



# Submerged

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A BLACKPOOL MYSTERY

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Gray

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SUBMERGED

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## *CHAPTER ONE*

Molly Graham came to a shaky stop in front of an old Victorian on Walnut Grove, steeling herself to go inside Blackpool's police station. Except for the modest sign near the walk, a passerby wouldn't have thought it anything other than a stately old house with a primrose garden in need of serious weeding. The white paint was peeling in places around the cornices on the second floor.

In contrast, the inside was completely modern, though nothing she would call "state of the art." There was a drop ceiling in the main room, and fluorescent lights hung from it. The air was filled with the scent of lavender and Lysol, and an underlying acrid pong of cigarette smoke. Not that anyone could smoke in the building, but she knew that a scattering of officers and assistants did so elsewhere, and the odor clung to their clothes.

The assistant at the front desk—the only person Molly spotted this afternoon—was a petite woman who would have been forced into retirement years ago, had she been with a larger city's police department.

She looked at Molly through wire-rimmed trifocals, tucked a few wisps of iron-gray hair behind one ear and waited for Molly to speak.

Molly drew a calming breath. "I need to see Detective Chief Inspector Paddington."

The woman pushed her glasses up with an index finger. “He’s busy, Mrs. Graham.”

Although Molly didn’t know the woman, she wasn’t surprised the assistant recognized her; Molly had had her picture in the newspaper enough times, especially recently.

She wished it had more to do with the grants that she had helped to secure for the town, but to Molly and her husband Michael’s, dismay, their notoriety seemed to stem from a series of local murders and mysteries that they had solved—which brought Molly back to why she was here.

“This is very important.”

“I’m sure it is.”

“Please, can you tell him—”

“Is it a life-and-death emergency?”

“Yes.” A pause. “Well, not exactly, but—”

“Then take a seat, flower, and he’ll get to you when he has time.”

Trying to find some composure, Molly brushed her fingers along the edge of the desk. It was walnut, with a heavy lacquer on it, handmade by a craftsman and not mass-produced in some factory like the rest of the desks in the small department. She wondered if it had come with the house when the city bought it for the station.

“How about Sergeant Krebs? I could talk to her.”

“You could if she wasn’t busy, too.” The woman made a huffing sound. “They’re both occupied because of you, Mrs. Graham. They’re in a meeting about tomorrow’s big marina to-do.”

“It’s critical that I speak to someone. You see, I found—”

“I’m sure it is. Everything you do is momentous, isn’t it, Mrs. Graham? But I’m sure this is nothing that can’t wait, eh?”

Molly felt a surge of panic. “How about another officer? I don’t care which one, but—”

The woman shook her head and eased back from her desk. The glasses had slid halfway down her nose, and she pushed them up again. “The D.C.I. will get to you when he has a moment, flower. Or you can return when—”

Molly couldn’t stand it anymore. “Can I use a phone? Please.”

The assistant gestured to a desk overflowing with papers and used foam cups. The tag on it read Sergeant Merle Oates. “You can use that one...if it’s a local call.”

Molly was quick to punch in the numbers. She tapped her fingers on the only empty spot on the desk.

“C’mon, c’mon. Iris? Put Michael on.” She drummed faster. “Michael? No, I’m not using my mobile. It fell off the side of the cliff where I was hiking. I’d pulled it out to call you and the D.C.I., but I dropped it.”

“Molly, are you all right? You sound upset,” Michael said.

“I’m fine, really. It’s just...I’m at the police station... to report a dead body.” Molly noticed the old woman quickly pick up her own phone. “I’m going back out there to try to figure out who it is and what happened. I

should've done that right away, I guess, poked around, but I didn't want to disturb anything before the police looked it over."

"What? A body? Molly, slow down—"

"I didn't get that close, but I think he must have slipped and cracked his head open on a rock. It isn't an easy hiking trail, you know, even for a young person in good shape. Paddington's too busy right now to deal with it so I'm going back on my own."

"No, don't go by yourself. I'll meet you there. Where is it?" Michael asked.

flooded over her. "It's out by Jack Hawkins's nose. See you soon, love."

Molly raced out the front door, feet flying down the steps. She slid into her car just as D.C.I. Paddington and Sergeant Krebs ran out a side door.

"Molly!" Paddington waved at her. "Wait, Molly!"

She had the top down on her Mini Cooper, and she twisted in the seat toward him.

"What's this about reporting a murder?" Paddington demanded. Gripping the car, he loomed over her. Krebs, half his age and size, stayed a step back and regarded her reflection in the Mini Cooper's gloss paint.

"A dead body," Molly corrected. "Follow me, I'll show you. I believe the man slipped."

Paddington nodded and turned toward a nearby police cruiser, Krebs not far behind. Molly eased away from the curb, not waiting for Paddington to change his mind and order her to stay away.

She kept the top down, even though it felt a little

chilly this late in the afternoon. Molly kept to the speed limit, no easy feat. But she needed to give Paddington and Krebs a chance to catch up. Besides, the dead body wasn't going anywhere.

As Molly headed down Walnut Grove and turned on Main, she noticed a police cruiser pull up behind her; it looked like Krebs was driving—no flashers or siren.

They wound their way to the southern outskirts of Blackpool and onto an access road that ran along the cliffs. Molly often found excuses to drive this road during the late spring because of the colors—leaves greening and flowers springing up everywhere. That's why she'd gone hiking this afternoon. It had been too lovely to pass the time indoors. That, and she wanted a distraction to keep her mind off tomorrow's groundbreaking ceremony for the harbor renovation.

She considered this part of the countryside especially stunning. From here it looked like all of Blackpool was a watercolor painting and the buildings, with their colorful red roofs, seemed to be tumbling down the cobbled streets toward the sea.

After a few more minutes she pulled onto a narrow strip of gravel and waited for the cruiser to stop behind her, trying not to think about what awaited them. She got out and walked toward the edge of the cliff. The sun, just starting to set, turned the waves a glimmering copper down below.

Molly heard the approach of a motorcycle and spun to see Michael pull up.

“Wonderful,” Krebs growled. “Might as well invite the whole town.”

“Afternoon, Michael,” Paddington greeted. Then he turned to Molly. “Show me this dead body. I want to take a look before I call the coroner. Hopefully we can get this wrapped up before we lose the light.”

“Is anyone else joining us?” Krebs asked Molly. “Did you invite more people, Mrs. Graham?”

Molly didn’t bother to answer. She started picking her way down the side of the cliff, pointing to her left and right at narrow spots they should avoid. There were only a few handrails along this trail. In her opinion they marred the scenery, but made it a little safer for the less surefooted hikers—and now the police.

Michael nimbly stepped around Paddington and joined Molly. Experienced hikers, the Grahams were familiar with the long, winding trails that cut across the entire coastline, including this section.

The handrails stopped when the trail became steeper, discouraging the less proficient hikers from going further.

“Pretty desolate here,” Michael observed.

“And beautiful,” Molly added. There were a few cottages along the ridge farther to the south, and soft glows came from some of the windows. The air was clean here, and the wind carried a slight chill. It smelled of salt and rocks and felt good against her face.

“Careful,” Michael cautioned Paddington.

The D.C.I. motioned for Krebs to stay behind him. “Two more years,” he grumbled. “Two more bloody



years.”

“Not much farther!” Molly called several minutes later.

“What!” Paddington said. “If we keep going we’ll be in the sea.”

“Here.” Molly stopped on a meter-wide ledge and pointed. “He’s down there, see?”

“Not yet,” Paddington said.

Michael maneuvered around Molly so they were out of the D.C.I.’s way.

“Should’ve called Oates to handle this.” Paddington leaned over and peered at the rocky terrain below and a thin strip of rock covered with scree. “Is that a footprint? It’s as dry as Ghandi’s flip-flop here. Hasn’t rained in days.” He took a few more steps down and reached out a hand as if to catch himself. “I’ll probably take a tumble and ice myself, and you berks will be left with Krebs.”

Molly quietly watched him as she inched forward.

She noticed Krebs was staying farther up on what passed for a trail. “See him yet?”

There was a shuffling sound, the *click-click-click* of a rock caroming down the cliff from Paddington’s movements. Nobody else even breathed, and the sounds around Molly seemed to intensify—the lapping of the sea against the base of the cliff, the cry of some bird. Farther away was the shushing sound of a car driving by up on the main road, and fainter came a dog barking.

“Yes, I see the poor bloke,” Paddington finally said. “Now, how the hell am I going to get to him?” He

looked up. “Sergeant Krebs...call it in and notify the coroner.”

The D.C.I. managed to get on his hands and knees and lever himself over the edge of the cliff. Molly and Michael joined him and hovered, hands out to grab him if it looked as if he was going to slip.

Paddington scrambled onto the lower ledge. “And Krebs? Get Oates out here and tell him to bring some ropes with him.” Molly started down the last section just as he added, “You two, stay there.”

Seconds later when she knelt beside him, he shook a scolding finger at her. “I thought I ordered you to keep back.”

“Sorry.”

“Jack Hawkins’s nose, eh?”

She nodded to a long, bulbous rocky outcropping that shadowed the body.

“The actor from Middlesex,” Michael explained. He stayed on the rocks above them, recognizing there was not enough space for all of them. “He was in *Lawrence of Arabia*, *Ben-Hur*, *Zulu*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*...”

Molly was shoulder-to-shoulder with Paddington, and now could see the body clearly. The dead man had looked elderly to her, but she hadn’t been that close when she’d first spotted him. Now she realized that he was quite young, and she’d been confused by the rock dust on his skin and all the bruises. His clothes were rumpled and torn from the fall, his legs and arms twisted, and already the hungry, curious sea birds had

inflicted damage on his body. She wrinkled her nose at the foul stench and sucked in a breath when she spotted a small crab crawl out of his mouth and scurry away.

“I’d say late twenties,” Paddington said. “Maybe thirty, but no older than that.” If the odor bothered Paddington, he didn’t let it show. “Tennis shoes.”

New-looking ones, Molly noted, but a cheap brand. Molly knew shoes. “Not what I’d wear to hike this cliff,” she remarked. Actually, not what she’d ever wear.

“Been dead two, three days, I’d wager.”

“That recent?” Molly was surprised by Paddington’s assessment. The body looked so decomposed she would have thought it had been here weeks or months.

“But how—”

“The sea air,” Paddington explained as he pulled a pen out and used it to open the flap of the dead man’s shirt pocket and fish around inside. “Bodies decay fast in the open. The salt, the water spraying up here, the birds and crabs, other scavengers. Two days, maybe three at the outside, but the coroner will tell us for sure. Poor bloke.” He searched the other pocket. “Empty. Figures.”

Molly stared at the top of the corpse’s head. That way she could avoid looking into its empty eye sockets. She’d read somewhere that birds went for the eyes first.

“All this blood...” she said. “I figured he had been hiking and fell, hit his head.” The rock beneath the body was stained dark. She suspected there’d been more blood, but the sea spray had no doubt washed some of it away.

After pulling on gloves, Paddington gently examined

the corpse's skull. "Oh, he hit his head all right, and broke a few other bones in the process. But he was dead before that." He pointed to the man's neck, moving the shirt collar open and exposing the jagged line across the man's throat.

Molly felt bile rising in her mouth when she tried looking away and her gaze passed over the eye sockets again. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea, climbing down here with the D.C.I. Maybe she should have just given him directions.

"Slit all the way across," Paddington pronounced. "*That's* what killed him. This young fellow was murdered."

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