

# abducted

## The Betrayal

Lee Cambule

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## one

Gareth Oakley felt his eyelids flickering before he could feel anything else. He was swimming in the depths of a strange dream and needed a few grey moments to understand that he was still alive.

The dream was patchy but Bryony James played the starring role. The elegant movie star was shouting, screaming almost. Was she screaming at him? Maybe. The potency of her inexpressible beauty seemed to make his eyes ache in this dreamlike state.

Another voice echoed over a roaring sound, a coarse voice filled with panic crying 'shoot'. There was a flash of fear across Bryony's blue eyes and Gareth awoke from this bizarre dream just as a strangely familiar gun appeared between them...

*'Gareth!'*

He snapped into consciousness and felt numb pain shooting up his right arm, which had folded awkwardly beneath his body. Sprawled face down, a small puddle of blood was congealing carelessly against his face. Vision shifted out of focus, wild washes of blue blurring the shadowy scene beneath him.

He had been crossing the stone bridge that connected two sides of the engine room, an underground cavern controlling a volcano (it sounded even crazier as a semi-conscious reflection). They had just saved the day by stopping pressure from a subterranean magma source causing an eruption. Job done, they started back to Base Camp. Matthew Somerset and Michael Leigh had been a few paces ahead when that noise...

The bridge had collapsed.

He had fallen.

Fallen towards...

Gareth's vision shifted back into focus and his heart stalled when he realised what his blood was congealing on beneath him.

The river they had noticed beneath the bridge, right at the base of the cavern, was still gushing past at a frantic pace. It flowed just a few inches beneath him but there appeared to be nothing between Gareth and the river. Foam was lashing up at him even though he should be drowning in it.

His refocused senses confirmed that he was suspended in mid-air barely a foot above the river.

‘We should be d-dead.’

He glanced up through a thick, heavy air and his eyesight blurred again until the quivering frame of a young World War I medic with curly brown hair was outlined for him. Tears streamed down Michael Leigh's cherubic face but his eyes could not even blink as he gazed down. To Gareth, it looked like he was kneeling on some imperceptible floor, a transparent platform above the water.

Gareth glanced back to the ground that was not beneath him. A jumble of irrational thoughts washed over his mind, a cyclone of confusion to sweep away reality. His eyes flicked back towards the maroon puddle and his hand strayed to the bleeding wound over his eyebrow.

‘A force-field,’ he croaked, phlegm fighting into his throat. ‘An invisible barrier protecting the river. Like the one that stopped us leaving Carbonek. Perhaps we turned it on when the power came back.’

Michael could not drag his gaze from the river. He looked so small in his tattered green uniform, like a child dressing up in adult clothes. Gareth felt the cyclone dissipating enough for a familiar voice to return to frame his thoughts.

*Well, Gaz, to what do we owe this miracle? You were dead, mate, as good as dead. Plunging head first thirty feet into a river; I can't think of any force – divine or otherwise – that could explain this one.*

Gareth spun around, suddenly remembering three people had fallen from the bridge.

It was dark despite the reflection of the water. The river was as wide as whatever indescribable force held them above it. Gareth noticed rubble and dust scattered nearby, remnants of the bridge that mockingly collapsed underfoot. Between two large lumps of stonework was an outstretched arm as still as the stone.

‘Matt?’

Gareth began moving before his legs could recall their function. He slipped as the wound on his head gave way to giddiness, stumbling forward across the unseen force field. He sensed Michael following but his senses had been shocked, making the impossible trek over the river arduous.

He reached the coalminer's body and collapsed, feeling the invisible ground sloping away slightly. Tears started to form in his own eyes as he reached his good arm over to the broad neck of Matthew, grazing his grimy black beard.

His fingers found a pulse and a relieved sigh escaped his lips. 'He's alive. Thank God.'

A miracle, undoubtedly. Michael pushed past, his meekness forgotten and duty driving his instincts. His limited medical training returned and he checked the towering coalminer while Gareth scoped their surroundings.

The river flowed from and to pure darkness. A pale glow enveloped them, reflecting down from the engine room high above along with a sticky film of heat. The rippling of the water was being muted by whatever was protecting it; Gareth could almost make out a curved line above the centre of the river. The shape reminded him of the plastic domes of the chambers that the abductees had all woken up inside at the start of this nightmare.

'I-I think he's all right,' the words softly left Michael's bloody mouth without his knowledge, 'though his heart rate is s-slow and I'm not sure if he's b-broken something. Look at his leg.'

Gareth glanced at Matthew's left leg, which had twisted slightly in an awkward direction. 'Can we move him?'

'I w-wouldn't, his l-l-leg...'

'Michael, I don't know how long this thing might hold,' he interrupted, signalling towards the invisible dome. He sensed calmness in his words even though he had never felt so...

*What's the word, Gaz? Frightened, anxious, confused? Exhilarated? This is a little beyond your scope of experiences in the classroom, right?*

He turned away but the voice inside his head was relentless.

*Face it, all you really do is screw up your own life. Drink yourself to death, destroy the people you love, exist without living. You've never experienced life at a normal pace so how could you be expected to cope when the dials are all cranked up like this?*

'Gareth?'

*Look at him. That kid has seen more in his short service for his country than you have in your whole life. He doesn't look much older than your pupils yet he endured the deaths of honourable men in his arms while you sunk beers and played video games depicting Michael's war. Look at him and know he's better than you!*

'We need to move him now,' Gareth answered resolutely. 'If this thing – whatever it is – disappears, we'll fall into the river and we're dead if that happens. Stay here while I find something to help, okay?'

Michael heard the tones in his voice and new strength reflected in the young medic's eyes.

Gareth began crawling carefully over the invisible dome, willing his eyes to sharpen in order to cut through the dimness. As the dome sloped away, shapes of rock replaced the darkness. They merged into a stone ridge that ran alongside the river with water splashing against the underside of the dome as it sloped down between ridge and river.

Beyond that, nothing but shades of shadow.

*You need to get out of here, Gaz. You've solved the power problem but you made a promise to get everyone home. If you want to fulfil that promise, you'll have to put aside the man you were and become someone capable of keeping his promises.*

That little demon inside him was right (as usual, unfortunately). For the first time in his life, people depended on him and not like the children in his primary school class depended on him for an education. Survival was the goal and he had promised to deliver.

*First, let's get back to Carbonek. You saved the group from an erupting volcano, maybe now you'll be able to find the way home.*

On that hopeful note, he slid the last few feet off the invisible dome and landed on something he could see as well as feel. The ridge was narrow and followed the river into darkness in either direction. A rock wall lined the ridge, reflecting oppressive heat towards him. Some remnants of the bridge had bounced off the dome but otherwise there was nothing of...

Gareth's eyes finally returned to their old sharpness and he spotted a shape in the darkness several metres away. He trudged wearily towards it, nursing his numb arm. The shape took on a form which made him stop mid-step, breath wedged in the back of his throat.

The shape was the largest of several. Smaller shapes included a miniscule mound of ash that was once a fire, a shrivelled lump that

looked like a decomposed sack and two long metal pikes propped against the wall, rusted from the humidity.

It was the largest shape that snatched his breath.

It sat peacefully against the wall, head tilted like it had been watching his approach. There were deep sockets where eyes should be but with the flesh rotted away, even the narrow skull was faded and crumbled. It sat inside a metal jacket similar to a suit of armour but only bone and dust remained of its body.

Heat leant strength to the pungent stench of death and the cyclone finally overcame him. Gareth threw up beside the decayed remains of the first alien he had ever seen.





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