

The Price

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Molly couldn't recall just when the first time she'd seen him had been. Never before this summer certainly.

She did know that it wasn't until the fourth market of the season that she'd begun to watch for him. It was then the market steadied to a trickling flow of people rather than the flood that came initially. Sitting at her booth, she had time to observe things that on busier days escaped her notice.

He would wait until she was occupied with a customer before coming to her small booth and touching the weaving on the tables. If she stopped to talk to him, he turned away and melted into the crowd as if he were uninterested.

Her first thought was that he was a thief, but nothing was ever missing. The next explanation that occurred to her was that he was too abashed by her looks to approach. She knew that many men, even ones she'd known in childhood, were intimidated by her looks.

Being beautiful was better than being ugly, she supposed, but it caused quite as many problems as it solved. For instance, it cost her several weeks before the idea that he might be worried that she would find *him* frightening crossed her mind.

It wasn't that he was ugly, but he didn't look like anyone she'd ever seen either. Small and slight — he moved oddly, as if his joints didn't work quite the way hers did. He reminded her of the stories about the fauns with human torsos on goat's feet that ran through the hills. She'd even stolen a quick glance at his feet once, when he thought she was haggling with a customer — but his soft leather boots flexed just as hers did.

If she'd been certain that he was frightened of her, she would have let him choose his own time to approach her. But she had watched him closely last market day, and he didn't seem the sort to be easily intimidated. So she brought her small loom with her, the one she used for linen napkins, though usually she preferred to work with wool since wool caught her dyes better. The loom made her appear to be busy when there were no customers about — and so she hoped to lure him to the booth.

He wandered over casually, and she pretended not to notice him. She waited to speak until he became engrossed in a particularly bright orange-patterned blanket before she spoke.

"It's my own dye," she said without looking up. "There's a plant in the swamp that a marshler collects for me each spring. I've never seen a color that can match it — rumpelstiltskin, they call it."

He laughed, before he caught himself; it sounded rusty and surprised, as if he didn't do it often. She wasn't certain what the joke was, but she liked the sound of his laughter, so she smiled into her weaving.

"I know it," he said finally, when she thought that he'd decided to leave. "A wretched-looking plant to be responsible for such beauty."

She looked at him then, seeing his face clearly for the first time. His features were normal enough, though his nose was a bit long for the almost delicate mouth and eyes. His skin was mottled and roughened, as though someone had carved him from old oak and forgotten to sand the wood smooth. The effect was odd and unsettling.

He stood still under her regard, waiting for her judgment. She smiled, turning her attention back to her

weaving. "Beauty is as beauty does, sir. A blanket will keep you warm whether it is orange or dust-colored."

"But you made it beautiful."

She nodded. "That I did, for I must sell it, and most people look for pretty things. My face calls more people to my booth than might otherwise come here, and I am glad of it. But the blanket I sleep with is plain brown, because I find that it suits me so. Your face, sir, would not cause me to cross the street to look at you, but the way you touch my weavings led me to tease you into this conversation."

He laughed again. "Plain-spoken miss, eh?"

She nodded, then inquired mildly, "You are a weaver as well, sir?"

"And you are a witch?" His voice imitated hers.

It was her turn to laugh as she showed him the calluses on her fingers. "Your hands have the same marks as mine."

He looked at her hands, then at his own. "Yes," he said. "I am a weaver."

They talked for some time, until he relaxed with her. He knew far more than she about weaving in general, but he knew hardly anything about dyeing. When she asked him about it, he shrugged and said that his teacher hadn't used many colors. Then he made some excuse and left.

She wondered what it was that had bothered him so as she packed the merchandise that hadn't sold in the back of the pony cart with the tables she used to display her goods.

"Patches," she said to the patient little pony as he started back to the mill, "he never even told me his name."

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On the next market day, a week later, she brought some of her dyes with her in a basket, making certain that she included some of the orange he had admired so much. She left it out in the open, and it wasn't long before he approached.

She kept her gaze turned to the loom on her lap as she spoke. "I brought some dyes for you to try. If you like any of them, I'll tell you how to make them."

"A gift?" he said. He knelt in front of the little basket and touched a covered pot gently. "Thank you."

There was something in his voice that caused her to look at his face. When she saw his expression, she turned her attention back to her weaving so that he would not know she had been watching him: there were some things not meant for public viewing. When she looked up again, he was gone.

She didn't see him at all the next time she set up her booth, but when she started to place her weavings in the back of the cart, there was already something in it. She pushed her things aside and unfolded the piece he'd left for her.

Her fingers told her it was wool, but her eyes would have called it linen, for the yarn was so finely spun. The pattern was done in natural colors of wool, ivory, white, and rich brown. It was obviously meant for a tablecloth, but it was finer than any she'd ever seen. Her breath caught in her chest at the skill necessary to weave such a cloth.

Slowly she refolded it and nestled it among her own things. Stepping to the seat, she sent Patches toward home; her fingers could still feel the wool.

The cloth was worth a small fortune, more than her weavings would bring her in a year — obviously a courting gift. To accept such a thing from a stranger was unthinkable . . . but he didn't seem like a stranger.

She thought about his odd appearance, but could find no revulsion in her heart — perhaps only someone who was very ugly or very beautiful could understand how little beauty mattered. The man who had created the table cover had beauty in his soul. She thought of the clever fingers caressing her weaving when he thought she wasn't looking, of the man who had been so afraid to frighten her, of the man who had bared his ugliness so that she would not be deceived into thinking he was something other than what he was. She thought of the man who gave her a courting gift and the gift of time to go with it. Molly smiled.

The path she took approached the old mill from behind, where the pony's field was. With an ease that was half skill and half habit for both of them, Molly backed the pony until the cart was sheltered by an overhang. She unharnessed him and turned him loose to graze in his paddock. She covered the wagon with a canvas that fastened down tightly enough to protect her goods from rain or mice until the next market day. She left his gift there until she knew what to do about it — but she was still smiling as she walked through the narrow way between the mill and the cottage where she lived with her father.

The millpond's rushing water was so loud that she had no warning of the crowd that was assembled in front of the mill. Half a dozen young nobles gathered laughing and joking with each other while her father stood still among them with an expression on his face she hadn't seen since the day her mother died.

Fear knotted her stomach, and she took a step back, intending to go for help. Two things brought her to an abrupt stop. The first was that she finally recognized the colors that one of the young men was wearing — royal purple. There was no help to be had against the king. The second was that one of the young men had seen her and was even now tugging on the king's shirt.

She'd never seen him herself, though he had a hunting cottage nearby, for he seldom bothered to approach the village, generally bringing his own amusements with him. She'd heard that he was beautiful, and he was. His clothing showed both the cost of his tailor and the obsession with hunting that kept him fit. His hair was the shade of deepest honey and his eyes were limpid pools of chocolate. Despite the warm color, his eyes were the coldest that she had ever seen.

"Ah," he announced. "Here she is, the fair damsel for whom we have waited. But she starts like a frightened doe. I weary of speech. Kemlin, I pray you, remind us of why we are here."

Molly saw the boy for the first time. A page, she thought, though she really knew nothing of court rankings. He looked frightened, but he spoke clearly enough.

"Sire, you asked me to wander about the town and tell you something amusing. So I walked the streets from cockcrow to sunset and returned to your lodge."

"And what did you report?" asked the king.

"I saw a spotted dog run off with a chicken from —"

The king held up a hand, smiling sweetly. "About the miller's daughter, I pray you."

The rebuke was mild enough, but the boy flinched.

"I am sorry, sire. I came upon three men eating bread near the fountain at the center of town. Each apparently had a daughter who was passing fair. Each father tried to outdo the other as he spoke of his daughter, until at last the miller —"

"How did you know it was the miller?" The king's voice was soft, but the titters of the other aristocrats told her that he was baiting the poor boy.

"I knew him because you sent me to the mill last week to find some fresh flour to powder my hair with, sire."

"Ah, yes. Continue."

"The miller, sire, stood and said that not only was his daughter the most beautiful woman in the kingdom, but that she was such a weaver as might spin flax into silk, wool into silver fit to bedeck a queen's neck — nay, she might even spin straw into gold if she so chose."

Molly couldn't help glancing at her father, who stood so silently in the courtyard. His gaze when it met hers was full of sorrow. She smiled at him, a small smile, just to tell him that she knew it was not his fault that the bored nobles had decided to prey on something other than deer.

"After you told me your story this morning, what was it I said?" asked the king in a faintly puzzling tone, as if he couldn't quite recall.

"Sire, you said that if the paragon of maidenly virtues existed so fair, and so skilled: that she must be your bride." The boy looked at her now, with a wealth of guilt in his eyes.

Poor baited lamb, she thought, so tormented himself, but still able to feel compassion for another victim.

When the laughter died down, the king turned to her. "Fair maiden, I see that the first claim was not exaggerated. You have hair the color of mink and eyes like the sky." He paused, but she did not respond, so he continued. "Therefore, you and your father will come to my lodge as my guests. Tonight, after we dine, you will be shown a room full of flax that you may spin into fine silk thread. If you do not . . . what was it I said, Kemlin?"

Molly knew, and she was certain the boy did, too, that the king remembered perfectly well what it was he had said.

"Sire," said the page reluctantly, "you said that if she did not, you would have the mill torn to the ground, her father's tongue put out for lying, and the girl herself beheaded in the town square."

The king smiled, revealing a pair of dimples. "Yes. I remember now. You will come with us now."

Though the king offered her a seat pillion behind one of his nobles, Molly asked to walk with her father. The king seemed ill-inclined to press the matter, so she clasped her father's hand in hers and he returned her grasp until her hand hurt — though nothing of his torment showed on his face.

The king's hunting cottage was a castle in its own right, filled with assorted young men and women. Molly and her father sat together at the dining table, two ducks in a room of swans. Swans are vicious animals for all their beauty.

After the meal, she was taken to a room as big as her father's cottage filled waist-high with flax, with a small spinning wheel in the corner. She was given a small, closed lantern to light the chamber. She nodded goodbye to her father and waited until the door shut before she allowed her shoulders to droop.

The flax was high quality, and there was more of it than she would ever be able to afford if she saved for the rest of her life. But it was flax, and no matter how good the yam she spun, it would make fine linen cloth, but not silk. Even if fine linen thread would have been acceptable, she would never be able to spin so much in a single night.

Despair clogged her throat and misted her eyes and she kicked a pile of flax and watched it drift to the top of another pile. Wiping her arm across her eyes, she waded through flax to the spinning wheel and sat down to spin. Hours passed, and weariness slowed her quick fingers.

"Miss?"

She cried out in surprise.

The man from the marketplace shrank back as if to fade to wherever it was he'd come from.

"No," she said quickly, reaching out to him. She didn't know how he could have entered this room, but it was good to see a friendly face. "Please don't go, I was only startled. How did you get in here?"

"I heard . . ." he said hesitantly, watching her as if he expected her to scream again, "that you were here

and why. It sounded as if you might need help."

She laughed; it sounded forlorn, so she stopped.

Shaking her head, she said, "There is only one wheel here — and even if you can spin faster than I, you cannot spin flax into silk."

"You might be surprised," he said, pulling back his hood, revealing funny tufts of red hair. "Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time there was a boy, not a bad boy, but not particularly good either. In a mountain near his village were caves that all of the village children had been warned against, but, as he wasn't as smart as he thought himself, the boy decided to go exploring in the caves. He got lost, of course, and spent a long time wandering through the caves until his candle burned to nothing. He tried to continue and fell down a hole, breaking any number of bones."

Molly thought about the odd way that he moved and winced in sympathy. "How did you survive?"

"Ah," he said, "that is the crux of this story. I was saved by a dwarf, an outcast from his own people, who was very lonely indeed to want the company of a human. He used magic to save me, to let me walk and speak normally and to repair my addled wits. He taught me how to weave, an odd talent for a dwarf, I know, but he was quite good at it. I stayed with him until he died, several years ago — of old age, I should add, in case you suspect me of any foul deeds."

She hadn't, but it was nice to know.

He was quiet for a moment; then he said, "He taught me magic as well. If you like, I can spin your flax into silk, but magic always has a price. The price for my life was to live it as you see, something not quite human, but clearly nothing else."

"What would be the price of spinning all of this to silk?"

"Something you value," he replied.

She bowed her head in thought and removed a copper ring from her finger. "This belonged to a young man I loved, who loved me in return. He was called to fight in the king's army. Last year his brother brought back his body. Will this do?"

"Ah, miss," said the strange little man, a wealth of sorrow in his tone. "It will do very well — but I'm not certain I'm doing you any favors by my magic."

"Well," she said with a smile, though it wobbled a bit, "I would rather lose the ring than see my father lose his living and his tongue; and dead, I would value the ring not at all."

The man nodded and rolled the ring between his hands, spat on it once and muttered to himself. He opened his hands and the ring was gone.

Without speaking another word, he gestured for her to give up her place at the spinning wheel and set to work. His fingers flew far more swiftly than hers, and she wasn't able to see exactly when the flax turned to silk. She watched for a long while, but finally she slept, her head pillowed upon a pile of silken thread. She didn't feel the gentle touch of his clever hands against her cheek, nor did she hear him leave.

She awoke to the sound of a key turning in the lock. She looked swiftly to the spinning wheel, but there was no one there.

The king was the first to enter the room. He had been laughing, but as he stepped through the door and saw the silk, his face went blank with astonishment.

Molly came to her feet and curtsied. "Sire." "It seems," said the king slowly, "that your father was not overly hasty in his words — I will leave him his mill. Tonight we shall see if he keeps his tongue. Come, you will break your fast with my court."

Breakfast was not as bad as dinner had been, maybe because Molly was so tired she was able to ignore

everything but her plate and her father, who was once more seated beside her. They didn't speak, though he held her hand tightly, under the table where no one would see.

That night the king took her to the same room, but this time it was filled waist-deep with fine-combed wool.

"Tomorrow," the king said, "if you have not spun this wool into silver, your father shall have his tongue removed."

Molly raised her chin, fatigue banishing her normal caution. "I will have your word before the court that if the wool is spun to silver tomorrow morning, you will leave my father alone from that moment forward."

The king's eyebrows rose at her speech. "Of course, my dear. You have my word."

"And I will witness to it," said a woman's voice.

"Mother!" said the king, astonished.

Molly looked at the woman who had approached. She didn't look old enough to have sired the king; only the slightest touch of gray sparkled in her golden hair. Her hand rested gently on the shoulder of the young page Molly recognized from the day before.

The queen smiled at her son, though her eyes were shrewd. "Sir Thomas sent a message to me, telling me what you were up to. When I heard there was a child here who was credited with such marvels, I had to come and see. Kemlin tells me that she has already spun flax into silk."

"Why did Sir Thomas go whining to you?" asked the king in a dangerously soft voice.

The queen shook her head. "My dear, it's harvest time and you have the mill closed down because of some fantastic story you heard; of course he was upset. He had no way of knowing that the girl would be able to accomplish such a feat — she has no reputation for magic."

"I see," said the king in a voice that boded ill for Sir Thomas.

"Sir Thomas," said the queen in a soft voice, "is a particular friend of mine. I would be very displeased if anything were to happen to him." She smiled. "Now, shall we let this child get to work?"

Molly stepped into the room with her lantern and waited until the door had shut behind her before taking the narrow path cleared through the wool to the spinning wheel in the far corner of the room. The wool that she walked past was of far higher quality than she'd ever worked, as if someone had combed through all the fleeces in the land and chosen the very best. She thought it would be far more beautiful spun and woven into cloth than it would be changed to cold silver.

She wondered if he would come back tonight, and if he did, whether he would be able to help her. She didn't know anything about magic, but she thought there would be a significant difference between changing flax into silk and changing wool into silver: wool and silver are not very much alike.

"Miss," he said from the other side of the spinning wheel, though he hadn't been there just a moment ago.

This time she didn't jump or start at all, but smiled. "Good evening to you, sir. I'm very glad to see you, though I could wish it were under different circumstances."

He nodded, glancing around the room. "It seems a shame to waste this; he could have chosen lesser wool."

"Shall we leave it, then?" she said softly. "I would like to see how you are able to spin it into fine yarn for weaving."

He looked at her, light blue eyes dimmed by the shadows in the room. "You will die if it is not spun to silver."

"And my father will lose his tongue." She took off her necklace. It was a cheap thing, made of beads and

copper wire.

"Here," she said. "This was given to my grandmother by a traveling wiseman upon her marriage. Mother told me that it held a simple charm, just the blessing of the old man who made it, but — she wore it from her marriage to her death even as her mother had."

He took it from her, weighing it in his hand. "It has magic still. Some from the maker, but more from the warmth of the women who have worn it — this will do nicely."

He cupped the necklace in his hands and blew on it gently. Then he touched his lips to his hands, whispering words she couldn't quite make out, though they sounded soft and sweet. When he opened his hands the necklace was gone. Without a word, he sat on the stool and began to spin.

She watched for a while as silver chain grew on his spindle; then she lay down in the soft wool to sleep. When she awoke he was gone and there was not a wisp of unwoven wool in the room. Instead silver chain, as finely wrought as Ian Silvermaker had ever worked, sat in a pile that was taller than she was.

She realized that her head was resting on something soft and lifted it hurriedly, expecting to find a mound of wool. Instead she found his cloak. Even as she caressed it with her fingers it faded until it was no more.

"I know," she said to the empty room. "He must not know you've been here."

When the king entered the room there was expectation on his face. Molly watched as the courtiers filed in to finger the silver, and looked up to meet the queen's speculative eyes.

That morning, at Her Majesty's request, Molly ate beside the queen.

The older woman fingered the soft, woven brown-and-cream wool of her shawl and said, "I know a man who might be able to spin wool to silver."

Molly looked at the shawl and knew who had woven it. She'd seen such weaving only once before. She nodded her head. "I know a man who might weave wool into a shawl that fine."

"It was a gift from my son."

Neither smiled, but they understood each other well. The queen would not tell her son who was responsible for the magical transformations, but her first duty was to her son.

Molly's father was sent home without his daughter. He kissed her forehead before he left, and she held that kiss in her heart.

That night she was led to a different room, twice as large as the previous one. Inside was enough straw to bed down a sizable dairy herd every day for a year.

"If you can spin this into gold by morning," said the king with as much passion as she'd ever heard him speak, "I will marry you before nightfall. If you do not, you will die; this I swear on my father's bones."

She nodded at him and stepped into the room, pulling the door shut behind her. As she heard the key turn in the lock, the little weaver emerged from one of the stacks, dusting off his shoulders.

"How do you know the queen?" she asked.

He smiled. "She knew my master; he did a little magic for her and some weaving as well. Since his death she's commissioned a number of tapestries and such from me. She's an honorable woman, one who would make a staunch friend."

Molly shook her head and shrugged. Then struggled to make her decision plain without sounding plaintive. It was harder to tell him than she had thought it would be. "It doesn't matter what the queen is like. I have nothing more to give you to work your magic."

He looked so upset she stepped near him and touched his shoulder. "It's all right, you know. You kept my father safe, sir. I cannot tell you how grateful I am."

Silence fell between them, but she left her hand where it was.

"What did you think," he said finally, "of the tablecloth I sent you?"

She was surprised at his choice of topic, but grateful that he wasn't arguing with her. "I thought it was the most remarkable piece I'd ever seen."

"It might do. There was a little magic in its makings — something so that you would not miss the intent of the gift." He looked away. "If you tell me where it is, I will get it for you."

"No." She would not sacrifice his gift so that she could marry the king. Especially since she wasn't certain that death would not be preferable to the life of a miller's daughter married to the king.

"It was just a tablecloth," he said, though his eyes glittered with suspicious brightness.

She raised her chin, not letting tears fall for what might have been. "I will not sacrifice your work for his benefit — I would sooner sacrifice my firstborn child."

There was a long pause while he measured her words; then he gave an abrupt nod. "Accepted."

"What?" she gasped, but he was already speaking the words of his spelling.

This night she stayed awake, watching the golden straw give way to mounds of gold. As she watched, the realization came to her that he would not let her die, even though it meant she would marry the king. She also realized that she would rather this odd man raise her child than have it raised in the court with the king as its father.

When the last bit of straw was gone, she got stiffly to her feet and walked to him where he stood beside the spinning wheel. He'd pulled the hood of his cloak over his face and she pushed it down, kissing his cheek.

"Take care of my child for me," she whispered.

He started to say something, but the sound of a group of people approaching the door interrupted him. He took two steps back and vanished.

Molly said nothing when the king entered the room; she said nothing when he married her, nor did she speak a word that night.

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In the morning, the king asked her to spin more straw into gold.

She shook her head. "I was given three gifts of magic. I have no more."

He slapped her face and stormed out of the lodge, leaving his retinue to follow. The queen visited her later and gave her a cold, wet cloth to hold against her cheek.

"I have reminded my son," she said, "that his word was given based on your past deeds, and that the gold you brought was more than the amount most of the heiresses in the kingdom could have amassed. He's leaving for the castle, and I doubt he'll be back. Can you read?" Molly nodded.

"Good. I will send you letters once a week and you will reply. I'll see you set up comfortably here — Sir Thomas's wife will be here shortly. She's a sensible soul and can give you advice if you need it. I've arranged for several of the servants to stay here in addition to the normal staff. Your father may visit you, if you wish, but you are not to set foot outside the hunting lodge unless my son or I summon you to court."

Molly nodded again, as there didn't seem to be anything else to do.

The queen left, and Molly was alone.

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The child was born nine months later with his father's dimples and his mother's warm smile. Molly named him Paderick, after her father. She sent no word to the court, but the queen arrived the evening after the baby did.

"I have persuaded my son to leave the baby here until he is weaned," she said. "After that, I will see that he is well brought up."

"Like your son?" said Molly, raising her eyebrow, for sometimes she forgot she was only a miller's daughter.

The queen flushed. "I am sorry for what his carelessness did to you. But I am not sorry to have a grandson. I doubt that my son would ever have married if he hadn't tricked himself into it." She took a closer look at the blanket that the baby was wrapped in. "Is that a tablecloth?"

Molly smiled serenely and kissed her son's cheek. "It was a gift."

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Months passed, and Molly forgot that she had ever been lonely. Her father came to the lodge every evening to play with his grandson, and the servants all joined in. When Paderick cried, which was seldom, there were fifteen pairs of arms to hold him. The page, Kemlin, one of the servants the queen had left behind, would play nonsense games that left the baby crowing for more.

A year passed, and Paderick was weaned. None of the servants had the heart to send word to the queen — Molly certainly would not. If it had not been for the knowledge that the king would insist that her baby be sent to court and raised by servants, Molly would not have been able to give Paderick up to anyone, not even to her strange little weaver. As it was, she worried that he had forgotten.

The queen came at last, with an army of nursemaids — but Molly's servants kept them away from the baby. So it was that only the queen was sitting with Molly when the weaver came at last.

"It is time," he said softly.

Molly nodded and gathered her son up from his bed.

"What is this?" asked the queen.

Molly cuddled Paderick against her shoulder, soothing him back to sleep. "Magic has its price, lady. This is the price of my dowry gold — the price of the king's whim."

"My grandson?" asked the queen. Molly noticed that she asked no other questions, and she wondered what magic the queen had asked for, and what its price had been.

The queen turned to the weaver. "Is there nothing that can be done?"

He looked at Molly's hands as they cradled her child. "I know of a way that you may keep the child." He spoke to Molly. "When I lost myself in the caverns, I lost my name as well. I was given one by my master — if you can tell me what it is, I will give you back the child and pay the price of the magic myself. You have three nights to do this — an hour each night."

"Heinrich," said the queen quickly. "Adam, Theodore."

"Molly must do the naming," he said. "But no, no, and no."

Molly stepped toward him. "Leonard, Thomas, David." She knew that it would be none of those. He shook his head.

She continued until the hour was up. The clock in the corner chimed the hour, and he looked sad as he

shook his head for the last time. He bowed to Molly, took two steps back, and vanished.

The dowager queen spent the next day gathering names from books in the library, writing great long lists for Molly to read. Molly spent her day in her suite, playing blocks with Paderick and Kemlin.

"It doesn't matter, does it?" said Kemlin. "If the little man doesn't take him away, the old queen will."

Molly nodded.

"I would rather," said Kemlin seriously, "go live with a weaver than return to court."

Molly read through the list the dowager had given her; then, in the queen's presence, she read it again to the weaver. He shook his head at each of the names.

The next day the old queen questioned the servants and sent them looking for odd names from nearby villages. Molly played with her son.

That afternoon a messenger came from the court with an urgent letter for the queen. She read it once, then turned as pale as milk. Molly took the letter from her.

After she had read it, she looked at the curious faces of the servants and said, "The king has suffered a fatal accident while hunting."

She left Paderick with his grieving grandmother and went to her study. Alone, she sat in front of her loom and began to weave while she thought.

Without the king, she could raise her son, could teach him kindness as she'd hoped the weaver could do. There was no reason to lose him now, if she could solve the riddle.

She knew that he didn't intend to take her child. He had given her a question that he thought she could answer.

It was a name given to him by his master, who had been a weaver and an outcast dwarf. It was a name that he himself was not fond of — perhaps even embarrassed about, for he hadn't told her what it was. Although the queen had done business with both him and his master, she hadn't the faintest idea of his name.

It was not his own name, he said. His master had named him, as she might name a stray cat. She thought of the pets she had — the pony. Patches; the mutt that had kept her company while she worked — Scruffy.

"He was named for his looks," she said out loud in a tone of revelation. "His master was a weaver and named him after something he looked like." She stared at the orange yarn on her loom, remembering the funny laugh he'd given when she told him how she had made it. She thought of the twisted orange-and-brown plant the dye came from — a plant any trained weaver would know if he had not been trained by a dwarf who lived in a cave. Brilliant colors, she thought, would be useless in a cave. "Rumpelstiltskin," she said, very quietly.

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That night, the little weaver looked at Molly, urging her silently to think.

"Drusselbart," she said, finishing the list the old queen had given her. "Rippenbeist, or Hammelswade?"

"No," he said, exasperated.

"If I name you," she said softly, "you will pay the price of the magic and I will keep my son." He nodded.

She wrapped the sleeping baby in the tablecloth that had been his first gift. She tucked Paderick into the weaver's arms, ignoring the queen's frightened question.

"I have no name for you," she said, leaning to kiss his soft lips. She would not have him pay a price for

her rescue, since magic had already cost him too much. "No name, sir, but love."

The wood in the fireplace burst into flames, and the lodge shook. In the hall, the servants who had been listening at the door cried out. The old queen screamed, either in fright or in fury.

In the weaver's arms, Paderick giggled and shook his fists.

When the lodge settled once more upon its foundation, the room quieted. Not even the servants breathed a sound.

"Oh, Molly," breathed the little weaver, though he now was taller than her by several inches. "Such a gift you have given me. Do you know what you have wrought?"

The hood fell back and she saw that the odd marks on his face were gone. Without them — well, he wasn't as handsome as the king — but joy is very beautiful to behold whatever face it wears. His hair was still red, but it covered his head in thick waves. When he moved forward, he moved as any man did, his stride straight and strong. He kissed her.

"Love," he said, pulling away only slightly, "can pay any price and never show the cost. Will you come with me?"

As he spoke, the hall clock chimed the end of the hour for naming.

"Oh, Rumpelstiltskin." She laughed, for the name did sound odd. "Oh, my love, yes."

The weaver shifted Paderick until he held him with one hand while his other held the miller's daughter. Smiling, he took two steps back and left the dowager queen alone in the room.

Search though she might, the old queen never found the miller's daughter or her son again. The throne passed in due time to a cousin who was a much better king than the last one. The old miller disappeared that night as well, leaving an empty mill behind.

When Kemlin told the story to his own children, he would smile and end it by saying, "And they traveled to a place that the weaver knew of, where no one might bother them again. There they lived happily from that day until this."

Patricia Briggs

Patricia Briggs was born in Montana, and has lived in the Northwest most of her life. Her first novel, *Masques*, was published in 1993 and she has since published a second, *Steal the Dragon*. She lives in Benton City, Washington, with her husband, three children, a bird, two cats, and a horse.

Briggs grew up with fairy tales — her mother was a children's librarian — so when she decided to try her hand at reworking one, she initially looked at some of her favorites and discovered, to her dismay, that while she could expand on them, she really didn't want to change them. Instead she chose one of her least favorite tales. In its original version, "Rumpelstiltskin" has what Briggs considers a number of preposterous circumstances (what was a miller doing talking to a king anyway?), a doubtful cast of villains and heroes, not to mention several offensive themes that our society still perpetuates. She decided the tale was ripe for a rewrite. "The Price" is the result.

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