

Spinning Lies

by K.C. Shaw

Anna's father stood outside the mill with his bitterest enemy, making up lies about his daughter. He never meant to lie. His boasting simply turned into wishful thinking. By the time he swore to the despised Bill Cooper that Anna's fairy godmother had shown her how to spin straw into gold, he half believed it himself.

Bill's own daughter, Beth, could milk a cow faster than anyone in the village—a fact recently proven at the local fair—and Bill's smirk was the reason for Edward Miller's lies.

Bill said, "If Anna can spin straw into gold, why aren't you rich?"

"Because if she spun us up a lot of gold, we'd be taxed. And we wouldn't have any linens, because if she's spinning straw she can't spin flax."

Bill thought about this for a moment. "Why don't you just buy your linens?"

Edward said instantly, "Shop-bought goods are never as nice. You go on home, Bill Cooper, and just wish you had a daughter like mine."

"Beth can milk a cow faster—"

"You keep telling me that, but I don't see you with any *cows* made of gold. When Anna milks a cow—"

At this point, fortunately, Anna's mother came out and interrupted the conversation. Bill shuffled home through spring sunshine, thinking hard. This was an unusual habit for him. When his wife met him at the door of his newly-thatched cottage, he said, "Edward Miller says his girl can spin straw into gold. He says her fairy godmother taught her."

"Edward Miller doesn't know straw from flax," his wife said. "I'm going to market."

"Bring me a sugar pig," Bill said, and forgot all about spinning straw into gold.

His wife didn't forget. She had time to think about it as she walked into the village. By the time she reached the market, she was ready to complain about Edward Miller's lying ways to the first person she saw. That happened to be the ironmonger's wife, who listened with gratifying attention.

When Bill Cooper's wife went on to do her shopping, the ironmonger's wife hurried into the forge to tell her husband that Anna Miller could spin straw into gold. One of the ironmonger's customers overheard; he was the mayor's second underfootman and a dedicated gossip. In his haste to return to the mayor's household and spread the tale, he nearly forgot about the hammer he'd been sent to buy.

By small degrees, from mouth to ear to mouth, the rumor of Anna Miller's supposed talent spread across the village, the region, and the country, until at last it came to the ear of the king.

Heedless of the talk concerning her, Anna Miller sat outside her house spinning flax into linen thread with her friend Beth Cooper. The sun was warm and flowers bloomed in the little garden. The spinning wheels turned as the girls treadled.

Anna's light brown hair was tied back with a blue ribbon; she had freckles across her nose because she never remembered to wear a hat in the sun, and she was pretty in a comfortable sort of way. No one would ever call her glamorous.

Beth had dark hair scraped into two tight pigtailed. She had remembered her sunbonnet. “Dad says the king’s coming to the village next week,” she said.

“Really? Why?”

“To see the fairy who wears cloth spun out of gold.” Beth hesitated. “No, that’s not right. Something like that, anyway. Dad told me. You know he’s as dumb as a barrel of bricks.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say,” Anna said. “No one’s that dumb.”

“Just one brick, then.”

“Anyway, we don’t have any fairies around here, wearing gold or not. We’d know.”

“The king’s going to be disappointed, then,” Beth said.

“Will the prince be coming too?”

Beth grinned at Anna’s elaborately casual tone of voice. “I bet you wish he was.”

“I don’t care,” Anna said. She tossed her head. “I know *some* girls are silly and think Prince Thomas is *so* cute, but I for one hardly even notice his picture—that I know is on *your* wall at home.”

“I’m just being patriotic. I bet you don’t have a picture of him because it disintegrated from you kissing it too many times.”

“Beth Cooper, you are disgusting.”

“What would you do if the prince saw you and fell in love with you, and then he dropped to one knee right in the street and said, ‘Anna, will you marry me?’”

Anna said automatically, “Don’t be silly.” But she stared at the white flax slipping through her fingers as she spun, and only saw the prince—tall and handsome, with fair hair and a sword at his side. He would catch sight of her across the village square and be instantly fascinated. When he ran after her, she would glance up, her brown eyes filled with alarm at his approach, and he would look into her eyes and say, “I have found you, the woman with eyes like a wild doe, the woman who has haunted my dreams for weeks, so that I can scarcely sleep at night and toss and turn until dawn! Will you be mine? I must have you!” She would turn away gracefully without speaking, but he would catch her by the arm and beg for one kiss or else he would die, and she would curtsy and say, “I cannot marry you, my lord, because if I did the curse would turn me into a deer, but I will kiss you once and then you must never see me again,” and he would bend down and press his warm lips to hers—

“What’s wrong? You look like you’re about to burp,” Beth said. “Your mouth’s all bunched up.”

“Beth, you are as dumb as a barrel of bricks. Look, you made me break my thread.”

“I didn’t do anything. You’re just not paying attention—bee! There’s a bee! It’s after me, help!” Beth leaped to her feet and flailed at a honeybee who had mistaken her bonnet for a flower. Anna laughed.

A week later Anna was in the henhouse gathering eggs when she heard trumpets sound in the lane. The mayor sometimes began his proclamations with trumpets. Anna wondered idly what the mayor was doing on the outskirts of town, but she didn’t hurry with the eggs.

When she had gathered them all into her apron, she turned around to leave the henhouse—and there in the back garden stood her parents, the king, the prince, and a dozen royal guards and servants.

Anna stumbled backwards, accidentally tipping an egg out of her apron. It smashed on her shoe, to her embarrassment. She sneaked a glance at the prince, who was even more handsome than his picture. He wore red and gold clothes and he really did have a sword on his belt. He had looked away from her with a slightly pained expression, as though he had never wanted to see a girl with egg yolk all over her foot and wished he could forget the sight now.

The king cleared his throat. “*This* is the girl who can spin straw into gold?”

“What?” Anna said, and dropped another egg.

Anna’s mother said, “My dear, why don’t you come in and, er, get cleaned up. Your father has some important things to discuss with the king.” She put her hand on Anna’s shoulder and guided her into the house.

Anna heard her father say, “You can see just by looking that she’s a clever girl, but obviously we don’t have the right sort of spinning wheel for her to spin straw into gold. You need a flax wheel to spin flax, and a wool wheel to spin wool, and a straw wheel to spin straw.”

Anna’s mother shut the kitchen door gently and said, “Your father will be the death of me, Anna. Put the eggs in the bowl before you break them all.”

“What’s Father done now?” Anna said. “Has he really told the king I can spin straw into gold?” When her mother nodded, Anna went on, “Really, Mother! He just made that up! Who on earth would believe such a silly thing?”

“The king, for one.”

“But I don’t even have a fairy godmother.”

“Well, we did write to your Aunt Daisy’s friend Glitterbottom when you were born, but she said she had just retired and was about to travel and couldn’t possibly godmother another child. But maybe—”

Anna’s father burst into the kitchen, looking jubilant. “Anna, the king has agreed to give you a chance. And when you show him how you can spin straw into gold, he says you can marry Prince Thomas!”

Anna left with the king’s retinue that very afternoon. She wanted to pack, but the maid assigned to accompany her said, “You’ll be given some *nice* gowns when we reach the castle, Miss Miller.” Anna scarcely had time to hug her mother and father goodbye before the maid dragged her to the waiting coach.

Anna stared out the coach window at the countryside—green patchwork fields and pastures separated by hedgerows, little brooks glinting in the sunshine, copses of woods, and farmhouses with dairy cattle grazing behind them. She felt homesick already. And she didn’t know how to spin straw into gold; she didn’t even know how to get a message to Glitterbottom to ask for help.

They didn’t stay in an inn that night. Instead, the king’s servants pitched red velvet tents in a meadow, and furnished them with featherbeds that had been rolled up in one of the coaches. The king’s tent had gold tassels. Anna waited until her maid had gone to sleep, then crept out of their tent.

The camp was dark. Stars glittered overhead. Anna wandered around the camp, whispering to herself. “Mistress Glitterbottom, I need your help,” she tried, but no fairy appeared. “Glitterbottom, I’m Daisy Smith’s niece, and I have a favor to ask,” she tried next, but the night remained silent.

Then she heard voices and stopped short. But she was next to the king's tent, and it was only the king and the prince talking. "Father, I don't want to marry her," Prince Thomas said, sounding a little whiny. "She's *common*."

Anna blinked back tears and waited to hear what the king would say in answer. She hoped he would point out that Anna was a raving beauty, or blindingly intelligent, or at least that she had good manners. But the king said, "Don't worry, you won't have to. If she can spin straw into gold, I'll eat my crown. No, it's too bad, but we'll have to have her executed when she can't do it."

"Isn't execution a bit harsh? We could just send her home with a stern talking-to."

"And have every girl in the kingdom claim *she's* the one who can spin straw into gold? We'd never see the end of it."

Anna tiptoed away, trembling with fright. "Glitterbottom, *please* come help me," she whispered. "They'll kill me if I can't learn how to spin straw into gold!" But Glitterbottom didn't appear.

Anna scarcely slept that night. The next day she had to ride in the coach with the king, and was so scared that she wasn't sure she could speak.

"Your name's Anne?" he said.

"Anna," Anna whispered.

"Well, Anna, I hope you haven't forgotten your instruction. The kingdom could use some gold." He laughed, but Anna couldn't join him. "I don't expect we have such a thing as a straw wheel in the castle. What does a straw wheel look like?"

Anna took a deep breath. She didn't know how to spin straw into gold, but she did know how to lie in a good cause. She'd learned it from her father, after all. "A straw wheel is like an ordinary spinning wheel, but it has a much larger orifice, so the straw can get through. And a bigger bobbin. And it's double drive with two treadles, and it must have exactly twelve spokes in the wheel, and the drive band has to be leather from a white elk killed on midsummer's day during a thunderstorm. That's very important. It simply won't work without the right drive band. And the wheel itself must be made of mahogany wood, carved by a left-handed woodworker who was born during an eclipse of the sun."

"My word," the king said. "Is that all?"

"And the wheel must be painted gold."

"We'll see what we can do. That seems terribly specific."

"Well, it's difficult magic," Anna said. "My fairy godmother told me all about it. Her name's Glitterbottom; she's traveling, but if you send for her I'm sure she could oversee the making of the wheel, in case I've forgotten something."

"Oh, no, we'll go by your directions. You seem to know so much about it," the king said. He looked very serious, but Anna was sure he was laughing at her inside.

They reached the castle at last, and Anna stared at its tall stone walls and turrets with red and gold pennants snapping in the breeze. "Oh, it's beautiful," she said. "I bet my fairy godmother would love to visit me here. If you could send for her—"

But the king had turned to talk to the servant sitting next to Anna, giving directions for Anna's spinning wheel to be made—and for a room to be filled with fresh straw for her to spin.

It was only two days before the wheel was delivered. It was the ugliest thing Anna had ever seen, covered in gold paint that was still slightly sticky to the touch. A servant set it down next to a heap of straw, and another servant set down a stool. "See you tomorrow morning," the servants said, giving her nasty smiles, and they shut the door behind them. And locked it.

Anna roamed around the room, looking for exits, but she was in the top of one of the turrets. There was a window, but it was only six inches wide; even if she could somehow squirm through, there was no way for her to get down from the turret. "Oh, Glitterbottom, why can't you come help me?" she said aloud, but no one answered.

She sat down on the stool and tried to think. The king wouldn't know how much gold a pile of straw should produce, and Anna was wearing a gold necklace and ring. Maybe she could somehow get rid of the straw—throw it out of the window piece by piece, to be blown away on the breeze—and wind the necklace around the bobbin.

She took her necklace off, but when she tied it to the bobbin's leader, it seemed only too obvious what she'd done. She put her head in her hands and began to cry.

"What's wrong?" said a deep voice, and Anna looked up in alarm.

A little man stood in front of her, no more than three feet high. He had brown skin and a bald head, and his pointed ears stuck out like a fox's. His clothes were moss green.

Anna stared at him for a moment. "How did you get in?"

"I heard you crying, so I magicked myself here. What's wrong?"

"I'm supposed to spin all this straw into gold. If I don't, the king will have me killed—and I don't know how to spin straw into gold."

"Is that all?" The little man waved his hand. "I can spin straw into gold as quick as you please. What will you give me if I do?"

Anna wiped her tears away. "Oh, thank you—thank you, I'll give you anything! I have a necklace that my grandmother gave me. You can have it." She untied it and held it out to the little man.

He took it in hands as gnarled as tree roots. "How long have you had it?"

"Years and years. I wear it every day."

"Then it's a good payment, and I'll take it. Move over, my dear, and bring me some of that straw."

Anna brought the little man an armload of straw, and watched in amazement as he treated it just like wool or flax. He twisted a handful together and tied the leader to it, and began to treadle. The straw disappeared into the spinning wheel's orifice, and when it came out the other side—it was gold.

Anna gasped. "How do you do it? Will you teach me?"

"You don't have enough magic to learn. Bring me more straw."

All night long Anna brought armfuls of straw to the little man, who spun steadily. The bobbin filled up again and again with a thick gold rope, which the little man removed and tossed onto the floor as if it was worth nothing more than the straw. By the time the last piece of straw had disappeared into the orifice, the room glittered with gold.

The little man bowed and put on the necklace Anna had given him. "The king's a greedy fellow; you'll probably need me again. Better have something else to give me." And he stamped his boot on the floor and disappeared.

It was nearly dawn. Anna lay down among the gold and went to sleep with tears of relief still on her cheeks.

When the door opened a few hours later, the king, Prince Thomas, and half the court gaped at the sight of Anna asleep in a bed of gold rope. Sunshine through the window dazzled on the gold, making the room seem filled with light and making the gold-painted spinning wheel look tawdry in comparison.

The king was delighted. He called for a feast, and had the royal seamstresses make Anna a new gown—blue silk with pink lace, and slippers to match. Anna wore it to the feast. She sat next to Prince Thomas, who actually spoke to her instead of ignoring her. They talked about gold.

Anna thought she should have been happy, but the king had not said anything about her marrying Thomas. And that night, the servants escorted her up to the room with the spinning wheel again. The room had been filled with more straw.

Anna sat down on the stool and sighed. She wasn't as worried as she had been the night before, but she didn't know how to call the little man who had helped her. "I wish I could just go home," she said to herself, and a tear fell from her eye and splashed onto her hand.

"I was right, I see," the little man said in his deep voice. He looked just as he had the day before. "What do you have to give me this time?"

"You can have this brooch," Anna said, taking it off. It was a big square brooch, gold, with a giant diamond in the middle. Anna thought it was ugly. "Prince Thomas gave it to me today."

"Oh, *Prince Thomas* gave it to you, did he?" The little man sniffed. "I don't want it. What else do you have?"

"Just my old ring. But the brooch is worth so much more—"

"I don't care how much it's worth. I just want it to be yours. Have you had the ring long?"

"Longer than the necklace I gave you yesterday."

"Good. Hand it over." The little man took the ring and tried to fit it onto his little finger, but it was too small. He put it in his pocket instead. "That gown makes you look very pretty," he said gruffly, not looking at her, and then stomped over to the pile of straw as though he was angry.

As before, Anna carried straw to the little man all night long and he spun it into ropes of gold. She was worn out long before he was finished, but he didn't even seem tired. "That should keep the king happy for another day," he said, "but I bet I see you again." He bowed and stamped his foot, and vanished. Anna lay down among the gold and went to sleep.

The king was just as pleased as he had been the morning before, but Anna wasn't surprised that he didn't say anything about a reward again. She spent the day yawning as delicately as possible.

They had another feast that evening. Prince Thomas was positively friendly, but Anna was so sleepy she couldn't even appreciate his attention. "You seem tired," Thomas said.

"Well, spinning straw into gold takes a lot out of a girl. People have been known to die of it."

"Really?" Thomas looked alarmed. "Er, you don't think you'll die tonight, will you? Father's already had more straw brought in."

Anna sighed and stifled another yawn. "I'll try not to die. But after tonight, I'll have to take a break from spinning."

“I’ll make sure to tell Father.” Thomas smiled at her, which made Anna’s knees feel weak. He was so handsome, even if he was turning out to be as brainless as Beth Cooper’s father.

After the feast, Anna trudged up to the spinning room, which smelled of fresh straw. She sat down on the stool, wishing she could just lie on the floor and sleep. “I never learned that little man’s name,” she murmured. “I suppose I’d better start crying so he’ll come help me. That’s the only way I know how to reach him.”

She tried to summon tears, but it took a long time. She kept thinking about how handsome Thomas was. Finally she wondered what would happen if she couldn’t get the little man to help her again, and she realized she didn’t have anything else to give him. That frightened her so much that she startled to snifle, and as soon as she shed the first tear, the little man appeared in front of her.

He had threaded her ring on the necklace like a pendant, and was wearing it around his neck. But tonight he had on a little peaked cap too, the same color green as his clothes. “It’s good to see you again,” he said.

“I don’t know what to give you this time,” Anna said, “and I’m so tired—” She yawned. “You can have this brooch, really. Or these earrings. Thomas gave them to me today, so I haven’t had them long, but they’re quite pretty and very valuable.”

“Not interested,” the little man said. He strolled around the room, frowning. “You don’t have a handkerchief?”

“Oh, of course I do! It’s silk, see?”

“How long have you had it?”

“Just a few days, but what does it matter?”

The little man’s frown deepened, so that his face looked wrinkled up like a walnut. “If you don’t have anything of yours to offer me, then I’ll have to take something of yours that you’ll have later.”

Anna rubbed her forehead. “What will I have later?”

The little man looked at her from the corner of his eye. “A baby. I’ll take your first-born child in payment.”

“What? That’s terrible! I’d never agree to something like that!”

“Suit yourself.” The little man raised his foot as though about to stamp it and disappear.

“Wait!”

He lowered his foot again. “Then you agree?”

“Why do you want a baby? Babies cry, they keep you up at night, they have to have their diapers changed, they grow up to make bad choices and borrow money from you—”

“I don’t have a child, and I don’t have a wife to give me children,” the little man said. “Of course, you can always choose to be my wife instead.” He looked away from her, as though what he’d said wasn’t very important.

“But I’m going to marry Thomas,” Anna said, but she felt a pang of misgiving. If she didn’t agree to give up her first-born, the little man wouldn’t spin the straw into gold, and when the king arrived in the morning he would want to know why he still had a roomful of straw instead of a roomful of gold. And then the whole story would come out, and Anna would be executed.

The little man waited, tapping his foot on the floor. Finally Anna said, “All right. My first-born.”

“Done.” The little man sat down on the stool. “Bring me straw, my dear, and plenty of it.”

The wedding was set for the following week. Thomas insisted on holding it so soon; Anna secretly thought he just wanted to get it over with. She didn’t care. She was marrying a prince, and he was also the most handsome man in the kingdom.

The wedding celebration was sumptuous, with music and dancing and every kind of delicacy to eat and drink. Anna’s gown was so beautiful it looked as though it had been made for a fairy princess, and if Thomas spent most of the evening talking to other women, at least none of them was wearing his wedding ring. Anna tried to enjoy herself and not notice that her new husband didn’t seem interested in dancing with her.

Anna was standing by herself in the corner, sipping champagne and pretending that she was really too tired to want to dance anyway, when a small figure came into the ballroom and hobbled over to her, leaning on a stick. The figure wore a rumpled green gown and had long auburn curls, astonishingly lustrous for such an old woman. But as the person approached, Anna realized it was the little man, badly disguised in a wig and dress.

A servant stopped him, and Anna heard the little man say in an absurdly high-pitched voice, “No, no, I’m the bride’s great-great-aunt, just arrived. I’m sorry I missed the wedding!”

Anna hurried over. “Auntie, how good to see you,” she said, and the servant bowed and slipped away. “What on earth are you doing here?” Anna whispered to the little man.

He looked hurt. “I came to offer my good wishes,” he said, “for a long and fruitful marriage.”

“I haven’t forgotten my promise,” Anna said.

The king joined them, looking at the little man with disbelief. “One of your relatives?”

“My great-great-aunt.”

The little man managed a very awkward curtsy, and dropped his cane. “Good evening, your majesty,” he said. “My great-great-niece looks so lovely, doesn’t she? You’d never believe it now, but once I was a beauty too. People came from miles away just to look at me. But I ruined my beauty by spinning, night and day, such fine linen you never did see—but at such a cost! Now my face frightens small children and little dogs run away when they see me.”

The king looked aghast. “Spinning? Spinning made you—ah, not so attractive?”

“Spinning made me ugly, your majesty! I’m so glad my little Anna has married well and will never need to spin her beauty away like I did.”

The king turned to Anna. “You’re not to touch a spinning wheel again for the rest of your life. You can’t afford to lose one degree of your looks.”

The little man picked up his cane and winked at Anna. When the king had gone, he whispered, “My wedding gift to you, my dear.” And he stamped his foot and disappeared.

A year passed. Anna thought of the little man occasionally, but even when she became pregnant she didn’t really believe he’d come for her child. Fretting about something so outlandish seemed a waste of time, particularly when she had real problems to worry about.

Thomas wanted as little to do with his wife as he could get away with. He went hunting, he went fishing, he attended affairs of state alone, he took up jousting. Anna was left behind to embroider and sigh, and try not to think about the rumors her maids brought her about Thomas and certain high-born ladies.

It was autumn when she gave birth to a son. Thomas was away at a conference for jousting enthusiasts, but Anna looked into her infant's face for the first time and no longer cared what Thomas did. Her child was the only important thing in the world.

That night, the little man appeared by her bed.

Anna was half-asleep with her son in her arms, but she started awake when she heard the little man clear his throat. "I'm here for your first-born," he said.

"No!" Anna sat up. "No, you can't. He's too dear to me. Take anything else you like—take all my jewels, my beautiful clothes, my fine horses, but leave me my son."

"A promise is a promise." The little man frowned.

Anna hugged her infant and began to cry. "He's everything to me. You can't take him, you can't."

The little man hunched his shoulders and stared out the window. "Curse me, I've always been soft-hearted when it comes to tears. I'll offer you a bargain. If you can guess my name within three days, you can keep your son. If not, our bargain stands."

"Thank you," Anna managed to say. Surely there were only so many names in the world, and in three days she was sure to guess the little man's. "Is your name Glitterbottom?" she hazarded.

"That's a girl's name!"

"Well, then, is it Thomas?"

"No."

"Edward?"

"No."

"Henry?"

"No."

"William?"

"No."

Anna tried every name she could think of. When she had run out of names, the little man said, "I'll come back tomorrow. Maybe you can guess then."

The next day Anna had every scribe in the kingdom go through old books and scrolls, writing down every single name they could find, no matter how strange. "I want lots of names to choose from to name my son," she told them.

When the little man returned that evening, Anna had a stack of papers from the scribes, and on each paper were dozens of names. Anna read each one.

"Is your name Spiderlegs?"

"No."

"Muffinears?"

"No."

"Potatonose?"

"No."

"Burgerbutt?"

"No. I think you're making those names up."

"Well, is it Donald?"

“No.”

None of the names the scribes had found were the little man’s. When Anna read the last name, the little man shook his head. “No to them all. I’ll see you tomorrow, and I’ll take my son home with me.”

Anna lay awake all night, and her thoughts and plans and worries jangled around and around her head until she couldn’t think straight. It was only when her son cried to be fed that she felt a glimmer of hope through her deep dread. She got up and nursed him. She would find a way to keep him somehow.

In the morning, she left her son with the nursery maids and went for a ride in the crisp autumn air. The trees were red and gold, the sky brilliant blue, but Anna scarcely noticed.

She rode into the forest. Not many people lived there, but Anna visited every house she could find. She asked woodchoppers their names, asked charcoal burners the names of their relatives, asked fur trappers the names of all the fairies they’d ever heard of. She wrote all the names down.

She was on her way back to the castle when she came upon another house—a small one, and so hidden in the trees that she would have passed it without noticing it if she hadn’t caught the scent of baking. She dismounted and tied her horse to a tree, and was about to knock at the door when she heard the little man’s voice through the open windows.

He was singing the same song over and over, and Anna caught her breath. She peeked through the window.

The house was comfortable-looking and clean inside, with a neatly made bed, a table and chairs, a rag rug on the floor, and a new-looking cradle. The little man took a loaf of bread out of the oven and sang his song again.

“Today I bake, tomorrow I brew,
“Today for one, tomorrow for two,
“For little knows the royal dame
“That Rumpelstiltskin is my name!”

Anna closed her eyes for a moment in relief, then tiptoed away from the house.

When the little man appeared that evening, Anna was ready. She had dressed in her favorite gown and was holding her son.

“Here I am to take my boy,” the little man said.

“I still get to guess.”

“If you like. But you’ll never guess.”

“Is your name Bill?”

“No. And you’ve already guessed that one.”

“Is it Nick?”

“No.”

Anna hesitated, full of both fear and excitement. “Is it Rumpelstiltskin?”

The little man stared at her, and Anna saw his face fall. “How did you know?”

“I found your house. I heard you singing.”

Rumpelstiltskin stared down at his boots. “I’ll never have a family now. But you guessed fairly, and a promise is a promise.”

“Don’t go yet,” Anna said quickly. “You told me once that I could choose to give you my first-born, or choose to marry you instead.” She took a deep breath. “Since the husband I have doesn’t seem to like me, I thought that maybe I should take a husband who does. If your offer still stands.”

Rumpelstiltskin’s ugly face broke into a grin. “You mean it?”

“Yes.”

He took her hand in his calloused one. “Then come with me and be my wife, and your son will be my son.”

Anna leaned down and kissed him. And for the last time, Rumpelstiltskin stamped his foot. He, Anna, and their son disappeared.

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