

Op the Pastry Prince

PROLOGUE

THE CHILD SAT upon her bed, bedecked in a white flouncing nightshirt, reddish curls bound in a loose braid around her cherubic face, hands clasped before her heart, pleading with her mother. “Please, Momma, just one more story and then I promise to go to bed. Please tell it to me again. I love it so much.”

Her mother sighed and sat back upon the bedspread beside the girl, stroked her hand over the child’s blanket, and smiled, for she loved the story too. “Very well, but it’s the last time tonight, Amari.” She tried to sound stern, but her heart fluttered with the story and her daughter’s happy laughter ruined the effect of her frown. She grinned, “Once upon a time, a time not so long ago, there lived a ...”

“Not this story again!”

“Pappi!”

The girl jumped from beneath the covers and threw herself into her father’s arms, the man catching her easily and spinning her in a circle as she giggled and hugged tight to his neck.

She wrapped her tiny body around his and held him as close as she could, snuggling her head into his neck as he carried her back to her bed, sat with her in his arms beside her mother, the woman’s eyes bright with love as she looked at her husband.

“I hate this story.”

“Liar.”

His lips widened in a smile.

“But it’s my favorite, Pappi! How you and Momma met. It’s just like a fairy tale!”

A fairy tale indeed, though his daughter likely would never know the full truth of the story.

He huffed a breath of mock-annoyance, and she hugged him tighter at the sound.

“Please!”

“I already said it was the last one, Rol.”

He shook his head, knowing he'd lost even before he'd entered his daughter's room. "Can we at least rename the blasted tale? I'd rather be called the Gingerbread Man again!"

Amari scrambled from her father's lap and back beneath the bedding, pulled the blankets up to her chin and tucked her head into the pillow, waiting for her mother to start the story again, face bright with anticipation.

Tasiya laughed and smiled at her husband. "But I so very much like my Pastry Prince." She took Rollu's hand in hers, and began: "Once upon a time, a time not so long ago, there lived a sad lonely baker, looking to find a new home..."