

#### 4. Escape from Paradise

Lucinda had worked for three weeks within the walls of Paradise, the name given by her captors to the isolated and quietly resplendent compound in which she was confined with other workers collected from around the world. A part of the structure housed extensive, state-of-the-art genetic and stem cell laboratories. But the room in which she occupied herself was a library, containing an astonishingly complete collection of texts relating to the life, times, legend, and lore of Roger Bacon, book cases filled with philological reference tomes, and furnished as well with all of Professor Englemeyer's manuscripts, notes, and computer files relating to Bacon. Preeminent among these items of course, was original the Voynich manuscript itself, stolen, along with so much else, from the quiet Oxford quad that now seemed a million miles away.

Lucinda had tried to lose herself in the work, to become resigned to it. Not only did she fear for her own life. She had been told that her mother, who lived alone with her old grey and white schnauzer in a little thatched house outside a small town in Cambridgeshire, would not live long should Lucinda fail to cooperate. Securing her help had been as simple as that.

“So, Ms. Milne, you have completed the final passages?”

The voice startled her, coming from over her left shoulder, and she sat upright in her chair and turned from the book she was studying to look up and back to face the speaker, whose voice she knew well. It was Dr. Nostran Shesseribourne, her supervisory liaison with the genetic division. She regarded him bleakly.

“Yes, I've finished,” Lucinda said. “It's not really my area, of course. But I'd guess you won't have much trouble making the conversions, utilizing contemporary materials chemistry and biologicals.” She swiveled her chair back so she was once more overlooking the open book, as if facing it could somehow add probity to her words. “The meaning carries straight through

from the earlier chapters and the first part of this final one. The encipherment became trickier, more embedded, as Dr. Englemeyer and I went along—of course, we knew that was happening. But,” she swiveled back to face Dr. Shesseribourne again, “even though the big secret isn’t revealed until the end—as in any good mystery story, you might say—all the clues were there, all along. They only needed putting together.” She closed her eyes tightly, to keep back the tears that were prompted by her memories.

Dr. Shesseribourne, a tall, very thin man, whose thick black and white hair was combed straight back on his head, making him seem even taller, raised his head reflectively.

“Then we’re ready for phase two,” he finally replied and looked back down at her steadily. “Thank God! We all want to get this project done as soon as possible!”

Lucinda could only imagine the constraints under which Dr. Shesseribourne was working. To judge from the circumstances under which she had been brought to this place and impressed into the service of their unknown captors, she had to suppose his story was as desperate as her own. But no one spoke of such matters here. Not only had they been warned against doing so; but you couldn’t always be sure, when addressing the person next to you, whether he was an unwilling captive or a member of the conspiracy itself. Besides, you couldn’t know who was listening and watching. So they worked in relative silence, speaking when necessary, but saying little that didn’t need to be said.

Lucinda passed her recreational time in the central gardens. The compound grounds were ringed with high stone walls, and, as far as she could determine, were situated in the middle of a dense forest of old trees. The scientists and scholars were assigned to work and live in a large stone chateau, which, it seemed to her, had been completely refurbished and redesigned, so that most of its usable space was underground. The furnishings, appointments, and creature comforts

combined the elegance of an eighteenth century English lord's country house with the latest twenty-first century amenities in the kitchens, bathrooms, and computer, telecommunications, and recreation centers. To the rear of the chateau was an enclosed garden with topiary bushes that hid the prospect of the house, and, indeed, the rest of the world. In the center of the garden, heavily planted round with abundantly parti-colored wild flowers, were a few wrought iron lawn chairs and small tables, and Lucinda would escape there during the early afternoon, when the air was warm, and the mists seemed to gather, to try to collect some measure of peace and sanity.

Clutching her light weight, wine-colored cashmere cape beneath her chin, one of many elegant garments that had been supplied to her in lieu of her own clothing, all of which had been left behind in the haste of her departure, Lucinda played the game of speculating where in the world they were. From the climate and the hours of daylight and darkness, she supposed herself to be in the Western hemisphere, north of the equator. The air seemed somewhat warmer and the skies less greyly temperamental than England in November. Was this the Mediterranean? Southern Spain, perhaps? Italy? Even northern Africa? Or were they in the southern United States? Or Central America? Or even, she fancied, had they brought her to an Asian hideaway, cloaked in the immense distances of China, India, or the dozens of peninsular or island countries that abutted them? It had seemed like a long flight, but she couldn't be sure. She had no idea how fast the plane was flying. Besides, they had made a stop; and, for all she knew, they could have actually doubled back on their course. Exhausted and overwhelmed, she had finally fallen into the mercy of a deep sleep.

Lucinda sat back in her chair and closed her eyes. Less than a month had passed. And yet, already, the world of Paradise was becoming the real one, and her previous life, as a research assistant in an Oxford college, was becoming like a dream. One thing was certain: With the

professor dead, she would never return to the life she had known. The question that plagued her now was whether she would ever be permitted to return at all, would ever be allowed to leave this gilded cage. There was no use in dwelling on the eventuality of her own demise. But, it had to be admitted, her captors, whatever else they might be, were cold-blooded murderers. They hadn't hesitated for a moment to murder the professor. And, when her work for them was completed, she couldn't think of any reason that they shouldn't dispose of her in exactly the same way.

"Pardon me," a man's voice interrupted her dark reflections. "I don't mean to disturb you. But I'd hoped we could get acquainted, if you don't mind."

Lucinda opened her eyes to find herself looking at a handsome, blond young man in a lab coat. For a moment, she felt an irrational resentment over his intrusion into what she regarded as her special province, the little garden that no one else seemed to frequent. But, of course, she knew that all of the guests had the same right to be there as she.

"Hello," answered Lucinda, sitting forward. "I'm Lucinda Milne. I've seen you, coming and going to the laboratories. I gather you're one of the geniuses they have working on putting Bacon's formulae into action?"

"I'm a genetic engineer," acknowledged the man. "My name is Peter Stammos. I don't think I qualify as a genius. But I've done some advanced work in applied genetics. It's work that no one else has duplicated—so far! And, yes, of course, I'm here to implement the second phase of the project."

"The wonderful, all-important project!" Lucinda exclaimed. "About which we know nothing! Or do you, perhaps, know a bit more than the rest of us?"

Stammos walked closer to Lucinda, pulled one of the lawn chairs next to hers, and sat down in it.

“I know it’s a bad idea, whatever it is,” Stammos said softly, leaning close to her. “Listen, I don’t know if they can hear us here or not. But if I don’t talk to somebody soon, I think I’ll go crazy!”

“How do I know you’re not one of them?” Lucinda asked him.

“You don’t,” answered Stammos. “And I don’t know about you, either. But can’t we just trust each other? I mean, what do we have to lose? What more can they do to us?”

Stammos had a point, Lucinda thought. They were captives and their lives were already forfeit, apparently. So what, if their conversations were reported?

“Very well, Peter, if I may call you by your first name,” said Lucinda. “By all means, let’s chat. I gather you have some ideas you’d like to share?”

“Yes, you could put it that way, Lucinda,” responded Stammos, feeling warmth spread through him as he spoke her name for the first time. “These people are ruthless. They’re killers. I think we should try to get out of here, as soon as possible.”

Lucinda was startled, even frightened, by his forthrightness. Of course, she wanted to escape as well! But how could they? The building was heavily patrolled by armed guards. The gates were locked. And, to make matters worse, they had no idea where in the world they were.

“I don’t mean to scare you,” Stammos continued. “But we have to face the facts. We’ve been notified in the science division that your work is largely completed and that our work is about to begin at top speed. I can’t help but believe that, when the project is finished, we’ll all be considered a liability. We know too much. We’ve seen too much. Can you imagine that they are going to let us pack up and go back to our homes as if nothing had happened?”

“No,” Lucinda agreed. “The same thoughts occurred to me. But what can we do about it? You talk of escaping. But how can we possibly get out of here? Paradise might look like vacation retreat for millionaires, but it might as well be a high-security prison!”

“Paradise!” snorted Stamos. “I can’t think of a worse name for this hell hole!”

“Actually, it’s aptly named,” Lucinda said mildly, sitting upright in her chair and turning toward him. “In old Iranian, pairidaeza meant ‘a wall enclosing a garden or orchard.’ The Zoroastrian religion of the Iranians encouraged keeping arbors, orchards, and gardens. Some Greek mercenaries, who spent time in the Persian army, were so impressed when they saw the Great King of Persia planting and tending his own trees in his own garden, that they wrote about it in the histories of their travels, using the Greek word paradeisos, not to refer to the wall itself, but to the huge walled in parks that the Persian nobles loved to build and hunt in. This same word was later used by the Greek translators of Genesis to refer to the Garden of Eden. Old English eventually borrowed it into our language around 1200. Just around the time, as a matter of fact, that our dear friend, Roger Bacon, was born.”

Lucinda stood and bent down one of the slender, overhanging branches in her right hand.

“So you see, it is well named,” she said. “These are fruit trees. This is a small orchard, within a lovely arbor. Who can deny we are in a walled garden?”

They stood together in silence, looking into one another’s eyes. Stamos became sensible of Lucinda’s refined loveliness, the delicate regularity of her angular face, her pale skin, her large, deep blue eyes, and the almost unbearable sweetness of her pouting red lips. The slight chill in the air, their utter loneliness and desperation, the secluded, misted beauty of the lawn and flowers, emboldened him to put his hands on Lucinda’s arms and draw Lucinda near to him.

“You know a lot,” Stammos told Lucinda, “for one so lovely. If there were more time, I should take more time, but—”

Then Stammos drew Lucinda still closer and kissed her softly on the lips.

“I’m sorry,” Stammos said, releasing his hold on Lucinda. “I had no call to do that. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“It’s OK,” Lucinda said, stepping toward him, leaning her head on his chest. “That’s the best thing that’s happened to me since I got here. No, that’s not saying it right. It’s the best thing that’s happened to me in a long time!”

“It doesn’t change anything, though,” Stammos told her, holding her tightly against him. “We still have to escape,” he added, channeling the desire he felt coursing through his body into renewed determination. “Escape from Paradise.”