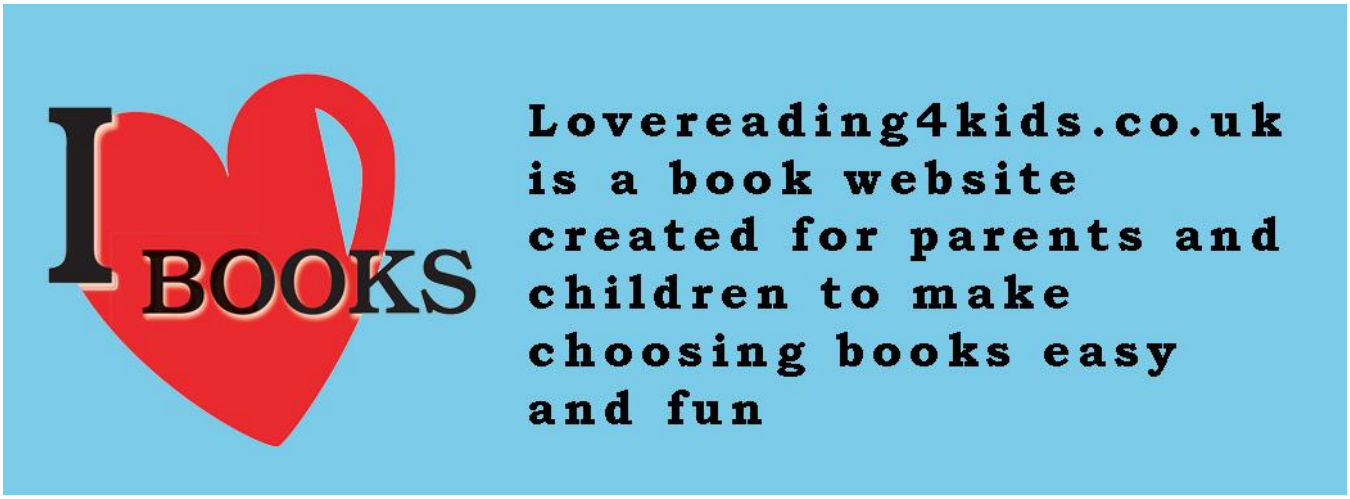


Opening extract from

Baker's Magic

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CHAPTER 1



Bee had never been so hungry in her life.

Oh, she'd been hungry many times. Stomach-growling, eat-a-big-meal hungry. But this was different. This hunger clawed at her insides, making her legs weak and her vision blurry. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten. Was it yesterday morning, or the morning before? It didn't matter. She had to keep walking. One foot in front of the other, the way she'd been doing for hours. For days. For weeks.

She kept her grey eyes trained on the ground, watching her feet move along the dirt road. She'd passed only two travellers since dawn. The first had been a hedge wizard, his green robes flapping as he strode past her, muttering to himself. The second was a merchant travelling back towards the coast, his cart piled high with nets to sell to the fishermen in the little coastal villages. If he'd been heading inland towards Zeewal, she would have asked for a lift, but luck hadn't been with her.

At least it was flat, as the whole countryside of Aradyn was flat – waving grasses for miles with nothing taller than a bush or a windmill to break the horizon. A hill would have been too much for her. The road ran alongside a canal, its slow-moving water green with algae. The banks of the canal were worn away, eroded by the fierce autumn storms that came sweeping up from the sea. Bee knew there were fish in there, and the thought of them made her mouth water. Roasted fish, fried fish, fish baked in a crust with fragrant steam rising... *Stop it. Just walk,* she told herself. *Just keep walking.*

A sudden flash of red made her raise her head. Her jaw dropped in amazement, the pain in her stomach momentarily forgotten. Off to the side, opposite the canal, a crimson stripe of field stretched into the distance, as far as she could see. Bordering it was a long swath of bright pink, and next to that a band of brilliant orange. She moved to the edge of the road and tried to bring the field into focus.

Flowers. It was flowers! Hundreds, no, thousands upon thousands of flowers, red, pink and orange. She'd reached the tulip fields outside Zeewal at last. She'd seen tulips before, of course, but only small patches of them, and rarely in colours other than red or yellow.

They didn't grow very well in the sandy soil at the coast, where Bee had lived. For years she'd heard about these fields, and she'd never quite believed the reports. Like the biggest carpet in the world, with the brightest colours, all made of flowers, people had said. How ridiculous it had sounded! But that was exactly what it looked like – only the description didn't really express how astonishing, how incredibly beautiful it was.

Bee stood and stared for a few minutes, entranced. In the distance, there were other colours – yellow, white, a deep purple so dark it almost looked black. The vivid stripes wavered in the sunlight. It was dizzying, and she turned away. Up the road, she saw stone walls rising high. Above them soared spires and turrets. *It must be Zeewal,* she thought. It was hard to tell how far away it was, but just seeing the walls of the town gave her the strength to start moving again. One foot, then the other. Faster now, because food was near.

Finally Bee reached the town gate. It was open, and she trudged through unnoticed, just a skinny, raggedy child like any other in the kingdom. She passed a cobbler's shop, and a bookbinder, a fishmonger's, a silversmith's. Her nose guided her. There was a scent of something wonderfully sweet that grew stronger and stronger as she walked.

And then, at last, she saw a bakery. The sign over the door showed a beautifully painted cake and a loaf of bread; just the picture was enough to make Bee clutch her middle.

She peered in through the front window and was glad to see that the shop was crowded with buyers. When she pushed open the front door, a little bell at the top rang and she winced – she hadn't wanted to be noticed. But the customers were all too intent on their purchases to pay her any attention. The shop smelled even better inside. There were loaves of bread, brown, white, and embedded with rye seeds. There were a few little tarts with red berries nested in custard. And there, sitting alone on a plate on a metal shelf near the front window, was one perfect sweet roll.

It was the most beautiful sweet roll Bee had ever seen. A flawless circle, puffy from rising, it was studded with raisins and drizzled with pink icing. She could feel the hunger rake its claws along her stomach lining as she gazed at it. Without thinking, she reached out and grabbed the sticky pastry, then turned and shoved her way back through the crowd.

She pushed against the door, relieved when it swung open. But then, behind her, she heard someone shout, "You! Stop, you!"

Shocked, Bee turned her head. Everyone in the bakery

stared at her as the voice continued to yell, "Thief! Stop that thief!" It took a moment for Bee to realize that she was the thief. But hunger gnawed in her stomach, and so she spun and sprinted out of the shop.

Bee dodged across the street, around a carriage and past a cart to the other side. Then her foot caught on something, and all at once she was airborne. She landed on the hard stones with a bone-jarring thump. To her horror, the bun flew out of her grasp and rolled slowly across the cobblestones until it came to rest on a fresh pile of horse dung.

"Gotcha!" A hand grabbed her by the ear and pulled her up. It was the baker. For a big man, he had moved fast. He stood, one hand holding her by the ear in a painfully tight grip, the other on his hip. His white apron strained over a round belly, and his face was just as round. He had a little halo of white curls, and his cheeks were strawberry-red with rage.

"Do you know what we do with thieves in Zeewal?" the baker demanded.

Bee stared at her feet. Her toes showed through her right boot, where she'd had to cut it open when that foot grew too big. Her left foot was a little smaller. Her trousers were ripped at the knee from her fall, and

her hand was scraped. She hurt all over, but the worst pain was her stomach when she looked at that roll sitting in the horse manure.

A crowd had gathered around Bee – the customers from the bakery and all the people who'd been passing by when she ran out. She couldn't bear to look at them. She'd never stolen anything before. She was no thief. Except ... now it seemed she was.

"Why, you're a girl," someone observed. She looked up. It was a boy who'd spoken, one of the scruffy children of Zeewal. He was older than Bee, maybe sixteen or seventeen, and he was even dirtier than she was. His face and apron were streaked with black, and his nails were filthy.

"So you can tell the difference!" she said, the scorn in her voice living up to the sting in her name. The crowd snickered. But Bee could understand the confusion. Her hair was short and uneven; she'd chopped it off herself when she caught it on fire trying to cook porridge in her foster home. And then there were the trousers. It was just too hard to work in skirts.

"It doesn't matter if she's a she or a he," the baker said, irate. "She stole from me, that she did."

"Sorry I tripped you," the boy said. "It was a reflex."

"You tripped me?" Bee said, outraged, as the baker yanked again on her ear. "Ouch!"

"The child is hungry," a woman said. "Look at her. She's half starved." Bee felt herself turning red as the crowd stared. It was mortifying. She breathed deeply, determined not to cry, and tried to look down again, but the baker's grip on her ear kept her head up. So she glared at the boy who'd tripped her.

"Let her go, Master Bouts," the woman said. "She didn't mean any harm."

"Let her go? But look what she did to my bun!"

"I'll pay for it," the boy said. Bee blinked in surprise. "And I'll pay for another as well, so she can eat it."

The baker snorted, but slowly he released Bee's ear. "There's no need for that," he said. His tone was grumpy, but the anger was fading from his face. "You come on in my shop, girl," he said to Bee. "I'll give you a bun, and then you'll tell me where your parents are and why you stole from me."

Bee looked at the people standing in a circle around her. She was trapped. There was nowhere to go but back into the bakery. At least there she might have something to eat. And she could escape the knowing gazes of all those who'd seen her steal – who thought she was nothing

more than a thief. The boy who'd tripped her gave her a small nod as she turned to follow the baker.

Back inside the fragrant shop, the baker, Master Bouts, introduced himself. He shooed out the few people left waiting to buy their bread and buns. There was much grumbling.

"I'll be open again in five minutes," he promised them, clicking the lock behind the last, an elderly woman who refused to let go of the loaf she clutched to her chest like a baby. "You can pay me later, Mistress de Vos," Master Bouts told her. Then he turned to Bee.

"So," he said thoughtfully. Bee was glad to see that he was no longer frowning. "So, who are you, girl? Where do you come from? No, wait." Master Bouts interrupted himself, reaching behind the counter and pulling out another sweet roll. It was very nearly as beautiful as the one that had come to such a tragic end. He held it out to Bee, and she snatched it from him, appalled at her own behaviour but unable to stop. In an instant she'd wolfed down half of it. She was so ravenous that she hardly had time to taste it.

"Slowly!" the baker cautioned. "You'll make yourself sick, that you will."

Bee forced herself to chew the next bite. Oh, but it

was good! The tender raisins, the sweet icing, the soft dough ... just delicious.

"S'good," she mumbled, her mouth full.

"I should think so!" the baker huffed. "It's my speciality. The Bouts Bun, I call it. Can't keep them in stock." He went into the back room and returned with a glass of water. "Wash it down, girl," he instructed. "I'd hate to have you choke to death still owing me for a bun."

Bee chewed and swallowed, chewed and swallowed, biding her time. "I don't have any money," she admitted finally, licking the last crumbs off her fingers.

"You don't say." The baker pursed his lips. "What's your name, girl?"

"Bee."

"That's not a name, that's a bug."

Bee scowled, ready to be offended, but the baker raised an eyebrow, as if daring her to get angry. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. "Beatrix," she said reluctantly.

"Well," Master Bouts mused, "Bee suits you better. I can tell you have a sting. And where are you from? I haven't seen you in town before."

Bee looked down at the floor. "From the coast. A small place. You wouldn't know it."

"And where are your parents?"

"I've no parents."

There was a silence. Then the baker said, more gently, "Can you sweep, Bee?"

"Sweep?" Bee looked up. "You mean, with a broom? Of course I can. Anyone can sweep."

"Can you wash dishes?"

Bee nodded.

"Can you bake?"

"I can bake," she said. It wasn't a lie. Bee never lied. But she didn't mention that her baked goods never seemed to go down very well. People grew unhappy eating them, or even angry, though usually pastries were a cheering food. Bee didn't think there was anything wrong with her breads and tarts, but others, it seemed, did not agree.

"Well, there you are," the baker said. "I'm short shifted and need a hand, and you need to pay me back. Work for me for a day or two, and you can earn a few more Bouts Buns."

"Can I have another one before I start?" Bee asked. She couldn't help herself.

Master Bouts shook his head in amazement. "You do have a nerve, girl – that you do!" But though his tone was stern, Bee saw a smile threaten to push up

his round cheeks. And despite her still aching stomach, despite her sore feet and bloody knee and scraped palms, despite her shame and humiliation, she gave the baker a tiny smile back.