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GEORGE




AN INSPECTOR LYNLEY NOVEL

THIS BODY
OF DEATH

This Body of Death

A Novel

Elizabeth George

 HarperCollins e-books

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

—ROMANS, 7:24

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BEGINNINGS

Reports from the investigating officers who interviewed both Michael Spargo and his mother prior to charges being filed against him all suggest that the morning of the boy's tenth birthday began badly. While such reports might well be deemed suspect, considering the nature of Michael's crime and the strength of the antipathy felt towards him by police and by members of his community, one cannot ignore the fact that the extensive document written by the social worker who sat with him during his interrogations and his subsequent trial reveal the same information. There will always be details that remain unavailable to the student of childhood abuse, family dysfunction, and the psychopathology that such abuse and dysfunction ultimately engender, but major facts cannot be hidden because they will necessarily be witnessed or directly experienced by those who come into contact with individuals in the midst of displaying—whether consciously or unconsciously—their mental, psychological, and emotional disturbances. Such was the case with Michael Spargo and his family.

As one of nine boys, Michael had five older brothers. Two of these boys (Richard and Pete, aged eighteen and fifteen at the time) as well as their mother, Sue, each had an ASBO filed against them as a result of ongoing disputes with their neighbours, harassment of pensioners living on the council estate, public drunkenness, and destruction of public and private property. There was no father present in the home. Four years prior to Michael's tenth birthday, Donovan Spargo had deserted wife and children and taken up life in Portugal with a widow fifteen years his senior, leaving a note of farewell and five pounds in coins on the kitchen table. He had not been seen or heard of since. He made no appearance at Michael's trial.

Sue Spargo, whose employment skills were minimal and whose education was limited to a failure to pass any one of her GCSEs, readily admits that she “took to the drink a bit too hard” as a result of the desertion and was consequently largely unavailable to any of her boys from that time forward. Prior to Donovan Spargo's desertion, it seems that the family maintained some degree of external stability (as indicated both by school reports and by anecdotal evidence from neighbours and the local police), but once the head of the household departed, whatever dysfunction had been hidden from the community came spilling out.

The family lived in Buchanan Estate, a dreary sprawl of grey concrete-and-steel tower blocks and unappealing terrace houses in a section of town fittingly called the Gallows, which was known for street fights, muggings, carjackings, and burglaries. Murder was rare here, but violence was common. The Spargos were among the luckier inhabitants. Because of the size of the family, they lived in one of the terrace houses and not in one of the tower blocks. They had a garden in the back of their house and a square of earth in the front although neither of these was kept up for planting. The house contained a sitting room and kitchen, four bedrooms, and one bathroom. Michael shared a room with the younger boys. There were five of them in all, distributed in two sets of bunk beds. Three of the older boys shared an adjoining bedroom. Only Richard, the eldest, had his own room, a privilege apparently having to do with Richard's propensity for committing acts of violence upon his younger brothers. Sue Spargo had a separate bedroom as well. Curiously, in interviews she repeated several times that when any of the boys became ill, they slept with her, and “not with that lout Richard.”

On Michael's tenth birthday, the local police were called shortly after seven in the morning.

family dispute had escalated to the point of causing a disturbance in the immediate neighbourhood when the occupants of the house adjoining the Spargos' dwelling had attempted to intervene. The later claim was that they were merely seeking peace and quiet. This is in opposition to Sue Spargo's allegation that they attacked her boys. However, a careful reading of everyone's ensuing interview with the police shows that a brawl between Richard and Pete Spargo began in the upstairs corridor of the Spargo house and grew from the latter boy's unhurried vacating of the bathroom. Richard's subsequent attack upon Pete was brutal, as he was quite a bit larger and stronger than his fifteen-year-old brother. It brought sixteen-year-old Doug to his assistance, which seems to have turned Richard and Pete into allies who then attacked Doug. By the time Sue Spargo waded into the fray, it had spilled down the stairs. When it appeared that she, too, was going to come under attack from Richard and Pete, twelve-year-old David sought to protect her with a butcher knife from the kitchen, where he had gone allegedly to make his breakfast.

It was at this point that the neighbours became involved, roused by the noise, which they could hear through the badly insulated walls of the adjoining houses. Unfortunately, the neighbours—three in all—came to the Spargo residence armed with a cricket bat, a tyre iron, and a hammer, and according to Richard Spargo's account, it was the sight of these that enflamed him. "Going after the family, they were," was his direct statement, the words of a boy who saw himself as the man of the house whose duty it was to protect his mother and siblings.

Into this developing imbroglio, Michael Spargo awakened. "Richard and Pete was going at it with Mum," his statement recounts. "We could hear them, me and the little ones, but we didn't want nothing to do with it." He indicates that he wasn't frightened, but when probed for more information it's clear that Michael did his best to give his older brothers a wide berth so as to avoid "a thumping. I looked at them crosswise." That he wasn't always able to avoid the thumping is a fact attested to by his teachers, three of whom reported to social workers bruises, scratches, burns, and at least one black eye seen on Michael's body. Other than a single visit to the home, however, nothing more came of these reports. The system, it seems, was overburdened.

There is some suggestion that Michael passed on this abuse to his younger brothers. Indeed, from accounts gathered once four of the children went into care, it seems that Michael was given the responsibility of seeing to it that his sibling Stevie did not "wee the sheets." Without resources as to how this was supposed to be accomplished, he apparently administered regular thrashings to the seven-year-old, who in turn took out his own rage on the other boys further down the line.

Whether Michael abused any of the littler boys that morning is not known. He reports only that once the police arrived, he got out of bed, dressed in his school uniform, and went down to the kitchen with the intention of having his breakfast. He knew it was his birthday, but he had no expectation of the day being acknowledged. "Didn't care, did I?" was how he later put it to the police.

Breakfast consisted of frosted flakes and jam rolls. There was no milk for the cereal—Michael brings up this point twice in his earliest interviews—so Michael ate the frosted flakes dry, leaving most of the jam rolls for his younger brothers. He put one of these into the pocket of his mustard-coloured anorak (both the jam roll and the anorak becoming crucial details as things developed) and he left the house through the back garden.

He said his intention was to go directly to school, and in his first interview with the police he claimed he did go there. This was a story he did not change until he was read the statement made by his teachers attesting to his truancy that day, at which point he changed his story to confess that he went into the allotments, which were a feature of the Buchanan Estate and which were positioned behind the terrace where the Spargos lived. There, he "might've give a bit of aggro to an old bugger working in a patch

of veg” and he “might’ve bashed in some shed door or something” where he “could’ve nicked some secateurs maybe only I didn’t keep them, I never kept them.” The “old bugger” in question does verify Michael’s presence in the allotment at eight in the morning, although it’s doubtful that the small enclosures of raised beds held much attraction for the boy, who seems to have spent some fifteen minutes “tramping them about” according to the pensioner, until “I gave him a right proper talking to. He swore like a little thug and scarpered.”

It seems at this point that Michael headed in the general direction of his school, some half mile from the Buchanan Estate. It was somewhere on this route, however, that he encountered Reggie Arnold.

Reggie Arnold was quite a contrast to Michael Spargo. Where Michael was tall for his age and rather thin, Reggie was squat and had carried baby fat well beyond babyhood. His head was regularly shaved to the skull, which made him the subject of considerable teasing at school (he was generally referred to as “that slap-head wanker”) but, unlike Michael’s, his clothing was usually neat and clean. His teachers report that Reggie was a “good boy but with a short fuse” and when pressed they tend to identify the cause of this short fuse as “Dad and Mum’s troubles and then there’s the trouble with his sis and brother.” From this, it is probably safe to assume that the unusual nature of the Arnold marriage, in addition to the disability of an older brother and the mental incapacity of a younger sister, put Reggie in a position of getting lost in the shuffle of daily life.

Rudy and Laura Arnold, it must be said, had been dealt a difficult hand of cards. Their older son was permanently wheelchair bound from severe cerebral palsy and their daughter had been deemed unfit for a normal classroom education. These two elements of the Arnolds’ life had the effect of simultaneously focusing nearly all parental attention on the two problematic children and burdening what was already a rather fragile marriage in which Rudy and Laura Arnold had separated time and time again, putting Laura in the position of coping on her own.

Caught up in the middle of trying familial circumstances, Reggie was unlikely to receive much attention. Laura readily confesses that she “didn’t do right by the boy,” but his father claims that he “had him over the flat five or six times,” in apparent reference to meeting his paternal obligations during those periods when he and his wife were living apart. As can be imagined, Reggie’s unmet need for nurturing metamorphosed into common attempts at gaining adult attention. In the streets, he evidenced this through petty thievery and the occasional bullying of younger children; in the classroom, he acted up. This acting up was seen by his teachers, unfortunately, as the aforementioned “short fuse” and not as the cry for help it actually was. When thwarted, he was given to throwing his desk, beating his head upon it and upon the walls, and falling to the floor in a tantrum.

On the day of the crime, accounts have it—and CCTV films confirm—that Michael Spargo and Reggie Arnold encountered each other at the corner shop nearest the Arnold home and on Michael’s route to school. The boys were acquainted and had evidently played together in the past but were as yet unknown to each other’s parents. Laura Arnold reports that she’d sent Reggie to the shops for milk, and the shopkeeper confirms that Reggie purchased a half liter of semi-skimmed. He also apparently stole two Mars bars “for a bit of a laugh,” according to Michael.

Michael attached himself to Reggie. Along the route back to the Arnold house, the boys extended their enjoyment of Reggie’s errand by opening the milk and dumping its contents into the petrol tank of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, an act of mischief witnessed by the motorcycle’s owner, who chased them unsuccessfully afterwards. He was later to remember the mustard-coloured anorak that Michael Spargo was wearing, and although he was not able to identify either boy by name, he

recognised a photo of Reggie Arnold when the police presented it to him, along with other faces.

Reaching home without the milk he'd been sent out to fetch, Reggie reported to his mother—with Michael Spargo as putative witness—that he'd been bullied by two boys who took the money intended for the milk. "He cried and was getting himself into one of his states," Laura Arnold reports. "And she believed him. What else was there to do?" This is indeed a relevant question, for without her husband in the home and considering that she was attempting alone to care for two disabled children, a missing carton of milk, no matter how needed it might have been that morning, would have seemed a very small matter to her. She did, however, want to know who Michael Spargo was, and she asked her son that question. Reggie identified him as a "mate from school," and he took Michael along to do his mother's next bidding, which was evidently to get his sister out of bed. By now, it was in the vicinity of eight forty-five and, if the boys planned to go to school that day, they were going to be late. Doubtless, they knew this, as Michael's interview details an argument that Reggie had with his mother following her instructions to him: "Reggie started whingeing about how it would make him late, but she didn't care. She told him to get his bum upstairs and fetch his sister. She said he was to pray to God and say thanks that he wasn't like the other two," by which she likely was referring to the disabilities of his brother and sister. This last remark from Laura Arnold appears to have been a common refrain.

Despite the command, Reggie did not fetch his sister. Rather, he told his mother to "do the bad thing to herself" (these are Michael's words, as Reggie seems to have been more direct) and the boys left the house. Back in the street, however, they saw Rudy Arnold who, during the time they'd spent in the kitchen with Laura, had arrived by car and was "hanging 'bout outside, like he was afraid to come in." He and Reggie exchanged a few words, which seem to have been largely unpleasant, at least on Reggie's part. Michael claims he asked who the man was, assuming it was "his mum's boyfriend or something," and Reggie told him "the stupid git" was his father and followed this declaration with a minor act of vandalism: He took a milk basket from a neighbour's front step and threw it into the street, where he jumped on it and crushed it.

According to Michael, he took no part in this. His statement asserts that at this point he had even the intention of going to school, but that Reggie announced he was "doing a bunk" and "having some bloody fun for once." It was Reggie, Michael says, and not Michael himself who came up with the idea of including Ian Barker in what was to follow.

At eleven years of age, Ian Barker had already been labeled as damaged, difficult, troubled, dangerous, borderline, angry, and psychopathic, depending upon whose report is read. He was, at this time, the only child of a twenty-four-year-old mother (his paternity remains unknown to this day), but he had been brought up to believe that this young woman was his older sister. He seems to have been quite fond of his grandmother, who he naturally assumed was his mother, but he apparently loathed the girl he'd been taught to believe was his sister. At the age of nine, he was considered old enough to learn the truth. However, it was a truth he did not take well to hearing, especially as it came hard on the heels of Tricia Barker's being asked to leave her mother's house and being told to take her son with her. In this, Ian's grandmother now says she was doing her best to "practise the tough love. I was willing to keep both of them—the lad and Tricia, too—as long as the girl worked, but she wouldn't hold on to a job and she wanted parties and friends and staying out all hours and I reckoned if she had to bring up the boy on her own, she'd change her ways."

She didn't. Courtesy of the government, Tricia Barker was given accommodation, although the flat was small and she was forced to share a tiny bedroom with her son. It was evidently in this room that

Ian began to witness his mother engaging in sexual acts with a variety of men and, on at least for occasions, with more than one man. It's worthy of note that Ian consistently refers to her neither as his mother nor as Tricia, but rather through the use of pejorative terms such as slag, cunt, gash, tart, and minge bag. His grandmother he doesn't refer to at all.

Michael and Reggie seem to have had no trouble locating Ian Barker that morning. They did not go to his house—according to Reggie “his mum was pissed most of the time and she yelled abuse out the door”—but rather they came upon him in the act of shaking down a younger boy on the route to school. Ian had “dumped the kid's rucksack out on the pavement” and was in the process of going through its contents to find anything of value, but most particularly money. There being nothing of value for him to take from the child, Ian “shoved him meanlike against the side of a house,” Michael's words, “and started going at him.”

Neither Reggie nor Michael attempted to stop the harassment. Reggie says that “it were only a bit of fun. I could see he weren't going to hurt him,” while Michael claims he “couldn't see 'xactly what he was up to,” a rather doubtful claim as all of the boys were in plain sight on the pavement. Nonetheless whatever Ian's full intentions were, they came to nothing further. A motorist stopped and demanded to know what they were doing, and the boys ran off.

There have been suggestions that Ian's desire to hurt something that day, having been thwarted, became the root of what occurred later. Indeed, under questioning, Reggie Arnold seems only too eager to point the finger in Ian's direction. But while Ian's anger had in the past certainly led him to commit acts the reprehensible nature of which caused him to be hated even more than the other two boys when the truth came out, the evidence ultimately shows that he was an *equal participant* (emphasis mine) in what followed.

JUNE

THE NEW FOREST, HAMPSHIRE

CHANCE ALONE BROUGHT HER INTO HIS ORBIT. LATER HE would think that had he not looked down from the scaffolding at that precise moment, had he taken Tess directly home and not to the wood that afternoon, she might not have come into his life. But that idea comprised the very substance of what he was supposed to think, which was a realisation he would only come to once it was far too late.

The time was midafternoon, and the day was hot. June generally prompted torrents of rain, mocking anyone's hope for summer. But this year, the weather was setting itself up to be different. Days of sun in a cloudless sky made the promise of a July and an August during which the ground would bake, and the vast lawns within the Perambulation would brown over, sending the New Forest ponies deep within the woodlands to forage.

He was high up on the scaffolding, getting ready to climb to the peak of the roof where he'd begun to apply the straw. Far more pliable than the reeds that comprised the rest of the materials, the straw could be bent to form the ridge. Some people thought of this as the "pretty bit" on a thatched roof, the scalloped pattern crisscrossed with spars in a decorative fashion. But he thought of it as what it was: that which protected the top layer of reeds from weather and avian damage.

He'd got to the knuckle. He was feeling impatient. They'd been working on the enormous project for three months, and he'd promised to begin another in two weeks' time. The finishing work still needed doing, and he could not hand off that part of the job to his apprentice. Cliff Coward was not ready to use the leggett on the thatch. That work was crucial to the overall look of the roof, and required both skill and a properly honed eye. But Cliff could hardly be trusted to do this level of work when so far he hadn't managed to stay on task with even the simplest job, like the one he was meant to be doing just now, which was hauling another two bundles of straw up to the ridge as he'd been instructed. And why had he not managed this most mundane of tasks?

Seeking an answer to that question was what altered Gordon Jossie's life. He turned from the ridge calling sharply, "Cliff! What the bloody hell's happened to you?" and he saw below him that his apprentice was no longer standing by the bundles of straw where he was supposed to be, anticipating the needs of the master thatcher above him. Rather he'd gone over to Gordon's dusty pickup some yards away. There Tess sat at attention, happily wagging her bushlike tail while a woman—a stranger and clearly a visitor to the gardens if the map she held and the clothing she wore were anything to go by—patted her golden head.

"Oy! Cliff!" Gordon Jossie shouted. Both the apprentice and the woman looked up.

Gordon couldn't see her face clearly because of her hat, which was broad brimmed and fashioned from straw with a fuchsia scarf tied round it as a band. This same colour was in her dress as well, and the dress was summery, showing off tanned arms and long tanned legs. She wore a gold bracelet round her wrist and sandals on her feet, and she carried a straw handbag tucked under her arm, its strap looped over her shoulder.

Cliff called out, "Sorry! I was helping this lady—," as the woman said, "I've got myself completely lost," with a laugh. She went on, "I'm awfully sorry. He offered ..." She gestured with the map she was holding, as if to explain what was patently obvious: She'd somehow wandered from the public gardens to the administrative building, which Gordon was reroofing. "I've never actually seen

someone thatch a roof before," she added, perhaps in an effort to be friendly.

Gordon, however, wasn't feeling friendly. He was feeling sharp, all edges and most of them needing to be smoothed. He had no time for tourists.

"She's trying to get to Monet's Pond," Cliff called out.

"And I'm trying to get a bloody ridge put onto this roof," was Gordon's reply, although he made it in an undertone. He gestured northwest. "There's a path up by the fountain. The nymphs and fauns fountain. You're meant to turn left there. You turned right."

"Did I?" the woman called back. "Well...that's typical, I s'pose." She stood there for a moment, as if anticipating further conversation. She was wearing dark glasses and it came to Gordon that the entire effect of her was as if she was a celebrity, a Marilyn Monroe type because she was shapely like Marilyn Monroe, not like the pin-thin girls one generally saw. Indeed, he actually thought at first that she might be a celebrity. She rather dressed like one, and her expectation that a man would be willing to stop what he was doing and eagerly converse with her suggested it as well. He replied briefly to the woman with, "You should find your way easy enough now."

"Were that only the truth," she said. She added, rather ridiculously, he thought, "There won't be any ...well, any horses up there, will there?"

He thought, What the hell ... ? and she added, "It's only ...I'm actually rather afraid of horses."

"Ponies won't hurt you," he replied. "They'll keep their distance 'less you try to feed them."

"Oh, I wouldn't that." She waited for a moment as if expecting him to say more, which he was not inclined to do. Finally she said, "Anyway ...thank you," and that was the end of her.

She set off on the route that Gordon had indicated, and she removed her hat as she went and swung it from her fingertips. Her hair was blond, cut like a cap round her head, and when she shook it, it fell neatly back into place with a shimmer, as if knowing what it was supposed to do. Gordon wasn't immune to women, so he could see she had a graceful walk. But he felt no stirring in his groin or in his heart, and he was glad of this. Untouched by women was how he liked it.

Cliff joined him on the scaffolding, two bundles of straw on his back. He said, "Tess quite like her," as if in explanation of something or perhaps in the woman's defence, and he added, "Could be time for another go, mate," as Gordon watched the woman gain distance from them.

But Gordon wasn't watching her out of fascination or attraction. He was watching to see if she made the correct turn at the fountain of nymphs and fauns. She did not. He shook his head. Hopeless, he thought. She'd be in the cow pasture before she knew it, but he fully expected she would also be able to find someone else to help her there.

CLIFF WANTED TO go for a drink at the end of the day. Gordon did not. He did not drink at all. He always never liked the idea of becoming chummy with his apprentices. Beyond that, the fact that Cliff was only eighteen made Gordon thirteen years his senior and most of the time he felt like his father. Or he felt the way a father *might* feel, he supposed, as he had no children and possessed neither the desire nor the expectation of having them.

He said to Cliff, "Got to give Tess a run. She won't settle tonight if she doesn't work off some energy."

Cliff said, "You sure, then, mate?"

Gordon said, "Reckon I know my dog." He knew that Cliff hadn't been talking about Tess, but he liked the way his remark served to cut off conversation. Cliff enjoyed talking far too much.

Gordon dropped him at the pub in Minstead, a hamlet tucked into a fold of land, consisting of a church, a graveyard, a shop, the pub, and a cluster of old cob cottages gathered round a small green

This was shaded by an ancient oak, and near it a piebald pony grazed, its clipped tail grown out in the time that had passed since the last autumn drift when it had been marked. The pony didn't look up as the pickup rumbled to a stop not terribly far from its hind legs. Longtime denizen of the New Forest, the animal knew that its right to graze wherever it wished long preceded the pickup's right to travel the Hampshire roads.

Cliff said, "Morrow, then," and went off to join his mates in the pub. Gordon watched him go and for no particular reason, waited till the door closed behind him. Then he put the pickup into gear once more.

He went, as always, to Longslade Bottom. Over time, he'd learned there was security in being a creature of habit. At the weekend he might well choose another spot to exercise Tess, but during the week at the end of his workday, he liked a place that was closer to where he lived. He also liked the openness of Longslade Bottom. And in moments when he felt a need for seclusion, he liked the fact that Hinchelsea Wood climbed the hillside just above it.

The lawn stretched out from an uneven car park over which Gordon jounced, with Tess in the back of the pickup yelping happily in anticipation of a run. On a fine day like this, Gordon's wasn't the only vehicle nosing the edge of the lawn: Six cars lined up like nursing kittens against the sprawl of open land upon which in the distance a herd of ponies grazed, five foals among them. Used to both people and the presence of other animals, the ponies remained undisturbed by the barking of the dogs already at play on the lawn, but when Gordon saw them some hundred yards away, he knew that a free run on the closely cropped grass was not on the cards for his own dog. Tess had a thing about the wild New Forest ponies, and despite having been kicked by one, nipped by another, and thoroughly scolded by Gordon time and again, she refused to understand that she had not been created for the purpose of chasing them.

Already she was itching to do so. She was whining and licking her chops as if in anticipation of a challenge that she assumed lay before her. Gordon could almost read her canine mind: *And foals are well! Wicked! What fun!*

He said, "Don't even think about it," and he reached inside the pickup bed for her lead. He clipped on and then released her. She made a hopeful lunge. When he brought her up short, heavy drama ensued as she coughed and gagged. It was, he thought with resignation, a typical late afternoon with his dog.

"Don't have the brains God gave you, do you?" he asked her. Tess looked at him, wagged her tail and dog-smiled. "That may have worked at one time," he went on, "but it won't work now.

"We're not going that direction." He led the golden retriever northeast, determinedly away from the ponies and their offspring. She went but she was not averse to what manipulation she could manage. She looked repeatedly over her shoulder and whined, obviously in the hope that this would move him to change his mind. It did not.

Longslade Bottom comprised three areas: the lawn upon which the ponies were grazing; a heath to the northwest that budded with cross-leaved heather and purple moorgrass; and a central bog between the two, where amorphous cushions of sphagnum moss soaked up moving water while bogbean flowers grew in pink and white bursts from rhizomes that rose from shallow pools. A path from the car park led walkers on the safest route through the bog, and along this route the feathery seed heads of cotton grass formed great white tussocks in the peaty soil.

Gordon headed in this last direction, for the path across the bog would take them up the slope of Hinchelsea Wood. In the wood he could release the dog. The ponies would be out of sight and, for Tess, out of sight was decidedly out of mind. She possessed that most admirable of qualities: She

could live entirely in the moment.

Summer solstice was not far off, so the sun was still high in the cloudless sky despite the hour of the day. Its light flashed against the iridescent bodies of dragonflies and upon the bright plumage of lapwings taking to the air as Gordon and the dog passed by. A slight breeze bore the rich scent of peat and the decomposing vegetation that had created it. The entire atmosphere was alive with sound from the gravelly *cour-lee* call of curlews to the cries of dog owners out on the lawn.

Gordon kept Tess close. They began the ascent towards Hinchelsea Wood and left both bog and lawn behind them. When he thought about it, Gordon decided the wood was better for an afternoon walk anyway. With the beeches and oaks in full summer leaf and the birches and sweet chestnuts providing additional cover, it would be cool on the paths beneath the trees. After a day in the heat hauling about reeds and straw on a rooftop, Gordon was ready for a respite from the sun.

He released the dog when they reached the two cypresses that marked the official entrance to the wood, and he watched her till she disappeared entirely into the trees. He knew that she'd return eventually. Dinner wasn't far off, and Tess wasn't a dog to miss her meals.

He himself walked along and kept his mind occupied. Here in the wood, he named the trees. He had been a student of the New Forest since coming to Hampshire, and after a decade he knew the Perambulation, its character, and its heritage better than most natives.

After a bit, he sat on the trunk of a downed alder, not far from a grove of holly. Sunlight filtered through the tree branches here, dappling ground that was spongy with years of natural composting. Gordon continued to name the trees as he saw them and went on to the plants. But there were few of these as the wood was part of the grazing land and as such was fed upon by ponies, donkeys, and fallow deer. In April and May they would have made a feast of the tender spring growth of ferns, happily moving on from these to wildflowers, juvenile alders, and the shoots of new brambles. The animals thus made Gordon's occupation of mind a challenge, even as they sculpted the landscape in such a way that walking beneath the trees in the wood was a simple thing and not a challenge, as described by beating a path through undergrowth.

He heard the dog bark and roused himself. He wasn't worried, for he recognised the different kinds of barks that Tess produced. This was her happy bark, the one she used to greet a friend or a stick thrown into Hatchet Pond. He rose and looked in the direction from which the barking continued. It came nearer and as it did so he heard a voice accompanying it, a woman's voice. Soon enough he saw her emerge from beneath the trees.

He did not recognise her at first, for she'd changed her clothes. From the summer frock, the sunhat, and the sandals, she'd altered her getup to khaki trousers and a short-sleeved shirt. She still had on her sunglasses—so did he for that matter, for the day continued bright—and her footwear was again largely inappropriate for what she was doing. While she'd given up the sandals, she'd replaced them with Wellingtons, a very odd choice for a summer stroll unless she intended to trek through the bog.

She spoke first, saying, "I *thought* this was the same dog. She's the sweetest thing."

He might have thought she'd followed him to Longslade Bottom and Hinchelsea Wood, save for the obvious fact that she'd got there before him. She was on her way out; he was on his way in. He was weary of people, but he refused to be paranoid. He said, "You're the woman looking for Monet Pond."

"I did find it," she replied. "Though not without ending in a cow pasture first."

"Yes," he said.

She tilted her head. Her hair caught the light again, just as it had done at Boldre Gardens. He wondered, stupidly, if she put sparkles in it. He'd never seen hair with such a sheen. "Yes?" she

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