



## Chapter Two

*Bentonsport*

*Today*

**C** *laaang!* Sarah Peterson had slid the last batch of cranberry orange bread into the oven when she jolted, startled by the loud bell on her back door. After two years, the bell still made her jump. Caroline Murphy, her neighbor and best friend, entered the room, boots clapping against the wooden floor. Sarah closed the oven door and switched off her iPod.

“So, how was it?” Caroline hung her coat, scarf, and cap on the hooks beside the door. She slipped off her boots and placed them under her jacket.

“How was what?” Sarah did her best to hold back a smile.

“Don’t give me that.” Caroline wagged a finger. “You know what I’m talking about.”

“It was okay.” Pulling a stool out from under the counter, she motioned for her friend to sit and then hugged her arms about herself, letting the buttercup-yellow walls cheer her. “It’s always pleasant to have an evening out. Mark and I went to Mount

Hamil and ate fried chicken. Kind of a loud place but a cozy environment. And the food was good.”

Settling in, Caroline unfolded some sewing from her flowered satchel, her straight brown hair blocking her face. “Do you think you’ll see him again?”

“I don’t know. We didn’t talk about future dates. We discussed his work in logging and mine here, baking—that type of thing.” Sarah put the blue sugar bowl and spoons on the counter—how nice they looked against the cherry wood top. “He’s a nice man who likes to have fun.” With luck, the subject would end there.

Caroline leaned in, her brown eyes flashing. “You could do a lot worse.”

“Don’t I know it.” Sarah laughed. She’d had her share of miserable dates. Nice was better than terrible, but wonderful would be even better.

Her kitchen remained Sarah’s favorite place to hang out, one of the reasons she’d decided to become a professional baker. Here, in her domain, she could always find peace. The center island, cabinets framing the back, and display cases surrounding the front comprised her home-based bakery.

Warm today as the ovens steamed the windows, blurring the snowy scene outside but allowing the light through the fine lace curtains. With Christmas less than two weeks away, the days were short—and daylight precious.

She brought out two China cups and saucers and poured tea. “On to more important subjects. How’s business?”

The fragrance of jasmine rose with the steam from the cups.

“We’re busy. Bill’s been working hard getting online orders shipped out. His new tin lamps are popular.” She held up a half-completed tree skirt. “I’ve been finishing several tablecloths and quite a few personalized Christmas stockings and these too. How about you?”

“Scads of bread, Christmas cookies, and pastries. Did you see the kids clustering in here yesterday? I invited Barbara’s third-

grade class to decorate cookies with me. We were up to our earlobes in powdered sugar.” She tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear, then sipped her tea, its sweet warmth a familiar comfort. “Speaking of kids, how’s the baby?”

“Moving and getting big. See?” Caroline smoothed her jumper against the growing bulge. Though both in their thirties, Sarah marveled how her friend could still pass for twenty. With her brown hair parted straight down the middle, smooth round face, and peppy demeanor, she seemed like a young college girl. “I’m over the awful tiredness and have so much energy now—kind of proportional to my weight.”

“We should all be so lucky.” Sarah giggled as she measured her sourdough starter. Then she added sugar, corn oil, salt, and water, stirring the batter with sweeping strokes. “I love easy recipes, especially this time of year. The holidays get too busy.” She kneaded the mixture and then placed the dough in an oiled bowl, allowing it to rest. She smirked. The deep sink filled lip-high with dishes loomed before her. “And now for my least favorite task—washing dishes.”

“Ah.” Caroline flattened the lace on the tree skirt. “But think what a great wife you’ll make someone. Baking and cleaning up too.”

“We can hope. Someday.”

Filling the sink with steamy water, Sarah peered through the misted window. She would find the right man—someone educated who enjoyed conversations long into the night and loved to laugh. The combination just hadn’t come together yet.

“Hey.” Caroline’s cheerful voice broke into her thoughts. “Bill and I are going to the jazz festival in Burlington next weekend. You should come. You’ll meet a few of his old high school buddies and hear some great music.”

Sarah stiffened. Yes, getting out and meeting people would be good for her. But she never liked being set up. She dipped her ringless left hand into the suds.

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Clenching her fingers under the water, she fibbed, “I’d love to.”