. Angels of cocoa, cinnamon and vanilla... If she’d known they were coming, she’d have baked a cake...

*Sugar...sugar bear. Sugar, give me some sugar, darlin’. Sugar, ah honey honey, you are my candy girl. Sugar...sugar pie. Wake up, sugar pie, honeybunch. Sugar in the morning, sugar in the evening, sugar in the afternoon...sugar...*

“Sugar. Come on—she’s coming around.”

“Sorry.” Sugar turned her head away from the hand patting her cheek. “I don’t know what hit me.”

“Shock.”

She was in the passenger seat of Gantry’s car. Given that she smelled even more strongly of smoke,

she was willing to guess Charlie had carried her there. If she'd known some hunky firefighter would have to pick her up she'd have worked harder to lose the fifteen pounds self-employment had put on her body.

Charlie was speaking into the radio on her shoulder. "She's conscious, so the paramedics can –"

"No, please," Sugar protested. "I don't need paramedics. I just fainted."

"Sorry, it's procedure."

"You did lose consciousness, Sugar," Gantry said quietly.

Without looking at Emily, Sugar admitted, "My health insurance deductible is huge. Please, if you can cancel that call I'd appreciate it. I won't let them work on me."

Charlie sighed, then shrugged. Turning away, she spoke into her radio again. The back of her black- and yellow-striped jacket was emblazoned with "C. BRONSON." Sugar remembered having seen the name around the neighborhood. Some mornings when she went out for the paper, she'd seen letters in bold red across the shoulders of a sweat-soaked T-shirt as the early-morning jogger zipped past the house. She'd even giggled to herself and thought, "Must be Ms. Majestyk."

"I'm glad you're feeling better." Emily glanced at her jeweled watch, but Sugar didn't sense she was unduly impatient. Yet she must be a busy woman, and

her trip to the suburbs had been pointless. “I think I should leave you in peace. Please let me know when you’re settled. I was really looking forward to doing this segment about you and your work. The photographs you sent were amazing.”

Sugar brightened, realizing that Emily did have a copy of her portfolio and a number of photos. “I will be asking for those back sometime soon, I hope, to make copies. It’s possible my computer survived. It was farthest from the kitchen. And my digital camera might still be okay.” She looked after the imposing Charlie, wondering when she might be able to go back into what was left of her home. She had no idea how far the water had spewed from the original blaze.

As if reading her mind, Gantry said, “You’ll probably be okayed to go back in tomorrow. At least you got a few things out. And some of your appliances will have survived the water.”

A screech of tires startled them all. Sugar started to get out of Gantry’s car but found that Gantry’s hand clamped on her shoulder held her in place with no effort at all. Sugar marveled for a moment at her unresponsive arms and legs. Wow, limbs could actually be so weak they trembled.

“What the hell did you do?”

Christ, it was Robert, her landlord. Large, loud and certain he knew what was best, Robert planted his feet, ignoring everyone but Sugar. The man was an

idiot, Sugar thought, to ignore two beautiful woman in order to look at her.

“I didn’t do anything. The fire started in the oven.”

“Some concoction of yours? How are you gonna pay for all this damage?”

“Are you the homeowner?” Emily’s tone snapped Robert’s attention to her. “Your own insurance will compensate you for damages and of course Ms. Sorenson for her lost property. And if they don’t, you will.”

Robert must have noticed how gorgeous Emily was because his tone became moderately more civil. “I’m not paying for anything of hers. She was supposed to get her own insurance.”

“Your own insurance company is aware that you have a...*dwelling*...in your garage?” Emily’s right eyebrow quirked.

Robert slowly turned purple. Sugar wondered if he’d like some tea now, too. “I don’t see that that is any of your—”

“But it is mine,” Gantry cut in. She flipped out a business card. “I will be reporting the illegal rental to other county departments. They will be quite interested to learn of it.”

It crossed Sugar’s mind that Elliot Ness hadn’t been the one to get Al Capone. The credit went to the I.R.S., and Robert would likely be getting a call from

them, too. He had been an ass to her the last eighteen months, over everything from “excessive” use of the driveway to whether her newspaper was too close to his after they were delivered. Now that her cheap place to live was no more, she was rooting for the Feds. Careful, she warned herself, with visions of health inspectors in her head. You’re not exactly squeaky-clean in all this, either.

“She was operating a bakery out of the cottage,” Robert accused. “Whatever happened was because she started it!”

“I did not!” Sugar really had had enough. All her hopes and dreams had gone up in flames. She didn’t even have flour to her name and her only order due in the next week might be lost. She’d forked out good money to enter the Seattle Eats competition a mere two weeks away and there was no way she’d have anything worth submitting now. She struggled past Gantry’s restraining hand. “I was making one cake a day, well within the capability of the oven.”

“You report me to anybody and I’ll report you!” Robert stepped toward Sugar but held up when Emily and Gantry moved in as well. “We have a contract!”

“A contract to further an illegal arrangement isn’t valid.” Emily waved one hand as if the truth of her words was something a first-grader would know.

“I’ll sue you for everything you have!”

“Oh, like that’ll make you rich.” Sugar dashed

angry, helpless tears from her cheek. “It wasn’t my fault.”

Robert cracked his knuckles. “You’ll never prove that.”

“She won’t, but I will.” The cool voice coming from behind Sugar brought Robert up short. Well, it was either the voice, Sugar thought, or the fact that Charlie was four inches taller than he was. Her lesbian trinity closed ranks. Charlie’s tone was scathing, “The oven was installed on a combined one-ten electrical connection, and two one-tens don’t make a valid two-twenty. There was also no ground and the circuit box was overfused. You endangered her life, your own, and that of your family and neighbors.”

“Your insurance company is going to be very, very unhappy,” Emily added.

“Even lacking intent to commit a physical crime, I wouldn’t be surprised to find that your entire rental fraud was criminal in nature,” Gantry speculated.

Robert’s mouth opened and closed and Sugar said the only thing that came to mind. “My big sister is a lawyer!”

Charlie cleared her throat and while she never broke a smile, Sugar saw one in the light brown eyes.

Robert gaped just once more, then hurried for his back door, slamming it shut behind him after a wild look at the four women, none of whom had moved.

“And the horse you rode in on, asshole.” Emily’s

vivid blue eyes crackled with animosity. “I hate bullies.”

“Here, here,” Gantry said. “That type doesn’t think beyond the next buck. Even now he doesn’t care that someone might have been killed.”

“Oh, oh—I know.” Charlie was smiling broadly now. “Let’s all get on our cell phones. You know he’s watching, and he’ll croak.”

Sugar felt like a spectator at a well-choreographed play. Three phones, three chirps, three women separating themselves by polite distances. Their conversations flowed over Sugar as if she wasn’t even there.

Emily said without preamble, “We’ll need to postpone the Cake Dreams feature...”

Gantry was more roundabout. “It’s me. Just checking in. How are you feeling?”

Charlie, after listening for a bit, said only, “Oh, hell, my mother called.”

Another cup of tea settled Sugar’s nerves more, and her sodden purse was brought out to her. It was typical of her, Sugar mused, that she’d rescued cookbooks but not her checkbook. Her cell phone was damp, but turned on for a minute before the battery went dead. She’d been meaning to charge it.

“Who can you stay with, dear?” Gantry patted her arm. “I will warn you that it’s not unusual to sleep badly the first several nights after a big shock.”

“It’s not like I have a girlfriend who’ll care,” Sugar muttered.

“Every woman needs a girlfriend,” Charlie remarked from her position leaning on the hood of Gantry’s county car.

“I have girlfriends, but not a girlfriend,” Sugar said. Charlie’s mouth twitched in what might have been a relieved smile. Sugar all of sudden wanted to blush. The woman had amazingly suggestive eyes. That or she was still in shock. Yes, that was a far more likely explanation.

Emily lightly touched Sugar’s arm. “I really must go, but as soon as you feel up to it, I would love to do the feature. We have a studio kitchen we could shoot in, change it a bit to look like it might be yours.” She frowned for a moment, as if ticking off a mental checklist. “I think we’d have done that anyway, given how small your real kitchen is, er, was. Here’s my card again, and please – I meant it – call.”

“I will,” Sugar said sincerely. If she ever hoped to get on her feet again the feature would be a real boon.

Emily hesitated. “I’m really sorry about all this. I had hoped...” At Sugar’s inquiring look, she hurried on, “A friend of mine is having her fortieth birthday this weekend and I’ve left organizing things late. I was

hoping I could persuade you to take a rush order for about twenty people. I even brought some photos of her cat.”

“Oh.” Sugar quickly ran through the necessary calculations. A lookalike cake for twenty had been priced on her Web site at two hundred dollars, something Emily had to know, and she could certainly use the money. It might cover half of a new windshield. She brightened. Her Web site, which was hosted on a paid server site, would still be up. She’d still get orders. All she needed was a kitchen. She had enough savings for supplies.

Grannie Fulton had a large, utilitarian kitchen capable of producing a Thanksgiving meal for thirty. Damnation.

“I think I can stay with my grandmother,” Sugar said slowly. “When did you want the cake delivered?”

“You really think, given all this—” Emily waved a hand at the smoldering, smoking cottage. “You think you could still do it?”

“I think so, yes.”

“Wow, okay. Well, here’s the photos.”

“Excuse me,” Gantry interrupted. “But why does she need photos of the cat?”

Emily flashed Gantry a smile. “Sugar does the most fabulously realistic three-dimensional cakes, to order. The only other place I know of in the country where you can get one like it is New York.”

Sugar eyed the calico's markings. They were intricate, with at least five different shades of icing and a lot of pastry brush painting to simulate fur. The yellow eyes and jeweled leather on the collar would be fun. But if she kept the pose simple, it was doable. "Would she like one of the cat on her back, like this? Wanting a tummy rub?"

"Oh, that would be delightful, yes." Emily grinned. "Okay. Well. Here, let me write my home phone on the back. If you realize later you can't, please call me, okay? I can always order something from the grocery."

It was unthinkable that she might lose the order to Safeway or Costco. Somehow Sugar found some basic business sense. Running a business wasn't her strength to begin with, so finding a moment of practicality under the circumstances was a bit of a miracle. Grannie Fulton would say the Lord had worked in His mysterious way. Right, burn down the house to make a good business contact. "Chocolate cake with a ganache, or vanilla with something like a lemon?"

"Chocolate. It's an all-dyke event."

Sugar nodded with a knowing smile. "And you know how much I charge for one of these?"

"Yes." Emily handed back her business card. "She's my best friend and it's her fortieth. I really don't want an ordinary cake. One of yours will make the freezer-to-oven easy hors d'oeuvres forgivable."

“As you wish,” Sugar murmured, her mind whirling through the ingredient list. She longed to go back into the house and at least get her metric scale and favorite measures. Her cake ingredients were calculated by weight, not volume, which allowed vast flexibility in sizing recipes along with precision in measuring. “I know I can get this done.”

Resigned, she knew that she would have to put up with Gran and the lectures about being single, missing church and preferring cookbooks to the Good Book. She would do nearly anything to avoid going back to restaurant slavery. Anything not to have to ask a single sister for money. Again. At Gran’s she could pay her way. At least Gran thought trying to make a living by baking was laudable.

Charlie joined them quietly, holding a large box as if it were a feather.

“The other thing I was going to talk to you about,” Emily said cheerfully, “is your entry for the Seattle Eats competition. I saw your company name on the competitors list. We’re covering it, and I was hoping we could tape your preparations as one of the competitor background stories.”

It was abruptly too much to think about. Sugar felt the blood drain out of her head again. Gantry put an arm around her shoulders. “I really think it’s time to move you to your grandmother’s.”

“I’m so sorry, babbling on.” Emily held the

passenger door open for Sugar. “Call me. We’ll get everything sorted out when you’re ready.”

Gantry’s arm was very comforting and Sugar found herself wondering how old she was. Anywhere between thirty-five and forty-five, she thought.

“Hang on a minute!” Sugar looked up dazedly to see Charlie offering her the box. “I thought you could use these. And we’ll leave warning tape on the doors and windows. I hope that keeps the jerk out of your stuff. Someone will be here tomorrow at ten a.m. to check if it’s safe to enter. If you’re here with a truck, you might salvage most of your equipment.”

Sugar peered into the large box, wondering where on earth Charlie had found such a large carton. It wasn’t full of clothes, which would reek of smoke, but the durable items from the counter and primary baking drawer. Her scale, stainless steel bowls, whisks, copper measuring cups, even her favorite metal scrapers and spatulas. Her cell phone charger and portable CD player were also inside. She blinked back tears. “Thank you. I – that was very kind. And what I’ll need most for the next few days.”

Charlie shrugged. “I guessed.”

The box was settled on the seat behind them, along with her squishy purse and the meager items Sugar had already removed from the house. Emily took her leave to back out the Jaguar. Gantry followed suit and the last Sugar saw of Charlie was as she walked back

toward the cottage with a roll of bright yellow warning tape in hand.

“Sugar, my child! You look back from the shores of hell itself!”

“Something like that,” Sugar said, then she was enveloped in Grannie Fulton’s attar of roses with a hint of vanilla scent. It was an aroma right out of her childhood and suddenly Sugar found herself in tears, crying helplessly in the safety of Grannie Fulton’s arms.

Gran had her and Gantry both in seats at the kitchen table with slices of banana bread and steaming mugs of coffee before Gantry could finish explaining what had happened. Sugar blew her nose and took a nibble of the treat. It was wonderful. Dense and moist, she tasted banana and pineapple, even a hint of coconut. She would have to get the recipe, she thought.

Then she recalled that her recipe boxes were now a fused pile of paper pulp and ink. She’d been meaning to scan them for, well, years. Tears trickled down her cheeks. Gantry offered a small packet of tissues which Sugar accepted with a grimace she hoped looked as grateful as she felt.

“Have another bite, Sugar Bear,” Gran urged. “There’s nothing that can’t be helped by food in your stomach.” She turned to Gantry. “Could I bother you to fetch that basket of preserves? My old legs aren’t what they were.”

Gantry rose to get another artifact of Sugar's childhood. "Goodness, I haven't seen a jam cozy in ages. What a beautiful handle, and it holds six tall jars. My grandmother's held four standard-sized."

"I used to have quite a crew to feed in my younger years. Now, every jar in there is all my own fruit," Gran said proudly. "You haven't tasted anything like my peaches in ages, either. Gantry, now that's an unusual name."

"It's a family name." Sugar watched Gantry's eyes light up as Gran proffered a jar of preserves. Gantry was earning big points, having the etiquette to use the jam spoon to put two dollops on her plate, not on the banana bread. Crumbs in the jam were verboten. "My father's middle name and his father's first name. If I'd had any brothers I might have escaped. Most of my friends call me Tree."

"Gantry has a fine, strong ring to it," Gran Fulton observed. "It seems to suit you as much as Sugar suits my granddaughter."

Sugar blew her nose to avoid meeting their combined gazes. "I don't know about that."

"You were the sweetest of the litter." Gran patted her hand. "And you know you can stay as long as you like. My door has always been open to you. I'd certainly like to meet any gentlemen friends you may have, too."

Sugar caught herself before she rolled her eyes, then stole a glance at Gantry, er, Tree. She responded

to Sugar's very slight shrug of chagrin with the most subtle wink on record. "I don't have time for dating, Gran."

"You're the last grandchild not married, so I worry about you. Go forth and multiply," Gran quipped.

"Mom and Dad did enough of that, and Patricia and Quinn did their part. I don't need to add to the population," Sugar answered back. She glanced at Tree. "I have three older sisters. That makes me the baby of the family."

"You still are," Gran said serenely. "Now, the guest room is all yours, and if you bring me the phone, my friend Judy has a daughter your size, and I'm sure we can get you a few things to wear. You'd best take a shower, dear. I can't say you smell all that good."

"I know."

"I'll be going," Tree said quickly, after bringing the phone from the counter to the table. "You have my card, Sugar. I'm glad to get you settled."

"Thank you. You've really been *very* kind."

"Not everyone is so lucky." Tree gave her a steady glance.

It wasn't ideal, Sugar knew, but Grannie Fulton was a darned good safety net. She nodded. "I know."

"Sugar, dear, would you go in the pantry and fetch a jar of last year's peach preserves? It was an uncommonly fine year, all the early spring rain. For

Gantry to enjoy all on her own.”

Sugar found the jar easily enough. She knew her way around Gran’s kitchen and pantry. There was a stockpile of baking ingredients, too. She could start on Emily’s cake tonight, if her nerves steadied. Right. Every woman looked like an angel to her and she cried at the smell of vanilla. She could bake tonight, sure.

“I really can’t accept it,” Tree protested. “There’s a rule.”

“A jar of fruit, what harm is that?” Gran pressed the gift firmly into Tree’s hands. “I insist. Kindness is in short supply in this world. That’s all I have to say.”

Tree relented with a grin. “Well, having tasted some already, I’d be a fool. And my mama didn’t raise no fools.”

Gran patted Tree’s hand. “It’ll make tea tonight that much better.”

Naturally, but clearly, Tree said, “My partner adores peaches. Thank you, really.”

Sugar waved good-bye from the door and steeled herself for Gran’s inevitable question.

“Now, what do you suppose she meant by ‘partner’? Do you think she’s one of those gay women?”

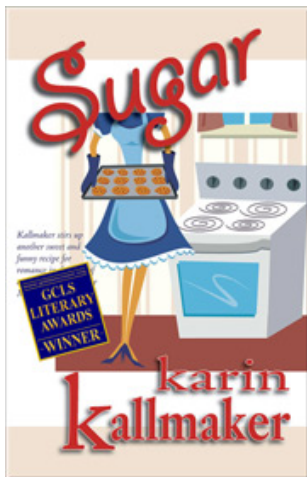
*I could have died in the fire.* Sugar thought about that for a long moment, and the reality of life’s fragility swept over her. She’d always thought it wasn’t worth the trouble of coming out to her Bible-thumping,

church-going, loving but homophobic grandmother. At that moment she no longer had the energy for the secret. “I do think she is, Gran. And so am I.”

Grannie Fulton gazed at her for a long, tense moment. After a sigh, she said quietly, “Whatever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, if there be any virtue I have learned to be content.”

She dialed the phone, leaving Sugar to make her way bemusedly to the shower. Maybe the world would make sense tomorrow.

## Excerpt from SUGAR



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