

# Lady in the Lake District

I knew I should have changed my ringtone before I left on vacation. In a rush to get myself together and on the plane for England, I left it on one of the pre-set ringtones which sounded like a drowning robot. Procrastination paid me back when my cellphone gargled at me from the night stand while I was lost in a dream about walking avocados (don't ask).

Instinctively, I reached to my left where I always kept my phone, but found myself grasping at air. I opened one eye and realized that I wasn't at home, but rather in my tiny room in London. The bedside table was on my right where the phone begged for my attention. Warily, I snatched it up, unlocked the keypad, and answered.

"Ah, Angela, I'm glad I caught you when you were awake," my boss cheerfully greeted. Since he used my real name rather than my code name Carla, I knew he was about to ply me for a favor. What else could it be since I was supposed to be on vacation? My first vacation since joining the secret little agency with no name. I figured if I left the country, I might escape the reach of the man I knew only as The Colonel. Oh, how naïve I was!

"I'm always a bit confused by the time zones," The Colonel said apologetically, although I knew damn well he knew exactly what time it was anywhere in the world.

The alarm clock on the table read 5:03 a.m., but given that this was London in June, the morning sun was already streaming persistently through my window. "It's quite all right, sir," I said, hearing the huskiness of my voice. "What can I do for you?"

"A strange development has come to our attention and it's right in your backyard," he explained. "I hate to bother you on your vacation, but we can't afford to monitor this situation from afar. You recall Charles Beaumont, don't you?"

"Yes, of course," I replied. Beaumont was one of the countless subjects we kept a close eye on in the name of national security. Although I was not intimately familiar with the case, I knew that he was the son of a wealthy British family with some sort of title. Publicly, he maintained the image of a legitimate businessman and philanthropist, but privately he harbored strong anti-Israel views and secretly supported terrorist activity outside the UK. While not a primary focus for my organization, he was certainly on our radar.

The Colonel continued, "Charles Beaumont has been missing for over 48 hours and Scotland Yard is suspecting foul play. They are heading over to Beaumont's flat in Knightsbridge as we speak to search for clues. I want you to go over there and find out whatever you can."

So much for the Tower of London tour.

"I've already spoken with a Chief Inspector Meddings from the Yard," The Colonel went on. "He'll be expecting you."

"Right, sir," I said, suppressing a yawn. "I'll let you know if I find out anything."

“Angie,” he said, more softly. “Law enforcement never takes kindly to federal agents nosing around, especially ones from outside their own country. Find out what you can, but don’t get in their way.”

“I will be the model of decorum, Colonel,” I assured him as I rang off.

Despite what the movies may lead you to believe, federal agents at my level do not make a great deal of money, and since this trip was not paid for by the agency credit card, I tried to keep my expenses low. My modest room was in a clean, little hotel on Bedford Place in Russell Square. Although modest, I did spring for the double bed and private bathroom. Listening to the college kids run in and out of the communal facilities across the hall, banging the stall doors all hours of the night, I was grateful for my luxury, although the shower was smaller than those quaint red phone booths out on the street.

After showering and putting on a modicum of makeup, I slipped on a floral summer dress and grabbed my purse. London in June was much like Washington DC in May (on a good day); with enough warmth to feel comfortable and a moist breeze to keep you cool. I walked the short distance from Bedford Place to the Russell Square Underground Station on Bernard Street, dodging black cabs belching diesel fumes and a few early commuters racing for their coffees and newspapers before work. There’s an energy about London in the morning, but not in the overwhelming way of New York City. To me, London feels like a big town.

The Piccadilly Line took me to Knightsbridge in only a few minutes where I was able to track down the address The Colonel had provided. After showing my ID badge to about half a dozen policemen, I was allowed to enter the swank apartment building and take the elevator to the fifth floor. The elevator, or lift I guess I should say, was bigger

than my whole room back in Russell Square, and the décor was impressively elegant. Similarly, the posh flat of Charles Beaumont was impressive. The furnishings were a mix of pre-Victorian with some modern pieces thrown in for comfort and practicality, but the most striking aspect of the place was the walls. Every inch of wall space was covered with paintings, and I'm not talking about starving artist stuff. Original Monets in the living room, a Van Gogh and some Picassos in the dining room. Every era and every style was represented. My head moved like it was on a swivel as I attempted to take in the breathtaking collection. The fact that my mouth was hanging open only became apparent to me when a rather gray looking middle-aged man in a battered overcoat came into view.

“Quite a load of pictures, eh?” he barked, in a growling cockney drawl which seemed to emanate from his belly button.

Startled, I managed to force out, “Hello, I'm Angela Bayard.”

After checking my ID badge, he grunted. “Yeah, the one from the States. I was told about you. I'm Chief Inspector Meddings. I suppose you'd like me to fill you in on the disappearance of one Sir Charles Beaumont?”

“Whatever you can tell me,” I responded.

“What I can tell you is nothing, miss, 'cause that's exactly what we've got. Nothing. The man has not been seen nor heard from in almost three days. The flat is completely clean. No sign of a struggle, no notes, no phone messages – we can't find a mobile anywhere and the e-mail program on his computer has been wiped clean. Of course, the techies might be able to scrounge something off the hard drive, but that'll take awhile, won't it?”

“If he was abducted, they certainly weren’t after the art,” I sighed, gesturing to the walls.

“Aye, the art. Bloke was mad for the stuff. Don’t know how he didn’t burn through the entire family fortune spending so much on paintings.” Meddings’s slit of a mouth curled up a bit at one side. “Although your lot might have some ideas about that.”

There were rumors that Beaumont’s support of anti-Israeli groups was not entirely charitable and that, in fact, he was funding his extravagant lifestyle through arms dealing. Given that he was not a man born to a life of crime, his incompetence was getting him into hot water with some dangerous characters. It was not at all surprising that certain people might want him dead.

“Inspector, I’m not in a position right now to share any – “

“Skip it, miss, I know how you people work. It’s not really my business anyway, is it? My concern is with any evidence which might lead us to Sir Charles’s whereabouts, and given the remarkable lack of such evidence, my team is out pounding the pavement, as you might say, to dig up anyone who might have seen, heard, or smelled Sir Charles in the last three days.”

“Do you have any leads...if you don’t mind my asking?”

Meddings’s chiseled features appeared to melt into a more friendly countenance. “It just so happens we do have one small morsel. After a bit of nosing around, we believe that Sir Charles not only collected art, he may have been involved in the sale of forgeries.”

I’m sure my eyes must have widened at that moment. This Beaumont character certainly liked living life on the edge. It was one thing to immerse himself in arms

dealing as a way to profitably support a cause he believed in, but to risk his reputation on such common criminal activity as art forgery didn't make sense unless he had a taste for self-destruction.

"I don't think it was for the money really," Meddings mused. "My instinct tells me that he may have done it for a laugh. Making someone think they owned an original when in fact he was holding the genuine article in his apartment. At any rate, Sir Charles seemed to have a great deal of contact with a man named Derek Smithers recently. Smithers was sent up a few years ago for doing some forgery work but got out about two months ago. A local pub owner says he saw Sir Charles and Smithers meet at his establishment three or four times over the past month. One of my men is bringing Mr. Smithers round now so we can have a word with him."

"Do you mind if I check out the apartment while we wait?"

Meddings flashed me a perturbed grimace for a moment, then pulled a pair of latex gloves from his overcoat. "Please try not to disturb anything. This is a crime scene after all, miss."

"I'm well aware of that, Inspector," I assured him as I snapped on the stretchy gloves.

My first point of interest was the book shelves. Nothing told me more about the inner workings of a person's mind than what he or she read. Aside from art books and a few cookbooks, Beaumont's shelves were stuffed with books about sorcery and witchcraft. I delicately removed one that had Post-It® notes sticking out of the top. The sticky notes marked sections which described rituals for raising dead spirits and opening

other dimensions. Another heavily annotated volume listed rituals for everything from casting evil spells to teleportation of objects.

“Were you aware of Beaumont’s fascination with the occult?” I asked Meddings.

“Yes miss,” he replied. “In fact, we found what looks to be a set up for some sort of voodoo hoodoo affair in the bedroom. Candles and statues and such. Quite the colorful gentleman, Sir Charles is.”

About 15 minutes had passed when Smithers was brought into Beaumont’s flat by a plainclothes officer. The art forger was a round ball of a man with bristly red hair and bright, blue eyes which fairly popped from their sockets. When we sat him down in one of the modern lounge chairs in the living room, he appeared nervous but not at all surprised that he was brought there. In fact, he seemed all too willing to relieve himself of his confession.

“You know why we brought you here, Mr. Smithers,” Meddings began his interrogation.

“I suspect it has to do with Sir Charles,” Smithers replied, in a high-pitched voice which cracked a bit.

“How do you know Charles Beaumont?”

“He contacted me shortly after I got out of the nick. I’d never met him before, but I knew him by reputation, of course. He asked me to meet him at the pub round the corner for a drink. I was a bit suspicious but, well, I figured it couldn’t do no harm, could it?”

“What did he want with you?”

“Well...I’m a little ashamed to admit it, really.”

“C’mon, c’mon! He wanted you to forge some paintings, didn’t he?” Meddings growled in Smithers’s face with a ferocity that came completely by surprise. Smithers recoiled in shock.

“No sir, absolutely not! I’m a recently freed man on probation. My mother didn’t raise no idiot, now did she?”

Meddings rubbed the back of his reddening neck. “So what did he want?”

“Well sir, he wanted me to...to alter, as it were, a very rare piece by John Constable.”

“Who’s John Constable?” I asked.

“One of England’s finest landscape artists,” Meddings tossed off matter-of-factly. I must have flashed him a surprised expression because he quickly added, “I do get out to a museum now and again, miss.” Turning to Smithers, he said, “You said ‘altered.’ Now what do you mean, ‘altered?’”

Smithers bobbed his head and squirmed, as if he was struggling to force the words from his stomach. “It’s like this, Inspector. Sir Charles had this Constable, but it wasn’t just any Constable, not that any Constable is ordinary or anything like that, mind you.”

“Get on with it,” the Inspector grumbled.

“Right, well, Sir Charles had uncovered an extremely rare oil painting that Constable had made of the Lake District. Now, Constable had made some sketches while touring the Lake District early in his career, but no one knew that he had actually executed a complete oil painting of the area. I mean, it was well known that he was not that fond of the Lake District, preferring to paint subjects around Suffolk where he was born. So this painting was a real find. Fetch quite a few quid on the open market.”

“Go on,” I urged, offering an apologetic glance to Meddings for my breach of protocol.

“You see, the painting depicted water, of course, and a pasture beyond which blended into a mountain in the background. In the pasture stands a young lady with auburn hair and a long, flowing white dress. The detail was quite remarkable.”

Meddings’s face looked like it was about to burst like a grape. “You don’t need to bore us with the details of the painting, Smithers.”

“On the contrary, sir,” Smithers protested indignantly. “I do indeed need to bore you with the details, because it was the fine detail of that little maiden in the pasture which infatuated Sir Charles. I mean, he was absolutely barmy over this tiny bird with the bleached frock. So he comes to me and he says, ‘I want you to paint an exact likeness of me next to this woman directly onto the painting.’ Well, you can imagine my shock! I know some of these rich blokes can be a bit round the bend, but deface a rare piece of art by one of Britain greatest painters, why, it’s like slapping the Queen herself!”

“So you turned him down,” I stated, half as a question.

Smithers smiled wryly, “Well, miss, funny thing about ol’ Smithers. There’s two sides to me, ya’ see. One is a great student of art history. A real connoisseur of anything made with a brush on canvas, you might say. The other side is a business man, and a business man can never walk away from a lucrative proposition when it’s put in front of him.”

“So you didn’t turn him down,” I stated.

He was squirming again, “Well, I mean, after all, it’s not like he had any intentions of letting anyone else see the painting, the selfish bastard! He was so in love

with that painting that he was going to keep it all locked up in this flat until the day he died. Besides, the painting was so rare, who would even know the difference. Even the greatest authorities would probably think ol' Sir Charles was in that painting from the beginning. Not that I'm bragging on my skills or nothing."

"So when was the last time you saw Sir Charles?" Meddings asked.

"When I finished my addition to the painting about three days ago," Smithers explained. "I came over here to his flat on three separate occasions to work on the alteration. He posed for me in this very living room and I worked at an easel near the window there. Best light in the room, you see? Anyway, on the last sitting, I finished up around 8:30 in the evening. He was quite pleased with the results, I have to say. In fact, I would describe him as over the moon with excitement. So he paid me for my work and I was off. That was the last I saw of the man. I didn't even know he was missing until your boys came rapping on my door this morning."

Meddings swept his arm across the room, "Can you point out the painting to us?"

"T'aint here sir," Smithers replied. "These are all impressionists, ain't they?"

A theory was beginning to germinate in my mind. I said, "Why don't we check the bedroom?"

The three of us moved to the bedroom and I got my first glance at the ritual staging area that Meddings spoke of. On the right side of the bed, a small oriental rug was rolled up and slumped in the corner. Next to it stood a sterling silver statue of a nude woman about three feet in height. A circle of candles, recently burned, were arranged in front of the statue and a pentagram was painted inside the circle with what appeared to be dark red paint.

As soon as Smithers entered, he pointed to the painting just above the statue.

“There it is! Wait, something’s wrong!”

Careful to avoid disturbing the candles, we maneuvered closer to the wall for a look at the painting. It was as Smithers had described it, but with one critical difference. There were no figures in the painting. No human beings at all were depicted; just the lake and the pasture and the mountains beyond.

“I don’t believe this,” Smithers gasped, shaking a gnarled finger at the landscape. “The two figures! They should be right there! Right there in the pasture they were! Constable’s lady and my version of Sir Charles!”

Meddings leaned in closely to the spot where Smithers had pointed. “Maybe Sir Charles didn’t fancy your work after all and had someone paint over it.”

Removing a jeweler’s loop from his pocket, Smithers stepped up to the painting and examined the pasture area through the magnifying glass. “I don’t see no signs of new paint strokes. I don’t even see my own! Just the original brush strokes for the grass.”

“Are you sure this is the painting?” Meddings asked, impatiently.

“I’d bet my life on it, sir,” Smithers’s face contorted in a sickly grimace. “Still, there would have to be some explanation. Somebody had to have painted over those two people, hadn’t they?”

“You’d better not be feeding us a load of bullocks, Smithers,” Meddings barked.

A tear formed in Smithers left eye, “I’m telling you the truth, Inspector. I don’t know what else to say.”

It was clear that Meddings was reaching the end of his tether. With a wave of his hand, the Inspector said, “All right, Smithers, give your statement to the detective in the other room. Then you’re free to go.”

At first, Smithers did not move, still staring with incredulity at the landscape on the wall. Only after Meddings cleared his throat loudly did the art forger jump. “Oh, yes sir, thank you sir.”

Stomping around the bed, I could see that Meddings was miserable. The last known person to see Sir Charles Beaumont alive could not provide him with a clear lead. I, on the other hand, was quite satisfied that the case was closed.

After bidding my farewell to Chief Inspector Meddings and his unit, I stepped onto the busy street and dialed The Colonel. “I don’t think Sir Charles Beaumont will be a bother to anyone ever again.”

“Oh really,” the Colonel replied. “What happened to him?”

“Officially, no one knows as yet.”

“And unofficially?”

“Unofficially, you’ll have to trust me. Sir Charles is not coming back. Of that I am certain.”

Normally, such an answer would have rated a severe tongue lashing, but The Colonel knew why he had sent me to that apartment instead of another agent, and he was confident in my hunches. Without another word, I heard him hang up.

Strolling to the tube station, I relished the warmth of the sun on my face and the cheerful prospect of a new day. I hoped Sir Charles and his maiden in white found happiness also, over the mountain and away from the troubles in this world.