

CHAPTER ONE

Beauty

Today started poorly and got even worse. It is now night-fall, and I am certain even the village's dung heap cleaner would not want to change places with me. I should have known the winds of good tidings were not blowing my way the moment I laid eyes on the baker's new apprentice, a boy a few years my senior who I have never seen in the village before. Our kitchen maid usually does the errands, but she is visiting her family today, so I went to fetch our order of barley rolls.

I do not often venture out into town alone, for Papa worries and his worrying makes me nervous. But this morning I made sure to hold my head high and to look more confident than I felt. I ignored anyone who called out for me to buy whatever they were selling, and made sure to step carefully over the waste constantly being tossed out the windows to the street below. Part of me wanted to take off running in the fields behind the village church and forget the barley rolls. I never feel nervous when I run. But that would be unladylike. I have not been allowed to run freely for years now.

When I arrived at the bakery, the baker — a kind man who always smells like fresh bread — greeted me by name. One of three things happens when someone hears my name for the first time. The worst is when they laugh. The

second worst is when they *start* to laugh but quickly turn it into a cough so as not to appear rude. Lastly, if they are a halfway decent sort, they will squint at my face as though searching for some prettiness that perhaps they missed initially. Upon finding none, they will then say something like, “Have you seen the new juggler performing in the town square? Such talent!”

No one, in all my twelve and three-quarter years, has ever said that the name *Beauty* suits me.

I blame my mother (may her soul rest in peaceful slumber amidst fields of wildflowers). She used her very last breath to bestow my name upon me. If I were the betting type, I would say she was more likely referring to the beauty shining forth from the gates of heaven — which were no doubt opening wide in welcome — than to the infant held up before her, red-faced and sporting a nose that leaned a bit too far to the left. My nose, thankfully, has righted itself as I have grown. Mostly.

When the baker said my name, his new apprentice turned to look. I figured he would choose the first option and laugh. He had the type of sharp chin and thin lips that indicate a certain meanness of spirit. But he did not laugh. Rather, he surprised me with a response I had not heard before. He tipped an imaginary hat at me and said, “Good day, Beauty, my name is Handsome!” And *then* he laughed. The baker gave him a sharp jab in the ribs and waved off my coin as he handed me my sack of rolls.

I cannot tell if my face flushed from the heat of the baker’s huge oven, or the hurtful words. Likely both. I know the teasing should not bother me, for I have many good qualities. My sister, Clarissa, insists no one makes better ginger candies. And I can outrun a hare, not that there is much use