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The Woods

by Victoria Watson

As night begins to fall, I can just make out the woods ahead of me. I know if I can make it to the thickest part, the heart within, I will not be seen and it will give me the safety of time and the darkness to decide what I must now do.

Every muscle aches and I have to remind myself to breathe -- almost to remind my heart to beat. This ceaseless journey has brought little comfort and I am no nearer to figuring out my dilemma as when I started it.

The branches close behind me like welcoming arms and the dim dusk light is extinguished as I feel my way forward. My hands brush past bracken and thorn, but I know these woods like the lines of my hand. I have picked blackberries here in the late summer, I have caressed the bark of the silver birch as it peels away from itself, I have seen the same mushroom rings spring up each year while the spores of fern dance in the early sunlight. With no light to guide me I follow the track, well-used by badger, fox and hare, I push away through the clumps of grass to where the world has been shut out and the dense musty undergrowth muffles all sound from beyond. Only here can I think, only here can my heartbeat slow and listen to the roosting wood pigeons, only here am I truly safe.

My eyes grow accustomed to the gloom and I hear an owl hooting in the distance, it is calling for its mate and will not return here until the dawn, when I shall be forced to leave. To face Susannah and tell her what I have learned.

I stop when I reach the brook, and kneel down to drink. My cupped hands still shaking from exhaustion and thirst. My hair falls forward and I catch a rippled reflection in the moonlight of my face and see only worry etched there. I gather my cloak around me and lean back on a familiar oak, feeling the bumps and ridges of its mighty trunk push into the bumps and ridges of my weary spine. I close my eyes and feel its strength support me, and I finally feel at peace.

Susannah will want proof of what I know but I have none to give her, she will be full of questions of which I have no answers. She will shout and scream, demanding so much more than I can give but then worse, realisation of what her husband has done will sink in like my fingers on the moss beneath me and only then will she be silent. Only then will she understand the consequence of his actions.

How can I tell her everything I have seen; it will bring her only pain and suffering? I am the messenger everybody is desperate to see but relieved to watch leave. I am the bringer of bad news, bad omens, and the changer of minds. I will only bring my mistress unhappiness and sorrow and yet I cannot see any other direction for me. The die has been cast.

Oh to just stay here in the sanctity of these woods. The keeper of secrets, the warm dark embrace of branch, limb and leaf. I wish for it, but I know I will have to leave here as soon as the light starts to dance upon the canopy above my head.

A snap of wood behind startles me from my thoughts and I hold my breath listening for more. Something breathes only a short distance from me and I lower my cloak to hide my face, my breath, my scent. Silence. I wait, blood pumping loudly through my veins. If I am captured here, then all will be lost. Drew's men will recognise me instantly and they will send message to him that they have tracked and caught me in a snare of exhaustion and carelessness.

I listen out but can hear nothing. No horses stamping the rock-hard ground with their travelled hooves and their breath billowing out from flared nostrils. No riders looking for any rustle in the matted undergrowth watching like the kestrel to the vole.

Only silence, maybe then I am still safe. I am not found, I am secure still from the dangers that lurk just beyond these trees.