



# Vanished

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A BLACKPOOL MYSTERY

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Gray

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VANISHED

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## CHAPTER ONE

Blackpool's red tile roofs gleamed in the sunshine. Boats dotted the sparkling water of the bay and blooming heather streaked the hills beyond. Even the sinister shape of Ravenhearst Manor, its ruined walls and chimneys like the edge of a serrated knife atop the cliff southeast of town, seemed merely picturesque. What better day for a festival? Michael Graham asked himself.

He wove his way through the costumed people thronging Dockside Avenue and entered what passed for a town square, a cobblestoned rectangle between the old town hall and the longest of the piers—the Magic Lantern Theatre on one side, the seawall bandstand on the other.

Beside him, Rohan Wallace's dreadlocks bounced up and down as he walked. Beside Rohan, their friend Dylan Stewart collided with a woman garbed in a Victorian gown. He mumbled an apology as he passed.

Last year, Michael and his wife, Molly, had wandered through Blackpool's Seafaring Days celebration like children through a toy shop. This year they were participants. Michael had even put together a sort of costume out of an old turtleneck and a pea jacket. Molly, on the other hand...

Where was she? He'd last seen her near the stall that was selling strawberries and cream.

Alice Coffey walked by without even a glance his way, her nose high above the cloud of powder-scented perfume emanating from her black clothes. Michael got the message:

to some of the locals, he and Molly were still no more than glorified tourists. Newcomers. Outsiders. How long did you have to live in Blackpool, he wondered, to be completely accepted?

Never mind. He and Molly had plenty of friends here.

He'd gotten to know native Blackpooler Dylan because of their shared interest in mountain-biking, and he'd met Rohan, an even more recent arrival from Jamaica, during the terrible events surrounding the theater murder last spring.

That first gruesome murder—on the night Molly had hoped to introduce plans for a documentary on the 1939 Blackpool train robbery—had led to several others that Michael and Molly had helped solve. All of Blackpool was both intrigued and appalled, especially when stolen artwork from the train seemed to bear the fingerprints of the Crowe family's ancestors.

The tall Jamaican nudged Michael now and pointed to a group of local teenagers. Michael recognized them as some of the tunnel rats, a group devoted to exploring the hazardous maze of tunnels and caves that wound underneath Blackpool. Some of the tunnels beneath the town had been prettied up as tourist attractions, but others, such as those under Ravenhearst Manor, were dark and dangerous—and said to be haunted by ghosts.

"I'm thinking of doing something with the smugglers' tunnels in my next game," Michael said to Rohan. "A cave-in, an old gravestone, a set of rusty tools, pirate's treasure or someone bent on mischief lurking in the darkness—it all gets your adrenaline racing."

"Mon, you don't need to be findin' pirate treasure," Rohan teased, "not with your video-game business."

“Well, no. But I’d like to find out if the rumors of gold hidden in those tunnels are true.”

Rohan smiled, his white teeth flashing against his dark skin. “Dylan, do you think they’re true? Dylan?”

Dylan’s blue eyes weren’t focused on them but on the slight figure of his wife. Naomi stood in the shadow of the old town hall’s outer wall, speaking urgently to Willie Myners. With their pale, nervous faces, the duo looked like ghosts hovering around the fringes of the celebration.

Every one of Dylan’s impressive muscles was clenched. He took a giant step forward just as Naomi glanced around. Her lips thinned. Her own step toward Dylan allowed Willie to slide as quickly as a snake into an alley.

“Here,” she called to her husband. “You’ve closed the bicycle shop, have you? All these day-trippers and students—you could be making loads of money. But no, you’re spying on me. Give it a rest, Dylan.” And she slipped away into the crowd.

Dylan sputtered, his broad face twisted into a scowl, his hands making fists at his sides.

The jaunty music of a brass band echoed off the old stone buildings and out over the harbor. Sharing a wary if sympathetic glance, Michael and Rohan said simultaneously, “The band’s playin’,” and “Look, there’s a group forming up for a country dance.”

Michael surveyed the dancers but Molly wasn’t among the couples. Lydia Crowe was, though. Her vacuous, candy-box prettiness made her seem younger than the twenty-something she was, and Michael’s gaze, sweeping the area for Molly’s familiar form, didn’t

linger. But that brief glance was enough to attract Lydia's attention.

She hurried forward. "Hullo, Michael. Let's dance!"

"Half a tick, Lydia, I..." Too late. Lydia was in his arms, gripping him like a boa constrictor, pulling him toward the dancers. Michael had no choice but to hang on, face the music and dance.

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Molly Graham smoothed the skirt of her 1920s flapper dress, its satin a shade of purple that matched her favorite amethyst necklace. She gave a wriggle that set its fringes to dancing flirtatiously. But Michael wasn't there to show his appreciation. Where was he, anyway?

Somehow they'd gotten separated.

"Molly!" called a voice that was not Michael's.

Molly looked around to see Tim Jenkins beckoning with his microphone. She'd first met the ITV reporter at a fundraiser in London, and now he'd taken her suggestion to do a story about Seafaring Days.

The reporter's height, long neck and prominent teeth reminded her of a giraffe, one that could use more leaves.

Tim was working, interviewing Rebecca Hislop in front of the Havers Customs House while his camera operator panned from them to Blackpool's scenic waterfront and back again.

Swathed in a vintage ruffled gown that made her look like one of the chrysanthemums for sale at her gift and flower shop, Rebecca was saying, "Folk in the olden days were smugglers and worse, pirates and slave traders, as well. Now they're gone—perhaps—but their

tunnels are still here. So are their old buildings and their dark spirits—or so the story goes.”

Tim glanced at Molly. She shrugged and smiled. Today, baskets of flowers hung from the quaint old buildings along Dockside Avenue and from the shops opening onto the narrow, deeply shadowed lanes behind. Contemporary Blackpool’s picture-postcard appearance only hinted at the drama of its seafaring past. At least she hoped the drama was in the past.

She and Michael had already discovered that here, memories were long and secrets plentiful, secrets that could turn deadly.

Tim’s eyes and the lens of the camera followed Rebecca’s gesture to the classical elegance of the Customs House. “That building’s designed by Charles Crowe,” she said, “one of Blackpool’s local heroes. And one of its villains, as well. He turned his hand to a variety of employments, some more ethical than others, and he had the money to prove it. Story goes he buried a priceless treasure somewhere in town!”

From behind Molly, Aleister Crowe’s smooth voice said, “Surely the ITV audience would be much more interested in facts, not sailors’ tales and gossip.”

Turning his back on Rebecca and sending Molly a thin smile, Aleister informed Tim, “My ancestor Charles Crowe was quite the Renaissance man, served in Nelson’s navy, traveled, traded—many of the local folk were jealous of his achievements. They still are. They spread scurrilous tales about him. What can you do when you’re the object of such envy?”

Rebecca rolled her eyes. Tim hadn’t yet blinked.

“Charles was a brilliant architect,” Aleister went on. “He designed not only this building, but also many of

Blackpool's finest structures, such as the church and the town hall. Your cameraman should be filming important historical landmarks such as those."

Aleister's rather stuffy dark-blue double-breasted suit wasn't a costume, she thought. He meant it to evoke the rather formal clothing of the Prince of Wales and had no doubt bought it from the same tailor, Gieves and Hawkes of Savile Row.

Aleister wasn't an unattractive man—his clothing was impeccable and his dark hair with its widow's peak was tidily groomed. It was his condescending manner and smug smile that grated. He even carried a cane, its handle fashioned into a silver crow.

With a sympathetic glance at Tim's bewildered expression as Aleister cornered him, Molly slipped off to starboard while Rebecca made her escape to port and her own vendor's stall.

Molly headed toward the harbor, keeping an eye out for Michael—he had to be here somewhere—

Oh!

Molly caromed off something large and soft. Even as she excused herself, she recognized Detective Chief Inspector Maurice Paddington, a large, rumped man whose name was laughably appropriate. Today, however, instead of the affable smile of the children's storybook bear, his face was set in a gargoyle's scowl. He popped the last bite of his Scotch egg into his mouth and then wiped his hands and mopped his moustache with a handkerchief the size of a pillowcase.

"The television crew's your doing, is it?" he asked Molly, saying crew as though it were synonymous with rat.

"Guilty as charged, Inspector."

"Those stories of lost treasure have caused a lot of



trouble for Blackpool over the years. Townsfolk have died searching for it. Outsiders, students, beachcombers, tourists—they've killed for it."

"Which is why the Crowe family pretends it doesn't exist. Unless they want it all for themselves."

"Surely you don't believe it exists," said Paddington.

"You know I like to keep an open mind, Inspector."

"You and your husband and your open minds—and them, as well," Paddington added, turning a baleful gaze toward Liam McKenna.

Liam's usual appearance—bristling beard, earrings, mystical tattoos—was so piratical that today he'd merely needed to add a tricorn hat to his bald head. He was walking backward, guiding an unusually large entourage on one of his Other Syde tours. ". . . tormented spirits of Emma Ravenhearst and Charles Dalimar crying out for revenge in the ruins of Ravenhearst Manor. And there's buried treasure, as well. Pirate's loot or gold stolen from gypsies in Romania, home of Dracula—who may not be all legend, eh? Gypsies, the Romany, placed a curse on the gold, so that generations of treasure-hunters have met dreadful fates..."

"Tchah! What nonsense!" Paddington exclaimed. "We've got quite enough ridiculous legends without fancies of that sort!"

With his attitude, Paddington seemed like the scion of generations of Blackpoolers such as Aleister, when, in fact, he was almost as recent an arrival as Molly and Michael. But the inspector's glare was already focused on someone else.

Willie Myners.

Willie was shrinking away from a young, very angry man. “That’s Robbie Glennison, isn’t it?” Molly asked.

“The very same,” Paddington answered. “He works for Callum at the Smokehouse. When he works at all. He’s not quite right in the head.”

Robbie looked like something dredged up out of the harbor, eyes bulging and lips flapping. Between the noise of the crowd and the band, Molly couldn’t hear what he was telling Willie, but there was no mistaking his rage.

Willie raised a hand protectively and took a step back that almost sent him into the gutter. As usual, he was casually dressed to the point of sloppiness, but his shaggy head of dark hair and his pale, intense face gave him the rakish charm of a romance novel’s bad boy.

Paddington started toward Willie and Robbie. For once, Molly hung back. She could believe Robbie was unstable. He certainly looked it now, leaning into Willie’s face, jabbing a bony forefinger into the chest of his sweater.

Police Constable Luann Krebs cut in on the pair from the side. Her glasses gleaming with zeal, her broad shoulders set beneath their epaulettes, she demanded of the two men in a loud voice, “What’s this, then, Robbie? Willie? Have you got a problem I can sort for you? Or are you just making trouble?”

Neither man answered. Robbie glared one last time at Willie then shambled up Compass Rose Avenue, kicking petulantly at a rack of newspapers outside the offices of the *Blackpool Journal*.

Willie melted into a second guided tour, this one conducted by Liam McKenna’s sister, Holly. She was as beautiful as Liam was grotesque, her long black hair

hanging to her waist like a silk curtain, her off-the-shoulder blouse, flowing skirt and necklace of fake gold coins suggesting campfires and gypsy wagons. She greeted Willie with a smile and a wink. The other members of her group, mostly men, did not.

Shaking his head, Paddington made a creditable about-face and stalked off, Krebs not far behind.

Molly turned toward the bandstand just as the music stopped.

There was Michael, trying to pry Lydia Crowe off his chest. Molly arrived at the scene just as Michael finally extricated himself from Lydia's tentacles. He had barely sent Molly a grin of mingled relief and embarrassment when two more male figures converged on the scene.

Aleister in his dark suit really did look like a crow, Molly thought. He grasped Lydia's arm, shaking his head reprovingly. A twentyish, redhaired and freckled young man dressed in a dark-blue Austen-era frock coat appeared on Lydia's other side.

Addison Headerly's gaze was fixed on Lydia's face with the open adoration of a puppy for a bowl of kibble.

Poor Addison, Molly thought. The Headerlys were as old a Blackpool family as the Crowes, but Molly sincerely doubted Aleister would consider them in the same league.

Aleister tried to shoo Addison away, his patrician nose turned up. Addison held his ground. Lydia stood with her arms folded and her lower lip protruding, but the sparkle in her eyes betrayed her pleasure at being the center of attention.

The Grahams backed away from the scene, Michael

stooping low enough to bring his mouth close to Molly's ear, seizing the opportunity to take a tiny nibble of it.

"Here's us, love, thinking small towns are peaceful places. Blackpool's proved us wrong."

Suddenly the music trailed away into a ragged blare. People shouted, pointed then surged toward the seawall.

"Whoa," Molly exclaimed, even as Michael asked, "What the hell is that?"

A magnificent pirate ship sailed past the lighthouse and into the harbor. A Jolly Roger snapped from the top of its tallest mast, and its tightly reefed sails shuddered.

With a rolling rumble and succession of flashes, the cannons ranged along its railing fired. Smoke filled the docks and gulls hurled themselves shrieking into the sky. All the people who had rushed forward now ducked for cover.

"It's the pirate's curse!" a woman—Holly?—screamed.

Coughing in the acrid smoke, Molly didn't protest as Michael's strong arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her down behind a concrete planter overflowing with flowers. Still, she managed to peer out from one side as he peeked out from the other.

Neither would miss a moment of this. Whatever this was....

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