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THE BLACKGAARD CHRONICLES™



BOOK FIVE

KNIGHT'S SCHEME



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The Blackgaard Chronicles: *Knight's Scheme*
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For
Bob, D. J., and Jerod



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CHAPTER ONE



It was late. The streets were deserted, which wasn't unusual for that part of Odyssey at that time of day, especially after what had happened there last week. A car pulled into the parking lot of what ten days ago was a thriving business and the newest hit entertainment attraction in town but was now the burned-out shell of a building.

The car rolled across the lot and parked on the far side of the shell, out of view of the street. Its occupant,

a stocky, neatly dressed man with thick, longish white hair, large round glasses, and a rather bushy white mustache shut off the engine and lights, exited the car, and headed toward the scorched ruins, moving with a slight limp.

John Avery Whittaker thought about recent events as he walked toward what used to be Blackgaard's Castle. Richard Maxwell, the young man who had caused the fire that destroyed it, was under arrest and locked up in jail. Maxwell had nearly died in the fire thanks to his boss, the owner and the place's namesake, Dr. Regis Blackgaard.

It was Dr. Blackgaard who caused Maxwell to be pinned under an arcade video game. According to Maxwell, Blackgaard and his cat then disappeared *into* the burning building. That's the reason Whit was there—well, *one* of the reasons. He needed answers to a good many questions.

He strode up to where the front doors of Blackgaard's Castle used to be and then slipped through them into the smoky wreckage. Though the walls were still in pretty good condition, the ceiling was a total loss, as

were all of the games and machines inside. Their blackened shells stood like tombstones, silent monuments to better days, even if they were brief.

Whit clambered over heaps of ceiling debris and around the charred wrecks of the games and finally reached his destination: a door marked "Private." It, too, was seared, and the sign on it now read "Pri . . te." Whit tugged on it, and the door opened rather easily. He pulled a flashlight from his pocket, slipped inside the door, and descended the stairs.

The flames had not reached the basement, though there was still a strong smell of smoke. Water from the fire engines and hydrants had trickled down the stairs and onto the floor of the corridor that stretched before Whit, leaving the area dank.

Both the police and fire departments had searched down here, but no trace of Blackgaard or his cat had been found in the hallway or in any of the rooms. They assumed Dr. Blackgaard had gotten out a different way upstairs, but Whit suspected otherwise. Lucy, a young friend of Whit's who'd frequently visited Blackgaard's Castle, had told him about an encounter

she had down here and her discovery of an oddity in the wall.

Stacked boxes on both sides of the hall formed a kind of maze. Whit maneuvered around them, checking them as he went. Most were completely empty. Then about halfway down the corridor, he came to a stack that wasn't empty. Whit pushed the boxes over, and the top box split open. Out spilled an odd assortment of old newspapers and magazines. A quick check of the other boxes in the stack showed they contained the same. There was nothing valuable about the contents, but the boxes were heavy and could not be easily moved. It was as if they'd been stacked to hide what was behind them.

Sure enough, when Whit examined the wall behind the stack, he confirmed Lucy's discovery: the outline of a door. It was very faint; you would have to be really looking for it to see it or run your fingers over it, as Lucy had, to find it. But moving the boxes revealed more: The door and a bit of the wall around it had been recently plastered.

Whit cleared away the toppled stack and examined the door. It had no knob or handle. Whit pushed on

it, but it wouldn't budge. He traced the outline of the door with his light and finally found what he was looking for: At the bottom left of the door, right at the floor, a small screw protruded from the wall. Whit tried toggling it in all directions, but it wouldn't move. He pulled on it; again, nothing. He then pressed it into the wall and was rewarded with a metallic *click*. He pushed on the door again, and this time, it opened easily.

Whit stepped through the doorway and shone his flashlight around the space inside. It hadn't really been affected by the fire that had raged above it. The room was filled with lab tables and accoutrements, mainly of a chemical nature—beakers and tubes and burners. Some were broken, but most hadn't been touched; indeed, much of the equipment was still in boxes. Curiously, though, the company names on all of the boxes and equipment had been either scratched off or marked over.

Nothing stood out to Whit, except for one small box sitting on a table. He could still make out some of the letters of the company name on it: “. . . ebit . . .”

Strange. He pulled out a notepad and pen and

copied down the letters as they appeared, spaces and all.

He made a perimeter search of the room but found very little until he came to a spot almost directly opposite the entrance door. That's when he felt a draft by his foot. He bent down and put his hand next to the floor. The draft was coming from behind the wall.

He rose and pushed on it. It didn't move. He looked along the base for another screw, found one, and pushed on it.

Click!

This time, the door bumped inward. Whit pulled it open to reveal a large tunnel extending into the darkness. "So that's how he and the cat got out," he muttered. He pointed his light down the length of the shaft, but he couldn't see beyond a few yards. Whit took a few steps inside and heard a crinkle beneath his foot.

He shone the light down; he was stepping on some folded papers. He picked them up, tucked the flashlight under one arm, and unfolded them. One appeared to be the blueprints of Blackgaard's Castle before it was Blackgaard's Castle. But when Whit examined the

second one, his eyes widened, a chill went up his spine, and he nearly dropped the flashlight.

It was very old, encased in laminate, and bore the title “Odyssey Passageways” printed across the top in ornate lettering. It was a map of a network of interwoven tunnels connecting various spots around town. Two of those spots were Gower’s Landing, which had become Blackgaard’s Castle, and the Fillmore Recreation Center, which became his own place, Whit’s End. But that wasn’t the cause of his reaction.

He had seen this map before.

At Whit’s End.

He had found it stuffed between two wall studs when he tore out the plaster and lath while renovating the space that became the Bible Room. He had sent it to one of his oldest friends, who collected and studied antiques.

Jack Allen.

Whit tucked the map and blueprints in his jacket and bolted back through the lab space, into the corridor, up the stairs, and out of the remains of the arcade, headed for his car.

He hadn't talked to Jack in more than five years, before he bought the Fillmore Recreation Center. In fact, the last time they were together was in Nebraska at the orphanage Jack ran.

Whit frowned. The Clara incident.

It was after his wife, Jenny, had died. Whit went to stay with Jack and ended up bonding with a little orphan girl named Clara. She'd brought comfort and hope back into Whit's life, and he wanted to adopt her. Jack had withheld the truth that Clara was already adopted. When Whit found out, he was so upset he told Jack he didn't think he ever wanted to see him again. He immediately regretted it and had tried to talk with Jack over the ensuing years, but they never reconnected.

Whit had even sent Jack the map as a sort of peace offering, but Jack never acknowledged he'd received it. Whit knew he needed to get ahold of his friend somehow, to make sure he was all right.

Questions raced through his mind . . . *How did Blackgaard get the map from Jack? Was Councilman Philip Glossman actually representing Blackgaard when he*

fought Jenny for the Fillmore Recreation Center all those years ago? Lucy had confirmed to Whit that Blackgaard was after Applesauce, the secret computer program Whit had created. Does Blackgaard plan to use the tunnel to sneak into Whit's End and steal Applesauce? How does Blackgaard even know about Applesauce to begin with?

Whit was almost to his car when a new thought struck him—one so frightening, it made him stop dead in his tracks.

What if Applesauce is just a feint, the tip of the iceberg? What if something much deeper—and far more terrible—is really going on?