



Barbara O'Neal

FAMILY, FOOD & SECOND CHANCES

Read an Excerpt

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Step One

STARTER

Sourdough starter, or mother dough as it is known, is made from wild yeast living invisibly in the air. Each sponge is different, according to the location it is born, the weather, the time of its inception, and the ingredients used to create it. A mother dough can live for generations if properly tended, and will shift and grown and transform with time, ingredients, the habits of the tender.

The Boudin mother dough, used to create the famously sour San Francisco bread was already fifty years old when it was saved from the Great San Francisco earthquake of 1906 by Louise Boudin, who carried the mother dough to Golden Gate Park in a wooden bucket. There it was packed in ice and used to make bread daily until a new bakery could be built at its current location. The mother dough, now more than 150 years old, is stored in a vault, "like a wild beast," and bread is made from it every day.

CHAPTER ONE

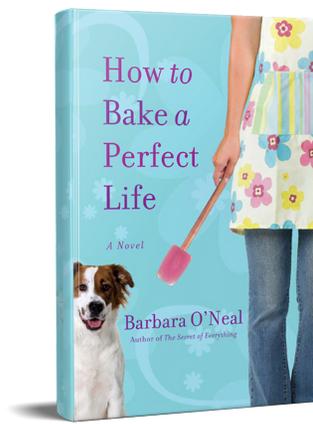
When the phone call that we have been dreading comes, my daughter and I are gathered around the center island of the Bread of Life kitchen. Sofia is leafing through a magazine, the slippery pages floating down languidly, one after the next.

I am experimenting with a new sourdough starter in an attempt to reproduce a black bread I tasted at a bakery in Denver a couple of weeks ago. This is not my own, treasured starter, handed down from my grandmother Adelaide's line, rumored to be over a hundred years old. That "mother dough", as it is called, has won my breads some fame and I guard it jealously.

This new starter has been brewing for nearly ten days. I began with boiled potatoes mashed in their water, then set aside in a warm spot. Once it began to brew and grow, I fed it daily with rye flour, a little whole wheat and malt sugar, and let it ferment.

On this languid May afternoon, I hold the jar up to examine it. The sponge is alive and sturdy, bubbling with cultures.

A



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thick layer of dark brown hooch, the liquid alcohol generated by the dough, stands on top. When I pull loose wrap off the top of the bottle and stick my nose in, it is agreeably, deeply sour. I shake the starter, stick my little finger in, taste it. “Mmm. Perfect.”

Sofia doesn't get as worked up over bread as I do, though she is a passable baker. She smiles, and her hand moves over her belly in a slow, warm way. Welcoming. It's her left hand, the one with the wedding set—diamond engagement ring, gold band. The baby is due in less than eight weeks. Her husband is in Afghanistan.

We have not heard from him in four days.

I remember when her small body was curled up beneath my ribs, when I thought I was going to give her away, when the feeling of her moving inside of me was both a terror and a wonder. If only I could keep her that safe now.

The bakery is closed for the day. Late afternoon sunshine slants in through the windows and boomerangs off the stainless steel so intensely that I have to keep moving around the big center island to keep it out of my eyes. The kneading machines are still as I stir together starter and molasses, water and oil and flour, until it's a thick mass I can turn out on to the table with a heavy spatula. Plunging my hands into the dark sticky blob, I scatter the barest possible amounts of rye flour over it, kneading it in a little at a time. The rhythm is steady, smooth. It has given me enviable muscles in my arms.

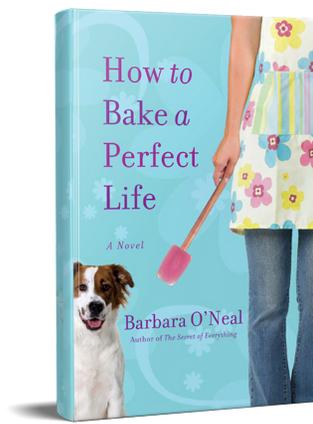
“What do you want for your birthday?” Sofia asks, flipping a page.

“It's ages away!”

“Only a couple of months.”

“Well, I guess as long as there are no black balloons, I'm good.” Last year, my enormous family—at least those members who are still speaking to me—felt bound to present me with graveyard cakes and make jokes about crow's feet, which thanks to my grandmother Adelaide's cheekbones, I do not have.

“A person only has to suffer through one 40th birthday in a lifetime.” Sofia turns a page. “How about this?” She holds up an ad for a lavish emerald necklace. “Good for your eyes.”



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"Tiffany. Perfect." At the moment, I'm so broke a bubble gum ring would be expensive, though of course Sofia doesn't know that the bakery is in trouble. "You can buy it for me when you're rich and famous."

"When I am that superstar kindergarten teacher?"

"Right."

"Deal."

I push the heel of my palm into the dough and it squeezes upward, cool and clammy. An earthy bouquet rises from it, and I'm anticipating how the caramelizing molasses will smell as it bakes.

A miller darts between us, flapping dusty wings in sudden terror. Sofia waves it away, frowning. "I hope we're not going to have a crazy miller season this year."

"The first moths of summer suicidal came," I sing, a line from a Jethro Tull song, and for a minute, I'm lost in another part of my life, another summer. Shaking it off, I fold the dough. "It's been a wet year."

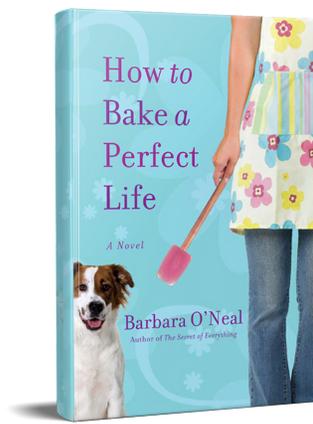
"Ugh. I hate them." She shudders to give emphasis. Then she closes her magazine and squares her shoulders. "Mom, there's something I've been meaning to talk to you about."

Finally. "I'm listening."

She spills it, fast. "I told you Oscar's ex-wife has been arrested in El Paso and Katie has been living with her best friend's family, but Oscar really wants her to come and live with me. Us. She's got some problems, I won't lie, but she just needs somebody to really be there for her." Sofia has eyes like a plastic Kewpie doll, all blink and blueness with a fringe of blackest lashes. "She can sleep upstairs, in the back room. Close to me. She lived with us before Oscar went to Afghanistan. It was fine."

"Hmmm. I seem to remember she more or less hated you."

"Okay, it wasn't fine. Exactly." Sofia bows her head. Light arcs over her glossy, glossy dark hair. "She was pretty angry then."



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“And she’s happy now?” I scatter flour over the dough and table where it is beginning to stick. “Because her mother is in jail and her father is at war?”

“No. I mean—”

The phone rings. I glance at it, then back to my daughter. Obviously there is no possible way I can say no. The child has nowhere to go, but—

To give myself a little time, I tug my hands out of the dough, wipe them off with one of the thin white cotton towels I love for covering the loaves when they rise. “How old is she?”

A second ring.

“Thirteen. Going into eighth grade.”

“Middle school.” Not the most delightful age for girls. Even Sofia was a pain at that age—all huffy sighs and hair-flinging drama. And tears. Tears over everything.

The phone rings again, and I hold up a finger to Sofia. “Hold that thought. Hello?”

“Good morning, ma’am,” says a deep, formal voice on the other end. “May I please speak with Mrs. Oscar Wilson?”

Every atom in my body freezes for the space of two seconds. Here it is, the moment I’ve been half-dreading since Sofia came home four years ago, her eyes shining. Mama, he’s the most wonderful man! He wants to marry me.

A soldier. An infantryman who’d already done two tours of Iraq during the bloodiest days of the war, and would likely do more. Oscar is older than Sofia by more than a decade, divorced, and father to this brand-new adolescent who has a very troubled mother.

Not a soldier, baby, I kept thinking.

And yet, the moment I met Oscar Wilson, with his beautiful face and kind eyes and gentle manners, I knew exactly why she loved him. It was plain he worshipped her in return.



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But here is the phone call.

“Yes,” I say with more confidence than I feel. “Just a minute please.” I put the mouthpiece against my stomach, turn to my daughter. “Remember, they come to the door if he’s dead.”

Sofia stares at me for a long, long second. Fear bleeds the color from her lips. But she has the courage of a battalion of soldiers. Taking a breath, she squares her shoulders and reaches for the phone. Her left hand covers her belly, as if to spare the baby. “This is Mrs. Wilson.”

She listens, her face impassive, and then begins to fire questions, writing down the answers in a notebook lying open on the counter. “How long has he been there? Who is my contact?” And then, “Thank you. I’ll call with my arrangements.”

As she hangs up the phone, her hand is trembling. Unspilled tears make her lashes starry. She stands there one long moment, then blinks hard and looks at me. “I have to go to Germany. Oscar is...he was...” She clears her throat, waits until the emotion subsides “—his truck hit an IED, four days ago. He’s badly injured. Burned.”

I think that I will always remember how blue her eyes look in the brilliant sunshine of the kitchen. Years and years from now, this is what I will recall of this day—my daughter staring at me with both terror and hope, and my absolute powerlessness to make this better.

“I have to go to him,” she says.

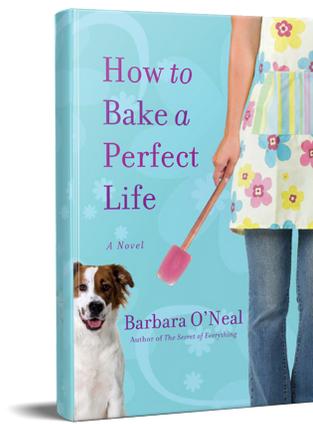
“Of course.”

I think, how badly burned?

She turns, looks around as if there will be a list she can consult. She’s like my mother in that way, wanting everything to be orderly. “I guess I should pack.”

“Let me scrape this into a bowl and I’ll help you.”

As if her legs are made of dough, she sinks suddenly into the chair. “How long do you think I’ll be there? What about



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the baby?” “One step at a time, Sofia. I’m sure you’ll have those answers before long. Just think about getting there, see what...how...what you need to find out.”

“Right.” She nods. Touches her chest. “Mom. What about Katie? She can’t stay where she is.”

A thirteen-year old whose mother is in jail, her father wounded, her step-mother pregnant with a new baby and flying off to Germany, leaving her with a woman she doesn’t know. “She’s never met even met me. Won’t she be scared?”

“Maybe for a little while, but I can’t let her go to a foster home. She can just come for the summer. Grandma will help you, I’m sure, and Uncle Ryan and—”

I hold a hand up. There is only one answer. “Of course, baby. Let’s get those arrangements made now, too, so you don’t have to worry about her.”

She leaps up and hugs me, her mound of belly bumping my hip. It is only as I put my arms around her that I feel the powerful trembling in her shoulders. I squeeze my eyes shut and rub her back, wishing I could tell her that everything is going to be okay. “Do your best, Sofia. That’s all the world can ask.”

Her arms tighten around my neck, like iron. Against my shoulder, I feel her hot tears soaking into my blouse. “Thank you.”