

*The Blackbird of Kirthgarran*  
*By Susan Brown*

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*I've seen Tweed's silver streams,  
Glitt'ring in the sunny beams,  
Grow drumlie and dark,  
As they roll'd on their way.*

*The Flowers of the Forest (Cockburn)*

ONE

I was convinced of two things as I lay in the grass listening to the tale of Thomas the Rhymer. One, that The Fairies had again stolen one of Mamma's bairns. And two, that as much as I'd loved the wild strawberries we had scavenged by the River Tweed that afternoon, I had never in all my eight years been hungry.

The evidence of the first was Mamma's teary eyes and the visit, several days earlier, from Mrs. Dundas with her customary offerings of lemon pudding and hartshorn jelly. I had learnt long ago that when the two instances occurred together they meant The Other People had whisked away another one of my siblings.

The second conviction required no thought at all. My stomach was hollow and wanting cake.

"Mamma," I interrupted, throwing my bracken-stuffed rabbit high into the air and catching him again. "I'm hungry."

She stopped her storytelling in mid-sentence, but I did not think she was surprised by my declaration. "Time for tea, is it?" she asked. She hugged her knees and squinted lazily at the June sun.

Thomas the Rhymer and The Fairies forgotten, I scooped up the wilting wildflowers I had collected and leapt to my feet.

Mamma brought her smiling face close to mine. Her blue irises with their random flecks of gray were the same as mine, and I gazed at them as if peering into a looking glass. Our hair was brown, the color of the dark honey that Mrs. Taggart poured into earthen jars. Our brows swept upward like wings. Mamma sometimes marveled at how alike we were, except for the purple mark that sometimes stained her cheekbone. She kissed my forehead and said, "Dear sweet lass. I ken you love your tea. Let's be away, then."

Her arms laden with flowers, cast-off shoes, stockings, and lap harp, she climbed the rise to the house. I followed happily, skipping and bouncing like a new lamb but never straying more than a few steps from her. We had spent the whole day together and had sought all our favorite places along the Tweed. Mamma had played the clarsach and we'd feasted on a picnic of bridies and shortbread and the luscious, sun-warmed strawberries. I believed she'd forgotten her stolen bairn, at least for a while, and I was thankful. The robbery of a brother or sister who would someday play games and provide company on long, dark days was disconcerting to me, but the loss of a child was devastating to Mamma. Every time it happened I was far more disturbed by her tears than my own fleeting disappointment.

"I cannot bear going inside, not on such a bonny day as this," Mamma said wistfully when we reached the garden. "Do you suppose we could persuade Mrs. Taggart to bring our tea outside?"

I wrinkled my nose. Mrs. Taggart, our housekeeper, never did anything inventive. A nippit woman with a sour temperament, she humored my father by serving tea as the English did, but it had to be done just so, with the dishes, milk, and tea pots placed carefully on china plates so none of the Bohea would stain the linen cloth, and all needed to be laid perfectly on the mahogany tea-table in the drawing room. How could she tolerate a wooden bench and a board set on trestles in the open air? The only advantage would be that any crumbs dropped from the Tantallon cakes or petticoat tails, or pieces of seed cake with their sprinklings of caraway seeds, could remain on the ground and be found by birds. What fun that would be!

It was portentous I was thinking of birds, for as soon as Mamma began arranging her burdens on a settle, I spied something shiny and black flopping on the lawn. I scampered closer and discovered it to be a rook. One wing rested crookedly on the grass. The bird tried to hop away from me a little, but I stooped to inspect

it with care and it paused to measure me, in turn, from a liquid bead of black.

Mamma came to us and lifted the rook with her fingers, saying softly, “Wheesht, wheesht,” in response to its quivering. It was panting with its thick ebony beak partly open. “The poor bird,” she said. “His wing is broken. And he’s dazed.”

We searched the branches of the oak tree above through which beams of sunlight gently filtered, and surveyed the paths of beaten turf that crisscrossed the countryside. Auld James the gardener was nowhere to be seen, nor was Young James the groom, but my half-brother Malcolm crouched on the riverbank. He had been at the Public School in Melrose for most of the day. I watched him select a handful of rocks and throw each one into the water with all of his might to create sprays of diamonds. The backs of his stockings showed stripes of dried blood where Dominie had laid his cane.

I turned back to the appealing beastie in Mamma’s hands. “Can you help him?” I asked, touching his glossy feathers. Pins poked my eyes and a swell of heat rose from my chest to my head. My love of animals was something else I had inherited from my mother. The rook was obviously suffering and I deemed it unjust that he had no words to use to ask for help, no language to describe where the pain was, and how deep.

“I’m not certain. I can bind the wing with linen, and we can keep him still.”

“Will he get better, then?”

“We can hope so. He may never fly again though, Keeley. We must be prepared for that. But oh! His wee feet are so warm! Here, feel them. He seems to trust us, do you not think?” She cradled him against her breast, examining his wing with a light touch. “It must have been Malcolm.”

I had no doubt this was his handiwork. He was seven years older than I and had a fondness for beleaguering feathered creatures, and me, with tossed stones. I wiped my nose on the hem of my blue duster and studied the bird’s beak and eye. The glistening eye blinked.

“We’ll care for him and give him water and food,” Mamma soothed.

“I can make a nest for him.”

Behind us came a low voice. “Kathleen.”

Mamma and I turned. Neither of us had heard my father’s approach.

He stood on the path silhouetted against a backdrop of apple trees and orange-red poppies, tall in his coat of black with the pewter buttons. I imagined he was just returning from one of his two sheep farms or his woolen mill. He removed his cocked hat and tossed it onto a settle as he walked toward us.

“Finlay,” my mother said. Her hands stilled upon the rook.

Father’s black hair, drawn into a queue, shone mahogany in the sunshine. Cheekbones and chin thrust themselves from the shadows on his face. When he was within a few paces from us, the arches of his brows drew close together. “What is this?”

“He has a broken wing.”

He stopped at Mamma’s side. He stared at the bird before his eyes crept up to Mamma’s. “Have you gone mad?”

Her face became the color of parchment and I took a step backward, clutching a fold of her white chintz gown. Father’s wrath was not to be taken lightly. At times I was the cause of it, especially when thunderstorms made me cry. He often forced me to suffer an hour or two in the dark cellar for my imprudence. Mamma seemed to have a similar fear of his anger, though I had never seen him lock her in the cellar.

“He’ll die if I do not care for him,” she said. “Last summer there was the robin, do you mind...”

Father plunged his hands between hers and tore the rook away. Mamma reached for the bird as her lips fell open. “You ken I care for all animals...” she began, but Father shouted, “You would do better to spend your time not wasting it on wild, broken creatures but giving me living, breathing sons!” He hefted the bird in one hand and flung him with great force into the air, and the flickering black rook disappeared behind the bank of hollyhocks.

I forgot to breathe. I was uncertain of where to look—at the verge of flowers and bushes where the stricken bird must now lie, or at my father who loomed above with a face as scarlet as the poppies.

Mamma said nothing. She gazed at the ground and I caught the glimmer of water in her eyes.

Father inhaled through his nose. “Look at you, Ket-*leen*. May God save your worthless soul. Your hair. Where have you been?”

She put up a trembling hand and pulled the white kertch from her head. Silken tresses fell to her waist all in a tangle.

“And your shoes. Where are they?”

She glanced at her feet and so did I. Bits of grass and earth were stuck to her toes and the hem of her gown was wet and muddied.

“This is not your Highlands, *Ket-leen*, where a gentlewoman walks with naked feet about the country like a heathen. Will you never do as I say? Is it the De’il that possesses you?” I wished he would stop saying “*Ket-leen*.” Her name was indeed Caitlin but he drew it out loudly and slowly as if it were an evil thing, even worse than the Anglicized “Kathleen.”

She did not answer him but lifted her eyes to his. His were blazing, but he inhaled deeply and a look of regret began to come over him. He took another long breath and let it come out from him cautiously, quietly. He held his hand out to her. Mamma hesitated, but blinking and swallowing, she let his fingers swallow hers. Father took a pair of steps away and she followed. Her other hand clasped mine and brought me with her.

He seemed to see me for the first time. “Leave the bairn.”

Her grip tightened but she bent down to me, making her eyes come even with mine. “Run along and find Jennet. Mayhap Malcolm will be there for his tea.” In a whisper she urged, “First put on your stockings and shoes.”

I bobbed my head in earnest. She joined my father beside the apple and cherry trees that edged the garden. Far away they went, separated by the length of an arm, he with his hands grasped together at his straight, dark back, she with her bare feet treading lightly on the grass and the pink ribbon at her waist wafting in the breeze. When they were almost hidden by the interlaced branches of the fruit trees they came to a halt and faced each other. Father’s hand went to her chin, lifted it. Slowly he kissed her.

I felt free all of a sudden to do as I was bidden, but I was not a dutiful child in the end. I dashed past the settle where our stockings and shoes and flowers lay and went in pursuit of the hurt bird. I searched and searched and finally found him. His head dangled when I picked up his little body, and I knew he was dead.

...

For days I thought about the rook. I had seen dead animals before—mice, of course, and the lambs and chickens intended for our suppers—but never had I seen a creature senselessly killed. Malcolm threw stones at birds, but he was a gloomy lad who did such things out of boredom, not anger. Learning that my own father, a grown man, held little regard for defenseless living things was a disquieting enlightenment.

He obviously cared for my mother. He was fond of taking her to the colorman’s shop in Edinburgh where he bought her pigments so she could mix her watercolor paints. He was fascinated by her drawings and paintings, and had several of them framed and hung about the house. He loved watching her apply brush to paper as much as he enjoyed listening to her playing her clarsach. Father never sang or tapped his foot, but he often begged her to play in the evenings and kissed her fingers afterward and said, “What sweetness springs from these hands.”

He did shout at her, however. He berated Mamma’s Highland upbringing and criticized her management of the household. His anger leapt up from some unknown place whenever she did not behave as he thought she should.

I had become used to the power of his voice, but the threat of his hands was something new. Slender but strong, they handled his beloved horses with gentleness and examined the fine lengths of wool from his mill with reverence. I remembered peeking at him once during prayers and finding his sinewy hands gripping each other until their knuckles turned white. I had believed his bones were going to snap. That memory, almost forgotten, blended with the vision of him pitching the bird into the air and the result burnt itself into my mind’s eye. It became clear to me that I must never let those hands near another of God’s creatures. Father’s horses were safe, I was sure, but nothing else. I was uncertain as to how I would save all of the world’s animals from my dangerous parent, but knew I must be vigilant forthwith—and brave.

I knelt beside my bed before the week was out and made my vow, and begged Our Heavenly Father to keep the rook’s soul safe with Him.

“And please tell the rook,” I whispered against my folded hands, “that I am so sorry I could not save his life.”

...

A fortnight later Jennet came to us in the sitting room. "There's a pedlar," she announced. "Mrs. Taggart's all for sending him off but I minded you wanted books for the lass, and asked him to wait. He says he's some for the wee one. Four in fact."

"We should go and see, should we not?" Mamma said to me brightly.

Father had long ago insisted that there be a tangible separation of our household and its affairs from our neighbors. Malcolm attended the school in the parish, but Mamma was forbidden to seek companions, visit the shops in the village, and attend the markets or the fairs. I imagined she was somewhat of a mystery to the folk of Melrose and beyond, as was I, but such isolation also meant there were few visitors at Gilchrist House. Each one was a novelty.

This one was a delight.

When Jennet, Mamma, and I reached the kitchen we found a jolly-looking man. Dirt lay in the grooves of his skin and a week's worth of whiskers speckled his face. He wore clothes of many different colors—brown trews, yellow tartan waistcoat, soiled green coat, scarlet wool knotted at his throat—and he was tapping his heels joyfully under Mrs. Taggart's affronted nose. Mamma asked him about his wares and he reached into his pack and produced chap-books of *Tom Thumb* and *Red Riding Hood*, a larger book titled *Toby Tickel's Collection of Riddles, Compiled by Peter Puzgalecap, Esq.*, and the second volume of *The World Displayed*, well worn.

"We'll take this one, I'm thinking," Mamma said after we examined them. I held up the copy of *Tom Thumb* for him to see. I wanted to plunk myself down right then and there and turn to the first page.

"A fine choice," he remarked. "For this wean?" He nodded his dust-coated head at me.

"She reads quite well, and has an appetite for it I can scarcely keep satisfied."

He bowed. "An accomplishment of which I cannot boast. But I do entertain myself in another manner." Without explanation he drew a bow and fiddle from a smaller bag. He plucked the strings one by one, listening intently. When he scraped the bowstring with a flourish up and down, mellow notes reverberated about us and I clapped at the merry sound. Tilting arm and chin, he threw himself into a jig. Mamma knew the song and began to hum along. Jennet tucked my rabbit under her arm and wheeled us about in a circle. Mrs. Taggart gathered a pile of washing, already laundered and dried, and fled the kitchen after giving each one of us a glance black with disgust.

The pedlar began to play "Lochaber No More," and Mamma sighed. The man raised an eyebrow and stilled his bow. "I hold that tune so dear," she said.

"She plays it on her clarsach," I added.

"Her clarsach!" The fiddle came down from his chin. "Have you a clarsach indeed, marm?"

"Oh aye," Jennet said. "Will I fetch it? How fine the two of you would sound together!"

The pedlar entreated Mamma with a look and she turned to us helplessly.

I cried, "Play it, Mamma, do." And Jennet was out of the kitchen and back with the harp before any of us had a chance to say anything.

The eyes of the man grew as round as teacups when Mamma sat on the wooden stool and balanced the clarsach. With care he brought his fiddle back up again and tuned his strings to hers. He positioned the bowstring and drew the first, wistful notes of "Lochaber No More." Mamma's fingers plucked chords, searching for the correct key, and when she found it she slid her finger backward for a few strings to produce an ascending glissando. The man played further measures and Mamma went along easily, matching her rhythm to his, finding the harmonies and adding chords. Jennet and I sat on the table to listen whilst Mamma and the grime-encrusted young man played song after song. The two gazed at each other, oblivious to the world about them and absorbed by the beauty of the music. Their faces showed love for the divine sound of their blended strings.

I noticed Father first. He had come to stand in the doorway. I jumped down to the floor when I saw the fury in his eyes. The pedlar's head came up and his arm fell. The abrupt ending of the music left a jagged hole in the room.

Mamma rose and put down her clarsach.

"Get out," my father said to the newcomer.

The pedlar reached for his bags. Unhurriedly he thrust his fiddle and the unsold books into them. All eyes were upon him as he stood, ready to go, a man dressed in gaudy colors and dusted with the dirt of the

roads, but proud nevertheless, and refusing to be cowed by my father's murderous stare. The pedlar walked past me and I held out *Tom Thumb* with a shaking hand.

"Keep it, lass," he said in a soft voice.

My father stepped aside and allowed him to go. His creased eyes were no longer on the pedlar, but on Mamma.

"Finlay," she said. "You're angry. And there's no need..." She was within his reach and his arm flew out. The backside of his hand struck her cheek with such force she fell to the floor.

I ran to her, remembering the rook, but Father pinched my arm and tossed me toward the door. "Take her," he said to Jennet.

We stumbled into the passageway and Jennet attempted to hold my head against her, covering my unobstructed ear with a palm when my father's voice raised itself in fiery wrath and let loose a wealth of words I did not comprehend. I was able to see Mamma attempting to rise from the floor. Father's fist swung through the air.

I could not bear it. I struggled out of the housemaid's grasp and ran away. My feet carried me to the garden where I hid under a gooseberry bush and hugged my rabbit until Mamma found me hours later. The flesh about her eyes was swollen and dark, and she gathered me to her without a word. I knew, in that moment, from whence came every inexplicable mark and bruise she had ever borne. The stains of purple upon her skin that I had taken for granted throughout my childhood were evidence of my father's betrayal.

Mamma said finally, "He did not hurt you?"

"No," I lied, thankful that my sleeve covered my arm. I was filled with shame because I had failed to protect her. Worse than that, I had brought today's misfortune upon her by urging her to play with the pedlar because I had believed it would bring her happiness.

When night fell, Jennet was dismissed from Gilchrist House. My father's voice bellowed throughout the rooms, and the maid's protestations of being sent away without the usual forty days of notice rang in counterpoint.

Jennet cried, "No wonder the others have left! Who would want to stay in this house with a master such as you!" Her voice was distorted with unshed tears.

She came into the upstairs sitting room, tying her belongings in a bundle and weeping at last. She embraced my mother and kissed my cheek with lingering tenderness. We waved farewell to her from the upstairs window until she disappeared amongst the trees just like the cook, scullery maid, laundresses, and other housemaids before her.

I looked at my mother's wounded face and felt the fires of dismay and anger burning hot in my chest. The death of the rook dimmed in significance. "Mamma," I said with passion. "We must run away. We can go with Jennet. We can hurry and follow her."

Tears filled her eyes. She shook her head. "No. No, dear heart, we cannot go. We must stay, for this is our home."

My mind whirred like the wings of a rising pigeon.

She was one of God's creatures. The dearest of them all. I kept asking myself, "How can I save her?"

...

I failed, again and again.

By the time I was ten years old Father no longer gave Mamma kisses amongst the apple and cherry trees, or asked her to walk in the garden with him. When I was thirteen he did not wait to take her behind a closed door to strike her. It did not matter if I put myself betwixt them, for then I felt the swiftness of his hand and Mamma begged me to leave them.

One February afternoon in 1782, when I was fifteen and Mamma was once again with child, she tidied Father's desk and accidentally knocked over the inkpot. Ebony liquid flooded onto the ledger that held the household accounts. Her tearful apology was not enough, nor was the subsequent clout from Father's hand. Father simmered all day and spent the night in her chamber. I suspected his presence was not welcome, but their intimacy was a matter of which Mamma never spoke. I relied solely upon her mood for determining Father's kindness toward her, or lack of it, and the next day her frame of mind was decidedly downcast.

Father left to visit the mill and Mamma and I occupied ourselves by sewing clothes for the coming bairn.

By this time I knew the truth about The Fairies. Mrs. Taggart had enjoyed filling my childhood with fear

of the love-hungry, underground dwellers who had a penchant for bearing away wee bundles and raising them as Their own. “The Other People have stolen your mam’s bairns, and They take them still,” she had been fond of informing me. “You’ve been lucky, have you not? But be wary. They slink about on silent feet, and They listen. They follow the sound of the wee ones’ voices. They would need only one moment, one quiet moment, to snatch you as well.” It was a pity the miserable woman had chosen to repeat her advice most often when I’d lain in my bed waiting for sleep to come, with only a slice of her candlelit face showing in the crack betwixt post and door. Her words had inevitably sent me diving beneath my bedding. But not long after Jennet left us, Mamma explained why I had no siblings and why I did not need to fear being abducted myself. Sometimes a wean grew within her, she said, a promise of a bairn to be, and then, for no reason, the promise went away.

Frozen rain pelted the windows, but in defiance of the winter murk Mamma exchanged her needle for her clarsach and filled the house with music. The years had changed her. She no longer laughed as she had when I was young. Her eyes no longer matched mine, for something inexplicable was missing from them. But her need, her love, for the sound of the harp had remained untouched. Her hands floated over the strings as if performing an ancient dance, her fingertips bringing forth chords both blissful and melancholy just as they had always done. Serenity flowed throughout the rooms but it was impossible for me to ignore yesterday’s bruise beneath Mamma’s eye.

When it was time for our supper she rose from her chair.

“Oh, the smell of that chicken roasting on the spit!” she said. “I am so ravenous...”

I looked at her in question because she did not speak or move further. My gaze followed hers. Blood was flowing down her ankles beneath her petticoat, forming a scarlet pool at her feet.

...

I could not endure the recollection of the remainder of that day. I hid the scenes deep in my heart, unwilling to remember the sight of her in her bed, unable to relive the moment Father told me of her death.

I buried the memories as if they were frightful things that must be put beneath heavy stones. Hidden and powerless—or so I believed—that is where they stayed.

The days after her passing were as blurred as a winter dusk obscured by a rimed window. A fierce wind came from the north, laden with snow. I lay motionless beneath my coverlet and listened to the screech and moan of it, but I was not fooled. It was not only the wind streaming past my window but the screams of banshees.

“I was your father who caused your mam to die,” their voices shrieked. “I was you who failed to save her.”

I believed them. Father had been cross because of the spilt ink. I could not know what had happened when he’d spent the night in her chamber, but surely, with her lying-in only three months away, she should have been left alone. Even if he had not used her badly that night he had for years prior to it, forcing her to try to produce another male heir when her body obviously could not sustain another pregnancy. And I had continually failed to persuade her to leave him. Aye, the banshees knew exactly who was responsible for Mamma’s death.

From my window I watched Father and Malcolm ride to Melrose to see her buried. Father had ordered me to accompany them, but illness was so entrenched in my stomach, throat, and head that I was allowed to keep to my bed. With my teeth chattering from fever-induced chills, I stared out through the casement at the unending hills and snow-covered dykes. I watched the flying snow and listened to the impassioned wails. When Malcolm and Father returned, the wagon that had borne Mamma to the kirkyard was empty. The rectangular shape left on the wagon’s bed by her coffin was already filled with snow and barely discernible.

I had no desire for the trays of food Mrs. Taggart brought upstairs. I remained in my bed for days until my fever broke, and then sought the unyielding confines of my wing chair. I wrapped myself in my coverlet and curled sideways, resting my head on the stuffed arm so I could look through my window and see the road leading to Melrose.

“I expect you’ll come downstairs the night,” Mrs. Taggart conjectured the afternoon she brought my tea and found me finally out of bed.

Suppertime came and went and I did not stir. A day passed, then another. I discovered that if I did not show myself, no one came to investigate. But the night came when the rattle of crockery and the aroma of

cooking chicken permeated the haze round me. Confusion, smoldering in my slumber-deprived brain, caused me to leave my chair and open my door. Chicken for supper. Mamma was ravenous. Had I only imagined her death? Was she waiting for me downstairs? I listened with every sense heightened—and thought I heard her voice, low and sweet, addressing Father in the dining room below.

I forgot my fear of the dark. Blear-witted, I left my room and followed her voice, followed the warm and greasy smell of the chicken, followed the steps that descended in blackness. The glow of candles drew me to the room where Father sat in readiness for his meal.

I stopped, stricken. There was no sign of Mamma. The end of the table opposite Father's was bare. No dishes were set there, no one sat in her chair. Bewilderment deepened as I tried to remember what was real and what was a nightmare.

"Well," came Father's voice at last. "I wondered how long you'd choose to starve yourself." When I did not respond he gestured toward my chair. "Now that you're here, sit."

I found myself moving forward. I took my seat. Father stared at me.

"Mrs. Taggart," he called. "Can you not do aught to improve the child's appearance?"

Mrs. Taggart appeared and planted her crooked fingers on my face as she washed my skin with a coarse cloth dipped in icy water. She dragged a comb through my waist-long, knotted hair, causing tears to spring to my eyes, but I was not sure if they came because of the hair she pulled or because the wounds in my heart were being cut open afresh by Mamma's absence.

"Look at me," Father commanded when she was done.

I could not bring myself to turn my head.

"The De'il tak' your impertinence! You will do what I tell you."

A cuff on my ear forced me to meet his gaze. I studied his windburnt face, his painstakingly styled white peruke. I vaguely remembered speaking to him when Mamma was laid out in the parlor awaiting her funeral, and again when he'd come to my room to see if I was ready to ride to Melrose Abbey. All I could seem to recall in any detail, however, was the night of her death when he had loomed over me with reddened eyes and told me she was gone. The memory peeked out from where I'd buried it and panic threatened.

He said, "How is it you've become ungodly and unkempt? You've been ill but certainly you are now well. Have you been continuing your studies?"

"No, sir."

"Your spinning?"

"No, sir."

"There's to be changes then. It seems you cannot be left unsupervised. Starting tomorrow you will come to me in the library prepared to resume your studies. And looking presentable, mind. With hair plaited and a clean frock."

"Aye, Father."

"Malcolm did not carry on so when his mother went to her grave, God rest her soul. It's damned annoying to have to look at you so. If you were a lad I'd send you off to university this very night." He rose and left me for a moment whilst Mrs. Taggart stirred the broth and began spooning it into broth-plates. He returned with a fat book and a ring of keys and placed them before me.

I recognized the volume as the housebook, and my eyes caught on the ragged, black shapes of dried ink spattered across the edges of the pages.

"They're your concern now," Father said. "As mistress of the house you are responsible. We'll see if you are any better at it than your mother was."

Mrs. Taggart's spoon halted in mid-air and drops of chicken broth fell to the table, becoming shiny, round jewels on the polished wood. She was clearly shocked, and eyed the items with her mouth ajar. The book held the household accounts: the quantities and prices for the linens, tea, brandies, china, and all the other plenishings of the house. The keys gave a person unequivocal power over Gilchrist House's doors, cupboards, and chests. Mistakes made with either were subject to the unpredictability of Father's temper.

Father reached in front of me and slid the ledger and keys farther down along the table to make room for our plates. The housekeeper's attention followed them, and slowly returned to me. Pure hatred shone out of her eyes.

The house became silent after Father led us in prayer. I could hear the distant ticking of the library clock.

Father looked up, holding a broth-soaked chunk of bread halfway to his mouth. "Eat," he said.

I dipped my spoon into my broth and lifted it to my lips. My stomach churned with nausea. My mouth ached with dryness. But I tilted the spoon and allowed broth to trickle past my tongue and go down my throat when all I really wanted was to follow Mamma to wherever she had gone.