

1. Abduction

“It was no dream, I lay broad waking,” thought Lucinda Milne, remembering a line from a Tudor love poet and taking short, shallow breaths, as she struggled to keep her senses. She had witnessed Professor Englemeyer, her tutor, employer, and friend, murdered only minutes before.

The man who had murdered him now held a gun in his right hand, pressed its muzzle against her back, and gripped her upper left arm, steering her forward, through the dingy corridor, down the old battered staircase, out the front door, and into the ancient quad. It was all the more eerie, because nothing was said, not by the man, not by Lucinda, and not by any of the man’s three confederates, one of whom went before them, and the other two bringing up the rear. It was 9:45 PM, November 13, and the enclave of Claremont College quad of Oxford University was dark and cold and quiet. The soft wind, shaking the branches of the nearby skeletal trees, was punctuated by the transient voices of students coming from or going to their rooms. A few shadowy shapes could be made out, passing down the walkways under the lamp light.

And so they moved forward, a tight, little band, across the quad, under stone arches of the main gates, and out to the street. Lucinda noticed the street lamp near where they were standing was out—a coincidence?—and then, suddenly, a large dark sedan with tinted windows pulled up in front of them. The man who had walked in front of their tiny troupe opened the back door of the automobile, and the man with the gun in her back pushed her inside and onto the back seat and got in after her. Almost immediately, the car pulled away from the curb. Within minutes, they were traveling at high speed on a highway in a direction of which she could have no clue.

The journey continued smoothly, without incident. Still, no one spoke. Her captor stared in front of him and did not look toward her once. He gripped his gun in his right hand and rested

it on his knee. As for the driver and the man who sat next to him in the front seat, Lucinda had not even seen their faces.

Lucinda thought of speaking, of protesting, but what was the use? She had seen what they were capable of—she winced at the memory of the professor gripping at his chest, dead, instantly, from the thrust of a knife to his heart. She would never forget the look of horror on his face and, of something else, a look of astonishment! As if the old man just could not believe that this violent end could befall him, of all people! A man who had lived the quietest, most retiring, inoffensive life imaginable, a man whose world was bounded by walls built of old books and manuscripts. Yet someone had breached those walls and taken that life. And whoever had killed him, together with his confederates, had kidnapped Lucinda and was now spiriting her away in a touring car—to where? And why were they doing this? What could it possibly be about? Yes, the professor had shouted questions at them in his study, Who were they? What were they doing there? Why had they barged so abruptly into his study? But, true to their form, they made no answer. The man who sat next to her now had given the only reply, a knife, quickly thrust into the professor's chest, apparently without anger or malice, but with a cool intensity of purpose that rendered its delivery surreally methodical and matter-of-fact. The professor, seated in his chair behind his desk, gripped his chest and started to issue a cry, which the man muffled with his left hand. Then, in a moment, the old professor collapsed, his body limp, head cocked back. The killer withdrew the knife, wiped the blade on the professor's lapel, stood erect, almost as if standing to attention, replaced the knife in his pocket, and turned to look at Lucinda with fiery black eyes. That was what she remembered: Those large, luminous eyes, bearing down on her in silent intensity, piercing her, so she felt she had to look away. Then, the man, gesturing to his confederates, walked quickly over to Lucinda, grabbed her by the arm, thrust the gun in her back,

and pointed her toward the door. As they walked, she remembered, they had passed the full length mirror hung by the entrance, and she saw herself looking back at herself, a petite, pretty, unhappy looking blonde in a modest print dress, in the grip of the tall, dark haired man, in a long, dark coat, with an impassive face and intense black eyes fixed on the exit.

These recollections were interrupted, as she felt the car stop and heard the motor shut off. Apparently, they had arrived at their destination. Her heart was pounding. She tried to take comfort in the reasonable notion that, surely, they had not brought her all this way to do her harm? She was pulled from the seat by her arm, and, once again, lead at gun point, this time up a short path into a small house. The blanket of darkness all around and the absolute stillness of the air made her think they were off in the country, far from city lights and activity. They entered a small vestibule and then a cozy, paneled room that looked like a hunting lodge or a vacation home. Lucinda was released and left to stand, awkwardly, on her own, while her former captor approached a man who had apparently been awaiting their arrival. They obviously took her helplessness for granted.

“Right on time, Lingarn!” their host said with satisfaction. “Good work!”

“There was no reason not to be on time,” answered Lingarn in a monotone, stiffening.

“The young lady is unharmed. I think my job here is done.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” answered the other man. “You’ll want to be off then, right away, I suppose?” He went to the desk and touched the intercom. “Ralph, bring the Mercedes up front and drive Mr. Lingarn to the airstrip.” He then turned back to Lingarn. “OK. You’d might as well switch cars. We’ll be in touch when you’re out of the country.”

Lingarn, Lucinda now observed, had raised the laconic to new levels of signature attainment. He nodded, made a curt gesture of farewell to the man he was facing, turned, and walked out the front door, all without adding a single word to what had already been said.

When the door closed, Lucinda found herself alone with the stranger. He was a short, chubby fellow, in his late fifties. He wore a cardigan sweater and tortoise shell glasses, his thinning hair was parted at the side, and his neck tie was loosened at the collar. It was hard to envision this harmless looking soul as the ring leader of a gang of murderers.

“Ms. Milne, please come over here and sit down,” the man said, walking over to an arm chair that faced his desk. “You really should sit down, I think. You’ve had a shock. And we have important things to talk about.”

His tone was serious, as if he wanted her to take him seriously. However, despite what might have been construed as an expression of solicitude, it seemed evident to Lucinda that he was less concerned about her comfort than about getting on with whatever it was that was behind this bizarre night of terror.

Finally! She was finally to learn what all this was about! Why had the professor been murdered? Why had she been abducted in the night? A chill ran up and down her spine. She wanted to know, but...what if she didn’t like the answers? In fact, how could she like the answers? Suddenly, after burning with curiosity for hours, she felt herself resist the guiding press of the man’s hand—for, she only now noticed, he had stepped over to lead her to the chair.

She took the chair she was offered, and her eyes closed as she nearly collapsed into its comfortable, cushioned interior. For one, mad second she fancied that, when she opened them again, she would find herself back home at Oxford.

The man’s voice destroyed this reverie.

“I’m Émile Marquand,” he said. “I run a kind of way station here for a group with which you will become acquainted presently.”

“A ‘way station’?” Lucinda asked. “What’s a ‘way station’?”

“People come here who are on their way somewhere else,” Marquand explained. “They wait. They are safe. Arrangements are made. And then,” he held up his right hand, perching his fingers together, and then, suddenly, flicked open his fingers wide, his palm facing Lucinda, “they go!”

“‘They go’?” said Lucinda, staring at his palm, which he lowered, and finally finding her voice. She sat forward and gripped the arms of her chair hard in her hands, saying with all the forcefulness she could muster, “Where am I going? And what am I doing here?”

“Good questions,” Marquand acknowledged. “Unfortunately, I’m not in a position to respond to them. I can tell you that you are in a secure location, that there is no way you can escape or communicate with the outside world, and that, within three hours, a party will arrive to escort you to another destination. Do you understand?”

“Do I understand?” Lucinda said. “No, I don’t understand! I don’t understand why you sent someone to murder Professor Englemeyer and kidnap me! Tell me that! Why don’t you tell me that?”

“I didn’t send anyone to do anything, Ms. Milne,” answered Marquand. “In fact, Lingarn’s orders were none of my concern. Except for the part dealing with you, that is. I was told to expect that he would arrive with a young woman in his custody.”

“His ‘custody’!” said Lucinda. “That’s a strange word to use for it! A strange word to use for an abduction!”

Marquand made no reply. At that moment, the telephone rang.

“Marquand speaking,” Marquand said, lifting the handset. “Yes, the cake arrived in perfect condition. Thank you, Mr. Gottenmoeller, sir. Very good. We’ll be ready.” He hung up the handset and looked over to Lucinda again.

“Good news,” said Marquand. “You’ll be leaving sooner than I thought. Almost immediately, in fact.”

“Good news?” asked Lucinda. “What’s good about it?”

“Why, I thought you’d be glad,” said Marquand. “Those questions you asked me, about what you call your ‘abduction.’ They’re all going to be answered.”