Chapter Three

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Truffles are magical - appearing randomly without much warning; not where you expect them but often where you don't. Elijah had found them on soil as thick and heavy as dough as well as high in the beech copses on light, chalky plains. He had found them sitting on the surface of the ground waiting to be picked up like easter eggs as well as massed tumescent nuggets woven into the root structure of a hawthorn tree.

Sometimes they appeared like clockwork appearing, according to the phases of the moon, exactly under the same tree year on year on the same day. But in other cases they would have been stolen by rivals before he had the chance to get there. Elijah was not the only truffle hunter in the area. There was Job - the flint-eyed grandson of the most celebrated hunter of them all Samuel Pike. He had once found a truffle weighing nine ounces, "like a cannonball" under a poplar tree of all unlikely places. Elijah was always polite to Job, though careful to avoid him. Whenever he went out hunting, he would always stuff a couple of small dessicated truffles into the left hand pocket of his coat in case he met him so that he could bring them out pretending that that was all he could find, keeping his real treasure in his other one.

Elijah had no illustrious truffle ancestors in his family. He had started hunting for the things purely from economic necessity. In the winter months when vegetables were scarce and the chickens not laying, they padded out meat pies and Mary earned a small living selling these to neighbours. But it was when he started working for Sir Richard that things really took off. Initially his job was just to coppice the woods, making sure that the trees were lopped on a regular basis so that they kept healthy but soon, he noticed his dog, Oswald, was unearthing more than old rabbits. He was digging

out these balls of what looked warty conkers or toad droppings and eating them.

Word soon reached sir Richard that his orchard was ripe with truffles and he asked for Elijah to come and see him. That day Mary and Elijah were united in equal trepidation - only in church had they ever seen the erect and darkly austere figure upon whom their accommodation and livelihood depended and for days before they had been carping like cats.

On the appointed morning Elijah appeared in the kitchen wearing his once smart and now slightly worn tweed jacket, woollen trousers and stockings. "You want to change that hat" said Mary eyeing the green trappers hat he had decided to wear. The brown crombie he replaced it with made his head look strangely elongated like a shrew.

It made her embarrassed that he should dress in the manner of someone hunting a white hart when he was in fact only foraging for tiny fungus balls in the ground but she had long since recognised that the rigmarole of dressing up helped him to focus.

He would often take with him a little harp, too, along with his dog and candle (for he usually hunted at night) to croon the spirits into helping him. It helped that he had the posture of a hunter seen on the walls of caves ; erect and still and that he moved slowly. His eyes were jet black, large and dark, with an expression of deep understanding but also anguish.

Sir Richard's, by contrast, were a piercing grey, the colour of a bird of prey's. As Elijah knocked on the door of the manor house he was reminded of the passage in the Bible when Luke says you should greet a house with blessings when you enter it, but instead found his mind going blank.

The leaves of a vine trailed over the door lintel, fluttering like a banner in the morning breeze. The moss, plumped up by the night rain sat like emerald cushions on the wooden frame of two small windows in the upper part of the door. After several minutes a low patter was followed by a clunk of locks and before him stood a man who merely nodded and held the door open. Elijah stepped inside, inhaling for the first time, the combination of polish and damp, that was the hallmark of all large houses and contrasted with the woodsmoke and doggy odour that was his own.

He followed the man down a wide corridor, flanked on either side by stags heads and other hunting trophies until he was ushered into an ante room as high as it was chilly. A crisp north wind penetrated through the diamond paned windows,

The man, who apologised that the fire had not been laid that morning left the room leaving Elijah to examine the finely wrought carving of the boxwood settle that he sat uncomfortably on, waiting for what felt like an execution.

How did it happen that some men ruled over others. It was not money alone for he found the same assumption of autocracy in some of the timber merchants he supplied or even tanners as in big landowners like Sir Richard. It was, he decided, an ability to hide their feelings. Some, hid them behind a silky veneer; charm, extreme solicitousness coupled with an intolerance towards self doubt and nervousness - both their own and other peoples.

They seemed to Elijah to hold a superior intelligence, not in things known or intellectual argument, but an intuitive sense of where weakness lay in others and going after it as a lurcher does a hare.

With a keen understanding skewering them with insights that would keep them constantly off balance, craving approval. Some of these would be made up -preposterous calmunies that would render the victim helpless and furious - but worse were those with an element of truth, rendering them humiliated and ashamed.

So it was that Sir Richard, when he eventually arrived, shook Elijah's hand like a long lost friend. His thick mane of grey hair framed a face whoever very features seemed bigger than normal and that bore no trace of anxiety or woe. A great moon of a face in the tradition of Caracalla or Augustus.

Men like this didn't suffer from the paralysing self consciousness that often had Elijah fretting over words he had never meant to utter, for days. But there was a crudeness to these highly efficient human machines, too. Their weakness was intolerance that was fundamental to the creative spirit. These men were built for action rather than speculation but in their impatience to railroad through life and get things achieved they forgot to take any wonder in it. Their eyes flitted like snakes unable to feel unless someone refused them something -which they seldom did. and were notable for their impatience that often flared into bad temper. Sir richard would intimidate staff and villagers alike with the moving target of his ire. Why, he would ask, were pig races allowed on the mead when the cress beds were still vulnerable l.lwhy had nobody told him that the villagers had been allowed to grow their own vegetables . As nobody dared put their livelihood on the line his ego raged unchecked. Only two things refused to submit to his will - women and truffles .

Elijah was ushered into a huge hall at the end of which stood the most beautiful woman he had ever seen – not in the conventional sense, although she was small and blonde with hair cascading down her shoulders, but in the tender expression of her eyes that denoted a sensitivity and nobility of spirit but also an intelligence that seemed to see straight through to his soul – as if she could divine the workings of his heart. From the second their eyes met he felt She inscrutable demeanour of all good looking people. She smiled radiantly, her blue eyes promising tenderness but looking amused rather than compassionate beckoning him towards a chair. The shock coupled with the fear that accompanies attraction was enough for Elijah to feel a warmth suffusing his cheeks.

He sat down while sir richard eyed him with the pitiless regard of the unassailable. Lady anne just smiled and took up her customary position in the well upholstered chair next to the fire.

"We hear that you have found a number of truffles in hooting wood and would like, if possible, if you could take a group of ladies, including lady Anne, to find them on the day of the boxing day hunt," said Sir Richard in his low growl.

"The days we go out are often long and we are absent for a long time and if you could take them it would be an enjoyable diversion."

It was clear that this was an order rather than a request but Elijah immediately recognised that it would be impossible to do. "I'm afraid I can't sir, as the dogs get distracted if too many people are in attendance both by the smell and noise. It is for this reason that I always hunt on my own."

This was not, in fact, strictly true, for in recent months he had started taking his young son, Oswin, out on occasional tours. But he was barked at to stand back as soon as truffles were found to allow dogs and master to commune in the delicate act of extracting them from the ground. There was a delicate balance to be struck between encouraging the dogs to find the truffles and stopping them from eating them, for these dogs loved the things as much as any epicurean and would scoff them before he had a chance to lever them out of the ground with his trowel.

"But I could take her ladyship out on her own if she would like," he suggested, immediately regretting what sounded like the impropriety of the suggestion.

Sir Richard was silent for a moment while he digested the implications of allowing his wife to be alone with the Truffler and questioned whether he was being insubordinate by refusing to take out a party of women on what seemed like such a harmless exercise, or merely truthful.

Lacking the silver tongue of those born to a higher caste, or simply more exposed to the rich variety of humankind, Elijah often took them aback with his bluntness. But on this occasion it provoked embarrassment more than indignation as both Sir Richard and his wife looked at him quizzically.

"That is a good idea, certainly," said Sir Richard brushing some imaginary fluff off his jacket. " what do you think Darling? "

His wife stood up, her silk dress cascading in a series of rustles onto the stone floor. " I think that would be most diverting, " she said, her smile now mingled with a faint look of apprehension.

"Do I need to bring a basket?"

“No, if we find any I'll put them in my pockets," said Elijah suddenly becoming overwhelmed by the plan and trying hard to think of how he could exit from it. "I had better go now - I will let you know when it's a good time; we will have to wait," he said before curtly nodding a goodbye and exiting swiftly out of the door.

Lady Anne watched him leave; his bear-like frame almost entirely filling the doorway as he bounded through it. There was something immensely endearing about him she decided; his thick mattress of black curly hair and large brown eyes reminded her of some woodland animal; a hedgehog maybe or a sheep. He was not like the men she usually encountered, versed in world affairs and industry.

Sir Richard stood, head bowed, a wry smile spreading over his lips as he elegantly traced the embossed leatherwork of his desk with his finger. “Sounds like truffles are harder to snare than the unicorn," he said, looking up towards his wife. "The man's a lipstick."

“Oh, I don't know, I think he's unusual,” she said quietly, concentrating suddenly on tugging at her cuffs. “I think I will learn a lot from him."