



Unearthed

A BLACKPOOL MYSTERY

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CHAPTER ONE

HOW CLOSE COULD A MAN COME TO DEATH BEFORE HE GAVE up the fight and slid into that dark abyss? Michael Graham stared down at the still, unresponsive figure in the white field of the hospital bed. He didn't know how many times the question had filled his mind during the past five days.

"He hasn't quit fighting." The middle-aged nurse jotted notes on the clipboard she held. She didn't look at Michael but he knew she had sized him up as closely as she had the patient. "That's a good sign. You have to take hope in that, Mr. Graham."

I know. I do take hope in that, Mrs. Guilder. Thank you." Michael leaned against the wall near the room's slatted window. Merciful Angels Hospital conducted business within an old building in Blackpool, but the interior had been gutted and refitted with modern equipment and dutiful personnel like Nurse Guilder.

The woman shot Michael a measuring glance. "Have you been taking care of yourself?"

"I have." Michael lied easily, but he had the suspicion that the nurse instantly saw through him.

"Sometimes the sickness of a friend is hardest on those around them. At least the people in the hospital are getting

rest and being monitored. You might try getting a little more sleep.”

Michael couldn't argue. He felt bone-tired and twitchy, the way he did in the final stages of putting a video-game project together, almost ready to go gold and turn a new game loose on the public. Those times had always been particularly draining. But they'd been nothing like watching over Rohan Wallace these past five days since he'd been shot by Aleister Crowe, who claimed Rohan had been trespassing on his property. Michael blamed himself for the near-death of his friend. Hadn't he dragged him into all this?

Truth to tell, though, it was the late hours spent trying to figure out his latest puzzle, one that Rohan had helped him discover....

“I will try to get more sleep, Nurse Guilder.”

The nurse nodded in satisfaction, made a final notation and hung up the clipboard. “Are you going to be here awhile longer?”

“If that's all right.”

“Of course.”

Even if Michael left, his thoughts wouldn't stray far from Rohan Wallace. His guilt had kept him from accompanying his wife, Molly, to the harbor where she was picking up Rohan's grandmother.

“I was told that Detective Chief Inspector Paddington has managed to find this poor soul's family,” Nurse Guilder said.

“He has.” Michael knew she was pumping him for

information. Part of him resented that, but he realized that gossip and stories were the lifeblood of a little town like Blackpool.

Besides that, he wanted to counteract the idea the local citizens had of Rohan Wallace as a thief. No one yet knew what he had been doing at Crowe's Nest, the ancestral home of the Crowe family, or why Aleister Crowe had shot him. Michael felt certain it had something to do with the model of the original town of Blackpool that Rohan had helped Michael construct, based on the one in the library. Their reconstruction had revealed some interesting secrets, but it hadn't revealed them all.

At times, when he was feeling morbid, Michael wondered why Crowe hadn't killed Rohan that night. Several months ago, he'd witnessed Aleister Crowe kill a man without hesitation. Except in that instance, he had done it to protect Michael from thugs trying to kill him.

So why had Crowe spared Rohan's life?

The nurse interrupted his thoughts. "Is Mr. Wallace's family coming to see him?"

"His grandmother is on her way now." Michael flicked a glance at the clock on the wall. "She should be here anytime. My wife went down to the harbor to meet her."

"Such a young man." Nurse Guilder shook her head sorrowfully and looked at the figure on the bed. "This is going to be a hard thing for a grandmother to see, even knowing he'll live. I've got two grandchildren of my own. Like angels, they are. I wouldn't want any kind

of harm to come to them, no matter what mischief they got themselves into.”

“No.” Michael studied the beeping, clicking machines that watched over Rohan while he remained in the coma. “He’s healing nicely?”

“Of course. Doctor Timms is absolutely brilliant at his craft. If I had to get shot, he’s the very man I’d want working on me.” Nurse Guilder paused at the door. “There’s a fresh pot of tea put on if you want some.”

Michael let his empty cup hang from a finger against his jeans and gave her a smile. “Maybe in a bit.”

She left.

Anxious, he walked over to the bed and stared down at the man who’d been both friend and confidant to him. One didn’t always mean the other. Rohan Wallace was different. Michael had sensed that from the start, and he’d learned to pay attention to the things Rohan knew. Even without understanding exactly how he knew them.

In the past five days, Rohan had lost weight, despite the constant saline and glucose IV bags. He was nearly Michael’s age, somewhere in his early thirties, and wore dreadlocks. His ebony skin had a warm cocoa luster, and scars from past physical encounters marked his arms and shoulders. A tube ran up his nose and bandages swathed his chest under the thin hospital gown.

Rohan had been—was, Michael insisted—a physical man. His calloused hands revealed a long and intimate acquaintanceship with hard work. He was quick to laugh

and quick to joke. And he had never hesitated to cover Michael's back.

Michael took his iPhone mobile device from his pocket and texted his wife. Molly probably wouldn't be able to hear the phone at the marina. With the archaeologists still mucking about after the discovery of the slaver the Seaclipse, the marina was a noisy place.

GRANDMOTHER?

To his surprise, Molly's reply was almost instant.

PLANE'S COMING NOW. TALK TO YOU SOON.

Opening the digital photo album on his iPhone, Michael studied the three-dimensional model he and Rohan had made of Blackpool. He had been intrigued by and noticed that the older buildings had enjoyed special relationships with each other, and then realized that the sides were designed to fold in on themselves to create a cube. He believed the cube was a three-dimensional map, but of what? Where did it lead? Each of the cube sides also held geometric markings: a square, a triangle, a pentagon and others. But again, he had no idea what they meant.

Blackpool had begun its life as a smuggler's port, a dream harbor where stolen goods could be swapped, stored and sold. In the 1700s, pirates had considered the town a haven, and legitimate businesses had sprung up in short order. Inns and taverns and eating places had manifested first, quickly followed by a blacksmith's

forge, a cooper's shop, a carpenter's workshop and a ship-repair business.

Glancing out the window, he stared down at the harbor. Professor Hume-Thorson's graduate students still worked at the site where the Seacclipse had gone down.

The slave ship remained out of reach for an in-depth study, and hadn't yet given up all her secrets. Enough surprises, though, had spilled out to start tongues wagging throughout Blackpool. Several marina businesses remained angry at the continuing marine investigation. Only two days ago, local sailors had gotten into a proper donnybrook with the archaeology crew. From all accounts, the professor had proven himself quite capable at fisticuffs. The locals now had a grudging respect for the newcomers.

The marina's makeover was progressing, too, though it would be a while before things were finished. Blackpool was in a state of transition, and many of the citizens blamed Molly, his wife, because she'd been responsible for securing the grant money that had enabled the renovations to go forward.

In a way, Michael had to admit that the feeling was justified. Molly had helped engineer a lot of changes in Blackpool, but most were ones that residents wanted or thought necessary, such as the marina remodel. The problem was that most folks wanted the changes to happen in the blink of an eye. The town hated anything that impeded the pace of everyday life.

Michael turned away from the window and wished he could just as easily turn away from the guilt that plagued him. Rohan lay unmoving on the bed. Why did you go to Crowe's Nest that night? What were you hoping to prove? What did you see in our model that I haven't yet?

Those questions gnawed relentlessly at Michael. He was used to being consumed by his imagination. He'd designed award-winning video games for years. He loved problems, and he loved solving them. But the conundrum Rohan had created was—at present—unsolvable. That rankled.

Coming up with a game-logic problem, designing an appropriate level, figuring out a story line that would prompt a player to think in the right direction—all of these things depended on how clever Michael was. Real-world mysteries demanded a whole new realm of patience and perseverance.

He sighed and rolled his neck. Then he noticed the man standing quietly in the doorway.

The aristocratic profile and the widow's peak made Aleister Crowe instantly stand out in a crowd. He was approximately Michael's age, in his early thirties, and was an inch or so shorter. Michael was built broader and more muscular, but Crowe was a predatory wolf. The walking stick he carried with the silver crow as a handle was an affectation rather than an aid, but it also set him apart from others. As always, he wore an immaculate black suit. Today he had a bloodred tea rose

in his lapel. It made Michael suspect the man had come from a lunch engagement with a woman.

Somehow the thought that Crowe had been out pursuing a potential love interest before coming to the hospital made his presence there even more egregious.

“Did you come round hoping your little friend might whisper secrets into your ear?” Crowe’s cold gaze pierced Michael.

“What are you doing here?” Instinctively, Michael walked around the bed and put himself between Rohan and Crowe.

“The last I’d heard, Paddington still wasn’t handcuffing Wallace to the bed. I wanted to make sure it was safe to go home.”

“You’re lying.”

Smiling in amusement, Crowe cocked an eyebrow. “You’re far too emotional, Michael. You really should get some rest.”

Michael made himself breathe slowly.

Crowe looked past him. “Where is your wife?”

“On an errand. I’m surprised you didn’t know.”

With a shrug, the man twirled his walking stick. “Contrary to your present belief, I don’t much care what you and your wife do in Blackpool. I only want to ensure that my family is protected.”

“Rohan didn’t go there that night to hurt you.”

“Then maybe you’d care to tell me why that man was sneaking through my house. How he managed to steal past a very sophisticated security system.”

Michael didn’t have an answer.

Crowe nodded arrogantly. “I thought as much.” He adjusted the tea rose in his lapel, then started to walk out of the room. “Take care, Michael. These lost causes you and your wife have a habit of chasing after might one day turn around and bite you.”

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