

CHAPTER 1



Come up here, O dusty feet!
Here is fairy bread to eat.
Here in my retiring room,
Children, you may dine,
On the golden smell of broom
And the shade of pine;
And when you have eaten well,
Fairy stories hear and tell.

Fairy Bread

Robert Louis Stevenson

The newborn shivered in her cradle, eyes closed, trying to make sense of a new reality where she no longer bathed snug in the warm fluid of her mother's womb. Endless space surrounded her. Her arms and legs moved freely now, both intriguing and terrifying her. She lay near enough to the shimmering glow of the firelight to hear its crackles, hisses, and pops, but too far to benefit from its heat.

There were strange smells, too: stale cigar smoke, the sour

stench of the bodies of her father, mother and two boarders who lived packed together in this single room, and the more pleasant scent of the porridge her mother made for breakfast. The infant had no names for these things and understood nothing of her father's long workdays in the coal mine or her birth into poverty. She understood only this: she had entered a strange, new world.

Dim sunlight came through the one window, blocked in part by thick clouds. The woman, her mother, leaned over the cradle and placed a calloused hand on the child's forehead.

"Ye're cold," she said. She removed her shawl and laid it over the bairn, tucking it around her with tender care. "I'm off tae put up some wash. Sleep, lass, an' I'll return soon."

The newborn sighed with satisfaction. Warmer now, she settled in for a nap in the stillness of the now-empty room, safe in the knowledge that the woman would care for all her needs.



"MOVE QUICKLY," said a high-pitched, tinny voice. "Her ma's outside."

The child opened her sleepy eyes to a wondrous sight. Until now, everything in her world overwhelmed her with its size. Yet here were several beings who shared her smallness. She found comfort in this. And unlike the larger beings who cared for her, this group seemed inquisitive, interested—even loving. Of course, she did not know these words yet, but she sensed them, as all children do.

Her visitors had golden wings that cast pinpricks of light across the gloomy room, adding a brightness that the clouds had stolen. Their clothes shimmered in vivid colors, and they all wore snug-fitting red caps.

A couple of them wove silver threads, their fingers moving deftly to create a supportive basket, and, gathering close

together like a swarm of bees, they lifted the child from her cradle, suspending her in midair.

"Don't let her fall," one of them said.

Out of nowhere appeared another child exactly her size, shape, and dressed exactly like her, which they placed in the cradle, smoothing a shawl around it as her mother had done for her.

"Ready?" one of them asked, her voice as melodic as the birds that tweeted outside the window.

"Aye," said another.

Then they were outside, and the chilly outdoor air stung the child's cheeks. This is how wee Jane Thorburn found herself soaring through the air on a spring morning, tickled by fairy wings.

While her mother, Elizabeth, hang the washing out to dry, instinct warned her to hurry back to the flat, where she leaned over the cradle to take a look at her daughter. The child turned away as if hiding a secret. Taking her in her arms, Elizabeth inspected her closely. The same hair, lighter than most newborns, with a reddish tinge to it; the same solemn, blue-gray eyes that overwhelmed her wee face; the same tiny body that had slipped out of Elizabeth's womb with no effort...but this wee bairn stared at her with expressionless eyes. Even worse, her scent lost its natural sweetness, replaced by a subtle but unmistakable rot. This child was not her daughter. She was a changeling.

Elizabeth pressed her fist to her mouth in shock. Right behind that feeling, though, was another, one that surprised her: relief.

Ever since her daughter's birth a few weeks before, she had been seized by a deep melancholy. What would she do with a lass? Women were banned from the better-paying jobs in the mines and were limited to working as "pit brow lasses," picking

stones from the coal as it came to the surface. A daughter was more trouble than she was worth.

But while Elizabeth's maternal instinct resembled the flicker of a firefly more than a healthy fire, the flame did exist. That fleeting moment of relief dissolved quickly into real panic. How would she explain this to Robert? To her friends?

She ran into the hallway to the next flat, feeling the stone cold on her feet despite wearing heavy socks, and she banged on the door, shouting until her friend Ellen answered.

"What's wrong?" Ellen asked, stifling a yawn and blinking her tired eyes to keep them open. Her dark brown hair, with a premature smattering of gray strands, hung in uncombed strings. Her two young children wailed in the background. "Sorry, we had a bit of a rough night here, an' I feel like I've lost the whole day."

"Fetch Beitris," Elizabeth said. "The fairies have taken Jane."

This news jolted Ellen wide awake. "It canna be. She was baptized." She clutched the cross around her neck. "I... Let me look at her." She followed Elizabeth to her flat, her children following at her heels, their wails now reduced to whimpers as the sense of strange adventure made them forget about their previous complaints.

Leaning over the cradle, Ellen observed nothing that suggested anything amiss, though her senses tingled in warning. She reached to touch Jane, but hesitated. Then, taking a deep breath, she forced herself to tickle the child's wee face. Her fingers met skin as cold as death. The eyes opened: empty, unseeing, doll eyes. Ellen yanked her hand back and brushed it on her skirt.

"How can this be?"

"Go, please," Elizabeth said sharply. "We need tae find her and bring her back before it's too late."

"I'll hurry." Ellen ran back to her flat, where she threw jackets on her children and clutched their hands in hers. In their

confusion they began to cry loudly again. “Shh, shh,” Ellen said to them. “We’ll be right back.” Running down the hall to the outside steps, she was almost a comical sight as she dragged her weans along, but Elizabeth did not laugh.

Dazed, Elizabeth picked up the stranger in hopes she, or it, was really her Jane, who simply needed warmth. She held it close to her, rubbing it to move its circulation, her heart lurching at every sound that might signal Ellen’s return. Everything about the child repulsed her. It wasn’t hers, it couldn’t be; it had to be a changeling. Still, her mind had played tricks on her ever since the birth. Every few seconds she looked at the babe again in disbelief, but the child just stared at her with those cold eyes. A clock ticked in the background, reminding her of the passing of time. With each minute that passed, she grew more frantic.

Robert would never forgive her for allowing this to happen. He had loved his daughter from the moment he held her in his arms. Her own father loved her like that. Yet she had left him, run away to live with Robert. Her parents warned her about life as a miner’s wife, but she was young and foolish then.

Had she only listened.

Though time slowed and dragged, Beitris arrived in less than ten minutes, with Ellen and her children following breathlessly behind.

Beitris had delivered all the babies in the area since the beginning of time, and she moved with the grace and speed of youth despite her wrinkled face and stooped back. Rolling up her sleeves to reveal arms muscled from hard work, she took the bairn from Elizabeth and moved her fingers with the deft motions of experience across its still form.

“Will she be all right?” Elizabeth asked.

“Aye, but we hinna a moment tae lose. Ellen, gather supper. We canna let Robert think there’s anything wrong. But leave a

spare pot for me an' boil some water. I'll need Elizabeth tae help me."

Ellen nodded and set about doing her assigned task. First she filled the pot for Beitris, then gathered bread and cheese and made a thin soup with the last of the week's vegetables, which she put onto the fire to heat.

Handing the changeling to Elizabeth, Beitris took a bag from her skirt and shook its contents, a variety of herbs, into the boiling water. They popped and sizzled, their sweet scent filling the room. She waved her hands over them, chanting ancient words passed down through the generations of her family as she did so.

Next, she stuck a poker into the fire and held it there until it glowed with orange-red heat. That's when the reality of what they were doing hit Elizabeth.

"Whit are you doin'?" She asked Beitris, holding the stranger ever more tightly, doubting herself now. There were no such things as fairies or changelings, only superstitious tales.

Beitris continued to heat the poker. In the calm voice of one who spent many, many years calming nervous young mothers, she said, "This is nae yer bairn. This is a changeling. What ye'll see will look strange, cruel even, but you must trust me. Set it in the cradle noo."

Still doubtful, Elizabeth placed the changeling in Jane's cradle with the same care she would have given her own child. Stepping away from her to give the old howdiewife room was one of the hardest things she'd ever done.

Beitris grabbed the now-hot poker in both hands, wielding it like a sword between her weathered arms as she moved toward the cradle.

"Dinna hurt her!" Elizabeth cried.

Ellen grabbed hold of Elizabeth. "This isnae Jane, remember. Beitris will bring the real Jane back."

As she held on to Elizabeth, Ellen squeezed her eyes shut in

anticipation of disaster. This was all her fault. She had caused this to happen, back on the day of the baptism. Until now she had managed to shut away the memories, but now they rushed forward to taunt her.

That day dawned bright with sun and promise. Ellen arrived early to help. They dressed wee Jane in a white lace gown that had once been Elizabeth's. Jane, tiny as a doll, swam in the dress, her head nearly disappearing amidst the layers of fabric. Ellen wished for more time to alter it, as Elizabeth was too fatigued and sad to do it herself. This would have to do, though. The town would likely gossip about the child's ill-fitting gown, but that mattered less than giving her God's protection as soon as possible.

Tradition called for someone to offer a gift of bread and cheese to the first person she met on the path to the church. Ellen volunteered, honored to play a role in this special ritual. Carrying Jane in one arm, light as a cloud, and the basket with the food offerings in the other, Ellen headed toward the kirk, with Elizabeth and Robert to follow a few minutes later.

Ellen didn't have to wait long before an old man, listing to the right and hunched over a too-short walking stick, ambled toward her. His clothes were rumpled and torn, and they hung on his gaunt frame. *Poor man*, she thought. Apoplexy had robbed him of his dignity. As she neared him, his face twisted in a grimace. Perhaps the news of a new, precious babe would help to cheer him.

Holding the basket out toward him she said, "Good sir, we offer ye a gift from this new bairn."

He stopped without speaking, looked at her, then at the baby, his face twisting even further into a sneer. "Pah!" He spat on the ground and walked away, leaving her standing with the basket still outstretched. Jane started to whimper and squirm.

"Sir?" Ellen pleaded to his back. "Please, sir, dinna curse the bairn this way."

Yet he kept moving, ignoring her completely.

"What shall we do?" she asked Jane, her knees shaking from the encounter. Jane responded only with sleepy sucking sounds. "Well, I see ye dinna want tae help me. I'll have tae fix this myself."

Normally the streets bustled with activity as townspeople prepared for morning service, but today they were oddly empty. Ellen continued to murmur loving words to Jane as they walked, praying for someone else to cross their path. She walked to within a block of the kirk when a young couple appeared. The woman, not more than eighteen, was ripe with her own child.

Ellen nearly dropped to her knees in gratitude and relief. Holding out the food offering with trembling hands, she said, "Good folks, this is a gift from a new bairn that we offer ye." She hoped she didn't look too desperate.

"Aye, of course," the young woman said, patting her own belly. "May I see the lass?"

Ellen held Jane up and the woman drew in a sharp breath, her eyes alight with the sight of the young beauty. Her mouth twisted and turned, not in bitterness, but rather in protection. To express a child's beauty aloud would invite evil influences.

"Thank ye," the woman said. "We would be honored."

Her husband, who stood next to his wife, silent until now, accepted the basket of food, then tipped his hat and bowed to Jane. "Welcome tae the world, lass," he said. Then the young couple continued on their way.

The baptism occurred as planned, and Ellen breathed easier, telling herself that no harm would come from tucking away the unfortunate details of the first encounter. Surely the goodwill of the young couple would counter the old man's bitterness and bring good fortune to the child. They would put the incident behind them, and no one needed to know.

Yet the scene unfolding in front of Ellen in the tiny flat, with

a new mother numb with fright and a howdiewife wielding a hot poker, was no mere bad dream. She moved her mouth in prayer, begging for forgiveness and hoping Beitris could bring Jane back home. Then she remembered her children were present, stunned silent but wide-eyed and open-mouthed. "Go back tae the flat," she said. "We will protect wee Jane."

They didn't have to be told twice. In an instant they were gone.

Beitris said, "I will burn the sign of the cross on the bairn's brow." She edged closer to the end of the cradle and began to lower the end of the poker toward the bairn's new, perfect forehead.

"No!" Elizabeth tried to wrestle away from Ellen, but Ellen held her tightly. "I was wrong. I'm sairie. There's naethin' wrong wi' the bairn. She's sleeping, that's all. Please stop!"

"Trust me, Elizabeth. Hold on tae yer faith." Beitris stood before the changeling in the cradle and edged the poker slowly, slowly toward her smooth, pale forehead. Ellen kept her face turned away while Elizabeth clutched her heart with one hand. The changeling's eyes flew open, and it glared at Beitris, daring her to do it.

The poker reached the changeling's brow, making a soft hissing sound. All at once, the bundle sprang up, letting out a wild, unearthly cry. Beitris fell backward and the poker clattered on the floor, the flat filling with smoke and the smell of brimstone as the changeling disappeared.

Beitris, stunned, sat on the floor with her hands over her face. All three women were coughing, and Ellen opened the door to let out the smoke.

"Are ye awricht?" Elizabeth whispered to Beitris. She extended a hand to the old woman, who took it and staggered to her feet. Her face grew pale, and every wrinkle deepened.

"Aye," Beitris said. "I'll be fine." To prove the point, she stood tall and placed her hands on her hips.

“Ye’re sure?”

Beitris nodded toward the cradle. “Look at the bairn. She’s back, and that’s what matters.”

Sure enough, Jane lay sleeping peacefully, her chest rising and falling with each tiny breath. Elizabeth reached for her daughter but pulled her hand back. The deathlike, icy sensation of the changeling and its final cry still haunted her.

Beitris, understanding Elizabeth’s hesitation, said, “Go on, then. Touch her. Make sure she’s real.”

Biting her lip, Elizabeth reached out again, this time cradling Jane’s head in her hand, feeling the soft down of her hair. The baby sighed, and her mouth moved in mysterious baby dreams. Her cheeks were rosy, her skin warm and soft. This looked and felt like her daughter. The brow remained smooth and white, with no sign of burns from the poker. Elizabeth kissed the child’s forehead and drank in her scent, now sweet and new.

And yet. Was this really her child? She would never be sure.

A darkness descended, surrounding her like smoke. She wished she had let the fairies take the child. Robert’s wrath now seemed easier to endure than years ahead with this strange being.

Beitris retreated to a corner and chanted quietly, eyes closed. “Protect this bairn from the Fey,” she said. “Surround her for the rest of her life with yer light and care.” Then she said more in the ancient language.

“What are ye sayin’?” Ellen asked.

“Words tae bind our prayers. I spoke in the language of the Fair Folk tae add further protection, an’ I will watch over wee Jane as she grows sae they canna take her again.”

CHAPTER 2

Baloo loo, lammy, now baloo, my dear;
Now, baloo loo, lammy, ain minnie is here;
What ails my sweet bairnie? What ails it this nicht?
What ails my wee lammy? Is bairnie no richt?

The Laird O' Cockpen

Caroline Oliphant (Lady Nairne)

“*W*hat is it? Where is she?” Queen Donella paced the floor, wringing her hands.

The queen’s maids of honor had entered the queen’s chambers empty handed, Flora trembling, Coira sulking. One moment the child was theirs, and they had even landed right outside the palace, then *poof!* Jane disappeared from their grasp.

Like all the Fair Folk, the queen was a small woman, but her erect posture and penetrating eyes the color of night gave her an imposing air. She trembled with smoldering, silent anger. Her mood even transformed the room: the walls turned from dazzling white to a deep red. Faces in the precious tapestries,

which told tales of the timeless history of the Fair Folk that long predated human existence, held Coira and Flora with contempt.

“Well? I’m waiting.”

“The howdiewife...” Flora began, then paused and looked at Coira for help.

“Coira? What happened?”

“Somebody—” Coira cast a pointed glance at Flora “—didn’t cast a protective shield around the bairn, and the humans took her back.” She spat out the words.

“I did protect her,” Flora insisted, “but the lass is baptized, which limits what we can do, and the howdiewife is powerful. I’m certain she will be watching the bairn closely from now on.”

“I told you we needed to take her before the baptism,” Coira said. “But no, everyone told me we had to wait an extra week for the new moon, that our magic would overpower the kirk’s blessings. I said it would be too late, but no one listens to me.”

Flora lightly stepped on one of Coira’s feet to remind her sister to back off. By “everyone” Coira meant the queen, and so had overstepped her authority—not an unusual occurrence.

“Coira,” the queen said, “may I remind you that we have traditions that must be followed. We determined that harnessing the power of the new moon would be the most effective way of capturing Jane. We sent the old man to create the curse that would keep her vulnerable, even after baptism. We did not, however, factor in the strength of Beitris.” She said nothing more to rebuke Coira. Despite her anger, Queen Donella had always been patient with her rebellious Maid of Honor, as Coira’s passion came from caring too much.

“I can handle that old howdiewife,” Coira said. “It would give me great pleasure to do so.”

Queen Donella shook her head. “We will consult the Wise Women,” she said. “They will review the prophecy to determine how to proceed. And Coira?”

“My queen?”

"Do not take matters into your own hands. Impulsive actions are not royal actions."

"Aye." Though she said the word the queen expected to hear, Coira bit her lip, and someone looking carefully might have noticed the crossed fingers behind her back.

When they left the room, Flora took Coira's hand in hers. "We couldn't have done more. The lass is lost to us."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Coira said.

"You never wanted to do this task anyway. What was it you said? Oh, yes. 'The queen's obsession with bringing a human to save us is insane.' As usual, I never reported this to her, though I should have."

Shrugging, Coira said, "Tell her what you will. The queen has never expected us to agree with her, but she did give us a job to do. To think we lost the bairn to that crazy old woman..." Her voice trailed off as she replayed the events in her mind. "You know how I hate to fail. I'll bring her back myself."

"Promise me you'll do what the queen says. Please let the Wise Women sort this."

Coira merely grunted. Flora said a silent prayer that Coira would behave herself.



BACK AT THE THORBURN FLAT, Robert strode in through the open door, his face darkened with a heavy layer of coal dust.

"Whit's goin' on?" he asked. "Where did all this smoke come fae?"

"Nothing, I...I burned the soup," Elizabeth said. "Dinna worry, I started again." She handed him a whisky, which he downed in a gulp.

"Ye wasted food? Just when we're gettin' out from under things?"

"It's my fault," Ellen said. She and Beitris were headed

towards the door, but Ellen turned back around. "And the next batch is almost ready. I'm sure ye're hungry, so come sit."

Elizabeth, still trying to compose herself, gathered bowls for their soup and plates for the bread and cheese.

Robert trained his eyes, dark with fury, on his wife.

"Go ahead and go," she said firmly to the other women. Turning to Robert she said, "I'm sairie. It willnae happen again. Sit and eat. Supper is ready."

Once Ellen and Beitris left, Robert took his seat at the table and accepted the food Elizabeth placed before him, saying nothing. She didn't make herself a plate; the events of the day had worn her thin, and she lost her appetite. He didn't acknowledge the hearty soup or the bread she'd made earlier in the day, so chewy inside with its rich, brown crust. He held out his glass for Elizabeth to pour him another whisky, silent as he worked up a hefty rage.

After the drink caused a florid glow to cross his face, he spoke.

"I work hard all week, an' I canna have ye wastin' food like this. We'll have naethin' by Friday if we're nae careful, an' I canna go tae work on an empty stomach."

"Aye, my husband."

She wanted to tell him the truth, but a story of changelings and magic would anger him much more than a burned dinner. Robert refused to allow any mention of fairies in his presence. She never quite knew why, but then, until today she never understood why people feared the fairies. Now she did. But more than that she feared her husband, whose anger often rose from nowhere.

He came toward her and lifted a hand. She flinched, covering her face with her apron, waiting for the blow.

Jane let out a cry. The sound snapped Robert out of his rage, and he went to her, gathering her in his arms as if he knew about the earlier danger. As he cooed sweetly to her in a soft

voice, his anger dissipated in an instant. Elizabeth sat quietly, holding the cheek that escaped unscathed.



ONE MIGHT THINK the child's ability to calm her father would endear her to Elizabeth, but this was not the case. As the days and weeks passed, she forced herself to hold Jane, to touch her soft hair, already lightening in color to a sweet reddish-blond, to drink in the child's beauty—but it did not move her. Guilt gnawed. What kind of mother didn't love her child? Beitris said some women struggled after birth, but all Elizabeth saw in Jane's eyes was a stranger.

Each night she lay awake, unable to sleep more than a few hours. Jane never screamed for her food; her cries were more like whimpering apologies that were easy to ignore, and so Elizabeth would rise only when Robert nudged her. The flat, once spotless and cared for, fell into disarray. Robert came home to uncooked dinners and dried porridge on uncleaned breakfast dishes, his wife seldom dressed for the day.

They argued. She cried and promised to do better, but months passed with no change. The boarders left for more peaceful lodgings, adding to money woes. Elizabeth rebuffed Ellen's offers to help, and soon she no longer welcomed Beitris, who expressed concern for the child's well-being. Jane wasn't growing as well as she should.

As Elizabeth's mind grew increasingly clouded, the seed of a thought grew each day to the size of an ancient oak within her, weighty and thick. It greeted her upon rising each day, and whispered to her as she fell asleep. She would give this child, this being, back to the fairies. That was the only solution that made sense.

When Jane was about six months old, Elizabeth woke knowing she could not wait another minute. She would take her

life back this day. With new purpose, she rose quickly and gave Jane more care than usual, feeding her, cleaning her, and dressing her in plenty of warm clothes. Then she took her daughter into the morning, nearly running to the edge of town, ignoring the curious glances of other mothers who were out and about. She didn't stop until she got to the nearest woods, where she called out for the fairies to come. Only silence answered.

Never having attempted to contact fairies before, she assumed it would be easy. They wanted Jane. There had to be a way to reach them. She tried calling out again. Still, only a soft wind responded.

By now, her heart started pounding. She couldn't imagine taking Jane back home. The feeding, the bathing, the changing, day after day after day, with no rest, no escape, no free time. Not for one more minute.

Perhaps they will come for her when I leave.

She lowered Jane to rest on a pile of leaves and adjusted a blanket around her. She felt a pang in her heart at seeing her daughter lying helpless on the ground. Images of wild animals regarding Jane as a tasty morsel caused her to hesitate. But then the cloud fell again over the remainder of her sanity. Turning her back on her daughter, she forced herself to walk away.

"Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth ignored the voice, thinking it was some sort of fairy trick. She heard a rustle nearby but did not look back.

"Elizabeth!" The voice grew sharper now, and this time Elizabeth stopped. She hadn't noticed Ellen running up behind her, but now her friend bent over to catch her breath.

"Ellen? What are ye doin' here? Where are the bairns?"

Ellen picked Jane up and smothered her with kisses. The bairn appeared unharmed. "I followed ye," she said. "Left the weans at home, which I'm sick about, but I'm glad I did, from

what I can tell." She walked toward Elizabeth, who slowly backed away. "Dinna run from me. I'll tell no one what I saw."

"I canna take care o' her," Elizabeth said. Her lower lip trembled. "She's...different."

"Dinna worry," Ellen said in a singsong, lullaby voice. "It gets tae be too much sometimes. Let me take her for a while. When ye're ready, we'll bring her home."

"No, no, I canna," Elizabeth said. "She belongs to them. They want her, an' she's too much for me. Please."

Ellen tucked Jane into the crook of one arm and put the other around Elizabeth. "Ye're just havin' a hard time."

The comforting words made their way somehow past Elizabeth's panic, and she began to calm down. Maybe there was another way. "But ye have two bairns already, an' I canna ask you to take mine, too." She nestled her head on Ellen's shoulder as the import of what she had tried to do revealed itself to her. "I left her," she said. "I'll be in hell for that for sure."

"Mebbe not," Ellen said. "God told me tae follow ye. Let's figure out what tae do together." She continued to hold Elizabeth. Jane slept, unaware of the fate that had nearly befallen her. "How about this? Do ye have a family member who can take her for a while, until you feel better?"

"I've felt sae alone," Elizabeth said, tears dropping from her eyes as she shared the weight of her burden. "Mebbe my brother Ewan would take her. They have waited a long time for a bairn, and they love Jane." But there was another problem. "What about Robert? What will we tell him?"

"I have an idea." Ellen cooed and smiled at Jane as the two women concocted a plan. Robert was the only potential problem, and Ellen assured Elizabeth that he would understand what needed to be done. "He's seen yer troubles," Ellen said. "I dinna think it will be sae hard, nae if he loves Jane like I think he does."

They returned to the flat. "I can keep Jane for a few days," Ellen repeated. "The lass is nae trouble at all."

"Naw, ye've done sae much already. I can keep her a bit longer, knowin' I have a place for her."

Ellen rubbed Elizabeth's back while Jane made soft cooing noises. "I'll look in on ye from time tae time," she said. "We'll get through this, I promise."



ELIZABETH INVITED her elder brother Ewan and his wife Kirstin to Sunday dinner. Ewan lived in nearby Menstrie, where he worked at a mill. The couple had inherited a modest sum of money from Kirstin's parents, which they used to buy themselves a small home. To Elizabeth it might as well have been a palace with its two bedrooms.

One thing they lacked, however, was a child. Kirstin delighted in Elizabeth's pregnancy as if it were her own, but after three years of marriage, there was no sign of such a blessing for them.

Kirstin wasted no time scooping Jane up into her arms. "Look at ye!" she exclaimed. "Sae big already."

"Big? She's nae much bigger than my two hands," Ewan said with a laugh, and he tickled Jane under the chin. She watched him with interest, her eyes thoughtful and grave. "But she looks like a wee wise person, sae serious." Ewan exchanged a longing glance with his wife, which Elizabeth noticed. His heartbreak lived just below the surface of his skin.

Robert said little and sat with arms crossed and eyes narrowed. He and Elizabeth seldom had company, even family, and he wasn't happy about others holding his daughter.

Elizabeth fed them all a simple meal of potatoes and cabbage, apologizing for the meager fare. Kirstin brought short-bread for dessert. As they sat at the table, Ewan held Jane in his

arms, and she brought a tiny fist to his beard in fascination. Everyone at the table wore a smile, even Elizabeth, though she dreaded Robert's response to her plan. She hoped the presence of others would dull his reaction.

"She likes ye," Elizabeth said.

"Aye," Ewan said. Then to Jane he added, "We love ye too, lass."

"Will ye have another soon?" Kirstin asked, her voice forlorn.

"I hope sae," Robert said.

"I hope nae," Elizabeth said.

Robert and Elizabeth turned away from each other after the awkward exchange. Kirstin raised her eyebrows and grabbed another piece of shortbread to have something to do.

Elizabeth tightened her fists at her side and said, "A bairn is a lot o' work, and a lass canna help sae much wi' the money when she's older. Unless, of course, she can learn a trade." The perfect moment had arrived. "I was thinkin', Ewan, mebbe the lass could learn weavin'. Pays better than domestic service, an' from the looks o' her she'll be too tiny tae think about the mines."

"We have lots o' time tae think about that," Robert protested.

Ewan, still unable to take his eyes from his niece, said, "We can take her when she's older," he said. "She can live wi' us, but visit often, an' I can put her in the mill tae learn. I'd be happy tae teach her."

Elizabeth couldn't wait that long. Jane wouldn't be able to work until she turned ten, eight if some rules were bent. She struggled to think of keeping Jane another year, a month, a week. "If she went noo, it would be better for her. Give her time tae adjust tae a new family. When she's older, it would be harder for her tae leave us. Right, Robert?"

Robert didn't answer her, but stared down at his plate, his teeth clenched and jaw pulsing. "Take my daughter?"

"It would be what's best for her." Elizabeth treaded on

uneven ground, but she preferred navigating his volatile nature to keeping Jane around.

Kirstin's eyes were wide with hope, and Ewan took her hand and squeezed it. The two of them seemed to hold a collective breath as they waited for Robert to speak.

Glaring at Elizabeth, he said, "What are ye up to? Ye just had this bairn, an' noo you want tae get rid o' her."

Elizabeth squirmed in her chair. "That's nae true." She wished he wouldn't talk to her in such an angry tone with her brother present, though his response didn't surprise her.

Robert had plenty more to say. "Ye dinna hold her, ye barely feed her, an' until today ye keep yer sairie bahoochie in bed all day. This past week I came home tae nae dinner an' nae fire. I'm workin' all day, an' I get tired an' hungry."

A look came over his face then, a look of realization as his own words sunk in. He covered his face with his hands and stifled a cry. "Oh, God," he said. "Oh, dear God."

Elizabeth tried to put an arm around him, but he pushed her away.

"Should we give ye some time?" Ewan asked. "Mebbe this needs more thought."

"Naw," Robert said. When he pulled his hands away his eyes were rimmed with red. "She's right," he said, his voice cracking, "Mebbe this is for the best. I'd do anythin' for that bairn, an' her ma's likely tae kill her if we dinna find someone tae care for her." Almost to himself, he muttered, "Ye'd be better off in the asylum." His last words echoed as the room fell silent.

Elizabeth sat up straight. She feared getting committed the most, but in hearing the words, she wondered if she didn't deserve that kind of punishment.

Ewan recovered first. "Sister, are ye havin' a hard time?" he asked.

Elizabeth nodded. Hearing the truth out loud, though horrible, was freeing, too. "Please dinna let him put me away," she

said in a childlike voice. "I ken it's wrong, but I canna seem tae stop."

"How about this?" Kirstin asked. She paused, the words to follow too difficult to say. "We keep Jane for as long as ye need. It'll give us great joy an' mebbe some good luck. When ye're feelin' better, we'll bring her back. Meantime, Robert, come visit her anytime. Ye'd still be her da."

All eyes were on Robert, who looked as dazed as if someone punched him. He stood and moved toward the door, but then stopped. Outnumbered, and still facing away from the others, he finally said, "Aye," weakly. He turned to take Jane from Kirstin, and the bairn nuzzled against him. "Ye're wise, lass, wiser than me," he whispered to her.

Ewan, Kirstin, and Elizabeth started talking then, making plans, promising visits, imagining the future. Robert and Jane sat quietly, holding on to each other as if they were drowning, alone together in the sea.

