Chapter Two

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In fact, over the previous six months or so Elijah had started to think of other women. Not in a particularly loving way, but intrigued. Where his wife seemed to be constantly on a journey to a destination that was not him, other women seemed, on the rare occasions he found himself amongst them, to seek him out.

He had taken to idly wondering about these women; what their bodies were like under their bodices, whether their embrace would be passionate or limp. But then he remembered how frightening women could be. He only had to comment on a spot of dust on the mantlepiece or a muddy boot in the hallway for his wife to turn into a furnace of rage, her face twisted in indignation and contempt. Perhaps all women were secretly the same, he mused, as he went to lie down on the big oak bed he handmade in the early days of their marriage with such hope and love. But perhaps they weren't, and this constant tussle played on in his mind.

In the wood Elijah had lost his way. The storm had blown out his lantern and sodden and shaken he sat down on a tree stump to take stock. The trees creaked like the rafters of a ship as the wind buffeted them with relentless little explosions. The leaves spread in a tarry mass glistening in the mud as water coursed down his neck and soaked through his boots so that even his precious supply of snuff he could feel congealing in his pocket. He called for his dogs - Wasp and Foy and it was as fumbled around for their heads that he suddenly caught sight of a dim yellow light. Lanced by the rain it was hard to make out what it was - moving or stationary; fire or lantern, near or far. There were no houses that he knew of in this part of the forest, but where was he exactly? He couldn't be sure. A few seconds later it had disappeared. Leaving him to muse over whether he was about to be attacked or saved, tricked and teased. It wasn’t the first time he had seen flickering lights. The first time had been when he stumbled across Sir Richard’s house, at that time, a derelict hull; a ghostly galleon that stood on the prow of the hill like some titanic Man o War. Elijah had been lured towards it by some music; lute and flute it sounded like that he had heard while wandering through the woods

but which seemed to be coming from the house, even though nobody lived there nor had lived there for 50 years. As he approached the house trying to divine the origin of the music it abruptly stopped, yet when he turned to return to his original path, it started up again. It was the third time this happened when the light suddenly appeared, a quiver of candle or lamplight in one of the bedroom windows and he stopped, surprised and then watching it for a bit, trying to work out if it was beckoning him forward or warding him off. As on this occasion, it stayed only for a few moments and was gone and when he retreated, afraid, but also curiously thrilled to be involved in such a surprising drama, no music could be heard. Elijah had always known there was more to existence than what lay on the surface. Mary had often scoffed in his belief that "little people" dwelt in the grasses and under the stairs but now, it seemed, he had been given proof of something else. A divine light, a human light. The question was, which?

By five in the morning a thin grey light had started appearing behind the upper boughs of the trees - a ghostly mist replacing the torrential downpour of earlier in the night and soon Elijah could begin to make out the marks in the mud of the horse cart. Every two or three weeks the coppicers would load up the horses would carry timber to the train stations to be transported to the sawmills. Oak bark was used for tanning; tree trunks for furniture and oddments of ash, the hardest wearing of all the woods, for shoes.

Such rigorous clearing of the forest floor engendered a profusion of truffles. Truffles couldn't grow where there was no light and needed the green shoots of saplings to truly thrive.

Trugs of the best truffles would be collected by the coppicers and would accompany the logs to the train station and from there, it was rumoured, to the king of England.

Those that had been damaged, either by the dogs half eating them, or the worms, we're sent to the local town where they would be made into pies by those like Mary, who would then sell them at the weekly markets.

Now Elijah followed one of these tracks, sometimes losing it where the storm had hammered with particular force, until he struck a bigger artery and eventually a road. Although there was no sun, he worked out, from the brightest part of the dim horizon where East was and struck out West, in the direction of his home.

Wasp and Foy, shivered,

Their coats, usually thick and curly, were as glossy as otters and they loped at the heels of their master enjoying the protection of his long cape.

Never had Elijah been so delighted to see the roof of a cow byre that he spotted nestling amongst the larch trees beyond a field next to the road. In an instant he knew where he was and the course of his three mile journey home.

He got home to find Mary had had as sleepless night as he. Her face, waxy with anxiety, which, even when smiling was never free from the look of mild pain. "I thought you had been trapped or shot," she cried, tears of relief coursing down her face. She quickly filled the hip bath with water while rubbing the dogs with a towel.

Theirs was a love that never paraded itself or expressed itself in lavish declamations but was the rock upon which both of them depended for their survival.

The children, woken by the commotion, appeared at the foot of the stairs, bemused and silent.

They took their parents competence for granted and the lapse in it was an icy gust of uncertainity that made it impossible for them to sleep. Their stomachs roiled with anxiety as their mother, a steamer to which they were attached like a couple of tug boats – lurched from side to side. But the man had come home, and all now lay quiet - the cat stretched its paws, the fire crackled and gently sighed - at the eye of the storm that was to come.