



Stolen

A BLACKPOOL MYSTERY

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CHAPTER ONE

“LOOKS LIKE EVERYONE IN TOWN showed up.” Michael Graham peered through the tinted window of his vintage limousine at the crowd gathered in front of the Magic Lantern Theatre. Chinese-style lanterns in bright colors hung over the marquee that announced, “Special Announcement Plus Showing of *Peter Pan 2: Return to Neverland*.”

“That was the point.” Molly leaned in over her husband’s shoulder.

For a moment, Michael grew distracted by her perfume and the heat of her body pressing against his. They’d been married three years, but her sheer physical presence still made a tremendous impact on his senses. He grinned in spite of himself and kissed the back of her neck.

Molly shivered, and pulled back. She held up a forefinger in warning. “Don’t even think about that.”

Michael laughed, but he let her have her space and returned his attention to the festivities filling downtown Blackpool. His newly adopted town was still fascinating to him. The mixture of old and new strewn throughout the hills and up to the cliffs overlooking the sea enthralled him.

Normally on a Friday night, Blackpool’s streets remained relatively desolate. But tonight the throng gathered all along the police barricade in front of the movie house, filling the thoroughfare and making traffic all but impossible.

The black night was fought off by more streetlights than normal, illuminating the squat stone-and-wood buildings in

the town square. The brightness seemed out of place amid warehouses and shops more than a century old.

Michael gazed at Molly, still focused on her iPhone. Her dark auburn hair curled under and swept her bare shoulders. The understated black dress showed off her petite figure but maintained an air of professionalism. A black onyx set in a silver pendant hung at the hollow of her throat from a fine silver chain.

Michael understood her distraction. His profession as a video and computer game designer demanded unwavering focus just as much as Molly's work in public relations and grant writing. She didn't hold back, and that passion was only one of the reasons he loved her so much.

Molly turned from the window, leaned in and kissed him. Her warm lips lingered on his for a moment and tasted like cherries. She drew back and looked directly at him. "The netbook stays in the car when we go inside."

Michael grimaced. Molly straightened the collar of his black leather jacket. "I need you to be yourself tonight."

"I'm always myself."

"True, but tonight I need the emphasis put on the wonderful and adorable self."

Michael rolled his eyes in mock reproach.

The limousine rolled a few more feet toward the theater, mired in the crowd. Irwin Jaeger—their houseman-turned-chauffeur for the night—glanced in the rearview mirror.

"My apologies. It appears we won't get any closer tonight," he said.

Neatly cut iron-gray hair lay under the chauffeur's cap

he'd put on for fun and a bushy mustache covered his upper lip. Thick bifocal lenses made his muddy-brown eyes look larger than normal. The tailored livery fit his thin frame exactly.

"This will be fine, Irwin." Molly smiled at the old man.

"Very good, ma'am." With an economy of movement, Irwin put the transmission in Park, got out and came around the car, opening the door with a flourish.

Michael climbed out, then extended a hand to Molly, guiding her toward the crowd in front of the theater.

CONFRONTED BY DOZENS of people, Molly Graham felt as though she'd stepped into her element. She loved being on stage, loved being the center of attention, and she loved bringing a production to successful fruition—in this case the filming of a documentary right here in Blackpool.

"Mrs. Graham, will you give us a hint of anything special you've planned?" Fred Purnell, reporter for the local paper, straightened one of his suspenders over his broad belly and forced his way next to Molly. His thinning hair lay oiled against his scalp and he wore his best shirt.

Molly smiled, conscious of the teen photographer that trailed Fred. The girl had a death grip on her camera. "Patience, Mr. Purnell." Molly plowed through the crowd, and the reporter struggled to keep up.

Purnell grimaced. "Everyone in town wants to know if you've discovered anything more about the robbery."

"All in due time."

"C'mon, Molly. Give an aging newspaperman a break."

Purnell was a dogged reporter for the newspaper he owned and operated, the *Blackpool Journal*, when news was breaking, but things were often slow in Blackpool.

Glancing over her shoulder, Molly spotted Michael a half step behind her.

Although she'd looked at her husband countless times, she could never grow tired of it. There was something earthy and magnetic about him. She had to admit, the leather jacket looked great on him, projecting a raw, rugged image that suited him well.

He wore a black turtleneck under it and black slacks. At six feet two inches tall, he kept his black hair shaved almost to the scalp, and his carefully trimmed goatee made him look distinguished.

Michael mouthed the word, *Robbery?*

Molly grinned impishly at him.

Everybody loved a mystery. Her uncle Peter, who worked for the Mystery Case Files Agency, an international private investigation firm, had regaled her with stories of crimes and criminals since she was a girl. She'd hung on his every word and loved trying to solve the crimes he'd dangled before her.

Most people had heard rumors about the documentary and knew that it was connected to an infamous robbery. But no one knew all the details. And, of course, there was the treasure....

CHAPTER TWO

TWENTY-SEVEN MINUTES LATER, Molly stood to one side of the Magic Lantern's large screen. For the moment the houselights glowed dimly and served only to stir the darkness inside the large room. Townsfolk filled every seat.

"You appear to have quite the turnout, Mrs. Graham."

Barely managing to quash an involuntary start, Molly turned toward the smooth, oily voice.

Aleister Crowe stood there in elegant evening wear. In his early thirties and with his dark hair worn brushed back to reveal a widow's peak, he looked as predatory as his namesake. Light reflected from the silver crow's head topping the walking stick he carried purely for looks, though rumor held that it was a sword cane passed down through generations of Crowes.

Crowe was gazing at the seated crowd and those standing at the back of the theater. "For such a small town, Blackpool seems to attract huge secrets. It would be a shame if you tripped across something that had been buried for a long time while seeking to film your little movie." He shrugged. "You might want to consider that before you start kicking a hornet's nest."

"Is that a warning, Mr. Crowe?"

A neutral expression slipped across his face like a well-used mask. "Just an objective observation."

“As I understand it, the Crowe family has no shortage of buried secrets.” They’d lived in Blackpool since the first pirates and smugglers had lit campfires on the sea-shores. “Is this documentary going to touch on one?”

“Touché, my dear. I suppose I should mingle and leave you to your event.”

Crowe then turned and walked away, disappearing almost instantly in the darkness of the theater.

Creepy. Molly shook her head and decided that she wouldn’t tell Michael about the encounter. He thought Crowe was obnoxious, but not scary. Molly wasn’t so certain. There was something menacing about Aleister Crowe—about all of the Crowes, actually—and Molly couldn’t quite shake it off. Maybe it was just the eeriness of Blackpool itself. The stories continued to cycle about infamous resident Emma Ravenhearst and the ghost that was said to haunt the ruins of where the old Ravenhearst mansion had stood just outside town.

At precisely seven o’clock, Molly walked out onto center stage. The baby spotlight switched on with a loud *snap* and bathed her in blue-white incandescence. She kept from blinking through an effort of will and avoided looking into the light. She couldn’t see the audience, but she heard a hush falling over the crowd, receding from the stage like an outgoing tide.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen and children.” Molly spoke naturally and the wireless mic pinned to her top carried her voice to the back of the theater. “I want to thank you all for coming.”

Michael sat in the front row beside Fred Purnell. The chair to Michael’s left was empty. Simon Wineguard, the documentary’s director, wasn’t seated where he was

supposed to be and that bothered Molly. They'd agreed about the timing and the seating.

She continued. "We're here to honor seven survivors of the Blackpool train robbery that occurred in 1940. We'll have those people on stage shortly. But as you've probably heard around town, that isn't the only reason for this event. To explain, please join me in welcoming Simon Wineguard, the famed director and historian." Molly glanced at the empty seat in the front row. "Simon, are you out there?"

"Over here, Molly."

The voice came from Molly's left. A moment later, the director trotted across the stage to stand beside her. In his forties, Wineguard was tall and a little overweight. His suit hung well on him, working with the rimless glasses to give him a professional appearance. He was bald on top, his shiny pate fringed by short salt-and-pepper hair. He hugged Molly briefly.

"Sorry, my dear. I lost track of time." Despite his outward calm, Wineguard seemed a little flustered. Maybe he was nervous about all the attention. He was used to being behind a camera.

"I knew I should have given you a map." She turned to the audience. "Many of you have probably heard of Simon. He's directed several history specials that have aired on the BBC, Discovery Channel and the History Channel. His films have been translated into more than thirty languages."

"Thankfully, I didn't have to learn all of them." The crowd laughed.

"Mr. Wineguard has come to Blackpool, to *you*, to follow up on another story." Molly let her words hang and the interest build. "When the Second World War

began, the government decided to move women and children outside of the metropolitan areas to protect them. London and the other major cities were prime targets for German bombs.”

Silence hung over the crowd. Although the war was seventy years ago, public interest and memory had not diminished. Several London neighborhoods still bore scars of the bombing. No one had forgotten.

“That decision led to Operation Pied Piper.”

The footage on the screen behind her showed black-and white reels of actual evacuations of the English cities. Tearful women and children were herded onto waiting trains like cattle.

Simon Wineguard stepped forward slightly. “Pied Piper has always fascinated me but I didn’t think I could do anything new with the subject.” Wineguard shoved his hands into his slacks pockets and walked away from Molly. The baby spotlight followed him and left her in the darkness. The move had been planned and everyone looked at him. “However, I found an interesting story while pursuing research on this special little hobby of mine.”

Molly sensed the anticipation building among the crowd. Fred Purnell leaned forward in his seat with his digital recorder outstretched. His teen photographer flashed away and bright light illuminated the stage again and again.

“I discovered that Blackpool had served as a final destination for some of those displaced families, but in 1940, some of those evacuees were on a train when it was derailed just outside of Blackpool. Some of the children aboard that train remained in Blackpool and made

this lovely town their home. Seven of those children live in Blackpool to this day.”

A montage of seven faces, four male and three female, replaced the previous images of evacuees. There were pictures of the survivors as children as well as adults.

“These people will be joining us in just a few moments.” Wineguard waved to the photographs on the screen. “We’re going to honor them, watch *Peter Pan 2*, then attend a small buffet.”

A spattering of clapping started and briefly gained momentum. Wineguard raised his hands to quiet it.

“But before we do that, I want to take just a couple more minutes to tell you what I’m going to be doing here over the next few weeks.” Wineguard paused. “Thanks to Molly Graham’s brilliant grant application and vision, I’ve received funding to do a documentary based on Blackpool’s connection to Operation Pied Piper. In fact, I think I’ve got quite the hook for our little enterprise.”

Wineguard’s voice lowered as if he was taking the whole audience into his confidence. “As you all know, the derailment of 1940 wasn’t an accident. It was a robbery.” He let the audience hang on to his words for just a moment. “The train carried several women and children evacuating from London, including an heir to the Sterling family fortune. Sadly, little Chloe Sterling perished when the bandits blew the train off its tracks.”

The image behind Wineguard switched to the scene of a train wreck. An overturned locomotive lay across the tracks in front of a shamble of broken cars. Groups of people clustered around trees and boulders with dazed, shocked expressions. Others lay on the ground under blankets.

“That train also carried a fortune in art, jewelry and

pottery. All from collections of wealthy families who were afraid to leave such treasures behind in London. More than that, there was a shipment of gold bullion on board marked for the war effort. The bandits obviously robbed the train for its valuable cargo.”

He scanned the audience. “Very few of those stolen goods have ever shown up. And the gold bullion never did.” He walked to the edge of the stage. “Some say that treasure—perhaps even the paintings—was sorted out, sold to private collectors who will never show their ill-gotten gain to anyone.” He paused, holding everyone’s attention. “But...some say that treasure has never left Blackpool.”

For a moment, the auditorium was completely silent.

Then a few whispered comments and questions broke the stillness. The volume of voices rose, and Wineguard stood in the spotlight rubbing his hands.

“Maybe, ladies and gentlemen, maybe we’ll be the ones to find out what happened to all those valuables seventy years ago. Maybe we’ll find out who robbed that train and killed those people so callously.”

The double doors leading into the theater suddenly banged open. A rectangle of fluorescent light from the lobby fell into the room. A woman stood silhouetted in the doorway.

“Inspector Paddington!”

“Here.” Paddington heaved himself up and whipped a torch from his equipment belt. He snapped it on and a bright blue-white beam shot out.

The woman in the doorway flinched, shielding her eyes with one hand. The inspector’s light revealed the blood spread across her fingers and wrist.

“Come quick,” she urged. “There’s been a murder.”