Chapter Four

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As Christmas became imminent so did Elijah's feelings of excitement mixed with trepidation about the forthcoming hunt. By day, he made hurdles for the sheep, chipped the logs and made shingles – both for his own and for neighbouring farms – but at night he fretted over whether the ground would freeze too hard to make it possible to excavate the truffles when the day arrived.

If this outing entranced and amused Lady Anne perhaps her friends would employ him at their nearby estates.

He was also alarmed by his attraction to the woman who seemed to hover in his mind like and angel of grace and wonder. Their different stations in life left absolutely no doubt in his mind that he would never be able to have any relationship with her other than a formal one, but he still could not manage to occlude her entirely from his thoughts.

Still, he awoke on Boxing Day with all passion and even curiosity, spent. All the unspoken excitement that had silently preyed on his mind for weeks had vanished, it seemed, overnight to be replaced with a sense of foreboding and even mild irritation. He just wanted to get the job done and be rid of the onus to perform and the humiliation of being attracted to one who lived in a world in which, at best, he could only be an entertainer.

Soon after breakfast he took off, kissing his wife more passionately than he had done for weeks and set off for the House. The rhodendron bushes, flanked by yew trees on the drive set the tone of the house – an edifice, it seemed to him, designed for intimidation rather than pleasure.

He rang the bell and waited. After a lengthy pause Anne appeared wearing a dark green hooded

cape, decorated by a large silver clasp at her neck. Her face shone out like a moon – her blue eyes and pale lashes seamless in a skin as flawless as porcelain.

She looked distracted but soon beamed a smile that was like a hurricane lamp to Elijah, so bright it was, yet cold. On her feet were tightly laced leather boots that protruded from what he could see of a long tweed skirt.

“Shall we go?” she asked with strained jollity. As they trudged through the fields and finally the woods, they relaxed in each other’s company, assisted in great part by the acrobatics of flocks of crows which turned like competing armies swooping and diving onto the tops of one or two trees.

The trees stood out like black sentinels against the grey sky, that threatened snow as the wind lashed their ears. Sensitive to the different festivities enjoyed by each of them, Anne asked simply what the children had been given for Christmas. The truth was a wooden horse and trap made by Elijah for the boy and a loom for the girl but he found it hard to talk about the children without a twinge of discomfort. He had seen Sir Richard’s children driving a pony trap around the village while his two daughters sat laughing in the back but he tried to put them out of his mind as he recalled the nights he has spent inlaying walnut into the spokes of the wheels he had made for Oswin.

Love is love whether it comes with grand gestures or small, he reminded himself. What mattered more than anything was giving time, paying attention and listening to children he decided but he felt a pang of grief that even on that score he failed his children miserably.

In the struggle for survival he upbraided them for even for the most benign of crimes – asking if he had seen any traps in the forest, or asking him for anything in fact – what day of the week it was, whether it would rain on Thursday when they meant to collect the apples from the orchard, even asking simply for a spoon for their porridge.

Their curiosity about him outweighed his about them but he knew that this would all soon be reversed and reflected on the deep well of love he felt for them upon which these minor irritations were merely tiny eddies. It was a passion that sometimes took him by surprise. It might be the way Oswin cocked his ear when listening to him, his face one of an almost mournful seriousness or how Flora stuttered slightly when she talked, as if the infinite variety of things she could say bowled her over, making it hard for her to decide on just one. It might just be the way they sat, cross-legged on the lawn, craned with complete focus over the wonder of a slug or ant. But most endearing of all was their laughter – peals of giggles, prompted to their greatest by the fall of an adult from a state of grace to the status of a fool.

What they had inherited from him - although, it seemed most children shared it - was a will that knew no deflection and the thing that both impressed and irritated him the most was their ability to pursue their interests to their logical conclusion. Long after he had thought he had successfully batted away the idea of taking them on an expensive outing to the Christmas Fair in Beaminster or slunk out of his rash commitment to buy them a donkey, they would return to the debate, with even more vigour than before. The intervals between their discussions lent them ample time, it seemed, to formulate new tactics, and like the canniest salesman in a Turkish souk they could trounce any objection to their desired objective with an arsenal of entirely rational sounding reasons for them.

It was then that he found them particularly exhausting and would retire, up to the bedroom he shared

with his wife leaving her the grisly task of confronting them. Oh how they howled, railed, and complained and Mary would, like Saint Sebastian, take all the arrows; her face as impassive as a nun's. Secretly, she sided with them, but knew that the price would be too great if she let the fiction of their united marriage, fall. She resented the way that he would cut himself off, like a king amongst subjects, allowing himself the luxury of the solitude she rarely enjoyed. Worse, was the fact that children seemed to respect the boundary he presented to them. While she was called upon to tend every graze and solve every argument, he would just silently remove himself, like a fox sensing danger, padding upstairs to lie on the divan to stare at the ceiling.

Before she had got married, Mary had been a solitary person, more likely to go for a walk in the woods than attend a birthday party. Social gatherings she found almost painful in their expectation of a performance that she felt unwilling and often unable to deliver. They seemed, in her mind, to trivialise her relations between people.

How could you gain any true communion with someone when any conversation was constantly being interrupted and diluted to accommodate three or four participants? How could you gain any intimacy?

But since having children, she found a new way of relating that was more collective; that revolved not around intimacy, but duty.

In the small village in which they lived this would require her to watch out for the other children on their daily sojourn past her door on their way to the school and back, as well as the elderly – in particular Mrs Fisher, who had lost her mind and was often to be found perambulating around the village in a cycle of confusion. Even the goats that fed on the common became her responsibility as the man who owned them so regularly forgot to uproot the stake to which they were shackled that they would bleat all night in hunger.

So, as time went on, as Mary moved into motherhood, with a thicker girth and carrying all the heavy artillery that the role necessitated of heavy copper pans, rows of bottled fruit and vegetables and broken sleep and medical emergencies, inside she felt herself shrivel to a pea.

While she peeled and scrubbed, washed and ironed, spun and darned to keep the family clothed and fed, she felt like a sponge with no outer limit.

The one person who gave her some definition was Elijah, to whom she could at least be a good wife, and more important still, she was needed. More important than love to her was that she was required, she had a purpose – even if that purpose would, in time, be rendered obsolete.