Chapter One

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The Trufflers Wife
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Mary sat at the oak scrubbed table examining a small fly hopping on a medlar in a bowl. It spelt bad news. Thousands of the tiny things had started come in the windows off the reed with which her husband had recently thatched their cottage and try as she might to douse them with vinegar or brush them out of the window, they kept appearing, like some biblical omen. Where was he? she wondered. It had been soon after breakfast that her husband had announced with his customary economy that he was off hunting, but now the sun had started to dip below the horizon, a blue grey haze replacing the dark orange of only seconds before. Upstairs she could hear the children gently snoring like owls in the eaves; downstairs the dogs who usually joined them, we're absent - out with their master hunting for the small black nuggets that would provide them with their meagre additional weekly income from Sir Richard who lived a mile away. Elijah was a singular man - half human, in her mind and half ram. His strong frame was topped by a broad forehead and a mass of thick glossy curly hair - almost negro in its intensity but not so black - and dark brown eyes that, depending on his mood, were compassionate and tender or distracted and bored. He would only go out truffling - or indeed do anything - when he felt like it. Often, they would be down to eating beets or the last bag of maize before he would finally don with sheepskin cap and chaps and shout for his dogs and take off for the woods in search of the uncinatum - so called because it looked like an old bone. She had tried to make him go out more – there were plenty of customers for truffle pies when she made them - a mix of pieces of lamb or rabbit eked out with the woody ingots - but it always led to him roaring, ‘Mary, the truffle will make mischief if you go on so,’ and so she quietened down, returning to her domestic chores with fury. Because even though she thought he spoke nonsense about the power of the truffle to drive men wild, she could never be completely sure. Now, she was simply worried . Although small and strong looking, with hands like crab claws and a face whipped raw by the wind, Mary had an imagination that always tended towards catastrophe. Even as a child she would stand at

the window of her parents cottage staring out into the blackness at night to scare off the foxes or badgers she was convinced would otherwise some how scale the walls and assail them all and now she worried just as constantly about how to make ends meet and her children's health. Wrestling with anxiety kept her awake for hours every night and hollowed her mind. She got up from the table and went outside to get another log for the fire. The wind caught her thick wool skirt flapping it round her legs like a ghost as a bat swooped out from under the store. Barely perceptible rain softly kissed her cheek. They had bought the farm, Elijah and she, six days after the birth of their second child, Alfred. Until then, they had lodged with a farmer down the road, where she had worked as a parlour maid, helping to milk the cows and Elijah, a coppice man. Women, with their more delicate hands and empathy were always said to be better at getting a cow to yield and Mary, who had bovine quietness, was the best of the three girls who worked on the farm. While she peeled apples or tied hazel baskets, he would be out in the forests, winnowing stakes to train saplings against or splicing trees down to a stump to allow for next years growth.

Theirs was a communion of need - but as time had elapsed they had grown together like two old trees; their branches leaning on and supporting each other to the extent that they only knew what weight they bore on occasions like this; when the other was in danger. There had been earlier passions - for him at least. But it had left him feeling both aroused and diminished and what he longed for more than anything, was to feel accepted. She, on the other hand, had had no former lovers; one brief exchange with a carter and another with a dairyman at the church fair but since having children she spent her time largely in female company, negotiating the ever changing sands of mothers. In many ways, she felt more comfortable living just amongst women. Before she met Elijah her best friend, Susannah had always swept in when a man arrived. With tresses so black they were almost purple, eyes like topaz and a vigour to prove herself attractive she could only shine if others around her were cast into shadow.

There had been six of them living at the farm, when Elijah first got a job there but the addition of two little ones was proving taxing for the couples hosts. She remembered when she first saw Eli crossing the yard as he came looking for work. Tanned and with a smile that spoke like a silent hello she idly wondered who he was. Not long after he made her a cherry a wood bowl. Well not made it so much as capitalised on a deformity he had sawn off a tree trunk by hollowing it out a little with a rasp. ‘You need something to call your own,’ he said, which had embarrassed her, before she realised he had meant it kindly. She had nothing to call her own. Her parents had both died many years before and she had nothing left of them materially. Now, she looked at the bowl with fear. What if she never saw him again? Only now did it strike her how its gnarled exterior and the marbled interior looked like a truffle and reminded her of the gulf between the appearance of something and its interior truth. The clod of earth that contained a pearl.

Occasionally he took a lantern and went out hunting after dark but not on a day like today, when the rain which had started to lash down like knives would make it impossible for the dogs to smell anything. Perhaps he had fallen down a badger hole. Horses often broke their legs in them, and Some of the setts were so large they looked like mantraps. Perhaps he had gone to see the farmer who churlish though he was occasionally invited him in for some cider, which he would nurse, untasted, until he left. John only ever saw men. Plantsmen, woodsmen, lords, he rarely encountered the world of women segregated anyway by the demands of children and decorum. Only on market day, when he would climb to the top of the hill where villagers would assemble to sell, in quiet despair, their meagre collection of mouldering apples, haw berries and tomatoes, did he exchange niceties with them and at the village parties at Christmas and to celebrate the end of harvest. In the main he found most women alarming - their outspokenness and honesty perturbed him in much the same way that children had done, before he had his own. But Mary was different. She didn't

challenge or appear to expect much of him. Most reassuringly, she didn't admire him. In the past he had found a certain type of woman, often nobly born Had found him intriguing. They would ask him questions and stare at him with a vixen like intensity which he pretended to enjoy, smiling and nodding but in fact found claustrophobic. He felt reassured by Mary, who was usually taken up with the need to stop the draught coming in the window, scalding beetroot or scaling the hayloft to look for eggs. Her life was a succession of little tasks which she rarely allowed conversation or thoughts about him, to impede. But now she was thinking about him. The background hum to her life had come to an abrupt halt causing her, for the first time in her life to pay it much attention.

The logs snapped in the fire. The drumming on the windows black as silk, streaked with silver as the rain turned to sleet. Her throat clenched in ever tightened knots as she tried to recall a comment he had made about Sir Richards new mantraps. Poachers from the nearest town had been caught stealing firewood and, in typically ruthless fashion, the baron had set about stopping them.

The forests, a mix of deciduous and firs trees went on for miles - the biggest forest they said in England, how could one possibly find him if he had been ensnared? She was surprised to be worrying so. Love, she pondered, is not like the storybooks suggest it should be or even like they say in church. It is not being kind, good and obedient; in fact those things seem could almost kill it dead. It is just simple unvarnished acceptance of a person in the way they want to be. And that is the interesting part. How people like to be. Except for the odd coup when he discovered a truffle the size of a fist, or when he secured a new client with groves extending to kingdom come, Elijah, she had learnt, mostly wanted to be ignored. She knew of some women whose husbands wanted to be spoiled - cosseted and stroked like cockateels as their wives twittered around them, engaged in an unstoppable river of discourse; others wanted to be admired, desired, found amusing. Worst were the ones who wanted to be detested - there were surprising numbers, she found, of those. Elijah, it seemed to her, wanted just her presence, as if the very sound of her coughing in the night or chopping vegetables was comfort. He didn't want to be entertained or interested just to co exist in animal warmth. Or at least, this is what she had assumed..